

Discretionary Housing Policy

Consultation Report

June 2013

Background

The Discretionary Housing Payment (DHP) is funding that is given to all Councils by central Government to provide housing costs to households that receive Housing Benefit. This funding is ring fenced and therefore the Council must use this money to provide additional financial assistance for housing costs to households that receive Housing Benefit.

The funding has increased substantially this year to reflect the roll out of the changes to Housing Benefits included within the welfare reforms and as a result of these changes, from April 2013, this funding can also be used to support households in receipt of Universal Credit Housing Costs (UHC). Harrow Council must ensure the use of the funding sits within the legal framework however it does have some discretion on where the funding is targeted and as a result has developed a Discretionary Housing Payment policy. Harrow Council will only award Discretionary Housing Payments from the central Government funding allocation and therefore will not top up this grant from other funding available in the Council. The Discretionary Housing Payment funding for the year April 2013 to March 2014 is £1.2 million.

The Council has ensured that the policy is inclusive and reflects the views of people living in Harrow and therefore has consulted on the development of the policy.

Consultation

The consultation was carried out from 20th May, 2013 to 16th June, 2013. People were able to give their views in the following ways:

Consultation Booklets and Questionnaires were sent to 176 Discretionary Housing Payment applicants, both successful and non-successful, with an invitation to respond to the questionnaire and/or attend a workshop to be involved in face to face feedback. These documents were also made available to the Community Reference Group to either respond as an organisation or provide to users if appropriate. This multi-agency Reference Group includes membership from CAB, Harrow Association of Disabled People (HAD), Harrow Mencap, the Landlords Association, Harrow Law Centre, Age UK, Mind in Harrow, Harrow Carers, Harrow Association of Somalie Organisations (HASVO), Councillors, The Equalities Centre, Jobcentre Plus, Unions and representation from all Council Services.

Specific Web pages were set up which enabled people to be able to view the draft policy as well as complete the web survey.

Face to face activity (Workshops/Discussion Groups) were held and all who were sent Consultation Booklets and Questionnaires were invited to attend. A workshop was also held with Registered Social Landlords whose stock includes Housing Benefit properties in Harrow.

Consultation Feedback

Questionnaire Feedback

In total 12 completed responses were received from the public which included one from a voluntary advice agency and two that had been completed on the web. The Citizens Advice Bureau (CAB) also provided an overarching response. All responses are detailed below:

Question 1: Do you agree with the principles of the Discretionary Housing Payment Policy?

	Yes	No	If you have answered no please let us know what you think they should be
Respondents	11	1	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - How can the Applicant prove a risk to Health and safety? - The policy should apply to new applicants of Housing - CAB – Concern that a resident who has received a voucher from the Housing Needs team to support them into a property could also receive DHP for a rent deposit or rent in advance.
Percentage	92%	8%	

Question 2: Bearing in mind that the policy has to sit within the statutory framework and within the framework for housing costs do you think any groups of people have been missed within the qualifying criteria?

	Yes	No	If you have answered yes, please let us know the groups that you feel have been missed and why
Respondents	2	8	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - People provided with Social Housing due to past criminal activities - Concern about how temporary accommodation can be adapted and landlords don't want property adapted - CAB concern that only people in receipt of Housing Benefit can access the DHP fund and how this assists them into a new property if they aren't currently renting and receiving Housing Benefit
Percentage (1 form left blank for this question)	17%	67%	

Question 3: To help us to support as many households as possible we will be looking at the financial circumstances for the person applying for Discretionary Housing Payment on a case by case basis. Each applicant will be considered so that the Council can understand their financial need and whether the person could contribute to their housing costs themselves. Are there any issues that we need to consider when taking forward this approach?

	Yes	No	Are there any issues that we need to consider when taking forward this approach?
Respondents	5	7	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Ability to make rent payments on date that Landlord requires as this is highly distressing - Need a case by case approach and properly analysed - Persons income, house rent, insulation (meaning insurance?) and number of children - Please consider my situation because I am in a financial problem - Need to put in your consideration not only the income for the applicant but also the expenditure particularly if have children - Landlords don't market their houses based on the Council fixed rates as in our case we have been working hard to find a house but having issues with finding landlords that accept Housing Benefit claimants.
Percentage	42%	58%	

Question 4: Are there any circumstances that haven't been taken into account within the financial criteria?

	Yes	No	The circumstances not taken into account
Respondents	3	9	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Positive comments regarding content of policy - Harrow should consider my situation or financial criteria because I am on a low income - I will speak for our case I know you do all your best and you think about everything... so for us you've put in your mind everything and you've helped us.
Percentage	25%	75%	

Question 5: Do you have any further comments on the policy?

	Yes	No	Are there any issues that we need to consider when taking forward this approach?
Respondents	6	6	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Policy very good and good to prevent practices of abuse - Families who strive to find a job – this type of scheme is needed to sustain families - Policy should remain as is 2013, 2014 and thereafter - Rent payment should be wholly reimbursed by the council in respect of those unemployed and to old people - Policy is important to people on a low income - People who have or are disabled should not be taken into account for the Bedroom Tax - Thanking for positive outcome of application to DHP - CAB – the policy is very clear
Percentage	50%	50%	

Of the 12 respondents 3 had been unsuccessful at previously applying for a Discretionary Housing Payment and 9 had been successful.

Face to Face Feedback

There were two workshops held, one with the public and one with Registered Social Landlords. Previous users of the scheme were invited to attend the public workshop however only one person attended.

The key points that were raised in the public consultation are:

- **Housing Association Forum** – Operational queries were raised at the meeting which included the following key points:
 - Can the fund be used to cover a shortfall between current DLA and future personal independence payments?
 - Would the list of scenarios turn into the final definition by default?
 - Is the Housing Department aware of the DHP Policy?
- **Public Workshop** – One attendee at the meeting who previously received a DHP who fed back the following key points in relation to the consultation:
 - Principles are good but does not apply to everyone
 - Health and Safety – How can prove and I kill myself and someone then has to look after son. Son burns himself as cannot reach things.
 - Housing costs – if Landlord will support any work to be done – i.e. paying for carpets what if temporary housing needs to be adapted again and again.
 - Qualifying Criteria – Begging government for help, not asked for carer to help as believe it's my duty. See other people smoking drinking and swearing, they get all the ehlp, because their children are at risk. Social workers involved. But my children may not be at risk and I do not get anything
 - Wants housing to check rents every 6 months so they can be told where can move and which place is cheaper.
 - Happy that income and expenses will be done on the individual persons income and not generalised.

Next Steps

The feedback from the consultation will be summarised and included within the report that will be put to Councillors for a decision at the July Cabinet Meeting.

Further to the decision the policy will be finalised and the qualifying criteria will apply to future applicants to the fund.