

PRIVATE SECTOR HOUSING RENEWAL POLICY

Background and Local Context

This Policy is published in response to the New Regulatory Reform Order 2002. The overall picture presented by Woking Borough Council's private sector stock condition survey undertaken in 2001 was that the private sector housing stock in Woking is of dwellings with few serious repair problems. The level of unfitness in Woking is 2%. This is well below the national average of 7%. However, attention needs to be paid to the inter-war stock which recent national surveys have shown, is becoming prone to unfitness. The Private Sector Stock Condition Survey also revealed that the highest level of unfitness in Woking fell in Asian/Asian British households, 10% compared to 2% for the Borough as a whole. All areas of the Borough can be considered for private sector renewal as the aim is improve private sector stock throughout Woking. The policy does however, prioritise elderly residents and those with special needs. The Policy links with aims and objectives outlined in the Council's Housing Strategy. Resources are identified in the Council's Housing Investment Programme. As a new Policy the use of resources will be closely monitored and discretionary grants will be subject to finite resources. Nonetheless, the policy is intended to bring the best outcomes for those living in the Private Sector.

Objectives

The Private Sector Renewal Policy is designed to ensure long-term improvement to the private sector stock within the Borough. Its purpose is to provide the best outcome and promotion of well being for those in most need in tandem with other Council objectives:

- To assist with continued improvement to Private Sector housing to ensure regeneration and environmental sustainability in the Borough
- The reduction of unfitness and disrepair in the private sector & where possible bring properties up to Decent Homes Standard
- To encourage and help home-owners to maintain their homes
- To increase energy efficiency & reduce fuel poverty
- To bring empty properties back into use via the Council's Private Sector Leasing Scheme
- To improve home security and general repair

The Private Sector Housing Renewal Policy aims to define the conditions under which Woking Borough Council will provide grants, facilitate loans or make repayable contributions to private sector renewal. Wherever possible owner-occupiers are encouraged to maintain their own property. The Home Improvement Agency Homelink works with home owners who are ineligible for grant to make improvements to their home. However, not all owners can afford to do so. Therefore, eligible applicants will be able to access either a grant or a loan or combination of both to assist with private sector renewal. Greater emphasis is given to exploring options for re-housing those over 60 years old. Assistance under the new powers may be conditional or subject to conditions, including the

requirement to contribute towards or repay the assistance. Both owner-occupiers and private sector tenants, including RSL tenants, can be considered for assistance. The purpose of grants will be to improve and repair private sector housing as there is a proven link between dwellings in a poor or unfit condition and ill health especially in vulnerable groups such as the elderly and those with special needs. The key outcome will be the reduction in the number of properties becoming unfit or falling below unfitness or Health and Safety ratings. Consideration will also be given to ensure that all properties, where possible benefit from energy efficient works including insulation and gas-fired central heating systems.

Delivering Private Sector Renewal – Our Partners

Our key partners are essential to ensure the delivery of comprehensive private sector renewal. Our Key partners are, but not exclusively:

1) Homelink

The Council works closely with the in-house Home Improvement Agency – Homelink. The Grants team works jointly with Homelink on grant applications to ensure the best outcome for the client. This collaborative approach brings many advantages to the client including the sharing of skills, experience & technical expertise which provides more flexibility and scope to 'top up' mandatory grants as well as assistance. Homelink is a Home Improvement Agency that offers:

- Free advice to owner occupiers over sixty or have special needs, or in receipt of a low income, on how to pay for and organise essential repairs, improvements or adaptations to the home.
- Information on ways to finance building work, including grants, loans and the Houseproud scheme.
- Welfare benefit and advice is also given.
- A handyman service.
- Practical support and assistance throughout the duration of the work.

The cost of the core service is 12% of the cost of the building Contract. These costs are typically included in the loan agreement or grant.

2) The Home Improvement Trust

The Council has entered into a Houseproud agreement with the Home Improvement Trust who will seek to help and encourage older or special needs residents to release some of the equity in their properties to fund necessary repairs and improvements. The Council assists in this process by providing where necessary small repayable grants (Access to renovation & repair) of up to £500 to lever in equity release loans. The purpose of the scheme is to provide long-term adaptation & repair solutions enabling elderly and those with special needs to remain in their own home. Woking Borough Council will facilitate the availability of a Houseproud loans to eligible homeowners by signposting the scheme via the Homelink Team or Housing Grants Team who will provide up to date information about the scheme. The Houseproud Scheme provides the following benefits:

- Helps people 60+ or any person with special needs who are not entitled to sufficient grant funding to release equity in their home to fund repairs, improvements and adaptations.

- Provides free independent financial advice.
- Is a non-profit organisation.
- Offers loans that carry a guarantee of no repossession.
- Offers loans from £3,000 up to 30% of the current value of the property.

(Independent Financial advisers who are regulated by the Financial Services Authority will provide independent legal advice to clients. The implications of taking out an equity release loan will be clearly explained and confirmed in writing by the Houseproud Adviser.)

3) Builders/Contractors and other Agents

Delivering Private Sector Renewal requires a partnership style of operation and a multi-agency management approach. The Council enters into such arrangements with its contractors and other Agents as equal partners. In doing so there is the expectation that they will adhere to the same quality standards in such areas as Equal Opportunities, Customer Care and conformance to relevant legislation, regulations and statutory guidance. Sustainability is a key component of the Council's vision, and taken into consideration in all that the Council does. Given this imperative the Council requires all organisations that it enters into long term partnership arrangements with to espouse this same value. The Council expects the Contractor to consider the sustainability impact of its operations against the Council's "18 Themes of a Sustainable Woking". Appropriate terms relating to sustainability in relation to the Services shall be agreed by the parties in writing and updated from time to time.

4) The Thameswey Scheme

The Thameswey scheme offers 100% grants to owner occupiers or private tenants who are:

- 18 or over
- In receipt of a means tested benefit
- Aged 60 or over

The scheme offers insulation works such as:

- Cavity wall insulation
- Loft insulation to 200mm, including cold water tank and pipe insulation
- Loft insulation top up (80mm to 200mm) including cold water tank and pipe insulation
- Hot water tank insulation
- Draft proofing
- 2 x low energy light bulbs
- Energy advice

5) Social Services

The Council works closely with Social Services Occupational Therapists to assess best outcomes for clients. All DFG applications require an approved OT report before a grant can be approved. Officers are currently working on a Service Level Agreement for the provision of OT services.

HOUSING RENOVATION LOANS

The requirements below will also apply to all Private Sector Housing Grants:

The applicant is over 18 years old.

The applicant must be the owner or tenant of the property.

Two itemised builders estimates required before approval can be given

No works to start before approval.

Works eligible for insurance cover will not receive grant assistance.

Final payments to be paid on submission of the Final Account and all certificates and guarantees

Eligibility:

Assistance Available

Assistance is available when a property does not meet the Housing Fitness Standard. (See Appendix C.) However the fitness standard does not reflect a modern understanding of the health and safety hazards within dwellings and focuses too much on conditions rather than the outcome of these conditions. Therefore, to increase number of properties brought up to standard, assistance will also be given when a property does not meet the Housing Health and Safety rating (HHSRS). The Standard protects the health, safety and welfare of occupants of substandard housing. Previously only properties that fell below housing fitness standards could be considered. This policy will be reviewed to incorporate the HHSRS. In 2004/5 it is expected that a new law will replace the fitness standard by the Housing Health and Safety rating system.

Applicants will be considered for assistance where

- A property fails to meet the Housing Fitness Standard or the Housing Health & Safety Rating (should the fitness standard be superseded).

Owners and Leaseholders:

Will be eligible for a grant to facilitate a Houseproud loan provided;

- At the time of application the applicant has owned and resided in the property for at least 12 months
- They have considered options for more suitable alternative accommodation
- The applicant has the means to repay the loan
- Priority will be given to households living in older properties as identified in the Private Sector Stock Condition Survey
- The Decent Homes Standard is met on completion of the works (this will include full insulation methods)

Those on income related benefits or without equity and sit outside Social Services eligibility criteria may be offered a grant (subject to funding availability)

Empty Properties Grants

- The property has been empty for over six months (with no likelihood of re-occupation) and is unfit or is in substantial disrepair
- The landlord will be eligible for a grant of up to the maximum provided s/he enters into an agreement with the Council that the property be leased for a minimum period of 2 years or agrees to let the property through the Council's private rented scheme for a period of 2 years provided:
- The landlord remains accredited.

Landlord Renovation Grants

The landlord will be eligible for a grant of up to the maximum if s/he provides a certificate of availability to the Council stating that the property will continue to be let for a minimum period of 2 years from the date of completion of the grant provided:

- The tenant is 60+ and those with special needs OR the property was built pre-1919.
- The landlord is working towards becoming an accredited landlord.
- On completion of works the property meets fitness standards or the Housing Health and Safety rating.
- On completion of the works the property has benefited from full insulation measures.

The Council will require repayment in full of grants other than Mandatory Disabled Facilities in the following circumstances:

- The property is sold within 10 years of award other than relationship breakdown on the death of the owner or his/her removal into long-term care.
- The property becomes unoccupied within 10 years from the certificated date of completion.

HOUSES IN MULTIPLE OCCUPATION

Discretionary grants are available for improvements to the fire safety of houses in multiple occupation (HMO). HMO means a house which is occupied by persons who do not form a single household.

Eligibility

To ensure effective targeting of HMO grants priority will only be given to applications where:

- The landlord either agrees to become a member of the Council's Accredited Landlord Scheme or adheres to the approved code of practice for HMOs and mandatory licensing from 2004 (as determined by Section 352(1) Housing Act 1985)
- There are inadequate means of escape from fire and/or other fire precautions

Maximum Grant

The maximum HMO grant the Council will normally give for any one property is £10,000. Additional grant funding may be available for energy efficiency and insulation works.

Landlords Contribution

The landlords contribution to the cost of the works will be calculated:

- With regard to the expected increase in rent following the completion of the works
- And the amount of loan which could be raised from that increase over a five year period (assuming an interest rate of 3% above Bank of England base lending rate).

In the event of an application being submitted by a landlord where there is no notional increase in rent as a result of carrying out the relevant works, the landlord's contribution will be calculated having regard to a points system based on nature and cost of the work, rental income, age of property and previous action taken by the Council.

Repayment of grant is required if the landlord of an HMO Property Grant fails to remain accredited. (See glossary.)

DISABLED FACILITY GRANTS (MANDATORY)

Mandatory Disabled Facility Grants are available to qualifying applicants for the purpose of providing a disabled person with the following: (See Appendix D.)

- Certain facilities within the dwelling
- Access into and around the dwelling
- Access to essential facilities and amenities within the dwelling

Eligibility

Mandatory grant will ordinarily be approved for all qualifying applicants

Maximum Grant

The maximum mandatory disabled facility grant limit is set by the Government at £25,000.

Works in excess of the grant approved may be funded by means of a Houseproud loan, applicants contribution or other means.

Eligible Works

Woking Borough Council will take account of qualified Occupational Therapist report as approved by Surrey Council but to be eligible, the proposed works must be:

- necessary and appropriate and
- reasonable and practicable.

Where large pieces of specialist fixtures are purchased with the aid of a DFG grant or loan, a contract for the initial maintenance of the fixtures, for the first five years will normally be included in the package of relevant works. Upon expiry of this period, the grant applicant will become responsible for the maintenance of the fixtures.

(Although Council tenants benefit from the Council's own adaptation works scheme they may if they so wish make an application for a mandatory DFG. A contribution might be payable if this option is taken.)

HOUSEPROUD LOANS

Houseproud loans are available to make the dwelling suitable for a disabled person in terms of their accommodation, welfare or employment.

Houseproud loans will be considered if:

- the client has considered other suitable housing options such as sheltered or supported accommodation
- the adaptation is required for a disabled person in terms of their welfare and accommodation
- there are dependant children under 18 years old living with the applicant.
- those on income related benefits or without equity and who sit outside Social Services eligibility criteria
- in very exceptional cases 'top-up' funding is required in addition to a mandatory Disabled Facilities Grant subject to funding availability

Eligible Works

Woking Borough Council will take account of qualified Occupational Therapist report but to be eligible, the proposed works must be:

necessary and appropriate and
reasonable and practicable (as defined by legislation).

Additional works that are considered to be in excess of these criteria may be funded by means of loan funding provided the Council is satisfied that the client has the means to repay the loan.

Where large pieces of specialist fixtures are purchased with the aid of a Priority Adaptations grant, a contract for the initial maintenance of that fixture, for the first five years will normally be included in the package of relevant works. Upon expiry of this period, the grant applicant will become responsible for the maintenance of the fixtures.

SAFE AND WARM GRANTS

Safe and Warm Grants are discretionary and are available for small scale repairs, improvements and adaptations for applicants aged 60 or over or disabled and who are in receipt of income related benefits or Job Seekers allowance.

Eligible Works

Safe and Warm Grants are available only for urgent works where no insurance is available that are affecting the health and safety of the applicants such as :

- Connection to Careline community alarm system
- Smoke alarms
- Dangerous chimneys
- Leaking roofs
- Defective drains
- Electrical repairs
- Dangerous structural instability (affecting the dwelling – not garden walls or sheds)
- Replacement boiler – (the Thamesway scheme will be offered first)
- Leaking water and pipes
- Leaking baths and lavatories
- Repairs to stairway
- Repair or replacement of doors which present a security risk
- Improvements to home security (doors, viewers, bars and chains, window locks etc)
- Ramped access
- Overbath showers

Grants for installation of energy efficiency measures are available to all owner occupiers and private tenants (subject to landlord agreement) who are 60, disabled or on income related benefits or tax credits. Energy efficiency works to include:

- Installation or extension of gas central heating with condensing boilers, where there is no central heating or it is not provided throughout the dwelling.
- Replacement of obsolete boilers more than 15 years old with condensing boilers.
- Provision of thermostatic controls and programmes to central heating.
- Insulation measures via the Thamesway scheme.

However, if gas central heating cannot be installed in 3 weeks the option of choosing storage heaters or other suitable forms of heating as an alternative is still available in the case of urgent works.

Maximum Assistance

Basic application £6,000 in 3 years but additional grants up to £9,000

All applicants will be considered for a Safe and Warm Grant as part of their application.

RELOCATION GRANTS

Eligibility

All elderly or special needs grant/loan applicants will be offered advice regarding alternative housing options.

Conditions

A relocation grant will be considered where:

- it is appropriate to the circumstances of the client and
- the cost of refurbishment or adaptation to a property is outside grant or other financial resources such as Equity Release
- in a consultation with an occupational therapist, the Council considers that the home is unsuitable for adaptation works for a disabled person

The grant will cover the cost of relocation but cannot be used to contribute towards the purchase price of a new property, but can be used to pay estate agency fees, removals, legal fees and other moving costs. The client can be considered for appropriate Council or Registered Social Landlord Sheltered or Supported accommodation if available.

The Council will need to be satisfied in consultation with the Occupational Therapist that the alternative accommodation is more appropriate/suitable for his/her needs.

The Council will not normally provide this assistance retrospectively. Applicants must receive written approval from the Council prior to relocation.

GRANT ELIGIBILITY & CONDITIONS

Grant Maximums

The maximum amount of each grant available is listed below. These rates will be reviewed by the Head of Housing. Any recommendations will be reported to the Executive Director for approval under delegated authority within budget setting timetables. With the exception of mandatory DFGs all grants are subject to the availability of funding.

Grant/Loan	Amount Available
Access to Houseproud Renovation & Repair Loan	£500 – repayable as part of condition of loan
Empty Property Grants	£20,000
HMO Grants	£10,000
Landlord Renovation Grants	£5,000
Discretionary Adaptation Grants	£ Discretionary subject to available funds
Relocation Grants	£1,000 (1 bed) £1,500 (2 bed) £2,000 (3/4 bed)
Safe & Warm Grants	£6,000 in any 3 year period. (An additional £3,000 available for energy efficient insulation & heating works if funding not available through the Thamesway Scheme or other scheme.)
Mandatory Disabled Facilities Grants (DFGs)	£25,000 – this limit is set by central government and will not be subject to a separate review
Houseproud Loans	Loans from £3,000 minimum up to 30% of the current value of the property

Review

Applicants have the right to review. If applicants do not agree with a decision under the stated policy they may apply for a review. Applications for review must be received within 28 days of a decision to decline a grant. Applicants will then be given 14 days to provide any information that they wish to be considered at the review. If this information is not provided the application will be reviewed on

the facts available. A senior officer who has not previously dealt with the case will consider the information and make a decision about the review. Applicants will be informed of the review's decision within 56 days in writing.

Complaints And Exceptions Procedures

Complaints will be in accordance with the Council's complaints procedures.

In cases where officers consider that a decision should be made outside the policy they will be able to refer it to the Council's Executive Committee for a decision.

Glossary of Terms

Landlord Accreditation Scheme:

A minimum standard of management and maintenance of properties which landlords are encouraged to meet.

Private Sector Stock Condition Survey:

A research project to assess the condition of the privately owned housing, Woking.

Health & Safety Rating:

Assessing potential level of harm to current occupant of a property.

Houses in Multiple Occupation (HMO):

Dwellings with more than one household living in them.

Decent Homes Standard:

Thameswey Ltd:

Is a Woking Borough Council Energy and Environmental Services Company wholly owned by Woking Borough Council. Established in 1999 one of its key aims is to enter into public/private joint ventures to deliver its energy and environmental strategies (primarily energy, tackling fuel poverty, waste, water and green transport)

Home Improvement Trust:

Is a "not for profit" company limited by guarantee. The trust works on behalf of Older Home owners and those with disabilities, to make Equity release more accessible, whereby, they may release some of the equity tied up in their home in order to fund repairs, improvements or adaptations.

Consultation:

Consultation took place with interested organisations and individuals such as: Surrey Users Network, North West Surrey Disabled Forum, BME Groups, Primary Care Trust and Age Concern at a Housing Strategies Workshop day in April 2003. A postal questionnaire of current and past users of the grants system was undertaken in May 2003.