

WYRE FOREST DISTRICT COUNCIL

CABINET MEETING
25TH OCTOBER 2007

Housing Strategy Refresh and Action Plan Update

OPEN	
COMMUNITY STRATEGY THEME	Improved Health and Wellbeing
CORPORATE PLAN THEME:	Enabling Community Wellbeing
KEY PRIORITY:	Housing
CABINET MEMBER:	Councillor Mrs. A.T. Hingley
RESPONSIBLE OFFICER:	Head of Planning Health and Environment
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APPENDICES	Appendix 1 – Housing Action Plans 2007-2008.

1. PURPOSE OF REPORT

- 1.1 To report progress on the refresh of the Council's Housing Strategy 2004-2007 and associated Action Plan.

2. RECOMMENDATION

The Cabinet is asked to DECIDE:

- 2.1 That the Housing Action Plans for 2007-08 are agreed and that officers progress and consult upon the Housing Strategy Refresh before the end of the 2007/08 financial year, subject to any further guidance on the development of a sub-regional Housing Strategy.**

3. BACKGROUND

- 3.1 This briefing is further to the update given to Members at the Service Policy Panel on 23rd January 2007. Following the publication of the Housing Green Paper "Homes for the future; more affordable, more sustainable" in July 2007 Local Authorities have been awaiting further guidance on the production of sub-regional Housing Strategies and what they should do with their own existing Housing Strategies in the interim. In the absence of any further guidance we have agreed

with the Government Office for the West Midlands (GOWM) we undertake a 'light touch' review of the Strategy which is currently underway.

- 3.2 Officers have recognised that even a light touch refresh involves a considerable amount of redrafting. As the current Strategy is still within its original period (2004-2007) and the priority areas are still highly relevant, the actual redraft can take place anytime up until 31st March 2008. However, the annual Action Plans, which are reported through the Scrutiny process and to Cabinet twice a year, are in need of an update and so these are the focus of the current briefing. The Council's strategic and operational housing role is also to be a more significant priority in the forthcoming update of the Community Strategy.

4. KEY ISSUES

- 4.1 Set out below is a commentary regarding the priority areas in the current Housing Strategy, which highlights some of the key housing issues likely to face the Council in future and that will feature in the refresh of the Strategy.

Priority One – Meeting Affordable Housing Need

The Council has exceeded its affordable housing targets that were set after the Comprehensive Performance Inspection in 2004.

The provision of affordable housing is a key Corporate priority and is the most significant housing challenge facing the Council. The recently produced South Housing Market Area Assessment highlighted that there is an annual shortfall of 175 affordable housing units, and that this rate is increasing. There is also going to be consideration of the housing needs of Gypsies and Travellers and where any new sites may be needed in the District.

The major challenge for the District Council is to ensure that we direct our strategy and operational resources at increasing the amount of affordable housing in the District. From a policy level this means influencing the West Midlands Regional Spatial Strategy partial review to allocate sufficient land, working with Housing Association partners to identify new sites, utilising the Local Area Agreement (LAA) to obtain more housing sites, attracting capital funding from the Housing Corporation, utilising the Council's Housing Capital receipts and developing strong planning policies through the Local Development Framework review. This applies to both urban and rural areas.

The Housing Green Paper recognises the high level strategic and operational housing role of Local Authorities and is strongly urging that this is fully and effectively resourced. Officers operate in a complex and fast changing environment to try and ensure that the Council and the local population benefit from a range of partnerships and funding mechanisms.

Increasingly our work will be interlinked at County and sub-regional level. We are now benefiting from taking a lead in developing the Housing Local Area Agreement which seeks to maximise the amount of public sector land being made available for affordable housing and in particular we are having productive outcomes with Worcestershire County Council on land disposals.

Once there is further clarification in relation to housing numbers for the District as part of the partial review of the Regional Spatial Strategy, the Council will need to review its targets for affordable housing delivery.

Priority Two – Tackling Homelessness and Providing Housing Options

These are key statutory services for the Council. Significant progress in improving the District's Homelessness situation has been due to a focus on preventing homelessness through a range of initiatives such as private sector rent deposits, mediation, debt advice, domestic abuse support services and floating support. The service is primarily operated through a contract with Community Housing Group (CHG) and also partnerships with a range of statutory and voluntary agencies. Between 2004-2006, there were 240 and 130 homelessness acceptances respectively, a reduction of 46%.

However, homelessness is volatile and subject to many influences such as unemployment and interest rate rises and the Department of Communities and Local Government has highlighted concerns over the level of youth homelessness in the District, which will require a targeted response and a consideration of how resources are utilised.

The recently launched Worcestershire Homelessness Strategy is seen as a positive approach to cross Local Authority working and reflects the high level of effective partnership working that takes place in housing. The Council is participating in current countywide Supporting People reviews on homelessness and young people and we will feed the outcomes from this work into the Strategy refresh.

The Council has been awarded funding from the CLG to implement a new Choice Based Lettings Scheme, which is a partnership between eight Local Authorities and Housing Association Partners. The operation of this scheme, together with the homelessness and advice service, is the subject of contract renegotiations with CHG which will be taken to Cabinet early in 2008. The final cost of the CBL scheme will have to be borne by the contract and the Council will be looking at any efficiencies that can be delivered through the new contract.

Priority Three – Maintain the independence of older and vulnerable people through housing and support

The Council works closely with its partners at a high strategic level through the Worcestershire Older Persons Strategy Programme Board and Supporting People where a comprehensive review of housing and support for older people is underway. Many of our services are also targeted at older people, notably the successful North Worcestershire Care and Repair Agency which has provided advice and practical assistance using Council grants to significant numbers of local residents.

Pressures upon these services will continue to grow with the increasingly older age profile of the local population.

Significant progress is being made in considering the supported housing needs of more vulnerable local residents. The Housing Corporation have indicated their 'in principle' support for a Foyer scheme in Kidderminster which will provide housing and support for young homeless people who want to develop their educational and vocational training.

We are also trying to secure capital funding to redevelop new accommodation for people with mental health problems on the site of older facilities on the Franche Road in Kidderminster.

In particular the Council needs to find housing and support solutions for those individuals in the community who have more chaotic lifestyles including those with substance misuse problems.

Priority Four – Improving conditions in Private Sector Housing

This is an area of the Council's statutory housing work where there is a significant increase on the demands being placed upon it.

The Housing Act 2004 introduced changes in housing inspection work and has increased the workload of the team. This is in part offset by the Care and Repair Agency now carrying out the delivery of grant work, but the Council is now much more proactive in Houses in Multiple Occupation and housing inspection and enforcement work, which is a time consuming process.

The recent Housing Green Paper highlights the need for Council's to be more proactive in reducing the rate of long term empty properties, a role which is carried out currently as part of the role of an officer whose contract is due to end in March 2008.

There has also been a general increase in housing complaints, the level of drainage complaints and more recently the impact of the floods on both drainage and watercourse management. The team's workload has and will continue to significantly increase because of the flooding; the resources required to manage this part of the team's responsibilities needs to be reviewed and may be considered as part of the 2008/09 budget process. This has to be managed alongside the team's statutory functions as outlined.

The impact of Climate Change and forthcoming Government legislation will also be significant and the affordable warmth and sustainability work carried out by the Housing Section will increasingly feature more prominently in the Housing Strategy. The Government target of ensuring that 70% of vulnerable private sector households live in Decent Homes by 2010 is a particular challenge for the Council. The draft report of the Council's recently completed Private Sector Stock Condition Survey indicates that the Council is currently at 63% and needs to bring approximately 600 homes back to a decent standard by 2010 to meet the Government target.

Although capital funding is available from the West Midlands Regional Assembly to assist with this, the problem is the lack of staff capacity to ensure the funding is

spent. This position is under urgent consideration to see if it can be self funded from the capital funding.

The Housing Action Plans 2007/2008

Attached at Appendix 1 are the proposed Action Plans for the current financial year and these take account of Corporate and Divisional Business Plan priorities that are already in place.

These will be updated fully again for 1st April, 2008 to coincide with the completion of the refresh of the Housing Strategy.

5. FINANCIAL IMPLICATIONS

- 5.1 All of the Council's housing activities are covered by Divisional revenue budgets and the single housing capital pot.
- 5.2 The Homelessness Prevention and Housing Options contract and implementation of the Choice Based Lettings Scheme will be subject to separate negotiations and will be reported to Cabinet in early 2008.

6. LEGAL AND POLICY IMPLICATIONS

- 6.1 None at present, but the revised Housing Strategy may result in new policies which will be reported separately.

7. RISK MANAGEMENT

- 7.1 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 could be increased homelessness and poor housing conditions not meeting statutory duties and having a very negative impact upon people's social, health and economic wellbeing.

8. CONCLUSION

- 8.1 It is recommended that the Housing Targets for 2007/08 are agreed subject to observations and recommendations by the Panel and that the refreshed Housing Strategy is developed and consulted upon over the forthcoming months.

9. CONSULTEES

- 9.1 Not applicable at this stage.

10. BACKGROUND PAPERS

- 10.1 None.

5.10.07