

Bath & North East Somerset Council

MEETING/ DECISION MAKER:	Housing & Major Projects Policy Development & Scrutiny Panel	
MEETING DATE:	20th January 2015	
TITLE:	Decent Homes Policy Update	
WARD:	All	
AN OPEN PUBLIC ITEM		
List of attachments to this report: Appendix 1 Proposed Decent Homes Policy 2014		

1 THE ISSUE

- 1.1 The Council is required to adopt and publish a housing renewal policy, referred to as The Decent Homes Policy in this report. This policy is periodically reviewed and revised as required. It sets out how Housing Services will provide assistance, including financial assistance, to help low-income, elderly, disabled and other vulnerable residents to undertake essential repairs and adaptations to their homes. The policy supports the aims of the Housing and Wellbeing Strategy, particularly around improving health and wellbeing and reducing inequalities within our communities.
- 1.2 The Council Cabinet adopted a revised policy in 2012 entitled the Home Health and Safety Policy. This report to the Housing and Major Projects Policy Development and Scrutiny Panel proposes several updates to this policy including a change of name to the Decent Homes Policy. This reflects the new property standard which the revised policy aims to achieve.

2 RECOMMENDATION

- 2.1 To note and comment on the proposed policy.

3 RESOURCE IMPLICATIONS (FINANCE, PROPERTY, PEOPLE)

- 3.1 The 14/15 revenue budget for housing condition improvements is £155k. The empty home loan is funded through the Wessex Home Improvement Loan fund (originally set up by a consortium of local authorities with funding from Government) which is held and administered by Wessex Resolutions on behalf of the Council.
- 3.2 The 14/15 capital budget for mandatory Disabled Facilities Grant (DFG) is £1.2m. This is funded by £442,000 Government grant; an agreement with Curo allows for an element of cost sharing on DFGs within their housing stock which is expected to contribute around £150,000; and the balance is funded through Council revenue contribution.
- 3.3 The budgets for the 2015/16 financial year will be subject to the February 2015 Council budget report.

4 STATUTORY CONSIDERATIONS AND BASIS FOR PROPOSAL

- 4.1 The Regulatory Reform (Housing Assistance) (England and Wales) Order 2002 provides local authorities with a general power to offer assistance to improve housing conditions. This assistance may take the form of financial grants, loans or any other type of help and support thought appropriate. Prior to making such assistance available it is a requirement that the Council must adopt and publish a housing renewal policy, referred to as the Decent Homes Policy in this document.

5 THE REPORT

- 5.1 The B&NES Housing Condition Survey 2012, identified particular groups of residents experiencing poor housing conditions, including:
 - Owner occupiers and private sector tenants over 65 years of age;
 - Lone parents with dependent children;
 - Owner occupiers on low income;
 - Residents with a disability; and
 - Vulnerable residents (as defined by being in receipt of certain benefits).
- 5.2 The previous policy addressed these issues through a number of schemes aimed at the improvement of homes occupied by low-income, disabled, elderly and otherwise vulnerable households. The proposed Decent Homes Policy 2014 builds on this by incorporating a number of updates including broadening the eligibility criteria for home improvement loan assistance to bring homes up to the Decent Homes Standard.
- 5.3 The schemes of assistance are summarised below together with the proposed updates to the current policy:

Advice and home visits – to help vulnerable people decide what work is required to remedy serious hazards and property defects. There are no proposals for change;

Mandatory disabled facilities grants (separately funded) – adaptations to ensure the homes of disabled people are suitable for their needs. There are no proposals for change;

Urgent repairs grants – to fast track urgent and small repairs for vulnerable people to reduce illness and accident. There are no proposals for change;

Council home improvement loans – to help vulnerable residents undertake essential repairs and safety improvements for improved health and wellbeing. The proposed updates are:

- To extend the eligibility criteria so that families on low income with children and young people living at home that are 18 years of age and under are entitled to apply for assistance (currently 16 years and under);
- To widen the eligibility criteria so that the more generous Decent Homes Standard (DH) is used as the minimum standard to determine eligible works, rather than a significant hazard under the Housing Health and Safety Rating System;

These updates will align the policy better with the needs identified in B&NES and allow low income vulnerable applicants with serious disrepair issues such as leaking roofs and damp to access improvement loans. Also housing conditions impact on health and educational attainment and many young people are living at home and in full time education until at least 18 years of age.

Energy efficiency improvement - home insulation and top up heating/insulation grants to help households with low income keep their homes warm and energy efficient. The proposed update provides an affordable warmth top up grant to work in conjunction with the Council's Energy at Home scheme. The current policy is out of date and needs to be brought in line with current schemes.

Community alarms grant – to help vulnerable people feel safer in their homes by providing community alarms and key safes. There are no proposals for change; and

Bringing empty homes back into use – covering assistance to encourage empty home owners to bring these homes back into use. The proposal is to incorporate into this policy the current Empty Homes policy on providing financial incentives to bring empty homes back into use. Under this policy empty home owners can apply for small grants of up to £500 or Council loans of up to £30,000 via Wessex Resolutions for the purpose of bringing a property back into use. This change will enable all financial assistance offered under the Regulatory Reform Order (RRO) to be contained within one policy.

5.4 For the purposes of this policy a household is defined as vulnerable if the household is a low income household and, aged 60 or over or with a limiting long term illness or disability or has dependent children aged 18 years of age or less.

6 RATIONALE

6.1 In summary the proposed changes will more effectively help vulnerable home owners on low income with essential repairs, bring the policy in line with new opportunities provided by the Council's Energy at Home scheme, and include all RRO assistance under one policy.

7 OTHER OPTIONS CONSIDERED

7.1 The option of do nothing was considered but rejected because this would limit the ability of the policy to achieve its aims.

8 CONSULTATION

8.1 Cabinet Member; Chair of Overview & Scrutiny Panel; Staff; Section 151 Finance Officer;

9 RISK MANAGEMENT

9.1 A risk assessment related to the issue and recommendations has been undertaken, in compliance with the Council's decision making risk management guidance.

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Background papers	<i>None</i>
Please contact the report author if you need to access this report in an alternative format	