

WYRE FOREST DISTRICT COUNCIL

CABINET
23RD MARCH 2010

Housing Assistance Policy

OPEN	
SUSTAINABLE COMMUNITY STRATEGY THEME:	Improved Health and Wellbeing
CORPORATE PLAN AIM:	Enabling Community Wellbeing
CABINET MEMBER:	Councillor T. Onslow
DIRECTOR:	Mike Parker, Director of Planning & Regulatory Services
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APPENDICES:	Wyre Forest District Council Private Sector Housing Assistance Policy 2010 <i>The appendix to this report has been circulated electronically and a public inspection copy is available on request. (See front cover for details).</i>

1. PURPOSE OF REPORT

- 1.1 To agree the proposed Private Sector Assistance Policy 2010, a replacement for the existing 2009 Policy, including changes to Discretionary Financial Assistance provided to improve housing standards.

2. RECOMMENDATION

The Cabinet is asked to DECIDE:

- 2.1 To adopt the Wyre Forest Private Sector Assistance Policy 2010 as set out in Appendix 1.**

3. BACKGROUND

- 3.1 Disabled Facilities Grants are governed by a strict legislative framework (the Housing, Grants, Construction and Regeneration Act 1996) and statutory guidance that has followed which have both increased the maximum grant payable and introduced the ability of Councils to clawback part of the grant in certain circumstances. These changes were outlined in the report in 2008.
- 3.2 From 1st April 2010 the delivery of the Disabled Facilities Grants and some discretionary financial assistance (to be called Home Repairs Assistance) work will be undertaken through a newly commissioned Home Improvement Agency managed by Festival Housing (please see Cabinet report of 16th February 2010).

- 3.3 The Housing Assistance Policy will also cover assistance given to bring properties in the private sector (owner-occupied) up to the Decent Homes standard or to respond to category one hazards. This financial assistance is offered as an interest-free loan. It is critical to the council meeting its decent homes targets (Public Sector Agreement 7) and funding will be used to assist those households where work is less than £5k or who don't qualify for Kickstart funding.
- 3.4 The Housing Assistance Policy supports the Council in the achievement of its Sustainable Community Strategy and the Corporate Aim of a Better Quality of Life.
- 3.5 Over the previous three years (from 2007 to the present day) the Council has undertaken disabled facilities grants to more than 600 elderly or vulnerable households and offered decent homes assistance to 141 households.

4. KEY ISSUES

- 4.1 The Housing Assistance Policy seeks to meet the following aims;
- Increasing the percentage of vulnerable persons in the private sector whose accommodation meets the 'Decent Homes' standard
 - Ensuring adequate conditions in rented accommodation.
 - Meeting the statutory duties of the Council to respond to health and safety issues in housing.
 - Meeting the statutory duties of the Council in relation to provision of housing adaptations for disabled persons.
 - Meeting the recognised local needs and circumstances identified in the current Housing Strategy, Community Strategy, Empty Property Strategy, Affordable Warmth Strategy, Community Safety Partnership Strategy, and Worcestershire County Community Strategy, (Wyre Forest Matters) and Supporting People Strategy 2005 - 2010, regarding house conditions and their affect upon health and safety.
- 4.2 The commencement of the new Home Improvement Agency and start of the Kickstart has given officers from across the council the impetus to review the current way financial assistance is delivered to home owners to improve their homes.
- 4.3 A group of Private Sector Officers have agreed a common policy for allocating Home Repairs Assistance and this is now enshrined in the Housing Assistance Policy for Wyre Forest. This common policy means home owners will receive a standardised service regardless of where they live. Through the use of a clawback, the Council is able to maximise the use of resources, as the funding pot is, in time, replenished whilst still bringing properties up to decent homes standard.
- 4.4 The introduction of Kickstart and maximum entitlement of Home Repairs Assistance being restricted to £5k should mean greater numbers of households are able to be assisted.
- 4.5 Households who have sought assistance for home repairs but have not yet been approved, will be transferred onto the new Housing Assistance Policy from 1st April 2010. All those households who have already been approved for assistance will

continue with the scheme under the Housing Assistance Policy April 2009 subject to funds being available until 01/04/10.

- 4.6 The Council uses Regional Housing Funding for Decent Homes to provide additional grants and loans designed to respond to local housing need and stock conditions as identified in the Stock Condition Survey and other methods. This Regional Housing Funding allocation to appropriate schemes is reviewed annually and delegated authority has been granted for scheme approval to the Director of Planning and Regulatory Services and the relevant Cabinet Member. Details of these schemes are revised and detailed annually separate to this Policy.

5. FINANCIAL IMPLICATIONS

- 5.1 The council currently commits £800k p.a. to Disabled Facilities Grants which includes a payment of £429k in government grant and £120k for decent homes assistance for owner occupiers.

6. LEGAL AND POLICY IMPLICATIONS

- 6.1 The Regulatory Reform Order (2002) gave Local Authorities the freedom to determine individually the financial assistance they offer with the exception of Disabled Facilities Grants providing they adopt a Housing Assistance Policy outlining the assistance they offer.

7. EQUALITY IMPACT NEEDS ASSESSMENT

- 7.1 The Housing Assistance Policy has been screened for equality impact in December 2009.

8. RISK MANAGEMENT

- 8.1 There is a risk that if the proposed Housing Assistance Policy is not approved, then the new Home Improvement Agency will have to operate a number of different policies across the county which will cause inequalities in service delivery.
- 8.2 Failure to update the policy in line with changes could leave the council vulnerable to legal challenge.

9. CONCLUSION

- 9.1 Assistance for the improvement or adaptation of properties is an essential part of responding to the needs of an aging society and supporting home ownership for vulnerable people.

10. CONSULTEES

- 10.1 Corporate Management Team
10.2 District Councils within the County

11. BACKGROUND PAPERS

- 11.1 Cabinet Report 16th February: Recommissioning the Home Improvement Agency
11.2 Housing Assistance Policy