

LEWES DISTRICT COUNCIL

Draft Private Sector Housing Renewal Strategy 2004-7



Private Sector Housing Renewal Strategy 2004 – 2007

‘Healthy Homes in the 21st Century’

Lewes District Council covers an area of 292sq Km (or 112.8 sq. miles) comprising of downland, weald and coastal urban areas on the Sussex Coast in Southern England. The District is home to 92,177 people, living in a mix of rural and urban communities consisting of coastal towns, rural villages and the County Town of Lewes.

Approximately 91% of the District’s 41,000 dwellings (i.e. 38,300) are privately owned. Of the privately owned properties, the vast majority are owner occupied, the remainder is provided by Private Landlords or Registered Social Landlords (RSLs).

The Council’s overall strategy for housing sets out how we intend to address housing issues across all tenures and to plan for the future housing needs of the District. The Housing Strategy can be found at www.lewes.gov.uk.

‘Healthy Homes in the 21st Century’ is a supplementary part of the Council’s Housing Strategy. It sets out our approach to Private Sector Renewal and includes the Housing Renewal Financial Assistance Policy.

Context

National

Much of Private Sector Housing is governed by national legislation. Significant changes have recently been brought about through two new statutory documents.

The **Regulatory Reform (Housing Assistance) Order 2002** had the effect of repealing most of the existing prescriptive legislation on renewal grants and replacing it with new wide-ranging powers to provide assistance for housing renewal. Local Authorities are charged with finding innovative ways of tackling unfitness in the private sector. With the Government placing emphasis on home owners to look after their own properties, the Local Authority must ensure that any policy is equitable and focus on those properties that are unfit and occupied by vulnerable groups.

The **Housing Bill** was announced in the Queen’s Speech on 26 November 2003. The Bill has been the subject of widespread consultation and will be a substantial piece of legislation. The main provisions of the bill are:

- A new Housing Health and Safety Rating System
- Licensing of Houses in Multiple Occupation
- A new Home Information Pack requirement

The **Decent Homes Standard** was established in July 2000 by the Government. A decent home is one which is weathertight, warm and has modern facilities. As part

of the Government's 2002 Spending Review, Public Service Agreement 7 Target to make all homes in the social sector by 2010 was extended to include private sector homes.

The wording of the target in relation to private sector homes should be read to mean:

“...and, for vulnerable households in the private sector, to increase the proportion who live in homes that are in a decent condition.”

The principle of extending the Decent Homes Standard to the private sector is welcomed as a means of tackling unfitness experienced by vulnerable people living in the private sector. We await guidance on the practical implications of employing the Decent Homes Standard to Private Sector Housing and its links to the Housing Health and Safety Rating System.

Regional

The Government Office for the South East (GoSE) published its Regional Housing Strategy in July 2003 and identified five key themes for housing in the region i.e.:

- Housing Supply
- Affordability
- Regeneration and Neighbourhood Renewal
- Homelessness and Supported Housing
- Quality and Sustainability

These themes are picked up and progressed within our main Housing Strategy. Where the regional strategy is applicable to private sector renewal, this paper will seek to incorporate the regional priorities.

Local

We have four overarching aims for all our work and these are:

- To protect and enhance the environment
- To help people improve the quality of life in local communities
- To strive for continuous improvement in Council services
- To promote equality of access to Council services

To progress these aims we have developed a number of overarching strategies that guide and link service delivery strategy policies and plans. These include the Global to Local Sustainability Strategy; the Community Strategy; the Lewes District Local Plan; the Medium-term Financial Strategy; the Energy Strategy, the Homelessness Strategy and the Equalities Plan.

The Private Sector Renewal Strategy is formulated with the principles of the above strategies at its heart.

We have also recently completed a Best Value Review of Housing, aimed at improving housing services. The review made a number of recommendations. Of particular relevance to this document, it recommended:

- Improvement to the interdepartmental working to deliver a joined up approach to housing across the organisation. Officers from a number of Departments in the Council, including Finance, Housing Services, Environmental Health and Planning, now working regularly together to develop a single approach to delivering the Council's Housing Strategy.
- Improvements to the work with external and partner organisations to develop stronger multi-sectoral working.
- The development of new and wider links to the Community and the development of improved consultation mechanisms.

The Service Improvement Plan resulting from the Best Value Review gives a sound basis for improving the Service in future years.

Consultation and Feedback

This strategy is a living document that is developed as part of a continuous process of developing the corporate agenda. A vital aspect of ensuring the strategy delivers the required corporate outcomes is sufficient consultation.

Updated data is continually gathered on Local Housing conditions, issues, needs and expectations.

Consultation with residents and stakeholders in the public, private and voluntary sectors include:

- Private Sector Landlords Forum
- District Accommodation Forum
- Private Sector Housing Forum
- Private Sector Focus Groups
- Citizens Survey 2002
- ESCC Social Services
- Anchor Staying Put
- Age concern
- Building Professionals
- Registered Social Landlords
- Estate and Letting Agents

Methods of stakeholder consultation include discussions prior to, and after, publication of draft documents; forums; public meetings and exhibitions. We tailor arrangements to suit the subject and the audience.

These consultation exercises have highlighted the following issues:

- Energy efficiency is seen as a priority
- The private rented sector to be given prominence in any strategy
- The local authority needs to have a clear position on equity release and private funding
- Develop an enabling role
- A greater focus on the elderly community, strengthening links with Help the Aged, Age Concern and other similar organisations
- Positive action to improve lower cost accommodation
- Provide a register of all rented properties
- Improve communication links between all organisations
- Housing Associations to work in partnership concerning young persons needs
- Elderly occupants to be encouraged to down size and offered (and given incentives) to move into sheltered accommodation in their local area
- Home sellers pack
- Listed buildings grants for essential repairs
- Increased enforcement
- Capital receipts to be used for loans to tackle unfitness or empty homes
- Single people in large houses – convert part for other residents
- Money to be ring fenced for renovation grants
- Facilitate a Council 'buddy' to assist landlords
- Increased publicity of grants available
- Sign posting i.e. recommendation of reliable contractors
- Independent financial advice

Partnership Working

The Environmental Health Department continues with developing partnership working with other stakeholders and partners in private sector renewal, social and community care and energy efficiency. Our partnerships cross boundaries in terms of cross cutting working (e.g. with the PCT on Health Improvement) and geographical spread (e.g. countywide groups).

The Corporate Housing Strategy

Our research tells us that in the District the overriding market dynamic is high house prices and private sector rents, with an increasing affordability gap and strong demand for social housing. Other key factors are rising levels of homelessness; growth in the Housing Register; a high and growing proportion of old people in the population who often have problems maintaining their property and a serious lack of affordable housing provision for young, single people.

Our strategic approach to housing includes five priorities related to balancing housing markets:

- Provision of more affordable housing
- Maintaining and improving the existing housing stock
- Supporting vulnerable people
- Providing good quality housing services
- Building sustainable communities

Housing Needs Survey

The Housing Needs Survey was conducted on behalf of Lewes District Council by Action in Rural Sussex in 2003. The survey was carried out to provide accurate information on the extent, location and nature of housing needs as a basis for an update on the policies and programmes arising from the District Housing Strategy and Local Plan. It also provided evidence of the extent of unaffordable housing of various types and tenure throughout the district.

The survey was designed to provide comprehensive and accurate data, with a high level of statistical validity. A 100% postal household questionnaire survey across all the rural parishes and a 33% sample postal household questionnaire survey in all the settlements of over 3000 population. 18,253 questionnaires were sent out with a 61.4% return rate.

88.7% said their home is suitable for their needs and the most likely cause of dissatisfaction with a householder's present home was that it was too small. There was a small, but significant, need (5.4%) expressed for disabled adaptations.

These findings reflect the long-standing difficulties arising from high property prices in Lewes District, together with the prevalence of low incomes in rural areas. There is a clear need for a substantial increase in additional affordable housing.

The Private Sector Stock Condition Survey

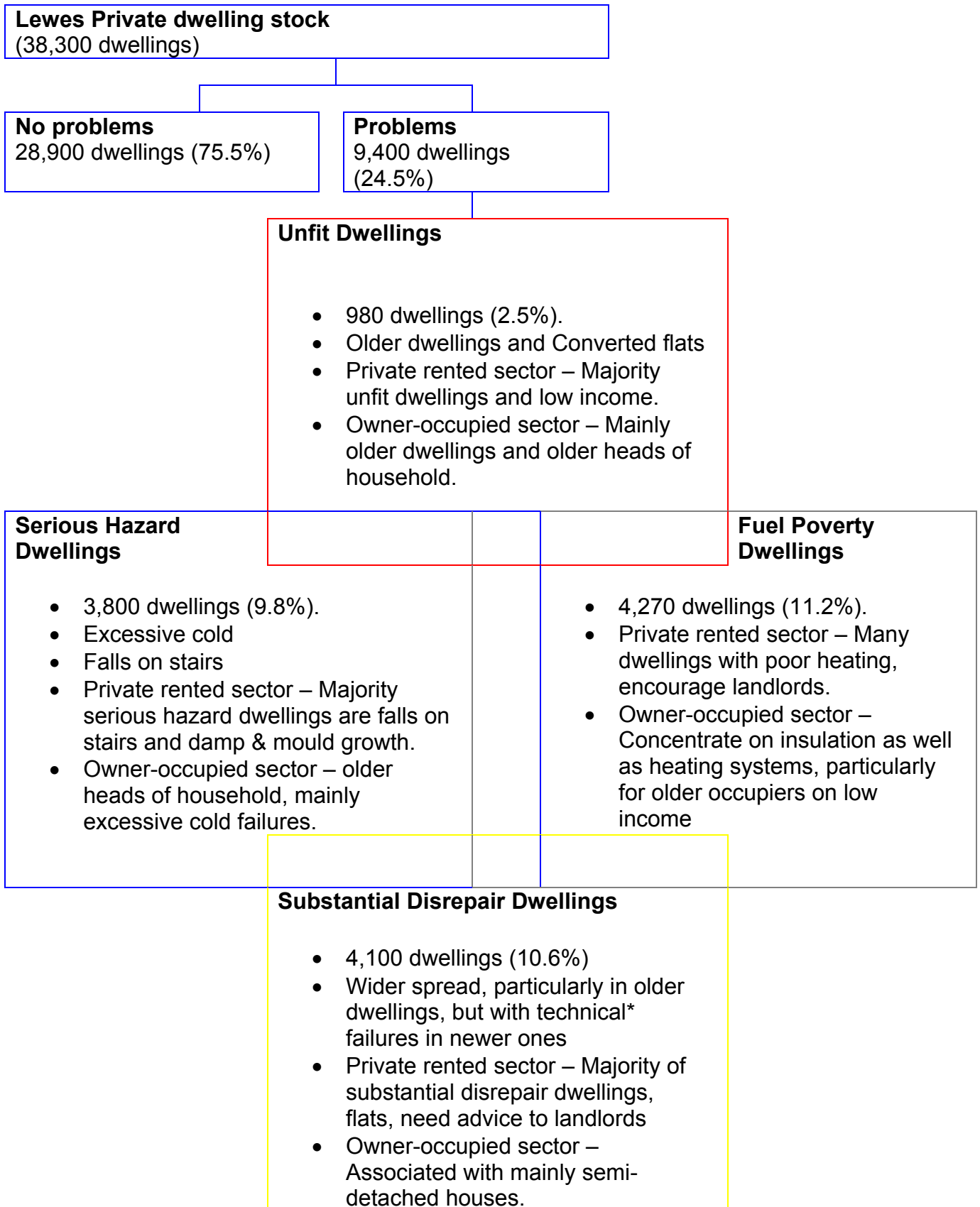
The 2003 Lewes District Private Sector House Condition Survey (HCS) was conducted in order to produce a comprehensive review of current stock conditions in the private sector and this report presents the findings of the HCS.

The survey was carried out on 1,000 dwellings within the District. The total private sector housing stock of the District is an estimated 38,300 dwellings. The total is based on the weighted results of the survey and is an estimate at the time of the survey. Giving a precise figure to the dwelling is unnecessary as dwellings are constantly being converted and built, such that the total number of dwellings changes on an almost daily basis.

The age profile of the private sector stock in the District suggests that the stock is more modern than the national average, with the majority of the dwellings (49%) having been built post 1964. There are more detached houses in Lewes than is the case for England as a whole and a higher proportion of dwellings are owner occupied. A stock profile such as this would tend to suggest that notably better than average stock conditions would exist, as poor condition is strongly associated with age of dwelling, with houses converted into flats and with the privately rented sector. Properties requiring action are widely dispersed and area based housing regeneration is not appropriate.

A wide variety of issues relating to the condition of dwellings in Lewes were collected from the survey and produced in subsequent analysis. Figure 1 overleaf summarises many of the key findings from the survey by the three main private sector tenure types.

Figure 1: Total numbers of dwellings affected by different combinations of house condition problems within the District



Local Housing Knowledge

The housing market imbalances as highlighted in the Needs Survey are no surprise, being typical of the South East England. Although we have developed many successful initiatives; working with partners, and attracting considerable external finance, we are still struggling to shift local housing markets towards balance. The strength of market forces overwhelms the efforts of any individual local authority. The advent of a South Downs National Park may further widen the affordability gap.

We are also aware of:

- a high and growing proportion of old people in the district who have problems maintaining their properties
- a serious lack of affordable housing provision for young single people.
- rising levels of homelessness

	AVERAGE COST (£)				
	Detached	Semi-Detached	Terraced	Flat	Average Cost
UK AVERAGE	255,191	150,450	127,760	160,152	160,142
Lewes	308,247	195,514	183,072	113,648	209,705
Brighton and Hove	342,337	219,454	223,948	146,491	189,896
Wealden	328,862	181,481	158,652	108,830	230,516
Rother	284,885	179,271	150,427	99,064	197,584
Eastbourne	256,653	174,326	156,859	132,553	162,636
Hastings	215,714	151,175	131,681	83,623	136,106

Table 1: Average house prices in East Sussex compared to the UK average (Land registry Jan-Mar 2004)

Statement of Policy

We seek to ensure that the private sector housing stock of the District is fit for human habitation, suitable for the residents' needs and is maintained to the highest standard of repair achievable within the resources available.

We recognise that poor quality housing can have a significant impact on the health and quality of life of the occupants, but believe that it is primarily the responsibility of homeowners to maintain their own property. It is clear, however, that some homeowners, particularly the elderly and most vulnerable, do not have the necessary resources to keep their homes in good repair. In these circumstances, the Council has an important role to provide assistance as part of its statutory duty to review the condition of the housing stock.

The Council in line with its policy on equalities is keen to ensure that it assists people with disabilities to remain living independently in their homes if it is their choice to do so. We will continue to work in close co-operation with East Sussex Social Services and the local Home Improvement Agency, Anchor Staying Put to provide such assistance.

Our Aims

Provision of more affordable housing

The 2004 Housing Condition Survey has estimated that nearly 1% of the private sector stock (350 properties) has been vacant for more than six months. The return of these properties back into use, either as owner occupied, private rented or a Housing Association property, will assist in the provision of housing stock, some of which may be classified as affordable.

We will aim therefore to:

- (a) identify empty properties within the District and make enquiries as to why they remain empty; and
- (b) encourage a range of initiatives designed to bring these empty properties back into use.

It is clear to us that this process will require us to work in close partnership with a number of other organisations and individuals. We already work in very close partnership with Brighton & Hove City Council and Downland Housing Association. We will continue to foster and build upon these partnerships.

We will recognise the important role private rented accommodation plays in the provision of affordable housing within the District. For many people, a rented property is the only available access to the housing market. For many others, the private sector is the preferred choice of housing provision. In both cases, it is important that this type of accommodation is of good quality and is accessible.

We will work with landlords and their agents and with tenants to achieve the aim of a good quality, viable and accessible private rented sector.

Maintain and Improve the Existing Housing Stock

We will work to reduce the number of unfit properties and properties in substantial disrepair in the District. In particular, we will work to tackle the relatively high level of unfitness in Newhaven. This will be carried out by a number of proactive measures, which will include encouragement through advice and facilitation; direct assistance and enforcement.

Our resources for private sector housing repairs were significantly reduced in 2001/2 and forced us to reprioritise our work and focus on the most vulnerable residents. The Financial Assistance Policy of Appendix A sets this out in more detail.

We are currently developing a private sector housing repair advice scheme. Owner occupiers who do not qualify for a grant will be given detailed information about the condition of their house and the best way to allocate resources on repairs. The scheme will provide a 'sign post' service working in partnership with the Home Improvement Agency, Citizens Advice Bureau and local DIY stores.

We will, through a programme of routine inspections, seek to increase the number of Houses in Multiple Occupation (HMOs) which are safe, free from serious disrepair and have adequate fire precautions.

By working in partnerships with landlords, we will seek to improve the quality of accommodation in the private rented sector. We will work to promote a landlord accreditation scheme. We will introduce HMO Licensing when the Government's scheme is introduced.

Supporting Vulnerable People

We will continue to resource and work closely with the Council's Home Improvement Agency – Anchor Staying Put - to support vulnerable people within the District. This will include support for the provision of aids and adaptations for disabled persons; support schemes – such as Lewes Handyperson; advice and support on energy efficiency Improvements and fuel poverty; and advice and guidance to persons on repairs, finance, support and benefits.

We will work in partnership with other partners in the health community, including the Primary Care Trusts (PCTs), Social Services, the voluntary sector and Anchor to prevent accidents in the home. In particular, we will develop actions to reduce the number of dwellings posing serious hazards through accidents.

Over recent months East Sussex County Council have reduced the Occupational Therapist waiting list and we will continue to work closely with Social Services developing our Disabled Facilities Grant (DFG) initiative. We will trial schemes and continually seek to speed up the application process for straightforward applications.

We will explore ways of streamlining the DFG process by combining the resources of partner organisations in a more effective and efficient way.

We will provide advice, assistance and information on building standards, housing conditions, dampness and condensation and energy efficiency to vulnerable groups utilising the Home Improvement Agency and our website.

Promoting Equality and Valuing Diversity

The Council recognises that it serves many diverse local communities and aims to meet the different housing needs of local people. We will identify and take account of the needs of different groups in society, particularly those who are disabled, elderly or vulnerable, to ensure that all the people of Lewes District have access to decent, affordable housing that enables a good quality of life.

We are committed to ensuring that people are not disadvantaged or excluded for any reason and that they have access to the private rented, social housing services and grants we provide.

We will take positive action to ensure there is no inequality and to raise standards for the most disadvantaged groups (i.e. disability adaptations, increase proportion of affordable homes that are suitable for the needs of disabled people). We are enhancing opportunities for under-represented groups to have a say in how our services are delivered i.e. young people, tenants, BME people.

The Council has adopted the Commission for Racial Equality's Code of Practice in Rented Housing to guide us in eliminating unlawful discrimination and promoting equality of opportunity and good relations between people of different racial groups.

Supporting Sustainable Communities

The provision of good quality housing is fundamental to ensuring the wellbeing of individuals and communities. Our role in supporting communities through economic and social regeneration is developed in other strategies such as the Community Plan. The Global to Local Strategy highlights good quality housing as a key issue in ensuring a better quality of life for local communities. The development of a Council-wide Sustainability Working Group will ensure that our approach is interdepartmental and corporate.

It is important that the Council works with communities in the development of its Housing Strategy. Consultation is vital. We will develop better consultation methods to ensure that all groups, including the 'hard to reach' are involved as we develop our approach to private sector housing renewal.

Saving Energy and Tackling Fuel Poverty

We will tackle fuel poverty as a key target of this strategy. In doing so, we will target actions:

- on dwellings with older heads of household;
- dwellings with benefit recipients and on low incomes;
- dwellings in the private rented sector;
- rural housing;
- 'hard to treat' dwellings and
- homes off the gas network.

We will work to encourage private sector landlords to improve energy efficiency in their properties.

Since 1997, we have worked hard to increase the energy efficiency rating of dwellings throughout the District. Our current SAP rating is 54. The Council's target is to achieve a 30% increase in energy efficiency by 2007 to achieve this we must continue to promote, advise and assist householders and work with other organisations and utility companies through the energy efficiency commitment.

Newhaven and the rural areas share the lowest mean SAP and this strategy will focus on energy efficiency improvements in these areas.

The Council's Energy Strategy confirms its commitment to energy efficiency improvements in residential and commercial premises throughout the District. All actions set out in this Strategy are guided by the Energy Strategy. Where possible, energy from renewable sources is encouraged.

Details of financial assistance available to households for energy efficiency improvements is set out in Annex A – Financial Assistance Policy.

Protecting and Enhancing the Environment

We recognise that the quality of our environment has an important impact on our quality of life. We have worked hard for many years to protect and enhance the local and global environment. All the Council's services are evaluated for the impact they will have on the environment as part of the Council's EMAS (EcoManagement Audit Scheme) accreditation. We are working to ensure the principles of sustainability are at the heart of all the work we do, from the decisions we make to the services we deliver.

Sustainability in housing means ensuring that the quality of housing meets the needs of individuals and communities, both now and for future generations. In practice, this means repairs and improvements should be carried out sustainably using locally sourced, environmentally preferable products and resources. Energy

use should be minimised. Renewable energy should be used where possible and practicable. We will encourage developers and landlords to do this.

New building and development must be carried out in ways which do not damage the environment and planning guidance and policy will be important aids to achieve this.

New developments will also need to consider other environmental 'quality of life issues' such as noise control, crime and disorder issues and access to services, including public transport. Planning and Building Control has an important role to play in these areas.

Enforcement Policy

Local authorities are required by Section 605 of the Housing Act 1985 to consider at least once a year, the condition of all housing in their areas, irrespective of tenure. This requirement is with a view to determining what action to take in the performance of their functions. We are committed to reducing the number of unfit and empty properties through a mixture of advice, assistance and enforcement as necessary.

Section 8 of the above Act required local authorities to consider housing conditions in their areas and the need to provide further housing accommodation including the special needs of chronically sick and disabled persons.

Landlords have a responsibility to ensure that all accommodation they are responsible for are fit for human habitation, safe and in good repair. We aim to work closely with and to encourage landlords to provide accommodation of a good standard. We recognise the value of the private rented sector and are keen for this section to flourish in the District. We are however aware that sometimes properties do fall below acceptable standards and that enforcement action is sometimes necessary. Where this is the case enforcement action will be taken in accordance with our published enforcement policy.

Key Objectives

The following key objectives have been formulated after receiving the results from the House Condition Survey and feedback from the numerous consultation exercises: -

- Identify and prioritise dwellings for inspection and repair
- To reduce the number of unfit properties, (particularly in Newhaven) by a combination of proactive measures. encouragement, assistance and enforcement
- Bring empty properties back into use
- Deal with the backlog of aids and adaptations for the disabled by improved partnership working

- Continue to make improvements in energy efficiency, targeting those most vulnerable and in fuel poverty
- Encourage renewable energy sources
- Increase the number of HMO's which are safe, free from serious disrepair and have adequate fire precautions
- Improve the quality of accommodation in the private rented sector, i.e. landlord accreditation and HMO licensing
- Providing support to the elderly via close working with the Home Improvement Agency, PCT's and the voluntary sector.
- Improve consultation with the public, stakeholders, landlords and other housing agencies and organisations.

Resources

Revenue

The number of full time equivalent staff dedicated to Private Sector Housing is 5.37.

The 2004/05 Estimate Cost for Private Sector Housing is £239,540.

Capital

Capital	£
Mandatory Disabled Facilities Grants	336,000
Minor Repairs Grants	80,000
Works in Default	25,000
Energy Efficiency Works	65,000
East Sussex Heat & Sun Scheme	25,000
	531,000

Private Sector Housing Strategy – A framework for Action

Key Objective: Provide more Affordable Housing

Activity: Bring empty properties back into use.

Target 1: Identify in March 2004 all properties which have been vacant for more than six months.

Target 2: Continue to work in Partnership with Brighton & Hove City Council and Downland Housing Association to encourage landlord/owners of identified vacant properties to bring them back into use.

Target 3: To promote the 'Empty Homes Telephone Hotline' to enable members of the public to report properties that appear to be empty.

Target 4: Best Value Performance Indicator BV64, relating to empty or vacant properties brought back into use, will be monitored and reported to Cabinet quarterly.

Activity: To promote the Private Rented Sector

Target 5: To work in partnership with landlords and their agents to promote and facilitate the provision of a good quality accessible private rented housing sector, including projects such as Rent Bond guarantee schemes and landlord accreditation schemes.

Key Objective: Maintain and Improve the Existing Housing Stock

Activity: Work to reduce the number of unfit properties and properties in disrepair in the District.

Target 6: We will inspect 80 unfit dwellings annually and provide advice, support or direct action to bring them to the fitness standard.

Target 7: Best Value Performance Indicators BV62 relating to the percentage of unfit private sector dwellings made fit will continue to be monitored and reported to Cabinet quarterly.

Target 8: We will provide Minor Repair Grants annually to 50 vulnerable/elderly tenants or homeowners.

Target 9: We will develop a project to provide advice and guidance to homeowners on repairs and where to get assistance to maintain their own homes.

- Activity:** We will enforce the legislation relating to HMOs.
- Target 10:** We will implement the Health & Hazard Rating System Scheme requirements as requested by legislation.
- Target 11:** We will carry out a rolling programme of inspections of Houses in Multiple Occupation to ensure that they are safe, free from disrepair and have adequate fire precautions.
- Target 12:** We will implement the HMO Licensing Scheme as requested by legislation.
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Key Objective: Supporting Vulnerable People

- Activity:** We will continue to support and work in partnership with Anchor Staying Put Home Improvement agency.
- Target 13:** We will, in partnership with the Supporting People Organisation fund the Anchor Staying Put Home Improvement Agency to provide support and advice to the elderly and vulnerable people.
- Activity:** We will provide Mandatory Disabled Facilities Grants for aids and adaptation in the District.
- Target 14:** We will provide 50 mandatory Disabled Facilities Grants (DFG) annually.
- Activity:** We will determine 95% of all fully completed DFG applications accompanied by a Social Services Occupational Therapists recommendation within three months of receipt.
- Target 15:** We will respond to all requests within five working days.
- Activity:** We will work with partner organisations, including East Sussex Social Services and Anchor Staying Put to speed up the DFG process.
- Target 16:** To implement a DFG Initiative project to reduce waiting times for adaptations and to ensure application and building works are carried out as quickly as possible.

Activity: To reduce the number of dwellings posing serious hazards through accidents.

Target 17: We will work in partnership with Anchor to support and promote the Lewes Handyperson Scheme to carry out minor repairs, including safety repairs, the homes of elderly or vulnerable people.

Target 18: We will work in partnership with Sussex Downs and Weald and Eastbourne Primary Car Trusts to support and promote a Home Loan Scheme to provide safety equipment to vulnerable families to prevent accidents in the home.

Activity: To reduce the number of properties posing serious hazards through cold and dampness.

Target 19: We will provide advice, assistance and information on building standards, housing conditions, dampness, condensation and energy efficiency to vulnerable groups using Anchor Staying Put and the Council's website.

Key Objective: Promoting Equality and Valuing Diversity

Activity: We will take positive action to reduce inequality and to raise standards for the most disadvantaged groups.

Target 20: Develop our relationship with SOMPRITI, Social Services and Anchor Staying Put.

Target 21: Improve consultation with young people, private rented tenants, the vulnerable and disabled.

Key Objective: Supporting Sustainable Communities

Activity: Housing Service Delivery incorporates the principle of Sustainability.

Target 22: Representative of Private Sector Housing Section is on Council's Sustainability Working Group.

Activity: Communities are consulted on Private Sector Housing issues

Target 23: Consultation mechanisms further developed to ensure communities including 'hard to reach groups' are consulted on private sector housing issues.

Key Objective: Saving Energy and Tackling Fuel Poverty

Activity: To achieve 30% improvement in energy efficiency by 2007.

Target 24: To promote home energy efficiency across the District.

Target 25: To provide financial assistance to install energy efficiency measures in the homes of elderly or vulnerable. Schemes to include:

- Warmfront
- Keep Warm in Winter, Energycare Network and Heat Project
- Fridge savers
- Utility partnership schemes
- Energy Tariff assistance.

Target 26: To promote the use of renewable energy in homes with Renewable Energy Grants.

Key Objective: Protecting and Enhancing the Environment.

Activity: Ensure all Private Sector Housing Activities are carried out in accordance with Council's EMAS.

Target 27: All significant environmental effects of Private Sector Housing Services evaluated and managed in accordance with EMAS.

Activity: All new development to be informed of Council's environmental requirements.

Target 28: Planning & Building Control guidance to be developed to inform developers of Council's Environmental aims.

Appendix A

Financial Assistance Policy

Types of Assistance Available:

Disabled Facilities Grants

Purpose of Grant

Mandatory grants are available for people who are registered disabled for works to: -

- Facilitate access by the disabled occupant to, from and within the dwelling.
- Provide essential facilities and amenities within the dwelling e.g. make the building safe where this is the only or most suitable option.

Where it is more cost effective to move to a more suitable property than adapting the current home of a disabled person, the Council, at its discretion, will consider the provision of removal assistance.

NB The following works are not considered mandatory.

- Extending the dwelling for the purpose of the family of the disabled i.e. if the dwelling is suitable for the disabled person in all other respects we do not extend.
- Access to a garden.
- Safe play area for children.
- Enabling the disabled person to work from home.

Dwellings include mobile homes and houseboats.

Eligibility

All owner-occupiers and tenants, licensees or occupiers (meeting the statutory criteria set out in the Housing Grants Construction and Regeneration Act 1996) are eligible for DFGs. All applications must be supported by, and recommended, by East Sussex County Council's Social Services Department.

Where a Council tenant is seeking help with adaptations it is for the authority to decide when to carry out the works under its own resources for capital works, or to advise the applicant to apply for a Disabled Facilities Grant. An application will not be processed where funding for maintenance is available directly/indirectly from central government, local government, public services or RSLs.

All applicants are encouraged, though this is not a mandatory requirement, to enlist the services of Anchor Staying Put Home Improvement Agency to assist them in the process of application: -

Anchor Staying Put, 32-33, Vicarage Fields, Hailsham, BN27 1BG.

Age of Property

There is no minimum age of a property, which is the subject of a DFG application.

Application

In order for the Council to consider awarding a DFG a complete and valid application must have been received. Such an application consists of: -

- A completed application form.
- A minimum of two complete estimates from different contractors detailing particulars of the relevant works.
- An Occupational Therapist's (OTs) recommendation detailing the relevant works.
- Details necessary to apply the test of resources.
- Details of any fees or charges, e.g. architects or agents fees (including Anchor Trust, if appropriate). These will normally not exceed 10% of the eligible expenses.
- Certificate of Future Occupation.
- Proof of Title.

All valid and completed grant applications are to be determined no later than six months after receipt by the Council. We may exercise our discretion to determine that grant monies will not be paid before a specified date (which cannot be later than 12 months after the date of application).

Commencement of Works

Work cannot be commenced before grant is approved. Works started before grant is approved cannot be grant aided.

Certificate and Conditions of Occupation

Application must be accompanied by a certificate relating to the future occupation of the property. These are: -

- An owner occupation certificate
- A tenants certificate
- A certificate of intended letting (if the circumstances require it)
- Repayment conditions are not applicable to DFGs.

Estimated Expenses

In determining the estimated expense and calculating grants the following elements are considered:-

- Which of the relevant works are eligible for grant 'the eligible works'.
- The amount of the expenses to be properly incurred in the execution of the eligible works.
- Costs attributable in relation to grant works, i.e. fees and charges.
- Cost attributable in relation to moving expenses including estate agent's fees, solicitors' fees, stamp duty, removal costs to a maximum of £6,000.
- The grant is means tested and the amount of grant paid will be determined by a 'test of resources' that determines the applicant's contribution to the works. The mandatory grant will in no event exceed £25,000.
- Any work that falls outside the criteria for mandatory DFGs will be referred to ESCC's Social Services Department for their consideration under the Chronically Sick and Disabled Persons Act 1970.

Supervision and Payment of Grant

Council Officers will inspect the grant works during their progress and, subject to satisfactory execution, Officers can recommend the Authority make interim payments. Final payments will be made on the Officer's satisfaction that the works have been completed satisfactorily and on receipt of the builder's (or in the case of materials, suppliers) invoice.

NB The Council Officers act on behalf of the Authority to ensure public funds are spent correctly. Applicants must be aware that Officers do not act on their behalf. There are therefore no guarantees as to the quality of workmanship and any disputes arising between applicants and their contractors are their responsibility.

Conditions of Grant

The eligible works must be undertaken by the contractor(s) who provided the estimate(s) included in the application. We may vary this requirement where we consider there is a genuine reason to do so and it is in the interest of achieving efficient housing renewal. Prior permission shall be obtained from the Council by the applicant before any change in contractor takes place. The use of a different contractor to one included in the application without our permission may result in our cancellation of the grant and/or repayment by the relevant person.

We will consider redetermining a grant approval where the eligible works cannot be completed without carrying out further works which were unforeseen or where the works are required to make the property fit for human habitation. Unforeseen works will only be considered for financial assistance by the Council where they could not reasonably have been foreseen and work has not been started prior to the work having been agreed as 'unforeseen work' by the Council.

Applicants must pay their contribution to grant aided works and provide satisfactory evidence that payment has been made, i.e. a signed and dated receipt, before the Council will make any grant payment.

Where works are taking place in addition to grant aided works, but which are not grant aided and are funded by the applicant, these works must be completed and paid for by the applicant to the satisfaction of the Council before any payment will be made with respect to the grant aided works.

In the event of a breach of any of the conditions set by the Council, we may demand payment from the applicant/owner/occupier/landlord/trustee/beneficiary, whichever is appropriate, a sum equal to the amount of the grant paid or, as the case may be, any instalments of grant paid and the same shall be repayable to the Council. We have the discretion either not to demand repayment, or to require payment of less than the full amount.

Minor Repairs Grant (MRG)

Purpose of Grant

Minor Repairs Grant replaces the Home Repairs Assistance Grant. It is awarded at the Council's discretion. It is primarily designed to provide assistance in the form of either grant or materials with small-scale works of repair, improvement and adaptation to a dwelling, in order to make a property suitable for occupation. MRGs will cover 80% of the cost of eligible work upto a maximum of £2,000. Upon completion all defects offering an immediate risk to the occupier must be completed.

NB Dwellings includes mobile homes on licensed residential sites.

Eligibility

Applicants must: -

- be aged 18 or over on the date of application;
- live in the dwelling as his/her only or main residence and have done so far at least 12 months prior to application;
- have lived in the property for at least a year prior to grant application
- have an owner's interest in the dwelling or be a tenant of the dwelling;
- have a duty or power to carry out the works in question;
- be (or alternatively his/her partner be) in receipt of Income Support, Council Tax Benefit, Guaranteed Pension Credit or Working Tax Credit which must include an extra element paid if the applicant/or partner are working and have a disability or severe disability;
- the eligible dwelling must be within Council Tax Bands A – D.

Application Process and Eligibility Criteria

All persons making a MRG enquiry will be sent an initial information pack detailing what grant assistance is available, the system of processing (including the Housing Health & Safety Rating System) and details of the Council's policy.

An inspection will be undertaken by an Inspecting Officer of the enquirer's property to assess the required works.

It is our policy to target MRG assistance in accordance with the following: -

The repairs must make the property suitable for occupation through rectifying problems of: -

- Serious disrepair
- Dampness prejudicial to health
- Inadequate heating
- Lack of hot water
- Defective or missing WC, bath, wash hand basin or sink.
- Unsafe facilities e.g. electrical installation.

Any items of disrepair eligible for a grant must be rectified to such a standard that they will not need replacing or repairing again for the next 10 years.

The Inspecting Officer will also apply the Housing Health and Safety Rating System. A grant will only be awarded where the applicant, partner or children are considered to be within the vulnerable group for the specified defect.

The Inspecting Officer will award points against the criteria outlined above.

Enquirers achieving sufficient points (i.e. 100 or above) will be forwarded an application form and the Inspecting Officer's assessment of necessary works.

Those enquirers whose premises on inspection do not achieve sufficient points, or do not fulfil the necessary criteria, will be advised accordingly.

Grant assistance will not normally be available for:

- Conservatories;
- lean-tos;
- out-houses;
- porches; or
- any part of the building which does not form part of the main structure.

However, grant assistance will be available for means of access to the property i.e. path or steps only where the person is classified as being in the vulnerable group or is disabled.

Council funds available for these works are limited. If available funding has been committed and no further resources are available applicants will be advised accordingly. Those achieving the required number of points will be placed upon a waiting list until funds are available.

Lewes District Council supports and works in partnership with Anchor Staying Put. All applicants aged 60 or over are encouraged, though this is not a requirement, to enlist the services of Anchor to assist them in the application process: -

Anchor Staying Put, 32-33, Vicarage Fields, Hailsham, BN27 1BG.

It is our policy to promote the use of Anchor Staying Put Agency to assist MRG applicants.

Discretionary Awards

If an applicant **fails** to meet **any** the following criteria:

- the eligible dwelling must be within Council Tax Band A-D;
- the applicant must have been in residence for 12 months prior to application;
- the applicant (or alternatively his/her partner be) in receipt of income support, CTB, Guaranteed Pension Credit or Working Tax Credit which must include an extra element paid if the applicant/or partner are working and have a disability or severe disability;
- 100 points have been achieved;
- must be able contribute to 20% of the eligible works;

AND

- is living in the property in a state of serious disrepair which offers an imminent risk to the occupiers health and safety;

OR

- the applicant is chronically sick or disabled and the condition of the property is materially affecting the applicant;

the Council will consider awarding a grant up to £2000 at the discretion of the Director of Planning and Environmental Services in consultation with the lead member for Housing.

The Application

In order for the Council to consider awarding an MRG, a complete and valid application must have been received. Such an application consists of: -

- a valid completed application form; and
- an estimate of the cost to the applicant of the works.

All valid and completed applications are to be determined no later than six months from the date of application. **The maximum grant will not in any event exceed £2,000 and will be limited to a maximum of £4,000 in any three-year period.**

Payment

Final payments will be made on the Inspecting Officer's satisfaction that the works have been completed satisfactorily and on receipt of a builder's (or in the case of materials, suppliers) invoices.

NB The Council's Officers act on behalf of the Authority to ensure public funds are spent correctly. Applicants must be aware that Officers do not act on their behalf. There are therefore no guarantees as to the quality of workmanship and any disputes arising between applicants and their contractors are their responsibility.

Conditions of Grant

The eligible works must be undertaken by the contractor(s) who provided the estimates(s) included in the application. We may vary this requirement where we consider there is a genuine reason to do so and it is in the interest of achieving efficient housing renewal. The applicant shall obtain prior permission from the Council before any change in contractor takes place. The use of a different contractor to one included in the application without our permission may result in the Council's cancellation of the grant and/or repayment by the relevant person.

We will consider redetermining a grant approval where the eligible works cannot be completed without carrying out further works which were unforeseen or where the works are required to make the property fit for human habitation. Unforeseen works will only be considered for financial assistance by the Council where they could not reasonably have been foreseen and work has not been started prior to the work having been agreed as 'unforeseen work' by the Council.

Applicants must pay their contribution to grant aided works and provide satisfactory evidence that payment has been made, i.e. a signed and dated receipt, before the Council will make any grant payment.

Where works are taking place in addition to grant aided works, but which are not grant aided and are funded by the applicant, these works must be completed and paid for by the applicant to the satisfaction of the Council before any payment will be made with respect to the grant aided works.

In the event of a breach of any of the conditions set by the Council, we may demand payment from the applicant/owner/occupier/landlord/trustee/beneficiary, whichever is appropriate, a sum equal to the amount of the grant paid or, as the case may be, any instalments of grant paid and the same shall be repayable to the Council. We have the discretion either not to demand repayment, or to require payment of less than the full amount.

It is a condition of the grant that the applicant takes all reasonable steps to pursue any relevant insurance claim or legal claim for damages in which the cost of the works to the premises to which the grant relates is part of that claim. The applicant shall repay to the Council the grant so far as is appropriate, out of the proceeds of the claim. This condition is not subject to a time limit and will therefore remain

operative until such time as any claim is settled and the appropriate amount of grant is repaid.

The Local Authority will take full consideration of the terms of the settlement received by the grant applicant and request repayment accordingly.

Where insurance claims have been received before the grant application is made, details of the insurance payments should be included in the application form.

Emergency Cases

In cases of exceptional emergency (i.e. where a vulnerable person is without heating in the winter) a MRG may be authorised to commence prior to approval. An Officer from the Council must visit and assess the situation and if he is satisfied that:

- the applicant meets all the eligibility criteria and
- the case is a genuine emergency and
- a written or verbal estimate has been obtained the Head of Environment and Health may authorise works to proceed. The grant approval must be sort as soon as possible.

Energy Efficiency Grants

Warmfront Scheme. This is for people on a state benefit, disability benefit or over 60 on a state benefit. (e.g. Council Tax Benefit, Housing Benefit, Income support etc). For more information telephone Eaga Ltd on Freephone no. 0800 316 2814. This is for loft insulation, cavity wall insulation and in some cases heating systems. Grants are available of up to £2,500.

Keep Warm in Winter Campaign. Run by Lewes District Council the scheme is for people over 60 on a Council Tax Band between A and D. You can get loft, cavity wall and hot water tank insulation along with low energy lightbulbs. This is a 100% grant. You pay nothing. Phone Lewes District Council on 01273 474968.

The Energycare Network. Grants for loft and cavity wall insulation. Open to anyone. Call Freephone 0800 389 1945.

Heat and Sun. Grants for insulation of £275 towards loft and cavity wall insulation and £600 for solar water heating. Open to anyone. Freephone 0808 0043 28786. The above grants are current for spring 2004, but may change throughout the financial year. Information on grants that are available can be obtained from the Energy Efficiency Officer on 01273 474968.

Other Forms of Assistance

The powers available to Council's under the Regulatory Reform Order 2002 are wide ranging. We are still working with other stakeholder and partners to develop a wide range of means of assistance to householders in the District.

Presently we work with Anchor Staying Put to provide a range of services for elderly or vulnerable residents, including: -

- A Handyperson Scheme
- Advice service in securing charitable funding for home improvements or adaptations if appropriate.
- Development of a Preferred Contractor Scheme.
- HOMES Scheme to offer a comprehensive survey and advice service for properties in disrepair.

Details of such assistance may be obtained from Anchor on 01323 441013, or by writing to them at Anchor Staying Put, 32-33, Vicarage Fields, Hailsham, BN27 1BG.

We are currently exploring, with other partner local authorities, the possibilities of setting up Equity Release Schemes, or alternatively providing advice on Equity Release Schemes. Currently, these are still in development, but when available will be published on www.lewes.gov.uk.

Exceptions Policy

Applications for discretionary grants, when not meeting the requirements of the above policy and criteria, can be awarded at the discretion of the Director of Planning & Environmental Services in consultation with the Lead Member for Housing on the Cabinet. Such an award will only be made subject to the provision of the Regulatory Reform (Housing Assistance) England and Wales Order 2002 and subsequent guidance.