

**CABINET**  
**26 MARCH 2019**

**PUBLIC DOCUMENT**

**TITLE OF REPORT: HOUSING GRANTS POLICY 2019-2024**

REPORT OF : SERVICE DIRECTOR - REGULATORY

EXECUTIVE MEMBER : EXECUTIVE MEMBER FOR HOUSING AND ENVIRONMENTAL HEALTH

COUNCIL PRIORITY : ATTRACTIVE AND THRIVING AND RESPONSIVE AND EFFICIENT

**1. EXECUTIVE SUMMARY**

1.1 This report asks Cabinet to consider and adopt a Housing Grants Policy 2019-2024 to replace the Council's existing Private Sector Housing Renewal Policy.

**2. RECOMMENDATIONS**

2.1 That Cabinet adopts the Housing Grants Policy 2019-2024 set out in Appendix A.

**3. REASONS FOR RECOMMENDATIONS**

3.1 The Council's existing Private Sector Housing Policy is outdated and no longer relevant to national or local circumstances. A new Housing Grants Policy is proposed which properly reflects the objectives set out in the Council's Housing Strategy.

**4. ALTERNATIVE OPTIONS CONSIDERED**

4.1 Option A. Cease providing any grant funding for the private sector. This would result in a direct saving of £60K from the capital budget but it would remove a safety net from poorer households who benefit from this grant and possibly could result in other burdens on the public purse if defects that have not been repaired or addressed lead to future health issues for the affected occupants.

4.2 Option B. Cease providing a Home Repair Assistance Grant (HRAG) but investigate other funding sources that could benefit private sector owner occupiers and tenants. The comments in option A also apply. There could be some mitigation of the future health issues if other sources of funding can be accessed. However, currently such funding streams are likely to be for energy efficiency works, not basic repairs.

## **5. CONSULTATION WITH RELEVANT MEMBERS AND EXTERNAL ORGANISATIONS**

- 5.1 The Executive Member for Housing and Environmental Health has been consulted and supports the Housing Grants Policy and the revised approach to Home Repairs Assistance Grant.

## **6. FORWARD PLAN**

- 6.1 This report does not contain a recommendation on a key decision and has not been referred to in the Forward Plan.

## **7. BACKGROUND**

- 7.1 From the 1970s onwards, all Governments sought to support the maintenance and renovation of the private sector housing stock through various grant schemes. The Housing Grants Construction and Regeneration Act 1996 was the last piece of primary legislation dealing with grant aid and is still the basis for delivery of mandatory disabled facilities grants (DFGs).
- 7.2 However, Local Authority duties/powers to offer a wide range of grants under the Housing Grants Construction and Regeneration Act 1996 were revoked by the Regulatory Reform (Housing Assistance)(England & Wales) Order 2002 (RRO), with the aim of providing more flexibility for local issues. The only exception was for DFGs, which continue to be mandatory grants.
- 7.3 The Government's approach at this time was set out in guidance from the Office of the Deputy Prime Minister in 2002. [Note, these functions now fall under the Ministry for Housing, Communities and Local Government.] The Government's view was that it is primarily the responsibility of homeowners to maintain their own property but accepted that some homeowners, particularly the elderly and most vulnerable, do not have the resources to keep their homes in good repair. Local Authorities therefore had a role to provide assistance in these cases. The stated Government view at the time was that an authority would be failing in its duty as a housing enabler and its responsibility to consider the condition of the local private sector stock if it did not make some provision for (private sector housing) assistance and local authorities were required to publish a policy regarding housing grants.
- 7.4 NHDC's Private Sector Housing Renewal Policy (PSHRP) came into effect in July 2003 and there have been various minor amendments since, the last being in 2008. The Council's offer in the original policy was:
- Handy person scheme
  - DFGs
  - Discretionary Renovation Grants/Loans
  - Home Repair Assistance Grants (HRAGs)

The handy person scheme and discretionary renovation grants/loans ceased to be offered a number of years ago as part of efficiency savings. The Council retains the statutory responsibility for offering DFGs but from October 2017, the delivery of the service was transferred to the Hertfordshire Home Improvement Agency, which has developed its own policy around the DFG offer.

- 7.5 The Council currently still offers discretionary HRAGs, based on criteria set out in the current PSHRP. The annual budget in recent years has been £60K. Grants are targeted at those in receipt of means tested benefits, for the following types of repairs/improvements:
- a) To remedy essential repairs or conditions that interfere materially with the personal comfort of an elderly, infirm or disabled occupant.
  - b) Remedial action to remove Category 1 hazard(s) (e.g serious hazards such as a leaking roof or lack of heating) where cost of works is less than £2,750 and property is occupied by person(s) falling within the defined vulnerable group for that hazard.
  - c) Urgent adaptations for the care of the disabled, elderly or infirm will be considered from applicants, including those not in receipt of benefit, in exceptional circumstances only, subject to authorisation by the Chief Officer and the Portfolio Holder.
  - d) Improvement to home security for the disabled, elderly or infirm.
  - e) Essential and significant repairs to the basic fabric or services of residential mobile homes.
  - f) Energy efficiency works as follows, where applicants are not eligible for assistance under another scheme e.g. Warm Front
- 7.6 However, there is now no central Government requirement to offer any housing related grant assistance, other than for DFGs. Full Council resolved at its February 2019 meeting to continue to support HRAGs through to 2023/24.

## **8. RELEVANT CONSIDERATIONS**

- 8.1 Having a warm, safe home is a basic need and the Council has supported the maintenance of good standards in the housing stock within the district for many years. In the Council's Housing & Homelessness Strategy 2013-2018, two of the four strategic priorities in the Strategy had relevance with regard to the private sector:
- Make the best use of existing housing stock
  - Warmer, safer, healthier homes
- The proposed Housing Strategy 2019-2024 continues this theme, with one of the three priorities being 'Improving standards of housing'.
- 8.2 Using savings or borrowing to fund housing maintenance/renovation has been and continues to be a good investment. However, it remains the case that there are poorer households and also 'capital rich revenue poor' households who are unable to secure funding for basic repairs and improvements where local authority support can have a positive impact on quality of life for residents.

- 8.3 HRAG has been shown to be a useful support mechanism to enable households who need to carry out urgent repairs but do not have the financial means to do so. Examples of the types of work for which grants have been sought are repairs or replacement of boilers, dealing with dampness caused by building defects and undertaking urgent electrical repairs. Most grants are significantly less than the maximum of £5000.
- 8.4 The uptake of grants has been fairly limited, with around a dozen grants being awarded each year. It is unclear whether this is just because there is not significant demand or whether there is a lack of awareness of the availability of the grant.
- 8.5 The Housing Grants Policy 2019-2024 sets a framework for future delivery of HRAGs. The grant criteria have been simplified so that there are now four main qualifying criteria, which encompass the previous six criteria:
- a) To remedy essential repairs or conditions that interfere materially with the personal comfort or security of an elderly, vulnerable or disabled occupant.
  - b) Remedial action to remove Category 1 hazard(s) and property is occupied by person(s) falling within the defined vulnerable group for that hazard.
  - c) Essential and significant repairs to the basic fabric or services of residential mobile homes.
  - d) Energy efficiency works, where applicants are not eligible for assistance under another third party scheme e.g. Energy Company Obligation (ECO)
- 8.6 The financial qualifying criteria have been widened slightly. Applicants must be in receipt of an income based benefit, which has always been the case, but additionally households who are not in receipt of such a benefit but have a household income of £20000 or less also will be eligible.
- 8.7 HRAGs are only available to owner occupiers or tenants with repairing responsibilities.
- 8.8 If Cabinet approves this policy, it is intended to develop a communications strategy to increase awareness of HRAGs, including targeting groups likely to benefit from the service.

## **9. LEGAL IMPLICATIONS**

- 9.1 Paragraph 5.6 of the Constitution sets out the Functions of Cabinet. Paragraph 5.6.1 states that the Cabinet can prepare and agree to implement policies and strategies other than those reserved to Council.
- 9.2 Section 3 of the Housing Act 2004 requires that local housing authorities must keep the housing conditions in their area under review with a view to identifying any action that may need to be taken by them.

- 9.3 The Council's Constitution delegates responsibility for housing grants to the Service Director – Regulatory [14.6.11 (b) (vii)], as such any grants issued will be under that delegation or subsequent sub-delegation.

## **10. FINANCIAL IMPLICATIONS**

- 10.1 There are no specific revenue implications arising from this report. Delivery of HRAGs is part of the Environmental Health Service's work programme and no additional staffing resources are required.
- 10.2 Funding for HRAGs comes from the capital budget and is agreed as part of the Council's annual budget setting process. In February 2019 Full Council resolved to continue the £60k budget through into 2023/2024, although HRAG is a discretionary grant and there would be no specific implications if it was necessary to reduce the budget in any particular year.

## **11. RISK IMPLICATIONS**

- 11.1 There are no particular risk implications associated with this report, however, if we chose not to provide grants for these type of urgent repairs, we would fail to align with the Council's Housing Strategy.

## **12. EQUALITIES IMPLICATIONS**

- 12.1 In line with the Public Sector Equality Duty, public bodies must, in the exercise of their functions, give due regard to the need to eliminate discrimination, harassment, victimisation, to advance equality of opportunity and foster good relations between those who share a protected characteristic and those who do not.
- 12.2 The aim of providing this grant is to assist poorer households and more vulnerable residents who may have difficulty funding basic repairs in their own homes, which if not addressed, could lead to unsafe conditions and adverse health issues.

## **13. SOCIAL VALUE IMPLICATIONS**

- 13.1 The Social Value Act and "go local" policy do not apply to this report.

## **14. HUMAN RESOURCE IMPLICATIONS**

- 14.1 There are no staffing issues arising from this report.

## **15. APPENDICES**

- 15.1 Appendix A - Housing Grants Policy 2019-2024

## **16. CONTACT OFFICERS**

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## **17. BACKGROUND PAPERS**

- 17.1 There are no background papers



# Housing Grants Policy 2019-2024

March 2019



## **1.0 Introduction**

- 1.1 The Council's overall approach to housing issues and the fulfilment of statutory duties relating to housing is set out in the Housing Strategy. The Strategy sets out the Council's priorities for housing in the district and the strategic measures that will be taken to achieve them.
- 1.2 The Housing Grants Policy sets out the financial support that the Council will make available in addressing issues in the private sector.
- 1.3 The requirement for a published policy relating to financial assistance came about as a result of The Regulatory Reform (Housing Assistance)(England and Wales) Order 2002. This largely swept away a range of previous mandatory grants that were available for housing renewal work, the only exception being grants for disabled facilities, which remain to this day. In place of the mandatory grants, local authorities were given a general power to offer financial assistance for repairs, improvements and adaptations.
- 1.4 The Council's first policy relating to financial assistance, the Private Sector Housing Renewals Policy was published in 2003 and there have been a series of amendments since.
- 1.5 The Council is a partner in the Hertfordshire Home Improvement Agency, which now delivers the Council's responsibilities in relation to disabled facilities grants.
- 1.6 This policy sets out the terms and conditions relating to Home Repair Assistance Grant (HRAG).

## **2.0 Home Repair Assistance Grant**

- 2.1 The Home Repair Assistance Grant is a discretionary form of assistance specifically designed to provide practical help, through a grant for small-scale essential works. It aims to help owner-occupiers and tenants who have responsibility for undertaking repairs to their homes but who have limited financial resources to undertake essential works that might otherwise lead to adverse health or safety conditions in their home.
- 2.2 This grant provides cash limited assistance up to £5000 within any three-year period, for minor works for owner-occupiers and private tenants who meet certain criteria. Applicants can submit more than one application but the total grant may not exceed £5000 in any three year period.
- 2.3 Private tenants may only make an application for a HRAG where their tenancy agreement places responsibility on them for carrying out the required works. In practice, this is only likely to apply to regulated tenancies, which began before 15 January 1989.
- 2.4 Private landlords and Registered Providers are not eligible to apply for a HRAG.
- 2.5 All grants are subject to conditions, which are set out in Appendix 1.
- 2.6 Where alternative sources of funding are available to an applicant, the Council will expect an applicant to pursue such options before making an application for a HRAG.
- 2.7 The HRAG scheme is a discretionary scheme and is subject to the resources that the Council is able to make available to support the scheme in any financial year.

## 3.0 Scope of grant assistance

3.1 Works that may be covered by a HRAG are as follows:

- a) To remedy essential repairs or conditions that interfere materially with the personal comfort or security of an elderly, vulnerable or disabled occupant.
- b) Remedial action to remove Category 1 hazard(s)<sup>1</sup> and property is occupied by person(s) falling within the defined vulnerable group for that hazard.
- c) Essential and significant repairs to the basic fabric or services of residential mobile homes.
- d) Energy efficiency works, where applicants are not eligible for assistance under another third party scheme e.g. Energy Company Obligation (ECO)

For the purposes of this policy, elderly is defined as anyone who is at or above the state pension age at the time of the application

For the purpose of this policy, in assessing vulnerability, regard will be had to the National Institute for Health and Care Excellence's quality standard 'Preventing excess winter deaths and illness associated with cold homes'  
<https://www.nice.org.uk/guidance/qs117>

3.2 Applicants must be in receipt of an income related benefit including:

- Child Tax Credit
- Housing Benefit
- Income Support
- Income-based Jobseeker's Allowance (JSA)
- Income-related Employment and Support Allowance (ESA)
- Pension Guarantee Credit
- Universal Credit

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<sup>1</sup> A category 1 hazard is a serious hazard affecting the occupants of a property under the Housing Health and Safety Rating System <https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/hhsrs-operating-guidance-housing-act-2004-guidance-about-inspections-and-assessment-of-hazards-given-under-section-9>

- Working Tax Credit

Or the total household income is £20000 per annum or less.

## **4.0 Other matters**

- 4.1 The Council's Private Sector Housing Renewal Policy, last amended on 20 March 2018, ceases to have effect in relation to any new applications granted after this policy comes into force. However, the Private Sector Housing Renewal Policy remains in effect with regard to any conditions applied to grants awarded under that policy.

# Appendix 1

## HRAG conditions

1. Applicants must be 18 years of age or older at the date of application and in the case of joint applications at least one applicant must be 18 years of age or older at the date of application.
2. It is the applicant who employs the contractors to undertake agreed works and the Council have no contractual liabilities in that relationship as their role is only to administer the grant process. The applicant is ultimately responsible for ensuring the quality of the completed works.
3. The agreed works must be carried out by one of the contractors whose estimates/quotes were submitted as part of the application. The grant will usually be calculated using the lowest priced estimates/quote except in exceptional circumstances.
4. The responsibility to gain all necessary approvals e.g. Planning Permission, Building Regulation Approval etc, rests with the applicant.
5. If an applicant submits an estimate/quote from a member of their family, who then carries out the agreed works, the grant will only be paid on the basis of the cost of materials and not labour.
6. An application for assistance toward works that have already been completed will not be processed. Any part of works not commenced, which would otherwise have been considered for assistance will be processed for possible grant assistance, as long as this work is not commenced prior to formal approval.
7. All payments shall be conditional upon confirmation that all works to which the grant relates have been completed and receipt of an acceptable invoice. Payment will normally be made to the applicant but can be made to the contractor if the grant recipient authorises this.
8. The applicant must grant the Council reasonable access to inspect the works whilst in progress and on completion, if requested to do so.
9. The Council may include the reasonable cost of preliminary or ancillary services, fees and charges within the calculation of assistance. The payment of any such fees is conditional on a grant being approved and the completion of all specified works.
10. The Council will only make a single payment when all works are satisfactorily completed; no interim payments will be made.

11. Grant assistance will only be approved for the benefit of applicants who are able to provide evidence of a valid National Insurance Number.
12. The Council reserves the right to re-consider any individual application against any of these terms and conditions.