

Overview and Scrutiny Committee



Forest Heath
District Council

Title of Report:	West Suffolk Housing Strategy: Progress Report against Action Points	
Report No:	OAS/FH/17/012	
Report to and dates:	Overview and Scrutiny Committee	20 April 2017
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Purpose of report:	To review progress against the West Suffolk Housing Strategy 2015-2018	
Recommendation:	<p>It is RECOMMENDED that, Overview and Scrutiny Committee:</p> <p>(1) Notes the progress to date against the actions arising from the West Suffolk Housing Strategy 2015-2018;</p> <p>(2) Notes the challenges facing delivery of the West Suffolk Housing Strategy; and</p> <p>(3) Keeps progress under review and receives a further update report in early 2018 in order to monitor delivery in 2017.</p>	
Key Decision: <i>(Check the appropriate box and delete all those that do not apply.)</i>	<i>Is this a Key Decision and, if so, under which definition?</i> No, it is not a Key Decision - <input checked="" type="checkbox"/>	

Consultation:		The production of the West Suffolk Housing Strategy was the result of extensive consultation. The delivery of the Strategy is dependent on close collaborative working across West Suffolk Councils' various departments and with parish and town councils, other authorities across Suffolk and beyond, Suffolk County Council, developers, housing associations, voluntary groups and the public. Specific partners are mentioned within the report as appropriate	
Alternative option(s):		No monitoring or scrutiny of delivery of the Housing Strategy – REJECTED . The West Suffolk Housing Strategy is ambitious and far-reaching, thus it is imperative to invite regular scrutiny of officers' efforts to deliver against the 40 objectives it contains	
Implications:			
Are there any financial implications? If yes, please give details		Yes <input type="checkbox"/> No <input checked="" type="checkbox"/> None arising directly from this report – see section 3	
Are there any staffing implications? If yes, please give details		Yes <input type="checkbox"/> No <input checked="" type="checkbox"/> None arising directly from this report – see section 4	
Are there any ICT implications? If yes, please give details		Yes <input type="checkbox"/> No <input checked="" type="checkbox"/> None arising directly from this report – see section 5	
Are there any legal and/or policy implications? If yes, please give details		Yes <input type="checkbox"/> No <input checked="" type="checkbox"/> None arising directly from this report – see section 6	
Are there any equality implications? If yes, please give details		Yes <input type="checkbox"/> No <input checked="" type="checkbox"/> None arising directly from this report – see section 7	
Risk/opportunity assessment:		<i>(potential hazards or opportunities affecting corporate, service or project objectives)</i>	
Risk area – KEY RISKS	Inherent level of risk (before controls)	Controls	Residual risk (after controls)
	Low/Medium/High*		Low/Medium/High*
Very little new affordable housing delivered	High	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • With Planning Policy Team, ensure up-to-date planning policies and affordable housing guidance • Provide evidence-based advice to developers and housing associations and challenge viability assessments purporting to yield low, non-policy compliant levels of affordable housing • Work with parish councils to promote small-scale rural development • Establish a housing development company 	Medium

Poor conditions in the private sector unchallenged	High	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Update regulatory policies • Target poorest quality private sector homes first • Encourage high standards in the private rented sector through the West Suffolk Lettings Partnership's engagement with landlords 	Low
Too many disabled and low income households living in unsuitable homes	High	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Commission Housing Improvement Agency and introduce performance-related outcomes • Revise the Housing Assistance Policy • Work with Suffolk County Council and others to identify disabled households and design individual remedies to enable them to remain living independently at home 	Medium
Too many homeless households living in high cost, unsuitable temporary accommodation	Medium	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Purchase and improve accommodation to use as a high quality alternative to unsuitable bed and breakfast accommodation for homeless households requiring interim accommodation 	Low
Ward(s) affected:		All	
Background papers: <i>(all background papers are to be published on the website and a link included)</i>		West Suffolk Housing Strategy 2015-2018 http://www.westsuffolk.gov.uk/Council/Policies_Strategies_and_Plans/upload/WestSuffolkHousingStrategy.pdf	
Documents attached:		Appendix A – Progress against Housing Strategy Objectives, Actions and Targets – December 2016	

1. Key issues and reasons for recommendations

1.1 Background

- 1.1.1 It is no longer a legal requirement for local authorities to have a Housing Strategy in place. Both Forest Heath District Council and St Edmundsbury Borough Council recognised, however, that in order to have a strategic overview of how the Councils will deliver a range of appropriate housing options, it was prudent to develop one and so a West Suffolk Housing Strategy was drawn up in 2014/15 following extensive consultation.
- 1.1.2 In drafting the Strategy, the overall aim was to ensure a range of housing options across the private sale, private rented and affordable housing sectors, such that all tenures can provide sustainable and suitable homes for the residents of West Suffolk.
- 1.1.3 The draft West Suffolk Housing Strategy was considered in detail at a joint meeting of Forest Heath's and St Edmundsbury's Overview and Scrutiny Committee on 23 July 2014. It was ultimately approved by Forest Heath Council on 8 October 2014 (and St Edmundsbury Council on 23 September 2014).

2. Delivery against the Strategic Objectives

- 2.1 The West Suffolk Housing Strategy includes a series of objectives against which key actions and targets have been formulated. These actions and targets are reviewed and, if necessary, amended, deleted or added to on an annual basis. The Housing Service reviews progress against the Housing Strategy actions on a quarterly basis.
- 2.2 The Housing Strategy groups the objectives under the following headings:
- planning
 - rural housing
 - developers and providers
 - private sector housing
 - adaptations and improvements
 - community
 - energy efficiency
 - land and resources
 - homelessness
 - efficiency and effectiveness
 - care and support.
- 2.3 **Appendix A** gives a detailed update on progress at December 2016 against the 40 objectives under these headings. The remainder of this report summarises, under each of the headings, key achievements to date and work underway and highlights challenges and external factors impacting on delivery.
- 2.4 The tables below give the latest position on actions monitored on a quarterly basis, that is, the position at the end of December 2016. If more up-to-date details are available, these have also been included.

Planning

Achievements

The Councils have achieved their CS5 and CS9 policies to deliver 30% affordable housing on all sites completed between January 2016-December 2016.

Negotiation over affordable tenures on a site in Kentford resulted in officers being able to maintain the required 30% affordable housing after a Registered Provider could no longer commit to the development. An alternative Registered Provider was secured but could not meet the original offer. The developer agreed to a revised offer but this resulted in a slight change on tenure mix.

As of April 2016, the Self-build and Custom House Building Act 2015, has required that each Local Authority keeps a register of individuals and associations of individuals who are seeking to acquire serviced plots of land to build houses to occupy as their home within the local authority area. The Housing Service has successfully set up and managed a register to help gauge the level of demand for self-build and custom house building in the area.

Work underway

The West Suffolk Affordable Housing Supplementary Planning Document has currently been updated to reflect recent changes to the NPPF and the Written Ministerial Statement (HCWS50) published in November 2014 on the provision of affordable housing on sites of 10 units or less. The updated SPD also provides further clarity to developers on how to calculate a commuted sum for both on-site and off-site contributions. Although this document has been consulted on internally we are currently awaiting the details of the Housing and Planning White Paper before going out for external consultation. Our aim is to have the document adopted by July 2017.

As at March 2017 the Strategic Housing Team is currently assisting Planning and Policy colleagues and the Cambridge Sub Regional Housing Board on a joint response to the recently published Housing White Paper.

Challenges for 2017

The National Planning Policy Framework is being reviewed. It is proposing to widen the definition of affordable housing to include Starter Homes and an Affordable Private Rent (APR) product. The APR product is designed to help with the emergence of the Build to Rent sector. Local policies will need to reflect these new tenures, however it is envisaged that local housing needs will still dictate the affordable housing tenure required for each development.

There has been an emerging trend where by the size of the affordable dwellings currently being offered by a number of developers as part of the S106 agreements is below a size that is acceptable to our local Registered Providers and this is causing difficulties in securing a Registered Provider prepared to take on the affordable dwellings. There are also well documented considerations other health and social wellbeing implications arising through the provision of small sized dwellings.

The Strategic Housing team will be working with Planning colleagues to explore the possibilities of introducing minimum space standards for affordable housing within the councils' Development Management policy that can then be enforced against.

During 2017 work will be required on identifying land that is suitable for the provision of small serviced plots for eligible people expressing an interest in Self-build and Custom Build housing.

Rural housing

Achievements

The Strategic Housing Team facilitated a workshop at Rural Parish Conference held in November 2016 exploring the benefits of rural affordable housing and how the Councils can assist parish councils and work in partnership with them to bring forward rural exception schemes to provide housing for local people.

Work underway

The Strategic Housing Team is currently working with two parish councils to bring forward small scale rural affordable housing schemes in the villages of Pakenham and Tuddenham. The homes built will be for local people with a connection to the parish.

Challenges for 2017

It remains unclear whether the extension of 'right-to-buy' to housing association tenants will also apply to affordable homes developed on rural exception sites. The outcome of this decision will be important when trying to secure local support for schemes, where the presumption is that the homes will remain affordable in perpetuity.

Developers and providers

Achievements

From Jan 2016 – December 2016 we delivered 166 new affordable homes.

Forest Heath 17 – RP(0) S106(17)

St Edmundsbury 149 – RP(83)S106(66)

Work underway

The target for Jan 2017 – December 2017 is predicted to be 132 new affordable homes:

Forest Heath 124 (note there are 8 completions predicted Jan-April 2018)

St Edmundsbury 8 (note there are 57 completions predicted Jan-April 2018)

Challenges for 2017

Some Housing Associations are struggling to maintain their development programmes given rising building costs and the Government's changes to the national rent policy. This was the case for Kentford as mentioned above.

In addition, at present, the 2016/17 programme appears heavily skewed towards one and two bedroom homes. The Strategic Housing Team has been working with developers and Registered Providers to ensure we are securing a number larger properties as well as wheelchair compatible properties to meet the long term needs on those applicants on our housing register.

Private sector housing

Achievements

We have continued to work pro-actively to bring empty homes back into use, with 26 homes returned to use following our interventions, 17 in FHDC and 9 in SEBC.(This remains a key priority under our strategy and, whilst it is a challenging area, will work with our partners to return prioritised and longer-term properties back into use.

Fully revised Housing Regulatory Policy now in place

Better management and practice in the letting of private rented housing is being achieved by the West Suffolk Lettings Partnership Officer working closely with the Housing Standards Team to carry out an initial assessment of both landlord and property

Work underway

Targeting the most hazardous properties and non-compliant landlords and owners through effective preventative and enforcement action – continues to be a key part of our work. 93 properties brought up to standard (49 in FHDC and 44 in SEBC). We have been pro-active as well as reactive, in responding to tenants complaints about their housing conditions. A project with the Suffolk Fire Service to reduce hazards in flats above commercial premises and surveys to identify and bring HMOs up to standard are examples of this, which will continue this year.

Challenges for 2017

Ensuring private rented accommodation at or under Local Housing Allowance rates (the maximum that can be covered in full by housing benefit) is proving difficult due to local private rent inflation. The West Suffolk Lettings Partnership is being reviewed to better understand whether incentives, including extended rent guarantees, could increase supply

New legislation on extending HMO licensing and tackling rogue Landlords will need to be implemented in future, along with additional sanctions available to deal with poor conditions. Further guidance is awaited from Government on these new measures.

Adaptations and improvements

Achievements

New Suffolk-wide Housing Improvement Agency (HIA) contract is now in place; the service commenced in December 2015. New model of working has a greater emphasis on efficiency and performance

The funding allocation from the Better Care Fund was increased in 2015-16, partly because the Housing Service is delivering Disabled Facilities Grants, DFGs, through a Suffolk-wide HIA and partnership approach

Revised Housing Assistance Policy approved by Cabinet in November 2015. The new policy has been simplified to provide a single form of grant to simplify uptake. At the same time, there are more safeguards to ensure repayment of grant monies if the property is sold/transferred Uptake for this grant, for home-owners, has been low, with work continuing with stakeholders to promote and increase uptake. This includes pooling resource with the Warmer Homes Healthy People project, which has similar funding to assist people effectively heat and insulate their homes. We are also considering the criteria of the policy, to encourage more grants. The grant is there to make homes safe, therefore it is considered a relevant part of the overall strategy.

The HIA commenced in May 2016 to deliver services, including DFG, to vulnerable residents to allow them to live independently in their homes. Partners have been working with the HIA to improve the service being delivered, to ensure more DFG completions and spend against our allocation. A total of 73 DFGs were completed at a cost of £425,535.22 (39 In FHDC at a cost of £191,834.10 and 34 in SEBC at a cost of £233,701.12).

Work underway

Work being carried out to establish a database of Occupational Therapy, OT, clients who require adapted housing, assess needs of disabled people against adapted stock available and determine what type of new build is required

Group established in West Suffolk, chaired by Suffolk County Council OTs, to action and monitor this issue

Challenges for 2017

Now the new HIA has commenced, the challenge is to:

- design systems between Housing, Suffolk County Council and Clinical Commissioning Group, CCG, to allow more residents to remain living independently in their homes
 - explore closer working with CCG to encourage more referrals from GPs, hospital and the like to help vulnerable residents adapt and repair their homes
 - help to prevent hospital admissions, delays in hospital discharge and maintain health through better housing
- Increase DFG throughput and spend to meet KPI targets for 17-18 through an improvement performance plan

Community

Achievements

In Strategic Housing Team were invited to the opening of Prior Avenue, a Havebury Housing scheme in Bury St Edmunds whereby HRH Princess Anne officially opened the development.

The Strategic Housing Team facilitated a workshop at Rural Parish Conference held in November 2016 exploring the benefits of rural affordable housing and how the Councils can assist parish councils and work in partnership with them to bring forward rural exception schemes to provide housing for local people.

Work underway

Working with Pakenham Parish Council on a proposal to develop affordable housing on a rural exception site in the village.

Neighbourhood plans are currently underway in:

- Newmarket – Neighbourhood Area Designation. In preparation
- Gt Barton - Neighbourhood Area Designation. In preparation
- Hargrave- Neighbourhood Area Designation. In preparation
- Barningham – Neighbourhood Area consultation ends on the 3rd April 2017

Challenges for 2017

As noted above, it remains unclear whether the extension of the right-to-buy to housing association tenants will apply to homes developed on rural exception sites. Providing affordable homes in the long run is often crucial to obtaining local support.

Energy efficiency

Achievements

A total of £5.7mn from DECC's Green Deal Communities Fund was secured to support energy efficiency improvements in the homes of Suffolk residents. The scheme was able to offer free or heavily discounted solid wall insulation across the county. In addition, free cavity wall and loft insulation top-ups were offered utilising ECO funds secured by Aran Services Ltd.

Through this work Suffolk's local authorities supported the large-scale roll-out of the Green Deal, and have continued to provide a trusted offer for residents, as well as

engaging with the private rented sector to promote the benefits to landlords and tenants of upgrading the energy efficiency of homes.

Solid wall insulation was the most common measure installed, with 142 homes in St Edmundsbury Borough Council and 14 in Forest Heath District Council benefitting from the insulation.

Through the county wide Warm Homes Health People Fund Suffolk residents have had access to over £2mn of funding to install first time central heating systems and replace inefficient boilers. These schemes finished in March 2017 and the project reporting is now being finalised.

Work underway

Residents in West Suffolk recently received a marketing letter from Aran Services promoting loft and cavity insulation. The letter, endorsed by the local authority encouraged residents to improve the insulation in their property. Surveys and installations are now taking place following this marketing campaign.

The Warm Homes Healthy People scheme continues to offer free home energy surveys to low income, vulnerable households. The scheme has a range of services and support to improve the thermal comfort of resident's homes.

Challenges for 2017

The government's latest mandatory energy efficiency programme launches in April 2017. ECO 2T is an 18 month programme committing £960mn to energy efficiency measures, focussing primarily on loft and cavity insulation. The challenge in West Suffolk is to work in partnership and promote the scheme to achieve an equitable level of investment in our residents homes.

Researching and accessing third party funding to enhance the offers available through the Warm Homes Healthy People scheme.

Every two years each local authority reports to central government under the Homes Energy Conservation Act. The latest report can be accessed at:
<http://www.greensuffolk.org/about/suffolk-climate-change-partnership/>

Land and resources

Achievements

Barley Homes (Group) Ltd (the councils' housing development company) was officially incorporated in March 2016, with the Member Shareholder Advisory Group also established and meeting several times during 2017.

Barley Homes first Business and Delivery Plan was approved by all shareholder councils in December 2016, releasing access to the £12m loan funding required to take forward the development of the initial four sites, delivering a total of 96 units of mixed tenures.

Work underway

The agreement of the heads of terms for the sale of the four sites to Barley Homes

Barley Homes have engaged Development Managers supported by a team of specialists to undertake all of the necessary preliminary works required for the submission applications for full planning permission on the initial four sites in Sept/Oct 2017.

Challenges for 2017

The challenge is now to identify further suitable development sites that are within public ownership that could be viable for Barley homes to develop. A review of suitable landholdings in Bury St Edmunds and Haverhill has been commissioned by the West Suffolk Property Board which will be reviewed by Housing and Property Services.

Homelessness

Achievements

A property on Newmarket Road, Bury St Edmunds (formerly Abbotts House) was purchased and refurbished. The property was opened in June 2016 and provides seven units of temporary accommodation. This has alleviated some of the demand for temporary accommodation however, demand across West Suffolk continues to increase. As at 15th March 2017, the number of households in temporary and emergency accommodation stood at 72. Without the purchase of the Newmarket Road property (and previously Lake Avenue) this pressure and cost would have been far greater.

The councils, along with colleagues in Babergh/Mid Suffolk, successfully bid for funding for a Rough Sleeper Outreach worker to support the increase number of rough sleepers across the area. Total funding of £120,000 is available to support this worker for two years. An appointment to this post will be made in late March 2017.

Work underway

The Housing Options Team continues to look at ways of reducing the demand for temporary accommodation, whilst at the same time investigating alternative provision, including purchasing assets and arrangements with existing providers. The team is also assessing its capacity and skills to ensure it is fit for purpose to meet future challenges (see below). This builds on the staff changes which have occurred during this year with a new Service Manager now in post.

Challenges for 2017

Homelessness due to private rented possessions and family breakdown and friends and family no longer able to accommodate remain high. There are a number of significant legislative and welfare reform changes coming in over the next few months, all of which will provide a challenge to the service. These changes include:

- Impact of changes to the Suffolk County Council Housing Related Support contract and reduction in funded bed spaces in the West. The government will be making further changes to Housing Supported Housing in April 2019 (with shadow arrangements in April 2018).
- Introduction of the Homelessness Reduction Bill which is anticipated to become legislation in the latter half of this year. The Bill will confer new duties on councils and is likely to increase caseload and review requests. Further information about the implications of this Bill for West Suffolk will be provided to members in due course.
- Universal Credit (UC) full service will be rolled out to St Edmundsbury in October 2017, with Forest Heath service being available from September 2018. The team need to work with partners to plan for the service to provide customer support. Experiences from elsewhere in the country are being reviewed and will inform our response to UC and its impacts.
- Continued changes to the welfare system impact on our residents and are likely to increase demand to our services, specifically (i) freeze to the Local Housing Allowance Rates; (ii) Child Tax Credit limited to two children; (iii) benefit cap; and (vi) removal of the automatic entitlement to housing support for 18-21 year olds.

Efficiency and effectiveness

Achievements

The new Choice Based Letting System provided by Abritas was implemented across the sub-region in June 2016. Whilst there were initial difficulties with the installation and use of the system, these have now reduced. The sub-regional partnership continues to work together to improve the system's reporting and functionality.

The councils underwent a Housing Peer Review in November 2016. The review was carried out by the National Practitioner Support Service (NPSS) and is intended to provide an independent overview of the housing option and homelessness team's performance across a number of factors. Overall the review was positive although there were some areas identified for improvement (see work underway below).

Work underway

The Housing Options and Homelessness Team is now working through the peer review's findings and have identified a number of improvements including the need to:

- review the Homelessness Strategy in light of increased demand and the forthcoming legislative changes;
- review the housing options structure to meet emerging challenges;
- offer additional prevention options; and
- increase the time available for staff to prepare for interviews and ongoing case management.

Challenges for 2017

It continues to be a challenge to respond to customer demand and balance this with staff development and training. After a difficult start, the Abritas system is now being used more effectively with further functionality developments identified.

Care and support

Achievements

As an outcome of the Human Centered Design project 2016 the Buurtzorg community care model has moved into a test and learn phase in West Suffolk. This model utilises a collaborative response approach aimed at supporting residents to remain in their home for as long as is appropriate

During the summer there was a focused communication/media campaign on promoting access to home improvement grants which lead to a small increase uptake in grants.

Work underway

During the summer of 2017 the Suffolk Coordination Service (SCS) which is currently provided by St Edmundsbury Council under a contract funded by Suffolk County Council will be transformed into combined Housing Related Support (HRS) Access Service dealing with an estimated 4000 applications and 12000 referrals to Supported Housing in Suffolk. Once this work is completed the service and associated staff will move into the county council.

Challenges for 2017

A key challenge for the future of housing and social care in West Suffolk will be to respond to growing specialist needs of the aging population. With West Suffolk's older population being larger than the national average and on the increase we realise that if we fail to identify and plan for the challenges posed we will be faced with managing crisis scenarios for years to come. As people get older, their housing needs often change. The rising

demand for services, coupled with the need to reduce public expenditure means all public sector services need to work together. During 2017 we will be working with Suffolk County Council and Health colleagues to undertake detailed research into the changing needs of the aging population and the future need for specialist housing.

3. Financial implications

- 3.1 The revenue and capital costs associated with delivery the various objectives, actions and targets have been included in the Medium Term Financial Strategy.
- 3.2 There are no revenue or capital implications arising directly from this report.

4. Staffing implications

- 4.1 There are no staffing implications arising directly from this report.

5. ICT implications

- 5.1 A number of actions have ICT implications, for example the implementation of the new choice based lettings system, however, provision for this has already been made in the relevant services' budgets and work programmes.
- 5.2 There are no ICT implications arising directly from this report.

6. Legal / Policy implications

- 6.1 Delivery of the West Suffolk Housing Strategy is a crucial contributor to furthering West Suffolk Councils' three strategic goals. The contribution of the Strategy to providing *Homes for our communities* is perhaps self-evident.
- 6.2 The Strategy, however, also has a crucial role to play in providing *Increased opportunities for economic growth*. For example, national research has found that every new home built supports 2.4 long term, sustainable jobs.
- 6.3 The Strategy's role in ensuring *Resilient families and communities that are healthy and active* can also be seen in the efforts to increase standards in the private rented sector, reduce the use of bed and breakfast to accommodate homeless people temporarily and the strides being taken to support local communities develop neighbourhood plans and devise small-scale housing developments on rural exception sites that local people want to see come forward to meet localised needs.
- 6.4 The Housing Strategy is well embedded in West Suffolk Councils' policies, and any legal input required to deliver specific objectives has already been identified, thus there are no legal or policy implications arising directly from this report.

7. Equalities implications

- 7.1 The Housing Strategy was subject to a detailed equalities impact assessment at its time of drafting. The objectives, actions and targets are primarily focused on those most disadvantaged in the housing market.
- 7.2 Of note, analysis of the Forest Heath DC's and St Edmundsbury BC's Housing Registers indicates that applicants with a disability are likely to have lower incomes than those without – (56% of applicants on the two Registers taken together report a gross annual income from all sources of below £10,000,

compared with 50% of those without a disability). The Housing Strategy aims to assist people with a disability into specialist housing for rent and to ease access to disabled facilities grants to assist in making adaptations to the current home.

- 7.3 Reported gross incomes vary by ethnic background. Taking £20,000 as perhaps the lower threshold for home ownership on a shared ownership basis indicates different levels of access between groups, with those on the lower income benefitting particularly from rented options:

Group	Number on FHDC and SEBC Housing Registers – combined figure*	Number on Registers with income below £20,000 a year	% within the group with income below £20,000 a year
Mixed background	28	27	96.4%
Gypsy and travellers	9	8	88.9%
Black background	27	23	85.2%
White British	1,925	1,610	83.6%
White Irish	17	14	82.4%
Asian background	28	22	78.6%
White – other background	257	191	74.3%
Chinese / other background	23	16	69.6%
* excludes households not giving income data (31 White British, 9 White – other)			
NOTE: there is no ethnicity data held for 94 households on the Housing Registers and in a further 10 cases there is no ethnicity and no income data held. These households have not been counted in the above analysis			

- 7.4 The affordable housing the Strategy is delivering will help those on lower incomes. Certain other groups may also have lower incomes, including younger people, including young families and people with caring responsibilities. While these groups will have lower access to the market housing, with again affordable options benefitting them.
- 7.5 There are no further equalities implications arising directly from this report.