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| Subject: | Discretionary Decorating and Gardening Schemes | | |
| Date of Meeting: | 14 January 2015 | | |
| Report of: | Executive Director, Environment, Development & Housing | | |
| Contact Officer: | Name: | Ododo Dafe | Tel: 01273 29-3201 |
| | Email: | Ododo.dafe@brighton-hove.gov.uk | |
| Wards(s) affected: | All | | |

FOR GENERAL RELEASE**1. PURPOSE OF REPORT AND POLICY CONTEXT:**

- 1.1 This report provides the findings of the recent review of the Discretionary Decorating and Gardening Scheme and sets out the recommended changes for consideration.

2. RECOMMENDATIONS:

- 2.1 That Housing Committee approve the following recommendations to come into effect on 1 April 2015:

- i) That the criteria, for those applying to both the discretionary schemes, be changed to age 75+ **and** in receipt of Housing Benefit, **or** on Disability Living Allowance/Personal Independence Payments or Attendance Allowance **and** in receipt of Housing Benefit.

Disability Living Allowance (DLA) and Personal Independence Payments (PIP) are non means tested benefits for people under 65 years of age who have personal care and/or mobility needs as a result of a mental or physical disability. PIP is gradually replacing DLA. Attendance Allowance (AA) is a non means tested benefit for people aged 65 and over that helps with the extra costs of long-term illness or disability, which can be either physical and/or mental.

- ii) That the decorating vouchers are removed and replaced with decorating packs.
- iii) That, for the discretionary decorating scheme, successful applicants are restricted to applying every other year.

3. CONTEXT/ BACKGROUND INFORMATION:

- 3.1 The discretionary gardening and discretionary decorating schemes are provided to help older tenants or those with a disability to maintain their properties. The current eligibility criterion is based around tenants being of pension age or in receipt of DLA. This criterion gives no determination of financial need or ability to pay. There is also no formal assessment of the property to establish the condition or whether it is reasonable to fund decoration. Each year the schemes are oversubscribed with waiting lists for both schemes. Currently tenants can apply to have one room decorated every year but cannot have the same room decorated for another 10 years. These discretionary schemes are separate from any service charges such as grounds maintenance in sheltered schemes.
- 3.2 The review has been carried out to look at how the needs of tenants can best be met and ensure that resources are used fairly and provide value for money.
- 3.3 Research has been carried out around the provision that other Registered Social Landlords (RSLs) provide and how our scheme compares. Given the discretionary nature of the scheme a number of RSLs have opted to no longer provide this service and instead invest the funding in maintaining their existing stock. Of the RSLs that do still offer a discretionary service the age criteria is generally higher than that of Brighton & Hove City Council (BHCC), most only being open to tenants aged 70 and above although still open to disabled tenants. Some RSLs only operate a gardening scheme and not a decorating scheme.
- 3.4 It should be noted that this scheme is discretionary and that tenants have garden and decorating standards that they are expected to maintain. The tenancy agreement states the following:

“If you have a garden, patio or balcony you must keep it tidy. You must not allow any garden plants, trees or shrubs to grow onto or over neighbouring land. You are responsible for minor repairs and you should decorate all internal parts of your home as often as is necessary to keep them in good decorative order”.

4. ANALYSIS & CONSIDERATION OF ANY ALTERNATIVE OPTIONS

4.1

| Option 1 | Anticipated benefits | Identified risks |
|---|---|---|
| Remove all discretionary decorating and gardening schemes | Savings from the scheme could be reinvested into services for tenants and to make improvements to the housing stock Greater responsibility on the tenants for maintaining properties | Disabled and older tenants may struggle to maintain their gardens without assistance. This could lead to overgrown gardens causing environmental hazard and nuisance to neighbours resulting in an increase in complaints |

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| | <p>and could result in tenants deciding to move if the garden is no longer manageable, ensuring residents are housed in properties that meet their needs.</p> | <p>and tenancy breaches.</p> <p>Less affluent communities deteriorate as gardens become unkempt and neighbours who may previously have kept their properties in a good state of repair lose enthusiasm for maintaining their own gardens.</p> <p>With no opportunity for tenants to access funding to improve their properties those already in poor decorative order may be neglected further. This may have a negative impact on a tenant's health and wellbeing.</p> |
| Option 2 | Anticipated benefits | Identified risks |
| <p>Replace the decorating vouchers with decorating packs and continue with the current criteria</p> <p>Keep the decorating and gardening works schemes as they are, continuing with the current criteria</p> <p>Tenants will be provided with the opportunity to attend a decorating workshop</p> | <p>Changing to decorating packs removes the risk of fraudulent use of vouchers</p> <p>Decorating packs provide better value for money containing all materials required to decorate a room. Tenants will not be required to return any paint brushes or other equipment, they would be able to keep them for any future decorating projects.</p> <p>No travelling for tenants- the supplier can deliver packs directly to tenants the next day</p> <p>Tenants will have the opportunity to develop their decorating skills in workshops provided by Mears.</p> | <p>Tenants would have slightly less choice in the materials they can purchase i.e. wallpaper is not included</p> <p>The scheme may not be targeted at tenants who are most in need as there is no assessment of the property/financial need</p> <p>Tenants will be restricted to one supplier in order for value for money benefits to be achieved from having packs that include everything needed to decorate a room</p> |

| Option 3 | Anticipated benefits | Identified risks |
|--|---|--|
| <p>The criteria, for those applying to both the discretionary decorating and gardening schemes, be changed to those aged 75+ and in receipt of HB or those on DLA/PIP or AA and in receipt of HB</p> <p>Replace the decorating vouchers with decorating packs and provide tenants with the opportunity to attend a decorating workshop.</p> <p>Restrict successful decorating applications to every other year.</p> | <p>Changing the criteria ensures that the schemes are targeted at tenants who are most in need</p> <p>Being able to improve the inside of a property can have a positive impact on the health and wellbeing of a tenant</p> <p>Decorating packs provide better value for money containing all materials required to decorate a room. Tenants will not be required to return any paint brushes or other equipment, they would be able to keep them for any future decorating projects.</p> <p>Changing to decorating packs removes risk of fraudulent use of vouchers</p> <p>No travelling for tenants - the supplier can deliver packs directly to tenants the next day</p> <p>Restricting successful decorating applications to every other year will enable more households to access the scheme</p> <p>Decorating packs will include basic information on health and safety and decorating tips. Tenants will have the opportunity to develop their decorating skills in workshops provided by</p> | <p>Decreased customer satisfaction - especially from those that were previously eligible and no longer are, based on 2013/14 figures: -</p> <p>Of the 372 applications accepted 23% or 86 tenants would no longer be eligible for gardening works</p> <p>Of the 235 applications accepted 31% or 72 tenants would no longer be eligible for decorating works</p> <p>Of the 152 applications accepted 5% or 8 tenants would no longer be eligible for decorating vouchers However, alternative sources of support could be investigated for these residents i.e. Age UK Help at Home service or the Royal Voluntary Service Good Neighbour Scheme</p> <p>Tenants would have slightly less choice in the materials they can purchase i.e. wallpaper is not included</p> <p>Tenants will be restricted to one supplier in order for value for money benefits to be achieved from having packs that include everything needed to decorate a room</p> |

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| | Mears. | |
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Having considered all the information and research gathered the recommendation would be to adopt option three, as per the reasons in the benefits table.

- 4.2 The discretionary scheme budget for the current financial year is £289,060. The proposed change in criteria for the scheme would reduce the number of tenants eligible to apply; however, it would mean that the scheme is assisting tenants in greatest need. For the financial year 2015/16 it is therefore proposed to reduce the budget by £38,170 to £250,890. The table gives details of how this reduction would be applied to each of the schemes and the number of properties that would potentially be affected. For 2015/16 the budget saving of £38,170 will be set aside to support residents between the ages of 65-74 facing particular hardship.

| | Current budget | | | Proposed budget 2015/16 | | | |
|---------------------|-----------------|----------------------|----------------------------|-------------------------|----------------------|----------------------------|--------------------------------------|
| | Amount | Number of properties | Average spend per property | Amount | Number of properties | Average spend per property | Reduction in properties from 2014/15 |
| Decorating works | £154,060 | 235 | £656 | £122,700 | 187 | £656 | 48 |
| Gardening works | £128,830 | 372 | £346 | £123,000 | 355 | £346 | 17 |
| Decorating vouchers | £6,170 | 152 | £40 | £5,190 | 144 | £36 | 8 |
| Total | £289,060 | 759 | - | £250,890 | 686 | - | 73 |

5. COMMUNITY ENGAGEMENT & CONSULTATION

- 5.1 Consultation has been carried out with over 100 tenants including those that applied for the decorating schemes but were turned down. The feedback from these tenants has been used to understand how tenants feel about the current schemes and to find out what changes they would like to see. A sample of the comments we received are presented below:

| Comment | Proposal |
|---|---|
| Application forms are too complicated | The application forms will be simplified and completed online; tenants without internet access will be able to speak directly to a Housing Service Advisor who will fill in the application for them. |
| The decorating voucher wasn't enough to do a whole room | Replace the vouchers with decorating packs. These packs will contain all materials needed to decorate the specified room. |
| Applied but the scheme was already full even though it had only been open a couple of | Changing the criteria and targeting those most in need will reduce the number of applications. |

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| months | |
| Would like you to assess the need for help before accepting or refusing | The change in criteria will ensure that help is provided to those most in need. |
| Better communication so that access can be arranged and gardens can be made ready | The website will have a link to the garden schedules that customers can access for up to date information on the routes and dates. The Housing Customer Service Team can also provide this information directly to those residents without internet access. |

5.2 The following feedback was received from discussions with the Home Service Improvement Group:

- The schemes should be promoted more widely so that all eligible tenants have equal opportunity to apply
- The application should be easy to understand and complete
- Tenants who are under 75 years may not be able to do the decorating themselves or have any friends or family that could do it for them. Therefore, they wouldn't be able to get their properties decorated unless they are on housing benefit, would exceptions be made in certain cases?

5.3 This report was presented to tenant representatives at the Area Panel meetings in December 2014 for their comments and recommendations. Tenants requested that the report be made clearer on the following points:

- Successful applicants will only be able to apply to have one room decorated every other year
- Clarify the parts of the scheme that won't be changing such as not being able to have the same room decorated again for 10 years
- That the discretionary schemes are separate from any service charged schemes
- Clarify that the decorating packs will include an information sheet on basic health and safety and decorating tips and that tenants will be offered the opportunity to attend decorating workshops if they want to
- Whether tenants will have to return the paint brushes and other equipment in the decorating packs
- Whether tenants can apply in advance if they are 74 but would be 75 by the time the scheme is open in April each year?

The following suggestions were made regarding publicising the schemes:

- Could information be included in annual rent statements?
- An article could be included in local association newsletters
- The Resource Centre could advise tenants of the schemes
- Associations could use social media such as facebook and twitter
- The report should be taken to a meeting of the Sheltered Housing Action Group (SHAG)

The following comments were made regarding the eligibility criteria:

- West and North Area Panels felt that raising the age to 75 is too high and one of the representatives from Central was also against raising the age
- Tenants that have been unsuccessful in accessing the schemes to date will not be able to for many years if the age is raised from 65 to 75, this is unfair
- Most people over 75 would not be able to do the decorating work themselves
- How would residents between the age of 65 and 75 get their decorating done?

Other comments

- It would take a long time to get your house decorated if you were only allowed to apply every other year
- Why has there been a reduction in the budget?
- The average cost that Mears charge to decorate a property seems high
- Clarify what will be contained in the decorating packs
- Sugar soap, disposable overalls and thicker dust sheets should be included in the packs

5.4 Area Panel recommendations

The West Area Panel was in agreement that raising the age to 75 was too old and requested that this was formally noted in the report.

The North Area Panel voted on each of the recommendations as follows:

- Raising the age criteria to 75 – everyone present voted against this recommendation
- Restricting applications to every other year – everyone present voted in favour of this recommendation
- Replace the vouchers with decorating packs – everyone present voted in favour of this recommendation

There were no recommendations from Central or East Area Panels.

- 5.5 The report has been amended to clarify the points raised in 5.3. The Chair of Sheltered Housing Action Group (SHAG) has been consulted and it has been agreed that an officer will attend a future SHAG meeting to outline any changes agreed by Housing Committee. Changes to the schemes will be advertised as widely as possible including an article in Homing In, on the council website, through resident association newsletters, social media and the Resource Centre. The suggestions and comments from tenants regarding the content of the decorating packs will be taken into consideration when deciding what to include. Tenants will be eligible to apply if they are currently 74 years old but will turn 75 during the financial year in which they apply.

6. CONCLUSION

The recommendations in this report will support the aim of offering discretionary decorating and gardening schemes that provide best value for money and meet the needs of vulnerable tenants in maintaining their homes and gardens and enhancing their quality of life.

7. FINANCIAL & OTHER IMPLICATIONS:

7.1 Financial Implications:

The HRA budget for 2014/15 for these discretionary schemes is £289,060. The proposals in this report would reduce the budget for these schemes for 2015/16 by £38,170 to £250,890. The changes to the eligibility criteria will reduce the number of tenants eligible to apply and will ensure that more is spent on those with the most need. For the financial year 2015/16 those facing particular financial hardship and in need of decorating services may be supported through the budget of £38,170 which has been set aside to support residents between the ages of 65-74 facing particular hardship.

*Finance Officer Consulted: Monica Brooks/Susie Allen
2015*

Date: 2 January

7.2 Legal Implications:

Although there is no legal obligation on the council to provide discretionary decorating and gardening schemes, it has sufficient power under the Housing Act 1985 to provide them. Where changes to current services are proposed, proper consultation with those affected or likely to be affected is necessary. The consultation to date has been appropriate.

Lawyer Consulted: Liz Woodley

Date: 11 November 2014

7.3 Equalities Implications:

An Equality Impact Assessment (EIA) has been carried out alongside this review to consider the impact each option might have on different groups. The EIA showed that tenants between the age of 65 and 74 that no longer meet the eligibility criteria will be impacted the most by these proposed changes. We would look to mitigate the impact by working with community organisations such as Age UK, the Help at Home Service, or the Royal Volunteer Service Good Neighbour Scheme to ensure that any vulnerable tenants falling outside of the new criteria will be signposted to other organisations that may be able to assist. For the financial year 2015/16 those facing particular financial hardship may be supported through the budget saving.

7.4 Sustainability Implications:

The most sustainable method for future applications to this scheme is considered to be online. The internal decoration of properties and maintenance of the gardens is the responsibility of tenants. However, the provision of discretionary schemes to assist tenants who might otherwise find this maintenance difficult or too expensive is important to the future upkeep of our properties.

7.5 Crime & Disorder Implications:

There are no crime and disorder implications.

7.6 Risk and Opportunity Management Implications:

The main risk identified with these proposals is that tenants between the age of 65 and 74 who are currently eligible would no longer be. However, these proposals provide the opportunity to ensure that the schemes are aimed at those who are most in need. For 2015/16 the budget saving of £38,170 will be set aside to support residents between the ages of 65-74 facing particular hardship.

7.7 Public Health Implications:

Overgrown gardens can have a significant impact on a local environment. A decent environment means a better quality of life for local people, gives people pride in their area and encourages new people to move there. This report considers both tenant quality of life and the impact on the wider neighbourhood.

Corporate / Citywide Implications:

7.8 There are no corporate or citywide implications arising from this report.

