

Minutes of the Place and Environment Scrutiny Committee held at 7pm on Tuesday 17th December, 2024 at the Council Chamber, Corby Cube, George Street, Corby, NN17 1QB

Present:-

Councillor Graham Lawman (Chair)

Councillor Melanie Coleman

Councillor Emily Fedorowycz

Councillor Zoe McGhee

Councillor Macaulay Nichol

Councillor Mark Pengelly

Councillor Lee Wilkes

Officers:

George Candler, Executive Director Place and Economy

Iain Smith, Assistant Director Regulatory Services

Amy Plank, Interim Strategic Lead for Private Sector Housing

Carol Mundy, Senior Democratic Services Officer (Committees/Members)

Emma Robinson, Democratic Services Assistant..

Also in attendance – Executive Member, Councillor Rowley was also present.

The chair welcomed members and the viewing public to the meeting.

74 Apologies for absence

Resolved to note that apologies for absence were received from Councillors Robin Carter and Geoff Shacklock.

75 Members' declarations of interest (if any)

Resolved to note that no declarations were made.

76 Notifications of requests to address the meeting (if any)

Resolved to note that no notifications to address the meeting had been received.

77 Minutes of the meeting held on 29 October 2024

Resolved that the minutes of the meeting held on 29 October 2024 be signed and approved as an accurate record thereof.

78 Private Sector Housing Assistance Policy

The circulated report of the Assistant Director of Regulatory Services, Iain Smith, was received in relation to the revised Private Sector Housing Policy which was appended to the report.

The purpose of the report was to seek approval to the proposed changes and recommendations to the policy as appended to the report, to enable more flexibility, equality and inclusivity to be provided for discretionary funding to deliver grants and a focus on supporting vulnerable, elderly and disabled residents by streamlining procedures and offering further financial assistance.

The report was presented to committee by Amy Plank, Interim Strategic Lead for Private Sector Housing.

She explained that the current Private Sector Housing Policy was a combination of the policies previously used by the four former legacy councils of Corby, East Northamptonshire, Kettering and Wellingborough and had been in place since April 2021.

Areas of improvement had been identified whereby new and revised proposals had been suggested for incorporation into the policy in response to the Regulatory Reform (Housing Assistance) (England and Wales) Order 2002 (RRO).

The refreshed policy enables grants to be provided for disabled facilities to allow people to live independently for longer in a more flexible and speedy manner. The report detailed the changes and proposals, and each was discussed individually with the reasons for the proposed changes being provided, along with alternative options for consideration.

The chair invited Mrs Plank to present each item and the committee was able to ask questions and comment thereon.

The proposals and recommendations are detailed below.

Proposal 1 – Discretionary DFG (Disabled Facilities Grants) Grant (Top-Up)

The report detailed that the current maximum Mandatory Disabled Facilities Grant is £30,000 with the Top-Up being a maximum of £10,000.

The recommendation was that the Discretionary DFG Grant (Top-Up) be increased to £20,000.

This was supported by the committee who considered this to be appropriate.

Proposal 2 and 2A– Means Test

Proposal 2 - All DFG works are means tested, except for children's applications and applicants with passporting benefits.

The recommendation was that no means test be introduced for equipment cases (installation of stair-lift, or a ceiling track hoist) not associated with any other DFG funded building works, up to a maximum cost of £8,000.

Proposal 2A – Applicants with a confirmed client's contribution are not eligible for a Discretionary DFG Grant (Top-Up). Those with passporting benefits and children's applications are eligible for a discretionary DFH (Top-Up) as the parents are not means tested.

It was recommended that parents are means tested for children's applications regarding the Discretionary DFG Grant (Top-up) **only**.

This was supported by the committee.

Proposal 3 – Land Charges

It was recommended that the following changes be made to the application of a land charge on a property:

- No land charge would be placed on Through Floor Lifts (TFL) cases, including enabling works.
- No land charge be placed on stair-lifts.
- No land charge be placed for any amount below £200.
- No land charge be placed for a child applicant on long-term foster placement.
- Any land charge be waived due to financial hardship and/or if moving properties to receive care from others.

Members proposed that an additional stipulation be made as follows:

- No land charge be placed if a person, for whom the works were carried out, dies.

The committee supported the above.

Proposal 4 – Fast Track Adaptions

Cases are prioritised based on a priority grading system set by an Occupational Therapist (OT), as standard, urgent or critical.

It is recommended that a 'fast tracking' process be introduced, outside of the OT priority grading system mentioned, to assist with hospital discharge cases, terminally ill applicants and palliative care.

This was supported by the committee.

Proposal 5 – Dementia Grants

The introduction of a dementia grant for works with a cost value of over £1,000 (works below that could be covered by the Minor Adaptions Budget held by Community Occupational Therapy). Grants will be based on the initial dementia diagnosis and prior to the disease escalating to the stage when major DFG adaptions are recommend. This would include the following adaptions:

- Safer flooring
- Labels and signs on doors and cupboards
- Contrasting colour decorations between walls and floors
- Installation of contrasting coloured fixtures such as grab rails and toilet seats
- Task focused lighting in bathrooms and kitchens
- Assistive technology for monitoring activity or to inform if it is day or night.

This was supported by the committee.

Proposal 6 – Motor Neurone Disease (MND) Grants

Currently not covered by the policy it was proposed to introduce grants for applicants with an early MND diagnosis, who can continue to work until no longer able to do so. An application for DFG would most likely deem them as non-eligible for a grant through the means testing process due to their earnings. It is therefore recommended that the introduction of this grant be based on disregarding their earnings to ensure that adaptations can be in place for when they no longer work and are unable to manage daily activities.

This was supported by the committee.

Proposal 7 – Independent Panel

Applicants where eligible can be entitled to a £30k mandatory grant and a £10k discretionary grant. If the cost exceeds £40k the applicant is required to meet the shortfall, or the works cannot proceed.

The introduction of an independent member/officer panel is proposed to review cases on an ad-hoc basis and understand the needs and approve further discretionary grants to meet the cost difference over the approved mandatory and discretionary limits, subject to the provision of evidence that the applicant is unable to raise the necessary funds themselves.

The committee asked if there would be terms of reference supplied for the panel to ensure that criteria was followed. The officer confirmed that this would happen.

This was supported by the committee.

Proposal 8 – Equipment Maintenance

Currently equipment is covered by a standard 12-month warranty offered by the supplier. Any ongoing maintenance, servicing, repairs or warranties are the responsibility of the grant recipient. The grant recipient can request a quote for an extension of the manufacturer's warranty (normally up to five-years) and purchase this service at their own cost.

It was recommended that all extended warranties be covered by the grant for all equipment for five years. Additionally, it was proposed that the grant covers the call out fees, if contacted by the applicant, including any repairs up to £500.

This was supported by the committee.

Proposal 9 – Private landlords and housing associations

The current policy does not allow for any special provision for private or social housing tenants. It is therefore proposed to streamline the grant application process for private and social tenants, if:

- The landlord or housing association make the application and
- manage the works, including the provision of drawings/specification for council approval and/or carrying out the works.

This was supported by the committee.

Proposal 10 – Non-mandatory works

The current policy makes no special provisions for non-mandatory DFG works not covered by legislation. It was proposed that the introduction of a mechanism according to which further consideration can be given to any such cases, is implemented as follows:

- All proposed non-mandatory work will be reviewed between the lead officer for DFGs, Surveyor, OT, carers, special support, GP etc before confirming them as reasonable, practicable and required by the applicant.
- All non-mandatory work up to an estimated cost value of £1,000 will be approved by the Disabled Facilities Grant Manager.
- All non-mandatory work, of a more extensive design proposal, will be subject to a feasibility visit by a surveyor to identify the estimated cost of works, if in excess of £1,000 and subject to the approval in principle by the DFG Manager, the case will be reviewed by the independent panel before approval or rejection can be confirmed.

This was supported by the committee.

Home Move Grants

There would be no change to the following grant conditions:

- To fund more cost-effective alternatives to provide a mandatory disabled facility grant.
- Maximum grant of £6k.
- Cost of adaptations (maximum £5k).
- Relocation costs (maximum £1k).

Other Policies – Home Repair Grant

It was also recommended that all grants included in the current policy, namely renovation grants (maximum grant £10K), landlord renovation grants (maximum grant £10k) and home repair assistance grants (maximum grant £5k) be replaced with one Home Repair Grant offering a maximum of £15k assistance to eligible owner-occupied residents, on a means tested benefit and/or low income. The grant aims to prevent category one hazards in the property, address safety improvements, electrical works, thermal insulation, affordable warmth, energy efficiency or lack of a heating system.

In summary the Place and Environment Scrutiny Committee praised officers for the excellent and detailed report and supported the suggested recommendation to enhance the policy. The inclusion of assistance for MND patients was considered a positive move.

It was noted that the policy had also been presented to the Prosperous Communities EAP before being presented to the Place and Environment Scrutiny Committee and that it would now be put before the executive for consideration.

Councillor Rowley, as Executive Member thanked the committee for its positive comments and clarified that the refreshed policy would mean that grants were available for those who needed it the most at the most vulnerable of times. Funding was provided by the government and this would ensure that it was used wisely and most effectively.

Officers clarified that funding was provided from central government and was guaranteed with small annual increases being provided. Funds were ringfenced and could be retained, they were subject to monthly monitoring and audited.

RESOLVED that Place & Environment Scrutiny Committee:

- (i) note the content of the report and approve the recommendations therein;
- (ii) commend the revised Private Sector Housing Assistance Policy to the executive on 16 January 2025 for approval

79 Scrutiny Forward Work Programme - For information only

The circulated workplan for Place and Environment Scrutiny Committee was received and noted.

It was suggested by committee members that the following additional items be considered by the Scrutiny Management Board for future inclusion on the Place and Environment Scrutiny Committee workplan:

- Home to School Transport Policy
It was noted that a report on the changes to the Home to School Transport Policy would be considered after it had been in operation for a full 12 month period.
- Green Burials
This could not be brought before a scrutiny committee, as currently there was not a policy to scrutinise. This would need to be formulated and agreed by the Sustainable EAP first.

Resolved that the workplan and comments be noted.

80 Close of meeting

Resolved that there being no further business the meeting was closed at 9.15pm.

Chair.....

Date.....