

SUBJECT:	DAYS ALMS HOUSES
REPORT OF:	<i>Graham Harris, Healthy Communities Portfolio Holder</i>
RESPONSIBLE OFFICER	<i>Martin Holt, Head of Healthy Communities</i>
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WARD/S AFFECTED	<i>Amersham Town</i>

1. Purpose of Report

To consider the award of housing grant funding of £100,000 to Amersham United Charities for the refurbishment of the Days Alms houses, 71-87 High St, Amersham

RECOMMENDATION

To agree a housing grant of £100,000 for the refurbishment of the Days Alms houses, 71-87 High St, Amersham subject to Days Alms houses entering into a Nomination Agreement with Chiltern District Council that will give the Council the right to nominate tenants to all future vacancies that arise following completion of the refurbishment works (excluding any vacancies that have to be utilised to decant or re-house existing residents during the refurbishment works).

2. Executive Summary

3. Reasons for Recommendations

3.1 The Day Alms houses consisting of nine, grade II listed properties, currently do not meet the standards required in respect of the Housing, Health and Safety Rating Scheme through the provision of poor or no thermal insulation, food safety, protection against accidents (falls), and the protection against fire/flames/smoke.

3.2 Whilst the Council has a duty to enforce housing standards which are hazardous to health, it discharges this function through advice and assistance, including financial assistance or through the use of its enforcement powers. The charitable owner has put forward proposals through the planning regime to improve the properties, ensuring compliance with legislative requirements and is seeking £1.2M funding through accessing charitable donations, loans and grants.

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3.3 Grant assistance of £100,000 from the Council would assist the charities fund raising efforts and reduce the potential future costs to the Council of enforcement or of accommodating persons currently living in the dwellings who may make a homelessness application because the condition of the dwellings means that they can no longer remain.

4. Content of Report

4.1 The Days Alms houses, 71-87 High St, Amersham, built in 1657, consist of nine small single bedroom properties, which currently do not meet the standards required under the Housing, Health and Safety Rating Scheme, presenting a risk to the health and safety of the occupants.

4.2 Amersham United Charities has submitted proposals to the Council to refurbish the properties and to bring them up to modern standards whilst maintaining their heritage aspects and listed planning consent (CH/2014/1591/FA) has been approved. The proposal is to convert the properties to create 7 habitable dwellings.

4.3 The current risks to health and safety of the occupants are associated with;

- cold homes and risk of fuel poverty resulting from the poor thermal insulation;
- food safety as the small size of the kitchens results in a lack of kitchen facilities and working space;
- there is a risk of falls arising from the steep and turning staircases; and
- residents have to escape from the first floor bedroom through the kitchen in the event of a fire.

4.4 The current conditions are such that should a resident suffer increasing mobility problems it would not be possible to install adaptations (e.g. stairlift etc.). In such cases, the resident would need to move and the Council would have a duty to provide alternative accommodation, increasing the pressures on the Council's housing and homelessness services.

4.5 As part of the refurbishment Amersham United Charities are seeking to enable the provision of level access showers and to install staircases that would support the installation of stair lifts. Such investment would reduce the need for the Council to support future disability adaptations through its grant programme. The small kitchens will also be extended to create sufficient space to enable the preparation of foods, and the walls and roof spaces are to be thermally insulated assisting the thermal comfort of the property.

4.6 Such works would enable the continued occupation of the homes by vulnerable elderly occupants, and reduce the risk of homelessness or injury to residents.

4.7 The cost of works is estimated to be £1.2M for which Amersham United Charities is fundraising through applying for charitable donations, obtaining loan funding, to be

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repaid through increased rents and has enquired regarding housing assistance funding from the Council.

4.8 The homes currently provide accommodation for vulnerable elderly residents aged between 50 and 92 years of Amersham and the surrounding district that are at risk of becoming homeless. The accommodation provided is a valuable resource that prevents the need for the Council to find alternative accommodation.

4.9 When vacancies occur the properties are offered to persons who are in need or at risk of homelessness who have a connection within the geographical boundaries of Amersham, Coleshill and Penn (with nominations being extended to the whole of Chiltern District).

4.10 In return for a grant, Amersham United Charities would consider entering in to a local letting policy, which would enable the Council to nominate persons to the charity for consideration for housing. This would allow vacant properties in the Days Alms houses to potentially be advertised via the Bucks Home Choice scheme. This would enable the Council to widen the availability of property through which it could discharge its responsibilities to house elderly and vulnerable homeless applicants.

4.11 A grant of approximately £14,275/property (£100,000) is being sought which would represent good value in terms of the Council benefiting from a supply of additional affordable accommodation if a local lettings agreement was in place. This compares favourably with other recent schemes where the Council has provided capital funding support to deliver additional affordable housing, namely:

- Chiltern District Council supported Paradigm Housing in 2014/15 to acquire properties with capital funding equivalent to £25,000 per property
- Chiltern District Council supported Hightown Praetorian and Churches Housing Association in 2014/15 to convert empty offices in Chesham into flats with capital funding equivalent to £16,590 per dwelling.

5. Consultation

Not Applicable

6. Options

The options available to the Council are;

1. **To not provide a grant to Amersham United Charities** – This may mean that the improvement works cannot take place and could result in the Council having to take enforcement action against Amersham United Charities because of a failure to meet HHSRS standards in the Alms houses. This will have an impact on the Council in terms of both the cost of enforcement action to the authority and the likely need for the Council to secure alternative accommodation for existing residents via the Bucks Home Choice or homelessness services. Additionally, this will create significant stress and uncertainty for existing residents who will face the need to move on.

2. **To provide a contribution by way of loan to United Amersham Charities.**
This would enable the properties to be brought up to current housing standards and in return for a loan a local lettings policy would be agreed with nomination rights to the council. However a loan may restrict the ability of the charity to secure alternative loan funding.

3. **To provide a contribution by way of grant to United Amersham Charities.**
This would enable the properties to be brought up to current housing standards and in return for a grant a local lettings policy would be agreed with nomination rights to the Council.

7. Corporate Implications

1. *Financial – 100,000 has been included in the Provisional Capital List for this project. The Private Sector Housing Strategy outlines the assistance that can be made to property owners to ensure that houses are free from hazards identified in the Housing Health and Safety Rating Scheme. Whilst the Housing Financial Assistance policy provides grants and loans to owner occupiers to undertake works to properties to achieve these standards it currently does not provide grants to landlords. Assistance can be provided on a case by case basis and an exception could be considered in relation to this enquiry.*

2. *Legal – Regulatory Reform (Housing Assistance) Order 2003 and the Local Government Act 2000 both enable the Council to provide Housing Financial Assistance to meet the wellbeing requirements of residents.*

8. Links to Council Policy Objectives

This proposal supports the objectives in the Joint Business Plan in relation to working to support healthier and safer local communities;

9. Next Step

Following approval of any award of grant, officers will work with Amersham United Charities to agree the local nomination agreement for tenants referred by the Council to the charity.

Background Papers:	It is a legal requirement that we make available any background papers relied on to prepare the report and should be listed at the end of the report (copies of Part 1 background papers for executive decisions must be provided to Democratic Services)
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