

To: City Executive Board
Date: 22 May 2018
Report of: Scrutiny Committee
Title of Report: Discretionary Housing Payments Policy

Summary and recommendations	
Purpose of report:	To present Scrutiny Committee recommendations concerning the Discretionary Housing Payments Policy.
Key decision:	Yes
Scrutiny Lead Member:	Councillor Andrew Gant, Chair of Scrutiny
Executive Board Member:	Councillor Susan Brown, Board Member for Economic Development and Partnership
Corporate Priority:	Meeting Housing Needs
Policy Framework:	Corporate Plan
Recommendation(s): That the City Executive Board states whether it agrees or disagrees with the recommendations in the body of this report	

Appendices
None

Introduction and overview

1. The Scrutiny Committee considered a report on the Council's Discretionary Housing Payment Policy at a meeting on 17 May 2018. This was provided in advance of the City Executive Board considering a recommendation to approve the Policy at its meeting on 22 May 2018.
2. The report provided the Committee with data on the annual expenditure for DHPs and the fluctuating level of grant received by HM Government over the past five years. Information was also provided on the number of applications received for DHPs and the number accepted and refused. It was noted that there were no substantial changes to the Policy, and that most amendments related to legislative and administrative updates that were required. The Committee would like to thank James Pickering (Welfare Reform Manager) for producing the report, and attending the meeting to present and take questions.

Summary and recommendations

3. One key issue that is evident from the report is that the varying level of HM Government grant received each year provided no consistency in the total level of grant available in any given year. For example, in 2015/16, the total net expenditure on DHPs was £270,505 (94% of the available grant), but this stretched to £494,566 in 2017/18 (97% of the available grant). In these circumstances, it is clear that the policy criteria is being applied with varying consistency based on the different levels of grant received each year. The Committee are pleased however to see that officers are working to ensure that the maximum amount of grant is being used to support local residents.
4. On the basis that demand will remain at current levels, the Committee believes that a reduction in DHP grant funding from HM Government will have an adverse impact on local residents. Therefore, the Committee proposes that the City Executive Board considers how 'topping up' the grant would enable a fairer and more consistent application of the DHP policy, which also benefits more people. For example, in years where the DHP grant increased, the Committee heard that more single people were able to receive DHPs.
5. The Committee understands that the Council has the ability to contribute two and a half times the Government grant amount. Whilst the Committee would not suggest committing this level of funds to top up the DHP grant, the City Executive Board is recommended to consider what approach to 'topping up' the grant would offer a fairer and further reaching policy. The Committee are aware that changes in other welfare benefits may impact on the demand for DHPs.

Oxford's position as one of the most unaffordable cities in the country, not least because of the affordability of housing, highlights the value of DHPs for local residents. Importantly, the demand for DHPs in Oxford is not contingent on, or defined by, the grant received from HM Government. To address this imbalance, the Committee believe that the Council should offset against any reduction in Government funding by bridging the gap between local demand and the level of available grant. In particular, the Committee suggests that the Homelessness Reserve should be considered as a possible fund for 'topping up' the DHP grant. In making this recommendation, the Committee wishes to highlight that the Council will receive approximately £100,000 less this year than in 2017/18.

6. ***Recommendation 1 - That consideration is given to 'topping up' the DHP grant provided by HM Government, in order that the policy criteria can be broadened to include more residents who are in need of support. Consideration should be given to how this might be funded and to what extent, such as from the Homelessness Reserve.***

Report author	Stefan Robinson
Job title	Scrutiny Officer
Service area or department	Law and Governance
Telephone	01865 252191
e-mail	srobinson@oxford.gov.uk

This page is intentionally left blank