

WELWYN HATFIELD BOROUGH COUNCIL
CABINET HOUSING PANEL – 22 JANUARY 2018
REPORT OF THE EXECUTIVE DIRECTOR (HOUSING AND COMMUNITIES)

STRATEGIC HOUSING UPDATE

1 Executive Summary

- 1.1 This report provides an update on the work of the strategic housing service and an overview of the current key issues.
- 1.2 The Community and Housing Strategy team are responsible for the development and monitoring of the Housing and Homelessness Strategy; response to issues in the private rented sector, licensing Houses in Multiple Occupation (HMOs); the Landlord Accreditation Scheme (PAL); management of the Disabled Facilities Grant service; monitoring empty homes and development of housing policy.
- 1.3 The team also deals with both enablement and delivery of affordable homes via the council's Affordable Housing Programme. The programme is monitored on a regular basis at this Panel and therefore is not part of this update.

2 Recommendation(s)

- 2.1 Members to note the content of this report.

3 Explanation

Housing and Homelessness Strategy 2013 to 2018

- 3.1 The council published the joint housing and homelessness strategy in 2013. The Action Plan is monitored on a quarterly basis by the Steering Group. The key priority areas are set out below, alongside an update on each area.
 - Supply of Affordable Housing
 - Raising standards in the private sector, particularly HMOs
 - Making best use of housing in the borough
 - Meeting older people and vulnerable group's housing needs
 - Prevention of homelessness

Supply of Affordable housing

- 3.2 Under this priority area, the main objectives were to set a borough wide target for housing and affordable housing development via the Local Plan. The Local Plan is currently under Public Examination; and to deliver the actions set out in the council's Affordable Housing Programme. The council agreed a five year Delivery Plan in April 2016. Progress on this is monitored on a biannual basis by

this Panel. 127 properties had been developed via the programme at the end of November 2017. We aim to deliver a further 45 properties (mix of new build and buy backs) by the end of this financial year (grand total 172).

Raising Standards in the private sector, particularly HMOs.

- 3.3 In the most recent census (2011) the percentage of private sector homes was 14%. It is likely that this proportion has increased since then, in line with national trends – which has seen a reduction in owner occupation and an increase in the number of households in privately rented accommodation.
- 3.4 The stock modelling work undertaken in 2014 indicated that there are approximately 2340 HMOs in the borough, which is around 5% of the housing stock (national average 2%). However as these are predominantly located within Hatfield, the proportion of HMOs as the housing stock within the town is greater.
- 3.5 The team has a strategic approach to management of the private sector, which is based on gathering good quality data, proactive and reactive inspection work and risk rating all HMOs at first inspection, to determine the future frequency of inspection.
- 3.6 The team carry out desk top research which rules out any properties which are not privately rented. Any properties that are suspected HMOs are sent a declaration form and the average response rate to this is 78%. Visits are carried out to properties where a form is not returned. Since this initiative began in 2016 just shy of 100 roads and 6119 properties have been investigated, resulting in the identification of 296 HMOs (previously not confirmed) plus 405 single occupancy privately rented homes.
- 3.7 More recently the team have used data available from the Tenancy Deposit Scheme Companies. They are obliged to share information in order that the council can carry out its statutory duties – including proactively identifying licensable HMOs. This new data has led to the identification of 125 potential HMOs
- 3.8 Overall the team has now risk rated more than 1200 HMOs of which 362 are subject to mandatory licensing.
- 3.9 The team also promotes our Landlord Accreditation Scheme. Since rebranding the team in June 2015, the focus has been on bringing letting and managing agents up to standard. Where they have applied, are eligible and following an audit of their management practices meet PAL standards, agents become ‘partners’ of the scheme.
- 3.10 There are currently twelve letting agents with partner status, covering around 1500 properties; there are a further 303 properties accredited under the management of individual landlords. Three further agents have applied for partner status and the team are working with them to bring them up to standard. We are working with partner agents to improve their competency in the area of property standards. Nine PAL Agents have now had staff attend two day training in the Housing Health and Safety Risk Assessments (HHSRS). If they pass, this certifies their competence in assessing risk under this system. We have also identified an agency to run a pilot of self-accreditation.

- 3.11 The government has signalled its intention to extend mandatory licensing of HMOs, removing the three storey threshold and including all HMOs with five people or more. This will significantly increase the number of properties that are subject to mandatory licensing within the borough, but is considered a positive move in terms of improving standards. The latest information received indicates this change may be progressed in March 2018
- 3.12 The Housing and Planning Act 2016 introduced extended powers to deal with rogue landlords – including the ability to apply a penalty to a private landlord for breaches under legislation, as opposed to prosecution. A recent report set out these measures and recommended a policy for the council to adopt.

Making best use of housing in the borough

- 3.13 This year the council approved the Older Person's Housing Strategy, which sets out the council's plans, working jointly with partners, to meet the housing needs and aspirations of older people in the borough over the next five years.
- 3.14 We want to ensure that the housing we provide best meets the needs of our diverse community. As a result of a review of council sheltered housing stock, a number of schemes have been identified for refurbishment and modernisation and a programme of works has been developed. By improving our schemes they become more attractive to current tenants who may consider down-sizing from family sized homes plus they provide a much more suitable environment, giving people a higher quality of life and enabling independent living for longer.
- 3.15 Subject to Cabinet approval in early December, work will progress in readiness for demolition and redevelopment of a sheltered scheme in Hatfield. The proposal is to re-provide a much larger block of one and two bedroom properties which meet a high quality design standard - including balconies, improved mobility access, larger units and maximising natural light.
- 3.16 In addition to this the community alarms and assisted technology services have been extended to both existing tenants and the wider community – helping people remain in their own homes for longer.
- 3.17 The council's Under Occupation and Overcrowding Strategy was reviewed and refreshed, to ensure that there are both incentives in place for tenants to move from homes that are too large for their needs, as well as help and support for families who are experiencing overcrowding.
- 3.18 As part of the council's Affordable Housing Programme, officers are investigating a buy back/rehouse option for older people living in owner occupied homes – whereby the council would purchase a family sized home at a discounted rate, in exchange for providing suitable rehousing.
- 3.19 The annual survey of empty homes is underway. Owners of long term empty homes (empty for more than six months) are contacted to find out why their property is empty and to offer help and support with bringing the property back into use. A report setting out the findings of the survey and recommended next steps will be presented to Committee for consideration early next year.
- 3.20 We are also due to embark on the redevelopment of a poor quality block of studio flats in Hatfield – which will deliver 16 high quality one bedroom flats and the redevelopment of our temporary accommodation in Howlands House – which

will deliver a much larger and modern facility to provide for the needs of homeless households locally

- 3.21 We continue to explore opportunities both within our own stock and with housing association partners, to ensure that the housing stock is delivering maximum value.

Meeting older people and vulnerable group's housing needs

- 3.22 As mentioned in 3.13 an Older Person's Housing Strategy has been agreed with an associated Action Plan.
- 3.23 Other key outcomes have been to complete a review of the needs of the gypsy and traveller community – this was completed in the summer of 2016 and is part of the evidence base for the Local Plan; a joint Strategic Board has been set up with Herts County Council children services, health and other districts – to jointly consider the supported housing needs of families with children and care leavers; a cross county joint pathway model for prevention, supported housing and move on accommodation is being developed as a result
- 3.24 Similarly a countywide Strategic Board, considering the needs of adults with support needs has been established. This has representation from Adult Care Services and health services, to better understand and meet the needs of vulnerable groups such as adults with learning difficulties, mental health issues, drug and alcohol use, victims of domestic abuse and ex-offenders. A Supported Housing Strategy to meet the needs identified across the county has recently been launched and a local multi agency Board meets quarterly to discuss potential joint working opportunities and strategic planning within the borough.
- 3.25 HCC tendered the housing related support element of women's refuges across the county. A 'lead provider' model has been established; SaferPlaces have been appointed to deliver this service across the county. They have subcontracted this work to Welwyn Hatfield Women's Refuge locally and partnership arrangements continue.
- 3.26 In accordance with the requirements of the Homeless Reduction Act, housing pathways are being reviewed and refreshed/established for all key care groups such as people with mental health issues and/or drug and alcohol issues; care leavers, victims of domestic abuse, older people and other vulnerable groups.
- 3.27 We are currently responding to two Government led consultations on housing for specific vulnerable groups. The first is "Improving Access to Social Housing for Victims of Domestic Abuse" and the second is on new funding proposals for Supported Housing – which covers two strands: sheltered housing and extra care as well as emergency short-term supported accommodation.

Prevention of Homelessness

- 3.28 Due to a combination of pressures, including a reduction in the number of vacant affordable properties, a higher number of approaches from homeless families and a reduction of availability within the private rented sector, there has been a rise in the number of households in temporary accommodation. This has brought the risk of the need to use bed and breakfast accommodation, other than by exception, much closer. This situation is monitored closely and the team is doing all it can to contain this within the current provision.

- 3.29 The team works hard to prevent homelessness and to be proactive about finding alternative solutions for residents. Achievements to date include the introduction of a more comprehensive online housing options module via Herts Choice Homes; establishment of a multi-agency Rough Sleeper Protocol – setting out ways to report and provide support to rough sleepers and the recently launched Welwyn Hatfield Housing First initiative which is a combination of outreach, money advice and accommodation for people who are sleeping rough or who are at risk of sleeping rough; the establishment of the ‘joint front door’ approach between HCC and district councils for the assessment of the housing needs of 16 and 17 year olds.
- 3.30 A key aim this year is to achieve Gold Standard Accreditation for the housing needs service – under the National Practitioner and Support Service initiative. This involves a detailed peer review exercise and continuous service improvement to meet ten key challenges. The service has achieved silver standard already – for completing seven of the ten challenges and hopes to be awarded gold standard by the end of this financial year.
- 3.31 The challenge over the next four months is to prepare for the implementation of the Homeless Reduction Act, which places extended duties on the council regarding prevention and assessment of homelessness.

Implications

4 Legal Implication(s)

- 4.1 There are no legal implications arising from this report

5 Financial Implication(s)

- 5.1 There are no direct financial implications arising from this report.

6 Risk Management Implications

- 6.1 Increase in homelessness; the reduction in availability of private rented accommodation is likely to lead to increased demand for housing and possibly a rise in homelessness with the associated financial burden and social cost to families; controls in place are robust housing options service and homeless prevention; joint work with the CAB and other agencies to prevent homelessness; development of single housing pathway with HCC and other districts for young people; Strategic Housing Boards across Herts to review/protect and develop supported housing services for adults with support needs; Affordable Housing Programme; plans to enhance temporary accommodation provision.

7 Security & Terrorism Implication(s)

- 7.1 There are not implications for security and terrorism arising from this report.

8 Procurement Implication(s)

- 8.1 There are no procurement implications arising from this report.

9 Climate Change Implication(s)

- 9.1 There are no climate change implications arising from this report.

10 Link to Corporate Priorities

- 10.1 The subject of this report is linked to the Council's Corporate Priority 'Meet the Borough's housing needs'

11 Equality and Diversity

- 11.1 An Equality Impact Assessment (EIA) has not been carried out in connection with the proposals that are set out in this report.

Name of author

Sian Chambers Ext 2640

Title

Head of Community and Housing Strategy

Date

30 November 2017