

MAIDSTONE BOROUGH COUNCIL

RECORD OF DECISION OF THE EXECUTIVE

Decision Made: 22 March 2023

Housing Renewal Policy 2023

Issue for Decision

The Housing Renewal Policy guides the council in delivering a range of statutory and discretionary grants to assist residents who are vulnerable and in need of adaptations to their homes to help improve their quality of life. The new policy has been developed with the assistance of an independent specialist, stakeholder organisations and service users.

Decision Made

That

1. The Housing Renewal Policy 2023 attached as Appendix A to the report be agreed.
2. The increase in the Home Improvement Agency fee from 12% to 15% be agreed.
3. The Head of Housing & Regulatory Services in collaboration with the Lead Member for Housing & Health develops a priority framework to process Disabled Facilities Grants.

Reasons for Decision

- 1.1 Maidstone Borough Council's Housing Renewal Policy sets out a range of policy matters relating to how we will enable vulnerable members of our community to maintain their homes to a decent standard, and the delivery of the Disabled Facilities Grant. In the main, staff and capital costs relating to this function are funded from the government grant under the Better Care Fund.
- 1.2 The Better Care Fund (BCF) programme supports local NHS and local authorities to successfully deliver the integration of health and social care in a way that supports person-centred care, sustainability and better outcomes for people and carers.
- 1.3 An element of the BCF is passported via Kent County Council to local housing authorities in Kent to deliver their initiatives that assist people who require their homes to be adapted, including the statutory Disabled Facilities Grant (DFG).
- 1.4 Last year Maidstone Borough Council received £1.5 million in grant, of which circa £200,000 was top sliced in a Kent wide agreement back to KCC to fund a pooled equipment and adaptations budget for social care clients. Maidstone Borough Council funds a range of initiatives through the BCF, including our Helping You Home programme that assists patients to move

out of hospital beds and back onto their home environment. Staffing costs incurred through administering the DGF are recovered from the grant. The table below demonstrates the indicative and proposed usage of the BCF grant.

Table 1.

Heading	Comment	Amount
Disabled Facility Grant	Grants provided to adapt a person's home to improve their quality of life	£900,000
Helping You Home	Expenditure incurred to make adaptations to enable residents to return home following a period of hospital care	£90,000
Staff fees	Eligible costs incurred administrating grants	£156,980
Discretionary budgets (to be agreed)	New discretionary grant budget to support elements of the Housing Assistance Policy	£150,000
Total		£1,296,980

1.5 Disabled Facilities Grant

There are three main agencies involved in the DFG process in a two-tier area such as Kent and these are:

- Kent County Council – through their Occupational Therapists, who are the qualified staff that assess what adaptations are required and make recommendations.
- The Home Improvement Agency – who act on behalf of the client to ensure they are fully advised on what assistance is available to the person and to oversee the work being contracted and completed.
- The Local Housing Authority – who receives, and processes grant applications under the DFG regulations.

1.6 Kent County Council commissions the Home Improvement Agencies (HIA) for across Kent and in our sub-region this is provided by Town & Country Housing Association. The HIA is funded in part from KCC and from the fee they can charge against the DFG for each completed grant.

1.7 With a number of agencies involved in the process there can be a tendency for the process to become stalled or for bottlenecks to appear at different parts of the system. In early 2022 MBC was not content with the delays inherent in the system and commissioned an independent review of our process with a view to improving the experience of our residents.

1.8 Foundations, the UK Government appointed National Body for Home Improvement Agencies (HIAs), carried out the review during the Summer of 2022 and provided a comprehensive report on their findings in the Autumn of 2022. This has formed the basis of some changes within the Housing

Renewal Policy 2023 and to our working practices.

1.9 The review concluded that the staff involved from across the three agencies were dedicated, wanted to see the best outcome for residents and were well trained in their areas of expertise. The impact once the adaptation was completed for the resident was notably positive. The review did conclude that there were areas for improvement. These included:

- Implementing a process that promotes more trust between the agencies.
- Re-focusing on a delivering a person-centred approach.
- Eliminating duplication of activity.
- Setting out clear processes and scope of responsibilities
- Providing more consistency in approach
- Introducing improved contract management by Maidstone Council with agreed KPIs and regular liaison meetings to consider operational issues and service delivery with the HIA and KCC.

1.10 The Foundations review provided a range of recommendations to MBC. Some of the recommendations have already been implemented with the result that the average approval times for grants have drastically reduced from 50 days to 11 days. To achieve other improvements listed in the recommendations, this report proposes policy changes that are captured in the accompanying draft Housing Assistance Policy and operational adjustments to pursue a smoother, more efficient experience for the resident.

1.11 The review provided a period of reflection on how we operate with KCC and the role undertaken by Town & Country HIA. In conjunction with the HIA we have agreed a more purposeful role for the HIA, taking on aspects that were previously carried out by MBC staff. It is also proposed to provide the HIA with greater autonomy in executing the agreed works, including making minor adjustments to specifications without the need for the DFG process to be reset and recommenced.

1.12 This has two benefits; firstly, this should improve the customer experience as they will be dealing more completely with one agency and will receive a more efficient service. Secondly, it frees our officer's time from duplicating elements of the process. This freed capacity will be utilised on the team's broader role in delivering our statutory duties to enforce housing standards.

1.13 To enable this transition to take place and provide sufficient resource to the HIA it is proposed to increase the fee that was agreed with the HIA from 12% to 15%. The fee setting is within the Council's powers to approve and has been set at 12% for the past 10 years with no increase. The modest rise reflects the increase in duties that the HIA will undertake on behalf of the Council and can be funded from the DFG grant without affecting the Council's budget.

1.14 Local housing authorities (LHA) have duties in relation to responding to requests to assess the condition of accommodation under the Housing Act 2004. The action required to be taken by the LHA is dependent on the severity of the conditions found as it relates to the occupiers. The more serious the hazard the more likely the LHA will be under a duty to act.

Otherwise the LHA has discretion to intervene.

1.15 The discretionary elements of the Housing Renewal Policy reflect these powers to intervene and provide an important mechanism for assisting our most vulnerable members of our community. This includes:

- Setting aside an element of the overall grant to provide a discretionary grant for residents who are unable to wholly fund their adaptation.
- Introducing a set of criteria for prioritising between DFG applications.
- Providing a means tested grant for vulnerable households to assist with remedying hazards; and to improve the energy efficiency of their home.

1.16 A further recommendation arising from the review will see the new Housing Renewal Policy 2023 develop a framework to prioritise the processing of grants. Currently prioritising between applicants is by date received and it the intention of the new policy to amend this to acknowledge the difficulties experienced by residents who have rapid onset illnesses and end of life conditions. A new framework will be introduced to enable those cases that require an urgent intervention to be identified and prioritised for completion.

1.17 Kent County Council has a policy to prioritise applications at their assessment stage and it is proposed to develop a new framework for the Council based on the same criteria to ensure consistency in approach. An example of what this might look like is attached at Appendix B to the report.

Alternatives considered and why rejected

It could have been decided not to adopt a new Housing Renewal Policy or the changes to how we work with the Home Improvement Agency but this approach is not recommended, as the current policy is now dated and no longer serves the best interest of our most vulnerable residents.

Background Papers

None

I have read and approved the above decision for the reasons (including possible alternative options rejected) as set out above.



Signed: _____

Leader of the Council

Full details of both the report for the decision taken above and any consideration by the relevant Policy Advisory Committee can be found at the following area of the [website](#)

Call-In: Should you be concerned about this decision and wish to call it in, please

submit a call-in form signed by any three Members to the Proper Officer by: **5pm**
31 March 2023