

Report of:	Head of Environment & Healthy Lifestyles
Contact Officer:	Mike Edmonds
Telephone No:	4416
Portfolio Leaders:	Health Portfolio Leader and Environment Portfolio Leader
Key Decision:	No
Report Track:	Health and Wellbeing Scrutiny Committee

HEALTH AND WELLBEING SCRUTINY COMMITTEE

3 MARCH 2020

FINAL REPORT FROM THE HOUSING ASSISTANCE POLICY TASK & FINISH WORKING GROUP

1 Purpose of Report

- 1.1 To present to the Scrutiny Committee the final report of the Housing Assistance Policy Task & Finish Working Group and the revised Housing Assistance Policy – Independent Living.

2 Recommendations

That the Health and Wellbeing Committee

- 2.1 note the work of the Task and Finish Working Group;
- 2.2 consider the report and the revised Housing Assistance Policy – Independent Living. (Appendix 2); and
- 2.3 determine and agree one of the options set out in paragraph 5.21 of this report.

3 Key Issues and Reasons for Recommendation

- 3.1 The Council's current Discretionary Housing Assistance Policy approved by Cabinet on 16th March 2017 is nearly 3 years old and due for review. (Appendix 1)
- 3.2 This review provides the opportunity for the Health and Wellbeing Scrutiny Committee to propose a number of wide ranging, flexible options to broaden the Council's ability to provide discretionary financial assistance to improve the quality of life for disabled residents in need of an adaptation to their home,

including opportunities to undertake preventative measures, to reduce hospital admissions and demand for social care and remove housing related obstacles preventing discharge.

- 3.3 In order to offer wider assistance the local housing authority must adopt a policy which explains how the authority will use its powers. This policy must be notified to the public and a copy made available at the Council offices.

4 Relationship to Corporate Priorities

- 4.1 This policy supports the Council's Strategic priorities Community Wellbeing and Prosperity by of increasing and improving housing choice, sustaining safe and secure communities and supporting the elderly and vulnerable.

5 Report Detail

Background

- 5.1 At its meeting held on 9th September 2019, the Health and Wellbeing Scrutiny Committee commissioned a Task and Finish Working Group to review the Council's Discretionary Housing Assistance Policy approved by Cabinet on 16th March 2017.
- 5.2 More specifically, the review was to:
- (a) look at the current policy and examine any problems with the existing system and processes;
 - (b) identify any opportunities to develop a more efficient and effective service for the Council's more vulnerable, elderly and disabled residents who need adaptations to be made in order for them to live independently, safely, confidently and with dignity in their own homes, for longer; and
 - (c) make suggested amendments to the policy to improve its effectiveness and enable those with disabilities to regain their independence faster.
- 5.3 The Task and Finish Working Group comprised the following Members:
- | | |
|------------------------------------|--------------------------|
| Councillor Maureen Freeman (Chair) | Councillor Josh Newbury |
| Councillor Diane Todd | Councillor Andrea Layton |
| Councillor Valerie Jones | Councillor Hyra Sutton |
| Councillor Doug Smith | |

Legal Context

- 5.4 Cannock Chase Council, in its role as a local housing authority, has a statutory duty to provide Disabled Facilities Grant (DFGs) to qualifying applicants under the Housing Grants, Construction and Regeneration Act 1996.

- 5.5 In addition, to providing mandatory DFGs, the Council has the power to offer discretionary financial assistance by virtue of the Regulatory Reform (housing Assistance) (England and Wales) Order 2002.

Financial Context

- 5.6 The Council's Disabled Facilities Grant allocation for 2019-20 from Staffordshire County Council in respect of the District's entitlement from the Better Care Fund is £926,471.

Task & Finish Working Group

Meeting 29th October 2019

- 5.7 At the first meeting of the Working Group on the 29th October 2019 Members received a presentation from Environmental Health Officers (Private Sector Housing).
- 5.8 The presentation covered the legal context, types of Disabled Facilities Grant, current processes, funding, policy, performance and the current problems.
- 5.9 Members were made aware that the DFG process could be complex, time consuming and bureaucratic, particularly with regards to the administration of the scheme and the means testing requirements. As such, Members were informed that this can lead to delays in processing applications and result in abortive and withdrawn applications.
- 5.10 Members were advised that the contribution a disabled applicant has to make towards an adaptation is determined by a prescribed means test, based on what the Government considers a person needs to live on per week, their income together with that of their partner, and how much they could fund through a commercial bank loan. In reality, many applicants are disabled and elderly and so are not able to access most loans.
- 5.11 In addition, because the means test does not take account of actual living costs; those applicants with high mortgages, or rent payments are hugely affected and unable to raise the funding required. As result, many applicants who do not have any available funds have a large contribution to make or do not qualify for a DFG.
- 5.12 Administration of the means test is time consuming for both the Council and the applicant, who has to produce evidence of their income (bank statements, benefit entitlements, wage slips and pension details) which is then used to calculate their contribution. This causes delays in the process and can lead to applicants withdrawing or aborting their claim.
- 5.13 Members were keen to ensure that any policy changes should provide greater flexibility for discretionary assistance and wherever possible the process was made simpler and easier for the most vulnerable applicants. Members of the Working Group agreed to research other current policies and examples of best practice in order to shape any future policy changes.

Meeting 19th November 2019

- 5.14 At the second meeting of the Working Group held on 19th November 2019, Members reported back on their findings from looking at other policies and examples of good practice.
- 5.15 It was agreed by the Working Group that officers should draft a revised policy that provides more flexibility and discretion in the allocation and delivery of Disabled Facilities Grants. This would, thereby reducing the time taken to process applications and eliminate unnecessary bureaucracy; so that residents have greater access to home adaptations to enable them to live in their own homes safely and independently.
- 5.16 In particular, officers were requested to look at policy changes that supported wider social care outcomes enabling additional works to be funded that support independent living, hospital discharge and health and safety issues where prevention is key.
- 5.17 Officers were requested to look at new forms of financial assistance including:
- Hospital Prevention and Discharge Assistance
 - Dementia Friendly Assistance
 - Carer Support Assistance
 - Assistive Technology Assistance
 - Discounting Applicant's contributions
- 5.18 Members also requested that officers promote the grants available to residents in a more targeted, clear and concise manner, should the revised policy be approved by the Council.
- 5.19 The table below summarises the changes included in the proposed Policy attached as Appendix 2:

Description	New /Existing/ Amended	Funding	Means Test	Land Charge	Objective
DFG (Mandatory Assistance)	Existing	£30,000	Y except where a child or on passported benefits	For cost over £5,000 Max charge £10,000 Duration 10 years	Adaptation of the home in accordance with the criteria in the Housing (Grants, Construction and Regeneration) Act 1996
Discretionary Assistance - Top- up grant	Amended	£20,000	As above	Y Full amount of grant	Provide for cost of the adaptation scheme where works exceed the Mandatory £30,000 limit

ITEM NO. 4.5

Description	New /Existing/ Amended	Funding	Means Test	Land Charge	Objective
Discretionary Hospital Prevention and Discharge Assistance	New	£12,000	N	Y Full amount of grant 10 years	Minor adaptations and other works designed to prevent admission to hospital, care or nursing home or assist with speedy discharge from hospital
Discretionary Dementia Friendly - Dementia Cognitive and Behavioural conditions Adaptations Grant	New	£10,000	N	Y Full amount of grant 10 years	Adaptations to assist the person diagnosed with dementia or cognitive/behavioural conditions to manage their surroundings and retain their independence.
Discretionary Relocation Grant	Amended	£7,000	Y except where a child or on passported benefits	Y Full amount of grant 10 years	To meet the reasonable costs associated with moving where the existing home is not suitable for adaptations
Discretionary Carer support assistance	New	£15,000	Y except where a child or on passported benefits	Y Full amount of grant 10 years	Provision of appropriate accommodation for a carer where required to provide 24/7 care.
Discretionary OT Assessment assistance	New	£200	N	N	Provision of Occupational Therapy report where an organisation/charity is to fund adaptation scheme
Discretionary Assistive technology assistance	New	£3,000	Y	Y Full amount of grant 10 years	Supports a technology based approach to keeping people safe and well in their homes. eg

Description	New /Existing/ Amended	Funding	Means Test	Land Charge	Objective
					life line, fall detectors, key safes – for purchasing equipment and monthly fee to connect with call centre (if required)

Other measures

Extended warranties: 3 years	New	As appropriate	Included in grant	As per grant	For all adaptations which require electrical installations such as through-floor lifts, step lifts, stair lifts, closomats etc.
Local Council Tax Reduction to be considered a DFG passport benefit	New	Not applicable	N	Not applicable	Anticipated to help people in sole receipt of this benefit to access necessary adaptations.
Discounting of first £5000 of applicants contribution following means testing	New	£5,000	Y	N	Anticipated to help people who are obliged to make a significant or unaffordable contribution to the adaptations required.

Options available to the Health and Wellbeing Scrutiny Committee

- 5.20 The Council does not have to offer discretionary financial assistance, but failure to do so could leave vulnerable people at risk of avoidable harm. The current increase in the levels of Better Care Funding is best used to support the aims of the BCF.
- 5.21 In summary, the Committee can either:
- (a) endorse the final report and the revised Housing Assistance Policy and supports a recommendation for Cabinet to approve and adopt the revised policy;

- (b) amend the final report and the Housing Assistance Policy and supports a recommendation for Cabinet to approve and adopt the amended policy; or
- (c) reject the final report and the Housing Assistance Policy and propose another way forward.

6 Implications

6.1 Financial

- 6.1.1 Grants and assistance to individuals as outlined in this report will be provided only up to the limit of the total DFG grants received by the Council. As such, there will be no direct financial impact on the Council's other financial resources.

6.2 Legal

- 6.2.1 The Council must adopt a policy for discretionary housing assistance before it can utilise its powers under the Regulatory Reform (housing Assistance) (England and Wales) Order 2002 as amended in 2008.
- 6.2.2 The proposals support the requirements of the Care Act 2014 which requires local authorities to deliver services built around and individual's need in order to promote wellbeing and, where possible, support independent living.

6.3 Human Resources

None

6.4 Section 17 (Crime Prevention)

None

6.5 Human Rights Act

None

6.6 Data Protection

None

6.7 Risk Management

- 6.7.1 There are no identified major risks associated with the revised policy. Not having a policy could mean that the Council would be unable to utilise the Better Care Fund for anything other than mandatory Disabled Facilities Grant. Any financial assistance in excess of mandatory disabled facilities grant is discretionary and will be reduced/ceased subject to funding.

6.8 Equality & Diversity

- 6.8.1 The revised Housing Assistance Policy has been subject to an Equality Impact Assessment. The proposed changes to the policy will have a positive impact on

elderly, disabled and more vulnerable people, with no negative impact on any person with a protected characteristic.

6.9 **Best Value**

This Policy seeks to achieve best consideration in the administration of mandatory and discretionary assistance.

7 Appendices to the Report

Appendix 1	Housing Assistance Policy March 2017
Appendix 2	Mandatory DFG and Housing Assistance Policy – Independent Living

Previous Consideration

None

Background Papers

Cabinet Report - Delivery of Disabled Adaptations and Policy for Discretionary Housing Assistance 16 March 2017