

SUBJECT:	Joint Private Sector Housing Strategy and Financial Assistance Policy
REPORT OF:	Councillor Paul Kelly – Healthy Communities Portfolio Holder
RESPONSIBLE OFFICER	Martin Holt, Head of Healthy Communities
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WARD/S AFFECTED	All

1. Purpose of Report

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

RECOMMENDATIONS:

- That Cabinet agrees to preparation of a Joint Private Sector Housing Strategy and associated policies across South Bucks District Council and Chiltern District Council.
- That Members consider the draft joint strategy and policy documents appended to this report and provide comments as appropriate.
- That Cabinet authorise the Head of Healthy Communities to publish a draft joint strategy and associated policies for consultation via the Council's website.
- 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2.1 The current Private Sector Housing Renewal strategy is out of date and needs to be reviewed. The strategy is one of the Council's Policy Framework documents and any revisions are subject to a 6 week consultation period under the Budget and Policy Framework Procedure Rules before a final draft is presented to Full Council for approval.

2.2 The housing service is now a shared service across South Bucks and Chiltern 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 Council's Private Sector Housing Renewal Strategy 2007-2012, which sets out the Council's approach to improving local housing conditions, is now out of date.
- 3.2 Since it was prepared there has been a change of government with resulting changes in national housing policy as well as the introduction of new legislative requirements and increased financial constraints. These changes include the introduction of the Better Care Fund, a new Energy Company Obligation scheme for energy efficiency improvements (replacing the Carbon Emission Reduction Target and Warm Front schemes), the removal of any target in relation to Decent Homes Standard in the private sector, a new requirement to provide further reports under the Home Energy Conservation Act and welfare benefit reforms impacting on private tenants.
- 3.3 There have also been local developments since the strategy was first prepared, not least the introduction of shared working with Chiltern District Council. In a housing context, there has also been the introduction of the Flexible Home Improvement Loan scheme; the development of the Bucks Affordable Warmth Network; the closure of the Home Improvement Agency and Handy person schemes, and an evidenced increase in the number of Houses in Multiple Occupation being rented in the district.
- 3.4 The Private Sector Housing Renewal Strategy therefore requires updating to reflect these changes.
- 3.5 The housing service became a shared service with Chiltern District Council in April 2014 and the shared housing standards 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.
- 3.6 In the past, it has been accepted best practice that a local House Condition Survey is carried out to inform the development of the private sector housing strategy. The last survey was undertaken in 2004 and reported on matters such as the decent homes standard, the prevalence of hazards under the Housing Health and Safety Rating System and energy efficiency standards.
- 3.7 Given the cost and the staff resource implications of commissioning a further survey, the need for an updated House Condition Survey must be carefully considered. 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 £20,000 - £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

- 3.8 The previous survey indicated that house conditions in the South Bucks 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.
- 3.9 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.
- 3.10 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.
- 3.11 A draft joint strategy has therefore been prepared based on current information about national and local conditions. It has also reflected comments and ideas discussed at the member workshop held on 3 February 2016. The draft joint strategy is contained in **Appendix 1** and the Action Plan to the strategy **Appendix 1a**
- 3.12 Amendments are also recommended to the financial assistance policy to provide more flexibility to assist occupants of mobile homes, disabled people requiring adaptations, and help to improve conditions in HMOs. The draft joint financial assistance policy is set out in **Appendix 2**. The main changes are highlighted in **Appendix 3**
- 3.13 Detailed draft joint policies on Houses in Multiple Occupation and Enforcement have also been prepared to provide greater clarity around areas of practice where there is an element of discretion, for example how the Council deals with non-licensable HMOs and Category 2 hazards.
- 3.14 The draft Houses in Multiple Occupation and Enforcement policies are contained in **Appendix 4**

4 Consultation

- 4.1 On 3 December 2015, the Healthy Communities Policy Advisory Group received a presentation on the current Financial Assistance policy for comment and discussion. Two of the key local housing standards issues (Disabled Facilities Grants and Houses in Multiple Occupation) were also discussed at the joint Member workshop held in February 2016. Comments and ideas from both of these consultation events have been reflected in the strategy.
- 4.2 The Healthy Communities Policy Advisory Group reviewed the draft strategy and associated documents on 13 June 2016 and support the approach being taken. In accordance with the Council's Budget and Policy Framework Procedure Rules the Overview and Scrutiny Committee have also been invited to comment on the proposals and will consider this at their meeting on 30 June
- 4.3 Following approval by Cabinet the draft will be subject to a 6 week consultation via the Council's website. Partner agencies, representatives of the Councils Landlord Forum, recipients of housing assistance and the voluntary sector will be consulted. The comments received will be reported to Cabinet together with any suggested amendments to policy and any comments from Overview and Scrutiny Committee. A

final draft of the strategy and associated documents will be presented to Council for approval.

5 Options

- 5.1 The Council could continue to operate its own separate strategy and policies. However, operationally, the approach to tackling housing standards is the same across both authorities and there are efficiencies in being able to offer the same products and services as part of one shared service.
- 5.2 The Council could procure a House Condition Survey before finalising its 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

- 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. The 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 Steps

If agreed, officers will finalise the joint strategy and policy documents, taking members comments into account and publish it for consultation via the Council's website.

Background Papers:	None except as referred to in this report
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