

Report to Housing Scrutiny Standing Panel

Date of meeting: 30 January 2007

Subject: Private Sector Housing Strategy – Housing Assistance Policy 2006

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Committee Secretary: Adrian Hendry (ext 4246)



Recommendation:

That the Panel recommend to Cabinet the attached draft Housing Assistance Policy be adopted as part of the Private Sector Housing Strategy.

Background:

1. The Panel agreed on 27 July 2006 to recommend to Cabinet that the draft Private Sector Housing Strategy be adopted as Council policy, subject to the submission of Appendix A (Housing Assistance Policy). The Strategy was presented to Cabinet on 18 December 2006.
2. The Panel also agreed to receive a further report that set out a detailed Housing Assistance Policy, which regulates the manner in which financial assistance is given to private sector households.

Report:

3. The Housing Assistance Policy forms Appendix A of the Private Sector Housing Strategy. It sets out the basis on which Epping Forest District Council will offer financial assistance for works of repair, renewal or adaptation in the private housing sector. It is a detailed statement of what financial assistance will be available and the conditions that will apply.
4. The Policy could only be submitted once approval had been received with regard to the proposed changes and initiatives as set out the Strategy.
5. Housing Assistance may be offered in accordance with the Policy towards the cost of:
 - (i) The improvement, repair or adaptation of existing living accommodation including mobile homes and houseboats;
 - (ii) The creation of new living accommodation by the conversion of existing buildings (including existing dwellings and commercial premises);
 - (iii) Any other initiatives that are consistent with the aims and objectives of the Council's Private Sector Housing Strategy.
6. The Policy specifies the conditions for eligibility and the amounts for the following types of discretionary grants:
 - Small Works Assistance;
 - Decent Homes Assistance;
 - Thermal Comfort Grants;
 - Empty Homes Grants;
 - Conversion Grants; and

- Discretionary Disabled Facilities Grants/Relocation Grants.

7. It also contains information on mandatory Disabled Facilities Grants but does not specify the rules for processing them or the conditions attached as these are laid down in the Housing Grants Construction and Regeneration Act 1996 (as amended).

8. The Policy sets out:

- How an application should be made and the rights of appeal;
- The restrictions on assistance;
- The responsibilities with regard to the supervision of works; and
- How payments will be made and caveats attached with regard to the repayment of any assistance.

9. Of importance to note for Small Works Assistance and Decent Homes Assistance is the proposal to extend the eligibility criteria to now include other vulnerable households such as the chronically sick and disabled and families with dependent children as well as just those over 60 years old. Applicants can be on low income (there will be test of resources) as well as just those in receipt of benefit.

10. A notable proposal with regard to Decent Homes Assistance is that the time period for a Certificate of Owner Occupation is 20 years. This means that any disposal of the dwelling within that time will trigger repayment of the grant. In practice, this is likely to mean that a significant proportion of grants made will be 'recycled' back into the capital fund.

11. Empty Property Grants are being introduced as part of the overall Empty Property Strategy and Conversion Grants are being introduced to encourage the owners of properties with redundant space (for example over shop premises) to convert the space to housing accommodation. Landlords will have to give a Certificate of Availability for Letting for 5 years. The Council can apply nomination rights if appropriate.

12. The Policy will be subject to annual review to take into account changing policies at national and regional level and all available information on the condition of private sector housing in the District.

Options considered and rejected: None but members may wish to adopt the proposed Policy as drafted or may wish to remove, add, alter or amend its provisions.

Consultation undertaken: Legal and Financial Services.

Resource implications: None as this Policy is an appendix to the Private Sector Housing Strategy.

Budget provision: None as this Policy is an appendix to the Private Sector Housing Strategy.

Personnel: None

Land: None

Community Plan/BVPP reference: BVPI 64

Relevant statutory powers: Housing Acts, Regulatory Reform Order 2002.

Background papers: House Condition Survey, Vacant Property Survey, Private Sector Housing Strategy.

Environmental/Human Rights Act/Crime and Disorder Act Implications: N/A

Key Decision reference: (if required):