



Report to: Communities Committee, 3rd November 2021

Report of: Corporate Director - Operations, Homes and Communities

Subject: HOUSING ASSISTANCE POLICY UPDATE

1. Recommendation

That the Communities Committee:

- 1.1 approve the increase in the current level of Discretionary Disabled Facilities Grant top up from £10,000 to £25,000;**
- 1.2 note the further minor amendments to the Housing Assistance Policy at section 4 and 5; and**
- 1.3 approve delegated authority to the Head of Homes & Communities in consultation with Communities Committee Chair and Vice Chair to make future small amendments to the policy as required.**

2. Background

- 2.1 The Promoting Independent Living Scheme (PIL) Service was commissioned in April 2020 by the six Worcestershire District and Borough Councils. Previously the service had been run Countywide by the Home Improvement Agency. The PIL service provides a range of property adaptations including the mandatory disabled facilities grant. The service supports disabled and older people to be independent, enabling carers to continue their role safely, preventing accidents and helping people to return from hospital. It therefore crosses the boundaries between housing, health, and social care. Reflecting this cross-sector role, in April 2015 the grant became part of a joint health and social care budget, the Better Care Fund (BCF).
- 2.2 The Council received an BCF allocation for 2021/22 of £780,221 which is pass-ported via Worcestershire County Council from Central Government and this is paid to the PIL service. The annual allocation has increased year on year from £304,000 in 2015/16 to the current level because of the Government's investment in DFG as a way of improving wider health objectives through the joining up of health and care services.
- 2.3 To assist in Officers in administrating the BCF the Housing Assistance Policy (HAP) has been implemented. This policy is reviewed regularly by Operational Officers from all Worcestershire Authorities and the Worcestershire Strategic Housing Officers Group. Following a year of the PIL service the below updates are recommended for implantation. The proposed updated Housing Assistance Policy is attached at **Appendix 1.**

3. Increase Discretionary Disabled Facilities Grant (Top Up) Value from £10k to £25k

- 3.1 This assistance can be used when a mandatory DFG value exceeds the £30,000 Legislative set limit. This is usually the case where the property is requiring an extension to meet the adaptation requirements. To enable the work to continue the Case Officer can ask the Council to consider a discretionary assistance top up of £10,000. There is additional criteria attached to this approval where the total top up value is added as a local land charge to be repaid to the Council upon sale or transfer of the property. Enabling this funding to be recycled for future customer's needs.
- 3.2 However, substantial changes to house prices, benefits, retirement ages and the costs of work mean that the £30,000 upper limit of DFG need reviewing and the level of top-up is also regularly insufficient. The last major review of DFG was in 2005, which led to the raised maximum grant from £25,000 to £30,000 and came into effect in 2008. A further review is outstanding and has recently been defined as an action within the Governments National Disability Strategy.
- 3.3 This has resulted in the £40,000 total DFG assistance in the current Housing Assistance Policy no longer being enough to cover the works and the agency fee (table 1). Therefore, by increasing the total value to £55,000 and with the ability to allow further discretion if required on a case by case basis to above this limit customers may continue to be assisted in an efficient way.

Year	Grant above £30K	Grant above £40K (discretionary top-up)	Grant Above £50K	Open cases not yet fully priced
14/15	1			
15/16	1			
16/17	2	1		
17/18	2			
18/19	2	1		
19/20		2	1	
20/21	3	2	2	2

Table 1 shows the number of grants year on year requiring above 30K.

- 3.4 The number of large-scale grants is small in number per annum and the budget is sufficient to address the current demand levels. The forecasts show that this demand will continue due to meeting the needs of autistic children and their families.
- 3.5 To ensure that this is the best value for the Council each of these Discretionary Assistance applications will be assessed against criteria which includes:
- Does this meet the Councils Strategic housing objectives and/or support the BCF metrics?
 - Have other funding sources been considered ie charity or social services?
 - Have all other options been considered ie moving to more suitable accommodation and has a visit been carried out by Millbrook's Housing Options Officer?
 - Does the applicant have local support network?
 - Budget availability
 - The amount of funding required and does the work provide good value for money.

3.6 This discretionary funding will also be opened to properties owned by Registered Providers and Private Landlords. Where the landlord will accept a charge on the property, where the landlord will make a contribution to the costs of the works, where the landlord will undertake a signed agreement for long-term commitment to match the property when a new tenancy occurs to a tenant with similar needs or to pay back the discretionary DFG funding. It's worth noting that both these property types can refuse any mandatory DFG work for their tenants.

4. To remove References in the HAP to Direct Application to the Council

4.1 Following receipt of advice from Legal Services as the function of providing Housing Assistance has been formally delegated by Committee direct applications would not be permitted. Therefore, all applications for access to this funding would be required to go through the Councils appointed agent which in this case is Millbrook Health.

5. To Add Hoarding Grant Assistance to Discretionary Assistance

5.1 There has been an increase in cases where Home Repair Assistance or Disabled Facilities Assistance is being applied for at a residence where the owner/occupier is a hoarder. In these cases, to enable Home Repair Assistance and Disabled Facilities Assistance to be carried out safely by Officers and Contractors the property must first be cleared. The clearance is carried out with the owner/occupier's involvement and is to be secured as a local land charge on completion. Over the last 12 months Worcester has had three cases where this has been needed. This will also support the delivery of the Countywide Self Neglect Policy where hoarding is a common component of self-neglect.

6. Preferred Option

6.1 The preferred option is to approve the updates for the Housing Assistance Policy as noted in sections 2.3, 2.4 and 2.5.

7. Alternative Options Considered

7.1 The alternative option is to not update the Housing Assistance Policy with these updates which would result in:

7.2 With regards to section 3 this will mean that less customers with significant needs being able to be assisted with their DFG works. This will impact on the person health and wellbeing of the individual, health and social care services and the carers. The work would not be possible unless the customer is able to source alternative additional funding themselves. This is already a part of the PIL service and caseworkers will have made every attempt to reduce the grant requirement using other charitable funding etc. and enable installation of the adaptation.

7.3 With regards to section 4 the Council would have to ensure that there were additional Council Officers trained to administrate any direct application, trained to carry out the works assessments and Schedules and to have suitable processes in place for grant approvals, contractor approvals and for grant payments and sign off.

7.4 With regards to section 5 in the cases where hoarding prevents safe access for Officers and Contractors the Millbrook Case Officer would have to determine whether it is reasonable and practical to proceed with the assistance required for the customer. With Home Repair Assistance without this additional funding to spend to

clear the property prior to contactors working, it would significantly reduce the remaining funding available under the Home Repair Assistance to carry out repairs to remove serious hazards from the property.

8. Implications

8.1 Financial and Budgetary Implications

The Better Care Fund Allocation for 2021/22 is £780,221 and has continued to be increased year of year since 2015. This has enabled a more efficient and preventative service to meet customer need. This increase is sufficient to address the policy change proposed without financial implications. The Governments Disability Strategy is stating a review of the current maximum grant threshold which is recognised as being out of date.

8.2 Legal and Governance Implications

The legal duties to provide DFGs are outlined by the Housing Grants (Construction and Regeneration) Act 1996.

The Council are required to have a Housing Assistance Policy if they wish to provide grants and services in addition to the provision of the mandatory DFG.

Worcester City Council fully delegates the administration and approval of the financial assistance contained within the HAP to the commissioned provider.

There are no additional legal implications. The updates follow the Legal advice provided on direct applications.

8.3 Risk Implications

There are no additional risk implications following this report whilst the demand remains similar to the trends seen during the preceding years.

8.4 Corporate/Policy Implications

The commissioning of the existing and new service supports the delivery of the Worcester City Plan 2016 -2021, especially in relation to:

- Theme 1 - Stronger and Connected Communities
- Theme 2 - A Prosperous City
- Theme 3 - A Healthy & Active City

The service will also support delivery against the priorities of the Worcestershire Strategic Housing Partnership Plan agreed in 2017:

- To improve homes and transform places
- Create a partnership approach to enable people to live as independently as possible (prevention/early intervention).

8.5 Equality Implications

An Equality Impact Assessment has been undertaken and there are no adverse impacts on any protected group. The Worcester Housing Assistance policy positively supports applicants with a disability.

8.6 Human Resources Implications

There are no Human resources implications identified.

8.7 Health and Safety Implications

There are no health and safety implications identified.

8.8 Social, Environmental and Economic Implications

The work outlined within this report enables people to remain living more independently in a home which is more suitable for their needs. This delivers whole system cost savings by people being discharged from hospital in a timelier way, preventing falls and admission to hospital, reducing the need for or level of care package required and delaying admission to residential and nursing home care.

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Background Papers: **Appendix 1 – Housing Assistance Policy**