
Meeting: Social Care Health and Housing Overview and Scrutiny Committee
Date: 18 June 2012
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 presented to Executive for adoption.

Advising Officer: Julie Ogley, 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 most closely aligns with the Council's Priority; Supporting and Caring for an aging population, but could also contribute towards Creating safer communities and Managing Growth effectively.

Financial:

2. The revised Renewal Policy will help enable the Council to recover funding provided by the Capital Programme and so contribute towards efficiencies. The policy is clear that the provision of discretionary grants and loans will be subject to the Council having sufficient resources. The Capital Programme for 2012/13 is net £150,000, which is included in the approved detailed Business Case.
3. The draft policy includes provision to utilise an additional £190,000 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. This will enable a greater number of residents to be assisted.

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 staff expertise and resource within the 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. However, a revised Equalities Impact Assessment will be completed, to ensure that the revised policy does not adversely prejudice any particular groups and is promoted to hard to reach vulnerable groups.
9. Advice was received concerning the level of assistance to eligible Park Home residents within the Policy. Most Park Home residents are generally older people. Reducing the existing level of assistance was viewed as potentially disproportionately detrimental to older people. Consequently, the level of assistance remains consistent with the existing policy.
10. The proposal to provide Loan Assistance for certain major adaptation cases provides an additional safeguard for some disabled homeowners who cannot obtain the required adaptation under the mandatory Disabled Facilities Grant.

Public Health

11. The draft Policy includes proposals to tackle housing conditions that directly impact upon the health of residents. In particular, tackling fuel poverty and remedying potentially dangerous hazards are priorities within the policy.

Community Safety:

12. The Council has a statutory duty under Section 17 of the Crime and Disorder Act to do all that it reasonably can to reduce crime and disorder in its area. The recommendation for assistance to help bring empty properties back into use will have a positive impact on communities where empty homes blight the neighbourhood, and the Safety Security grant could improve security of some of the most vulnerable households.

Sustainability:

13. The recommended types of assistance will help 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:

14. 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. Support the change in policy approach in providing Loan Assistance rather than grant assistance in most cases.**
- 2. Agree that the attached draft revised Renewal Policy at appendix B is presented to Executive for approval, subject to any final amendments and having regard to the consultation outcome.**

Introduction

15. 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.
16. 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.
17. The existing Renewal Policy has not been extensively tested since it was adopted but financial pressures and the ambition to assist more residents require that the Policy is reviewed and a change to the Policy considered during 2012/13.

Proposed Renewal Policy

18. 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.
19. 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, which in turn enables further improvement work to be undertaken. In 2011/12, the Council recovered approximately £17,000. This will increase in future years with adoption of the new Policy. There was no disagreement to this approach within responses to the consultation on the draft, revised Policy.
20. It is proposed that the types of assistance remain largely unchanged other than being provided as loan assistance, rather than grants, in virtually all cases. The exceptions are Safety Security and Emergency Repair grants (£500 maximum) for the most urgent, quick response cases, Home Improvement Grants of up to £2,500 for Park Homes and Houseboats, and potentially Relocation assistance, to help the vulnerable households move to more suitable property (where the existing property cannot be adapted to meet needs/reduce overcrowding).

21. Land registry charges cannot be made against Park Homes, preventing a form of security for loan assistance which means that the Council should consider continuing to provide Grants in these circumstances. It is the case that Park Homes are generally occupied by older people and removing or reducing any type of assistance to Park Home residents would create an inequality, detrimental to older people.
22. Safety, Security and Emergency Repair Grants have been particularly useful to remedy urgent situations quickly. Since the current policy was approved in April 2010, the Council has completed approximately 40 of these grants, mainly for urgent repairs to electrical and gas installations.

Fuel Poverty external funding opportunities

23. The draft policy includes provision to utilise up to £190,000 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 is secured for 2012/13.
24. 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 2013. The proposal is to offer loan assistance to households with someone aged 65 years or more with less than £20,000 in savings.

Disabled Facilities grant

25. The Council provides capital resources to meet the need for major adaptations for people with disabilities. Legislation enables the Council to impose repayment conditions to Disabled Facilities Grants (DFG) recipients of more than £5,000. There are some exemptions but the Council may be able to recover a level of DFG funding. It is proposed to include this option in the draft Renewal Policy but to keep this under review.
26. The draft Policy includes the provision of discretionary loan assistance for Disabled Facilities Grants “tops ups” in certain circumstances. This proposal is consistent with most authorities who responded in the July 2011 benchmarking survey. Specifically, for owner occupiers in financial hardship who are not able to progress a DFG due to having an assessed contribution, the Council will offer discretionary Loan Assistance to “top up” the DFG and enable works to commence.

Consultation of draft policy

27. The draft, revised Renewal Policy was subject to a 14 week public consultation. In comparison to the consultation of the current Renewal policy in 2009/10, the response this time was relatively small, even after a reminder was sent to Parish Councils and an extension of the time given to respond. However, the responses were generally supportive of the proposals including the move towards provision of loan assistance in most cases. Appendix A is the consultation response.

28. This consultation did provide some alternative views on the ordering of priorities. It was suggested that Priority C – (Reduction of category 1 hazards) should replace Priority B – (Reducing cases of fuel poverty). It is recommended, however, that the priority order remains due to the fact that virtually all cases of fuel poverty will also present a category 1 hazard for Excess Cold, which has shown to be the most common hazard within the housing stock.

Recommendation

29. Subject to any further amendments required by Overview and Scrutiny Committee, it is recommended that the revised Renewal Policy is presented to Executive for approval.

Appendices:

Appendix A – Renewal Policy consultation summary

Appendix B – Private Sector Housing Renewal Policy (draft v6)

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