

WELWYN HATFIELD BOROUGH COUNCIL  
SOCIAL OVERVIEW AND SCRUTINY COMMITTEE 10 SEPTEMBER 2018  
REPORT OF THE EXECUTIVE DIRECTOR (HOUSING AND COMMUNITIES)

STRATEGIC HOUSING UPDATE

**1 Executive Summary**

- 1.1 This report provides an update on strategic housing and provides a summary 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; delivery of the housing needs service, regulatory standards 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 Cabinet Housing Panel.

**2 Recommendation(s)**

- 2.1 Members to note the content of this report.

**3 Explanation**

**Housing and Homelessness Strategy**

- 3.1 The council's current Housing and Homelessness Strategy expires this year and a new five year strategy is currently being developed.
- 3.2 The council recently held a stakeholder forum to take on views and ideas on what the key issues and challenges are going forward; there have also been a number of focus groups and sessions with relevant stakeholders around three key themes
  - Housing quality and support
  - Asset management and new delivery
  - Homelessness
- 3.3 The draft strategy will be available for consultation in October.
- 3.4 In terms of the current strategy (2013 to 2018), there were five priority areas and a summary of achievements under each area is set out below

### 3.5 **Supply of Affordable housing**

- 3.6 The council agreed a five year Delivery Plan for its own Affordable Housing Programme in April 2016. Progress on this is monitored on a biannual basis by Cabinet Housing Panel. 183 properties had been delivered via the programme at the end of July 2018. We aim to deliver a further 46 properties (mix of new build, and open market purchase) by the end of this financial year, which will give us a grand total 229 properties to date.
- 3.7 In September 2017 the council was successful in securing £14K funding via a bid to the Local Government Association (LGA) Special Advisors programme.
- 3.8 The LGA commissioned Campbell Tickell consultants to carry out this work, aimed at helping the council extend its housing development programme, and they produced an advisory report, which was summarised in a report to Cabinet Housing Panel in August.
- 3.9 The key outcomes arising from this work is that a comprehensive assessment of Housing Revenue Account land and assets is underway, to identify potential housing development and modernisation opportunities; 'Spot the Plot' - an initiative to encourage staff and members to identify possible sites has been launched; a company is being procured to provide advice on the next steps to establishing a Local Housing Company – which could be used to help deliver more homes in a flexible way.
- 3.10 A new Housing Development Strategy will be agreed, once this work has completed.

### 3.11 **Raising Standards in the private sector, particularly HMOs.**

- 3.12 In the most recent census (2011) the percentage of private rented homes in the borough was 14%. However we are aware 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.
- 3.13 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.
- 3.14 In order to improve the quality of data we hold, the team carry out desk top research to identify privately rented homes. Any properties that are suspected HMOS are sent a declaration form and the average response rate to this is 77%. Visits are carried out to properties where a form is not returned. Since this initiative began in 2016 just shy of 100 roads and 6569 properties have been investigated, resulting in the identification of 366 HMOs (previously not confirmed) plus 495 single occupancy privately rented homes.
- 3.15 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 more than 100 HMOs

- 3.16 Overall the team has now risk rated more than 1300 HMOs of which 351 are subject to mandatory licensing.
- 3.17 From October this year, the mandatory licensing scheme will be extended to include all HMOs with five or more occupiers – regardless of the number of storeys. We estimate that there will be an additional 700 properties which will be subject to licensing. The team is being expanded to ensure that there are sufficient resources to manage the extended scheme. The increased costs will be covered by the license fees.
- 3.18 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.
- 3.19 There are currently twelve letting agents with partner status, covering around 1500 properties; there are a further 300 properties accredited under the management of individual landlords. Four further agents have applied for partner status and the team are working with them to bring them up to standard.
- 3.20 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. The council has recently adopted a policy on how we will use these powers.

### **Making best use of housing in the borough**

- 3.21 Last 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 five years.
- 3.22 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 is underway. 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.
- 3.23 Minster House in Hatfield is currently being decanted, in preparation for demolition and redevelopment. A larger modern 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 will be developed.
- 3.24 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.
- 3.25 We are currently re-developing poor quality blocks of studio flats in Northdown Road, Hatfield – which will deliver 16 high quality one bedroom flats. We are also preparing plans to redevelop our temporary accommodation in Howlands House – which will deliver a much larger and modern facility to provide for the needs of homeless households locally

- 3.26 As stated earlier in this report, we have recently commissioned a full review of the Housing Revenue Account assets, which will identify both land and assets which have potential redevelopment opportunities.

### **Meeting older people and vulnerable group's housing needs**

- 3.27 As mentioned in 3.21 an Older Person's Housing Strategy has been agreed with an associated Action Plan.
- 3.28 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 – called the Homeless Hub – has been set up and was launched this year.
- 3.29 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.
- 3.30 In accordance with the requirements of the Homeless Reduction Act, housing pathways have been 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.
- 3.31 The government has recently consulted on proposals to change the way supported housing is funded and made an announcement in August that they have decided to retain the costs for supported housing within the welfare benefit system – so that housing benefit will continue to be the source of funding for most supported housing costs.

### **Prevention of Homelessness**

- 3.32 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 and the council is now having to resort to the use of bed and breakfast. Appendix A shows the increased number of households in temporary accommodation. The number of households in temporary accommodation at the end of July 2018 was 119 and 19 households in bed and breakfast accommodation.
- 3.33 The team works hard to prevent homelessness and the quality of advice provided was recognised earlier this year when the team were only the second Hertfordshire council to be awarded the Gold Standard by the National Advice and Support Service. This was achieved through demonstrating that our service meets set standards and is also assessed via peer review.
- 3.34 The council has used the government 'flexible support grant' to fund an innovative project called Housing First. As part of this service we commission specialist outreach services for people sleeping rough, specialist advice for people who are

either homeless or at risk of homelessness plus a specialist supported housing provision; we have also been part of the establishment of the 'joint front door' approach between Herts County Council and district councils for the assessment of the housing needs of 16 and 17 year olds.

- 3.35 A project group is working on options to reduce the reliance on bed and breakfast. This includes developing options in the private rented sector, consideration of temporary units – such as pods/shipping container style units; utilising council properties which are empty because they are awaiting re-development ,supporting the development of an all year round night shelter and extending our own property acquisition programme.
- 3.36 The Homeless Reduction Act was implemented in April this year. This brought about a major change in the legislation around homelessness and extended the duties of the council. As a result we have seen a significant increase in the caseloads of the housing options officers. Any person who is homeless or at risk of homelessness within 56 days is provided with a Housing Support Plan, which must be regularly reviewed and monitored.
- 3.37 The box below sets out the caseload change in the first three months of the new Act.

Housing Options Team Caseloads

<b>Year</b>	<b>Total Enquiries full year</b>	<b>Total Housing Options Cases</b>	<b>Total accepted full duty</b>	<b>Total number in Temporary accommodation</b>
2016/17	1454	294 (20% of enquiries)	119	65 cases April 2017
2017/18	1092	264 (24% of enquiries)	171	100 cases March 2018
2018/19 (Quarter One only)	284	223 (78.5% of enquiries)	12*	119 cases End of July 2018

\*Due to the extension in the duty period, the process leading up to a final decision is extended and therefore the number of decisions are currently low; over time we would expect this to increase, as it is due to the initial time lag following the introduction of the new Act.

- 3.38 The team was restructured in preparation of the new legislation, but there are still some vacancies in the structure; once we are fully staffed, we will review the position again to see if the level of resources invested in this area are sufficient to manage the demand.

**Implications**

**4 Legal Implication(s)**

- 4.1 The council is legally obliged to carry out a review of homelessness in the borough and to produce a Homelessness Strategy. The homelessness review is currently underway and the council will then produce a combined Housing and Homelessness Strategy
- 4.2 The Homeless Reduction Act 2017 came into force on 3 April 2018
- 4.3 The mandatory Houses in Multiple Occupation licensing scheme is being extended to include HMOs which are lower than three storeys – this comes into force in October 2018.

## **5 Financial Implication(s)**

- 5.1 There are no direct financial implications arising from this report. The team are working hard to develop alternative housing and prevention initiatives, to ensure that the use of bed and breakfast is minimised

## **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 'Our Housing'

## **11 Communications Plan**

- 11.1 There is a communications plan associated with the Affordable Housing Programme and the implementation of the Homeless Reduction Act.

## **12 Health and Wellbeing**

- 12.1 The availability of good quality housing has a positive impact on health and well being

### **13 Equality and Diversity**

13.1 An Equality Impact Assessment (EIA) has not been carried out in connection with this report, as it is for information only.

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