

Private Sector Housing Renewal Strategy Empty Property Strategy 2007-2009



Implementation and Action Plans

Background

Cabinet report - 18 December 2006

Recommended

That the Private Sector Housing and the Empty Property Strategies be adopted but their **full implementation be delayed**: until

- The views of the Housing Scrutiny Panel on the detailed Housing Assistance Policy be sought; and
- Pending a review of available resources.

The Housing Assistance Policy is a detailed statement of what financial assistance will be available and the conditions that will apply and forms Appendix A of the Private Sector Housing Strategy.

The Housing Assistance Policy was presented to the HSSP on 30/1/07.

Background

Cabinet report - 12 March 2007

Recommended

- That the Housing Assistance Policy be adopted as part of the Private Sector Housing Strategy; and that a progress report be presented 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.

Both strategies contain an action plan – copies of which you should have in front of you.



Private Sector Housing Renewal Strategy

Objective	Work to be done	Target Date
1. Adequate levels of appropriately trained staff	Recruitment and training to be carried out. All staff to be competent in new Housing Act 2004 procedures	July 2007 Training in HA 2004 to be on going

Achieved:

- New EHO recruited March 2007 to deal with mandatory HMO licensing (subject of previous growth bid);
- All existing staff trained with regard to the Decent Home Standard and the new Housing Hazard Safety Rating System – training on going;
- 2 members of staff left – new officers now in post.

Not Achieved:

- The recruitment of a Private Sector Housing Officer (growth bid secured in order to implement only the *key components* of the strategy and secure the use of the specific funding from Go-East in respect of attaining the Decent Homes Standard and moving forward with dealing with empty homes) - advert out this week.

Objective	Work to be done	Target Date
2. Review of licensing system for high risk Houses in Multiple Occupation (HMOs)	<p>Licensing system in place</p> <p>Review after 3 - 6 months to ensure effective operation, and thereafter annually</p> <p>Advertise again after 6 months to ensure that all potential licensable properties are covered</p>	<p>June 2007</p> <p>September 2007</p> <p>December 2007</p>

Achieved:

- Licensing system is in place;
- Forms have been sent to all 'known' licensable HMOs;
- Inspections have commenced on other HMOs - identified either through complaints or as part of the HMO licensing regime.

Not Achieved:

- Unable to review licensing system as target suggests due to insufficient timescale and poor responses;
- Have not advertised licensing requirement to date – this is in hand - aiming to advertise before the end of 2007.

Comments:

- Application forms are not being returned;
- Approx 1/3 of landlords have informed the Council that they will change the use of the property so that it falls outside the mandatory licensing requirements;
- Many properties we believed to be licensable are not – but are still considered to be high risk HMOs – legislation requires comprehensive inspections to be carried out, this is a very time consuming exercise.

Objective	Work to be done	Target Date
3. A new systematic approach to inspection and enforcement in the private sector	Introduce proactive inspections in addition to reactive inspections, focusing first on high risk HMOs and Park Home sites. Introduce procedures to ensure rigorous response to complaints on private sector housing issues.	April 2007

What we have done

- Inspections of high risk HMOs – implemented in part but currently facing resource issue due to sheer amount of work required at the initial stage and complex nature of new inspection regime;
- Inspections of Park Home sites - implemented in part – new model licensing standard still awaited from Government;
- Officers working with Essex Fire and Rescue Service on free Home Fire Safety Check Scheme (Park Home sites only);
- Officers working with the HSE and other Essex LAs to set up Caravan Working Party with regard to Health & Safety on these sites;

- No written procedures per se but all complaints are being processed under the requirements of the Housing Act 2004 e.g. inspection and enforcement under the new Housing Health and Safety Rating System

Objective	Work to be done	Target Date
4. Introduce Landlords Forum	Contact known landlords and representatives, advertise intention to set up Landlords Forum, hold initial meeting to agree aims & objectives and constitution.	April 2007

Not Achieved:

- Landlords Forum - had planned to hold initial meeting in September but this will slip into 2008 – most probably post April 2008 when the restructuring finalised.

What we have done to engaged with the private rented sector:

- Sent out questionnaires to all Letting Agents and formulated a list of Estate Agents and Letting Agents;
- In conjunction with Housing Services met with Letting Agents re RDGS and informed forum of the requirements of Housing Act 2004/HHSRS;
- Attended an E15 Acting School open day - produced a comprehensive document for students, their parents and landlords entitled 'What to expect from your landlord'.

Objective	Work to be done	Target Date
5. An accreditation system in partnership with local landlords linked with Deposit Guarantee Scheme	Formalise links with Epping Forest Housing Aid. Discuss with representatives of local landlords and voluntary agencies agreed standards of accommodation and management. Establish procedures for self assessment/ inspection. Publish advice to landlords and prospective tenants. Link with Deposit Guarantee Scheme.	Consult & develop scheme July 2007, implement September 2007

- Not completed all the work

but

- Working procedure established with Epping Forest Housing Aid - joint visit to ensure property meets the Decent Homes Standard before occupation. If not then EHO recommends works/amenities required in order to meet the standard.

Objective	Work to be done	Target Date
6. Adopt Empty Homes Strategy	Format for Strategy has already been approved. Formal Strategy to be approved and all measures implemented	Adoption - December 2006 Majority of measures implemented - March 2007

Achieved:

- **Sally to follow with our progress to date and update you with regard to the PLACE Scheme.**



Empty Property Strategy

1. Nominate a lead officer for Empty Homes

- Achieved – but officer taken off other private sector duties

2. Information to be posted on the Council website and published in the Forester magazine

- Website
- Forester magazine
- Other publicity : National Week of Action
- Council Tax leaflet

3a. Relevant non Environmental Health staff to report empty homes

- All Council staff have been e-mailed to advise on the issue of empties and procedure for reporting
- Propose annual reminder
- All council staff are informed of issues as they arise e.g.. National Week of Action

3b. Finders Fee Scheme

- £5000 in this years budget to fund a Finders Fee Scheme
- An owner receives a non-refundable premium of £1000 for letting his property to a family nominated by the Homeless Prevention team
- **To Qualify:**
 - 6 months empty
 - Preferable 2 and 3 bed properties
 - Offer AST for 12 months minimum
 - Property to be in safe and lettable condition
- **The situation to date**
 - Almost ready
 - Information literature drafted
 - Notification about the scheme will be in the next Forester

4. Go-East funded initiative to renovate sub standard empty homes

- PLACE – Private Leasing Agreements Converting Empties
- £700,000 – target to bring 20 long term empty properties in EFDC back into use
- It is a private sector leasing scheme offering high level grant to funding
- Situation to date
- Contracts have been signed by all partners
- Information leaflets with printing
- Notification in the next edition of the Forester
- Some interested owners

5. Council tax reduction to 50% after 6 months empty; no reduction after 12 months

- **Implemented April 2007**

6. Empty Homes Grant

- Property has been empty at least 1 year
- A significant hazard exists
- All works are carried out to bring the property to the Decent Homes Standard
- Maximum grant of £10,000 to owner occupiers
- 50% of the cost of works up to a maximum of £10,000 for landlords
- Conditions-owners to occupy for 10 years
 - landlords to let for 5 years
- **Situation to date**
 - Procedures set up and ready to go
 - Publicised by leaflet
 - Notified in the Forester

7. Increased enforcement options

- **Compulsory purchase orders (CPO)**
- 8/8a Sun Street, Waltham Abbey

- **Empty Dwelling Management Orders (EDMO)**

- **Situation to date**
- First CPO has been made, no objections and await confirmation by GO-East
- Issue of EDMO's remains outstanding

So where are we at?

- We have visited nearly 400 properties from the council tax empty property list
- We have reported back to council tax those found not to be empty
- We have written to the owners of all empty properties
- We are giving information and advice and are starting to promote the schemes and incentives

Some data

	Total empty	>12months empty	<12 months empty
October 2006	483		
March 2007	431	303	128
October 2007	375	218	157

And to do next....

- Set up a partnership with a Residential Social Landlord to manage EDMO's
- **Prioritise for action- depending on:**
 1. Length of time empty
 2. Whether subject of complaint
 3. Condition and effect on the community
 4. Suitability to meet a housing need
 5. Suitability for PLACE
- 6. **Develop website and council tax leaflet**



Private Sector Housing Renewal Strategy

2003 POLICY

Renovation Grants

Large means tested grants for older people to address multiple defects in properties that fall below the statutory standard for housing conditions.

Home Repairs Assistance

Small grants for older people on low incomes to address single defects and provide thermal insulation.

Discretionary Disabled Facilities Grants (DFGs)

Means tested grants for registered disabled home-owners to top-up mandatory DFGs.

Mandatory Disabled Facilities Grants (DFGs)

Means tested grants for registered disabled home-owners to provide essential facilities or access to essential facilities.

2003 POLICY

- ∅ Renovation Grants
- ∅ Home Repairs Assistance
- ∅ Discretionary Disabled Facilities Grants (DFGs)

Mandatory Disabled Facilities Grants (DFGs)

2007 POLICY

- ∅ Decent Homes Assistance
- ∅ Small Works Assistance
- ∅ Thermal Comfort Grants
- ∅ Discretionary DFGs
- ∅ Relocation Grants
- ∅ Empty Homes Grants
- ∅ Conversion Grants

Mandatory Disabled Facilities Grants (DFGs)

2007 POLICY

∅ Decent Homes Assistance

Large **repayable** grants for **vulnerable people** to address multiple defects in properties that fall below the **statutory standard** for housing conditions.

∅ Small Works Assistance

Small grants for **vulnerable people** to address single defects.

∅ Thermal Comfort Grants

Small grants to improve the thermal comfort of homes for vulnerable people **and landlords**.

∅ Discretionary DFGs

Means tested grants for registered disabled homeowners to top-up mandatory DFGs.

∅ Relocation Grants

Means tested grants for registered disabled homeowners to pay for relocation costs.

∅ Empty Homes Grants

Grants to bring empty residential properties back into use.

∅ Conversion Grants

Grants to convert redundant space in existing buildings into rented accommodation.

Mandatory Disabled Facilities Grants (DFGs)

Mandatory Disabled Facilities Grants (DFGs)

2007 POLICY

Ø Decent Homes Assistance

Limited interest but uptake has been slow.

Ø Small Works Assistance

Good uptake.

Ø Thermal Comfort Grants

Good uptake. Difficulties sometimes experienced where grants are given to top-up Warm Front Scheme.

Ø Discretionary DFGs

No change.

Ø Relocation Grants

One application being processed.

Ø Empty Homes Grants

Enquiries and some interest.

Ø Conversion Grants

No enquiries to date.

Mandatory Disabled Facilities Grants (DFGs)

Mandatory Disabled Facilities Grants (DFGs)

ISSUES

- ∅ Increased emphasis on enforcing standards on owner-occupiers.
- ∅ The Decent Homes Standard.
- ∅ The PSA 7 target.
- ∅ Encouraging people to release equity.

TOOLS

Encouragement

Monitor and **R**evue

Time

Publicity



A Simple Guide to the HHSRS (Housing Health and Safety Rating System)

The HHSRS is a system of assessing the condition of dwellings. Its principle is that a dwelling, including its structure, means of access, any associated outbuildings and garden, should provide a safe and healthy environment for the occupants and any visitors.

To satisfy this principle a dwelling should be free from unnecessary and avoidable **hazards**. Based on statistics collected nationally on the causes of accidents within the home and their outcomes, the HHSRS gives a **rating** to any hazards. If an accident is very likely to occur and the outcome is likely to be extreme or severe (e.g. death or a major or fatal injury) then its rating will be high and it may be considered to be a **category 1 hazard**. If this is the case the Council has a duty to take action. Further details are included in the question and answer section at the end of this leaflet.

Of course there are some hazards which can't be eliminated, steep staircases for example, but any risk of suffering harm by falling could be reduced by the correct positioning of banisters and handrails.

Twenty nine hazards are identified in the HHSRS and the risk of harm from some is relatively minimal. However, there are some which because of the frequency with which they occur and the severity of the potential outcome, are of major significance and could be considered to be 'Key Hazards'. These are summarised over the page:

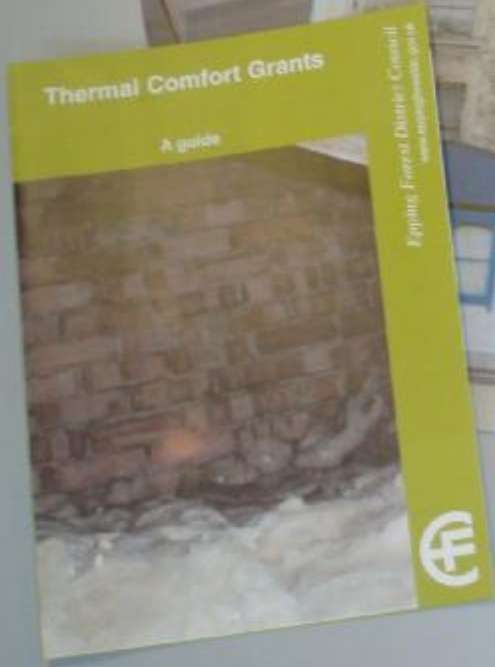


A Simple Guide to the Decent Homes Standard

A Decent Home is one which is wind and weather tight, warm and has modern facilities.

The government has set targets to reduce the numbers of vulnerable families living in non-Decent Homes. Vulnerable families are considered to be those who are in receipt of at least one of the main means tested or disability related benefits.

There are four parts to the Decent Homes Standard which are described in the over the page. A property must meet **all four of them** to be considered 'Decent'.



In summary

- Too early in the process to say if amendments to the Housing Assistance Policy are considered necessary;
- New grants regime and inspection and enforcement requirements of the Housing Act 2004 have had significant impact on the way in which we work and on available resources;
- Due to various delays we have only just advertised for the new grants officer - this has slowed the grants process down, other staff resources have been used to try and plug the gap and we have been unable to fully 'sell' our new regime;
- HMO licensing very slow;
- Private Sector Housing Strategies and supporting documents need to be finalised, amalgamated and placed on the council's website;
- Procedures need to be formalised;
- Need to improve our systems for monitoring compliance with the Decent Homes Standard;
- Greater engagement in the private sector required.

In summary

- P.L.A.C.E. contract now signed up by all parties with EFDC playing a significant part in the process
- Up to date database on Empty Properties and vast improvement on meeting our BVPI;
- Greater understanding of our Empty Properties and associated problems;
- Most objectives met on the Empty Property Strategy and good progress with others;
- New grant regime has been introduced;
- Leaflets and procedures available for all the new types of grants;
- The new range of grants (despite the potential need for some amendments in the future) are meeting the needs of our residents;
- Inspections are being carried out on Park Homes, Officers are working with the Fire Authority on Free Home Safety checks, and with the HSE/LAs re Caravan Working Party;
- All inspections being carried out under the new more complex HHSRS;
- Our HMOs are being brought up to standard – guidance produced for tenants of HMOs;

In Summary

*Reminder – That the Private Sector Housing and the Empty Property Strategies be adopted but their **full implementation be delayed** pending a review of available resources.*

The implementation of the new grants regime, the PLACE initiative and other work on empty properties, the introduction of the requirements of the Housing Act 2004, including the mandatory licensing of HMOs and the new system of inspection and enforcement has been exciting and challenging but, as predicted, is currently stretching existing staff resources. There is still a lot of work to be done and other private sector housing issues to be addressed.

My thanks to both Lyndsay and Sally who have worked exceptionally hard in implementing the Strategies and the necessary changes to the way in which we work in order to meet the new provisions of the Housing Act 2004.

A review of the work carried out to date, other outstanding private sector housing matters and available resources is required.

The team looks forward to working with Alan and other officers of Housing Services next year with a view to continuing the good work that has been achieved so far and to improve our private sector housing functions.



Empty Properties: