

5. CABINET REFERRALS

5.1 Housing and Community Overview and Scrutiny Committee – 13 March 2013

OS/081/13 ENVIRONMENTAL HEALTH - HOUSING ASSISTANCE POLICY – Refers to Agenda Item 11.

Mr Baker introduced Nicholas Egerton, Team Leader, Environmental Protection and Housing; and author of the report to the committee. The purpose of the policy was to replace the current Private Sector Housing Strategy and would take into account the change in the Council's powers.

Within parameters, local authorities had wider powers to supply financial assistance and the draft policy set out a comprehensive explanation of the types of financial assistance that the Council could provide. This was due to go to Cabinet on 26 March for approval. Appendix 2 of the report set out the types of costs the Council could incur when processing an application and proposed this could be added to the loan. Consideration had to be given as to whether the applicant should incur any costs if the application for a loan was not granted.

Key points of discussion:

The Chairman said the Housing Strategy was about bringing empty homes into use and could see that the proposal could encourage this but was not sure how the Council would get to know which homes were empty.

Mr Egerton said work had started on this using information based on Council Tax. There was a list of properties that had been empty for over 6 months, visual risk assessments were being done and an Empty Property Strategy was being worked on. 480 properties were currently being looked at but from initial feedback some of those were not empty.

Regarding the question of whether the costs should be added to the loan, the Chairman was in agreement.

Regarding the question as to whether the applicant should incur any costs if the application for a loan was not granted, the Chairman was unsure as she did not want to put people off from applying.

Councillor McLean said a precedent had been set in planning. Planning applicants did not get their money back if their application was refused.

Councillor Mahmood asked if the changes to the benefits system had been incorporated in the report.

Mr Egerton said one of the recent changes had not been incorporated in the report. There would be changes that would occur during the lifetime of the policy. There could be scope to consider the Healthy Homes Loan more broadly. Properties would be looked at to check for significant hazards.

Costs incurred could run to several hundreds of pounds (electrical reports, Gas Safety reports, structural reports etc.).

Councillor Mahmood suggested some comment on chalk mines may be helpful.

Councillor Adeleke suggested costs be looked at on a case by case basis but the committee was not in agreement with this.

The Chairman was still concerned that requiring applicants to pay the costs might put people off and asked if there was any information on this.

Mr Egerton said it might put people off but he did not want the Council to provide a free service to get reports of that nature done. Loans could be up to £20k.

The Chairman said that changes could be made to the policy after a review and asked for a vote.

Vote

Those in favour of charging the cost to the applicant, even if the application was not granted:

5 for, 3 against and 3 abstentions.

Councillors Adeleke and Adshead asked that it be recorded that they abstained.

Outcome:

1. That Cabinet be recommended to approve the Private Sector Housing Assistance Policy.
2. That the Council should recharge for costs incurred and be added to the loan for successful applications.
3. That the Council should recover costs paid to external agencies/companies for applications that were unsuccessful.