

Report to the Cabinet

Report reference: C/121/2007.

Date of meeting: 12 March 2007.



**Epping Forest
District Council**

Portfolio: Housing.

Subject: Private Sector Housing Strategy – Housing Assistance Policy 2007.

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Democratic Services Officer: Gary Woodhall (01992 – 564470).

Recommendations:

- (1) That the Housing Assistance Policy be adopted as part of the Private Sector Housing Strategy; and**
- (2) That a progress report be submitted to the Housing Scrutiny Standing Panel 12 months from the date of implementation of the Policy or a lesser period if significant amendments to the Policy are considered necessary.**

Background:

1. The Private Sector Housing and the Empty Property Strategies were adopted by Cabinet on 18 December 2006 but their full implementation was delayed pending:

- (a) a review of available resources; and
- (b) the views of the Housing Scrutiny Panel on the detailed Housing Assistance Policy.

2. The draft Housing Assistance Policy, which regulates the manner in which financial assistance is given to private sector households, was presented to the Housing Scrutiny Standing Panel on 30 January 2007. The Panel recommended that the Policy be adopted. Copies of the draft policy have been distributed to all members of the Cabinet. Further copies of the policy can be obtained from either of the contacts listed above.

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. It is proposed that Housing Assistance be offered in accordance with the Policy towards the cost of:

- (a) the improvement, repair or adaptation of existing living accommodation including mobile homes and houseboats;
- (b) the creation of new living accommodation by the conversion of existing buildings (including existing dwellings and commercial premises); and
- (c) any other initiatives that are consistent with the aims and objectives of the Council's Private Sector Housing Strategy.

5. 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.
6. 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).
7. 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.
8. Of importance to note for Small Works Assistance and Decent Homes Assistance is the proposal to extend the eligibility criteria, as defined in the Decent Homes guidance, to 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.
9. A notable proposal with regard to Decent Homes Assistance is that the time period for a Certificate of Owner Occupation is 10 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.
10. 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.
11. Subject to approval the Policy will commence on 1 April 2007. The Private Sector Housing Policy Officer will monitor the demand, uptake and success of the new forms of Financial Assistance on a 3 monthly basis. A report will be presented to the Housing Scrutiny Panel in April 2008 with regard to the results of the monitoring exercise. If during this period it becomes apparent that either the criteria and/or other conditions need to be revised in order to ensure that there is sufficient uptake of the different forms of assistance to meet the objectives of the Private Sector Housing Strategy, then a report will be presented to the Housing Scrutiny Standing Panel before April 2008.
12. The Policy will be subject to an 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.

Statement in Support of Recommended Action:

13. The Housing Assistance Policy forms Appendix A of the Private Sector Housing Strategy. The new forms of Financial Assistance and hence the Private Sector Housing Strategy cannot be implemented without the adoption of Policy as it regulates the manner in which financial assistance is given to private sector households. The effectiveness of the Policy will be monitored and a report will be presented to the Housing Scrutiny Standing

Panel in April 2008 or before that time if significant amendments to the Policy are considered necessary.

Other Options for Action:

14. Members may wish to adopt the proposed Policy as drafted or may wish to remove, add, alter or amend its provisions.

Consultation undertaken:

15. The Housing Scrutiny Standing Panel recommended a review of the scheme after 12 months or earlier as necessary. The Portfolio Holder for Housing agreed to include this recommendation in the report.

Resource implications:

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): Will advise when key decisions have ref nos.