



POLICY AND RESOURCES SCRUTINY COMMITTEE – 2ND JUNE 2015

SUBJECT: DISCRETIONARY HOUSING PAYMENTS POLICY

**REPORT BY: ACTING DIRECTOR OF CORPORATE SERVICES AND SECTION 151
OFFICER**

1. PURPOSE OF REPORT

- 1.1 To seek the views of the Scrutiny Committee on the attached Discretionary Housing Payments Policy prior to consideration by Cabinet.

2. SUMMARY

- 2.1 Discretionary Housing Payments (DHPs) are additional short-term payments made towards rent. They are only paid to customers already receiving Housing Benefit who need more help with their housing costs over and above their benefit award.
- 2.2 To help Local Authorities mitigate the impact of Welfare Reform, funding for DHPs has increased in recent years. However, it is important that the limited funding available is targeted at those most in need. With this in mind, the DHP policy appended to this report has been drafted. The policy complies with the Department for Work and Pensions Discretionary Housing Payments Guidance Manual (April 2014) and the Pan-Wales Discretionary Housing Payment Policy Framework.

3. LINKS TO STRATEGY

- 3.1 The payment of Housing Benefit is a key element of the Council's anti-poverty and regeneration strategies.

4. THE REPORT

- 4.1 Since July 2001, Discretionary Housing Payments (DHPs) have enabled Local Authorities to help those entitled to Housing Benefit or Council Tax Benefit who, in their opinion, require further financial assistance with housing costs.
- 4.2 From April 2013 DHPs were available only to those entitled to Housing Benefit as Council Tax Benefit ended in March 2013 and was replaced by the Council Tax Reduction Scheme, which is not a Department for Work & Pensions (DWP) related benefit. Therefore, DHPs could no longer be used for help towards paying Council Tax.
- 4.3 Local Authorities have a responsibility to ensure that DHP funding is utilised effectively so that it is paid to those who have the most need. Decisions on assessments are made with reference to the relevant DWP Regulations. These are the Discretionary Financial Assistance Regulations 2001 [SI 2001/1167]. There is no set criterion but each claim has to go through a financial income and expenditure assessment.

- 4.4 Every Local Authority is required to have a written policy that provides clear guidelines on the assessment of DHP applications. Local Authorities have a duty to act fairly, reasonably and consistently when considering entitlement to a DHP award, thus ensuring that the most vulnerable receive the financial assistance they need.
- 4.5 The number of people supported with DHPs has increased significantly in recent years as shown in the table below: -

Year	Total Spend (£)	Number of Claimants Supported
2012/13	74,586	239
2013/14	388,788	1,207
2014/15	428,113	1,266

- 4.6 The funding allocated by the DWP for the 2015/16 financial year is £381,973 and the Council needs to consider the way in which this is allocated to ensure that those most in need are supported. It is therefore proposed to adopt the policy appended to this report to ensure that all claimants are treated fairly and those in most need are given the financial assistance they require to support them to maintain or achieve a solution to secure their tenancy.
- 4.7 It is important to stress that DHPs are principally short-term financial support towards long-term sustainable solutions and payment cannot be made indefinitely. It is fundamental when a DHP is awarded that a sustainable solution is sought and it is imperative that claimants work with their landlords and other support available so that financial advice can be given or affordable accommodation found.
- 4.8 Under the proposed policy payments granted will initially be for a maximum period of up to 3 months (13 weeks). In a limited number of cases where there are particular exceptional circumstances the award may be extended beyond this initial period subject to an assessment of on-going need.

5. EQUALITIES IMPLICATIONS

- 5.1 The proposed policy will help the Authority ensure that it acts fairly, reasonably and consistently when considering entitlement to DHPs. The limited funding available will be targeted at those most in need of financial support.

6. FINANCIAL IMPLICATIONS

- 6.1 As detailed throughout the report.

7. PERSONNEL IMPLICATIONS

- 7.1 There are no direct personnel implications arising from this report.

8. CONSULTATIONS

- 8.1 There are no consultation responses that have not been reflected in this report.

9. RECOMMENDATIONS

- 9.1 Members are asked to consider and comment upon the DHP policy appended to this report prior to consideration by Cabinet.

10. REASONS FOR THE RECOMMENDATIONS

- 10.1 To ensure that the Scrutiny Committee has an opportunity to express its views on the proposed DHP policy.

11. STATUTORY POWER

- 11.1 Decisions on assessments are made with reference to the relevant DWP Regulations. These are the Discretionary Financial Assistance Regulations 2001 [SI 2001/1167] and associated amendments.

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Appendices:
Appendix 1 Draft Discretionary Housing Payments Policy