

NORTH LINCOLNSHIRE COUNCIL

**ASSET MANAGEMENT, CULTURE AND HOUSING CABINET
MEMBER BRIEFING**

PLANNED REVIEW OF THE HOME ASSISTANCE POLICY 2011

1. OBJECT AND KEY POINTS IN THIS REPORT

1.1 This report relates to the Home Assistance Policy 2011.

1.1.1 It outlines suggested policy changes following the introduction of the 'Green Deal'.

1.1.2 It outlines issues and options related to the discretionary spend on disabled facilities grants.

1.1.3 It suggests other minor amendments to bring the policy into line with relevant national and local developments.

1.1.4 It proposes wider consultation on any proposed changes.

2. BACKGROUND INFORMATION

2.1 The Housing Regulatory Reform Order 2002 gives local authorities wide ranging powers to offer assistance to improve housing conditions provided an Assistance Policy is published.

2.2 The current Home Assistance Policy was published in 2011. Primarily, following the introduction of 'Green Deal' it needs revising to bring it in line with these changes to sources of energy efficiency funding. Also it is an opportunity to consider other amendments particularly related to loans and other forms of discretionary assistance.

2.3 The Home Assistance Policy is delivered via the capital programme. The policy has two key strands. Firstly, the mandatory disabled facilities grant element. This receives an annual allocation from Central Government topped up by the council. Secondly, discretionary assistance funded entirely by the council but also used to match fund with external funding opportunities.

2.4 The council's capital contribution is determined as part of the annual budget process. It is prioritised alongside other schemes.

Disabled Facilities Grants

- 2.5 With an ageing population there is an increasing demand from disabled people for assistance to adapt their homes so that they can live as independently as possible.
- 2.6 Providing the occupant qualifies, there is a statutory requirement to provide disabled facilities grants to all types of property regardless of ownership. The government has set the maximum amount of statutory assistance at £30,000.
- 2.7 Adult disabled facilities grants are means tested unlike children's cases.
- 2.8 Currently, the council provides an unlimited discretionary top up for disabled facilities grants for schemes costing over £30,000. This covers any additional costs.
- 2.9 In 2011/2012, this amounted to £98,266 (an average of £19,653 per grant) and in 2012/2013, it totalled £173,687 (an average of £21,711 per grant).
- 2.10 Without the discretionary top up, some of the larger adaptations would be unlikely to go ahead. The majority of the higher cost adaptations are for children with complex needs.
- 2.11 Options include; no change to the present policy, or a cap on the maximum discretionary top up available, or to withdraw the use of discretionary top ups completely.

Other Discretionary Assistance

Green Deal

- 2.12 The introduction of the Green Deal has changed the way funding is provided by energy companies. The Home Assistance Policy needs to reflect these changes to concentrate assistance to those who are in fuel poverty and those in hard to heat homes to help them take advantage of the energy company funding.
- 2.13 The Energy Company Obligation provides an opportunity to shift away from the council funding individual or group schemes towards providing minor top ups to support vulnerable householders to access the funding available from the energy companies themselves.
- 2.14 The Policy can be amended to incorporate these minor top ups to enable households in fuel poverty to be assisted. It would also enable the council to meet its agreed priorities under the Home Energy Conservation Act and its new reporting mechanism. The area as a whole would also benefit from the availability of external money and the improvements this can enable.

Loans

- 2.15 The policy also supports vulnerable households through loan assistance to carry out urgent repairs. Some minor operational amendments are required along with the inclusion to assist with energy improvements in certain circumstances. Appendix A outlines the benefits of providing discretionary home assistance to improve properties in significant disrepair with health and safety hazards.
- 2.16 Options include; continuing with the range of discretionary assistance and maintain these in the revised policy, or a lesser level of support in terms of funding or forms of assistance, or to withdraw fully all forms of discretionary assistance.

3. OPTIONS FOR CONSIDERATION

- 3.1 Option one – to continue with the existing policy and provide the full range of discretionary assistance.
- 3.2 Option two – to consult on the full range of options outlined in the report.
- 3.3 Option three – to consult on a lesser range of options.
- 3.3 Option four – to withdraw all forms of discretionary funding.

4. ANALYSIS OF OPTIONS

- 4.1 Option two is suggested as the best option. Any changes to the existing policy will have implications for other parts of the council, partners, the third sector and most importantly the most vulnerable in our community. It is important that we do not miss any unintended consequences of policy changes.

5. RESOURCE IMPLICATIONS (FINANCIAL, STAFFING, PROPERTY, IT)

- 5.1 Financial – any allocation of capital to the Home Assistance Programme has to be set in the context of the wider council priorities. Disabled facilities grants are mandatory and central government provide an annual capital grant but only to a maximum of £30,000 per eligible grant application. The current financial constraints means it is prudent to consider the implications of discretionary assistance and if this is the best use of resources and what other options are available.
- 5.2 There are no further resource implications at this stage. Staffing implications could result from amendments to the level of discretionary assistance.

6. **OUTCOMES OF INTEGRATED IMPACT ASSESSMENT**

6.1 An integrated impact assessment will be presented with the amended Home Assistance Policy.

7. **OUTCOMES OF CONSULTATION AND CONFLICTS OF INTERESTS DECLARED**

7.1 The report identifies a range of prospective consultees. No formal consultation has taken place at this stage.

8. **RECOMMENDATIONS**

8.1 That the Cabinet Member authorises progress of a consultation on a review of the discretionary elements of the Home Assistance Policy, as outlined in the report.

8.2 That the Cabinet Member receives a further report in January 2014 outlining the results of the consultation and the options that arise to amend the Home Assistance Policy.

DIRECTOR OF PLACES

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Background Papers used in the preparation of this report: None

Discretionary Home Assistance Funding

Currently the Council has a programme of offering discretionary assistance to the vulnerable and elderly to help repair their homes to remove health and safety hazards and/or to make them warmer.

The last private sector house conditions survey completed in 2008 identified major disrepair as the biggest cause of non-decency and Excess Cold as the main health and safety hazard. The elderly homeowner living in rural areas is most at risk of being unable to repair their home due to having insufficient capital available. In such circumstances, the Council has been able to offer equity release loans to help them repair their homes and deal with urgent health and safety hazards.

North Lincolnshire has pockets of significant fuel poverty and hard to heat properties, often because they are off the mains gas network. The introduction of the Energy Company Obligation has resulted in a number of small schemes, funded in the main by the Energy Companies, being completed within the Borough.

The ability to help householders in this way recognises that housing quality and suitability is a major determinant of health and well-being, and hence, poor housing impacts directly on demand for NHS services and social services.

The relationship between housing and health is a complex one and poor housing conditions often coexist with other forms of deprivation (unemployment, poor education, ill health, social isolation etc), making it difficult to assess the overall health impacts of poor housing. Nonetheless, research shows a positive correlation between poor housing conditions and poor health of the occupant, particularly the elderly or the very young.

Older people are the main users of both hospital and primary care and their homes are a particularly important factor in them being able to maintain physical and mental health and addressing health inequalities. An adapted home in good condition allows an older person to remain at home for longer with just a minimal amount of input from social services. Ensuring a safe and healthy home is therefore important in keeping people at home, which research shows is better for their long-term health and helps keep care costs down. It also reduces the costs of health care. It can decrease GP visits by older people with chronic conditions, enable timely hospital discharge, extend independence for patients with dementia and provide end of life care at home.

There is a well recognised causal link between housing and the main long term conditions (eg. heart disease, stroke, respiratory, arthritis) whilst risk of falls, a major cause of injury and hospital admission amongst older people, is significantly affected by housing characteristics and the wider built environment.

Recent data produced using the BRE Cost Calculator shows a saving to the NHS and the wider community of over £500,000 from the remedying of Category 1 hazards* (Excess Cold and Falls only) in the home during the first 2 quarters of this financial year.

Without the ability to help the vulnerable and elderly home owner deal with urgent home repairs, such as broken central heating boilers through home assistance funding, statutory action and the use of works in default to carry out such repairs will be necessary. There will also be impacts on a range of other partners, such as Social Services, NHS.

*Removal of hazards following enforcement