

Decision Report - Non-Key Decision

Forward Plan Reference: FP/22/12/07

Decision Date - 15/03/23



Somerset Private Sector Housing Renewal Policy 2023 - 2028

Executive Member(s): Cllr Bill Revans - Leader of the Council

Local Member(s) and Division: Somerset wide policy

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1. Summary / Background

- 1.1** The report seeks Member approval for the new Somerset Private Sector Housing Renewal Policy. The policy sets out the types of financial assistance that the Council can offer owner occupiers, tenants, and landlords for disabled adaptations to their home and to carry out essential repairs on their property. The report also recommends delegating authority to the Service Director for Housing Services in consultation with the Executive Portfolio Holder to make future minor operational and legislative changes to the policy to reduce the burden on Executive.
- 1.2** The Regulatory (Housing Assistance) (England and Wales) Order 2002 requires Local Housing Authorities to publish an assistance policy. The Local Housing duty currently sits with the four Somerset District Councils. There are three policies, (a joint policy between Sedgemoor District Council and Somerset West and Taunton Council, and a Mendip District Council and South Somerset policy). There were several options including merging the current policies. Instead, the creation of the new Council provided the ideal opportunity to review good practice within Somerset and nationally to come up with a new, innovative policy which addresses the issues facing Somerset (detailed in Paragraph 11 of this report).
- 1.3** On behalf of the Somerset authorities, Somerset Independence Plus has partnered with Foundations who are the national body for Disabled Facilities Grant and Home Improvement Agencies in England and Wales to draft the new policy. Extensive consultation was undertaken with stakeholders and the public through individual as well as group sessions.
- 1.4** The funding for the grants and loans comes from the Councils Better Care Fund allocation. It is the intention that Councils can maximise the services they can offer through low level and medium-term interventions which in turn reduces the prospect of a person being admitted to hospital and the costs which this incurs.

1.5 The new policy provides the following forms of assistance.

- Mandatory Disabled Facilities Grants (DFG) (up to £30k).
- DFG top up grants to assist clients whose grant scheme exceeds the £30k limit. Up to £30k additional funding.
- Contribution Assistance Grant to cover the cost of contributions assessed as being unaffordable following a means test. £2,500 available.
- Professional fees to support cases where fees have been incurred and following the grant approval, the scheme for a justifiable reason does not proceed. Up to £3k.
- Stairlift Loan Scheme, an innovative new project to loan stairlifts to avoid the DFG process and secure the maintenance and condition of the unit.
- Help to Move Assistance. Covers the cost of moving home for applicants whose home does not meet their needs. Up to £5k available plus a 20% contingency.
- Thinking Ahead Grant. Works to make the home dementia friendly or to meet sensory needs. Up to £2,500.
- Safe, Warm and Secure Grant. To cover the cost of essential repairs for owner occupiers on a means tested benefit or low income. Up to £15k.
- Homes First Assistance. To support timely discharge from hospital or a care home and avoid admission into hospital. Low level works up to £6k, no means test.
- Enhanced Minor Works. Blending the Care Act funding traditionally used for minor works such as grab rails and the Better Care Fund, enhancing the grant amount from £1k to £2,500. The intention to include more work on low level intervention to avoid the more complex DFG route.
- Funding of the Housing Occupational Therapist roles. The posts manage clients with complex housing needs.
- Capital schemes. Schemes which fall outside of the current grant provision within the policy.
- Empty Homes Grants.
- Low interest loans from the Councils preferred loan provider Lendology.
- Houses in Multiple Occupation (HMO) grants.

2. Recommendations

That the Executive:

- Approve the adoption of the Somerset Private Sector Housing Renewal Policy.

- Delegate authority to the Service Director for Housing Services in consultation with the relevant Executive Member responsible for the service to make future minor and operational and legislative changes to the policy.

3. Reasons for recommendations

In Somerset, each District has their own Private Sector Renewal Policy. From the 1st of April 2023, the Local Housing Authority responsibility will transfer to the new Somerset Council.

This provided the ideal opportunity to draft a new policy which encompasses current good practice and new innovative approaches.

The five-year policy will safeguard the people in Somerset by providing a comprehensive suite of financial provisions fitting the prevention agenda, providing choice within certain limits, preventing hospital admission and assisting with discharge.

4. Other options considered

Three options were considered.

- Option One – To do nothing. This risks an increase in fuel poverty, increasing disrepair and more of a dependency on the state due to a lack of independence and choice. Increase in social and residential care costs and risk of injury.
- Option Two – To merge the current policies. The district policies which exist at present are fit to tackle the circumstances of the local area. There is a need to be inclusive of Somerset in its entirety to manage the policy and be innovative in the approach towards delivery.
- Option Three. To proceed with the changes. Increases choice and innovation and meets the challenges faced at a time when social services, residential care, primary and emergency care are under immense pressure.

5. Links to County Vision, Business Plan and Medium-Term Financial Strategy

5.1. The new Corporate Plan is being approved.

One of the objectives of the plan is for a fairer Somerset. A Fairer Somerset - Somerset is a county of diversity. Somerset Council wants to make this a county of opportunity for all. There are massive differences in the quality of residents lives in Somerset depending on their backgrounds. Those on the lowest incomes are more likely to struggle to pay their energy and food bills, more likely to have housing that is harder to heat and have less access to essential services. Life in these circumstances is harder and more challenging.

A priority for the Council is to do whatever it can to reduce these inequalities so that everyone in Somerset can live their lives as they choose. To achieve this, the Council will have to make a greater effort in the parts of Somerset which are struggling the most. The Council will work with communities and through the Somerset Integrated Care Partnership to get a detailed understanding of what the issues that cause such disparities are and how the Council can work together to make a difference.

The current cost of living crisis means that more of Somersets children will grow up in homes where parents struggle to feed, clothe, and keep them warm. The differences between the lowest and average income homes are stark. The Council has evidence that demonstrates that those who don't have a good start are more likely to continue to face difficulties throughout their lives and the Council is committed to working to help significantly reduce numbers of children who experience poverty.

The Council needs children in Somerset to get an excellent education and to aspire to achieve their goals in life. Education outcomes in Somerset are not considered good enough, especially for children from lower income homes. All children need access to good schools, colleges, further education, and higher education. The Council wants to see young people stay in, or return to, Somerset because they have the option of a well-paid, rewarding job. The lack of affordable housing contributes to the challenges of keeping younger people within Somerset.

The Council will continue to demonstrate leadership around the whole range of housing issues and use the skills and knowledge from a wide range of partners to be innovative in its approach to housing and supporting people who are struggling. The provision of decent quality, low-carbon social housing will be integral to the Council in delivering a fairer county."

The recommendation to adopt a Somerset Private Sector Renewal Policy is to ensure simplicity through one single policy. The work forms part of the Local Government Reorganisation (LGR) Service Alignment workstream to ensure services are safe and legal from vesting day.

- 5.2.** The staff resourcing to support the policy has been accounted for through the Medium-Term Financial Planning. The capital resource is from the Better Care Fund which has been agreed through the Integrated Care Board. The Board being an instrumental link with the Council for the objective of improving lives and the priority for independent living of which Somerset Independence Plus is a key delivery agent.

6. Consultations and co-production

- 6.1.** The development and coproduction of the policy included views from stakeholder focus groups, and interviews with individuals. Stakeholders included representatives from the current District Private Sector Housing teams, Adult Social Care, (Occupational Therapists, Mental Health teams and Social Workers), Childrens Occupational Therapists, Age UK, NHS Somerset, GP surgeries, Homes in Sedgemoor and Somerset West and Taunton Housing Management, Registered Providers across Somerset, Climate Change managers at Somerset County Council, NHS England, CABs in Somerset, Community Council for Somerset, the Centre for Sustainable Energy, Public Health. This is just a representative sample. All their views have been considered in the policy and the findings universally accepted. Views have also been incorporated into the Equalities Impact assessment.
- 6.2.** The Policy Options Paper was presented to the Service Alignment Board on the 18th January 2023 and was endorsed, with no recommendations other than advice on the risk assessment.
- 6.3.** The Programme Management Board were presented with the policy on the 21st February 2023 with no additional requirements.
- 6.4.** The Chairs of the Scrutiny Committees listed in the report, the Leader and Opposition Spokesperson, Portfolio Holders have all been consulted with no comments other than points of clarification in some instances.
- 6.5.** If applicable, you will also need to set out details of any Executive Member conflicts of interest.

7. Financial and Risk Implications

- 7.1.** An extensive cost impact analysis exercise was undertaken on each grant type to understand what impact introducing a new grant provision or increasing the grant value would have on the budget. The top up grant options will mitigate increasing RICS construction costs which push grants in some circumstances above the mandatory grant limit which hasnt changed since the original legislation was introduced.
- 7.2.** The capital funding for the policy is from the Better Care Fund (BCF) which is awarded directly to the Local Authority from Government and identified in the funding stream specifically for Disabled Facilities Grants and other capital spend linked to assistance for vulnerable and low-income households. The BCF is guaranteed at the same levels for a further two years after which time there will be a review of the weighting used to calculate the fund.
- 7.3.** Funding and monitoring of the policy has been agreed through the Somerset Integrated Care Board.

- 7.4. Fees from the grants supports the income for Somerset Independence Plus.
- 7.5. There is a risk if the Council does not adopt part, or all the measures incorporated in the new policy. By not having an agreed published policy, the Council will need to continue using the current District policies. This leads to a postcode lottery as each Council currently have their own grant provisions. Delivery would be confusing and good practice limited to certain areas in the County. It would be difficult to manage budgets and would cause inequality for the vulnerable and low-income households who the policy is expected to assist.
- 7.6. Comprehensive consultation has taken place over several months with key stakeholders and representatives of the community. To ensure the policy incorporates what can reasonably be expected to be delivered with current resources and budget to mitigate inequality and ensure a fair policy for the residents of Somerset.

Likelihood	4	Impact	2	Risk Score	8
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8. Legal and HR Implications

- 8.1. This policy provides a published policy meeting the requirements of The Regulatory Reform (Housing Assistance) (England and Wales) Order 2002. The policy details the framework for residents in Somerset to apply for financial assistance to provide a Disabled Facilities Grant or grant/loan for essential repairs.
- 8.2. Procurement such as a fixed price quotation framework for the contractors who undertake major and minor works has already been put in place sometime before the policy was drafted. Somerset Independence Plus is already a County wide service which has procured several frameworks in conjunction with Somerset County Council and the Districts through the host Sedgemoor District Council. The frameworks have been incorporated into the registers of the Procurement workstream.
- 8.3. There are no legal implications from this decision. The requirement under the Regulatory Reform (Housing Assistance) (England and Wales) Order 2002 is to provide a published assistance policy.

9. Other Implications

9.1. Equalities Implications

The Equalities Impact Assessment is attached to the report. The Equalities Impact Assessment has been reviewed and approved by the Equalities and Risk Manager at Sedgemoor District Council.

The framework of the policy aims to fulfil the Councils strategic and statutory housing role in providing and facilitating assistance to those most in need. The framework assists the Council to enable this to happen, by improving the time it takes for example to fit wet rooms and shower trays, and quality control.

Evidence and data used for the assessment:

- Private Sector housing staff performance data
- The latest Joint Strategic Needs Assessment data from the JSNA
- ONS data 2021/22
- English House Condition Survey 2020/21
- Two months consultation through stakeholder events and one to one interview
- Foundations

Key findings and impact - The policy is primarily aimed at those who are most vulnerable or on low income regardless of tenure. A potential applicant could be anyone of the protected groups defined by: Age; Disability. Gender Reassignment; Pregnancy and Maternity; Race; Religion or belief; Sex; Sexual Orientation; Marriage and civil partnership. Several of the proposed products remove some of the restrictions for eligibility from the original policies. In the main a positive impact. The policy must be delivered in a transparent and consistent way.

Conclusion drawn – Regard was had to previous EIAs prior to consultation. The conclusions of the EIA have been incorporated into the policy with checks and balances put in place to mitigate any potential discrimination.

Actions – Steps to ensure consistency and transparency when making decisions as to any forms of assistance.

9.2. Community Safety Implications

The policy includes provision for security measures as part of the Safe, Warm and Secure grant. This can include locks, alarms, and other items regardless of tenure. The grant also considers client needs such as applicants who are visually impaired, have sensory loss or disability. The intention is for applicants to be able to remain safe within their community, not fear social isolation or exclusion, interacting freely without fear of crime or injury. Applicants can be referred through several methods and is not restricted to an Occupational Therapist assessment, a referral could come via the Police for example.

The grant links with Public Health through the Domestic Abuse project whereby grants can be accessed via professionals and the framework of contractors which will be used for the Home Maintenance delivery within

the policy. Public Health and the Community Safety teams were a valuable stakeholder in the process of drafting the policy.

9.3. Sustainability Implications

Sustainability is key cornerstone in the fabric of the policy. The framework of contractors for adaptation grants has clauses to use sustainable resources, encourage recycling, minimise waste and dispose of any waste in a responsible way. New equipment such as the shower units are designed to use minimal water and electricity to heat the water. The Energy Retrofit service of Somerset Independence Plus will be using the grants and loans within the policy to top up the Government funding received by Somerset Independence Plus to ensure the retrofitting of insulation and heating measures. Somerset Independence Plus have been successful in securing £10 million in Government funding for Local Authority Delivery Scheme (LADS) 1A, 1B and Housing Upgrade Grant (HUGS) 1 and 2.

The work of HUGS is already incorporated into the economic planning framework and the Climate Strategy workstream. The retrofitting process having a positive effect on the local workforce and economy as the framework used by Somerset Independence Plus and its agents for retrofitting are encouraged to train and employ local people.

9.4. Health and Safety Implications

The policy seeks to improve the safety, warmth, and security of homes in Somerset by funding disabled adaptations, essential repairs, retrofitting of energy measures and security regardless of tenure. The financial assistance on offer will eliminate or reduce significant hazards in the home.

Health and safety legislation and mitigation of risk has been incorporated into all the frameworks used by Somerset Independence Plus to keep contractors and applicants safe during working hours and outside of working hours. The specification and contract exercise involved procurement and the health and safety team. To date, there have been no reported concerns with health and safety.

9.5. Health and Wellbeing Implications

Housing with poor energy efficiency can have a considerable negative impact on residents' health and wellbeing in many ways. For example, children living in cold homes are more than twice as likely as those living in warm homes to suffer from a variety of respiratory problems, including asthma. Mental health is also negatively affected by fuel poverty and cold housing for all age groups and existing conditions such as arthritis can be exacerbated.

The policy aims to improve the home by meeting the needs of people with disabilities, and vulnerable low-income households by assisting with essential repairs and improving the warmth and security. This enables people to live comfortably in their home and undertake everyday tasks which most people benefit from such as school, work, and community activities.

Case studies are already undertaken in an ongoing project with University West of England to measure the impact of policy intervention. Following the client from before and after the works were completed to measure the health impacts. This will continue in the new policy.

9.6. Social Value

Already procured frameworks have considered social value, incorporating developing employment, skills, and training opportunities as part of the contract. It is essential for the policy to have community engagement as those who are actively involved in retrofit assessments are being recruited from the community to increase capacity.

The frameworks for Minor Works and adaptations uses local Small and Medium Enterprises (SMEs), 20 in all for adaptations and 10 for minor works. Ramping is also undertaken by a local SME.

Suppliers are actively encouraged in all of Somerset Independence Plus frameworks to reduce single use plastics and be considerate with materials used. PAS 2035, the standard used for energy retrofitting is particularly rigid on this issue. Energy retrofit looks to reduce carbon emissions as properties for HUGS must go from an EPC rating of D or below (which is the minimum level for eligibility) to an EPC C or above.

10. Scrutiny comments / recommendations:

- 10.1.** The proposed decision has not been considered by Scrutiny. As part of this decision, it has been circulated to Scrutiny Chairs for information.

11. Background

- 11.1.** Having warm, decent, and affordable housing is a major element of wellbeing. As in most parts of the country, Somerset faces the challenge posed by an expanding population, particularly at the older end of the age spectrum. There are also an increasing number of households with at least one family member having some form of disability, sometimes with complex medical and health needs particularly in children and young adults.
- 11.2.** To put Somerset into perspective, Somerset has an aging population and higher proportion of people with disabilities. Amongst the 65-74

age group, the annual rate of growth is estimated to be 3.4%, five times the average growth rate. One in six of the population identified themselves as having a long-term health problem or disability, which limited their day-to-day activity. (2021 census).

- 11.3.** There are many residents who are living in the most rurally isolated areas of Somerset with access to few services for example the Somerset Levels and Exmoor. Many parts of Somerset rank amongst England's lowest population density, meaning that vulnerable households living in these very rural areas (often in homes without access to gas) have even less mainstream support than households living elsewhere. In addition, there are an estimated 10,310 households in Somerset who are without gas central heating, living within the 25% most deprived areas in the UK, but who could be connected to the gas network.
- 11.4.** 11.6% (28,000 households) were in fuel poverty in 2015, 0.6% higher than the national average, this has since risen to 19.1%. In some areas the fuel poverty was as high as 27.3%. Puriton, Woolavington, Wellington Rockwell Green and West and Taunton Eastgate being some of the areas most affected. An estimated 216,000 adults (45%) of the population of Somerset are finding it difficult to afford their energy bills. 24,000 adults are behind on their energy bills. (OPN 2023)
- 11.5.** Invariably the reason for poor energy efficiency is down to the age of the property and the person's ability to afford or manage to effect repairs. It is estimated that over 65% of the stock across Somerset was built pre 1945 and 70% is owner occupied (6% higher than the national average). It is estimated that 54% of the stock in Sedgemoor and Somerset West and Taunton was built before 1945 with the largest proportion being built pre the First World War as is evidenced in the market towns. One in seven properties in Somerset will have one or more Category One hazards, again above the national average.
- 11.6.** There is a strong correlation between unsatisfactory housing conditions and households in economic and social disadvantage. Elderly and vulnerable private sector households are over-represented in non-decent housing. There are limited resources available for private sector housing renewal but increasing dependency levels in the private rented sector and among vulnerable owner-occupiers who may be capital rich but revenue poor.

12. Background Papers

- The Somerset Housing Assistance Policy 2023 – 2028
- Equalities Impact Assessment

Report Sign-Off

		Date completed
Legal Implications	Honor Clarke	16/02/23
Governance	Scott Wooldridge	23/02/23
Corporate Finance	Jason Vaughan	06/03/23
Customers, Digital and Workforce	Chris Squire	22/02/23
Property	Paula Hewitt / Oliver Woodhams	16/02/23
Procurement	Claire Griffiths	17/02/23
Senior Manager	Duncan Sharkey	17/02/23
Commissioning Development	Sunita Mills / Ryszard Rusinek	16/02/23
Executive Member	CLlr Bill Revans - Leader of the Council	17/02/23
<u>Sign-off Key Decision / Consulted on Non-Key Decision</u>		
Local Member	N/A - Somerset Wide Policy	N/A
Opposition Spokesperson	Opposition Spokesperson - Leader - Cllr David Fothergill	28/02/23
Scrutiny Chair	Scrutiny for Policies and Place Committee - Cllr Gwil Wren	28/02/23
Scrutiny Chair	Scrutiny For Policies - Adults and Health Committee - Cllr Rosemary Woods	19/02/23
Scrutiny Chair	Scrutiny for Policies - Childrens and Families - Cllr Leigh Redman	16/02/23
Scrutiny Chair	Scrutiny For Policies and Environment - Cllr Martin Dimery	21/02/23