

## Bath & North East Somerset Council

DECISION MAKER:	<b>Cllr Liz Richardson, Cabinet Member for Homes and Planning</b>	
DECISION DATE:	<b>On or after 29th October 2016</b>	EXECUTIVE FORWARD PLAN REFERENCE: <b>E 2912</b>
TITLE:	<b>Decent Homes Policy Update</b>	
WARD:	All	
<b>AN OPEN PUBLIC ITEM</b>		
<b>List of attachments to this report:</b> Appendix 1: Decent Homes Policy Update 2016		

### 1 THE ISSUES

- 1.1 The Decent Homes Policy sets out how Housing Services will provide assistance, including financial assistance, to help low-income, elderly, disabled and other vulnerable residents to undertake essential repairs, improvements and adaptations to their homes.
- 1.2 The updated Decent Homes Policy 2016 includes three amendments. Firstly, the ability in exceptional circumstances to offer a discretionary financial “top-up” where the assessed cost of disabled adaptations exceeds the mandatory Disabled Facilities Grant limit. Secondly, expanding the availability of low cost home energy loans to all residents in B&NES for energy efficiency improvements through the Council’s Energy at Home Scheme. Finally, widening the eligibility criteria for the small Urgent Repairs Grants to include Home from Hospital Clients.

### 2 RECOMMENDATION

- 2.1 The Cabinet Member is asked to agree with the Decent Homes Policy 2016 Update contained in appendix 1.

### 3 RESOURCE IMPLICATIONS (FINANCE, PROPERTY, PEOPLE)

- 3.1 The schemes within the Decent Homes Policy, including Disabled Facilities Grants (DFGs), are funded from the following sources:
  - DFG programme – the 2016/17 budget (£1.002m) is funded through a combination of the DFG element of the Government’s Better Care Funding grant (£571k), a voluntary contribution from Curo Housing (£150k) and

corporate revenue funding (£281k). In 2017/18 an increase in the DFG element of the Better Care Funding grant will significantly reduce the revenue funding element.

- Non-DFG programme – the 2016/17 budget (£120,000) is funded by a s256 grant from Health.

- 3.2 The proposed non-DFG changes will not have an adverse impact on the budget for two reasons. Firstly, that the loan scheme, which is administered by Wessex Resolutions Community Interest Company (WRCIC), is effectively (excluding an annual administration fee) self-financing. Secondly, the Urgent Repairs Grant budget has historically been underspent.
- 3.3 The proposed DFG “top-up” will create an additional pressure limited to £50,000 p.a. over the existing capital programme. Current estimates for 2017/18 capital DFG requirements are at £1.1m including both this top-up element and demand pressure for the statutory element.
- 3.4 The additional cost of DFG capital can be funded through the increase in Better Care Funding grant in 2017/18 and subsequent years.
- 3.5 Capital programme increase will need to be sought through the Council’s budget setting process.
- 3.6 The DFG “top-up” will reduce down-stream pressure on the social care and health budgets as a result of reducing the need for alternative care where a necessary adaptation could not otherwise be provided.
- 3.7 These changes are all subject to the availability of funding and subject to annual budget limits.

#### **4 STATUTORY CONSIDERATIONS AND BASIS FOR PROPOSAL**

- 4.1 The Regulatory Reform (Housing Assistance) (England and Wales) Order 2002 provides local authorities with a general power to offer assistance to improve housing conditions. This assistance may take the form of financial grants, loans or any other type of help and support thought appropriate. Prior to making such assistance available it is a requirement that the Council must adopt and publish a housing renewal policy, referred to as the Decent Homes Policy in this document.
- 4.2 This policy helps to improve the housing conditions of residents, including low-income vulnerable residents, by making assistance available for essential repairs, energy efficiency improvements and home adaptations to eligible applicants.

#### **5 THE REPORT**

- 5.1 The B&NES Housing Condition Survey 2012, identified particular groups of residents experiencing poor housing conditions, including:
  - Owner occupiers and private sector tenants over 65 years of age;
  - Lone parents with dependent children;
  - Owner occupiers on low income;

- Residents with a disability; and
- Vulnerable residents.

5.2 The Decent Homes Policy addresses these issues through a number of schemes aimed at the improvement of homes occupied by low-income, disabled, elderly and otherwise vulnerable households. The proposed updated Decent Homes Policy 2016 builds on this by incorporating three amendments. Firstly, the ability in exceptional circumstances to offer a discretionary financial “top-up” where the assessed cost of disabled adaptations exceeds the mandatory Disabled Facilities Grant limit. Secondly, expanding the availability of low cost home energy loans to all residents in B&NES for energy efficiency improvements through the Council’s Energy at Home Scheme. Finally, widening the eligibility criteria for the small Urgent Repairs Grants to include Home from Hospital Clients.

### 5.3 Disabled Facilities Grants (DFGs)

5.3.1 The Housing Grants, Construction and Regeneration Act 1996 provides eligible residents with a means-tested mandatory DFG up to a maximum of £30,000. DFGs fund the provision of safe, accessible facilities such as for washing and access to and within the home. These works enable disabled people to live more safely and independently at home and prevent further downstream costs on residential and acute care services.

5.3.2 There are a small, but increasing number, of cases where the client has significant needs and the cost of works exceed the mandatory DFG maximum. In these cases the Council can offer discretionary Home Improvement Loans, through Wessex Resolutions Community Interest Company, to owner-occupiers to cover these additional costs. This is a low-interest rate repayable loan secured against the property. However, some grant applicants are unable to access these loans because they are not owner-occupiers or due to issues of affordability. This can mean that essential adaptations do not go ahead and clients are left in unsuitable accommodation.

5.4 It is therefore proposed to introduce the ability to offer, in exceptional cases, a discretionary grant of up to £20,000 when the loan is not available. In the case of owner-occupiers this grant would become repayable when the property was sold. The decision to offer these grants would be made by a multi-disciplinary panel. The funding pot would be limited to £50,000 p.a. and the grants subject to the availability of funding. Home Energy Efficiency

5.4.1 Changes to the Decent Homes Policy are proposed to widen the availability of Home Improvement Loans to fund energy efficiency measures for residents improving the energy efficiency of their home. It is also proposed that future Council approved energy efficiency schemes including affordable warmth schemes are covered by the policy.

5.4.2 Encouraging more residents of Bath and North East Somerset to improve the energy efficiency of their homes will contribute to the Council’s agenda on climate change, help improve the housing stock and enable people to stay warmer and healthier in their own homes. It will also help to reduce the number of cold homes with Category 1

Housing Health and Safety Hazards for Excess Cold (the most significant Hazard in the area). The scheme is subject to the availability of funding and subject to annual budget limits.

## 5.5 Urgent Repairs Grant

5.5.1 Changes to the Decent Homes Policy are proposed to widen the availability of the Urgent Repairs Grant so that clients of the Council's Home from Hospital Contract Service (currently delivered by the Council's commissioned Home Improvement Agency) are not subject to a Test of Resources (TOR). These grants are for works to peoples' homes that can be essential to enabling them to be discharged from hospital. Removing the need for a TOR for this group will take away unnecessary delays. The grants are small (maximum of £1,000) in comparison to the cost of staying in hospital. The scheme is capped and subject to the availability of funding.

## 6 RATIONALE

6.1 The proposed changes to the Decent Homes policy will benefit a wide range of residents by helping to fund improvements to housing conditions which might otherwise not go ahead. They will mean that the policy is more effective in helping a wider range of home owners and tenants to live independently in warm and more energy efficient homes. Improving the safety and suitability of homes can improve health and wellbeing and reduce costs to the health service in the long run.

6.2 The proposed changes will also bring the policy in line with new opportunities provided by the Council's Energy at Home scheme enabling residents to fund home energy improvements with no upfront costs. It provides in a single policy all housing related assistance under the Regulatory Reform Order 2012, including empty homes assistance.

## 7 OTHER OPTIONS CONSIDERED

7.1 The option of not updating the policy was rejected because this would limit the effectiveness of the policy.

## 8 CONSULTATION

8.1 The Leader of the Council, the Cabinet Member for Homes and Planning, the Section 151 Finance Officer, the Council's Monitoring Officer and Staff were consulted on the proposed changes to the policy.

## 9 RISK MANAGEMENT

9.1 A risk assessment related to the issue and recommendations has been undertaken, in compliance with the Council's decision making risk management guidance.

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<b>Background papers</b>	<i>None</i>
<b>Please contact the report author if you need to access this report in an alternative format</b>	