



Chartered
Institute of
Environmental
Health

The London Housing Strategy

Response to draft for public consultation from the Mayor
of London

August 2009

The Chartered Institute of Environmental Health

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We are a **registered charity** with over 10,500 members across England, Wales and Northern Ireland.

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1. Introduction

- 1.1. The CIEH welcomes this strategy and the consultation and in particular, the higher profile given to the private rented sector within it.
- 1.2. Of particular concern however, is that the strategy does not fully consider owner occupiers within London - the largest sector in London. Owner occupied properties together with the private rented sector, contribute to 72% of London's housing stock. The CIEH considers that the size of this sector needs to be recognised in any strategy and sufficient resources made available to address problems in this sector.
- 1.3. Importantly, it should be noted that sustaining elderly and vulnerable residents in their homes is not only a key requirement of national and regional policy, but it also helps manage costs associated with hospital accommodation or care homes. It is noted that Home Improvement Agencies and the role that they can play does not appear to be considered by this strategy.
- 1.4. The CIEH believes that every borough should have a Home Improvement Agency enabled and resourced to deliver programmes to support the elderly and disabled in their homes.
- 1.5. This response initially provides information on private sector housing need, linkages to the funding background and to Government priorities. It then deals with the sections of the strategy and consultation in order. They are not intended to be read in isolation as there are cross-over and linkages in a number of areas.

2. Private sector housing need

- 2.1. London has worked closely with the BRE in developing its private stock condition model based on the national stock condition survey, census data and various other annual data sources.
- 2.2. BRE itself works closely with the Audit Commission, DEFRA, DECC and CLG on how to use the model to support its reporting requirements for the new national performance framework indicators. An update has been commissioned in east London to reflect the changed definition of the decent homes standard and it was found that the cost of making decent the private sector homes of vulnerable residents in east London alone was £806 million.
- 2.3. Current funding settlements however, continue to fall and this has meant that programmes to support independent living for vulnerable residents and to address climate change have had to be cut.

3. London funding background

- 3.1. Until 2004/ 05, all government funding linked to the private sector renewal index was passed direct to London boroughs. When this was first top-sliced to support regional funding for 2004/ 06, the amount provided through the sub-region was supplemented by the additional funding arising out of the government's Communities Plan. However, this was reversed by the London Housing Board in allocating private sector funding for 2006/ 08. Of the £90 million allocated to London on the basis of the private sector needs index just £30 million was passed on by the London Housing Board to support private sector decent homes work in Boroughs.
- 3.2. There have been implications of this change. When DCLG funding was passed direct to boroughs, many used it as an indicative budget for private sector work. The first call on such funds was usually to provide the match funding required by government for mandatory Disabled Facility Grant provision.
- 3.3. In addition to the decent homes and empty property programmes (which the London Housing Board continued to fund) budgets were also to be spent on private sector area renewal, home security measures and support for renewable energy schemes. The limits set by the London Housing Board in 2006 removed funding from all these areas. In reinstating funds from their own capital resources, boroughs had to prioritise funding for Disabled Facilities Grants since these are a mandatory entitlement and central to any equalities policy. Funding for schemes such as Renewal Areas, which are supposed to run for at least 10 years, and for home security and renewal initiatives are no longer available.

4. Government Priorities

- 4.1. Government concern to support independent living in an ageing society has been clearly demonstrated by the recent report "Lifetime homes, lifetime neighbourhoods; A National Strategy for Housing in an Ageing Society". A review of the performance management framework for local authorities has also been carried out and this introduced national performance indicators 136, 139, 142, and 187 to support work to tackle fuel poverty and support independent living. 72% of London's houses are in the private sector and although this new attention from government has raised the profile of work in the private sector, the redirection of funding has left insufficient resources to properly support this area.

5. The consultation headlines

Raising aspirations, promoting opportunity

Rethinking London's Housing

- 5.1. The CIEH supports the view that a real choice of homes for Londoners needs to be provided, and in particular a range of family homes.
- 5.2. We would also like to see adequate funding being made available for disabled access and adaptations in the owner occupied, privately rented and RSL sectors.

Helping home owners and first time buyers

- 5.3. The CIEH supports all efforts to enable Londoners to access the housing market, and to help existing homeowners at risk of repossession and homelessness. We agree that schemes need to reflect London's needs.

Improving the social rented sector

- 5.4. The CIEH believes that the health, safety and welfare of tenants in the social sector need to be properly protected. However, we also believe that this sector has received disproportionate levels of funding compared with the private sector and that this imbalance needs to be addressed.

Improving the private rented sector

- 5.5. The CIEH supports the actions to raise standards in the private rented sector in London and recognises that the Mayor has no direct control over a number of these activities. The CIEH looks to the Mayor to support local authorities undertaking this work by providing resource to support service delivery.
- 5.6. We note that the Landlord Accreditation Scheme has established support from almost all London Boroughs and strongly support the steps to increase the number of accredited landlords and see this as a tool to improving standards in this area.
- 5.7. We are aware that significant resources are required to maintain the database (particularly with regard to the assessment of the "fit and proper" person aspect); we look to the Mayor to support this scheme.
- 5.8. It is clear in the CIEH view that boroughs should first and foremost take a strategic approach in dealing with the private rented sector. A crucial part of this is for the Mayor to encourage boroughs to undertake their statutory duties under Section 3 of the Housing Act 2004. Such an approach should be based on local evidence with a combination of enforcement and incentive with effective consultation through accreditation schemes.
- 5.9. Boroughs need to provide advice for tenants and landlords as well as enforcing legislative requirements but comparing advice and enforcement represents a false dichotomy for LHAs that struggle to achieve the necessary balance with limited resources. The key barriers to effective delivery remain funding and recruitment.
- 5.10. The CIEH nevertheless believes that considerable effort needs to be made by government to address the fear of retaliatory eviction and afford it the same priority as the fear of crime generally. The aim should be to cultivate an environment in which such fears are demonstrably unfounded. The CIEH seeks the Mayor's support for this.
- 5.11. The CIEH also believes that the Mayor can greatly assist in raising standards in the private sector by encouraging landlords organisations in London in their quest to increase membership. The overwhelming majority of landlords own one or two properties; most of these landlords do not belong to a landlord organisation and do not regard themselves as businesses or as professionals.

Improving homes, transforming neighbourhoods

Designing better homes

- 5.12. The CIEH welcomes the measures being taken to consolidate standards and policies in the London Housing Design Guide, in particular recognition for the fact that new homes in the UK are some of the smallest in Europe. We also welcome the attention that will be given to improving the environmental quality of urban areas with the emphasis on green and play spaces and accessibility.
- 5.13. We think this is a key area where the Mayor can have influence over ensuring homes are fit for 21st Century living.

Producing greener homes

- 5.14. We welcome the support that is proposed for greening new homes. However, many people's lives are shortened due to excess cold and these initiatives must continue to be supported as a priority. To achieve this, considerable and sustained investment is needed which includes energy efficiency measures. The bulk of this investment should then be targeted at private sector dwellings (including the hard to heat) as these generally have a worse SAP rating than the social housing sector.
- 5.15. There have been a number of pilot schemes including Warm Zone and Coldbusters in London which approach climate change with a particular focus on fuel poverty. Funding has continued to be distributed according to the number of vulnerable private sector residents in non-decent homes. The CIEH considers that this work has to remain a priority and be funded accordingly.
- 5.16. The CIEH welcomes the target that all occupied homes in London will have a SAP rating of at least 40 by 2016 and the target of 65. In addition, we consider that all efforts should be made to integrate SAP improvements into the wider planning and building control framework to ensure that every opportunity is maximized in this important area.
- 5.17. It is essential that London gains its full allocation of available funding and takes advantage of economies of scale to ensure costs are as low as possible; this is currently evident with the pan-London retrofit project between the London Collaborative and the LDA.
- 5.18. We would also encourage the benchmarking of existing sub-regional schemes to identify those that are most effective and efficient so that lessons can be shared.

Revitalising homes and communities

- 5.19. The CIEH supports all efforts to bring empty properties back into use and that funding be targeted at areas and estates that need it most. However, we ask that there is greater flexibility to use this funding innovatively including for the recruitment of staff that will be used to deliver in this complex and time-consuming area.
- 5.20. We recognise that (particularly in the current financial climate) some owners of empty properties may not feel incentivised to bring these properties back into use and welcome tailored approaches to dealing with the issues.

- 5.21. Whole programme funding has had success in allowing boroughs to choose the best way to maximise capital investment to bring empty properties back into use. A balanced approach incorporating enforcement should be adopted to ensure properties are bought back into use as quickly as possible.
- 5.22. The CIEH has concerns over the target that no more than 1% of homes should stand empty for more than 6 months. Whilst such targets are useful and focus resources, they are difficult to measure; a target relating to numbers of empty properties returned to use would be more beneficial, to prevent limited resources being spent on surveys of limited value instead of dealing with existing properties.
- 5.23. We agree that there should be no financial incentive to leave a property empty, but the removal of the council tax discount may then place an additional burden onto local authorities in identifying and managing their empty property stock. A comprehensive empty property strategy is needed to ensure that this complex issue is dealt with effectively and efficiently.
- 5.24. The CIEH would also like to see considered as part of “Revitalising homes and communities” that there is recognition of the necessary financial support for local authorities to provide disabled facilities and adaptations in both private sector and RSL housing.
- 5.25. We also consider that the reinstatement of cross tenure funding is needed, to support “right to buy” leaseholders and area based interventions by local authorities. With the distribution of housing renewal funding to social housing tenants only, “right to buy” leaseholders have in recent years been unable to manage the financial demands of major works programmes and this has made it difficult to operate such schemes.

Maximizing delivery, optimizing value for money

Delivering across London

- 5.26. The CIEH supports efforts to develop a regional investment plan and in particular, efforts to promote new delivery mechanisms.

Delivering locally

- 5.27. The CIEH supports the work undertaken by the Mayor with London Boroughs in support of shared aims. Local authorities have a wide range of skills and tools available to them and their ability to deliver tangible outcomes is key to the success of a number of initiatives in the consultation. We are pleased therefore that this contribution is recognised.
- 5.28. The CIEH would like to see continued and additional engagement with London boroughs to enable finances to be used effectively and efficiently, income to be maximised and the investigation of novel funding sources such as loans to support this important work.

Investing to deliver

- 5.29. As previously discussed, changes in the way funding was allocated have meant that boroughs now are limited to using their funding for housing renewal for vulnerable residents and returning empty properties for use. This means that a Borough's ability

to deliver the objectives set out in the strategy is restricted and, indeed, it is likely that there is insufficient funding to carry out all the works required.

6. Conclusion

The CIEH welcomes this draft strategy and hopes that the comments made will help formulate the final version. We look forward to working with the Mayor in future to help deliver the objectives contained within it.