

**HOUSING
RENEWAL POLICY
2003/04**

**CONSULTATION
DRAFT**

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1.0 Summary of the Regulatory Reform Order - Housing Renewal

- 1.1 The Government's Regulatory Reform Order on Housing Renewals repeals the previous prescriptive range of private sector housing grants. The exception being the mandatory Disabled Facilities Grants which along with their "ring-fenced" budget remain unaltered.
- 1.2 In place of the prescriptive grants system, Council's have much more freedom to help in a variety of ways to improve private sector housing and its occupants. Councils can provide grants, loans, advice and help with moving. The Council can set its own grant regime and conditions.
- 1.3 The overall aim of all of these measures is to have a well maintained private sector housing stock.
- 1.4 Funding will continue to be sought from the single capital pot of monies that the Council receive which has to serve a range of Council demands and needs.
- 1.5 Expenditure on housing in the private sector under the previous grants regime has provided real impacts and improvements. The new freedoms will allow the Council to provide a wider range of help methods and is to be welcomed.

2.0 Links to other corporate strategies and key aims

2.1 The Housing Renewal Policy forms an integral part of the Council's wider housing strategy and key corporate aims. The corporate aims are:

- To safeguard and enhance a natural and built environment - renewing empty and run-down housing, saving the ozone layer by insulation measures.
- To address the needs of South Derbyshire residents for good quality homes and of a variety of tenures, located in well placed and safe environments - landlord/tenant work, 106 Agreements, renovation to modern standards.
- To promote the health and welfare of all sections of the community including access to leisure and cultural activities - the links to poor, damp housing and poor health are well documented.

2.2 Housing Strategy Aims

2.2.1 Work with stakeholders to maintain and improve the district's housing stock.

2.2.2 Adapt public and private sector housing to meet the needs of both young and older disabled people.

2.2.3 Make homes across all tenures safe, secure and warm and develop burglary reduction projects.

2.3 Empty Homes Policy

2.3.1 The Council has a comprehensive policy aimed at bringing empty homes back into use.

2.4 Private Sector Housing Strategy

2.4.1 The strategy contains the details of delivery of the range of measures the Council will use to maintain and enhance the private sector stock.

2.4.2 It also contains stock condition and housing needs information that the Council uses to target its spending appropriately.

2.5 Homelessness Strategy

2.5.1 We will link with the public sector's emerging homelessness strategy to help provide the best range of choice for homeless people.

2.5.2 Our links to the Landlords Forum and our accreditation scheme will be key links to this strategy.

3.0 Fundamental Principles

- 3.1 This document details the principles, methods and new approaches to be taken to promote and support good quality housing within the private sector.
- 3.2 In drafting this policy, it is recognised that available funds are inadequate to meet all the needs of the private sector and careful targeting of assistance must be undertaken. Up to date stock condition information will therefore continue to be an essential tool. The bid for private sector capital is assessed against all council properties.
- 3.3 It is assumed that the level of capital allocation from the single pot is unlikely to increase and will remain approximately the same for the foreseeable future. Additional funding from government schemes and partnerships (HEES, Supporting People) will be identified and used where possible.
- 3.4 Responsibility to maintain private property clearly rests with the owner, however it is recognised that the private housing stock is an important public asset requiring a level of protective investment for the longer term public benefit.
- 3.5 In addition to an area based approach, the Council will continue to offer a safety net of grant assistance to those most in need. Owners with significant capital available in their property will generally be expected to fund work themselves.
- 3.6 The determination of direct grant funding by the Council will be considered according to the homeowner's 'ability to afford'. The homeowners 'ability to afford' will be determined using the current 'test of resources' calculation or the receipt of an income related benefit.
- 3.7 The development of equity release loans for homeowners is currently underway with our partners Walbrook Care and Repair and the Derbyshire Building Society. Loans offer the potential to assist many more private sector homeowners than previously possible, within a limited budget regime. However, in practise loans are likely to have limited scope and low demand. An equity release loan package will be incorporated as a future policy revision, when it becomes available.
- 3.8 Priority for assistance will be given to the most vulnerable groups. Disabled people will be offered disabled facilities grants through a 'one stop' service and more flexible assistance including help towards relocation.
- 3.9 All private housing dealt with by the Council will be judged against the current fitness standard until such time as the Housing Health and Safety Rating System becomes operational.
- 3.10 Houses identified as obsolete or unsustainable will be placed in a programme for regeneration. Owners of demolished houses will be helped to purchase a new property.
- 3.11 As detailed in the empty property strategy, long term empty properties will continue to be a priority for action with no 'prior ownership' requirement where grant assistance is given. Enforced sale and CPO powers will be used for intransigent owners.
- 3.12 Promotion of high rented property standards and good landlords will be encouraged through financial assistance, voluntary accreditation and our Landlord Forum. Consistent and effective enforcement action will be taken to reduce substandard privately rented accommodation. Free advice and assistance will continue to be available to private sector tenants.

4.0 Main priorities for assistance

4.1 Based on the existing stock condition/housing need information and the outcomes of the relevant Best Value Reviews, our priorities are to promote and support good quality housing within the private sector in the following key areas:

- Area improvement to contribute to regeneration
- Individual property
- Empty property
- Individual needs of the disabled and vulnerable
- The private rented sector
- Home energy efficiency
- Crime reduction

4.2 Area Improvement

4.2.1 Area initiatives can have a significant impact on a run down area of the district and are less costly than the provision of individual renovation grants. The Home 2000 project carried out in the urban core during 2000/02, funded external improvements and target hardening works to 350 number of properties in the neighbourhood. The improved area triggered private investment to improve other amenities nearby and subsequently benefited further.

4.2.2 It is intended to identify a further area suitable for this type of improvement from the 2003 stock condition survey and subsequently implement a scheme.

4.2.3 We will continue to work with the Council's Planning Division to develop 106 Agreements to be used for affordable housing and improvement.

4.3 Individual Properties

4.3.1 The 'demand led' provision of full renovation grants to individual owner occupiers in the past has led to pepper potting of resources and has had little beneficial impact on the district as a whole. With escalating builder's costs, individual properties have increasingly taken up a disproportionate amount of our total resources.

4.3.2 We therefore propose, under the new policy that full renovation grants will cease. There may be some exceptional cases where grant assistance is justified, such cases will be considered on their individual merits according to the new conditions and criteria contained in the amended private sector renewal strategy.

4.3.3 The Council will provide advice, support and information to homeowners through a comprehensive home maintenance guide (to be published in August 2003) and free advisory visits and home maintenance surveys.

4.4 Empty Properties

4.4.1 Empty properties serve to blight an area and result in lost council tax revenue which would otherwise benefit the community. We will continue to operate our empty homes strategy which will be amended to include a specific empty homes grant. Area blight and rural areas providing affordable property to let will be our main priorities for action.

4.4.2 Grant assistance will be offered to owners purchasing property which has been empty for over one year or to existing owners of long term empty properties, where the property is in such a bad state of repair that it is not financially viable for them to renovate it without assistance. The amount of assistance will be 50% of the cost of the eligible works. The property may be renovated for occupation by the owner or for let to a tenant and a 5 year grant condition will apply. Rents will be set at an affordable level. As is the case under the Council's empty home strategy, first choice of tenancy will be offered to a person on the council house waiting list as a grant condition.

4.4.3 Compulsory purchase by agreement, with transfer to a Registered Social Landlord will be offered in the case of problematic empty properties where the owner is unable to bring it back into use or unwilling to retain ownership.

4.4.4 Enforced sale or compulsory purchase will be used for problematic long-term properties where the owner is unwilling to take reasonable steps to bring the property back into use.

4.5 Individual needs of the Disabled, Elderly and Vulnerable

4.5.1 As part of our Best Value Review of Housing Services, the Council has made a decision to put responsibility for all disabled adaptations, in both the private and public sector, under the Environmental Health Division. All residents will therefore apply for a Disabled Facilities Grant to fund their adaptations. As part of the proposed structure, an in-house architectural and occupational therapist unit is proposed. The aim of this is to speed up delivery of adaptation assistance to those in need.

4.5.2 Home repair assistance grants will continue to be available to assist the elderly or disabled to live independently in their own homes. The grant provides financial assistance with minor repairs, improvements, adaptations, security measures and energy efficiency improvements. Delivery of these grants will continue in partnership with Walbrook Care and Repair Agency. Grants for works up to £2,500 will be available to eligible persons over 60 years old or disabled and in receipt of an income related benefit. A grant of up to £5,000 may be approved in exceptional circumstances subject to agreement with the Agency and the Environmental Health Manager.

4.5.3 In addition to our partnership with Walbrook, minor repair grants will be made available through the Council to persons under 60 years of age who are on benefit and therefore classed as vulnerable.

4.6 Private Rented Sector

4.6.1 High standards of accommodation and responsible landlords in the private rented sector will be promoted and encouraged through a voluntary accreditation scheme. Accredited accommodation will be required to meet minimum standards set by the Council and will carry the added benefit to landlords of access to the tenant waiting list and a rent deposit scheme.

4.6.2 The Landlord Forum run jointly with our East Staffordshire Borough Council partners and will continue to meet twice a year to promote high standards, knowledge and awareness and good relations between landlords and officials.

4.6.3 Poor standards of accommodation will be dealt with through enforcement action and irresponsible landlords excluded from any financial or other benefits available.

4.6.4 Landlord grants will be available to improve the property for the benefit of the tenant and will include assistance towards the provision or improvement of:

- Security measures
- Fire/home safety
- Heating and energy conservation measures
- Kitchen and bathroom amenities

4.6.5 Grants will be awarded at a rate of 75% of the cost of the eligible works up to a maximum of £10,000 and subject to a 5 year grant condition period.

4.7 Home Energy Efficiency

- 4.7.1 The Council is committed to achieving the Government's aims to reduce harmful CO₂ emissions and to tackle fuel poverty which results in potential ill health effects.
- 4.7.2 We will continue to work with the Government's Warmfront Scheme which targets the fuel poor and improve the thermal efficiency of their homes.
- 4.7.3 We will aim to assist a wider range of households within our district by utilising a further sum of money from the capital pot to fund various initiatives throughout the year to promote and improve energy conservation measures in the home.

4.8 Crime Reduction

- 4.8.1 For the last 3 years money has been made available to fund crime reduction measures in partnership with the Council's Community Leisure Services and the Police. Vulnerable households and victims of crime have benefited from the installation of security measures including alarm systems funded by the scheme. It is proposed that this scheme will continue to be funded annually.
- 4.8.2 We will work with the Council Crime and Disorder Partnership to develop more joint working.
- 4.8.3 Currently we are looking at an expanded home security scheme and increased area improvements.
- 4.8.4 A handyman scheme is proposed to carry out repairs to make properties more secure.

5.0 Other types of assistance available

5.1 Home Maintenance Advice

- 5.1.1 Timely home maintenance can prevent longer term problems from building up in the private sector housing stock. The Council has been developing an advice and information booklet to the householders on home maintenance. We aim to have this published by August 2003 and will distribute it widely.

5.2 Help with relocation

- 5.2.1 New powers under the Regulatory Reform Order allow help with relocation costs where the existing property is clearly unsuitable for the occupant. An example of this would be in the case of a disabled person where the Council could move them to an existing adapted property. We will work to pilot a scheme along the lines of that within the public housing sector.

5.3 Exceptional cases

- 5.3.1 Exceptional cases may arise which are outside the scope of policy or assistance. It is not possible to cover all exceptions that may arise and each case will therefore be considered on its own merits. As a general principle though, the Council will prioritise assistance to those least able to help themselves.

5.4 Loans

- 5.4.1 Loans, as previously mentioned, we have been working with Walbrook Housing Association and the Derbyshire Building Society for two years to develop a suitable equity release package. Where persons do not have the necessary finances, but have suitable value tied up in their property in the way of capital, we will work with them to release this capital to fund works of disrepair. There are developments nationally towards the centralised loan and equity release scheme. As we develop our package with our partners or a national scheme is rolled out, we will look to incorporate this within our policy.

6.0 Complaints or comments regarding the Council's policy

- 6.1 For the Council's policy to be relevant to its residents, we need to take in the widest range of use. We would welcome any suggestions about this draft policy. Please send your complaints or comments to Mr M E Alflat, Environmental Health Manager, South Derbyshire District Council, Civic Offices, Civic Way, Swadlincote, Derbyshire, DE11 0AH or e-mail: alflatm@south-derbys.gov.uk.
- 6.2 We will acknowledge receipt of your letter and give you a written reply once your points have been considered.

7.0 Appeals about decisions in individual cases

7.1 Complaints about the operation of the Council's policy and arising out of it offers, or lack of offers for assistance, the Environmental Health Manager will review the appeal.

7.2 Appeals must be set out in writing and must include the specific grounds on which the appeal is based. Grounds for appeal will be considered where:-

- The policy has not been applied consistently or correctly.
- An exception has occurred outside the scope of the policy that merits an exception to that policy.

7.3 All appeals will be considered and a written reply given by the Environmental Health Manager.

8.0 Reviewing and revising the policy

8.1 We will review the policy one year after its adoption. Any significant revision to the policy will be published.

8.2 Should major changes to policy arise, we may revise the policy earlier.

MEA/LJW
13.02.03

