

REPORT TO: Executive Board

DATE: 27 February 2014

REPORTING OFFICER: Strategic Director – Policy and Resources

PORTFOLIO: Resources

SUBJECT: Discretionary Housing Benefit Scheme Guidance

WARD(S): Borough-wide

1. PURPOSE OF REPORT

1.1. To consider the attached Discretionary Housing Benefit Scheme Guidance, as recommended by the Corporate Policy and Performance Board.

2. RECOMMENDATION: That the Discretionary Support Scheme Guidance document recommended by the Corporate Policy and Performance Board, as shown in Appendix 1, be approved.

3. BACKGROUND

3.1 Discretionary Housing Payments (DHP) provide claimants with financial assistance, in addition to welfare benefits, in those circumstances where the Council considers that additional support with housing costs is required.

3.2 Given the significant changes in welfare provision currently taking place, it is considered helpful to provide further guidance to those Officers who administer applications for DHPs, to ensure consistency and equitable treatment when such applications are assessed.

3.3 Appendix 1 presents a report considered by the Corporate Policy and Performance Board on 22nd January 2014, which recommends the adoption of the Discretionary Housing Benefit Scheme Guidance. A copy of the Guidance is also attached within Appendix 1.

3.4 Discretionary Housing Payments are available to claimants who are entitled to:

- (i) Housing Benefit (HB), or
- (ii) Universal Credit (UC), and
- (iii) Have a rental liability, and
- (iv) Require further financial assistance with housing costs

3.5 The level of DHP award may cover all or part of a shortfall in rent, or may assist with the cost of taking up a tenancy.

- 3.6 There are various types of shortfalls which a DHP award can provide assistance for, including;
- (i) under-occupation in the social rented sector
 - (ii) where the benefit cap has been applied
 - (iii) Local Housing Allowance restrictions
 - (iv) rent shortfall (in part or in full) between eligible rent and HB award
 - (v) non-dependant deductions
 - (vi) income tapers
 - (vii) reductions in HB or UC
- 3.7 In general, 'housing costs' means rental liability and include; rent, rent deposits, or rent in advance, or other lump sum costs associated with a housing need such as removal costs.
- 3.8 Discretionary Housing Payments cannot be awarded towards:
- (i) Ineligible service charges (example – gardening charges, water charges, meals).
 - (ii) Support charges (example – charges which relate to care or supervision).
 - (iii) Increases in rent to cover rent arrears which are not liable for housing benefit.
 - (iv) Sanctions and reductions in benefit (including HB overpayment recovery action).
 - (v) Amounts of HB/CTB that have been suspended.
 - (vi) Rent where a person is getting support through a Council Tax Reduction Scheme (CTRS) but not HB or UC.

4. Discretion Housing Payment Scheme Guidance

- 4.1 The DHP Guidance included within Appendix 1 is intended to give Officers a framework to work to when assessing claims. This will help to ensure a consistent and equitable treatment of applications for what is a cash-limited sum of money.
- 4.2 Notwithstanding this each case will still be considered on its individual merits, to ensure that the Guidance does not fetter cases of exceptional hardship not covered in the document.
- 4.3 In addition there is an Appeals Process to Members which is already in existence.

5. IMPLICATIONS FOR THE COUNCIL'S PRIORITIES

- 5.1 Delivery of the Discretionary Housing Payments Scheme has the potential to affect all of the Council's priorities.

6. RISK ANALYSIS

- 6.1 Payments will be monitored from the scheme to ensure that these remain within the total budget available.

7. EQUALITY AND DIVERSITY ISSUES

- 7.1 The Guidance will ensure the consistent and equitable consideration of each application.

8. LIST OF BACKGROUND PAPERS UNDER SECTION 100D OF THE LOCAL GOVERNMENT ACT 1972

Document	Place of Inspection	Contact Officer
Notifications from the Department of Works and Pensions	Revenues & Benefits & Customer Services Division Kingsway House Widnes	Peter McCann

