
Meeting: Social Care Health and Housing Overview & Scrutiny Committee
Date: 4th February 2010
Subject: Draft Private Sector Housing Renewal Policy
Report of: Cllr Mrs Carole Hegley, Portfolio Holder for Housing
Summary: The report provides Members with the draft Private Sector Housing Renewal Policy for 2010-2012.

Contact Officer: Nick Costin – Head of Private Sector Housing
Public/Exempt: Public
Wards Affected: All
Function of: Council
Key Decision No

RECOMMENDATION:

- 1. That the Social Care Health and Housing Overview & Scrutiny Committee consider the content of the proposed policy and suggest any final amendments before presentation to Executive on 9th March 2010.**
- 2. That the Social Care Health and Housing Overview & Scrutiny Committee recommend that Executive adopt the proposed policy (with appropriate amendments) on 9th March 2010.**

Reason for Recommendation: To enable Members of Social Care, Health & Housing Overview & Scrutiny Committee to make final comment on the Private Sector Housing Renewal Policy before it is presented to Executive on 9th March 2010 (to meet Government requirements).

CORPORATE IMPLICATIONS

Council Priorities:

This policy will most closely align with the Council's Priority; *Supporting and Caring for an ageing population*, but could also contribute towards *Creating safer communities*.

Financial:

The type of assistance to be made available within the Renewal Policy will both influence and be influenced by the Capital Programme. The policy contains a clause to ensure that the provision of discretionary grants and loans will be subject to the Council having sufficient resources. It should be noted however, that if the policy meets regional priorities, funding could be provided to the Council for such assistance to be made available. £160,000 was received for 2009/10.

Legal:

The Regulatory Reform (Housing Assistance) (England and Wales) Order 2002 requires local authorities to develop a policy for providing households with financial assistance to improve their homes. The only assistance that the Council must provide under the Housing Grants Construction and Regeneration Act 1996 is Disabled Facilities grant, which is included with policy proposals.

Risk Management:

The greatest risks are associated with the Council not adopting a Renewal Policy by the end of March 2010 as Government and legal requirements will not be met, leaving the Council open to a variety of challenges.

It is suggested that the Renewal Policy, once adopted, have a life span of 2 years. This will enable the Council to review the policy in light of better information and intelligence on the private sector housing stock.

Staffing (including Trades Unions):

There are no direct staffing implications from this report. The proposed types of assistance will be administered by existing staff within the Housing Service.

Equalities/Human Rights:

The Renewal Policy is subject to an Equalities Impact Assessment, which is being presented to Equalities Forum on 25th February 2010. The policy directly supports some vulnerable groups such as older people and people with disabilities. The implementation of the policy will have regard to Equality Forum recommendations, to help ensure that it does not adversely prejudice any particular groups and is promoted to hard to reach vulnerable groups.

Community Development/Safety:

No direct implications from this report. The recommendation for assistance to help bring empty properties back into use will have a positive impact on communities where empty homes can blight the area, and the Safety Security etc grant could improve security of some of the most vulnerable households.

Sustainability:

The recommended types of assistance contained within the issues and options paper will often improve the sustainability of the existing housing stock. Improvements and repairs undertaken will frequently prolong the life of the home, reducing the need for households to have to move home, or for the property to have to be replaced.

Introduction

1. The Regulatory Reform (Housing Assistance) (England and Wales) Order 2002 requires local authorities to develop a policy for providing households with financial assistance to improve their homes. The order removed previous prescriptive legislation and provided authorities with more freedom to develop financial products and innovative forms of assistance. The creation of Central Bedfordshire Council means that this Council must develop such a policy, which is required by Government to be adopted by the Council's Executive by the end of March 2010.
2. The adoption of a new policy will bring a consistent approach across the area, and will help meet Council and Directorate priorities. Currently, legacy policies are continuing, meaning that different forms of assistance are available in the former Mid Beds and South Beds areas. Members of Overview and Scrutiny Committee were presented with an Issues and Options paper on 15th October 2009. Comments made by Committee members were incorporated into the first draft Policy.

Consultation of Draft Policy

3. The draft policy was signed off for consultation by the Director of Social Care Health and Housing for consultation in early December. The draft was then sent to all Central Bedfordshire Council Members, all Town and Parish Councils, and Senior Officers of the Council. A variety of comments have been received during consultation, some of which will be incorporated in the proposed policy attached to this report as Appendix A. The policy is not subject to statutory consultation. A summary of consultation responses is available from the Head of Private Sector Housing.
4. In addition to the consultation mentioned above, the policy and an accompanying Equalities Impact Assessment will be presented to the Equalities forum on 25th February 2010. This will help ensure that the proposed policy will not adversely impact on any minority groups in Central Bedfordshire, and has been developed in close consultation with the Council's Corporate Equalities Officer.
5. A number of issues were also raised at the Housing Strategy stakeholder consultation event on 15th January 2010 in terms of how the Council should respond to local private sector housing issues. Some of the key issues raised included the need for the Council to effectively communicate how residents could be assisted or advised in relation to their housing problems. The issues of fuel poverty and empty homes were also highlighted, both of which are included as priorities in the proposed policy.

Renewal Policy implementation

6. Several consultation comments related to how the policy will be implemented and promoted in Central Bedfordshire. Although an implementation plan is outside the scope of the attached policy document, which is focused on proposed policy assistance priorities for the Council, the Head of Private Sector Housing will develop an implementation plan immediately after the policy is adopted by Executive and when the Equalities Impact Assessment is signed off by the Equalities Forum.
7. The implementation plan will, however, be greatly influenced by the determination of the Council's capital budget for 2010/11 and 2011/12. The policy is clear that in times of financial constraint, assistance will only be available to address the highest priorities.
8. The implementation plan will also be influenced by the outcome of the Audit Commission mock Housing Inspection beginning in April 2010. The Audit Commission is focusing on Access to Services as part of the inspection.

Conclusion

9. A Renewal Policy is required to be adopted and in place before the end of March 2010. The policy will have a lifespan of two years, to be reviewed when the Council has developed private sector housing stock information and evidence base from the current position.
10. The proposed policy is based upon known national and local issues and priorities, and has taken account of comments received from targeted consultation. It proposes a balanced approach between the provision of grant and loan assistance, both of which are subject to resources being available. A greater emphasis on loan assistance should help ensure some recycling of Council resources in future years.
11. The proposed policy (with any final amendments from Overview and Scrutiny Committee) will be presented to Executive on 9th March 2010 for adoption, as required by the legislation and Government.

Appendices:

Appendix A – Private Sector Housing Renewal Policy

Background Papers: (open to public inspection)

None

Location of papers: Priory House, Chicksands