



## Homelessness Prevention Fund Policy 2021

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# Homelessness Prevention Fund Policy 2021

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# 1 Introduction

- 1.1 The Homeless Reduction Act 2017 (HRA) places two main duties on the local authority:
  - a duty to prevent homelessness where someone is threatened with homelessness within 56 days; and
  - a duty to relieve homelessness where someone is already homeless.
- 1.2 The Act requires local authorities to provide homelessness services to all eligible people threatened with homelessness or actually homeless, irrespective of priority need, intentionality and local connection.
- 1.3 If an applicant becomes homeless, they may require temporary accommodation. Local authorities will focus on homelessness prevention and relief initiatives to prevent anyone from having to live in temporary accommodation.
- 1.4 Living in temporary accommodation can be disruptive, and have a detrimental impact on the physical, emotional and financial welfare of homeless households. The provision of temporary accommodation is also extremely costly to the local authority and there is a constant effort to reduce expenditure.
- 1.5 Often a small spend, to resolve issues within existing accommodation, or to help someone to access accommodation, far outweighs the cost of providing temporary accommodation and/or affordable/social housing.
- 1.6 To positively end a prevention or relief duty to an applicant the local authority must be satisfied that the applicant has suitable accommodation available for their occupation and a reasonable prospect of that accommodation being available for at least six months.
- 1.7 Both duties can be discharged with a long-term offer of social housing (for qualifying applicants) but with increased pressures on demand for social housing it is not always a quick or appropriate solution for many applicants, in addition, applicants are not able to exercise choice (see North Northamptonshire Keyways Housing Allocation Scheme and Discharge of Homelessness Duties (Accommodation Offers) Policy for more information).
- 1.8 North Northamptonshire Council will always strive to help someone to remain in their existing accommodation – where it is safe and suitable to do so – or to help them to secure alternative suitable accommodation with friends and family, supported accommodation, private rented accommodation (see Private Rented Sector Access Fund Policy for more information), or low cost home ownership.

1.9 Funding for this policy is from 2 main sources:

- Ministry of Housing Communities & Local Government (MHCLG) allocation of Homelessness Prevention Fund (formerly Flexible Homelessness Support Grant and Homelessness Reduction Grant)
- North Northamptonshire Council

## **2 Aims and Objectives of this Policy**

- 2.1 The aim of this policy is to enable Housing Advisers to deliver the HRA in a true and meaningful way and prevent homelessness by providing a payment which allows them to remain in their current home or relieve homelessness by a providing payment which enables them to secure alternative suitable accommodation – irrespective of priority need, intentionality, and local connection<sup>1</sup>.
- 2.2 In turn this policy would prevent the need for many homeless households to be provided with temporary accommodation, which is a better, less disruptive, outcome for the household and helps the Council to keep its costs to a minimum.
- 2.3 The aim of this policy is to ‘spend to save’; a small spend can save a much larger spend in provision of temporary accommodation and staffing costs associated with assessing and determining applications for homelessness assistance.
- 2.4 In accordance with homeless applicants’ Personalised Housing Plans (PHP), applicants will still be required to take reasonable steps to prevent or relieve their homelessness, including saving money and contributing funds where possible to assist with resolving their housing situation.
- 2.5 Any payment would be made as a grant to the applicant, on the basis the provision of the payment would outweigh the costs associated with progressing and determining an application for assistance and or providing temporary accommodation, even long-term social housing.<sup>2</sup>

## **3 Examples of Homeless Prevention Fund Payments**

- 3.1 Housing Advisers should be encouraged to use this Fund as creatively as possible to prevent and relieve homelessness, even on a temporary basis to avoid or delay the need for a household to be provided with temporary accommodation until such time as long term housing can be secured.

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<sup>1</sup> Although the Council will not apply any blanket policies and will consider each case on its own merits; the Council will refer cases with no local connection in accordance with legislation and guidance

<sup>2</sup> This policy operates on a ‘spend to save’ principle, and there is no requirement for Housing Advisers to carry out actual calculations/cost balancing exercises

- 3.2 For those households who are threatened with homelessness, Housing Advisers will often need to get to the root cause of the issue, for example:
- Purchasing bunk beds and storage solutions to help with overcrowding and organisation in a busy family home
  - Purchasing carpets or curtains to alleviate noise or nuisance issues
  - Providing board/lodging payments for a young adult to remain in the family home until they can claim benefits/source employment
  - Provide financial supplements to support other friends/family members providing accommodation to prevent someone from becoming homeless
  - Purchasing a mobile phone to allow support/contact to be provided
  - Purchasing ID so that someone can claim benefits, open a bank account and or secure a room rent or tenancy
- 3.3 Housing Advisers should take the view, that if it will solve the housing problem, then any request for payment from the Fund will be considered.
- 3.4 The Homelessness Prevention Fund can also be used in more traditional situations:
- Clearing or part clearing rent or mortgage arrears to enable a household to remain in their accommodation
  - Funding or part funding rent in advance where a household has secured accommodation via North Northamptonshire Keyways (the Council's Choice Based Lettings System)
  - Funding or part funding storage and/or removals as part of a solution to prevent or relieve homelessness
  - Reconnection enabling a household to travel to another part of the country, or to another country, because they can access accommodation and/or support there
  - Payments to private landlord to delay the eviction of private tenants while alternative accommodation is secured to prevent the need for temporary accommodation.
- 3.5 A payment can be provided in any other situation if deemed reasonable and appropriate in accordance with the aims of this policy by the Authoriser (see 'Fund Payments Authorisation Procedure' for more details).

## **4 Eligibility**

- 4.1 The Fund can be used for:
- Single people, couples or families who are homeless (including those owed the main housing duty under S193 Part 7 Housing Act 1996 (as amended) (the Act)) or threatened with homelessness within 56 days
  - They must have completed a full housing assessment with a Housing Adviser and deemed eligible for assistance in accordance with S185 of the

Act<sup>3</sup>

- They must have a local connection to the North Northamptonshire Council area in accordance with homelessness legislation (households without local connection may be considered if there are exceptional circumstances determined by the Authoriser)
- They must be actively engaging with the Council to prevent or relieve their homelessness.

#### 4.2 Households may not be eligible if:

- They have income/savings which would enable them to make the payments themselves.
- There are reasonable alternative means of funding available, for example, if benefit or charitable payments would reduce or clear arrears.
- There is evidence to suggest that they would be unable to manage a tenancy successfully, even if support was provided for example, they have been refused access to supported accommodation owing to their needs being too high.
- It becomes evident that false information has been supplied, or relevant information has been withheld.
- The accommodation is considered too expensive for the household to afford, is unsustainable, in some way unsuitable, or is in a poor state of repair.
- Where larger payments are made, for example to clear rent or mortgage arrears, the payment will not result in the applicant being able to access or remain in accommodation for at least 6 months.

#### 4.3 Circumstances in which payments will not be made include but are not limited to:

- Hotels or lodgings (the Fund is intended to facilitate alternatives to this)
- Where other funding is available for example, Discretionary Housing Payment (DHP) or charitable funds
- Anything which could be seen to support potentially illegal or immoral action by any party
- Where repeat payments have been made to an applicant from this Fund to remedy homelessness owing to the same cause

#### 4.4 No recourse to public funds

- 4.4.1 The Fund can be used to reconnect households with no recourse to public funds who elect to return to their local authority area or country of origin where they have access to accommodation and/or support.

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<sup>3</sup> Except for those households seeking voluntary reconnection to their area or country of origin where they have access to accommodation and/or support.

## 5 Homeless Prevention Fund Procedure<sup>4</sup>

- 5.1 The Housing Adviser must make an assessment that the applicant is eligible for assistance from the local authority in accordance with S185 of the Act, and homeless or threatened with homelessness in accordance with S175 of the Act.
- 5.2 The applicant must have completed a full housing assessment with a Housing Adviser and be actively working with the Housing Adviser to prevent or relieve their homelessness including referrals to any support services or organisations, for example, money/debt advice. The applicant must also be able to provide the usual documentary evidence and in addition copies of statements from all bank, post office, building society or savings accounts held to evidence that they do not have the necessary funds available to them.
- 5.3 The Housing Adviser must make an assessment that the applicant meets the eligibility criteria for this Fund in Section 4 of this policy.
- 5.4 The Housing Adviser can still offer support to applicants assessed as ineligible for assistance under S185 of the Act using this Fund. Please refer to paragraph 4.4 for further details.
- 5.5 The Fund should be considered and detailed in line with a range of associated reasonable steps within the applicants PHP.
- 5.6 To request approval for a payment from the Fund to be made, the Housing Adviser must submit the Homelessness Prevention Fund Request to the Authoriser for authorisation.
- 5.7 Once authorisation is provided the Housing Adviser should complete a Payment Requisition and send it to Finance for the payment to be made. The payment will be made by BACS to the receiving party.
- 5.8 For purchasing smaller items, the Housing Adviser should arrange this with the Authoriser for use of their corporate credit card.<sup>5</sup>
- 5.9 The Housing Adviser must attach the Homelessness Prevention Fund Request, authorisation and Payment Requisition/goods receipts to the applicant's case. The Housing Adviser must also confirm details of any payment from the Fund in the applicant's general advice/end duty letter.
- 5.10 Clearing arrears
  - 5.10.1 Where a payment is being made to help an applicant to remain in their

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<sup>4</sup> The Housing Options Service in the locality area formerly known as the district of East Northamptonshire is delivered by Home Direct (under contract until March 2022). Authorisation for payments from the Fund will be provided by North Northamptonshire Council (Authoriser), but payments will be made by Homes Direct who will in turn invoice North Northamptonshire Council for reimbursement.

<sup>5</sup> Please see footnote (4). Home Direct hold their own corporate credit card to enable purchasing of smaller items although any expenditure against the credit card in respect of this Fund is approved by North Northamptonshire Council (Authoriser).

accommodation (for example by clearing or part clearing arrears) the Housing Adviser must assess the ongoing sustainability and affordability of the accommodation using the Personal Budget Sheet.

#### 5.11 Receiving party

- 5.11.1 Where a payment is to be made by BACS the receiving party must provide written agreement that the payment will be used in the way intended, for example, to clear or part clear arrears.
- 5.11.2 A payment will not be made to the applicant unless in exceptional circumstances as determined by the Authoriser.

#### 5.12 Part 6 Offers

- 5.12.1 In majority of cases, applicants will have been made aware of any offer/nomination and been provided with sufficient notice of any requirement to pay rent in advance.
- 5.12.2 In circumstances where there are genuine affordability issues a Housing Adviser can use the Fund to help an applicant to take up a Part 6 Offer. The Housing Adviser must contact the landlord/Registered Provider to negotiate a lesser payment if possible and request that some form of contribution is made by the applicant.

## **6 Recording, Monitoring and Review**

- 6.1 A record of payments will be kept by the Authoriser in each locality team and the Authoriser in each locality team will monitor spending under the Homelessness Prevention Fund against the budget.
- 6.2 This policy will be reviewed annually or sooner if there are any changes to legislation or operational requirements that may impact on this policy and its delivery.
- 6.3 Minor changes to this policy can be agreed by the **INSERT POSITION**. Where there are significant changes or changes to legislation then this will require the appropriate governance.

## **7 Complaints and Appeals**

- 7.1 Use of the Fund is at the discretion of the Authoriser and there is no application procedure or appeals process.
- 7.2 In addition, the Authoriser has authority to refuse any request of a Housing Adviser (or applicant) for use of the Homelessness Prevention Fund where an applicant's circumstances are as such that it would be inappropriate or improper to utilise public resources.



- 7.3 North Northamptonshire Council operates a Compliments and Complaints Policy so that everyone is clear about how to compliment, comment and complain about services provided by the Council and what will happen to those comments once they are received. A copy of the Compliments and Complaints Policy can be found on the North Northamptonshire Council website.

## **8 More Information**

- 8.1 If you would like further information about this policy please contact North Northamptonshire Council's Housing Options Service:

**ENTER CONTACT DETAILS**