



Cabinet (Resources) Panel

11 February 2014

Report title	Revisions to the Private Sector Housing Policy	
Decision designation	AMBER	
Cabinet member with lead responsibility	Councillor Peter Bilson Economic Regeneration and Prosperity	
Key decision	No	
In forward plan	No	
Wards affected	All	
Accountable director	Tim Johnson, Education and Enterprise	
Originating service	Education and Enterprise	
Accountable employee(s)	Lisa Morgan	Housing Improvement Officer
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Report to be/has been considered by	n/a	

Recommendation for action or decision:

The Cabinet (Resources) Panel is recommended to:

1. Approve the amendments to the existing Private Sector Housing, Small Works Assistance Grants policy under the Regulatory Reform (Housing Assistance)(England and Wales) Order 2002 to remove the repayment requirements for grants up to a value of £500.

Recommendation for noting:

The Cabinet (Resources) Panel is asked to note:

1. If the cost to the housing capital budget reaches £4,000 during a financial year, a report will be submitted to Cabinet (Resources) Panel reviewing the policy.

1.0 Purpose

- 1.1 The purpose of this report is to request that Cabinet (Resources) Panel approves the amendments to the existing Private Sector Housing Small Works Assistance Grants policy under the Regulatory Reform (Housing Assistance) (England and Wales) Order 2002 to remove the repayment requirements for grants up to the value of £500.
- 1.2 It is proposed that all works carried out up to a value of £500 are carried out through the handyperson scheme.
- 1.3 Grants made for works carried out with a value between £500 and £5,000 will remain repayable on demolition, sale or change of ownership, through a charge being added to the property.
- 1.4 All grant criteria and eligibility are to remain the same; applications will be processed through Housing Services.

2.0 Background

- 2.1 At its meeting of 5 December 2012, Cabinet approved the delivery of private sector housing assistance measures through an "in house" Home Improvement Service. The housing assistance policy provides for repayable emergency small works assistance grants to assist vulnerable homeowners to deal with housing matters which potentially compromise their health and safety.
- 2.2 The small works assistance grants scheme targets owner occupier households with limited income. It is used for works of an urgent nature considered to be dangerous or prejudicial to health and includes electrical and gas safety as well as security improvements.
- 2.3 Small works assistance grants are available across the City through Wolverhampton Home Improvement Service (WHIS) via the Handyperson Scheme, to owner-occupiers over 60 years of age who are in receipt of means-tested benefits. A maximum grant of £5,000 per application is available for works where there is immediate risk to the householder. The grant is payable for works to address situations which are considered to be dangerous (category 1 hazards under the Housing Health and Safety Rating System) or likely to be "prejudicial to the health" of the occupants. These defects should be of an "acute" nature rather than indicative of a "chronic" long-standing or gradual degenerative condition. The exception to this may be in circumstances where long standing rot /infestation or disrepair would lead to imminent risk of collapse of a part of the structure.
- 2.4 The housing capital programme approved by Council on 1 March 2012 included a budget of £1.0 million per annum for five years for small works assistance from 2012/13.

3.0 Rational

- 3.1 Early feedback from the operation of WHIS has highlighted that the need to provide a more reactive service to deal with acute issues and the current policy of requiring all grants to be repayable regardless of the amount, discourages the most vulnerable residents in the city from using the service. The potential recipients of these grants are frequently very vulnerable and the complexity involved in explaining the process of making small charges on their property in order for the works to be carried out often results in them refusing assistance. This leads to the resident continuing to endure substandard housing conditions. This may have a continuing detrimental impact on their health and well-being and require a greater input from public sector services.
- 3.2 It is proposed therefore to amend the housing assistance policy to remove the repayment requirement for small works assistance grants under the value of £500.
- 3.3 The costs to the Council of registering small charges of less than £500 represent a significant proportion of the cost of administering the scheme. The proposed changes will reduce the administrative and legal cost to the authority as well as ensuring that more vulnerable people are able to access a suitable and cost effective service.
- 3.4 Progress on expenditure and assistance delivered will be monitored monthly through the WHIS reporting mechanism housing strategy delivery plan.

4.0 Financial implications

- 4.1 Non-repayable grants will be an immediate non-recoverable cost to the housing capital programme. The policy limits the non-recoverable element to works costing less than £500.
- 4.2 Under the current policy, the administration of an individual grant including Land Registry fees and reclaiming the charge is between £150 and £280 per property. Assuming the minimum administrative cost level and maximum cost of works, the maximum cost to the housing capital programme is £350 per grant. In 2013/14 there have been no grants made under £500. It is not possible to estimate the number of grants under £500 which will be made, however if the cost to the housing capital budget reaches £4,000 during a financial year, a report will be submitted to Cabinet (Resources) Panel reviewing the policy.

[CF/18122013/V]

5.0 Legal implications

- 5.1 The Regulatory Reform (Housing Assistance) (England and Wales) Order 2002 confers a power on local authorities to improve living conditions in their area. It provides that assistance can be given for a range of matters including repairing living accommodation and its adaptation or improvement. Housing assistance can be provided in any form (i.e. grant or loan) and can be made subject to conditions. This power to provide assistance

can only be exercised once a policy has been adopted and published. Thereafter the local authority can only provide assistance in accordance with that policy. The recommendations within this report are consistent with the Council's strategic objectives in operating the housing assistance policy.

- 5.2 The proposed alteration to the policy would represent a cost saving to the Council due to the reduction in administration of local land charges and follow up administration through Legal Services. [RB/20122013/A]

6.0 Equalities implications

- 6.1 Initial equality analysis has been completed a full analysis is not required.

7.0 Environmental implications

- 7.1 Small works assistance grants enables Housing Services to improve the standard of housing in the City, reduce inequalities and potentially reduce carbon emissions in line with the Council's sustainability strategy; in turn this will improve the function, amenity and visual impact of the City neighbourhoods.

8.0 Human resources implications

- 8.1 Administration of the grants received will be contained within existing resources from Housing Services.

9.0 Schedule of background papers

- 9.1 Housing Assistance in Wolverhampton 11 April 2012 Cabinet report,
Delivery of Housing Assistance Policies, 5 December 2012 Cabinet Resources Panel
Regenerating Wolverhampton, Cabinet Team – 26 April 2004
The Regulatory Reform (Housing Assistance) (England and Wales) Order 2002
Housing Renewal Guidance – ODPM Circular 05/2003