

To: Cabinet
Date: 09 September 2020
Report of: Scrutiny Committee
Title of Report: Discretionary Housing Payment Policy

| Summary and recommendations | |
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| Purpose of report: | To present Scrutiny Committee recommendations concerning the Discretionary Housing Payment Policy report |
| Key decision: | Yes |
| Scrutiny Lead Member: | Councillor Joe McManners, vice-Chair of the Scrutiny Committee |
| Cabinet Member: | Councillor Marie Tidball, Cabinet Member for Supporting Local Communities |
| Corporate Priority: | Support Flourishing Communities, Foster an Inclusive Economy |
| Policy Framework: | Council Strategy 2020-24 |
| Recommendation: That the Cabinet states whether it agrees or disagrees with the recommendations in the body of this report. | |

| Appendices |
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| None |

Introduction and overview

1. At its meeting on 01 September 2020, the Scrutiny Committee considered a report to Cabinet concerning the renewal of the Discretionary Housing Payment Policy.
2. The Panel would like to thank Councillor Marie Tidball, Cabinet Member for Supporting Local Communities, for presenting the report and answering questions. The Committee would also like to thank Paul Wilding, Rough Sleeping

Manager for compiling the report and supporting the meeting, and Richard Wood, Interim Welfare Reform Team Manager, for his contribution to the meeting also.

Summary and recommendation

3. Councillor Marie Tidball, Cabinet Member for Supporting Local Communities, introduced the report. The current version of the policy had been introduced in 2013 against a backdrop of significant welfare reform and underpinned by a drive to prevent homelessness. In 2019/20, for example, 602 DHP applications had been made of which 85% had been successful however it had become apparent that the policy needed to be revisited in the light of the economic consequences of Covid-19. She paid tribute to the work of the Welfare Reform Team not just in relation to this report and the application of the DHP policy but also their wider work in supporting vulnerable members of the community.
4. Paul Wilding, Rough Sleeping & Single Homelessness Manager, reminded the Committee that the DHP policy was discretionary. It deliberately left some room for flexibility of implementation, neither absolutely ruling any particular set of circumstances in or out. This flexibility assisted in getting the help to those who most needed it. It was recognised that, in parallel with the flexibility, there was a need to ensure consistency of decision making. This was addressed by the way in which officers in the Welfare Reform Team cross-checked their decisions with one another (particularly in relation to more complex cases) and the regular review of a 10% case sample.
5. The Committee's discussion and questioning in response to the topic focused primarily on access, particularly in relation to the challenges of non-English speakers, and the impact of such challenges in take-up by those eligible.
6. The Scrutiny Committee makes three recommendations relating to
 - Access to advice and support
 - Promoting the Discretionary Housing Payment

Access to advice and support

7. Committee members raised reports that had been passed on to them about the challenges non-English speaking Asian women were having in accessing support for Housing Benefit and other types of benefit. The situation with Covid-19 was reported to have made the challenge worse, with the closure of some advice services, and the geographical limitations in support being applied by others. East Oxford residents, for example, were unable to access services at the Rose Hill advice centre. Whilst a broader issue than Discretionary Housing Payments, it is nevertheless felt to be of relevance owing to the fact that it touches on how those in need are signposted and access Discretionary Housing Payments and other forms of support.
8. In raising this issue, the Committee does not wish to disregard the efforts made by the Council already, particularly in making its translation services available to advice centres, which it welcomes. It simply wishes to raise that despite the steps that the Council has taken to date, barriers to access do remain. With the Council

due to start work towards the recommissioning of advice services in around two months, the Committee considers that a fuller understanding of these barriers would inform that process and result in a more accessible service being delivered.

9. One suggestion posed by the Committee as a suitable response to the challenges of accessing advice for non-English speakers in East Oxford was the provision of in-person translation services. The Committee identified two particular issues that were causing challenges to non-English speakers. The first was the challenge of requiring interpretative support throughout the application process, from awareness raising at its commencement, all the way through to making an application. Committee members highlighted the way that applications could often require communicating with multiple people at different stages of the process, which could stymie the application if translation services were not available, or at least make them more difficult because previously established information had to be communicated, with the higher chance of misunderstanding causing delay or refusal of an application. Concerns were also raised that in the absence of interpretation services being available, applicants could be reliant on partners to do their translation. For those in coercive or abusive relationships, the power imbalance caused by relying on an interpreter could be an encouragement to stay within such relationships, and the ability of an abuser to control the message meant the existence of an additional barrier to recognising those at risk. Owing to these factors, the Committee commends the idea to the Council for further consideration.

1. Recommendation 1: That the Council reviews how non-English speakers access advice services, including the suitability of current arrangements for advice services grant-funded by the Council, and the case for providing an in-person translation service in East Oxford, as part of the recommissioning of advice services.

10. Whilst addressing known barriers to access is laudable, solely doing so falls short of meeting the Council's equality aspirations for its residents. It is the wish of the Committee that rather than reacting to partial data which surfaces by informal sources, the Council is proactive in monitoring the protected characteristics of its applicants. By definition, excluded groups are liable to have their needs and challenges unregistered. Full-spectrum monitoring is a valuable counter to this, highlighting those areas where the Council should investigate further, and providing richer information by dint of the capacity to compare outcomes for those intersecting multiple risk factors. Investigating and responding to the insights afforded by such monitoring would provide a far more comprehensive and effective response to the Council's desire to ensure that all members have a fair and equal opportunity to access this important service.
11. It is the view of the Committee that the likely single biggest determinant on under-claiming is likely to be ethnicity, and suggests that this be prioritised. However, it also recognises that this is a view based on incomplete evidence, and that the Council's priorities should alter if emerging data does not support this thesis.

Recommendation 2: That the Council develops and implements a plan to monitor the ethnicity and other protected characteristics of DHP

applicants, with a view to identifying any particular communities where access to DHP or the number of successful awards from DHP claims are unexpectedly low so as to understand the barriers to access and to inform service development to ensure fair and equal access to DHP for excluded groups.

Promoting the Discretionary Housing Payment

12. To identify that there may be particular groups facing specific systemic challenges with access of Discretionary Housing Payment is not to imply that there are not challenges with ensuring support is provided to those outside such excluded groups. The Committee notes the difficulties faced by the Council in identifying those entitled to Discretionary Housing Payment due to the policy of the Department of Work and Pensions not to share information on those who are in receipt of Universal credit. Indeed, it commends the efforts being made to overcome these challenges, both in terms of working with the Job Centre to increase awareness of Discretionary Housing Payment, but also in lobbying government for a change in policy. Notwithstanding these efforts, however, the Committee notes the potential that residents at a time of particular stress may still not be accessing the support the Council is able to provide for lack of awareness. This is a situation the Committee encourages the Council to address.
13. The Committee recognises that as the administrator of Discretionary Housing Payments, as well as being in contact with a significant proportion of those eligible to apply on other Council-related business, the Council owns a significant and direct responsibility to remedy this through its own activities. Ensuring relevant staff members and teams are able to identify, communicate and raise application rates amongst eligible residents will be key and is encouraged by the Committee. In addition to these efforts, however, the Committee encourages the Council to recognise its reliance on other partners – Job Centre Plus, healthcare providers, third sector advice organisations, community and religious groups, and the general public – to raise awareness of the support that is available. It approves of the Council's intention to do this systematically via a communications plan and seeks that this intention is followed through on.

Recommendation 3: That the Council makes further effort to increase access to DHP for those most in need, including raising awareness with stakeholders and residents through a clear communications plan, and by carrying out targeted outreach to residents most at risk of homelessness informed by business intelligence.

Further Consideration

14. It is not anticipated that Scrutiny will wish to revisit this topic until it is next reviewed by the Council.

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Cabinet response to recommendations of the Scrutiny Committee made on 01/09/2020 concerning the Renewing Discretionary Housing Payment Policy report

Response provided by Cabinet Member for Supporting Local Communities, Marie Tidball

| Recommendation | Agree? | Comment |
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| 1) That the Council reviews how non-English speakers access advice services, including the suitability of current arrangements for advice services grant-funded by the Council, and the case for providing an in-person translation service in East Oxford, as part of the recommissioning of advice services. | Yes | The council wants to ensure fair access to its commissioned advice services, in particular for groups and communities who may currently struggle to access advice and support, including non-English speakers. The current 3 year funding agreement with the advice organisations in the city runs until the 31 st March 2021 and therefore the council will soon begin the process of reviewing and recommissioning services. The committee's recommendations will be used to inform the review. |
| 2) That the Council develops and implements a plan to monitor the ethnicity and other protected characteristics of DHP applicants, with a view to identifying any particular communities where access to DHP or the number of successful awards from DHP claims are unexpectedly low so as to understand the barriers to access and to inform service development to ensure fair and equal access to DHP for excluded groups. | Yes | We share the view that collecting detailed data on protected characteristics should be priority, and that it will provide valuable insight in the future to shape service development, helping ensure fair access to support. The team will make the necessary procedural changes to fully monitor equality data, so this information will be available in the future. |
| 3) That the Council makes further effort to increase access to DHP for those most in need, including raising awareness with stakeholders and residents through a clear communications plan, and by carrying out targeted outreach to residents most at risk of homelessness informed by business intelligence. | Yes | The Welfare Reform Team have a strong track record of promoting DHP, and carrying out targeted outreach to engage residents in greatest need, ensuring the DHP fund is used effectively. However we acknowledge this needs to be continually renewed and reinforced, so accept the recommendation. The team will review its plan, ensuring there are clear communications reaching residents and stakeholders over the next year, as well as key internal stakeholders, alongside continuing to develop and rolling |

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| | | out new targeted outreach schemes to reach those most in need. |
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