

Report title	Home Improvement Agency update and policy review
Report author	Alice Foster, Community Services Manager
Department	Community Services
Exempt?	No
Exemption type	Not applicable

Purpose of report:

To resolve

Synopsis of report:
This report provides an update and overview of the Home Improvement Agency service from March 23 - April 24.

This report outlines proposed changes to the Home Improvement Agency Assistance Policy, since the last update in June 2023. This includes increasing the amount available through some discretionary grant available to vulnerable residents. It also proposes updating and providing a more transparent way to means testing for grant.

Recommendation that:

The reviewed Home Improvement Agency Assistance Policy, as set out in this report, be approved

1. Context and background of report

- 1.1 The Home Improvement Agency (HIA) provides a dedicated service for elderly and disabled residents who need extra help to undertake repairs and/or adaptations to their homes. The HIA supports residents throughout the entire grant application process and provides advice on any other assistance available. HIA is a non-profit making service and is funded by the Better Care Fund and resourced by the Council. The cost incurred by the Council is in principle reimbursed by the fees it charges for its services to residents.
- 1.2 In January 2023, a report was presented to this Committee outlining the progress of the service over the previous 12 months, and the development plan for the next year.
- 1.3 In June 2023, a further report was presented to this Committee proposing updates to the Home Improvement Agency Assistance Policy. These were approved, and were implemented over the last 12 months.
- 1.4 This report outlines the progress made throughout the last year, including improvements following the updated Policy. It also includes further proposed updates to the Home Improvement Agency Assistance Policy.

2. Report and, where applicable, options considered and recommended

HIA service – 23/24 update

- 2.1 This report provides an outline of the service from April 2023 – March 2024.
- 2.2 Spend approximately £414,000 from April 23 - March 24. Runnymede is given approximately £874,000 annually to spend on disabled adaptations.
- 2.3 The table below shows the breakdown of referrals and complete cases from April 23 - March 24.

	Q1	Q2	Q3	Q4	TOTAL
Number of referrals	34	34	32	38	138
Number of DFG cases complete	5	5	7	7	24
Number of discretionary DFGs complete	1	0	2	4	7

- 2.4 Officers completed 24 DFG cases during this period. There are a large number of cases in progress and Officers continue to work hard to complete DFGs in an efficient manner. The variety of works spans from minor repairs, stairlifts, and wet rooms, to extensions and other disabled adaptations.
- 2.5 In January 2023, Officers started the process of reviewing and updating the process for selecting contractors for disabled adaptation works. This work has been completed and is being implemented within the HIA and Housing Teams. Disabled adaptation works have divided into two lots, of the most common works. Contractors are allocated on a rotational basis, shared between them. This change will help to speed up the application process, and provides a more efficient service for residents.
- 2.6 The Policy update in June 2023 provided more information on the wider range of grant available following the Regulatory Reform Order.
- 2.7 The Regulatory Reform (Housing Assistance) (England and Wales) Order 2002 (RRO) provides general powers for housing authorities to provide assistance for housing renewal, including home adaptations. By publishing the Housing Assistance Policy under the RRO, housing authorities can use government funding for the Disabled Facilities Grant (DFG) more flexibly. It is primarily for the provision of home adaptations to help people live independently. However, it also enables funding to be spent on other forms of assistance such as repairs and grant top up.
- 2.8 The policy provides residents with information on the mandatory and non-mandatory grants available. It outlines how grants can be used, and how this is aligned to mandatory grants, the RRO discretionary grants and allows Runnymede Borough Council to be more flexible.
- 2.9 This flexibility enables the Council to support more residents, and make sure that the grants on offer are relevant to the Borough's needs and demographic.
- 2.10 The mandatory grant available is the Disabled Facilities Grant (DFG). Residents can receive up to £30,000 towards adaptations to their home with the aim is to support them to continue to live independently. This includes works such as wet rooms,

stairlifts and access solutions, including ramps. This is a means-tested grant and is for residents who are disabled, elderly or vulnerable.

- 2.11 In addition to offering residents the mandatory DFG, Runnymede Borough Council provides a selection of discretionary grants to support vulnerable, disabled, and elderly residents. The policy explains the types of grants available in these strands, which include minor works, home from hospital, clearance grants, energy efficiency grants, relocation grants and a dementia living package. These grants make use of the RRO and allow us to offer a service to residents that can support their wellbeing and continue to live independently in their homes. They are structured in a way that they can be accessed depending on circumstance and situation.
- 2.12 Residents have access to loans, including from Parity Trust, to support them with works to their property. They can be accessed when they do not qualify for a grant, or when the grant does not cover the full works. These are only available for homeowners.
- 2.13 Following the Policy update, the HIA Team has become tenure neutral. This has provided consistency to residents, no matter what their housing status is and ensures all residents receive a fair, holistic assessment of their needs and appropriate adaptations. Becoming tenure neutral provides all residents the opportunity and flexibility to access the most appropriate grant suitable for them and their needs. Over the next 12 months, the service manager, Surveyor and Housing Managers will meet monthly to improve communication and collaboration on cases.
- 2.14 Grants are now approved by a panel. All non-means tested grants are approved by service Managers. All means tested grants, including DFGs, are approved by a panel including the Corporate Heads of Community Services and Housing Services and Business Planning. In their absence, Deputy Heads of Service will provide approval on the panel.

Proposed policy changes

- 2.15 The proposed changes to the Policy include increases in the discretionary grant amounts. This is to take into account the current economic climate, with materials and labour costs considerably more, and residents incomes not matching this. The service has seen the impact of this over the last 12 months, and the Policy should reflect this.
- 2.16 The table below outlines the proposed changes to the policy:

Policy reference	Proposed changes	Reason
2.6	To implement a means testing checklist, to support the approval of discretionary grants where necessary	To increased transparency and equity
5.1	Increase in Clearance Grant amount from £1,500 to £5,000	We have completed clearance grants this year and found that the amount is not enough to provide sufficient support
6.2	Increase in Energy Efficiency Grant from £2,000 to £3,000	Increase in the cost of labour and materials

9.2	Change to the in the Discretionary Disabled Adaptation Assistance Grant to provide an additional £5,000 if needed	Increase in the cost of labour and materials, provides more financial support for vulnerable residents
13	Include assistive technology to allow for enabled care for independent living	The RRO allows the DFG to be used in conjunction with assistive technology. This inclusion allows more flexibility and the ability to provide further support to residents

- 2.17 The proposed changes to the Policy include allowing further flexibility within the Discretionary Adaptation Assistance grant. On top of the £15,000 there will be top up of £5,000. This is to allow for the additional cost of labour and materials. It also provides the service with more options and adaptability to support residents.
- 2.18 One Clearance Grant has been approved and successfully implemented in 2023. Working closely with Environment Health, Adult Social Care and the Mental Health, the feedback was that the £1,500 available through the grant is not enough to have a large impact on residents' lives. It is proposed that this amount is increased to £5,000. This means that vulnerable residents have access to a larger fund to clear more of their homes and support them to continue to live this way long term. In the successful grant application, the £1,500 clearance grant was used alongside the £5,000 minor works grant to support home repairs, including providing cooking facilities. This small increase will have a significant impact on residents' wellbeing.
- 2.19 As previously stated in point 2.14, material costs are increasing. This includes the costs of heating and boilers. Six Energy Efficiency Grants were approved and successfully carried out in 23/24. It is proposed for the grant to be increased from £2,000 to £3,000 to support those living in fuel poverty and reflect the current economic climate. This grant will be used alongside the ECO4 Scheme, that is available to residents in Partnership with Happy Energy.
- 2.20 The ECO 4 Scheme was approved by Committee in January 2024. It is a government funded scheme designed to tackle fuel poverty and help reduce carbon emissions. The ECO4 Scheme provides funding for the installation of energy efficiency measures for low-income households with an EPC rating of D or lower.
- 2.21 The HIA Caseworkers have recently qualified as Level 4 Trusted Assessors. Throughout the next 12 months, the team will now work to implement this throughout the service, as outlined in the Corporate Business plan for 24/25. The benefits of this change will include continuing to offer a holistic service, supporting with reduce waiting times and free up OT resource for more complex cases. The Team will meet monthly with Surrey ASC Ots to discuss cases, and agree on priorities.
- 2.22 Alongside the changes stated above this change, it is proposed that the means testing process is adapted. This allows for further flexibility, supported through the RRO, and enable the Council to support vulnerable residents. A new checklist has been created, proving transparency and consistency with means testing, especially in waiving the payments in part of full. This is appendix C of the Policy. The checklist means all applications will have to fulfil a clear criteria outlining the reason and the risk of not completing the adaptation. It also provides the option for residents to pay a percentage of the cost of the works, if it is assessed that they are able to.

- 2.23 The Policy includes the addition of assistive technology under the DFG. Under the RRO, DFG monies can be used to install and facilitate digital technology to support residents wellbeing and independence. This could include the installation of alarms, doorbells, lighting systems, automatic door openers, and broader electronic support. There will be £25,000 ringfenced annually from the DFG monies to support with this.

3. Policy framework implications

- 3.1 The strategic focus of the Health & Wellbeing Strategy is placed under three main objectives with aim one 'Healthy Homes', linking directly and positively to the work the HIA Team carry out. The service supports residents to live safely at home, helping them to continue to live independently.

4. Resource implications/Value for Money

- 4.1 Moving to a tenure neutral service has had an impact on resourcing and staff time. There have been 39 Social Housing Properties that the team have worked on, on top of the 127 referrals for private tenures. This is approximately a 23% increase in referrals just from Social Housing Properties over the last 12 months. This has meant that the waiting time between first initial referral and first contact has increased. However, following the successful implementation of the new disabled adaptations contract for building works, it is the hope that this will decrease time at this stage of the process.

5. Legal implications

- 5.1 None identified.

6. Equality implications

- 6.1 The Council has a duty under the Equality Act 2010. Section 149 of the Act provides that we must have due regard to the need to;
- a) eliminate discrimination, harassment, victimisation and other conduct prohibited by the Act
 - b) advance equality of opportunity
 - c) foster good relations between persons who share a relevant protected characteristic and persons who do not share protected characteristics.
- 6.2 We should at all times act in a way that is non-discriminatory through our policies and procedures and interactions with people.
- 6.3 The HIA team supports disabled and vulnerable residents in Runnymede. It is implemented in accordance with the principles of the Council's Equality Objectives 2023 – 2027 as adopted by the Council in October 2023.
- 6.4 When the policy was first adopted a full equalities impact assessment was undertaken. This has been reviewed to reflect the updated policy and a screening assessment has been considered by the Council's Equalities Group, as attached at Appendix B.

7. Environmental/Sustainability/Biodiversity implications

- 7.1 To run a sustainable service we need to ensure that our people, our materials, and our contractors are sustainable. To have sustainable people, the workforce needs to ensure they are working together effectively to deliver the best possible outcome for

residents. The HIA Team and Housing Team will work collaboratively throughout the application process to utilise all skills and resources in the best way possible.

7.2 To make sure our materials and contractors are sustainable, we have implemented a new contract to support with sustainable procurement practises.

7.3 It is recognised that a mandatory part of the HIA service is the requirement for Caseworkers to travel around the borough to visit clients in their home, and there will be an environmental impact associated with the use of their car. To mitigate this impact, they are classed as mobile workers, and able to work from anywhere in the borough. For example, if the clients house is closer to their home, they will work from home before and after the visit.

8. Risk Implications

Not applicable

9. Other implications

Not applicable

10. Timetable for Implementation

Not applicable

11. Conclusions

11.1 This report provides an update on the HIA service over the past 12 months. The team have successfully delivered DFG and discretionary grants to vulnerable residents across the Borough. Additionally, the Team provide a holistic service, putting residents at the centre of decisions, working flexibly to support as many as possible. The service has also moved towards becoming tenure neutral, successfully collaborating across the HIA and Housing Teams. All residents across the Borough.

12. Background papers

Full Equalities Impact Assessment conducted in 2023
A 'track changes' version of the reviewed policy

13. Appendices

Appendix A - Home Improvement Agency Assistance Policy – June 2024 review.
This the review policy, including the changes outlined in this report.

Appendix B Equalities Screening Assessment