
PRIVATE SECTOR HOUSING RENEWAL STRATEGY

**Responsible Cabinet Member - Councillor Bill Dixon,
Neighbourhood Services and Community Safety Portfolio**

Responsible Director - Cliff Brown, Director of Community Services

Purpose of Report

1. To advise members and seek their approval for the adoption of the new Private Sector Housing Renewal Strategy 2008-2011.

Information and Analysis

2. The Private Sector Housing Renewal Strategy (**Appendix A**) has been reviewed following changes nationally, regionally and in the Tees Valley sub-region. The implementation of the Housing Act 2004 brought with it radical change and modernisation to the private sector housing market and legislative changes which gave local authorities greater powers and discretion in terms of licensing, along with more flexibility in how financial assistance can be provided. The Council embraced the changes and mirrored the philosophy of providing financial assistance in the form of loans as opposed to grants. A new Financial Assistance Policy was introduced in 2007 on this basis.
3. Subsequently, the Regional Housing Board has been championing the introduction of a common private sector loans product that is transferable across the region. The clear attractiveness of a common loans product being the reduced administrative costs, increased efficiency, and access to specialist advice and assistance. Darlington Borough Council have agreed to offer the new regional loans product in Darlington, although there is still some local discretion on the targeting of this financial assistance to ensure local priorities continue to be met and the interests of the most vulnerable members of the community are protected. The Regional loans product should be available in 2009.
4. In the interim, Care and Repair, Darlington's Home Improvement Agency undertook some local customer consultation to gauge why the "take up" of the initial new loans product was low. Revisions to the Financial Assistance Policy were proposed and implemented in September 2007 based on customer feedback and to ensure the local loans product was more aligned with the regional loans product. This means Darlington is better strategically placed to benefit from any funding which becomes available through the Regional Housing Board.

5. The Private Sector Housing Renewal Strategy is only as strong as the information and evidence on which key strategic decisions are taken. To better inform the new Private Sector Housing Renewal Strategy, a review of the Service Level Agreement between Darlington Borough Council and Three Rivers Housing Association for the Home Improvement Agency will be completed and implemented in April 2008. In addition, a new refreshed private sector stock condition survey will be procured jointly with two neighbouring Tees Valley authorities in 2008 which will ensure that resources are appropriately targeted and key benchmarking data can be collected.
6. In early July 2007, the new Tees Valley Sub-Regional Housing Strategy was published which provided the framework by which future priorities across all tenures were set and identified an action plan to deliver a sustainable and balanced housing market accessible to all. The Tees Valley Sub-Regional Housing Strategy also provided the backbone and supporting evidence for a concerted application for funding for the Tees Valley sub-region from the North East Regional Housing Board in November 2007. Investment was targeted at a range of measures, which spanned all tenures and delivered innovative and creative solutions to non-decency, fuel poverty, independent living and housing market renewal.
7. Following the Housing Green Paper in late July 2007, the national focus has shifted towards the provision of affordable housing and increasing its supply to meet increasing demand. Although the change in national policy has provided a unique opportunity for the Tees Valley Sub-Region to make an application for growth status, which has already been commended, the change of emphasis towards affordable housing has created shortfalls in funding for housing market renewal and private sector financial assistance.
8. The new Private Sector Housing Renewal Strategy provides the framework to operate within this new financial context and continue to tackle non-decency and make positive contributions towards increasing the safety, well-being and thermal comfort of the most vulnerable members of the local community which ordinarily reside in poorest privately rented accommodation.

Outcome of Consultation

9. The new Private Sector Renewal Strategy has been the subject of consultation with the private Landlords Forum, has been influenced by customer feedback on the new Financial Assistance Policy via Care and Repair and feedback from customers who engage with the dedicated Housing Renewal Team. The new strategy addresses the views and comments presented and also is positioned strategically to maximise inward investment opportunities.

Legal Implications

10. This report has been considered by the Borough Solicitor for legal implications in accordance with the Council's approved procedures. There are no issues which the Borough Solicitor considers need to be brought to the specific attention of Members, other than those highlighted in the report.

Section 17 of the Crime and Disorder Act 1998

11. The contents of this report have been considered in the context of the requirements placed on the Council by Section 17 of the Crime and Disorder Act 1998, namely, the duty on the Council to exercise its functions with due regard to the likely effect of the exercise of those functions on, and the need to do all that it reasonably can to prevent, crime and disorder in its area. It is not considered that the contents of this report have any such effect.

Council Policy Framework

12. The issues contained within this report do not represent change to Council policy or the Council's policy framework.

Decision Deadline

13. For the purpose of the 'call-in' procedure this does not represent an urgent matter.

Recommendation

14. It is recommended that Members support the implementation of the new Private Sector Renewal Strategy.

Reasons

15. The recommendations are supported by the following reasons:
 - (a) The new Private Renewal Strategy represents a proactive response to non decent private sector homes in Darlington
 - (b) The new Private Sector Renewal Strategy recognises the local, sub-regional and regional opportunities available to maximise inward investment into Darlington.
 - (c) The new Private Sector Renewal Strategy is based upon robust evidence of local private sector housing conditions and provides a sound basis for targeting vulnerable households.

Cliff Brown
Director of Community Services

Background Papers

- (i) The Housing Act 2004.
- (ii) Regulatory Reform Order 2002.
- (iii) Quality and Choice, A Decent Home for All, 2000.
- (iv) Homes for the Future: more affordable, more sustainable 2007.

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