

(Informal Joint) Cabinet



Forest Heath
District Council

Title of Report:	Housing Assistance Policy and Application Guidance	
Report No:	CAB/FH/15/058	
Report to and date:	(Informal Joint) Cabinet	24 November 2015
Lead officer:	Andy Newman Service Manager (Housing Standards) Tel: 01638 719276 Email: andrew.newman@westsuffolk.gov.uk	
Purpose of report:	To approve the revised Housing Assistance Policy and Application Guidance.	
Recommendation:	It is <u>RECOMMENDED</u> that the revised West Suffolk Housing Assistance Policy and Application Guidance, as contained in Appendix A to Report No CAB/FH/15/058, be approved.	
Key Decision: <i>(Check the appropriate box and delete all those that do not apply.)</i>	<i>Is this a Key Decision and, if so, under which definition?</i> Yes, it is a Key Decision - <input type="checkbox"/> No, it is not a Key Decision - <input checked="" type="checkbox"/>	
<i>The decisions made as a result of this report will usually be published within 48 hours and cannot be actioned until five clear working days of the publication of the decision have elapsed. This item is included on the Decisions Plan.</i>		
Consultation:	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> The proposed changes simplify the processing of existing policy and do not essentially change it. Consultation is not considered necessary. 	

Alternative option(s):		<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Alternatives are to reduce the extent of the policy or to dispense with it, (since there is no legal requirement for it). However the aim of the Housing Strategy is to increase the number of decent homes occupied, particularly for more vulnerable residents, so these options were not considered further. 	
Implications:			
Are there any financial implications? If yes, please give details		Yes <input type="checkbox"/> No <input checked="" type="checkbox"/> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Both councils currently have annual capital budgets for Housing Assistance Grants of £800,000 for St Edmundsbury and £420,000 for Forest Heath. The revisions to this policy will not require any additional funding. 	
Are there any staffing implications? If yes, please give details		Yes <input type="checkbox"/> No <input checked="" type="checkbox"/>	
Are there any ICT implications? If yes, please give details		Yes <input type="checkbox"/> No <input checked="" type="checkbox"/>	
Are there any legal and/or policy implications? If yes, please give details		Yes <input type="checkbox"/> No <input checked="" type="checkbox"/> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Housing legislation, in the form of the Regulatory Reform Order, enables a discretionary policy of this nature. 	
Are there any equality implications? If yes, please give details		Yes <input type="checkbox"/> No <input checked="" type="checkbox"/> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> The policy does not exclude any resident or prejudice them under the Equality Act and the processes aligned to the policy will be fully compliant with this legislation. 	
Risk/opportunity assessment:		<i>(potential hazards or opportunities affecting corporate, service or project objectives)</i>	
Risk area	Inherent level of risk (before controls)	Controls	Residual risk (after controls)
	Low/Medium/ High*		Low/Medium/ High*
Limited take up of the discretionary grants	Medium	The grants scheme will be promoted and targeted as appropriate	Low
Ward(s) affected:		All Wards The policy is not restricted to any specific wards, residents who meet the eligibility criteria are entitled to make an application.	
Background papers: <i>(all background papers are to be published on the website and a link included)</i>		None	

Documents attached:

(Please list any appendices.)

Appendix A: Revised West Suffolk
Housing Assistance Policy and
Application Guidance

Appendix B: Existing Housing
Assistance Policy and Application
Guidance

1. Key issues and reasons for recommendation(s)

1.1 Background

- 1.1.1 The West Suffolk Housing Strategy recognises the importance of maximising the use of existing housing. The West Suffolk councils (Forest Heath and St Edmundsbury) offer discretionary grant assistance under the Housing Assistance Policy. The strategy contains an action to review and revise the policy to ensure it meets its purpose.
- 1.1.2 Each of the two West Suffolk councils had its own Housing Assistance Policy prior to sharing services and in 2012 these policies were aligned. The current policy supports the prevention of harm to health by helping vulnerable homeowners without sufficient funds, or access to other sources of funding, to maintain or repair their own homes. It also offers a grant to owners of longer-term empty homes to enable these to be repaired and let out.
- 1.1.3 The review considered that, in the main, the existing policy helped to ensure decent safe housing for households benefiting from a grant.
- 1.1.4 Some changes were however considered necessary to simplify the policy and increase uptake. In doing so, we also wish to introduce processes to ensure we recover as much of our funding as possible so that we can continue to offer grants and invest in this sector.

1.2 Key Changes

1.2.1 The key changes are:

- Bringing together current decent homes grants (small works, heating & insulation and major works) into a single Housing Assistance Grant. The eligibility criteria remain the same, while simplifying the process.
- Widening of eligibility for the empty home grant to incentivise uptake. The change removes the previous criteria around specific leasing schemes and nominated families from our housing register. The view is that it is better to incentivise the occupation of homes in this way, rather than homes remaining vacant with no uptake for the grant. Should enforcement action prove necessary to release the empty home for occupation, this reasonable approach will be seen in the Councils' favour.
- A requirement to pay back all Housing Assistance Grant when the property is sold or transferred (with the exception of grants under £1000). In the case of Empty Home Grant, repayment is due if the property becomes vacant for longer than three months.
- A requirement to ensure value for money in respect of grant aided works. With constrained budgets it is particularly important that the cost and quality of work is satisfactory.
- The removal of the discretionary 'top up' grant for the mandatory Disabled Facilities Grant (DFG). The maximum grant available of £30,000 is considered reasonable and sufficient.

- The policy also includes an appendix relating to DFGs including a protocol to ensure that the Councils meet our legal duty in that all works are eligible, reasonable and practical, will meet the essential needs of the disabled resident and can be completed at an acceptable cost. The protocol is designed to ensure that DFG is appropriate and that other options have been considered.
- Since agreement with the Portfolio Holder for Housing, a further amendment is being recommended to how some charges are imposed on properties. In respect of discretionary grants, at present, the charge is a local land charge and is declared if a property search is carried out but it needs to be specifically reclaimed by the Council. It is now possible to register this charge with Land Registry. This means the charge can be automatically reclaimed by the Council, as the charge is applied directly, therefore making the process for reclaiming grant monies on the sale of the property easier and more secure. This change does not affect the policy itself just the way in which grant conditions are administered.

2. Promotion

- 2.1 The new policy will be promoted to encourage uptake for these grants targeting areas of West Suffolk in particular where there is a density of poorer housing and where residents may benefit from a Home Assistance Grant.
- 2.2 We will promote new Empty Homes Grant in line with our strategy. The grant is part of a wider set of tools that we are using to work with and support owners in bringing their homes back into use (including enforcement, where appropriate).