



Service Policy Panel

Report of: Housing Services Manager
Date: 23rd January 2007
Open

Housing Strategy Action Plan Review and Update

1. Summary

- 1.1 To report progress on the implementation of the Council's Housing Strategy 2004-2007.

2. Background

- 2.1 The Council's Housing Strategy 2004-2007, which has been approved by the Government Office for the West Midlands as "Fit for Purpose", has an Action Plan, with key milestones to be achieved between 2004-2007.
- 2.2 The performance against these milestones and general progress on implementation, have previously been reported to the Housing Health and Rural Affairs Policy and Scrutiny Panel and then onto Cabinet.
- 2.3 Progress was last reported to the Service Policy Panel on 21st June 2006.
- 2.4 Housing Policy, both nationally and regionally is being developed and implemented at a rapid pace, and the Council is fully participating in this work. The Housing Action Plans for 2004 – 2007 are attached at Appendix 1 and the final column contains commentary on progress against the key priorities.

3. Future Updating of the Housing Strategy

- 3.1 There has been a requirement for Council's to produce Local Housing Strategies and for them to meet the Government's 'Fit for Purpose' criteria, which this Council's Strategy met in 2004.
- 3.2 Housing policy and strategy is one of the Government's priorities and the approach being taken by Local Authorities is under review. The recent Local Government White Paper "Strong and Prosperous Communities" (Oct 2006) together with other emerging guidance has continued the approach of a regional and sub regional focus on housing. Since June

2005 there has been a West Midlands Regional Housing Strategy which is forming the basis for West Midlands housing policy, the links to other key priorities such as health and community safety and housing investment.

- 3.3 It is likely that there will at some stage be the development of sub regional housing strategies mirroring the four West Midlands housing market areas. Until that process is considered and formalised we have been advised by the Government Office for the West Midlands that Local Authorities should “refresh” their Housing Strategies and update their Action Plans. The Council’s Housing Strategy is due for review in Summer 2007 and it is proposed to carry out a light touch review of the document, possibly on an annual rolling basis until the final is clarified by GOWM. The revised proposals will be brought back to the Service Policy Panel at the appropriate time.

4. Key Issues

- 4.1 Appendix 1 highlights performance, but set out below is a brief summary of the most significant elements:

Priority One – Meeting Affordable Housing Need

The Council has exceeded its target to secure funding for 120 new units of affordable housing, with a total of 155 having received approval to date. This target is included in the Council’s Improvement Plan as an outcome from the Comprehensive Performance Assessment Inspection in 2004.

As part of the review and refresh of the Housing Strategy Action Plan the Council will need to consider new targets. This will be heavily influenced by progress and indications of likely housing supply targets that are currently being considered as part of the West Midlands Regional Spatial Strategy Phase 2 Revision.

An investment strategy is currently being developed by the Housing Corporation to consider where capital funding should be directed to within the South Housing Market Area (Worcestershire and South Warwickshire).

The Council is currently leading on the inclusion of targets in the refresh of the Worcestershire Local Area Agreement to maximise the amount of public land made available by Local Authorities and members of the Worcestershire Partnership. This is to try and increase the planned release of land for affordable housing rather than open market tendering of sites. There will be a particular focus in trying to assist lower income households onto the homeownership ladder through a range of shared ownership.

Priority Two – Tackling Homelessness and Providing Housing Options

The Council together with its contractor, Community Housing Group and other partners continues to develop its successful approach to

homelessness prevention, which has seen a significant reduction in the number of people accepted as homeless.

Recent new initiatives include a Sanctuary Scheme for families that have suffered domestic violence, whereby additional security measures are built into homes to try and prevent access by violent partners and allow the family to remain in their own homes without recourse to a Refuge.

The Council is participating in a wide range of strategic and policy areas such as Supporting People and Older Peoples Services, all of which link into housing options and other priority areas for the Housing Strategy.

Perhaps the most significant new area of work will be the introduction of a new way of allocating social housing through partner Housing Associations. A bid by the South Housing Market Area Partnership for Government funding to set up a Choice Based Lettings (CBL) Scheme has been successful with £208,000 being secured to set the scheme up by December 2007. The Government requires this new type of scheme which involves applicants bidding for Housing Association properties that become available, to be up and running by 2010. The Council working with Community Housing Group and its Housing Association partners will be in a position to meet this target well ahead of schedule. Further progress will be reported to the Council at the appropriate stage.

Priority Three – Maintaining the Independence of older and vulnerable people through housing and support

The adoption of an Older Persons Strategy for Worcestershire will ensure a focus on services for older people and the Council has been proactive in working with the County Supporting People Team on reviewing services and looking at ways of commissioning new supported housing services in the District where possible. This includes work being carried out with partners on the Wyre Forest Homelessness Forum to assess the feasibility of a foyer scheme for young vulnerable homeless people in the District. The Care and Repair Agency continues to assist the Council in meeting the needs of older and vulnerable people who wish to remain in their own homes.

Priority Four – Improving conditions within Private Sector Housing.

The Council has made significant progress in implementing the Housing Act 2004 and has been proactive in setting up a Statutory Register for Houses in Multiple Occupation and working with landlords to improve housing conditions, taking enforcement action where necessary.

The Council continues to meet the Best Value Targets on Empty Properties and developing new initiatives particularly in connection with improving affordable warmth and energy efficiency in domestic properties.

A stock condition survey to assist the Council better understand and address the problems of poor housing in the private sector has been

slightly delayed, but when completed will assist in sharing a common approach on research with the other Local Authorities in the South Housing Market Area.

5. Financial Implications

- 5.1 All of the Council's housing activities are covered by divisional revenue budgets and the Single Housing Capital Pot.

6. Risk Management

- 6.1 The Housing Strategy is essential to meet a range of statutory duties and targets, and the Council's own corporate objectives. The risk in not fulfilling these requirements and could be increased homelessness and poor housing conditions, having a very negative impact upon peoples social, health and economic wellbeing.

7. Options

- 7.1 At the present time it is proposed that the Service Policy Panel recommends to Cabinet, that officers carry out a light touch review of the current Housing Strategy and Action Plans, during the Summer 2007, notwithstanding any further guidance on Housing Strategies being forthcoming.

8. Appendices

- 8.1 Appendix 1 – Action Plans

Officer Contact Details:

Tim Rice
Housing Services Manager
01562 732560