

STEWARDSHIP AND RESPONSIBILITY:

A policy framework for private housing in Scotland.

In general officers are in agreement with the final report and the recommendations of the H.I.T.F. but would take this opportunity to add the undernoted comments.

Quality Standards for Private Housing in the 21st Century

The Tolerable Standard

The recommendations regard the extension of the Tolerable Standard to include elements such as thermal insulation and safe electrics are welcome. However it is sad to note that condensation has not been included. Any extension to the Tolerable Standard will have resource implications and this must be taken into account

The proposal that any lead in the water supply should be grounds for failure will put additional pressure on local authorities to sample and analyse water supplies.

Scottish Housing Quality Standard

It is noted that the S.H.Q.S. is to replace the proposed Index of Housing Quality and include elements such as disrepair, energy efficiency, security and fire safety. If these elements are likely to attract e.g. Improvement Grant it will put further pressure on local authority budgets which are already stretched to their limits.

The recommendation that the Scottish Executive should include a cross tenure Scottish Housing Quality Standard is welcomed. This should be aligned to the proposed Social Housing Standard.

The Repairing Standard for Private Landlords

The recommendation that there should be a statutory requirement that all written leases should include a statement of the private landlord's responsibilities in respect of repairs is welcomed, as is the recommendation that there should be widespread publicity to ensure private landlords and tenants are all aware of changes and implications.

Improving the Operation of the Housing Market

Improving the Information available to House Purchasers

The recommendation that the Scottish Executive should take forward proposals for a single survey, initially commissioned by the seller but ultimately paid for by the successful buyer is welcomed. Care will be required that the introduction of a single survey instead of the current multiple survey arrangements will not substantially increase the cost of survey.

Although surveyors, being able to charge for only one survey may increase the cost, the competition for surveys may help keep the cost down.

Agree in principle with the recommendations but the lessons learnt from any pilot must be fully taken into account before rolling this out.

The recommendation that sellers of residential properties should provide "seller packs" is also welcomed but the whole process must be transparent to be tenable. The suggested "log book" in theory is fine but there may be difficulty in getting people to complete and maintain the book in practice.

Tax and Benefit Incentives

The recommendation that the Scottish Executive should give consideration in particular to changing VAT for repairs and maintenance, changes to the income support rules for owner occupiers and reduction in stamp duty are welcome.

Facilitating Common Repairs and Maintenance

The recommendation that local authorities should provide encouragement to the establishment of owner's associations and provide modest funding to help set up these is welcomed but again the resource implications need to be taken into account.

The recommendation that legislation should be introduced to deal with unco-operative shared owners, to allow local authorities to carry out repair works and recover costs when properties are next sold, is welcomed.

Public Sector Intervention and Support at the Local Level

It is well noted that the H.I.T.F.'s view is that the primary responsibility for maintaining and improving the condition of private sector housing rests with the owners. However it is noted that the H.I.T.F. does recognise there is a case for public intervention proportionate to the seriousness of the problem.

Strategic Planning

The recommendation that the Scottish Executive should set targets for the reduction of below Tolerable Standard houses and other relevant targets which might be measured against any new Scottish Housing Quality Standard is encouraging.

Moray Council has included this as one of their objectives in their LHS.

The introduction of means testing for all improvement Grant applications however may present problems in targeting these properties. The available resources for private sector grants will determine timescales in achieving any targets.

Providing assistance to owners.

It is encouraging to see that the eradication of BTS houses and disability adaptations are being recommended as national priorities.

The recommendation that local authorities should be encouraged to make loans for works of repair, improvement or adaptation, but this will put additional pressure on budgets already heavily committed.

The recommendation that grant conditions should be extended to ten years is welcome, as is the recommendation to allow local authorities to apply additional conditions.

Modernising Local Authority Powers

The recommendations here are extensive but welcome.

It is recommended that mandatory entitlement to grant for owners of properties subject to notices in respect of improvement or repair is removed and any form of assistance is determined by the local authority. This should allow local authorities to make more use of their statutory powers to secure improvements and repairs.

The recommendation that local authorities should be given power to make and enforce a maintenance order requiring owners to submit and operate a maintenance plan for their building is encouraging. This hopefully should go some way to persuading owners to prevent properties from falling into serious disrepair.

The recommendation to replace Housing Action Areas with Housing Renewal Areas and their additional powers is welcome.

Other recommendations to strengthen the powers of entry and increase the options to recover costs are also welcome.

Improving Standards in the Private Rented Sector.

Strengthening the Rights of Private Tenants

The recommendation at long last that legislation should be amended to allow tenants the right to carry out disability adaptations with the consent of the landlord is very welcome indeed.

Regulation and Accreditation

The recommendation that encouragement be given to develop voluntary accreditation schemes to help address property condition, property management and tenancy management should go some way to playing a useful role in improving the landlord-tenant relationship.

Wider issues

It is encouraging to note that H.I.T.F. is recommending that the Scottish Executive should develop a much greater interest and engagement with the private rented sector. Most if not all the recommendations will have resource implications and the Scottish Executive should take this into account before final decisions are taken on proposed action.