

RUNNYMEDE BOROUGH COUNCIL**PRIVATE SECTOR HOUSING RENEWAL ASSISTANCE POLICY****1.0 Introduction**

- 1.1 The financial assistance policy forms part of a wider private sector renewal strategy to address poor conditions and improve the condition of private homes in Runnymede.
- 1.2 This policy sets out the financial assistance that will be provided to private homeowners and tenants in Runnymede and procedures introduced in response to the adoption of the Runnymede Private Sector Renewal Strategy 2010 to 2015. The new strategy takes advantage of the additional financial freedoms provided by the Regulatory Reform (Housing Assistance) Order 2002 and associated guidance documentation to offer a combination of loan assistance and grant aid. Since the introduction of the Regulatory Reform (Housing Assistance Order) 2002, there have been legislative changes made in respect of Disabled Facilities Grants. The revised procedures also take into account the experiences gained since the introduction of loans and grants.
- 1.3 The underlying principles of the financial assistance policy are:
- Homeowners should, in the first instance, be responsible for improving and maintaining their homes. Financial assistance from the Council is only appropriate where homeowners do not have the means to do so.
 - The Council's financial assistance scheme must provide best value. In other words, the Council must use its public funds prudently and effectively. Loans will be provided in preference to grant aid where this is considered appropriate and affordable for the homeowner. Because loans are ultimately repayable, the Council will be able to assist more people and improve more homes by this method. Grant aid will only be provided where loans are not appropriate.
 - Any financial assistance scheme cannot assist all homeowners in need, or even address all cases of unsatisfactory housing. The financial resources available to the Council are limited and must compete with other priorities for capital funding such as the provision of new affordable homes and the repair and improvement of the councils own housing stock. Loans and grant assistance are only available in certain circumstances that have been designed to address the priorities set out below.
 - Repair or adaptation of a property for the existing occupier may not always be the most reasonable and practical solution. In handling applications for assistance the Council will have to assess the appropriateness of the case and give consideration to alternatives such as re-housing or re-location. It also has to be borne in mind that a homeowner's equity can be a source of finance for home repairs and improvements even where the homeowner is on a low income.

2.0 Priorities

- 2.1 The priorities for the financial assistance policy are:
1. To assist low income elderly or disabled persons whose homes are in need of urgent repair to make their homes safe to live in.
 2. To assist low income disabled owner-occupiers and private tenants to adapt their homes to meet their needs.

3. To assist low income elderly or disabled homeowners and private tenants to be, and feel, safer in their homes.
4. To assist low income elderly, disabled or families with children who are homeowners, or private tenants to tackle energy efficiency and fuel poverty.

3.0 Types of Assistance

1. Disabled Facilities Grant
2. Moving Home Loans
3. Minor Works Grant
4. Major Works Grant
5. Runnymede Renewal Loan

3.1 Of the above, only the Disabled Facilities Grant is mandatory, which means that it is covered by national legislation, and shall be available providing that the qualifying criteria are met. The other forms of assistance are discretionary, which means that each are decided depending upon the circumstances of each case, and are subject to the funding restraints imposed by the annual budget available for them.

3.2 Other grants are available from various sources. The “Warm Front” scheme can provide assistance towards heating and energy efficiency measures to tackle energy efficiency and fuel poverty. Enquiries about these grants is available from the Council’s Energy Project Manager on 01932 425172.

3.3 DISABLED FACILITIES GRANTS

3.3.1 The national scheme of mandatory Disabled Facilities Grants is available to homeowners and tenants to cover the costs of works to adapt the home to meet the needs of the disabled person. The scheme may vary over time, as and when changes are made in legislation or government guidance.

What is covered?

3.3.2 The following categories of adaptation are detailed in the Housing Grants, Construction and Regeneration Act 1996 as being works which must be considered for DFG assistance. Further amendments were introduced in 2005 following Government guidance.

- a. Facilitating access to and from the dwelling or building by the disabled occupant;
- b. Making the dwelling or building safe for the disabled occupant;
- c. Access to the principal family room by the disabled occupant;
- d. Access to or providing a bedroom for the disabled occupant;
- e. Access to or providing a room containing a WC for the disabled occupant or facilitating the use by the disabled occupant of such a facility;
- f. Access to or providing a room containing a bath or shower for the disabled occupant or facilitating the use by the disabled occupant of such a facility;
- g. Access to or providing a room containing a wash hand basin for the disabled occupant or facilitating the use by the disabled occupant of such a facility;
- h. Facilitating the preparation and cooking of food by the disabled person;
- l Improving or providing a heating system for the disabled person;

- j Facilitating the use of or power, light or heat by the disabled person by altering same or by providing additional means of control;
- k Facilitating access and movement around the dwelling to enable the disabled person to provide care for someone;
- l. Making the dwelling or building suitable for the accommodation, welfare of employment of the disabled person;
- m. Facilitating access to and from the garden by a disabled occupant, or making access to the garden safe for a disabled occupant.

Eligibility and Process

- 3.3.3 The disabled person must be registered disabled or eligible to be registered.
- 3.3.4 The applicant must be either an owner or a tenant. However in the case of a tenant's application, the agreement of the owner of the property will be required. In the case of mobile homes, consent is normally required by the site owner.
- 3.3.5 A recommendation is required from an Occupational Therapist that adaptation works are necessary and appropriate to meet the needs of the client. In the first instance, the client will be referred to Surrey County Council Social Services Adult or Children and Families team for an initial interview to establish if an Occupational Therapist assessment is required. Sometimes equipment is recommended rather than physical adaptations to the property.
- 3.3.6 If an Occupational Therapist assessment is undertaken and recommendations made, the Council's Grant Officer may review the recommendation before a formal application is received. Consideration will be given to whether the proposals are "reasonable and practical". If a private Occupational Therapist has provided the recommendation, the Grant Officer will consult with the Social Services Authority.
- 3.3.7 Grant applications can only be approved if it is considered reasonable and practicable to carry out the relevant works having regard to the age and condition of the dwelling or building. In some cases it is not possible to carry out necessary repairs due to the age of the building. For example, it is sometimes not possible to widen doorways for wheelchair access in traditional terraced properties.
- 3.3.8 If in agreement with the recommendation a financial assessment or means test of the applicant and partner if applicable will be made of whether the applicant is likely to qualify for a grant. The terms of the means test are dictated by legislation and sometimes a financial contribution may be required. In the case of a child, no means test is required.
- 3.3.9 If the grant proceeds beyond the enquiry stage, the applicant will be advised and invited to make a full application for the grant. Runnymede Care and Repair will assist with this process and provide advice throughout.
- 3.3.10 As funds are limited, the final decision will be based on the most cost effective solution. For example, a through floor lift or stair lift will take preference rather than an extension. Full details are available in the Council's leaflet "Guidance on adaptations that can be considered for a Disabled Facilities Grant"
- 3.3.10 The application for a DFG should include:
- Satisfactorily completed application form
 - A detailed specification
 - Certificate of ownership and future occupation

- At least two estimates for the work to be carried out

3.3.11 the Council's Grant Officer has up to 6 months to make a decision and work is required to be completed within 12 months of approval of a grant.

Terms of the loan

3.3.7 The maximum cost of works to which grant can be considered is £30,000 which includes fees. If the total cost of the works and fees exceeds £30,000, there may be a contribution to pay.

3.3.9 Disabled Facilities Grants may be wholly or in part repayable. A condition regarding repayment will be attached where the grant exceeds £5,000. The repayment condition will be applied where the property is disposed of (whether by sale, assignment, transfer or otherwise) within 10 years or if there is a change of ownership within 10 years of the completion of the works. Repayment will be limited to £10,000 or the total sum of the grant which ever is the lesser. If subsequent loans grants are made, the total of both will be taken into account. For example, if a stair lift is funded in one year and a walk in shower the following, the total will be calculated against the £5,000 limit.

3.3.10 Where repayment conditions are attached to a grant, the grant will be recorded as a charge in the Local Land Charges and Land Registry. These land charges are in line with Government regulations that came into force on 22 May 2008 and the Council's Housing Renewal Assistance Policy. If the means test shows an applicant contribution, then this may be payable in addition to the charge on the property. The table below provides examples of grants and charges that apply:

Examples of Charges to be applied to properties based on DFG levels

Grant	Land Charge	Comment
£4,999	No charge	Below level for repayment
£5,500	£500	A charge relating to the value above the £5,000 will be placed
£6,000	£1,000	A charge relating to the value above the £5,000 will be placed
£8,000	£3,000	A charge relating to the value above the £5,000 will be placed
£15,000	£10,000	The maximum charge of £10,000 will be placed
£30,000	£10,000	The maximum charge of £10,000 will be placed

3.3.11 Where a grant is subject to repayment conditions the Council may demand repayment in whole or in part on the disposal of the property if having considered:

- The extent to which the grant recipient would suffer financial hardship
- Whether the disposal is to enable the grant recipient to take up employment, or to change the location of his/her employment;
- Whether the disposal is made for reasons connected with the physical or mental health or well being of the grant recipient or of the disabled person;
- Whether the disposal is made to enable the grant recipient to live with or near a person who is disabled or infirm and in need of care, which the grant recipient intends to provide;
- Whether the disposal is made to enable someone to provide care for the grant recipient who is in need by reason of disability or infirmity.

3.3.12 Appeals against this decision will be referred to the Director of Housing and Community Services.

Timescales for Disabled Facilities Grants

The Disabled Facilities Grant process is complex. Several agencies or persons are involved at different stages and consequently the time taken from an initial enquiry through to the completion of the work can take 8 to 12 months. Cases can be subject to delay for a range of reasons, some of which are beyond our control. As funds are becoming more limited due to an increase in demand, then a waiting list will operate. Applicants will be advised of the estimated waiting time and this will also be subject to Government and Council funding being made available.

3.4 MOVING HOME LOANS

3.4.1 This scheme is available for anyone who may qualify for a DFG but is used to help disabled people move to a more suitable property. The loan is available for applicants who cannot afford to move taking into account savings, equity and the likely fees payable. This would be when their existing property either cannot be adapted to meet the disabled person's needs (as recommended by the Occupational Therapist) or where it would be too expensive to adapt. For example, sometimes small terraced property cannot be adapted for a wheelchair user as the doorways are too narrow and rooms too small. In such circumstances it may be more suitable to consider moving home. In some circumstances, there is insufficient equity in the property to cover all expenses. Assistance may be given for the following to either private ownership, private, Housing Association or Council rented:

- Solicitor fees involved in selling and buying
- Packing, unpacking and removal costs
- Cost of valuation survey
- Mortgage redemption fees
- Estate agent fees
- Stamp duty fee (if applicable)
- Works involved in putting up curtain poles, curtains, blinds etc
- Disconnection and reconnection of utility fees

3.4.2 The cost of moving will be assessed to be the more financially viable option based on the feasibility and estimated costs of adapting the existing property. If the new property requires a DFG, this cannot exceed £30,000. Any property identified for a move must have the approval of the Council and Occupational Therapist that it will be suitable for the applicant.

3.4.3 Where a tenant needs to move to a more suitable rented property then assistance can be provided to help with removal costs, disconnection and reconnection of utility fees and works involved in putting up curtain poles, curtains, blinds etc.

3.4.4 A means test would be required in all cases and any contribution taken into account towards the moving home costs and DFG costs to adapt the new home.

3.4.5 Payments will be made on receipt of 2 acceptable estimates for the fees identified and only paid when contracts have been exchanged on the new property. Approval for payment will not be made if the applicant had previously accepted a new tenancy or had planned to move. Owners Certificates will be required to prove ownership.

3.4.6 As with the other loans, the moving home loan will be registered as a charge against the property and the Council will seek repayment if the property is disposed of within 10 years. Where applicants move to rented property, a payment will be a grant and not be repayable unless there are resources from the sale of a private property and immediate repayment can be made following a move to a new home.

3.5 MINOR WORKS ASSISTANCE

3.5.1 Small grants are available on a discretionary basis, within an annual budget limit, to assist low income, vulnerable homeowners and tenants to carry out small scale works of repair, improvement or adaptation which address their health, safety and security needs or otherwise essential minor repairs to improve the condition of the home. These grants are only available for works administered by our Home Improvement Agency (Runnymede Care & Repair) and only in circumstances where there is no other funding available to carry out the works.

- Maximum grant is £600 plus any VAT chargeable and fees payable to the Home Improvement Agency.
- No more than £1,800 (plus VAT and/or Fees) can be payable in regard to the property within a 3 year period.
- Applicants must be elderly, disabled or otherwise vulnerable.
- Applicants must have lived in the property for a minimum of 2 years prior to the application.
- Applicants with savings of more than £6,000 will not be eligible.
- Applicants with less than £6,000 in savings will be means tested and may have to make a financial contribution.

Applicants must be in receipt of, or eligible for, a means tested benefit; or be proven not to be able to afford the works. If the applicant has sufficient capital, they will be expected to use their own resources and not apply for a grant. However, assistance can be provided with organising the works for a fee.

3.5.2 These are small grants for urgent minor repairs or adaptation. Because such works will be organised and overseen by our Home Improvement Agency there is no absolute need for an application to be submitted for approval prior to works starting. This will mean that, subject to the Home Improvement Agency establishing that works are essential and that the client is eligible for assistance, there will be the minimum delay in undertaking the works.

3.6 WARMFRONT TOP-UP

3.6.1 The Warm Front Grant is a Government-funded initiative managed by EAGA (a green support services and outsourcing Company) which provides a package of insulation improvements. On occasions the amount of such a grant is insufficient to cover the costs of the works involved. Where it is essential for the insulation and heating improvements to be carried out, and the client is eligible for a Minor Works Grants, then the grant can be used to “top-up” the Warm Front Grant.

3.7 MAJOR WORKS ASSISTANCE

3.7.1 Grants for major repair work are available in a limited number of cases to homeowners or tenants with repairing responsibilities, who do not have the means to do so themselves. Such grants are available on a discretionary basis, within an annual budget limit. Major works assistance is only available to cover essential works which will remedy a hazard that otherwise would seriously affect the occupiers' wellbeing.

- Applicants must be homeowners or private tenants with repairing obligations under their tenancy agreement. Owners of mobile homes and caravans qualify as homeowners where it is their principal home.
- Applicants who would be able to obtain a commercial loan or a Runnymede Renewal Loan are not eligible.
- In considering grant assistance the Council has to be satisfied that undertaking remedial works is the most appropriate course of action. In certain cases, re-housing and/or demolition might be more appropriate.
- If the property is a mobile home, grant is only available where the mobile home is sited on its own plot on a licensed mobile home site.
- The grant is only available for works organised and overseen by our Home Improvement Agency (Runnymede Care & Repair).
- Maximum grant is £6,000 plus any VAT chargeable and fees payable to the Home Improvement Agency.
- No more than £12,000 (plus VAT and Fees) can be payable in regard to the property within a 3 year period.
- Applicants with savings of more than £20,000 will not be eligible.
- Applicants with savings of less than £20,000 will be means tested and may have to make a financial contribution.
- The property must have a Category 1 or 2 hazard (see Note 2), where serious defects or disrepair significantly affect the health and safety of the occupant(s). The defects must be remedied after the works covered by the grant have been completed.
- The works to be covered by the grant must be essential works that remedy the hazard. Such works could include energy efficiency measures where the hazard is that of “excess cold”.
- Applicants must have lived in the property for a minimum of 2 years prior to the application.

Note 1 There are situations in which a homeowner or a private tenant may have repairing obligations and may otherwise be eligible for a loan but where it is not possible or plausible to raise a charge against the property. Changes in occupation in regard to mobile homes or tenancies are not subject to Land Charges Searches being made and therefore the Council would have no effective means of recovering a loan. Loans will therefore not be appropriate in these circumstances and applicants will be treated as not being eligible for a loan.

Note 2 Hazard Categories are defined in the Housing Act 2004 and are determined using the Housing Health and Safety Rating System.

3.8 RUNNYMEDE RENEWAL LOAN SCHEME

3.8.1 Runnymede Borough Council will provide secured loans on a discretionary basis within a specified annual budget, to assist with essential repairs costing up to £30,000 to elderly and disabled homeowners who would otherwise be unable to carry out the works.

- The homeowner must be in receipt of a means tested benefit or otherwise have insufficient capital or income to be able to finance the total cost of the essential works privately (this will be established by application of the means testing calculation currently used for Disabled Facilities Grants).
- The homeowner must either be disabled or be a person of 70 years or over, (if a couple, the older person being 70 years or older).
- The property must have a Category 1 or 2 hazard, where serious defects or disrepair significantly affect the health and safety of the occupant(s). The hazard(s) are to be assessed in accordance with the Housing Health and Safety Rating System and as defined by the Housing Act 2004.
- The loan is only available for works organised and overseen by our Home Improvement Agency (Runnymede Care & Repair).
- The loan can only be for the cost of works together with ancillary costs that are needed to remedy the identified hazard(s), plus any VAT chargeable and fees payable to the Home Improvement Agency (Runnymede Care & Repair).
- The maximum amount that can be loaned is £30,000 or 30% of the available equity, whatever is the less. This can be a single loan or a combination of loans (including loans given under earlier Assistance Policies) on one property. Available equity means that not already used as security for other loans/mortgages.
- No interest will be applied to the first £6,000 of the loan. For amounts in excess of £6,000, interest on the amount over £6,000 at 5% per annum will be added to the repayable amount each 1st April following the first anniversary of the loan being made.
- Repayment of the loan may be deferred until such time as the person named on the loan and partner (if applicable cease living at the property).
- Any partial voluntary repayments that the client may wish to make will be deducted from the loan, reducing in the interest bearing element first. No charge or penalty will be applied to voluntary repayments.
- Clients will be sent an annual statement detailing the amount of the loan or loans, together with any interest accrued.

3.8.2 The loan scheme procedure is dependant on the fact that the property is classified as having a Category 1 or 2 hazard (as defined by the Housing Act 2004). The Council may undertake “works by agreement” after service of a statutory notice requiring those works to be carried out.

3.8.3 After completion of the works the client will be sent a notice setting out the amount to be repaid together with the rate of interest payable (if applicable), and also indicating that repayment can be deferred until the property is sold or the client (s) cease living at the property. The Notice will be recorded as a charge in the local land charges register. Repayment will be recovered when the property is sold.

Exemption from the requirement to repay

3.8.4 In exceptional circumstances, the Council may waive repayment of all or part of an outstanding loan. Such cases will be considered by the Director of Housing and Community Services. Repayment will be waived only in circumstances where it would not be reasonable

to demand repayment. For example, repayment could be waived if the owner of the dwelling is elderly or infirm and is selling the property with the intention of funding a move to suitable alternative accommodation, sheltered housing, residential care home or to a similar institution or to somewhere where care will be provided by any person and where the amount due back to the Council would be essential to fund the move.

4.0 General Considerations Applying to Grants and Loans

4.1 Budgetary Restraints

4.1.1 The budgets for grants and loans are set annually. There may be occasions when otherwise eligible cases are held over from one year to another.

4.2 Exceptional Circumstances

4.2.1 There may be cases where grant or loan assistance should be considered where the criteria are not met. Where there are exceptional circumstances, the Council will use its discretion to consider grant aid or loan assistance as long as this is still broadly compatible with priorities of the scheme. All such cases will be considered by the Private Sector Housing and Enabling Manager.

4.3 Discretion to vary the grant/loan amounts

4.3.1 In order to progress a grant or loan application from the enquiry stage it is necessary to estimate the costs of works required in order to establish eligibility for the scheme. In some cases, builder's estimates may be higher than anticipated and/or unforeseen works may be encountered. Consequently the Private Sector Housing Manager will have the discretion to approve grants or loans higher than the maximums indicated where it is appropriate to do so up to a maximum of £1,000.

4.4 The Home Improvement Agency

4.4.1 Runnymede Care & Repair is our local Home Improvement Agency based in the Runnymede Civic Centre and funded by Surrey Supporting People and Runnymede Borough Council. Care & Repair offer advice and assistance to homeowners and private tenants who are over 60 and/or disabled or vulnerable, who wish to repair, improve, or adapt their homes. Care & Repair will provide the necessary documentation for grant assistance in order for the Private Sector Housing Manager to certify the necessity and eligibility for financial assistance.

4.5 Home Improvement Agency and Fees.

4.5.1 Organising and overseeing grant is complex and often involves a considerable amount of work.

4.5.2 Fees in respect to grants and loans payable to the Home Improvement Agency are therefore set at 15% of the cost of the works (without VAT) and are subject to a minimum of £20 for grants and £100 for loans.

4.5.3 Additional fees may be payable where a private Occupational Therapist assesses a client or where other agents or surveyors are involved in a case.

4.5.4 Dependent on circumstances, the Private Sector Housing Manager has the discretion to agree a variation in the level of fees payable to the Home Improvement Agency to take into account exceptional circumstances.

4.6 General Conditions Attached to Grants or Loans

- A minimum of two estimates are required, or where appropriate the Council's schedule of rates with specialist contractors e.g. stair lifts.
- Formal approval will be provided within 6 months of application.
- Any grant approval should include fees and client contribution.
- The client contribution must be paid before work commences.
- The assisted works must be completed within twelve months from the date of approval, or such further period as the Council may allow.
- The assisted works must be carried out in accordance with such specifications as the Council determine.
- The assisted works must be carried out by the contractors that submitted the estimates upon which the assistance was approved.
- The assisted works must be executed to the satisfaction of the Council.
- The Council must be provided with an acceptable invoice, demand or receipt for the works and any professional fees or charges.
- Advance payments will only be made with the prior approval of the Council before works commence e.g. if contractors request stage payments.
- Unforeseen works will be regarded as additional works which could not have been reasonably foreseen at the time of approval, but are necessary and can only be approved with the agreement of the council.
- Appropriate warranties should be in agreed before commencement of works and evidence provided when the works are complete.
- Works eligible for funding through an insurance claim will not receive assistance.

5 Appeals

- 5.1 Any applicant wishing to appeal against a decision on the provision or recovery of financial assistance may appeal in writing to the Director of Housing and Community Services.
- 5.2 Any person wishing to complain about the level or standard of service provided should follow the Runnymede Borough Council complaints scheme.