

SUBJECT:	<i>Private Sector Housing Strategy and Financial Assistance Policy</i>
REPORT OF:	<i>Healthy Communities Portfolio – Cllr Graham Harris</i>
RESPONSIBLE OFFICER	<i>Martin Holt, Head of Healthy Communities</i>
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WARD/S AFFECTED	<i>All</i>

1. Purpose of Report

To seek approval to publish and implement a joint Private Sector Housing Strategy and associated policies in respect of financial assistance, Houses in Multiple Occupation and housing enforcement across Chiltern District Council and South Bucks District Council, and to seek comments on a draft joint strategy and associated policies.

RECOMMENDATIONS:

1. That Cabinet authorise the Head of Healthy Communities to prepare a Joint Private Sector Housing Strategy and associated policies.
2. That Members consider the draft joint strategy and policy documents in Appendix X and provide comments, as appropriate.
3. That Cabinet authorise the Head of Healthy Communities to publish and implement a final joint strategy and associated policies in consultation with the Portfolio Holder.
4. That a House Condition Survey is not carried out at the current time, but that the need for a survey is reviewed annually by the Head of Healthy Communities in consultation with the Portfolio Holder.

2. Reasons for Recommendations

- 2.1 The current private sector housing strategy is due to be reviewed and updated next year, however, there are a number of amendments which are required now in order to ensure that the financial assistance policy provides sufficient flexibility to assist those most in need.
- 2.2 The housing service is now a shared service across Chiltern and South Bucks districts. A joint strategy and policy will assist the shared service in offering a consistent approach to improving housing standards across both districts and provide greater operational efficiencies.
- 2.3 A House Condition Survey is not considered to be cost effective at the current time as officers' current understanding of local housing conditions is sufficient to be able to plan and develop appropriate interventions, within the level of resources available.

3. Content of Report

- 3.1 The Council has a statutory duty to regularly review housing conditions in its area and to take action to tackle serious health hazards in housing. The current Private Sector Housing Strategy sets out the council's approach to improving housing conditions in the private sector and details its policies on:
- giving financial assistance in the form of grants and loans under the Housing Grants, construction and Regeneration Act 1996 and the Regulatory Reform (Housing Assistance) Order 2002
 - undertaking enforcement activity
 - licensing Houses in Multiple Occupation
- 3.2 The current strategy and associated policies were last amended in 2013 at which time some major revisions were made to the financial assistance policy to ensure it was appropriately targeted. At that time, the need for a further House Condition Survey was considered and it was decided that the costs of a survey outweighed the likely benefits, but it was agreed that this should be reviewed in two years.
- 3.3 Since then, the housing service has become a shared service with South Bucks District Council. The shared service has been operating now for two years under separate private sector housing strategies for each district. However, the objectives of the service are common across both authorities and both districts share broadly the same issues and challenges in improving housing standards. The opportunity is therefore now sought to prepare a joint strategy and associated policies to ensure a common approach across the two areas and consistency in the products and services on offer to residents in both districts.
- 3.4 In preparing a joint strategy, consideration should be given to the need for a further House Condition Survey. The arguments considered in 2013 are still relevant today:
- 3.5 Private sector housing staff do not have the capacity or the necessary statistical expertise to undertake a survey in house, therefore the options are to:
- a) Undertake a procurement exercise to appoint consultants to carry out a house condition survey (estimated cost £35,000 plus staff time)
 - b) Not to undertake a survey at the current time and rely on nationally and locally available data to inform the direction of the strategy
- 3.6 Previous surveys (the last undertaken in 2007) have indicated that house conditions in the Chiltern District are generally better than the national average, although the general trends are mirrored. Therefore, data from the English Housing Survey can be used reliably to give an indication of the types of issues which are likely to exist in the local housing stock. Neither survey can provide sufficient detail to give information about the number, location and condition of HMOs in the district.
- 3.7 More recent analysis of national and locally available data carried out for the Home Energy Conservation Act report has provided a useful up-to-date insight into the energy efficiency of the stock.
- 3.8 Moreover, based on the current understanding of national and local trends in house conditions and given the existing constraints on expenditure, it is unlikely that a

detailed house condition survey would prompt a significant policy change or revision of the key objectives of the Private Sector Housing Strategy, therefore the benefits of a new survey would be limited.

- 3.9A draft strategy and related policies have therefore been prepared based on current information about national and local conditions. It has also reflected comments and ideas discussed at the joint member workshop held on 3 February 2016. The draft joint strategy is contained in **Appendix X.1**.
- 3.10 Amendments are also recommended to the Financial Assistance policy to **achieve consistency with South Bucks District Council policies and** provide more flexibility to assist disabled people requiring adaptations. The draft joint financial assistance policy is set out in **Appendix X.2**. The main changes are highlighted in Appendix X.3
- 3.11 No major changes are proposed to the current House in Multiple Occupation policy or the Enforcement Policy, although some changes are suggested to the HMO licence fees to ensure full cost recovery and reflect current costs. The draft joint HMO policy and draft joint Enforcement Policy are contained in Appendix X.4.

4. Consultation

- 4.1 On 19 November 2015, the Communities Health and Housing Policy Advisory Group received a presentation on the current Financial Assistance policy for comment and discussion. Subsequently, two of the key local housing standards issues (Disabled Facilities Grants and standards in the private rented sector) were discussed at the joint Member workshop held on 3 February 2016. Comments and ideas from both of these consultation events have been reflected in the draft joint strategy.

5. Options

- 5.1 The Council could continue to operate its own separate strategy and policy. However, operationally, the approach to tackling housing standards is the same across both authorities and there are benefits in being able to offer the same products and services as part of a shared service.
- 5.2 The Council could procure a House Condition Survey before finalising a joint strategy and policy for private sector housing interventions. However, the likely cost of undertaking a survey (including officer time) is disproportionate to the level of resources available for tackling conditions and the benefits are considered to be limited.
- 5.3 The Council could decide to end its programme of discretionary grants and loans however enforcement action would still be necessary to tackle category 1 hazards which would have implications for revenue budgets through funding works in default, appeals against enforcement action to the Residential Property Tribunal and prosecution of landlords etc for failure to comply with enforcement action.

6. Corporate Implications

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- 6.1 Finance: The proposed joint strategy and associated policies can be implemented within existing staff structures and capital budgets. A full house condition survey is likely to cost in the region of £35,000 or £20,000 for a 'desk top' exercise. The revenue implication for ending the financial assistance programme would include the costs of works in default, additional staff costs and legal costs, as well as the opportunity costs of staff not being able to deliver against the wider housing programme.
- 6.2 Legal: The Council has a statutory duty to keep housing conditions under review, to take enforcement action to address serious hazards, to licence large houses in Multiple Occupation and to approve applications for Disabled Facilities Grants. A strategy provides a clear framework for these activities. The Council must publish a policy if it is to provide financial assistance under the Regulatory Reform Housing Assistance Order 2002.
- 6.3 Social Inclusion: The delivery of the private sector housing strategy will enable the Council to support vulnerable households who are most at risk of poor health, accidents and/or homelessness through poor housing conditions.
- 6.4 Sustainability: Delivery of a programme of grants and loans will enable incentives to be offered to householders to install insulation measures and will therefore support targets in relation to domestic carbon dioxide emissions.

7 Links to Council Policy Objectives

This links to the 'Working towards safe and healthier local communities' aim of the Joint Business Plan 2014-19.

8. Next Step

If agreed, Officers will finalise the joint strategy and policy documents taking Members comments into account. The final version will be agreed by the Head of Healthy Communities in consultation with the Portfolio Holder.

Background Papers:	None except as referred to in this report
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