

## **BARNSELY METROPOLITAN BOROUGH COUNCIL**

**This matter is a Key Decision within the Council's definition and has been included in the relevant Forward Plan**

### **Report of the Executive Director Core Services**

#### **Discretionary Housing Payments (DHP) – Proposed Amendments to the Scheme**

##### **1. Purpose of Report**

- 1.1 The purpose of this report is to seek authority to amend the current Discretionary Housing Payment (DHP) scheme to support the work carried out by the Housing Options Team in their new duties under the Homelessness Act 2017, specifically to support more people in crisis in a timely manner. In addition, the amended policy seeks to strengthen the commitment of the Council in their duty as a corporate parent to looked after children.
- 1.2 Universal Credit (UC) Full Service went live in Barnsley in July 2017. We are closely monitoring the impact of UC on the increase in demand for DHP's. Applications from UC claimants are steadily increasing. The amendments to the scheme should protect the funds available by ensuring that people do more to help themselves if they are to continue to receive payment of DHP's.

##### **2. Recommendations**

- 2.1 It is recommended that the new policy be agreed.

##### **3. Introduction**

- 3.1 There have been a number of factors that have made it timely to revisit the scheme. The introduction of the new Homelessness Act 2017, UC Full Service roll out and the role of the Council as a corporate parent to looked after children.
- 3.2 The DHP scheme is a discretionary scheme which aims to provide people with financial assistance towards their housing costs. This could be to meet a shortfall in their rent or a cost relating to moving to a new home. The scheme is entirely discretionary which the Council is free to determine how to operate.
- 3.3 The fundamentals of the scheme remain the same. The claimant has to pass a financial gateway before they are considered and furthermore must be in receipt of Housing Benefit (HB) or UC to initially apply. Awards are made for 6 months to allow the claimant time to take action to improve their circumstances. Past practice has been to allow the claimant a further award as long as they still meet the requirements of the financial gateway.

- 3.4 The amended scheme differ in that there is now a proposal to have a fast-track route for people in crisis (paragraph 3.7 refers). In addition, where people are seeking help to address a shortfall in income there will be conditions attached for any further awards beyond the initial 6 months. Any further awards will rely on the claimant taking up professional help / support to improve their circumstances. In the majority of circumstances we would expect that the claimant would need to seek the help of the Housing Options team who would put in place a housing support plan. This plan will ensure that the claimant will get the help that they need to remain in the property or find more affordable accommodation going forward.
- 3.5 Claimants who do not need the support of the Housing Options team will also be required to evidence that they have sought further additional help / advice to improve their circumstances before any further award of DHP will be made.
- 3.6 The new cross working arrangements between the benefits and taxation team and the housing options team will ensure that the customer benefits from a joined up service, not having to repeat and provide information twice and ensuring that any payments are made promptly in order to avoid evictions. It will also ensure that Council resources are used in a more efficient way.
- 3.7 As mentioned above, the scheme has also been amended to include a fast-track route for the more vulnerable people in our community. We will automatically provide financial assistance for a period of 6 months for the following people:
- Rough sleepers securing accommodation;
  - People fleeing violence;
  - Children leaving care.

Once the initial 6 months has passed then the financial gateway criteria must be met before any further awards will be considered. The amendment has been included to help those in difficult circumstances get financial help quickly and to give them space to deal with more urgent issues.

#### **4. Proposal and Justification**

- 4.1 It is the intention that in approving this proposal it will result in less people becoming homeless and help people in finding accommodation that better suits their needs and budget.
- 4.2 We currently monitor the overall spend forecast out to the year end. This will continue to ensure that the amendments to the scheme do not adversely impact the funds available.

## **5. Consideration of Alternative Approaches**

- 5.1 An alternative approach is to continue to implement the scheme as is. However, the new duties under the Homelessness Act and the potential increase in applications under UC mean that the current policy will not adequately protect those in most need.

## **6. Impact on Local People**

- 6.1 The amendments to the policy are to ensure that the people who are in most need get the time they need to get the right support in place to find affordable accommodation or improve their financial circumstances to remain in their current property.

## **7. Financial Implications**

- 7.1 The Discretionary Relief Scheme is cash limited and set each year by the Secretary of State.
- 7.2 The cost of the scheme is carefully monitored to ensure that the funds last to the end of the financial year and that no customer in need is turned away purely down to the funds being exhausted. However, the payments are linked each year to one off grant funding by the Government which may be withdrawn at any time.

## **8. Employee Implications**

- 8.1 There are no issues arising as a result of this report.

## **9. Communications Implications**

- 9.1 There have been 2 consultations on the proposed scheme. The first consultation was an online survey to both past and current recipients of a DHP. The second consultation was a stakeholder event.
- 9.2 Both landlords and external organisations were invited to a consultation event held at the Digital Media centre. A full report can be found at appendix B. The event also feeds in to the equality impact assessment as discussed below.
- 9.3 The response from both events was positive in terms of the fast-track scheme with 75% agreeing in the first group and 100% in the second group.
- 9.4 The second change in respect of applying conditions to further awards of a DHP was mainly positive. In the first group 48% agreed and 21% neither agreed nor disagreed. In the second group 100% agreed. The first group raised concerns that professional help and advice would not help them meet their accommodation expenses as they simply did not have enough money to meet all of their outgoings.

## **10. The Corporate Plan and the Council's Performance Management Framework**

- 10.1 Approving this proposal will support the Corporate Plan by meeting the Council's priority of a strong and resilient community.

## **11. Promoting Equality and Diversity and Social Inclusion**

- 11.1 The full EIA can be found at appendix C where all equality implications concerning the DHP scheme have been addressed and full consultation analysis presented.
- 11.2 We consulted colleagues in respect of the Council's responsibility as a corporate parent and the policy has taken into account these duties in respect of the fast-track route for looked after children leaving care.
- 11.3 The aim of the consultation event was to include various stakeholders including those who supported potentially effected groups identified in the EIA.

## **12. Tackling the Impact of Poverty**

- 12.1 The scheme helps those most in need. The amendments to the policy aim to help people get out of poverty by ensuring they have the support in place to find affordable accommodation.

## **13. Tackling Health Inequalities**

- 13.1 There are no issues arising from this report.

## **14. Reduction of Crime and Disorder**

- 14.1 There are no issues arising from this report.

## **15. Risk Management Issues**

- 15.1 There are no issues arising from this report.

## **16. Health, Safety and Emergency Resilience Issues**

- 16.1 There are no direct health and safety implications arising from this report

## **17. Compatibility with European Convention on Human Rights**

- 17.1 This report recognises the promotion and importance of equality, diversity and human rights for all members of the local community and the wider Borough.

## **18. Conservation of Biodiversity**

- 18.1 There are no direct issues arising as a result of this report.

**19. Glossary**

19.1 Not Applicable

**20. List of Appendices**

20.1 Appendix A – Discretionary Housing Payments Policy.

20.2 Appendix B – Engagement and Consultation Plan.

20.3 Appendix C – Equality Impact Assessment.