
Meeting: Executive
Date: 9 March 2010
Subject: Private Sector Housing Renewal Policy
Report of: Cllr Rita Drinkwater, Portfolio Holder for Housing
Summary: The report proposes that Executive adopts the proposed Private Sector Housing Renewal Policy for Central Bedfordshire Council

Advising Officer: Julie Ogle, Director of Social Care, Health and Housing
Contact Officer: Nick Costin, Head of Private Sector Housing
Public/Exempt: Public
Wards Affected: All
Function of: Executive
Key Decision Yes
**Reason for urgency/
exemption from call-in
(if appropriate)** N/A

CORPORATE IMPLICATIONS

Council Priorities:

The recommendations contribute to the Council's priority to support and care for an ageing population but also contribute to 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. Consequently, the adoption of the policy will not itself commit the Council to providing assistance (other than for mandatory disabled facilities grants).

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, has 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 within the policy 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 25 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 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 grant could improve security of some of the most vulnerable households.

Sustainability:

The recommended types of assistance 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.

Summary of Overview and Scrutiny Comments:

- Overview and Scrutiny Committee recommend that Executive adopt the proposed policy, with a requirement to review smaller grant payment cases within six months of policy adoption.
- Full details are contained in an Appendix B

RECOMMENDATION(S):

1. **That the Executive note the contents of this report, including the recommendations from Overview and Scrutiny Committee, and specifically adopt the proposed Private Sector Renewal Policy for Central Bedfordshire**

Reason for Recommendation(s): So that the Council can meet statutory and Government requirements as well as providing a clear and consistent policy for housing renewal in Central Bedfordshire.

Executive Summary

This report outlines the requirement for Central Bedfordshire Council to adopt a Private Sector Housing Renewal Policy, which will set out the package of grants and loans that the Council intends to provide for eligible, vulnerable households in need of assistance to repair or maintain their homes. The proposed Renewal Policy has been agreed at Overview and Scrutiny Committee and is attached. The proposed policy is clear that the Council will only provide the proposed grants and loans if sufficient capital resources are available.

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.

Consultation of Draft Policy

3. The draft Renewal Policy was signed off for consultation by the Director of Social Care Health and Housing in early December. The draft was 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 were 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 25 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 15 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 draft policy was presented to Overview and Scrutiny Committee on 4 February 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, including Overview and Scrutiny Committee. 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.

Appendices:

Appendix A – Draft Private Sector Housing Renewal Policy

Appendix B – Social Care, Health and Housing Overview and Scrutiny Committee comments

Background Papers: (open to public inspection)

Reports to Overview and Scrutiny Committee dated 15 October 09 and 04 February 10.

Location of papers: Website or Dunstable Offices