

WIRRAL COUNCIL

DELEGATED DECISION BY THE CABINET MEMBER – NEIGHBOURHOOD, HOUSING AND ENGAGEMENT

17TH SEPTEMBER 2015

SUBJECT:	REVISED PRIVATE SECTOR HOUSING AND REGENERATION ASSISTANCE POLICY 2015
WARD/S AFFECTED:	ALL WARDS
REPORT OF:	KEVIN ADDERLEY
RESPONSIBLE PORTFOLIO HOLDER:	COUNCILLOR GEORGE DAVIES
KEY DECISION	YES

1.0 EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

- 1.1 The purpose of this report is to provide the opportunity to consider the proposed revisions to both the Council's Private Sector Housing and Renewal Assistance Policy (referred to as the *Assistance Policy*) and associated Environmental Responsibility Policy and agree the implementation of the revised Policies with immediate effect.
- 1.2 This report also advises members of minor changes made to the *Assistance Policy* since the last formal review.

2.0 BACKGROUND AND KEY ISSUES

- 2.1 The Regulatory Reform (Housing Assistance) (England and Wales) Order 2002 (referred to as *the RRO* in this report) gave Local Authorities the power to provide assistance to improve living conditions in their area. This assistance can be provided in any form and can include such things as advice about property improvements and financial assistance in the form of grants and/or loans. This power cannot be used unless a policy for the provision of such assistance has been adopted. Once adopted, Housing Renewal Guidance Circular 5/2003 recommended that the policy should be monitored, reviewed and amended (if necessary) to take into account changes in local circumstances and government policy. In this way, the policy should evolve over time to meet the needs and aspirations of Wirral residents. Any significant changes should be subject to consultation prior to being adopted and the public should be notified about the revised policy. Circular 5/2003 was cancelled earlier this year, however, it is considered good practice to continue reviewing the policy to ensure that it remains fit for purpose and relevant to the needs of Wirral residents. In addition to *the RRO*, Part 1 of the Local Government Act 2000 allows Local Authorities to give financial assistance to any person in order to promote the economic, social and environmental well-being of an area. This power supports the use of products aimed at non-residential interests involved in regeneration activity connected with housing schemes.

- 2.2 On the 13th of October 2011, Cabinet Members agreed to incorporate a Policy on Environmental Responsibility and supporting guidance into the *Assistance Policy*.
- 2.2 On the 21st June 2012, Cabinet Members agreed to allow officers to make minor changes to the *Assistance Policy* without having to undertake a full consultation exercise. Such changes are to be reported to and agreed by the portfolio holder for Neighbourhoods, Housing and Engagement (formerly Housing and Community Safety) at the time the changes are made and will be reported to Cabinet at the next annual review of the *Assistance Policy*. Since the last review one minor change was agreed and made to Home Repair Assistance Loan, Renovation Loan and Cosy Homes Heating Grant financial products in April 2014. This change was subsequently incorporated in the Policy document and referenced to show the date when the change was made. Please see internet link in 2.3 below.
- 2.3 The current *Assistance Policy* (Version 6) was adopted by Cabinet on 11th July 2013 and can be accessed using the following internet link:

<http://www.wirral.gov.uk/my-services/housing/housing-strategies-policies-partnerships/housing-regeneration-assistance-policy>

The Environmental Responsibility Policy and supporting guidance can also be accessed using the above link.

3.0 SUMMARY OF MINOR CHANGES MADE SINCE THE LAST REVIEW

- 3.1 The following table summarises the minor changes made to the *Assistance Policy* since the last review:

Assistance amended	Amendments Agreed	Date Amendment Made
Home Repair Assistance, Renovation Loan, Cosy Homes Heating Grant	Applicants are not restricted to the Business Approval Register to select contractors. Applicants are now only recommended to use a contractor registered with the Business Approval Register	7 th of April 2014

4.0 SUGGESTED AMENDMENTS TO THE EXISTING POLICY FOLLOWING AN INTERNAL REVIEW

Wirral's policy is currently split into 3 distinct sections covering:

- Assistance for relocation (in connection with demolition schemes)
- Assistance for renovation
- Other (help for empty properties, energy efficiency, debt advice etc)

4.1 Assistance for relocation

This consists of a range of financial and advisory assistance targeted at residents and home owners involved in housing demolition schemes. The ongoing clearance schemes

were started in connection with the former Housing Market Renewal Initiative. A range of capital resources has been secured to fund the remaining schemes to completion, including the funding of relevant financial assistance currently provided in the *Assistance Policy*. Both the Homemovers and Business Movers Service were originally introduced as part of the former HMRI to provide bespoke assistance to those being displaced by the large scale demolition programme. The majority of the remaining properties to be cleared are now vacant and it is proposed that these services are removed from the policy

Proposal

It is suggested that both the Homemovers and Business Movers Support Services be removed from the *Assistance Policy*.

4.2 Assistance for Home Adaptation

The Wirral Home Improvement Agency no longer exists and adaptations are now facilitated/delivered by the “Disabled Adaptations Service” in line with the relevant Disabled Facility Grant legislation.

Proposals

It is suggested that the Wirral Home Improvement Agency is withdrawn from the *Assistance Policy*.

4.3 Other

A range of assistance is available to support action involving Empty Properties, Energy Efficiency Improvements, Debt and Housing Advice and the ability to introduce new assistance to secure additional grant funding to support carbon reduction measures (in this last case, as and when resources are made available). The HOUSED programme is nearing completion with the majority of the remaining renovated properties currently at various stages in the conveyancing process. There is no current intention to continue this programme with any further property acquisitions.

Fast track specialist housing and debt advice, with an emphasis on preventing homelessness, has been available to both residents and accredited landlords/agents living within Wirral, from Wirral Citizens Advice Bureau (CAB). The external grant funding to support this assistance has now ended. A new Homeless Prevention Fund is available to support homelessness prevention and relief. This is a central government directly funded scheme, administered by the Housing Options Team. The fund can be used in a flexible approach to assist the client to remain in their current home or assist clients to obtain alternative accommodation.

Eligibility for the Cosy Homes Heating Grant is based on a means test incorporating the receipt of certain benefits. Since the last review, the Government has introduced Universal Credit as a replacement for specific benefits for new applicants. Currently under the terms of the *Assistance Policy*, any applicants in receipt of Universal Credit would not qualify for Cosy Homes Heating Grant, however, would qualify, had they been in receipt of the benefits replaced by Universal Credit. In addition to this, the Government introduced the Energy Company Obligation 2 (ECO 2) which came into effect on 1st April 2015. The guidance for energy companies delivering the Home Heat Reduction Obligation (“Affordable Warmth Grant”) under ECO 2 means there is less assistance available to households on the qualifying benefits leading to a requirement

for the Cosy Homes Heating Grant to ensure it is able to assist these residents as they are often on the lowest incomes and more vulnerable to the effects of fuel poverty.

In September 2015, the Council and its City Region partners were notified of their success in obtaining funding through the Government's Central Heating Fund (CHF). This provides part-funding towards new full central heating systems in homes where no central heating is present. The eligibility criteria differs slightly from Cosy Homes Heating however to benefit from this funding the Council will refer eligible households through this route, which in some circumstances will mean a reduced grant is needed from the Council. Referrals through this route will be time limited until the full expenditure of the local CHF pot or until the end date of the CHF, whichever is the sooner.

Public Health's "Healthy Places" funding is being made available until 31st March 2017 to support selective licensing through several interventions, including making available solid wall insulation grants. "Cosy Homes Solid Wall Insulation Grants" will be for households on the same eligible benefits as Cosy Homes Heating Grants. This will ensure the grant is being directed to those most susceptible to cold and damp related illnesses who are least able to improve the energy efficiency of their property.

Proposals

It is suggested that HOUSED and fast track specialist housing advice be withdrawn from the *Assistance Policy*

Amend the Cosy Homes Heating Grant eligibility criteria to incorporate appropriate applicants in receipt of Universal Credit as well as incorporating the other Affordable Warmth eligible benefits to ensure the grant can assist low income vulnerable households unable to access the Affordable Warmth grant for technical reasons or if energy companies meet their ECO 2 targets before the end of the obligation period (1 April 2015 to 31 March 2017).

Include the new Cosy Homes Solid Wall Insulation Grant for private households in the Selective Licensing areas.

The range of advice given as part of the fast track debt and housing advice service should be updated to reflect changes made since the last policy review.

It is suggested that the Homeless Prevention Fund be incorporated within the revised financial assistance policy (Section 8).

The proposed changes have been incorporated into the draft revised policy in Appendix 1.

4.4 Future proposal

In relation to home adaptations, officers will be reviewing the service and exploring financial assistance options which aim to support service delivery & vulnerable disabled persons retaining independence and remaining in their homes as well as hospital discharge in line with Government policy; and this will be reported to members in due course.

4.5 The Environmental Responsibility Policy has been updated to reflect both the changes made and proposed since its original introduction in 2011. The revised Environmental

Responsibility Policy is now incorporated into the revised *Assistance Policy* in Appendix 1

5.0 OTHER OPTIONS CONSIDERED

5.1 Making no changes to the *Assistance Policy* was considered, however, this was ruled out on the grounds that the changes above would facilitate more efficient programme management and delivery and support operating costs. In addition, all of the assistance currently set out in the *Assistance Policy* is now not available and/ or has changed as a result of changes to Council budgets and/or national policy direction. The assistance available in the revised *Assistance Policy* can be managed using current staffing and financial resources

6.0 CONSULTATION

6.1 Previous policy reviews have largely involved the addition of assistance available through the *Assistance Policy*. These reviews have been subject to public consultation. On this occasion, following an internal review by officers, the proposed revisions are considered to be relatively minor changes incorporating the withdrawal of some forms of assistance based on lack of demand, minor amendments to other existing forms of assistance and the extension of Cosy Homes to include solid wall insulation and it is suggested that on this occasion public consultation is not necessary as the impact is likely to be minimal.

7.0 IMPLICATIONS FOR VOLUNTARY, COMMUNITY AND FAITH GROUPS

7.1 None

8.0 RESOURCE IMPLICATIONS: FINANCIAL; IT; STAFFING; AND ASSETS

8.1 Sufficient capital resources are in place to deliver the revised *Assistance Policy* during 15/16. The 15/16 programme includes the recycling of repaid loans from previous financial years to reduce the demand for new capital resources.

8.2 No new IT investment is required as a result of this report

8.3 There are no staffing implications to this report

8.4 There are no asset implications to this report.

9.0 LEGAL IMPLICATIONS

9.1 The review undertaken and proposed changes would have been consistent with the former guidance to the Regulatory Reform (Housing Assistance) (England and Wales) Order 2002. In the absence of any official guidance, the action recommended in this report is considered to be reasonable

10.0 EQUALITIES IMPLICATIONS

10.1 The suggested revisions to the *Assistance Policy* will continue to help those members of society least able to afford to undertake improvements or move to alternative accommodation. In addition, the *Assistance Policy* will assist private landlords to improve housing conditions for some of the most vulnerable members of society. The *Assistance Policy* targets assistance towards low income households. Those applicants

deemed to have the ability to afford improvements or relocation by other means will be sign-posted accordingly.

10.2 An Equality Impact Assessment (EIA) has previously been completed for the Private Sector Housing and Regeneration Assistance Policy and minor changes have been necessary to reflect the amendments suggested in this report. The revised EIA is in Appendix 2

11.0 CARBON REDUCTION IMPLICATIONS

11.1 The revisions to the Environmental Responsibility Policy remove the compulsion for contractors employed by loan/grant recipients to have their own Environmental Policies. As an alternative, contractors will be encouraged to have an Environmental Policy and guidance on writing such a policy and the benefits of having a policy is retained.

12.0 PLANNING AND COMMUNITY SAFETY IMPLICATIONS

12.1 There are none

13.0 RECOMMENDATION/S

13.1 Consider and agree the revisions to both the Council's Private Sector Housing and Renewal Assistance Policy and associated Environmental Responsibility Policy and agree the implementation of the revised Policies with immediate effect.

13.2 Note the minor changes made to the *Assistance Policy* since the last formal review.

14.0 REASON/S FOR RECOMMENDATION/S

14.1 The current Private Sector Housing and Regeneration Assistance Policy has now been operative for over 12 months, having been approved by Cabinet in July 2013. It is considered good practise to regularly monitor, review and amended (if necessary) the *Assistance Policy* to take into account changes in local circumstances and government policy and a commitment has previously been given to review the policy.

14.2 The Policy on Environmental Responsibility and supporting guidance has not been reviewed since its introduction in 2011. A review will align this policy with any changes made to the *Assistance Policy*.

14.3 Cabinet Members agreed on the 21st June 2012 that any minor changes made to the *Assistance Policy* should be summarised and reported at the next formal review.

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APPENDICES

1: Draft revised Private Sector Housing and Regeneration Assistance Policy (Version 7), including Environmental Responsibility Policy

2: Equality Impact Assessment

REFERENCE MATERIAL

Until earlier this year, ODPM Circular 05/2003 – ‘Housing Renewal’ has been used as a guide to preparing and reviewing Wirral’s Assistance Policy, however, this Circular has now been withdrawn by the Secretary of State for Communities and Local Government, and there is currently no guidance on this matter.

SUBJECT HISTORY (last 3 years)

Council Meeting	Date
Cabinet ‘Private Sector Housing and Regeneration Assistance Policy 2013/14	11/7/2013
Cabinet ‘Private Sector Housing and Regeneration Assistance Policy’	21/6/2012
Cabinet ‘Private Sector Housing and Regeneration Assistance Policy 2011/12	13/10/2011
Cabinet ‘Private Sector Housing and Regeneration Assistance Policy 2011/12	21/7/2011