

**MAIDSTONE BOROUGH COUNCIL**

**COUNCIL**

**9 DECEMBER 2020**

**REPORT OF THE POLICY AND RESOURCES COMMITTEE HELD ON 25**

**NOVEMBER 2020**

**DISCRETIONARY HOUSING PAYMENTS**

**Issue for Decision**

The Council is provided with an annual Discretionary Housing Payment grant by the Department for Work and Pensions in order to provide additional financial support to that awarded through the Housing Benefit scheme.

Whilst the Council already has a Discretionary Housing Payment Policy in place, Appendix 1 to this report sets out an updated Policy to be approved.

**Recommendation Made**

That the Discretionary Housing Payment (DHP) Policy as shown in Appendix 1 to the report, be adopted.

**Reasons for Recommendation**

The Council is provided with an annual Discretionary Housing Payment grant by the Department for Work and Pensions in order to provide additional financial support to that awarded through the Housing Benefit scheme.

Discretionary Housing Payments operate outside the main benefit system but for ease of administration are normally paid alongside Housing Benefit.

The payments are limited to providing support with housing related costs for residents in receipt of Housing Benefit or the housing element of Universal Credit. Support is restricted to those within the rental sector and cannot support homeowners.

The budget available to Maidstone Borough Council in 2020-21 is £406,051, which includes additional funding because of the expected take up of Discretionary Housing Payments due to COVID19. Last year 2019-20 the budget was £302,510.

Whilst this represents a significant budget, demand for DHP is high with support targeted to help those households affected by welfare reform or who are homeless or at risk of homelessness.

Last year (2019-20), 354 residents benefitted from a DHP award which was given for reasons such as

- shortfall in rent whilst moving to a more affordable property
- removal costs as downsizing
- partner died, shortfall in rent whilst applying benefits

- possession order - paid to prevent eviction
- assist move from temporary accommodation

The Council already has a Discretionary Payment Policy in place which was approved by the Council in 2017. The Policy has been updated to provide clarity that:

- a DHP payment is a short-term emergency fund
- applications will only be accepted from a person within the Council's area
- provides a framework for officers to be guided in decision making whilst ensuring consistent treatment but allowing for sufficient discretion
- applications can be made by someone acting on behalf of someone else who is vulnerable or needs support
- the customer is expected to take responsibility such as taking tenancies at reasonable rents, seeks/receives appropriate housing advice, provides sufficient proof of debts/expenditure, shows evidence of job seeking activities (where not vulnerable)

On recommendation of Internal Audit, the Policy will be updated and approved on an annual basis in future.

The policy sets out the Council's aims in operating the DHP scheme and the types of situations that it will prioritise such as to:

- help alleviate poverty
- encourage employment
- prevent homelessness
- support vulnerable households
- provide support at a time of crisis

### **Alternatives Considered and Why Not Recommended**

The impact of not adopting this revised policy means the council is working to an out of date policy.

### **Background Documents**

None

### **Appendices**

Appendix 1 – Discretionary Housing Payment Policy

Appendix 2 – Audit Report Discretionary Housing Payments

Appendix 3 – EqIA