

21 September 2021		ITEM: 5
Housing Overview and Scrutiny Committee		
Housing Strategy 2022-27 – Engagement Programme		
Wards and communities affected: All	Key Decision: None	
Report of: Ryan Farmer – Housing Strategy and Quality Manager		
Accountable Assistant Director: Ewelina Sorbjan – Assistant Director of Housing		
Accountable Director: Ian Wake – Corporate Director, Adults, Housing and Health		
This report is Public		

Executive Summary

As a local authority, it is vital that Thurrock Council has a document to share the aims and ambitions of the organisation regarding housing in the borough.

The council adopted its current Housing Strategy in 2015; however, a new Housing Strategy is now in development. It will consider recent changes to legislation and regulation, trends in the housing market, the impact of recent welfare reforms, and new opportunities for meeting the housing needs of Thurrock’s residents. The strategy will also consider the turbulence and uncertainty of the COVID-19 pandemic and the future impact it may have.

The Housing Strategy will cover the range of tenures available in Thurrock - social housing, owner-occupiers and the private rental sector. However, it is important to note that the strategy will consider housing needs in the borough and the barriers residents may face with accessing safe, secure and suitable accommodation, rather than analysing specific options or sites for housing provision.

Activity to start scoping and developing the new Housing Strategy began in spring 2021. The engagement period began in August 2021, and it is intended that a final draft will be presented to the Housing Overview and Scrutiny Committee in January 2022.

1. Recommendation(s)

- 1.1. Housing Overview and Scrutiny Committee are asked to note the contents of this report and comment on the emerging themes presented, in particular, to highlight the priority areas which committee members feel should be considered for inclusion within the Housing Strategy 2022-27**

2. Strategy Development and Delivery

The Housing Strategy will set out the council's plans and approach towards housing for the five years from 2022 to 2027. Key themes and high-level strategic actions will feature within the final Housing Strategy, supported by an action plan aligned with the priorities and themes of the document.

The engagement of internal and external partners and stakeholders is integral to the successful design, development and delivery of this strategy. This report has been produced to achieve direct and meaningful engagement with members of the council's Housing Overview and Scrutiny Committee on the themes which have been outlined and the priorities and actions that members feel the council should consider including in the strategy.

Further details regarding engagement can be found in the corresponding section of this report.

In development alongside the Housing Strategy are two other critical documents for the Housing service, supporting and providing supplementary information. These are:

- the Housing Asset Management Strategy, which will outline the council's approach to managing, maintaining and investing in Housing assets to ensure that properties provide attractive, good quality council-owned homes for current and future residents
- the Housing Resident Engagement Strategy, which will set the aims and ambitions of the Housing service in improving its interaction and communication with those who live in and around Thurrock Council's homes and neighbourhoods

3. Context

3.1. This section of the report provides corporate, legislative, regulatory, national and local context within which the Housing Strategy needs to be developed. The details set out below demonstrate some of the factors considered in determining the broad themes for the Housing Strategy.

3.2. Corporate Context

Thurrock Council's vision and corporate priorities, adopted in January 2018, will underpin the Housing Strategy. The council's vision is for Thurrock to be *an ambitious and collaborative community which is proud of its heritage and excited by its diverse opportunities and future.*

Sitting alongside the vision are the three corporate priorities of People, Place and Prosperity.

3.2.1 People

The Housing Strategy will appropriately address and meet the challenges set within this priority. Resilient partnerships across sectors and empowered communities are integral to any Housing Strategy's meaningful development and success. This approach will ensure that services are provided that consistently meet and reflect the needs of those who use them.

3.2.2 Place

While the Housing service has specific responsibility for maintaining and developing the homes and neighbourhoods managed by the council, and plans for these areas will be addressed by the Housing Strategy, this document must go beyond council-owned stock and consider all tenure types. This strategy will improve understanding of households' needs across the borough, identifying the requirements for homes and infrastructure that will support current and future Thurrock residents.

3.2.3 Prosperity

The Housing Strategy will aim to deliver opportunities for residents to achieve their aspirations, including accessing skills training with partner organisations and building links to enhance economic prospects alongside major strategic projects in the borough. The strategy will also seek to expand relationships with other housing providers to increase affordable housing levels in Thurrock.

3.3. Legislative and Regulatory Context

It is necessary that the Housing Strategy is developed within and reflects current legislation and regulation, with the flexibility to adapt to legislative changes that may occur during the document's lifetime. This section outlines some elements that define the powers, duties and obligations of local authorities towards housing which must be considered in setting the direction of the Housing Strategy.

3.3.1 Legislation

Thurrock Council has many housing duties and responsibilities, with only some of these directly relating to its role as a social housing provider and developer. Within legislation, the council also has duties towards homelessness prevention and relief, enforcing property standards and licensing in the private rental sector, and strategic assessments of the borough's current and future housing needs.

3.3.2 Regulation

The Regulator of Social Housing has set four consumer standards and will intervene where failure to adhere to the standards has caused or would risk causing serious harm to tenants. As a social housing provider, the council is required to adhere to these standards.

The four consumer standards are:

- Homes Standard
- Tenancy Standard
- Neighbourhood and Community Standard
- Tenant Involvement and Empowerment Standard

The Regulator of Social Housing has also set three economic standards. However, as a local authority, only the rent standard is applicable. This standard establishes the limit for the maximum weekly social and affordable rents which social landlords can charge.

3.4. National Context

The housing landscape is ever-changing, impacted by alterations to government policy, significant events in the housing sector and other national influences.

Whilst Thurrock does have more localised challenges, some of which are outlined in a later section, the strategic approach towards housing in the borough is equally affected by the national context.

3.4.1 Social Housing White Paper - *The Charter for Social Housing Residents*

In November 2020, the Government published its social housing white paper, *The Charter for Social Housing Residents*, as updated in January 2021. Within this document, the Government set out its intentions for its actions to ensure that residents in social housing are safe, are listened to, live in good quality homes, and have access to redress when required.

The charter outlines the following seven elements that every social housing resident should be able to expect:

- to be safe in your home
- to know how your landlord is performing
- to have your complaints dealt with promptly and fairly
- to be treated with respect
- to have your voice heard by your landlord
- to have a good quality home and neighbourhood to live in
- to be supported to take your first step into ownership

Further to establishing these aspects, the Government announced that it would strengthen the Regulator of Social Housing, empowering the regulator to be proactive in monitoring and enforcing the consumer standards that social housing landlords are held to, and also requiring landlords to:

- be transparent about their performance and decision-making so that tenants and the regulator can hold them to account
- put things right when they go wrong
- listen to tenants through effective engagement

Whilst the white paper outlines these intentions, the timelines for implementing the policies and measures announced in the document remain unclear.

The Government may undertake consultation and introduce legislation supporting the social housing white paper during the lifetime of the Housing Strategy. Therefore, the strategy must be designed to meet and address the proposals in the social housing white paper appropriately.

3.4.2 Grenfell Tower Fire and Building Safety

The Grenfell Tower Fire on 14 June 2017 brought both fire and building safety and tenant and resident engagement into sharp focus for housing providers across the country. The tragedy triggered a wave of activity, such as tenant engagement roadshows by housing ministers, the development of a social housing green paper, and the commissioning of a review of building regulations and fire safety led by Dame Judith Hackitt.

Among other recommendations, the report drew particular attention to the importance of engaging with residents, having appropriate strategies for engagement in place, and ensuring that residents had access to information and involvement in decision making.

The report also highlights the strength of structured engagement through residents' associations and tenant panels and the need for cultural change across the sector regarding the relationship between landlords and residents.

The council's duties and obligations relating to building and fire safety are likely to be broadened in the coming months and years due to the progression of the Building Safety Bill and the commencement of the Fire Safety Act 2021. As such, the Housing Strategy must respond to these and flex with any future responsibilities.

3.4.3 COVID-19 – Community Engagement and Resilience

The COVID-19 pandemic significantly impacted how people interacted, including with organisations like local authorities and housing providers. Local authorities were required to engage with their residents and communities in new ways and increased volumes. However, this period also saw communities building resilience and developing support networks organically.

Although the COVID-19 pandemic restricted and prevented traditional face-to-face interaction and engagement activity with those who access the council's services, there were opportunities to find new ways to stay connected, such as using social media and other technology solutions. The level of contact with residents also increased to ensure that those most vulnerable could receive the support they needed through exceptionally challenging times.

The experience of the COVID-19 pandemic demonstrated that there is demand for developing new ways of engagement that take advantage of digital tools and resources whilst retaining the capacity for traditional and in-person approaches to resident participation and information sharing.

3.4.4 COVID-19 – Impact on Housing and Homelessness

At present, there are still concerns that the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on housing and homelessness has not yet fully emerged.

Initiatives such as 'Everyone In' and the Coronavirus Job Retention Scheme and introducing legislation to temporarily implement a moratorium on evictions and extend eviction notice periods provided some stability and security to households across the country during a time of significant uncertainty, but these were not permanent resolutions.

The ban on bailiff-enforced evictions has now ended. In addition, the Coronavirus Job Retention Scheme is due to conclude in September 2021, with the removal of the £20 per week Universal Credit increase scheduled for October 2021. When these temporary protections are removed, there will likely be a surge in Thurrock households experiencing financial hardship and at risk of homelessness.

The impacts on the private rental sector and the broader housing market in Thurrock are uncertain; however, the council must consider these factors in developing the Housing Strategy.

4. Local Context

4.1. Affordability

Affordability of accommodation in Thurrock is an ongoing challenge, both in the private rental sector and those aiming to purchase properties.

Data published in June 2021 estimates that 56.24% of first-time buyers would be priced out of purchasing a flat on the open market, with levels of unaffordability increasing for larger sized properties.

Using the same household income data to consider the affordability of properties in the private rental sector, approximately 33% of households would not afford the median rent of a one-bedroom property. Again, unaffordability increases for larger sized properties.

After being frozen for several years, the Government realigned Local Housing Allowance (LHA) rates with local market rents in 2020. LHA rates reflect the maximum housing benefit or Universal Credit housing element, which applicants can claim towards housing costs in the private rental sector. In 2020 LHA rates were set at the 30th percentile of local market rents and were frozen once again.

Although LHA rates have been frozen, market rents have not. There is a growing disparity between LHA rates and 30th percentile rents. This challenge of private sector affordability directly relates to the demands for accommodation at social and affordable rents.

4.2. Social and Affordable Housing Provision

In Thurrock, the council is the primary provider of social housing. Based on data published by MHCLG, as of 31 March 2020, it was estimated that 14.3% of dwellings in Thurrock were owned by the council, with other registered social housing providers owning less than 3.1% of homes in the borough.

This imbalance has led to additional pressure and demand on Thurrock Council as the primary provider of affordable accommodation in the borough, highlighting the need for alternative provisions.

4.3. Local Strategy Development

There are a number of other strategic documents under development across the organisation that can inform and be informed by the production of this Housing Strategy.

These include the Local Plan and the Health and Wellbeing Strategy refresh. There will be areas of commonality between these documents and the scope of the Housing Strategy, presenting the council with an opportunity for strategic synergy.

5. Strategy Themes

After considering the above outlined contextual factors, six themes have emerged as areas for exploration and refinement through the engagement and development of the Housing Strategy. These themes are:

- Community Resilience and Engagement
- Safety and Security
- Health and Wellbeing
- Understanding and Addressing Housing Need
- Investment, Development and Standard of Homes
- Housing Services

This section of the report provides detail regarding each of these themes.

It is anticipated that further refinement of these themes will take place following the conclusion of the engagement period of the Housing Strategy development and the assessment of the feedback collected.

5.1. Community Resilience and Engagement

This theme provides an opportunity to build on the foundations of community resilience developed during the COVID-19 pandemic.

Activity under this theme will also facilitate strengthened resident representation and participation in how housing services are designed, delivered and reviewed in the future.

This approach will empower the individuals and households that access and use Housing services following the model set in the council's Collaborative Communities Framework, which seeks to influence how the council works for the benefit of communities.

The work within this theme of the Housing Strategy will link directly to the Housing Resident Engagement Strategy. It will also address the Social Housing White Paper elements relating to residents being treated with respect and having their voices heard by their landlords.

5.2. Safety and Security

This theme relates not only to safety and security in a physical sense but also refers to the perception of safety and security that residents have within their homes and neighbourhoods.

The important topic of building and fire safety is integral to physical safety and will continue to be a significant priority to the council. The Government is actively consulting and progressing legislation surrounding fire and building safety. As such, the Housing Strategy must have a mechanism for addressing any key measures, duties or responsibilities which are introduced.

Relating to both physical safety and the perception of safety are the council's estates and neighbourhoods. This strategy will set out the council's intentions for maintaining these as safe environments for those who live, work and travel in and around them. This approach will also extend to tackling anti-social behaviour and addressing concerns around safeguarding, domestic abuse and violence against women and girls.

The above-outlined elements of this theme act in support of the Social Housing White Paper proposals regarding residents having both a safe home and a good neighbourhood to live in.

Beyond the council's responsibilities as a landlord, this theme provides an opportunity to tackle poor standards and unsafe properties in the private rental sector.

In addition, consideration can be given to opportunities to improve standards within owner-occupied properties, to develop ways that residents can access support to live safely, well, and independently in their homes for longer.

5.3. Health and Wellbeing

Housing is a key element in the health and wellbeing of individuals and households. The lack of safe, suitable and secure accommodation will ultimately impact a person's mental health, physical health and general wellbeing.

This strategy intends to take action and put measures in place to provide residents with the greatest opportunities to live well and independently within their homes and communities for as long as possible.

Supporting the health and wellbeing of the borough's residents is a factor and ultimate aim across all themes within this strategy. To reflect this, it is anticipated that health and wellbeing may be represented differently in the final draft, appearing instead as an aspect of each theme rather than a standalone theme itself.

Currently, the Housing Strategy and the Health and Wellbeing Strategy are being refreshed, providing a valuable chance to produce a coordinated approach to tackling health inequality through housing and housing services.

5.4. Understanding and Addressing Housing Need

Central to providing housing options that meet the varied needs of current and future Thurrock residents is developing a detailed understanding of those needs.

Affordability of accommodation is a challenge for many Thurrock residents. However, the differing aspirations, circumstances and needs of individuals and families in the borough mean that this strategy should consider a range of housing options.

Housing need relates not only to affordability but also to factors such as the tenure of accommodation, the size of property needed, the requirements for adaptations and the level of support necessary for those who face challenges with living independently.

This theme will also consider housing needs relating to age and the options required to address these.

The work in this theme will align with the council's Homelessness Prevention and Rough Sleeping Strategy, which was approved in early 2020. This theme will also help to inform and support the development of the Local Plan.

5.5. Investment, Development and Standard of Homes

Alongside the Housing Asset Management Strategy, this theme provides the opportunity to outline how the council will deliver good quality homes, maximise the value of its assets and plan for a sustainable future.

Through this theme, the Housing Strategy will set the aims, aspirations and intentions for future Council-led residential development, particularly relating to the type, size and tenure of properties.

The Housing Strategy will also present actions aiming to explore other affordable housing options and alternative housing delivery methods.

Over the past eighteen months, people have been using their homes in vastly different ways compared to the time before the COVID-19 pandemic. This theme allows the opportunity to consider the future use of homes, including their increasing adoption as places of work, to inform development plans and priorities.

Due to the climate emergency, this theme must identify and address the challenges relating to low/zero carbon housing and energy efficiency, not only within the council's stock but across the dwellings in the borough. Further to this, action will need to be outlined to tackle the ongoing issue of fuel poverty affecting many households in Thurrock.

There is an aspiration that the Housing Strategy can serve to influence the type and size of properties that other affordable and private housing developers may seek to build within the borough, ensuring that homes are built to meet the identified needs of Thurrock residents.

It is also the intention that the Housing Strategy can identify actions to influence and drive higher standards of accommodation within the private rental sector.

5.6. Housing Services

This Housing Strategy relates to all tenure types; however, the document presents an opportunity to identify and drive improvements to Housing services for the future. This theme would aspire to ensure the delivery of high-quality resident-centric services that provide value for money and strong resident satisfaction levels.

This theme will consider how services could be transformed or redesigned to be delivered more within communities and localities whilst also exploring opportunities to improve digital engagement with Housing services and officers.

Other relationships exist between this theme and proposals in the Social Housing White Paper regarding landlord performance, regulation and complaints handling.

6. Next Steps

- 6.1. The engagement period for the development of the Housing Strategy began in August 2021 with presentations and engagement meetings with officers from across the council, with further opportunities for engagement intended throughout September and October.

From September 2021, the council will undertake active engagement with community forums, resident associations, strategic partnership groups and wider community, voluntary and faith sector organisations. Further engagement activity is to be programmed and held with a range of

stakeholders and interested parties before the end of October 2021, as set out in the engagement section within this report.

- 6.2. An officer-led Housing Strategy Development Oversight Group has been formed with representation from Planning, Public Health and Housing Development to ensure strong links with other areas currently developing important and related strategic documents. The members of this group will collectively contribute towards and review the feedback received throughout the engagement period of the Housing Strategy.

During this and the development phase, group members will bring experience and expertise from a range of disciplines to ensure that a well-rounded strategy is produced that compliments the council's broader strategic aspirations.

- 6.3. It is currently anticipated that the final draft of the Housing Strategy 2022-27 will be presented to Housing Overview and Scrutiny Committee in January 2022.

7. Reasons for Recommendation

- 7.1. As outlined within this report, the current Housing Strategy adopted by the council requires a refresh. With engagement and collaboration forming central priorities of the strategy development, this reports offers the opportunity for members of the Housing Overview and Scrutiny Committee to make known their views and bring forward the priorities of their constituents relating to the themes proposed in this report.

8. Engagement (including Overview and Scrutiny, if applicable)

- 8.1. Collaboration is a critical principle in the design, development and ongoing monitoring of the Housing Strategy. There is an aspiration for wide-ranging engagement with various partners and stakeholders; however, these must be sensitive to the current context relating to COVID-19 and must also be in line with any guidance and legislation in effect.

- 8.2. It is intended that 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 community, voluntary and faith sector

- 8.3. Examples of activity explored for use again include detailed sessions with council staff, partners and key stakeholders, online surveys, statistical

analysis, Microsoft Teams virtual briefings and workshops, and presentations to other key council services, committees and boards.

8.4. As outlined, the presentation of this report aims to achieve direct and meaningful engagement with members of the council's Housing Overview and Scrutiny Committee on the development of the Housing Strategy. In addition, it provides an opportunity for members to identify and share any appropriate stakeholders for further engagement, and bring forward priorities as outlined by their constituents.

9. **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

10. Implications

10.1. Financial

Implications verified by: **Mike Jones**
Strategic Lead - Corporate Finance

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 to deliver against any objectives and actions identified through the development stages.

10.2. 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.

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.

10.3. Diversity and Equality

Implications verified by: **Becky Lee**
Team Manager - Community Development and Equalities

Engagement activity is planned to occur 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 engagement results will help inform a Community Equality Impact Assessment before implementing the strategy to identify and address any issues affecting those within the protected characteristics.

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

Not applicable

11. Appendices to the report

- None

Report Author:

Ryan Farmer

Housing Strategy & Quality Manager

Business Improvement - Housing