

Disabled Facilities Grant Update - (Community Services, Darren Williams – Corporate Head of Community Services)

Synopsis of report:

- **To provide an update on progress with the Home Improvement Agency, following a report brought to Committee in November 2019 and post pandemic; and**
- **To outline the current activity of the team, ongoing recruitment requirements and challenges faced by the team in supporting residents**

Recommendation(s):

- i) to approve that in the event of recruitment for an HIA Surveyor post being unsuccessful, the Council procures and engages a specialist consultant, to support with the procurement of works, funded by the Disabled Facilities Grant; and**
- ii) to approve the increase of the non means-tested threshold for small grant applications, from £2,500 to £5,000, in response to increased costs experienced**

1. Context of report

- 1.1 The Regulatory Reform (Housing Assistance) (England and Wales) Order 2002 gave Councils new powers to provide financial assistance for private sector housing improvements. In order to exercise these powers local authorities were required to formulate a Private Sector Renewal Strategy. In July 2003 the former Housing and Community Services Committee adopted such a strategy and the provisions thereunder were included in the Council's Constitution and Scheme of Delegation to Officers.
- 1.2 In November 2019, a report was made to Community Services Committee providing background to the Disabled Facilities Grant received by the Council, via the Better Care Fund (BCF) annually. This is delivered internally via the Home Improvement Agency, within the Community Services Business Unit.
- 1.3 Members were advised of the challenges that had faced the Home Improvement Agency Team and the intended route to make necessary improvements, to provide a timely, supportive service to residents of the borough.
- 1.4 The pandemic has delayed the service moving forward since then, but this report sets out the progress made, details the current challenges faced and the next steps in the development of the Home Improvement Agency provision in Runnymede.

2. Report

- 2.1 The Home Improvement Agency (HIA) provides advice, support, and assistance to elderly, disabled and vulnerable people who are home-owners, who live in privately rented or housing association properties and who wish to adapt, repair, or improve the property to continue living independently there.

- 2.2 HIAs deliver a range of services to residents including handyperson services, information and advice, help to move home, make repairs and improvements, assistance in facilitating timely hospital discharge, adaptations outside and within the home, home safety advice and solutions and initiatives around warm homes for vulnerable residents.
- 2.3 Within the HIA is the Disabled Facilities Grant funding (DFG), which is received from Central Government via the Better Care Fund, to provide financial assistance where required in supporting eligible residents to make changes to their home to continue to live independently. The volume of grant funding received for 2022/2023 in Runnymede totals £874,000.
- 2.4 As a condition of receiving this grant funding, the Council has a Home Improvement Agency Assistance Policy which was reviewed and approved by this Committee in 2019. This is attached at Appendix 'A.'
- 2.5 To try and increase both flexibility and timely interventions, supported by the inclusion of the Regulatory Reform Order into the Home Assistance Policy, a table of different pots of funding, based around specific medical conditions (e.g. Dementia Assistance) or ways in which the DFG can be used to support the wider Health and Social Care agenda was produced.
- 2.6 In addition, the opportunity to look at providing a timely, accessible service by introducing access to non means-tested funding was included. Non means-tested grants are currently available up to a value of £3,000 for those with Dementia, £2,500 for minor works grants and up to £7,500 to support timely hospital discharge.
- 2.7 One of the key objectives following the report in 2019, was to be able to increase the size of the team to deliver both the level of service desired, and be able to facilitate all grant applications in a timely fashion. This was agreed in the Community Services restructure completed ready for 2021/2022.
- 2.8 However, with the pandemic taking priority, limited work in this area was possible and recruitment was not undertaken until the end of 2021.
- 2.9 Recruitment has now commenced, and the Home Improvement Agency Team has grown from a team of 20 hours of Administration resource and 9 hours of casual Caseworker resource to the following:
- 83 hours per week of Caseworker resource
 - 30 hours per week of Administrator resource
- 2.10 We still have to recruit a Manager, who will provide the operational management support and direction to the team. This was expected to go to advert by the end of May 2022. There is also a full time Surveyor post, to lead on specifying works required, that is currently vacant, with the impact highlighted further on in this report.
- 2.11 Recruitment of the above resources, creating a team of five staff, has enabled considerable progress to be made in addressing the backlog of enquiries and applications that could not be progressed during the pandemic.
- 2.12 Since January 2022, the 54 applications from 2019/2020 and 2020/2021 that remained incomplete have been reviewed and progressed via the completion of updating applications, financial assessments, and assessments of

individual clinical need and all cases have either been completed or are drawing to a conclusion.

- 2.13 The team is now focused on addressing the 2021/2022 backlog of cases, in addition to supporting new incoming enquiries and applications. Currently there are 111 open cases from April 2021 onwards.
- 2.14 The dedication of the team in supporting residents since January 2022, has been very pleasing. The existing team members have supported the new members of staff through their experience and knowledge, embracing the new approach and ideas that the recruitment has successfully brought.
- 2.15 A major success has been the reduction in the length of time from initial enquiry to approval of grant application. This stood at between six and nine months prior to the pandemic but has reduced to four to six months. This is evidence of the commitment and can-do attitude the team are collectively applying to supporting residents.
- 2.16 However, the team still face challenges in relation to the processes they follow and being able to reach a point of works completed in residents' homes. These are:
- Access to Surveyor resources
 - Cost increases for materials and labour
 - Access to contractors to undertake works
 - Availability of equipment from suppliers
- 2.17 Regarding the Surveyor, together with the Housing Business Unit, specifically the Housing Maintenance team, a flexible approach to supporting DFG applications has been applied, and the team have benefited from the support they have received.
- 2.18 Despite efforts to recruit an interim surveyor initially, experienced in specifying adaptation works etc., Housing Maintenance have been unsuccessful in their attempts. The full time Surveyor post within the establishment is due to go out to advert, and it is hoped that a suitable candidate looking for a permanent position will be found. This post will work directly in support of the HIA, but will be based within the Housing Maintenance section, to benefit from the process etc., expertise and experience of colleagues around them.
- 2.19 However, based on previous experience of trying to fill vacancies in this area, Officers are concerned that recruitment will prove unsuccessful, leaving the continued gap within the service. As a result, Officers are proposing that in the event of a failure to recruit, a consultancy agency, specialising in this work, is engaged, that can be funded by the Disabled Facilities Grant provision. It is proposed that initially this arrangement would be for up to 12 months.
- 2.20 Increased costs for labour and materials have been experienced over the last six months. This has negatively impacted the ability to support applications for relatively small amounts of money, via the non means-tested small grants pot, due to £2,500 being insufficient to complete many of the "minor" works.
- 2.21 As a result, Members are asked to approve an increase in the non means-tested threshold for small grant applications from £2,500 to £5,000. In doing so, the Dementia funding pot will also increase to £5,000 but the funding pot to support timely hospital discharge will remain at £7,500.

- 2.22 Approval of the above will allow for a quicker response to applications, to avoid the potential for applications from residents who are not in immediate need of aids or adaptations, approval of applications will be subject to evidence of individual need.
- 2.23 Understanding that as the service is promoted (intended to start when a Manager is in post and the back log of applications is addressed), an increase in applications could potentially see the need to review the use of non-means-tested funding pots or a reduction in the maximum grant size. Officers will monitor this, and report back as required.
- 2.24 Members are advised of the challenges in accessing contractors to complete works specified and delays to the process as a result. Such delays are caused by two main reasons. Firstly, the backlog in such works across Surrey due to Covid impacts, has resulted in reduced availability of contractors. This is a particular problem given the specialist nature of the works required.
- 2.25 Secondly, the Council does not have enough contractors available due to a lack of procurement activity around suppliers that goes back as far as 2010. Officers recognise the need for renewed procurement activity, and it is intended that this will be a priority for the newly appointed Manager, supported by Housing colleagues and the corporate Procurement team.
- 2.26 A time limited waiver was granted in July 2021 by the Corporate Head of Law and Governance, in consultation with the Council's Procurement Board, to minimise the impact of a shortage of contractors. This avoided the need to procure each specified works. However, attempts to utilise existing Housing Maintenance contractors who have been through corporate procurement processes and join up on procurement with neighbouring Councils remains ongoing. Therefore the waiver is in the process of being re-applied for.

3. Legal Considerations

- 3.1 The Housing Renewal Grants (Services and Charges) Order 1996 specifies the services and charges which can be properly included within an application for a Disabled Facilities Grant. Included in this are the following areas that would be relevant to the role that a consultant would fulfil if required:
- Technical and structural surveys
 - Design and preparation of plans and drawings
 - Preparation of schedules of relevant works
- 3.2 Article 3 of the Regulatory Reform (Housing Assistance) (England and Wales) Order 2002 gives local authorities the wide discretionary powers, including to provide assistance subject to conditions or unconditionally.
- 3.3 The Authority is able to waive the means test altogether where the cost of the adaptations is below a certain amount. Means testing can be waived also for specific equipment types (e.g. stairlifts) or for timely interventions such as the prevention of falls. Means testing can also be waived where the applicant would face excessive financial hardship if required to pay for the entirety of the adaptations.

4. Equality implications

- 4.1 There are no equality implications resulting from this specific report. However, the DFG is aimed at helping residents who would most likely share the protected characteristics of age and disability.

5. Environmental/Sustainability/Biodiversity implications

- 5.1 There are no environmental implications resulting from this specific report, however it is intended that as part of the process to appoint new contractors in the future, quality questions and evidence of their environmental credentials will be sought as part of the process.

6. Conclusions

- 6.1 Solid progress has been made in 2022 in improving the service available via the Home Improvement Agency and in addressing the backlog of cases created because of the pandemic.

- 6.2 Whilst progress has been made, there are still some challenges within the process undertaken to support some of the borough's most vulnerable residents, and having identified these, Members are asked to support the continued improvement and timeliness of the service provided to residents.

(To resolve)

Background Papers

None Stated.