

Rother District Council

Report to: Overview and Scrutiny Committee

Date: 7 June 2021

Title: Financial Assistance Policy 2021-2025 (Disabled Facilities Grants)

Report of: Head of Service Housing and Community

Ward(s): All

Purpose of Report: To propose a revised Financial Assistance Policy that sets out the tools for providing housing renewal assistance as required by the Regulatory Reform (Housing Assistance) England and Wales Order 2002.

Officer

Recommendation(s): It be **RESOLVED:** That Cabinet be requested to agree that:

- 1) the Financial Assistance Policy 2021-2025 be recommended to Council for adoption; and
- 2) initially, £200,000 be allocated to the DDPG from the balance of DFG funds held in earmarked reserves.

Introduction

1. The Council must have an adopted Financial Assistance Policy to be able to provide Disabled Facilities Grant funding through the Better Care Fund (BCF). The proposed Financial Assistance Policy can be found at Appendix A.
2. The Housing Renewal Financial Assistance Policy sets out the financial tools available to the Council for providing financial assistance to households and residents in Rother. The Council is required to have such a policy under The Regulatory Reform (Housing Assistance) (England and Wales) Order 2002.
3. Disabled Facilities Grants (DFGs) are also included in this policy and are given to vulnerable clients to allow them to remain in their own home and remain independent.
4. It is also proposed that a new Discretionary Disabled Project Grant (DDPG) be introduced as part of the Policy to enable the Council to spend its full complement of BCF allocation and identified needs within the community be met. The use of the Council's annual DFG allocation will remain prioritised to meet the identified needs of individuals through mandatory and discretionary grant awards; however, the DFG grant is regularly underspent, and the Council can therefore have regard for wider local needs.

5. The DDPG will invite applications from residents of Rother to improve and update disabled facilities for community-based buildings and groups. In addition, the Policy will allow the Council to make improvements to its own community assets, parks and open spaces where a need is identified and facilitate greater access to disabled residents and visitors to the district.
6. The expenditure on DFGs in 2019/20 was £1,186,860, enabling the Council to complete 129 adaptations. To deliver DFGs the Council receives referrals from the East Sussex County Council (ESCC) occupational therapy team. The capacity of the occupational therapy team is limited and this can affect the number of adaptations delivered each year; this situation is replicated across East Sussex and much of the wider country. However, there does not appear to be unmet demand from qualifying residents for the mandatory grants.
7. As the DFG funding allocated through the BCF is ring-fenced for the purpose of providing disabled adaptations, the Council has a cumulative underspend within its financial reserves of approximately £1.3m. The Council's BCF allocation for 2021/22 is £1,844,806, an increase of approximately £650,000 on last years' allocation.

Discretionary Disabled Project Grant (DDPG)

8. The increased allocation of central Government DFG funding presents an opportunity to make better use of the discretionary powers granted to the Council by the Regulatory Reform Order and support innovative projects that can improve the lives of our disabled residents.
9. The Council has worked closely in recent years with the countywide Joint Approach to Housing Solutions Officer Group. The Group works in partnership with ESCC and Clinical Commissioning Groups to look at options for using grant money more flexibly. As a result, districts and boroughs in East Sussex are recommending that their financial assistance policies are revised to allow for greater flexibility, through measures such as the new DDPG proposed within the revised Policy. It is proposed that initially £200,000 is allocated to the DDPG from the balance of funds in earmarked reserves. Funds for the DDPG will only be allocated from previous year underspends in order to ensure the full allocation of the current year funding is available to residents for adaptations.
10. The DDPG will be accessed and administered in a very similar way to the Council's existing Community Grants Scheme. A panel of relevant Council officers, ESCC occupational therapist representatives and the Portfolio Holder for Housing and Homes will be formed to assess applications and award grant allocations. The total value of the grant available through the DDPG will be variable and dependent on demand for mandatory DFGs. Individual grant applications will be limited to £10,000. In exceptional circumstances, the value of individual grant awards may be increased.
11. The grant is intended to support smaller projects that are easily deliverable. The conditions of the DDPG will also be supportive, responsive, and uncomplicated so that the grant is accessible to as wide a range of groups and organisations as possible. However, applicants will need to evidence the extent of the need for any proposed adaptation as well as illustrate what efforts have been made to secure funds from other sources and the reasons for these applications having been unsuccessful.

12. Further, the Council will not approve any grant unless the appropriate permissions and consents have been obtained. The contractual relationship regarding the works will be between the applicant and the contractor and the applicant will be responsible for ensuring the works subject to the grant are carried out to the required standard. The Council will inspect any works to ensure they have been completed to required statutory standards.
13. A copy of the DDPG application form can be found at Appendix B. The form includes the DDPG eligibility criteria and the types of adaptations the grant will support as well as the criteria against which applications will be assessed and grants awarded.
14. The types of adaptations for which grant will be awarded include, but are not limited to:
 - Disabled access – including ramping, wheelchair access, external step approaches, communal entrances.
 - Communal stair lifts.
 - Accessible playground/play for children with disabilities.
 - Sanitary facilities for disability and wheelchair users.
 - Toilets.
15. Applicants will be invited to provide responses to the following priorities against which scores will be given and grants awarded:
 - The proposed adaptation is needed and there is evidence that people with disabilities will benefit.
 - The proposed adaptation provides access to facilities or activities that are presently inaccessible to people with disabilities.
 - The proposed adaptation supports communities to promote active lifestyles that benefits physical and mental wellbeing.
 - To ensure the resilience of community and voluntary groups in the future.
 - To improve the safety of people with disabilities.
 - To support the local economy and businesses.

Conclusion

16. It is recommended that the Council adopt the revised Financial Assistance Policy. The Council must have an adopted Financial Assistance Policy to be able to provide Disabled Facilities Grant funding through the BCF. DFGs are essential for improving the health and wellbeing of residents who experience disability and mobility impairments. The proposed Policy will allow the Council to continue to support residents by funding adaptations that improve access to their homes through the mandatory DFGs.
17. In addition, the new DDPG will allow the Council to maximise the use of its BCF allocation through more flexible use of the funds. Further, the Policy will allow the Council to harness these funds to make adaptations to its own estate and those public realm locations for which it is responsible. These new measures will provide greater access to public buildings, venues, parks and open spaces for disabled people, supporting the local economy and improving the health, wellbeing and quality of life for residents and visitors to the district.

Financial Implications

18. The financial implications are discussed in the main report

Legal Implications

19. Legal colleagues have and continue to be consulted prior to the adoption of the Policy proposed.

Environmental Implications

20. The Housing Needs team endeavours to use local building contractors when undertaking necessary DFG works. The team will continue to review its approach to tendering such works in line with its broader objectives to achieve carbon neutrality by 2030.

Equalities and Diversity

21. An Equalities Impact Assessment has been completed to support the proposed Policy. The Policy proposals will benefit disabled groups and promote an equality of access to essential facilities and recreational activities that promote the health, wellbeing and safety of disabled groups.

Other Implications	Applies?	Other Implications	Applies?
Human Rights	No	Equalities and Diversity	Yes
Crime and Disorder	No	External Consultation	No
Environmental	Yes	Access to Information	No
Risk Management	No	Exempt from publication	No

Chief Executive:	Malcolm Johnston
Report Contact Officer:	Joe Powell
e-mail address:	joe.powell@rother.gov.uk
Appendices:	A Financial Assistance Policy 2021-2025 B DDPG Application Form
Relevant previous Minutes:	None
Background Papers:	None
Reference Documents:	None