

Central Bedfordshire Council

SOCIAL CARE, HEALTH & HOUSING OVERVIEW & SCRUTINY COMMITTEE

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Central Bedfordshire Housing Assistance Policy

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This report relates to a Key Issue

Purpose of this report

1. The report introduces the reviewed Central Bedfordshire Housing Assistance policy and proposes that it is presented to Executive for adoption.

RECOMMENDATIONS

The Committee is asked to:

1. Consider the feedback received as a result of the public consultation on the reviewed Central Bedfordshire Housing Assistance policy. This is included as Appendix B
2. Comment on the draft Central Bedfordshire Housing Assistance policy (Appendix A), with particular regard to the Council's duty to promote equality and provide comment to the Executive
3. Note the equality impact assessment of the draft Housing Assistance policy

Issues

1. Legislation requires local authorities to develop a policy for providing households with financial assistance to improve their homes. Every local authority is required to adopt and publish such a policy. The Council's current (second) Renewal Policy was approved by Executive in July 2012.
2. The current policy has been operating relatively successfully during the last three years. The policy is very much Loan Assistance based, which has resulted in funding returning to the Council, enabling further

improvement work. £0.093M was returned to the Council in 2014/15 and £0.125M in 2015/16. Appendix C provides a summary of the types of assistance provided over recent years. Customer satisfaction is measured at the end of the process and remains high

3. Housing assistance is popular since promotion through Warm Homes Healthy People, and demand normally exceeds the budget. Returned funding can help the programme be extended to assist further customers. In general, the policy is working well and only minor changes are recommended with no changes to overall policy intent. There is, however, a proposed closer alignment with the aims of the Better Care Fund in provision of assistance to help prevent hospital and care home admissions, and facilitate earlier discharge.
4. The types of assistance proposed in the draft policy are broadly similar and are aimed at preventing negative health impacts. Research in 2013 indicated that the highest proportions of health hazards in homes in Central Bedfordshire are Fall/Trip hazards and Excess Cold

Options for consideration

5. Whilst the Council has the option of not providing any assistance, the eligibility criteria helps ensure a basic safety net for the most vulnerable households with poor or unsafe housing conditions. If there was no Housing Assistance, some cases would result in costly enforcement work in order to remedy hazards that pose a risk to residents. The Council has a duty to take action in respect of category 1 hazards.
6. The Council has to provide mandatory Disabled Facilities Grants (DFGs) and receives funding through the Better Care Fund. The Council would be legally challenged if DFGs were not provided. There would be alternative cost impacts in some cases where discretionary funding is not provided, for example, funding for discretionary Adaptation works would be required for customers meeting Care Act eligibility.
7. The public consultation did not recommend a significantly different policy for Central Bedfordshire. There were comments concerning the need to develop good quality and accessible homes through the Development Strategy.

Reason/s for decision

8. There are no perceived negative impacts of the draft Policy as it improves assistance for older people in Park Homes and disabled residents with assessed needs that don't qualify for mandatory Disabled Facilities Grant. The draft policy aligns with aims of the Better Care Fund and provides more opportunity to work with landlords and

empty homes owners where they want to work with the Council to meet urgent affordable housing need.

9. Public consultation was undertaken from late March to early May and resulted in more than 50 responses. The Consultation report is attached at appendix B. Respondents were generally supportive and in agreement with the reviewed policy. 78% agreed with the priorities in the draft policy, 74% agreed with additional assistance to Park Homes residents, 80% agreed with additional assistance for empty homes owners where they help the Council meet affordable housing need, and only 8% were dissatisfied with the draft policy.

Council Priorities

- Enhancing Central Bedfordshire
 - Protecting the vulnerable; improving wellbeing
10. The policy improves the quality of homes and helps enhance residential environments. Assistance provides a safety net for vulnerable households living in unsafe, cold or unsatisfactory homes. The policy helps improve the health and well being of customers receiving assistance to improve their homes.

Corporate Implications

Legal Implications

11. The Regulatory Reform (Housing Assistance) (England and Wales) Order 2002 requires local authorities to develop a policy for providing households with financial assistance to improve their homes if the authority wishes to use its powers under the Order. The Order removed previous prescriptive legislation (apart from DFG legislation) and provided authorities with more freedom to develop financial products and innovative forms of assistance.

Financial and Risk Implications

12. The capital programme in 2015/16 was £0.15M gross (£0.1M net) but increases to £0.25M gross (£0.15M net) for 2016/17, and £0.3M gross (£0.2M net) for the remainder of the MTFP period. Repaid Loan assistance can help provide further in year funding to meet demand but is not predictable.
13. The programme is monitored and reported upon monthly through Capital Budget reports. This helps ensure sound forecasting and identifies risks of potential over or under spends of the programme.
14. The policy has established working procedures and systems in places to ensure a fair and consistent customer services and programme

administration. When approved, the revised policy will require appropriate amendments to those working procedures and practice notes.

15. The policy mitigates the risks of:
 - Failing to deliver the council's priorities and addressing the key private sector housing issues
 - Failing to prevent negative health impacts, and
 - Failing to meet statutory requirements.

Public Health Implications

16. The policy looks to improve the health and well being of vulnerable residents in poor housing conditions. Living in cold and damp homes can have negative health impacts. Falls and trips are a cause of hospital admissions. Unsafe and inaccessible homes occupied by disabled people have multiple negative impacts on residents and their carers.

Equalities Implications

17. An equalities impact assessment (EIA) has been completed as part of the policy development process, and it is available as a background document. The EIA assesses whether the draft policy supports Central Bedfordshire's legal duty to:
 - Eliminate unlawful discrimination harassment and victimisation and other conduct prohibited by the Act
 - Advance equality of opportunity between people who share a protected characteristic and people who do not share it
 - Foster good relations between people who share a protected characteristic and people who do not share it
18. The EIA concludes that the revised policy will contribute to ensuring that all users and potential users of services and employees are treated fairly and respectfully with regard to the protected characteristics of age, disability, gender, reassignment, marriage or civil partnership, pregnancy and maternity, race, religion, sex and sexual orientation.
19. The assistance set out in the policy is targeted at those made most vulnerable by poor quality or unsuitable housing. This includes people with disabilities that struggle to live independently in their home because of the physical barriers, Park Home owners that are most commonly older people that are at an increased risk of fuel poverty and older, frail people that are at most risk of falls in the home.
20. Poor housing conditions have a disproportionate impact on vulnerable households as they may have poorer health and access to

financial resources to remedy the situation may be limited. The range of assistance advances equality of opportunity by giving those at most risk of poor/unsuitable housing financial assistance to improve their housing situation and thereby their health and wellbeing.

21. The EIA found no evidence that this draft policy could damage relations or contribute to inequality

Implications for Work Programming

22. None.

Conclusion and next Steps

23. The reviewed Central Bedfordshire Housing Assistance Policy looks to build upon the success of the existing policy but develops further assistance for some vulnerable groups; older people in park homes and residents with disabilities who cannot be assisted (partly or at all) by DFG assistance. The reviewed policy also enhances assistance to empty homes owners where they help the Council meet affordable housing need.
24. The reviewed policy also provides opportunities to use funding allocated through the Better Care Fund to facilitate early discharge from hospital or prevent admission to a hospital or care home where such assistance is recommended by health or social care professionals. This is new to the draft policy and should provide speedy solutions for vulnerable residents in this position.
25. The reviewed policy attached at appendix A will be presented to Executive for adoption on 2nd August 2016.

Appendices

The following Appendices are attached/provided through an electronic link:

26. Appendix A – Draft Central Bedfordshire Housing Assistance Policy 2016 – 2020
27. Appendix B – Consultation report
28. Appendix C - Summary of the types of assistance provided over recent years

Background Papers

29. The following background papers, not previously available to the public, were taken into account and are available on the Council's website:
 - (i) Equality Impact Assessment (link to be provided once established)