

Area Panels: December 2014

Briefing Paper: Discretionary Decorating and Gardening Schemes (Housing)

Background

Brighton & Hove City Council offers the following discretionary schemes to tenants of pension age and those with a disability to help them maintain their properties.

Decorating:

- Vouchers to purchase decorating materials
- The decorating carried out by Mears
- Applications are restricted to one room per year per household and the same room cannot be decorated again for another 10 years

Gardening

- Grass cutting and hedge trimming carried out by Mears
- Applicants accepted to the gardening scheme receive four cuts a year, two of which include hedge trims

Currently, in order to be eligible for either scheme, the applicant must be pension age or in receipt of Disability Living Allowance (DLA)/Personal Independence Payments (PIP) or Attendance Allowance (AA).

Why we are reviewing these schemes

The schemes have not been fully reviewed since their introduction over 30 years ago and recent government changes to Disability Living Allowance, pension age and the introduction of the Welfare Reform Act 2012 have prompted a review to make sure that resources are used fairly and provide value for money.

Current issues with the existing schemes

- There is no formal assessment of the property to establish the condition of the garden or property and whether it is reasonable to fund gardening or decorating
- There is no determination of financial need or ability

Feedback so far

Telephone consultation around the current scheme has been carried out with over 100 tenants including those that applied but were turned down. Their comments included:

- Application forms should be less complicated to fill in
- The allowance was only enough to decorate half a room
- Better communication so that access can be arranged and gardens can be made ready
- Trees need cutting back but aren't included in work
- Once you register and are accepted you shouldn't have to apply again every year
- The able bodied adult in the house may not be capable of doing decorating, it's unfair that we are not able to get the decorating done because of this

- Applied but the scheme was already full even though it had only been open a couple of months
- Current criteria doesn't allow for temporary changes in a tenants circumstances i.e. able bodied relative staying with a tenant on a temporary basis
- Would like you to assess the need for help before accepting or refusing
- The schemes should be promoted more widely so all eligible tenants have an equal opportunity to apply
- The application should be easy to understand and complete
- Tenants who are not disabled but are over 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.

Recommendations for changing the schemes

- Change the eligibility criteria for both the decorating and gardening schemes to age 75+ **and** in receipt of Housing Benefit (HB), **or** any age and on DLA/PIP/AA **and** in receipt of HB
- Restrict successful decorating applications to every other year
- That the decorating vouchers are removed and replaced with a decorating pack containing all materials needed to decorate one room

Why these recommendations have been brought to Area Panels

To seek the Area Panel representatives comments prior to the report being presented to Housing Committee in January.

Next steps

All feedback will be considered and summarised in the report being presented to Housing Committee on 14 January 2015.

If agreed the changes to the scheme will be implemented at the beginning of the 2015/16 financial year and widely publicised including on the council's website, in Homing In and by other means to ensure the information is accessible to tenants e.g. through tenant association newsletters.

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AREA PANELS

Agenda Item

Brighton & Hove City Council

Subject:	Discretionary Decorating and Gardening Schemes		
Date of Meeting:	1, 3, 4, 8 December 2014		
Report of:	Executive Director, Environment, Development & Housing		
Contact Officer:	Name:	Jane White	Tel: 01273 29-4598
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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 the Area Panels comment on the following recommendations:
- 2.2 That the criteria, for those applying to both the discretionary schemes, be changed to age 75+ **and** in receipt of HB, **or** on DLA/PIP or AA **and** in receipt of HB.
- 2.3 That the decorating vouchers are removed and replaced with decorating packs.
- 2.4 That, for the discretionary decorating scheme, successful applicants are restricted to one award 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.
- 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	<p>Savings from the scheme could be reinvested into services for tenants and to make improvements to the housing stock</p> <p>Greater responsibility on the tenants for maintaining properties 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>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 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</p>

		may be neglected further. This may have a negative impact on a tenant's health and wellbeing.
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>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</p> <p>No travelling for tenants- the supplier can deliver packs directly to tenants the next day</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</p> <p>Successful applications to either the decorating works or decorating packs are restricted to one award 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</p> <p>Changing to decorating packs removes risk of fraudulent use of vouchers</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</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>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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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 £288,390. The proposed change in criteria for the scheme would reduce the number of tenants eligible to apply but would also enable those tenants in greatest need of assistance to access this scheme. For the financial year 2015/16 it is therefore proposed to reduce the budget by £38,390 to £250,000. 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. Savings from the schemes will be reinvested in services to tenants and in making improvements to the housing stock.

	Current budget			Proposed budget 2015/16		
	Amount	Number of properties	Average spend per property	Amount	Number of properties	Reduction in properties from 2014/15
Decorating works	£154,060	235	£656	£122,672	187	48
Gardening works	£128,830	372	£346	£122,138	353	19
Decorating vouchers	£5,500	152	£36	£5,190	144	8
Total	£288,390	759	-	£250,000	684	75

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 months	Changing the criteria and targeting those most in need will reduce the number of applications.
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 not over 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?

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 £288,390. The proposals in this report would reduce the budget for these schemes for 2015/16 by £38,390 to £250,000. 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. This saving will be reinvested in services and improvements to tenants and will be included as part of the 2015/16 budget report to Housing Committee on 14 January 2014.

Finance Officer Consulted: Monica Brooks

Date: 12 November 2014

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.

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 75 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.

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.

