

18 February 2015		ITEM: 6
Housing Overview and Scrutiny Committee		
Draft Housing Strategy 2015-2020		
Wards and communities affected: All	Key Decision: Non-Key	
Report of: Barbara Brownlee, Director of Housing		
Accountable Head of Service: Not applicable		
Accountable Director: Barbara Brownlee, Director of Housing		
This report is public		

Executive Summary

This report presents the first draft of a new Housing Strategy for Thurrock which will set out the vision and direction for housing over the next five years. The aim is to create an engaging and aspirational document for both internal and external stakeholders. The Strategy will define the inherent relationship with health and wellbeing and support Thurrock Council's Corporate Plan and five strategic priorities. The vision for the strategy is:

Thurrock is a destination of choice with growing healthy and prosperous communities, living in high quality housing across all tenures where residents are empowered to help themselves, and supported with consistently excellent services.

There are three core priorities that underpin the Housing Strategy vision:

- Core Priority 1 – Raising the Bar: Delivering high quality housing and services
- Core Priority 2 – In on the Ground Floor: Proactively supporting residents to maximise health, wellbeing and employment outcomes
- Core Priority 3 – Looking Ahead: Creating sustainable communities and boosting housing supply

Each core priority is supported by objectives and an action plan detailing how this will be realised between 2015 and 2020. The Strategy has been developed in consultation with key stakeholders and is supported by a robust evidence base.

The Housing Strategy is enclosed as Appendix 1 together with the supporting Evidence Base as Appendix 2.

1. Recommendations

That Housing Overview and Scrutiny Committee:

1.1 Endorse the Housing Strategy and proposed actions to 2020.

2. Introduction and Background

- 2.1 The housing landscape has seen extensive change in recent years with the recovery after the economic recession and extensive public spending cuts to reduce the deficit together with a series of reforms to get Britain's economy moving again. The devolution of power with the introduction of the Localism Act 2011 represented a significant change for housing together with radical reforms to the Welfare System. Against a backdrop of diminishing funding, this has presented new challenges for the delivery of homes and services.
- 2.2 At a local level, Thurrock has seen high levels of population growth in the ten years to 2011. The population of Thurrock is relatively young with a large proportion of the population of working age. Nearly a third of households are families and lone parents with dependent children. With the current housing market, this means more young people are living at home for longer and unable to move on from the family home.
- 2.3 The number of growing families and above average levels of overcrowding indicates a need for an increase in the supply of family homes to support these families. The Strategic Housing Market Assessment indicates 42% of all housing required is three bedroom homes.
- 2.4 With the projected increase in the older population and in particular those over 75, there is a requirement to ensure there is suitable support and accommodation to enable older people to remain independent from training staff on dementia to new homes built to HAPPI standard. Over 65s are forecast to increase by 58% between 2012 and 2031, bringing the percentage of older people more in line with regional and national averages. Dementia is currently below average although hospital admission rates are high. It is estimated the number of older people with dementia will increase by up to 70% over the next 15 years as a result of the growing population.
- 2.5 Thurrock suffers from high levels of unemployment and this is particularly evident in the more deprived areas of the borough demonstrating the need for targeted interventions. In the most deprived wards, youth unemployment is prevalent and above average numbers of the working age population are long term unemployed. This is reflected in benefit claimants with high levels of those claiming key out of work benefits. Nearly half of all our general needs tenants are unemployed, reflecting the higher levels of worklessness in social housing. This increases to over 60% when excluding those registered as retired or living in sheltered housing.

- 2.6 The historical skills gap in Thurrock is evident through the high number of residents in elementary occupations and administrative roles with a lack of those in senior positions and professional occupations. Qualifications are below average at all levels with over 10% of residents having no qualifications, reducing employment prospects. However, through significant educational investment, young people are achieving more, with GCSE attainment rising year on year and now ahead of regional and national averages.
- 2.7 Across Thurrock, there are significant variances in health and wellbeing. The life expectancy of residents living in the most deprived areas in Thurrock is up to 8 years lower than for those living in the least deprived. Obesity is prevalent in Thurrock for both children and adults, compounded by poor levels of healthy eating and low levels of participation in sport. This has health implications in both the short and long term and can impact on a child's development and educational attainment. In addition, there are above average levels of child poverty at 22%.
- 2.8 Violent crime in Thurrock is significantly worse than the national average and can result in people becoming unintentionally homeless following a breakdown in a relationship. For tenants living in council homes, public order offences are most common, followed by reports of domestic abuse.
- 2.9 Safeguarding our residents is of critical importance and preventing crime can help residents avoid crisis. Targeted preventions and support is needed to reduce inequalities across different wards. Close working with health partners will enable an evidence based approach to tackling health issues experienced by residents. Increased measures are needed to reducing violent crime and ASB together with raising awareness on safeguarding amongst staff.
- 2.10 The private rented sector has grown considerably in the ten years to 2011 and is set to continue despite previously representing a below average proportion of homes in Thurrock. Grays Riverside now has a third of households renting privately in the local area.
- 2.11 Homelessness in Thurrock is significantly better than the national average with an increase in the number of cases prevented. The termination of an assured shorthold tenancy is the most common reason for homelessness and with the growth in the private rented sector this is likely to become more prevalent. An above average number also become unintentionally homeless due to families no longer being able to accommodate the individual emphasising the need for suitable accommodation to accommodate large families and enable young people to move on to sustainable housing. There is a shortage of homes in the private rented sector that can be offered to residents at risk of becoming homeless and this pressure is further increased with the London authorities using financial incentives to attract landlords.

- 2.12 Increased engagement with private sector landlords is critical as this market continues to expand. This includes exploring the use of incentives to increase the availability of homes in the private rented sector for the council to utilise.
- 2.13 Affordability is key issue for residents. The average income to be able to buy or rent a property in Thurrock is estimated to be £25,000 and the ratio of earnings to household price remains consistently above average, highlighting the challenges for first time buyers looking to enter the housing market. Private sector rents are comparatively high with Local Housing Allowance not keeping pace, and there has been an increase in the number of households claiming housing benefit in the private sector.
- 2.14 Conversely, the average house price in Thurrock is comparatively low at £180,974 and has not yet reached levels seen at the peak before the recession. This has impacted on the number of starts on site with low land values discouraging private developers from investing in the area. Thurrock needs to work collaboratively with the private sector to boost the supply of housing in the borough.
- 2.15 For social housing, there is a demand for one bedroom homes, indicating the need for affordable housing for young people and single households. In addition, interventions in school will allow young people to be educated earlier on their housing options with the aim of reducing demand on social housing and enabling them move into suitable accommodation.
- 2.16 Thurrock council owns over 10,000 homes, dating back as far as 1920s. This includes over 1,000 sheltered housing properties across the borough. Half of the general needs properties are three bedroom homes and the remaining majority comprise one and two bedroom flats. There are large pockets of stock in some of the most deprived areas in the borough including Tilbury, Belhus, Chadwell St. Mary and Ockendon. Due to the age of properties, many are less energy efficient, increasing health risks for residents. The Transforming Homes Programme will play a significant role in improving the quality of our stock together with wider regeneration on key estates.
- 2.17 The core priorities for the Strategy have been developed in response to both the national drivers and local context reflecting the needs of residents. The evidence base will continue to be reviewed and updated to ensure that we can use our limited resources to best effect. This includes conducting a housing needs survey to better understand the demand for housing in Thurrock which is expected to be completed by mid-February.

3. Issues, Options and Analysis of Options

Housing Strategy Objectives

- 3.1 The Housing Strategy vision is: *Thurrock is a destination of choice with growing healthy and prosperous communities, living in high quality housing*

across all tenures where residents are empowered to help themselves, and supported with consistently excellent services.

- 3.2 Three core priorities have been developed to support this vision and represent the key focus over the next five years:
- **Raising the Bar:** Delivering high quality housing and services
 - **In on the Ground Floor:** Proactively supporting residents to maximise health, wellbeing and employment outcomes
 - **Looking Ahead:** Creating sustainable communities and boosting housing supply
- 3.3 The Strategy has a clear approach that underpins the delivery of each objective:
- Partnership Working
 - Evidence Based
 - Maximise Resources
 - Proactive
- 3.4 The SMART Action Plan will provide a mechanism to monitor the Strategy on a monthly basis internally to ensure we are delivering against the objectives. Quarterly updates will be provided to Members on progress against the Strategy and an annual report will be produced to report on success to date. This will be made available to all stakeholders to ensure accountability and transparency. For each objective, 'key measures of success' are being developed to report on the progress of the overall Strategy and ensure we are delivering.

Core Priority 1: Raising the Bar

- 3.5 Delivering high quality housing and services across all tenures is central to ensuring positive health and wellbeing outcomes for our residents. There are four objectives that support this:
- Deliver tailored and needs led services to all residents
 - Provide high quality council housing
 - Enhance the quality of housing in the private sector
 - Deliver value for money with high levels of customer satisfaction
- 3.6 Increasing engagement with residents will enable more tailored and needs led services. In particular, there is a focus on working with specific communities, including Gypsy and Travellers, to understand their needs and how best to support them. Increasing the use of digital channels will enhance the accessibility of the council to a wider audience. By working with partners, including adult social care, interventions can be evidence based to ensure a needs led approach.

- 3.7 The £68m Transforming Homes Programme is central to increasing the quality of council housing and will be delivered over the five years of the Strategy. This is supported by a strategic approach to asset management to ensure the maintenance of all properties. The revised repairs policy will encourage residents to undertake low level repairs themselves to reduce the current above average number of repairs per property and enable enhanced support for vulnerable residents.
- 3.8 Raising standards within the private sector is also critical. This is of particular importance in the private rented sector with the growth seen and as the council becomes increasingly reliant on this sector to discharge its homeless duty. The Well Homes Programme will continue to be delivered to support residents living in the private sector and reduce potential hazards impacting on health and wellbeing. Increased engagement with landlords through the development of structured forums will be a priority together with exploring financial incentives for landlords and the setting up a social lettings agency. A licencing scheme for landlords will aim to reduce rogue landlords and issues with ASB together with a strengthening of the enforcement team.
- 3.9 Taking a proactive and evidence based approach to services will enable best use of resources and a value for money service. Investment in housing staff with training and development opportunities, setting out clear career pathways, will increase the quality of our services. This together with a transparent and auditable approach to customer contact will increase customer satisfaction across services. Through continual review of contracts and re-procuring services, it will be ensured that services continue to represent value for money with maximum benefits to the community.

Core Priority 2: In on the Ground Floor

- 3.10 Through our preventative approach, we can use our limited resources more effectively and enhance residents overall wellbeing. Health and Employment is intrinsically linked to housing and we want to work in partnership to maximise the opportunities for our residents addressing social and health inequalities across the borough. The key objectives are:
- Empower residents to make informed choices with access to advice and support
 - Support our residents through prevention and early intervention to sustain their homes and avoid crisis
 - Support residents to maintain and improve their independence
 - Create employment pathways and support residents to access these
- 3.10 As part of the 'Digital First' approach taken by the council, investment in digital tools, for example HED, will empower residents to make informed housing choices and reduce demand on call centres and offices. Training staff and volunteers based at community hubs on housing advice will increase accessibility of information and staff will be equipped with mobile technology to enable them to be out in the community providing support.

- 3.11 Preventative services will be maximised to prevent residents from reaching crisis. This will be achieved through understanding the key challenges facing local people and working with partners to provide a joined up approach. This will include exploring working with credit unions to increase financial inclusion and continuing to utilise our three tiers of financial support. The viability of a mortgage rescue scheme will be explored to support people who are struggling to keep up with mortgage repayments. A working group will also be set up to review the extent and support for those with leave to remain in the country but no recourse to public funds.
- 3.12 Targeted health interventions in Sheltered Housing will support independent living – a model which is planned to be rolled out to general needs and private sector. Staff will also be trained on dementia to aid early diagnosis and support. Working with adult social care, residents with learning disabilities and mental health issues will be supported to live in suitable accommodation, maximising the use of community based interventions. Increasing awareness of safeguarding and strengthening the approach to ASB will be expanded upon to ensure the safety of residents.
- 3.13 Through the procurement of services, further employment opportunities will be created for residents. This will include targeting tenants on estates being regenerated to support those suffering from long term unemployment with the opportunity to enhance their skills and train as an apprentice. Working with partners, including DWP, will enhance employment and training advice and opportunities for residents. Apprenticeships will also continue to be created in house for residents.

Core Priority 3: Looking Ahead

- 3.14 Increasing the supply of housing is central to this Strategy – and with the reduction in government funding together with the current housing landscape in Thurrock – we need to find innovative new approaches, working across both the public and private sector to tackle this growing issue. The key objectives are to:
- Boost the housing market delivering new affordable homes to meet local need
 - Increase housing supply, working collaboratively with the private sector
 - Enhance local communities through estate regeneration
 - Ensure the sustainability of our homes to meet residents' needs now and in the future
- 3.15 With the development of Gloriana Thurrock Limited, the strategy will deliver 1,000 new affordable homes over the next five years. This will be supported with funding from the HCA and the additional borrowing in the HRA. Gloriana will provide the opportunity to unlock sites and kick start the housing market. With high levels of youth unemployment and child poverty in Tilbury and the surrounding areas, a 30 unit Foyer will be developed to empower young

people to gain the life skills needed to move into the community. Working with Adult Social Care, additional extra care and HAPPI schemes will also be explored to ascertain the most appropriate support for older people and vulnerable residents.

- 3.16 Working collaboratively with the private sector is critical to increasing housing supply. This will include establishing strategic partners including a regeneration partner and working with the sector to identify land available for development, maximising opportunities for new affordable housing.
- 3.17 Seabrooke Rise represents a first significant wholesale estate regeneration for Thurrock and is being developed in the context of the wider masterplanning for Grays. This is being followed over the five years by development of a strategy for the regeneration of further estates across the borough including Flowers and Broadway. Working with Regeneration, the Garrison Estate will also be regenerated increasing housing provision.
- 3.18 All homes will be built to 'Lifetime Homes' and Sustainable Homes standards, and reflect high quality design and materials. To enable people to remain in their own homes for longer, schemes for older people will adopt HAPPI standards. A Green Space Strategy will enhance open spaces for residents increasing community gardens and vegetable patches. Our housing stock will continue to be assessed to ensure homes are fit for purpose. This will include decommissioning Sheltered Housing that is no longer suitable for an increasingly older client group. Energy efficiency homes will be built, minimising the impact on the environment and funding through the Green Deal will be explored to enable retrofitting of existing homes.

4. Reasons for Recommendation

- 4.1 The Housing Strategy is required to set the strategic vision for housing and ensure our ambitious targets are realised over the next five years. This Strategy will be for external and internal stakeholders.

5. Consultation (including Overview and Scrutiny, if applicable)

- 5.1 The Strategy has been produced in consultation with our key stakeholders including council tenants and Members together with our partners as demonstrated below:
 - Tenant Excellence Panel
 - Health and Wellbeing Board
 - Leadership Group
 - Youth Cabinet
 - Community Safety Partnership
 - Overview and Scrutiny – 18th February 2015
 - Cabinet – 11th March 2015

6. Impact on corporate policies, priorities, performance and community impact

- 6.1 Thurrock Council's vision is to create a place of opportunity, enterprise and excellence, where individuals, communities and businesses flourish. The core priorities set out in this Housing Strategy reflect this ambition and run across all five priorities from Thurrock's Corporate Plan and Medium Term Financial Strategy 2013-16.

7. Implications

7.1 Financial

Implications verified by: Mike Jones
Management Accountant
mxjones@thurrock.gov.uk

We have developed a 30 year HRA business plan to identify resources needed to improve our existing stock and deliver much needed new housing. Through robust financial management, we will ensure that our housing objectives and action plan are appropriately resourced. We will endeavour to access funding, both from central government and by working in partnership with the third sector and private business, to support our objectives.

7.2 Legal

Implications verified by: Alison Stuart- Principal Lawyer
Tel : 01375 652 040

The Strategy will ensure that we deliver on our legal duties as a council and Legal Services should be consulted to provide ongoing advice and assistance in relation to these legislative requirements.

7.3 Diversity and Equality

Implications verified by: Natalie Warren
Community Development & Equalities Manager
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The Strategy seeks to reduce health and wellbeing inequalities across the borough. An impact assessment is being completed to ensure accessibility of housing and services to all protected characteristics.

Report Author:

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