

Runnymede Borough Council's Home Improvement Policy Report, (Alice Foster, Community Services Manager)

Synopsis of report:

To provide the Committee with an update on the Home Improvement Agency service, delivered in Runnymede Borough Council. This includes gaining approval for the changes to the Home Improvement Agency Assistance Policy and moving to a tenure neutral service.

Recommendation(s):

- **Members approve the proposed Home Assistance Policy (Appendix A) and the move to a tenure neutral service for residents, led by the Home Improvement Agency**

1. Context 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 Community Services Committee outlining the progress of the service over the previous 12 months, and the development plan for the next year.
- 1.3. This report outlines the progress made throughout the first part of 2023 so far, focusing on stage one of the development plan. This was to revise and update the Housing Assistance Policy.
- 1.4. The changes that have been made are outlined in this report.

2. Report and, where applicable, options considered

- 2.1 Home Improvement Agency Assistance Policy – information outline and updates
 - 2.1.1 In January 2023 the Committee report outlined that the current policy will be updated to provide more information on the wider range of grant options, following the Regulatory Reform Order (RRO).
 - 2.1.2 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 more flexibly. It is

primarily for the provision of home adaptations to help people live independently; however, it enables funding to be spent on other forms of assistance such as repairs and grant top up.

- 2.1.3 Under the RRO there is also the opportunity to consider potential wider use of funding, to deliver improved health outcomes for residents, provided that use is agreed with and in accordance with local Better Care Fund priorities. The Better Care Fund is managed locally by North West Surrey Alliance and Adult Social Care jointly, with officers of the Council contributing to the plans and priorities through attendance at the Local Joint Commissioning Group.
- 2.1.4 The Home Assistance Policy sets out the requirement to provide both mandatory and non-mandatory grants via the DFG, and how both are delivered against the legislation that sets out the requirements relating to DFG expenditure.
- 2.1.5 This flexibility enables the Council to support more residents, and make sure that the grants on offer are relevant to the Boroughs needs and demographic. Runnymede are given approximately £874,000 annually to spend on disabled adaptations.
- 2.1.6 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. For adults, this is a means-tested grant and is for residents who are disabled, elderly or vulnerable. Children are also eligible to apply for a mandatory grant and these are not means tested.
- 2.1.7 In addition to offering residents the mandatory DFG, Runnymede Borough Council provides a selection of discretionary grants to support vulnerable, disabled, and elderly residents. These are divided into two categories, "Minor Works and "Home from Hospital" grants. The policy explains the types of grants available in these strands, which include clearance grants, energy efficiency grants, relocation grants and a dementia living package.
- 2.1.8 Included within the policy is also a discretionary grant of £15,000 that can be used as a 'top-up' to the mandatory £30,000 available through the DFG. With material and labour costing considerably more now, plus the cost-of-living crisis impacting residents affordability in part funding works themselves, this top-up allows residents to receive all adaptations they need to live safely and independently at home.
- 2.1.9 Via the Home Improvement Agency team, residents are signposted to potential loan solutions where they are ineligible for a grant or where works exceed the limit of the funding available, including from Parity Trust, to support them with works to their property. Loans via Parity Trust are only available for homeowners.
- 2.1.10 One of the major changes to the Home Assistance Policy presented with this report is the move to a tenure neutral offering following Ombudsman advice received by the Housing Business Unit in 2023. Taking the step to a tenure neutral process will provide consistency to residents, no matter their housing status and ensure all residents receive a fair, holistic assessment of their needs and appropriate adaptations.

- 2.1.11 As part of the move to a tenure neutral service, the next stage of this transition will include working in partnership with Woking Borough Council to determine the viability of extending the HomeLink Handyperson Service, in Runnymede, to incorporate support to Council tenants, with appropriate works funded either via existing Housing budgets, or where appropriate, paid for privately. The forthcoming work in relation to the Handyperson service, is included within the Community Services Service Area Plan for 2023/2024.
- 2.1.12 For information, the Handyperson service is delivered by Woking Borough Council, in partnership with 3 other local authority partners.
- 2.1.13 In creating a tenure neutral policy, consideration has been given to appropriate levels of sign off for grant applications. The revised policy proposes the following sign off processes:
- All non-means tested grants will be approved by officers, in the case of Housing from an appointed Manager for all Council tenant applications for all other applications, the Independent Living Manager and Deputy Head of Community Services.
 - All means tested grants, including the DFG, will be reviewed and signed off by the Corporate Head of Community Services and the Corporate Head of Housing, who will provide oversight and an independent view of applications within each other's area of responsibility. Where necessary, Adult Social Care or health system partners may be invited to join discussions relating to an application.
- 2.1.14 Following recent guidance on development of the management and use of Disabled Facilities Grant, the policy review now includes information on the Armed Forces Covenant (AFC) and how former service personnel can be supported. The HIA Team have attended training on this subject, and alongside the updated policy and knowledge from the team, they will be able to appropriately support applications for grant funding when required.
- 2.1.15 Finally, within the January 2023 report, officers highlighted the intention to adopt a Trusted Assessor model. Foundations, the Governing Body for DFGs, recommend using a Trusted Assessor model to streamline the referral process, and ensure that OT (Occupational Therapy) resources are used most effectively, in more complex cases. To move towards a more holistic approach, aiming to reduce waiting time for residents, better utilise OT resources, and offer a modern service.
- 2.1.16 It is intended to work towards the adoption of a Trusted Assessor model, that will be able to be used across all tenures, given that this approach provides an effectively and timely way to progress more routine, yet urgent applications, for example a stairlift for a resident who is at risk of falls and lives alone.
- 2.1.17 As a result, the policy has been written with the inclusion of the use of Trusted Assessors in Runnymede, to enable this approach to be implemented later in 2023/2024.

2.2 Housing update provided by the Housing Team

- 2.2.1 Runnymede Borough Council's Housing Service proposed a Housing Adaptations Policy at the June 2021 Housing Committee meeting. However,

following feedback from the Local Government and Social Care Ombudsman involving an individual housing case that had been escalated to them, a tenure neutral policy has been developed across the authority.

- 2.2.2 The Local Government and Social Care Ombudsman highlighted recent legislation, guidance and case law to the authority which had not been reflected within the policy. - R (McKeown) v Islington LBC [2020] EWHC 779 (Admin); [2020] PTSR 1319
 - R v Birmingham City Council ex p Mohammed [1999] 1 WLR 33, QBD
 - Disabled Facilities Grant (DFG) delivery: Guidance for Local Authorities in England [2022] (DLUH&C, DH&SC).
- 2.2.3 External legal advice has been received from a Barrister at 4-5 Gray's Inn Square to support the development of the new and proposed policy.
- 2.2.4 Given the tenure neutral status of the new policy, whilst approval of the Home Assistance Policy is a responsibility of Community Services Committee, approval of the policy in relation to the Councils housing stock and tenants, will also be sought from Housing Committee.

2.3 Housing Assistance Policy next steps

- 2.3.1 As a requirement of adopting the RRO, public consultation will take place in Summer 2023 prior to the formal adoption of the new policy.
- 2.3.2 Consultation will be undertaken through the following channels:
 - Through use of Council social media platforms
 - Consultation discussions to be held at RBC Day Centres with hard copy material available.
 - Consultation with Runnymede Access Liaison Group (RALG).
 - Promotion of the consultation via community notice boards
- 2.3.3 Member support with the consultation is welcomed, particularly encouraging residents in the communities they serve to engage in the process. Again, we are aware that some residents will not have access to technology, where required paper copies of the policy will be made available.
- 2.3.4 On the basis that the consultation is supportive of the policy, it will then be implemented by officers. However, should there be any considerable changes required because of the consultation, a further report will be brought back to Committee.

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

- 4.1. Moving towards a tenure neutral service is likely to have resource implications. These will firstly be on staffing. The HIA Team will be taking on a greater amount of work, with 3000 additional social housing properties. The Team will work closely with Housing to share the workload and prevent any backlogs or delays due to resource.
- 4.2. There may also be resource implications on revenue costs for the Housing Team. This is because they expect to accept more applications for disabled adaptations due to the change in policy following the legislation. This will be monitored, and a further report will be presented if a supplementary estimate is required.

5. Legal implications

- 5.1. Relevant legal issues are dealt within the body of the report.

6. Equality implications

- 6.1. The HIA team supports disabled and vulnerable residents in Runnymede. It is implemented in accordance with the principles of the Council's Equality Objectives 2016-2020.
- 6.2. As part of the policy review, an Equalities Impact Assessment has been conducted to ensure we do not discriminate or disadvantage any residents. It also helps to promote equity within the service.

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.
- 7.2 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.
- 7.3 To make sure our materials and contractors are sustainable; we are carrying out a procurement process to support with sustainable procurement practises. Once this has been agreed, it will be brought to Committee for approval.
- 7.4 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. Other implications (where applicable)

- 8.1 None identified.

9. Conclusions

- 9.1. This report outlines progress and changes made to the Housing Assistance Policy, including the use of the DFG and the impact of the RRO. There are varying ways we the Council can spend the DFG funding and these are outlined in the policy.
- 9.2. The policy update includes a breakdown of all grants, how to access them, and the suitability criteria. Following an update from the Housing Team, the policy describes the change to becoming a tenure neutral service.
- 9.3. This report also outlines the next steps for the HIA Team, including changing the Handyperson service to tenure neutral and beginning to adopt a Trusted Assessor model over the next 12 months.
- 9.4. Following Committee, the Policy will be sent out for consultation to relevant groups, including RALG. All considerable changes will be brought back to Committee for approval.

(To resolve)

Background papers

Background papers - Housing Adaptations Policy from page 166 of this agenda pack [Agenda-9-June-2021-Housing-Committee \(runnymede.gov.uk\)](#)