

16 March 2021		ITEM: 9
Housing Overview and Scrutiny Committee		
Interim Housing Strategy Timetable		
Wards and communities affected: All	Key Decision: None	
Report of: Ryan Farmer – Housing Strategy and Quality Manager		
Accountable Assistant Director: Carol Hinvest – Assistant Director of Housing		
Accountable Director: Roger Harris – Corporate Director, Adults, Housing and Health		
This report is Public		

Executive Summary

As a local authority, it is important that Thurrock Council has a document that states its ambitions and goals regarding housing in the borough. The current Housing Strategy was adopted in Thurrock in 2015.

A new Housing Strategy is required, which considers current legislation, regulation and market trends, the impact of recent welfare reforms, and new opportunities for meeting the housing needs of Thurrock’s residents whilst considering the turbulence and uncertainty resulting from the COVID-19 pandemic.

This report summarises the reasons for the development of a new interim Housing Strategy, outlining the indicative stages for the design and ongoing management of the document and setting the scope of consultation to ensure that this interim document best reflects and respects the current and future needs of households in the borough.

Activity to start scoping and developing the new Housing Strategy is expected to begin in Spring 2021, with a view that a draft can be presented to the Housing Overview and Scrutiny Committee in Winter 2021.

1. Recommendation(s)

1.1 Housing Overview and Scrutiny Committee are asked to note the contents of this report and comment on the proposal to develop a new housing strategy. The Committee is also asked to comment on the consultation proposals as set out in section 6.

2. Introduction and Background

- 2.1. The council's existing Housing Strategy was agreed by Cabinet in March 2015. It was implemented later that year and was due for review in 2020. A report was presented to the council's Housing Overview and Scrutiny Committee on 29 October 2019, which provided an outline plan and timetable for the refresh of this document, with the anticipation that a draft could be presented to the Committee in Autumn 2020.

Preliminary work was scheduled to begin in late 2019 with the compilation of the base of evidence for this work with initial stakeholder engagement to follow soon after; however, the process to develop this key document subsequently experienced significant disruption.

- 2.2. Shortly after the outline plan and timetable were presented to the Housing Overview and Scrutiny Committee, the council entered a pre-election period as a result of the passing of the Early Parliamentary General Election Act 2019. Although this did not affect the ability to undertake research for the foundation of the strategy development, it pushed back any initial stakeholder engagement into the new calendar year; however, this too would be disrupted.
- 2.3. The COVID-19 pandemic has led to instability and uncertainty for households across the borough, not only in relation to their housing need but in their everyday lives. It became apparent that much of the research which had already been undertaken, based on findings before the pandemic began, may no longer be appropriate to use as the foundation of this key strategic document.
- 2.4. It was therefore determined that the development of the Housing Strategy should be deferred until such time that there was greater stability and certainty. This decision has been kept under regular review, considering the impact that social distancing rules and the implementation of lockdown measures would have on meaningful consultation with residents across the borough.
- 2.5. Neither the Housing service nor the wider council can be solely responsible for responding to housing demand in the borough or addressing the wider social issues at the heart of homelessness. It is only through true collaboration across organisational and institutional boundaries and across the public, private, and community and voluntary sectors that sustained progress can be achieved. The operational impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on partners and stakeholders has had to be given due consideration, and understandably, efforts to respond to and tackle the virus have taken priority.
- 2.6. At present, there are still concerns that the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on housing and homelessness has not yet been felt fully.

Initiatives such as 'Everyone In' and the Coronavirus Job Retention Scheme, and the introduction of legislation to temporarily implement a moratorium on evictions and extend eviction notice periods have provided some stability and security to households in Thurrock during a time of significant uncertainty, but these are not permanent resolutions. At the start of the 2021/22 financial year,

the first of the extended eviction notice periods will expire, and the the Coronavirus Job Retention Scheme is now expected to end in September 2021, along with the £20 per week Universal Credit increase. When these temporary protections are removed, it is highly likely that there will be a surge in Thurrock households experiencing financial hardship and at risk of homelessness.

- 2.7. Although insecurity remains for families and households across the borough, other important pieces of work are in development across the organisation, such as the Local Plan and the Health and Wellbeing Strategy. There are benefits that can be realised by producing a Housing Strategy that complements these other strategic documents.

In November 2020, the government published their social housing white paper, “the charter for social housing residents”, which builds on the proposals set out in the green paper published in August 2018 and outlines standards for landlords that social housing residents can expect.

- 2.8. With all these factors taken into consideration, it is proposed that an interim Housing Strategy is developed. The final document will have a reduced term so that a refresh can be undertaken once the full effects of the COVID-19 pandemic have been reviewed and analysed.
- 2.9. The interim Housing Strategy will cover the range of tenures available in Thurrock - not only social housing, but also owner-occupiers and the private rental sector. It is important to note that the strategy will consider housing need in the borough and the barriers which residents may face with accessing safe and secure accommodation, rather than providing an analysis of options or sites for housing provision.

The development of the strategy is expected to engage key internal and external partners and stakeholders as fully as is possible in line with any legislation or government and public health guidance in place at that time. This will ensure that the interim strategy best reflects and respects the needs of the diverse range of households in the borough. Further examples of consultees can be found in section 6 of this report.

- 2.10. The broad strategic aims which will be identified over the coming months will be underpinned by an action plan with jointly owned themes and actions. Outcomes will be delivered through the action plan, which will have regular monitoring and annual updates provided to Housing Overview and Scrutiny Committee.

3. Developments since 2015

- 3.1. There have been a number of significant events and developments since March 2015 which have affected the housing landscape locally, regionally and nationally. These include:

- The implementation of the Welfare Reform and Work Act 2016 that required social housing providers to reduce rent levels by 1% each year for four years, beginning in 2016/17
 - The freeze of local housing allowance rates, which controls the maximum level of Housing Benefit or the housing element of Universal Credit, running from April 2016 to March 2020
 - The introduction of the Housing and Planning Act 2016
 - The government's Housing white paper, "Fixing our broken housing market", published in February 2017
 - The Grenfell Tower fire in June 2017, which led to a number of investigations, inquiries and reports, as well as reviews of fire and structural safety
 - The roll-out of Universal Credit for new benefit claimants in Thurrock in October 2017
 - The implementation of the Homelessness Reduction Act 2017 in April 2018, significantly increasing the level of support and advice which local authorities are required to provide to those who are homeless or at risk of homelessness
 - The removal of the Housing Revenue Account borrowing cap in October 2018, lifting restrictions placed on local authority borrowing for building, refurbishing and regenerating properties
 - The implementation of Additional HMO Licensing in the borough in June 2019 that requires landlords to comply with national health and safety standards and local criteria before a 5-year licence is granted
 - The government's social housing white paper, "The charter for social housing residents", published in November 2020
- 3.2. Since 2015, the cost to purchase properties or rent in the private rental sector locally has increased significantly; however, household incomes have not matched this. The population of Thurrock has also grown over the past five years, whilst the supply of new dwellings has not kept pace with demand. The impact of these factors on the housing market in Thurrock has led to rising unaffordability and limitations on the housing options available to residents of the borough.
- 3.3. There is also the potential for further significant changes in housing policy and legislation, following the government's response to a number of consultations, including:

- A review of the rules which govern the ways that Local Authorities are able to use the money raised through Right to Buy sales, published in August 2018
- The Building Safety Bill – draft legislation announced in the Queen's Speech in December 2019, which followed the "Building a safer future" proposals for building safety requirement reform, published in June 2019 and based on the recommendations in the Hackett Report following the Grenfell Tower fire
- "A new deal for renting" – proposals to remove Section 21 'no-fault' private sector evictions and strengthen the Section 8 eviction process, published in July 2019

3.4. It is expected that further clarity on the above consultations may become available as work on the Housing Strategy progresses.

4. Strategy Development Stages

4.1. There will be a number of stages and milestones required for the development and ongoing management of the interim Housing Strategy. Throughout all stages, engagement with partners and stakeholders is essential. Best endeavours will be undertaken to obtain as full participation as is possible in line with legislation and guidance in place.

4.2. In the first instance, it will be necessary to undertake a preliminary assessment of the current housing situation in Thurrock, including the analysis of market trends, an investigation into the internal and external factors which affect housing locally, and a review of current and projected housing need in the borough. It will also be important to understand the impact the COVID-19 pandemic has had on all of these factors to differentiate between short-term effects and much longer-term changes.

This piece of work will provide a clear understanding of local challenges and a strong foundation for the strategy to be built upon. The strategy will also be supported by a private sector stock condition survey which has been commissioned and an affordability study which is being undertaken in partnership with Public Health colleagues.

4.3. The second stage will be to establish a number of key themes and factors which are important to residents in Thurrock. This will allow for priority issues to be identified which will require further action to address.

4.4. The third stage of the development of the interim Housing Strategy will be to define the actions which are necessary in order to tackle the issues and challenges which have been identified. This will form the basis of the action plan that will detail accountability and ownership for each action.

- 4.5. Finally, once approved and published, it is of utmost importance that the strategy and its action plan is regularly reviewed to ensure it remains relevant and delivering outcomes in line with its strategic aims.
- 4.6. An initial timetable for the development, consultation and production of a reviews Housing Strategy can be seen below:

Date	Event/Stage
16 March 2021	Launch development with paper to Housing Overview & Scrutiny Committee
April 2021 – May 2021	Assessment of current Housing situation and analysis of factors affecting housing need in the borough
June 2021 – July 2021	Identification of key themes and priorities through engagement with residents and key stakeholders.
August 2021 – September 2021	Development of key actions for action plan and identification of action owners
October 2021 – December 2021	Public Consultation on Draft Strategy
January 2022	Final draft of Interim Housing Strategy presented to Housing Overview & Scrutiny Committee
January 2022	Final document presented to Cabinet for approval and adoption

- 4.7. This timetable is indicative and based on the understanding and context at the time of writing. It is anticipated that a review will be undertaken in Summer 2021 after the evidence base has been collated, and key themes and priorities have been identified. This review will determine whether the strategy will continue as an interim document or if circumstances at the time provide the certainty required for a full strategy to be developed.

5. Reasons for Recommendation

- 5.1. As outlined, the current Housing Strategy which has been adopted by the council, requires a refresh as it is was due for renewal in 2020.
- 5.2. Due to significant changes since 2015 in welfare reform, housing and homelessness regulation and legislation as well as housing provision in the borough, and the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on the needs and requirements of households, it is recommended that the development work outlined in this report commences in Spring 2021 so that an interim strategy can be published in an appropriate timeframe.

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

6.1. As explained throughout this report, collaboration is a key principle in the design, development and ongoing monitoring of the interim Housing Strategy. There is an aspiration for wide-ranging consultation to take place with a variety of key partners and stakeholders; however, these must be within the guidance and legislation in effect at the time. It is intended that, wherever possible, consultees will include (but are not limited to):

- Residents of Thurrock
- Council Officers from a range of services, including Housing, Adults Social Care, Children's Services, Public Health, Planning, Regeneration and Housing Development
- NHS representatives
- Housing associations
- Partner organisations
- Organisations from the voluntary sector

6.2. Examples of previous consultation activity which will be considered for use again, depending on restrictions in place, include face-to-face sessions with Council staff, partners and key stakeholders, online surveys, statistical analysis, Teams virtual briefings and workshops, and presentations to other key Council services, committees and boards.

6.3. It is intended that specific activity with members of the Housing Overview and Scrutiny Committee will take place to ensure that all appropriate stakeholders and issues as identified by members can be included throughout any period of consultation.

7. Background papers used in preparing the report (including their location on the council's website or identification whether any are exempt or protected by copyright):

- None

8. Implications

8.1. Financial

Implications verified by: **Hannah Katakwe**
Housing Accountant, Finance & IT

Through robust financial management and assessment of plans to improve existing stock, develop new housing and deliver housing services across the borough, the council will ensure that the refreshed Housing Strategy has the

appropriate resources in order to deliver against any objectives and actions which will be identified through the development stages.

8.2. Legal

Implications verified by: **Tim Hallam**
Deputy Head of Legal and Deputy Monitoring Officer

Given the nature of this report there are no legal implications directly arising from it. By way of background information and context, a refreshed Housing Strategy will ensure that the council will deliver on its statutory duties as both a local authority and a social housing provider. Legal Services should be consulted to provide ongoing advice and assistance.

8.3. Diversity and Equality

Implications verified by: **Roxanne Scanlon**
Community Engagement and Project Monitoring Officer

Consultation activity is planned to take place with other public bodies, voluntary organisations, service users and other identified stakeholders before a new strategy is implemented. By undertaking a review, a broad range of stakeholders throughout the community can be identified and involved in the activity to develop a holistic strategy. The consultation results will help to inform a Community Equality Impact Assessment prior to implementation of the strategy to identify and address any issues affecting those within the protected characteristics.

8.4. Other implications (where significant) – i.e. Staff, Health, Sustainability, Crime and Disorder)

Not applicable

9. Appendices to the report

- None

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