

Housing Update

Report number:	OAS/WS/24/010	
Report to and date(s):	Overview and Scrutiny Committee	18 July 2024
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- Decisions Plan:** **This item is not required to be included in the Decisions Plan.**
- Wards impacted:** **All wards.**
- Recommendation:** **It is recommended that the Overview and Scrutiny Committee:**
- Notes** the consultation and engagement that has been undertaken and feedback received to inform the new Housing, Homelessness Reduction and Rough Sleeping Strategy.

Context to this report

- 1.1 On 18 January 2024, the Overview and Scrutiny Committee considered a Housing Update (report [OAS/WS/24/001](#) refers).
- 1.2 The council will adopt a new Housing Strategy and is required to adopt a new Homelessness Reduction and Rough Sleeping Strategy, in 2024. These strategies are being combined to create a single strategy document to further strengthen and align the council's housing priorities.
- 1.3 We are in the process of building on the commitments outlined in the council's [strategic priorities](#) to develop a new strategy document. The purpose of the new strategy is to set out the current housing situation in West Suffolk through our own understanding of the challenges and opportunities, the latest statistics and feedback through consultation. Alongside this we will set out our future priorities and ambitions to help more people better afford a place to live, improve living conditions and reduce homelessness. The strategy will set out the actions we want to take to achieve those ambitions.

Purpose of this report

- 1.4 The opportunity is being taken to present the Overview and Scrutiny Committee with:
- (a) The consultation and engagement that has been undertaken and feedback received to inform the new Housing, Homelessness Reduction and Rough Sleeping Strategy.
 - (b) The priorities to be included in the new strategy.

Summary of consultation and engagement so far undertaken to inform the new strategy

Public consultation

- 1.5 As part of developing the new strategy to help direct the council's approach to housing over the next few years, a public and stakeholder online consultation was held between 6 February and 20 March 2024. A total of 145 respondents took part in the online survey and an overview is provided below:
- 1.6 - Of the 145 respondents, the largest groups of respondents were West Suffolk residents (103) and town, parish and district councillors (24).

- 115 respondents provided a postcode. 83 identified as West Suffolk residents with 54 per cent said they were living in IP33, IP28 and IP32 postcodes.
- 131 provided their age category. A larger proportion of older people completed the survey in comparison to those under 24 with ages 45 to 70+ representing 67 per cent of the total.
- 131 answered whether they had a long-standing illness, disability or infirmity. 70 per cent answered 'no' and 29 per cent answered 'yes'.
- Across all respondents, the top three priorities under '**delivering more homes**' were: increase housing delivery, use of the council's planning powers, understand what the needs are in West Suffolk for adapted accommodation.
- Across all respondents, the top three priorities under '**regulation and housing standards**' were: reduce the number of empty homes, monitor and actively promote high standards in the private rented sector and work in collaboration with ARP to bring empty properties back into use'.
- Across all respondents, the top three priorities under '**supporting and housing local people**' were: prevent homelessness and rough sleeping at an earlier stage, work with partners to find appropriate accommodation options for those with support needs and increase options for temporary accommodation.
- Across all respondents, the top priorities under '**the environment**' were: ensure all new housing include measures to address water efficiency and achieve energy efficiency above building regulations, take opportunities to bid for funding to deliver improvements in energy efficiency and link the climate change agenda with the inequality and health agendas.

Member workshops

1.7 Three Member workshops were held, each of which focused on a different priority area, with an overview provided below:

1.8 **Housing standards, regulation and environment** on 19 March – 22 attendees;

Members discussed the following areas:

- Issues around **empty homes** and mechanisms the council has available to bring them back into use such as the Council Tax premium. There was a discussion around whether this could be introduced sooner. Also look at each individual case as there could be mitigating circumstances. Idea around loans

being introduced to support people bringing homes back into use.

- The support being made available to tenants and landlords in the **private rented sector** through the Safe Suffolk renters project and enabling tenants to report issues in confidence.
- Ensuring issues reported are managed quickly and efficiently particularly by registered providers.
- The work being undertaken to ensure that **houses in multiple occupation** are being managed properly by landlords as they provide an important housing option for some local residents.
- Officers were commended for the work carried out to improve the management and use of **Disabled Facilities Grants** through Independent Living Suffolk. This is important work that also helps to prevent delays with discharge from hospital.
- Funding available to support **energy efficiency** measures in housing to reduce cost of heating and improve health and wellbeing.

Supporting and housing local people on 10 April – 17 attendees;

Members discussed the following areas:

- agreed that providing **high quality, accessible and timely housing advice services to all residents and local people in need** is a priority for the council
- Members requested that **veterans and their families** be included as a priority group when they are in military accommodation and facing eviction. This would be considered and would require a policy change in the Lettings Policy.
- The allocation of housing to West Suffolk residents on the housing register. It was explained that all new builds and 90 per cent of relets are allocated to West Suffolk residents because certain local connection criteria must be met. The remaining 10 per cent of allocations are to enable movement around the Cambridge sub-region (of which we are part) or to support individuals/families fleeing domestic violence from a different area and this arrangement is reciprocated. The team always tries to keep families close to existing links.
- The importance of **early intervention** and providing support to individuals and families experiencing issues such as affordability, substance misuse and domestic abuse as quickly as possible.
- Working to end **rough sleeping** and continuing support to prevent a cycle of homelessness such as through education around tenancy sustainment.
- Facilitating **access to suitable accommodation** with different housing tenures being utilised such as private rent, social rent and HMOs.
- Continuing to develop **strategic relationships** across Suffolk and the Cambridge sub-region that will support residents.

Delivering more homes on 18 April – 20 attendees.

Members discussed the following areas:

- **Increasing the supply of housing** is a high priority and providing the right housing for different needs. Affordable housing in particular and how this can be addressed through the emerging Local Plan
- Looking at a range of house building methods and **new models for housing delivery** is a priority including a range of needs such as smaller dwellings for single people as well as affordable rent for those on a lower wage.
- The link between **viability and affordable housing** and providing the right infrastructure is key.

Partner and stakeholder engagement

1.9 A consultation workshop for partner organisations was held on 12 June 2024 at which over 25 different organisations were represented. We have also engaged with a number of localities and specific groups including the Environment and Sustainability Reference Group, private sector landlords, the horseracing industry and staff. Engagement sessions are also planned with young people at West Suffolk College, registered providers, housing developers and disability groups.

1.10 Through this engagement we have gained a range of valuable insight and feedback. Key messages are around:

- Deliver more homes including affordable – providing the right housing for different needs
- Reduce the number of empty homes
- Support for tenants in the private rented sector
- Prevent homelessness and rough sleeping at an earlier stage
- Holistic approach needed across the system (strategic and operational) to help individuals

At the consultation workshop with partner organisations, discussions focused on the need to:

- Address the need for safe and secure housing as part of a whole system approach.
- Integrate housing need with the wider challenges faced by individuals and communities around health and employment (in particular supporting vulnerable people and those with mental and physical health issues).
- Push for a shared system-wide strategy backed by funding to deliver and plan for aspirational services (challenging due to lack of long-term funding from central Government)

1.11 Over the duration of the strategy we will continue the conversation with residents, partner organisations and stakeholders to understand local need and how we need to respond through our approach to delivering on our priorities.

2. Proposals within this report

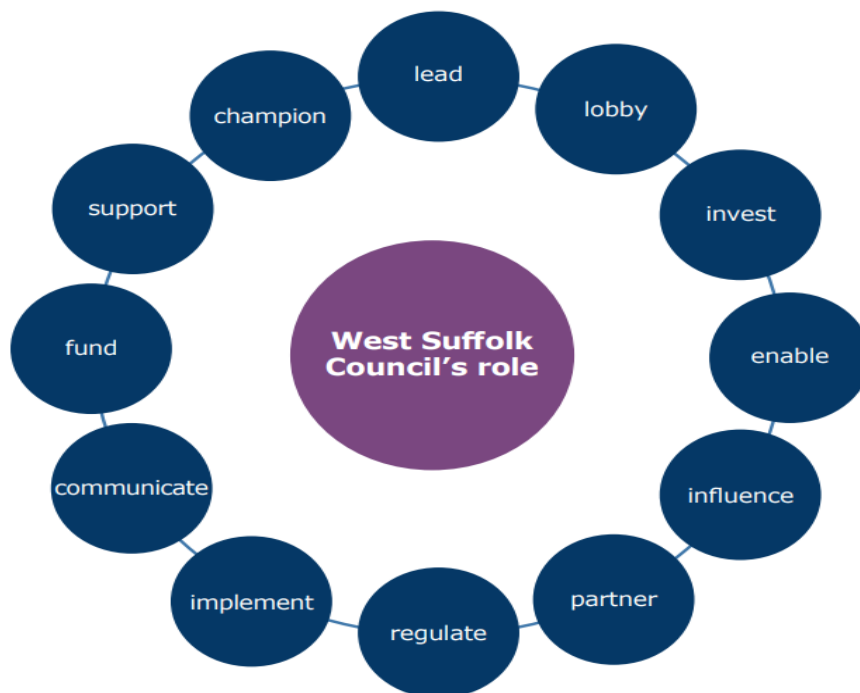
Informing the development of the new strategy

2.1 The priorities and emerging actions are being shaped by feedback from the consultation and engagement sessions set out in section 1 of this report.

2.2 In order to deliver the strategy, there are a number of key working principles that are important to the way we work and will underpin our approach:

- Prevention
- Communication
- Use of data and evidence
- User centred
- Making the most of digital opportunities
- Collaboration and partnership
- Promoting equality and diversity

The council has a unique role in delivering housing locally through the Local Plan, as a local planning authority, through regulation and enforcement, providing housing for vulnerable households and the relationships we have with a range of partners. When working to address our housing priorities, the council will take a variety of different roles:



- 2.2 An important part of this picture is the [evidence base](#), our understanding of current housing pressures and options around addressing these in the future. Existing information and feedback has been utilised, such as, feedback from the local plan process, Safe Suffolk Renters project, the Suffolk Health and Housing Needs Assessment and user experiences (for example, we have lived experience information from rough sleepers).

The council's priorities for delivering against the strategic priority for affordable, available and decent homes

- 2.3 Priority 1 – New homes, affordable, sustainable and accessible
Priority 2 – Better quality homes, safe and secure and matched to need
Priority 3 – Preventing homelessness and rough sleeping and responding to diverse needs
- 2.4 The Overview and Scrutiny Committee is **asked to consider** the feedback received and emerging priorities.

3. Alternative options that have been considered

- 3.1 The council could decide not to adopt a Housing Strategy, however, it would not be able to set out the priorities around housing to support local residents with the type of housing to meet their needs and improve the quality of existing housing.
- 3.2 The council has got a statutory duty to adopt a Homelessness Reduction and Rough Sleeping Strategy.

4. Consultation and engagement undertaken

- 4.1 The Housing, Homelessness Reduction and Rough Sleeping Strategy will be the subject of public and stakeholder consultation as set out in section 1 of this report.

5. Risks associated with the proposals

- 5.1 The emerging West Suffolk Local Plan was submitted to the Secretary of State for independent examination on the 24 May 2024. The Local Plan includes policies that relate to affordable housing provision, rural exception sites. These policies have a viability impact, the inspector will examine the deliverability of all the Local Plan policies cumulatively and determine whether the policies are viable and

deliverable. This may result in a change to the targets and policies proposed. The outcome of the process is expected in Spring 2025.

6. Implications arising from the proposals

- 6.1 Financial – there will be financial implications arising from the emerging actions. However, these are currently in development as will be part of the budget setting process for the life of the strategy.
- 6.2 Legal compliance – not applicable
- 6.3 Personal data processing - not applicable
- 6.4 Equalities – An Equalities Impact Assessment has been carried out as part of the development of the strategy.
- 6.5 Crime and disorder - not applicable
- 6.6 Safeguarding - not applicable
- 6.7 Environment or sustainability – there will be environmental and sustainability considerations around new and existing housing that will be addressed through the new Housing, Homelessness and Rough Sleeping Strategy.
- 6.8 HR or staffing - not applicable
- 6.9 Changes to existing policies – This work will result in the adoption of the new strategy.
- 6.10 External organisations (such as businesses, community groups) – the new strategy will detail how the council will continue to work alongside partner organisations to provide affordable, available and decent homes for those living and working in West Suffolk.

7. Appendices referenced in this report

- 7.1 None

8. Background documents associated with this report

- 8.1 [Housing Strategy 2018 to 2024](#)
- 8.2 [Homelessness Reduction and Rough Sleeping Strategy 2018 to 2024](#)
- 8.3 [Strategic Priorities 2024 to 2028](#)