

**TO: EXECUTIVE MEMBER OF ADULT SERVICES, HEALTH & HOUSING
25 JANUARY 2016**

**REVISION OF DISCRETIONARY HOUSING PAYMENT POLICY
Director of Adult Social Care, Health & Housing**

1 PURPOSE OF REPORT

- 1.1 The purpose of the report is to seek consideration of revision of the Council's Discretionary Housing Payment (DHP) Policy.

2 RECOMMENDATION

- 2.1 That the Executive Member is asked to agree:**

Discretionary Housing Payment Policy as set out at Appendix A.

3 REASONS FOR RECOMMENDATION

- 3.1 The recommendation support the Council's priority to create a borough where people are and feel safe and the medium term objective to support older and vulnerable people by providing targeted financial support for vulnerable households.

4 ALTERNATIVE OPTIONS CONSIDERED

- 4.1 The Council could decide to continue with its existing DHP Policy. However, this would run the risk of undermining the Council's various strategies to address poverty and also strategies to prevent homelessness and ensure the Council is able to maximise the spend on DHP in line with the allocate budget from central government.

5 SUPPORTING INFORMATION

- 5.1 The policy is updated to reflect amendments to the Discretionary Financial Assistance regulations which ensure the scheme covers the introduction of Universal Credit.
- 5.2 Bracknell Forest went live with Universal Credit on 28 September 2015. This is for single Job Seeker's Allowance claimants, which will be later followed by couples and households with children. The national rollout for new claims will continue until 2018. The national migration of most existing claims is scheduled to be completed from May 2016 and all by 2021.
- 5.3 The revised policy includes the following changes.

DHP cannot be paid, when a benefit suspension has occurred or there is general doubt to Housing Benefit or Universal Credit.

The Council must be satisfied that the claimant is entitled to Housing Benefit or Universal Credit and requires further financial assistance with housing costs. A DHP cannot be considered if the claimant has not yet been awarded Housing Benefit or Universal Credit but may be eligible.

Unrestricted

DHP cannot be paid for housing costs already met by Housing Benefit or Universal Credit.

Each claim will be considered on a case by case basis having regard to the purpose of DWP benefits received and whether the money received from those benefits have been committed to other liabilities such as being associated with a disability.

The policy continues to provide support to claimants affected by key welfare reforms which include:

- Benefit cap;
- Removal of spare room in the social rented section;
- Reduction of Local Housing Allowance.

- 5.4 The regulations give the Council very broad discretion. Decisions must be made in accordance with ordinary precepts of good decision making. Local authority's have a duty to act fairly, reasonably and consistently. Each case must be decided on its own merits and decision making must be consistent.

6 **ADVICE RECEIVED FROM STATUTORY AND OTHER OFFICERS**

Borough Solicitor

- 6.1 The LA has the legal powers to award these grants.

Borough Treasurer

- 6.2 The Council receives an annual grant for Discretionary Housing Payments from the Department for Works and Pension. The policy states that the budget will be maintained in line with this grant, so there should be no direct implications for the budget from this policy.

Equalities Impact Assessment

- 6.3 An Equality Impact Assessment screening is included in this report at Appendix B. The recommended policy is extension of the Council's existing policies and as such should not generate adverse impacts. The ability of the Council to provide targeted financial support to households who face financial hardship will mitigate other related costs for the Council such as increased homelessness costs.

Strategic Risk Management Issues

- 6.4 The ability of the Council to provide targeted financial support to households who face financial hardship will mitigate other related costs for the Council such as increased homelessness costs.

7 **CONSULTATION**

Principal Groups Consulted

- 7.1 All stakeholders and Benefit customers and the wider community were consulted on the proposals.

Method of Consultation

7.2 A link on the Council's public website was set up to explain and encourage responses to the proposed revision of the policy. This was available from 5 November to 14 December 2015, a period of six weeks.

Representations Received

7.3 There were 5 responses to the consultation, which included representation from Bracknell Forest Homes.

Bracknell Forest Homes	No issues or changes made regarding the DHP policy. Housing benefit already follow this policy, it is now set in stone
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The following table sets out the response to each proposed change:

Proposed changes	Agree	Disagree	Neither agree or disagree
Agree with principles of draft scheme	1	2	1
Should we limit DHP applications if applicants have not exhausted other forms of income or actively sought a move	4	0	0
Should the Council be able to make assistance conditional on the applicant undertaking certain actions	4	0	0

What issues should the council consider when considering limiting DHP applications.
Do they own pets, do they drink excessively, do they own a car less than 4 years old, do they smoke.. If so they do not need assistance
Nationality
If they can't afford their rent, they should return to live with family. The benefits Britain culture needs to end now

Further comments on policy
Severe conditions on how they spend our money
Maintain responsible attitude to British nationals resident in Bracknell
Use the left over DHP money to invest in contraception

Unrestricted

Consultation responses in terms of equality groups were as follows:

7.4

Gender	3 male 1 female
Age	18-34 year olds: 1 35-49 year olds: 1 50-64 year olds: 1 65-79 year olds: 1
Ethnicity	White British / Scottish / Welsh, Northern Irish: 3 Show people / circus: 1
Religion	Christian: 2 No response: 2
Sexual orientation	Heterosexual: 3 Bi-sexual: 1
Health problem or disability	No. 4

Background Papers

Contact for further information

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