

Forest Heath District Council

(This report is a key decision. This report has been subject to appropriate notice of publication under the Council's Access to Information Rules)

Report of the Cabinet Member for Planning, Housing and Transport

CABINET

3 JULY 2012

CAB12/010

INTERIM HOUSING STRATEGY AND LOCAL TENANCY STRATEGY (Forward Plan Reference JUL12(A)/06)

Summary and reasons for recommendation(s)

The Council has recently approved a new Strategic Plan covering the period 2012-16. The priorities and objectives were the subject of public consultation to help inform the development of a delivery plan which sets out the timescales, commitments and resources required in order to achieve the priority outcomes.

One of the strategic priorities was Housing – Meeting the District's Housing Need. The Interim Housing Strategy attached to this report sets out the housing issues facing the District and includes an action plan designed to meet the strategic priority in housing. Also included is the Local Tenancy Strategy that all local authorities are required to produce. Local authorities are being required to produce a tenancy strategy for their area concerning the nature and length of tenancies in their area offered by Registered Providers working in the area. The Tenancy Strategy is not binding on Registered Providers but they do need to have regard to this policy in determining tenancies so it is a key document in shaping housing activities in the area.

Recommendation(s)

Cabinet are asked to:

- 1. Recommend the Interim Housing Strategy to go forward for Council approval;**
- 2. Approve the Local Tenancy Strategy for public consultation; and**
- 3. Request Officers to bring back a paper setting out the options for the administration's longer term position with regard to the provision of new affordable housing in the District.**

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How will the recommendations help us meet our strategic priorities?

1. The strategy aims directly to deliver one of the strategic priorities of the Strategic Plan and the actions are framed around that priority. Specifically the strategy aims to meet the following priority:

2. **HOUSING – MEETING THE DISTRICT’S HOUSING NEED**

Objective 1: To provide adequate provision in our planning policy framework to meet current and future housing needs

- Encourage affordable homes and ensure adequate housing provision and the right choice of housing types through our planning policy framework

Objective 2 To help manage the district’s existing housing stock.

- Work with Register Providers and private landlords to make the best use of the existing housing stock
- Working to improve housing conditions and reduce the risks posed by poor quality homes

Objective 3 – Use our influence to bring empty homes back into use

- Pro-actively seek to advise property owners and where necessary, take enforcement action.

3. It will also assist with the other priorities, in particular economic development.

Wards affected

4. The proposals do not impact directly on any one individual Ward, but as a whole will indirectly impact on all Wards.

Key issues

5. This Interim Housing Strategy sets out what Forest Heath District Council will do to meet the housing needs of the current and future residents of the district of Forest Heath. It examines the needs of the current and projected future populations, taking account of migration in and out of the district, and describes the Council’s housing vision, along with the priorities for action and investment.
6. The Housing Strategy is an interim one. In line with shared services it is intended to produce a joint housing strategy with St Edmundsbury covering West Suffolk. The previous Forest Heath Housing Strategy finished in 2010. The St Edmundsbury Housing Strategy should begin its review process later in 2012 with a view to being

completed in 2013. The Interim Housing Strategy is designed to cover the period until the joint review process starts later this year.

7. The Local Tenancy Strategy is not an interim strategy and will need to be subject to full consultation. Each local authority is required to have their own local strategy and St Edmundsbury recently published their own.
8. Housing and policies related to housing are currently undergoing change on a scale which is arguably unprecedented. The Government is introducing radical reforms to housing and planning and the benefits system. This strategy is set in the context of those changes and seeks to respond positively to them.
9. The strategy seeks to act as an overarching strategy and database in the field of housing in that it sets out a great deal of context information and data. This is the base upon which the actions contained in the action plan are set and the need to which they seek to respond. The action plan contains a number of tasks which are effectively sub strategies. However the intention is not to reproduce all the data and needs based assessments but to rely on the data contained within the interim housing strategy as the base point for the action plans that will be produced.
10. The data reveals a number of salient features. In summary key amongst these are:
 - Housing need in the area is generally increasing and levels of homelessness are rising
 - Affordability is a problem across the area in all sectors
 - Levels of new housing completions are falling particularly in the social housing sector. This is mainly because of the lack of development proposals by Flagship Housing although the future levels are uncertain due the impact of the changes in funding arrangements for social housing being unclear
 - There is increasing pressure on the private housing market mainly as a result of reducing options in other sectors and general problems in the housing market
 - Potential house purchasers are finding it difficult to enter the home ownership market
11. The planned actions focus on two main areas. Reform of the planning arrangements is designed to ensure that the overall planning policies of the Council are appropriate to the strategic objectives. The focus on private sector housing issues partly reflects the increasing importance of the sector in delivering housing solutions for the area. It is also a feature of the uncertainties in supply over new social housing. The actions in the private sector focus on turning empty homes back into use and house condition and making best use of the housing that already exists.

Other options considered

12. Until recently it was a statutory requirement to produce a housing strategy. This is no longer the case although it is a statutory requirement for local authorities to have a strategic approach to housing in their area. The strategy represents this strategic approach.

Community impact

13. The impact on all sections of the community has been considered as part of the identification of the priorities and actions in the Interim Housing Strategy. The Strategy seeks to meet the needs of all sections of the community both current and future. At the heart of the Local Tenancy Strategy is the promotion of sustainable communities and the principles that are contained therein.

What consultation has been undertaken and what were the outcomes?

14. This report seeks approval to progress to public consultation for the Local Tenancy Strategy. Although included as an annex to the Interim Housing Strategy it has been written as a stand alone document that can be published separately. The Interim Housing Strategy has been developed in consultation with partners and key stakeholders. However as a result of its interim nature and plan to start a review of the West Suffolk strategic approach to housing later this year it will not be the subject of formal consultation at this stage. The West Suffolk Housing Strategy will be the subject of full and formal consultation.

Financial and resource implications

15. The actions within the Interim Housing Strategy are contained within existing budgets.

Risk management implications

16. Where risk(s) are identified and action is required to treat any or all of them, these will form part of the Council's Strategic Risk Register which is reported to the Performance and Audit Committee. At this stage the key risk lies in the uncertain nature of the impact of many of the changes being introduced in both planning and housing. In particular the impact of the new affordable rent regime on the supply of new social housing threatens the ability of the Council to deliver its wider strategic objectives.

Legal/Policy implications

17. The Council will be required to meet all aspects of housing and planning legislation in delivering its strategic approach to housing.

Documents attached

18. Appendix 1 – Interim Housing Strategy and Local Tenancy Strategy.

Background papers

19. None