

# Forest Heath District Council

(This report is a key decision. This report has been subject to appropriate notice of publication under the Council's Access to Information Rules)

## Report of the Portfolio Holder for Housing, Planning & Transport

**CABINET**

**3 JULY 2012**

**CAB12/011**

### **HOUSING ASSISTANCE POLICY** (Forward Plan Reference: JUL12 (A)/04)

#### **Summary and reasons for recommendation(s)**

Forest Heath and St Edmundsbury have similar priorities in terms of their overall approach to housing. Both councils seek to ensure safe and suitable accommodation for residents, supporting economic activity whilst ensuring vulnerable households are protected.

We wish to improve housing in the private sector where some of the worst and most unsuitable conditions can be found, and to deal with some of the serious housing challenges highlighted in our strategies. The aim is to support some of these improvements by offering discretionary financial assistance for those in most need

Both Councils have previously offered similar types of financial assistance and grant around meeting these objectives; therefore the revised policy seeks to combine these into one document. With shared services imminent and the policies requiring review, developing a common policy and approach to providing housing assistance in the private sector is seen as a sensible way forward.

#### **Recommendation**

**Members are requested to:**

- 1. Endorse the policy and recommend it to Council for implementation from 1 October 2012; and**
- 2. Recommend to Council that the Head of Service, in consultation with the Portfolio Holder for Planning, Housing and Transport, be authorised to make any minor typographic, factual, spelling and grammatical changes to the document provided they do not materially affect the substance or meaning of the Strategy.**

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[keith.marley@forest-heath.gov.uk](mailto:keith.marley@forest-heath.gov.uk)**How will the recommendations help us meet our strategic priorities?**

1. The Council has prioritised housing, with an aim to ensure that homes are available to local people. To achieve this, it recognises that there will be a need to improve the district housing stock, and the implementation of this policy will contribute to meeting this objective.
2. The grants and financial assistance being offered will enable poor and unsuitable housing to be improved to a decent standard, providing more safe and suitable homes and raising the standard of the private sector.
3. Some of the assistance will ensure that properties meet energy efficiency and performance requirements, which is in line with environmental policy and strategic housing objectives.
4. Bringing empty homes back into use is a key objective under the housing priority and a number of actions have been identified, including financial assistance to encourage owners to make their properties available. Owners will be eligible for a grant towards necessary works on the condition that the property is rented out on completion of works.
5. We have set a priority to support elderly and vulnerable people. The adaptation and improvements through this policy will improve the quality of life for these residents, enabling them to live independently in their homes.
6. The Council is essentially making an investment in the private sector by providing this financial assistance, with some of the funding repayable depending on the specific grant conditions and criteria. The overall condition of the stock will be improved year on year, which has a positive community, health and economic benefit in the longer term.

**Wards affected**

7. There are specific wards that have been highlighted as having greater need and poorer housing, which links directly to lower income and poorer health outcomes. At the present time it is not envisaged that the policy will be directly targeted at these wards, mainly because the uptake of the assistance being offered is unlikely to be in excess of the resource available to deliver it. We will, however, consider how best to promote the assistance on offer and monitor the situation in this regard.

## **Key issues**

8. Whist the previous policies of both Councils' were similar, some changes have been made to account for any differences, and to offer additional assistance to meet strategic priorities. We have also taken the opportunity to consider the previous wording, format and evidence to support the grant schemes, and our overall approach to housing assistance.
9. The main changes in brief are:
  - A new empty home grant; a 'repair and let' scheme to bring homes back into use.
  - A new thermal comfort grant; replaces previous Housing Assistance Grant (HAG), & other 'green' schemes, providing energy efficiency measures to the home.
  - A new healthy home grant; replaces HAG, and covers smaller works, equipment, safety measures etc.
  - A new discretionary disabled facilities grant (DFG); provides a £5,000 'top up' to the maximum mandatory DFG, the potential for 'non-essential' needs to still be met and help for relocation as an alternative to an adaptation in the home.
10. Both councils are in a Suffolk-wide Home Improvement Agency (HIA) partnership, with the contract being co-ordinated by Suffolk County Council's Supporting People. The current provider, Orbit Care & Repair, will oversee much of this grant work, and specialises in bridging the gap between the applicant and the Grant Authority. This helps the Council with the necessary resource to deliver the assistance being offered, and provides expert services for vulnerable residents.

## **Other options considered**

11. There are no other viable options.
12. It would be inappropriate, given the importance placed on improving existing housing, helping vulnerable people and the serious shortage of good quality housing, to reduce or dispense with the current schemes in the policy. Nor would it be sensible to continue with two separate policies, with a single staffing structure imminent. Combining the policies into a single document, with the potential to deliver even greater assistance when it is most needed, is considered an appropriate way forward.

## **Community impact**

13. The impact on the community would be positive. The policy is targeted at those residents in most need, without sufficient funds to improve their housing or make it suitable to live in. There will be investment in the private sector, which is less likely if left to market forces, and the housing will therefore be more sustainable and of better quality. The policy will be accessible, particularly through the use of the HIA because of the specialist services it provides.

## **What consultation has been undertaken and what were the outcomes?**

14. The existing policy went through a comprehensive consultation process, and was partly based around the information gathered from this. It is not envisaged that further consultation will be necessary at this stage, particularly as the changes are relatively minor and are in line with the key strategic housing priorities. These themes have already been consulted on through the Council's Strategic Plan.

## **Financial and resource implications**

15. These grant payments will be funded from the Council's Capital Programme. Currently the Capital Programme includes an approved budget of £200,000 per annum for Disabled Facility Grants, £220,000 per annum for Private Sector Renewal Grants and £50k per annum for the Empty Homes Grants, a budget funded as part of the Council's new Strategic Plan.
16. The Council receives an allocation from the Government to assist with mandatory DFG payment; however the Government has removed previous funding to support decent homes. Both of these elements are reflected in the budget provision outlined above and is considered sufficient to meet current demand.
17. As the funding for this policy is through the Council's capital programme all expenditure/grant payments must comply with the relevant accounting code of practice and capital financing regulations.
18. In addition to the capital budget there is a revenue budget of £17,000 to fund the annual contribution to the Home Improvement Agency (HIA). It should also be noted that not only is the HIA resource required to deliver grant work, but also adequate support and administration within the relevant service.

## **Risk management implications**

19. The risks are minimal if the policy is implemented properly. The Council, under its statutory housing duty, is expected to pro-actively find ways of improving private sector housing in its district. Whilst there may be financial, legal and reputational risks if grant application processes do not comply with legal and policy guidelines, there is also a risk if there is no such policy, and the Council simply responds to poor housing complaints in the private rented sector.

## **Legal/Policy implications**

20. The Regulatory Reform (Housing Assistance) Order 2002 gives local authorities the discretionary powers to provide support and financial assistance to homeowners to deal with poor quality housing, supporting their strategic housing renewal principles and objectives. The Council provides mandatory DFG for adaptations to properties under the Housing Grants, Construction & Regeneration Act 1996. The Housing Assistance Policy provides the framework to implement the various grant schemes.

## **Documents attached**

21. Appendix A: Housing Assistance Policy & Application Guidance 2012

## **Background papers**

22. Nil