

## **CABINET MEMBER FOR HOUSING AND PREVENTING HOMELESSNESS**

RECORD OF DECISIONS of the meeting of the Cabinet Member for Housing and Preventing Homelessness held on Monday, 29 November 2021 at 4.30 pm at the Guildhall, Portsmouth

### **Present**

Councillor Darren Sanders (in the Chair)

Councillors Cal Corkery  
Scott Payter-Harris

#### **27. Apologies for absence**

There were no apologies for absence.

#### **28. Declarations of interest**

There were no declarations of interest.

#### **29. Private Sector Housing Financial Assistance Policy 2021**

Clare Hardwick, Head of Private Sector Housing, introduced the report.

In response to questions from Councillor Corkery, officers explained that it was entirely at the council's discretion as to what extent it could require higher environmental standards than specified in building regulations, for example, when installing energy efficient doors. There are no barriers to this as long as it is cost effective.

In response to questions from Councillor Payter-Harris, the DFG (Disabled Facilities Grant) was being increased from £30,000 to £40,000 not only because costs have risen because of Covid but also because they have been rising year on year. The £30,000 limit has not changed for 14 years. The forecast spend has increased from £1.1m to £1.4m partly due to the backlog of cases when officers could not inspect properties during Covid. In addition, the policy would enable cases to be processed more quickly so spend is predicted to increase.

The top-up grant to provide help with ancillary costs of boiler replacement is on average about £500.

Funding for discretionary repair work comes from a council pot of repayment from historic loans and whenever a grant is made the pot diminishes. The policy allows for replenishing the pot by recycling loans.

Councillor Payter-Harris echoed Councillor Corkery's point on environmental standards and would like to see green energy used where possible. He thought the decision to stop means testing for some types of work was sensible as it ensures people are not excluded from getting help. He thanked officers for the report which covers an important area of work.

Felicity Goodyear had had experience of DFG work being replaced twice and was keen to ensure that contractors do a good job, as otherwise repeated replacements are a waste of money.

Officers said building work should comply with relevant legislation and there is a dedicated officer who inspects the work to see it is being completed to the standard expected. This system has been in place for a few years. Officers are always striving to work with contractors to ensure quality.

With regard to the costs to the council of the interest free loan for homeowners, officers said the borrowing rate is currently about 2.37% spread over a number of investments. Although there is a cost it is not as much as grants would cost. The DFG is £40,000 maximum whereas the maximum for a discretionary loan is £25,000 which is very rare; the average is about £4,000 or £5,000. There is £200,000 in the budget for discretionary loans, which comes from the repayment of previous loans. There are no interest costs for the council with the loans as the money cycles round.

In response to concerns from Councillor Payter-Harris if supply outstrips demand, particularly as an ageing population means more people could be eligible, officers said the policy is subject to availability and there is no guarantee someone will get a grant. They suggested devising an early warning mechanism if funds look likely to run out; quarterly reports could be submitted to the Governance & Audit & Standards Committee (GAS).

Summing up, Councillors Sanders commended the report's direction of travel and he hoped the works would improve people's lives. The Residents' Consortium had raised valid points about quality of work. Removing means testing is good as it reduces administrative costs. There is a risk that loans may not be paid back but if there were no loans then the funds would not be used at all and no-one would benefit. He would like it recorded that the policy includes how it will meet environmental and energy efficiency standards where possible and feasible but also to recognise that buildings are people's homes. It is sensible to have an early warning mechanism in case funds start depleting and, if all parties agree, reporting to GAS is sensible.

## DECISIONS

The Cabinet Member agreed that the Private Sector Housing Financial Assistance Policy 2021, as outlined in Appendix 1 of the report, is implemented from 29 November 2021.

The meeting concluded at 5.08 pm.

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Councillor Darren Sanders  
Chair