

CABINET

Discretionary Housing Payment Policy Individual Cabinet Member Decision (Cllr John Gilbert)

Report of Head of Revenue Services

PURPOSE OF REPORT			
<p>The Council has a discretionary power to provide additional financial assistance towards housing costs to recipients of housing benefit/council tax benefit.</p> <p>This report sets out a policy framework to ensure that the Council acts fairly, reasonably and consistently throughout the Discretionary Housing Payment decision making process.</p>			
Key Decision	<input type="checkbox"/>	Non-Key Decision	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>
Date Included in Forward Plan		Not Applicable	
This report is public			

RECOMMENDATION:

It is recommended that the Council adopts the Discretionary Housing Payments policy attached as Appendix A to this report.

1.0 Introduction

- 1.1 Under the Discretionary Financial Assistance Regulations 2001 the Council may award an additional payment to a recipient of Housing Benefit/Council Tax Benefit to provide help with housing costs. Housing costs are defined as rent and/or Council Tax liability.
- 1.2 The payments are made outside the Housing Benefit/Council Tax Benefit schemes and are made to people in a variety of circumstances. However, the characteristics of the awards mean that they are often paid to people in hardship and other vulnerable situations.
- 1.3 Whilst it is good practice to have a policy framework for dealing with applications for Discretionary Housing Payments the Council must treat each case on its merits so as not to fetter the discretion it is exercising.
- 1.4 The costs of awarding a Discretionary Housing Payment are currently met by a central government contribution towards such expenditure. However, as demand increases it is possible that expenditure may exceed this and the Council will need to make a decision during the 2010/11 budget process as to whether it wishes to finance expenditure over and above the Government contribution.

2.0 Proposal Details

- 2.1 The policy shown at Appendix A to this report sets out a policy framework and provides a procedural guide to dealing with applications under the scheme that ensures the Council acts fairly, reasonably and consistently during the decision making process.
- 2.2 The policy document formalises the current working arrangements.

3.0 Details of Consultation

- 3.1 The policy framework has been discussed with the Benefits Inter Agency Partnership Group and the members of the Discretionary Housing Payment panel themselves and any views are incorporated in to the document

4.0 Options and Options Analysis (including risk assessment)

- 4.1 Cabinet can decide not to adopt this policy however, it is good practice to have a policy that is open and transparent and demonstrates how the exercise of this particular discretion fits in with corporate objectives.
- 4.2 By adopting this policy Cabinet will endorse the current arrangements that are working effectively but which are not encapsulated in a policy document.

5.0 Officer Preferred Option (and comments)

- 5.1 Officers recommend the adoption of this policy.

6.0 Conclusion

- 6.1 Decision should be made in accordance with recommendation.

RELATIONSHIP TO POLICY FRAMEWORK

The proposals within this report link to the corporate objectives of:

- Alleviating Poverty
- Encouraging residents of the district to obtain and sustain employment
- Safeguarding residents in their own homes and preventing homelessness
- Helping families to stay together
- Supporting young people in their transition to adult life
- Supporting the vulnerable members of our community
- In addition, the report displays our commitment to joint working with stakeholders to improve service delivery

CONCLUSION OF IMPACT ASSESSMENT

(including Diversity, Human Rights, Community Safety, Sustainability and Rural Proofing)

An initial Equality Impact Assessment has been undertaken and it has concluded that there is no adverse impact on the equality target groups.

FINANCIAL IMPLICATIONS

The amount spent on the award of Discretionary Housing Payments is subject to a cash limit set by the Department for Work & Pensions.

This "permitted total" is an amount up to which the Council can spend but not exceed in any financial year. For 2008/09 this figure is £53,963. The Government makes an annual contribution towards the Council's permitted total. For 2008/09 this figure is £21,585.

Although the Council may finance any spending above the Government's contribution it has not done so during the last 7 years. Revised estimates of expenditure on Discretionary Housing Payments for 2008/09 are that £21,382 will be awarded in 2008/09.

The 2009/10 budget shows an estimate of £22,600 income from central government and expenditure of the same amount. Although the government's contribution will not be known until February 2009.

If the Council finds that there are increasing demands in 2009/10 to award Discretionary Housing Payments in excess of the Government contribution a growth bid will need to be considered as part of the 2010/11 budget.

DEPUTY SECTION 151 OFFICER'S COMMENTS

In terms of the budget framework, the award of Discretionary Housing Payments is limited to £21,585 for 2008/09 and an estimated £22,600 for 2009/10. Any awards above these sums would be subject to finding compensating savings elsewhere or the submission of a growth item in line with the relevant budget process.

LEGAL IMPLICATIONS

Legal Services have been consulted and have no observations to make on this report.

MONITORING OFFICER'S COMMENTS

The Monitoring Officer has been consulted and has no further comments to add.

BACKGROUND PAPERS

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