
Meeting: Social Care Health and Housing Overview and Scrutiny Committee
Date: 24 October 2011
Subject: Private Sector Housing Renewal Policy
Report of: Cllr Carole Hegley , Executive Member for Social Care Health and Housing
Summary: The report proposes that the draft revised Renewal Policy is consulted upon before being presented to Executive for adoption.

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: Council

CORPORATE IMPLICATIONS

Council Priorities:

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

Financial:

2. The proposals within the Renewal Policy will help ensure that the Council is better able to recover funding provided by the Capital Programme and so contribute towards efficiencies. The policy also contains a clause to ensure that the provision of discretionary grants and loans will be subject to the Council having sufficient resources. Capital Programme budget information is contained within the draft policy attached.
3. The draft policy includes provision to utilise £195,000 of potential external funding to tackle fuel poverty. This funding will be provided as loans and will also be recoverable by the Council in future years. The intention of the draft Policy is to ensure that the Council recovers as much financial assistance as possible through the use of loans rather than grants in most cases.

Legal:

4. The Regulatory Reform (Housing Assistance) (England and Wales) Order 2002 requires local authorities to develop, adopt and publish a policy for providing households with financial assistance to improve their homes.

Risk Management:

5. The draft policy is based upon meeting legal requirements and includes an appeals process as required. The contextual information provided, and consultation process will help reduce risk of challenge to the Policy.

Staffing (including Trades Unions):

6. There are no direct staffing implications from this report. The draft Policy has regard to the current number and expertise of staff within the Private Sector Housing Service.

Equalities/Human Rights:

7. Public authorities have a statutory duty to promote equality of opportunity, eliminate unlawful discrimination, harassment and victimisation and foster good relations in respect of nine protected characteristics; age disability, gender re-assignment, marriage and civil partnership, pregnancy and maternity, race, religion or belief, sex and sexual orientation.
8. The current Renewal Policy is subject to an Equalities Impact Assessment, which was approved by Equalities Forum on 25 February 2010. The draft policy is broadly similar and directly supports some vulnerable groups such as older people and people with disabilities. The draft policy will, however, be subject to a reviewed Equalities Impact Assessment, to help ensure that it does not adversely prejudice any particular groups and is promoted to hard to reach vulnerable groups.

Community Safety:

9. 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:

10. 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.

Procurement:

11. All proposed forms of assistance are provided following a competitive quotation process other than urgent situations where safety is at risk.

RECOMMENDATION(S):**The Committee is asked to:-**

1. **Note the contents of this report and review the contents of the attached draft Renewal Policy, in particular the proposed forms of assistance in section 4**

2. Agree for the draft Renewal Policy to proceed to consultation, subject to any amendments required

Introduction

12. 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.
13. The current Renewal Policy has an approach of offering traditional grants for small types of work and loan assistance for more costly types of improvement work.
14. The existing Renewal policy has not been extensively tested due to a delay in funding allocation in 2010/11. However, financial pressures in particular require that a review and change to the policy is needed during 2011/12.

Review of Proposed Renewal Policy

15. It is proposed that the current priorities remain largely unchanged. The highest priority remains the safety and security of the most vulnerable households. This is followed by the need to tackle fuel poverty, which is increasing following significant fuel price rises, and is consistent with the aim to reduce excess winter deaths.
16. The main change within the proposed policy is the move towards provision of loan assistance rather than grants, in most cases. This enables the Council to recover and recycle funding wherever possible, which in turn enables further work to be undertaken.
17. It is proposed that the types of assistance remain largely unchanged other than being provided as loan assistance in virtually all cases. The exceptions are Safety Security and Emergency Repair grant (£500 maximum) for the most urgent, quick response cases, Home Improvement Grant of up to £1,000 for Park Homes and Houseboats, and potentially Relocation assistance, to help the vulnerable households move to more suitable property (where existing one cannot be adapted to meet needs/reduce overcrowding).
18. Land registry charges cannot be made against Park Homes, which are generally occupied by older people. Removing any type of assistance to Park Home residents would create inequality in being detrimental to older people.
19. Safety Security and Emergency Repair grant has been particularly useful to remedy urgent situations quickly. Since the current policy was approved in April 2010, we have completed 9 grants and have several in progress.

Fuel Poverty external funding opportunities

20. The draft policy includes provision to utilise up to £195,000 of potential external funding to tackle fuel poverty. This funding will be provided as loans and will be recoverable by the Council in future years. The funding may only be available until April 2012.
21. To help tackle fuel poverty and to utilise the external funding, it is recommended that the affordable warmth assistance eligibility be widened for a limited period to make full use of this funding. This is available until April 2012. The proposal is to open this loan assistance up to households with someone aged 65 years or more with less than £20,000 in savings.

Disabled Facilities grant

22. The Council provides a good level of resource to meet the need for aids and adaptations for people with disabilities. Legislation enables the Council to impose repayment conditions to disabled facilities grants of more than £5,000. There are many exemptions but the Council may be able to recover some Disabled Facilities Grant funding so this option is included in the revised Renewal Policy.
23. The draft Policy includes the provision of discretionary loan assistance for disabled facilities grants “tops ups” in certain circumstances. It is proposed to include this type of assistance for certain cases, which is consistent with most authorities who responded in the July 2011 benchmarking survey.

Conclusion and Next Steps

24. Following agreement and/or amendment of the draft Renewal Policy by Overview and Scrutiny Committee, it is intended to undertake a 12 week public consultation. This will include consultation with previous clients to help provide a customer perspective.
25. Following consultation, it is intended to take the proposed policy to Executive Committee for formal adoption.

Appendices:

Appendix A – Private Sector Housing Renewal Policy (draft)

Background papers and their location: (open to public inspection)

Central Bedfordshire Council Private Sector Housing Renewal Policy (current). Available from Watling House or Council website