

Report of	Meeting	Date
Director of Partnerships, Planning and Policy (Introduced by the Executive Member for Business)	Executive Cabinet	25 th March 2010

PRIVATE SECTOR HOUSING ASSISTANCE POLICY 2010-2012

PURPOSE OF REPORT

1. To report back on the progress of the private sector housing assistance policy consultation process as agreed at Executive Cabinet on the 3rd December 2009 and to request delegated approval of the policy following the end of the extended consultation period.

RECOMMENDATION(S)

2. To approve in principle the private sector housing assistance policy which has been updated to reflect the consultation response received to date.
3. That the Executive Member for Business be granted delegated authority to approve the final version of the private sector housing assistance policy, including any minor amendments required at the conclusion of the consultation period on the 13th April 2010.

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY OF REPORT

4. Following the in principle approval of the private sector housing assistance policy by Executive Cabinet in December 2009 this report presents the revised policy and summarises the changes made to the policy based on the consultation received to date.
5. These main changes include:
 - a) improvements to the Disabled Facilities Grant (DFG) service standards;
 - b) changes to the Minor Repairs Grant to maximise and reinvest in the budget while still offering the same standard of service;
 - c) introduction of an optional support service in the commissioning of MRA works; and
 - d) improved clarity on the eligibility and conditions of the Energy Efficiency Assistance grant in order to ensure we target our resources to help vulnerable and low income households.

REASONS FOR RECOMMENDATION(S)

(If the recommendations are accepted)

6. The proposed policy is designed to offer a mechanism to provide housing assistance to customers in private housing, in a way that maximises the effective use of resources in targeting customers in most need.
7. The policy integrates the various strands of housing assistance and enables the Council to provide a more coherent approach to improving housing conditions in the borough.

8. The updated policy presented here for consideration reflects the consultation feedback received to date.
9. Following an extension of the consultation period requested by the Equality Forum, delegated responsibility is now requested to approve any further changes to the policy which are considered appropriate between now and the end of the consultation period on the 13th April 2010. This will enable the policy to be in effect by the end of April as planned.

ALTERNATIVE OPTIONS CONSIDERED AND REJECTED

10. None.

CORPORATE PRIORITIES

11. This report relates to the following Strategic Objectives:

Put Chorley at the heart of regional economic development in the Central Lancashire sub-region		Develop local solutions to climate change.	✓
Improving equality of opportunity and life chances	✓	Develop the Character and feel of Chorley as a good place to live	✓
Involving people in their communities		Ensure Chorley Borough Council is a performing organization	✓

BACKGROUND

12. The Regulatory Reform (Housing Assistance) Order 2002 gave Local Authorities in England and Wales new powers to improve living conditions in their area. This power enables an authority to provide any assistance to provide assistance to any person for:
 - a) the acquisition of alternative living accommodation, where the council wish to purchase a person's home as an alternative to adapting improving or repairing it.
 - b) The adaptation or improvement of living accommodation (including by alteration, conversion or enlargement).
 - c) The repair of living accommodation;
 - d) The demolition of buildings comprising or including living accommodation.
 - e) The construction of replacement living accommodation to replace that which has been demolished.
13. Reflecting this legislation, the Council introduced an interim Housing Renewal Grant Policy in July 2003. This policy was subject to a review and amendment in April 2004 and a draft Housing Renewal Grant Policy was produced in early 2006, prior to the commencement of the outsourcing of the delivery of the Council's housing grants to Anchor Staying Put South Lancashire in 2006.
14. The updated Private Sector Housing Assistance Policy reflects the updated legislation and government thinking as set out in 'Delivering Housing Adaptations for Disabled People: A Good Practice Guide' (CLG, 2006) and 'Lifetime Homes, Lifetime Neighbourhoods: A National Strategy for Housing in an ageing society' (CLG, 2008).
15. Therefore it is now timely, in light of updated legislation and best practice, to revise the policy to ensure it meets the needs of the community as well as providing an efficient and effective mechanism to target resources on the most vulnerable households.

16. Whilst it is acknowledged that the prime responsibility for maintaining and improving private sector housing rests with home owners, the Council is committed to improving housing quality across all tenures. It is recognised that there are vulnerable home owners who cannot afford to repair or improve their homes and who may not be able to obtain loans from commercial lenders. This policy provides an opportunity for the Council to clearly set out its position for the next two years in an approach that maximises the effectiveness of its use of resources.
17. The provision of advice and information to everyone will be the bedrock of the new in house Home Improvement Agency and this policy reflects this. The reduction in capital finance has reduced the level of grant assistance the Council can offer, but information can still be provided to homeowners about repair and maintenance of their home.
18. The issue of effective use of resources is an important consideration not least in a challenging financial climate but also because of the way the Audit Commission assesses the effectiveness of the Strategic Housing Function.
19. The Audit Commission have indicated that, through Comprehensive Area Assessment (CAA) and inspection of private sector housing functions, they will assess:
 - a) How effectively the Council have targeted resources at people living in the worst housing conditions
 - b) How effective the Council is in providing Value for Money. In this context it will judge the Council's ability to level in additional resources.
 - c) The Councils capacity to demonstrate positive outcomes for residents.
20. Thus the Councils ability to respond positively to these requirements will influence how the Strategic Housing service is perceived externally.
21. The draft policy was approved in principle, subject to consultation at Executive Cabinet on 3rd December 2009. Following discussions at the Equality Forum on the 19th January and to comply with the Compact Agreement the consultation period was extended to 13th April 2010 to ensure a full 12 week consultation period.
22. The policy was due to be approved by Executive Cabinet in March however due to the extended consultation and the Executive Cabinet recess delegated responsibility to approve the policy is requested in order to enable the new policy to be implemented in April 2010 as planned.
23. The Strategic Housing Partnership which include members from the Citizens Advice Bureau, Help the Homeless, NHS, Social Services, private landlords and voluntary SCAs, have also be consulted on the revised policy.

SUMMARY OF CHANGES

24. Responses to the consultation to date have lead to the following minor changes to the private sector housing assistance policy. In summary the changes are:
25. Prioritisation of DFG's has been removed from the policy as it could have been deemed to be discriminatory however we still aim to fast track cases which are defined as urgent by the occupational therapist referrals. The team will endeavour to make a decision about an application within the eight week timeframe, which is below the six months required by legislation.
26. The repayment of grant monies for the Minor Repairs Assistance (MRA) Grants has extended to require 100% repayment in perpetuity when the property is sold or transferred. All repayments will be fed back into the minor repairs grants budget to maximise best use of

our limited resources available for these grants in order to help other vulnerable households.

27. Similarly the maximum MRA grant available has been reduced from £5,000 to £3,000 (except in exceptional circumstances, where the chief officer can approve up to £5,000). This more accurately reflects the costs of repairs which these grants are aimed at funding and again enables the Council to make the most out of the limited MRA budget available, and ultimately help more people.
28. The policy introduces an offer of support from the Council to commission works where an MRA grant has not been awarded, however a small fee will need to be charged in order to cover costs. This will be recycled back into the service and is in line with best practice.
29. The clarity on the eligibility and conditions of the Energy Efficiency Assistance has been improved to ensure that the grants help vulnerable households on low income to achieve affordable warmth.
30. Finally we are working with the regional group 4NW to establish a regional loans group which should produce economies of scale, however these arrangements are unlikely to be in place until 2011/12, therefore the home improvement loans section has been updated to reflect this.

IMPLICATIONS OF REPORT

31. This report has implications in the following areas and the relevant Directors' comments are included:

Finance	✓	Customer Services	
Human Resources		Equality and Diversity	✓
Legal	✓	No significant implications in this area	

COMMENTS OF THE DIRECTOR OF PARTNERSHIPS, PLANNING AND POLICY

32. The key focus of this policy is to ensure we continue to improve housing quality of private sector housing across the borough. The policy is currently out to consultation and has been presented to the Equality Forum for consideration. In addition, in line with the Council's equality scheme the policy will be subject to an Equality Impact Assessment and all reasonable endeavours will be made to ensure none of the Council's seven equality strands will be disadvantaged.

LESLEY-ANN FENTON
DIRECTOR OF PARTNERSHIPS, PLANNING AND POLICY

There are no background papers to this report.

Report Author	Ext	Date	Doc ID
Rebecca Ostapski	5779	04/03/2010	Housing Assistance Policy March 10