

Cherwell District Council

Overview and Scrutiny Committee

18th February 2014

Housing Services Plan

Report of Head of Regeneration and Housing

This report is public

Purpose of report

The purpose of this report is to provide the Overview and Scrutiny Panel an update on the work of Housing Services including key challenges and achievements. This report follows the 'order' of the Council's Housing Strategy (2012 – 2017) from which the annual Housing Service Plan flows.

1.0 Recommendations

The meeting is recommended:

- 1.1 To note progress to date in preventing homelessness, delivering and enabling housing development, improving housing standards and commissioning housing related services
- 1.2 To note the challenging financial context in which services are being delivered.

2.0 Introduction

- 2.1 In 2012, the Council launched a new five year Housing Strategy: *Enterprise, Innovation ad Empowerment*. The Strategy contains six objectives:
 - Increasing the supply and access to housing
 - Developing financially and socially sustainable communities
 - Housing for our most vulnerable residents
 - Ensuring our homes are safe, warm and well managed
 - Preventing homelessness
 - Maximising resources ~ Investment Ready District
- 2.2 This report provides an overview of the key 'headlines' relating to these objectives, including achievements and challenges.

3.0 Report Details

The report follows the order of the Council's Housing Strategy as this is the overarching document that informs the annual Housing Service Plan.

3.1 Housing Priority One: Increasing the supply and access to housing

3.1.1 The Housing Strategy has an annual target to deliver 150 affordable homes per year. We are on target, having delivered 109 homes to date this financial year and many others on site nearing completion.

3.1.2 There are established quarterly development meetings held with Registered Providers (RPs) to ensure all partners are up to date with policy, funding opportunities, development opportunities and council priorities. Council officers are in regular contact with the Homes and Communities Agency (HCA) to maximise inward investment such as the newly announced Affordable Homes Programme for 2015 – 2018.

3.1.3 As well as delivering new affordable housing, CDC officers work hard to ensure as much existing stock as possible is retained as affordable housing. The Council is actively working with all its RP partners in order to better understand and create a strategic response to RP's disposal programmes. In the past year there have been 11 requests by several RP's to dispose of or convert social rented homes following those properties being made vacant. In some cases the Council has agreed the disposal or conversion request, sometimes it has not. The Council continues to take a pragmatic and partnership approach towards discussions around the disposal or conversion of properties owned by RP's. Moving forward it is not anticipated that a high number of these requests will be made by RP's although the Council will continue to monitor the situation closely.

3.1.4 In relation to private sector housing the Council's Cherwell Bond Scheme (CBS) is going well, with people still being regularly housed through this route and there is a reduction in the number of claims from landlords due to the excellent management input from the Housing Needs Team including tenant and landlord liaison and mediation. Furthermore CDC has entered into a joint initiative with South Northants Council to establish '*Homes2rent*' which is designed to assist people who are looking for private sector housing. This also provides a focused advertising opportunity for local landlords and thus another great opportunity to stimulate the private sector housing market. Finally, CDC promotes this sector through Landlord Home Improvement Grants, Landlord's Energy Efficiency Grants, Newsletters and Forums all of which are extremely well received.

It is really important to note however, this achievement has been in the context of growing landlord concern about welfare reform and growing demand more widely within the district for private sector housing. This means that landlords can 'pick' tenants who they perceive to present less risky and thus tenants in receipt of benefits are often perceived as less favourable. CDC works extremely hard to mitigate this perception and offer a package of measures outlined above, however it is recognized that only growth in the private rented sector (so that supply meets

demand) will really address this issue. Therefore officers are looking at ways to increase the private rented sector and attract inward investment.

- 3.1.5 Through its Build! ® Programme, the Council has secured HCA funding for four programmes to deliver 262 homes. A number of brownfield sites have been acquired with others in negotiation. A confidential update is attached as Appendix One to this report. Alongside site acquisition, design and construction, there has been a great deal of work invested to create a training programme for all applicants, access to mortgages (and mortgage advice) and the procurement of a supply chain; this includes the appointment of Jewsons as the preferred Builders Merchant to support the programme. Going forward, and of course subject to Executive approval in March, the Council has an excellent opportunity to 'scale up' the learning from the smaller schemes in the Build! ® programme through the proposed Graven Hill development.
- 3.1.6 The Community Land Trust (CLT) was legally established as an Industrial and Provident Society in July 2012. It has a Board of 14 of which 10 are Directors, 3 are Co-opted members and 1 is the Council's Custodian Trustee. The CLT is established to have a dual role in being able to operate as an 'umbrella organisation' to enable community led developments, yet also undertake direct developments in its own right. The CLT has been actively involved in the design process of the Build! ® Schemes and community engagement activities has been invaluable. The CLT is itself to be established as a RP this year which means that it will be in a position undertake direct development, access grant funding and to take on the ownership of Council and/or RP led schemes to rent or shared ownership upon completion.
- 3.1.7 The Council's Regeneration and Housing Team has been actively involved in regeneration projects including the Orchard Way Phase One (residential works) with other projects planned for 2014.
- 3.1.8 This year has seen a big increase in action on empty properties. Thankfully much has been achieved through agreement of the owners and through advice and signposting to sources of help. Others have had more intensive input and this detail is included in Confidential Appendix One. As a matter of last resort the Council has had to pursue enforcement measures on a small number of properties. This includes using warrants to access and inspect properties (when the owner will not engage), applying to the Secretary of State for a Compulsory Purchase Order (i.e. Crown House for which the Council is awaiting an outcome) and Empty Dwelling Management Orders (EDMOs). Enforcement action has also been undertaken to deal with specific problems such as rodents.
- 3.1.9 The Council continues to remain active and supportive in the delivery of rural housing and is in liaison with a number of parish councils in relation to future rural exception sites and the potential impact of local and national policy changes. The Council provides grant funding to Oxfordshire Rural Community Council (ORCC) and is an active member of Oxfordshire Rural Housing Partnership. Furthermore through the Community Land Trust it is hoped that future rural housing will be much more 'community led' with assets owned by local communities in perpetuity.

3.2 Housing Priority Two: Developing financially and socially sustainable communities

- 3.2.1 The Council supports Banbury and Bicester CAB to deliver a district-wide advice service covering housing and debt which is proving to be an invaluable tool in homeless prevention and tenancy sustainment.
- 3.2.2 The Housing Needs Team has invested its time and the Council is also investing some funding to support a much needed Credit Union.
- 3.2.3 Through its Build! ® programme and in partnership with ACE, the Council is providing construction training. This includes Level One NVQ Site Carpentry to people who are unemployed and modular training to people in employment.
- 3.2.4 Cherwell Community Land Trust is seeking to engage communities, including rural and urban communities to enable community led housing initiatives and engage communities in new housing developments.
- 3.3 **Housing Priority Three: Providing housing for our most vulnerable residents**
 - 3.3.1 CDC Officers are actively involved with OCC to review the impact of any reduced funding for housing related support including supported housing schemes. Furthermore CDC Officers are working closely with all providers of supported housing to assess the impact of any funding reductions and opportunities for alternative revenue funding and opportunities to reduce expenditure/scheme overheads. Once the extent of funding reductions is fully known and the impact fully understood an update will be made available to Elected Members.
 - 3.3.2 OCC's part-funding for CDC's Home Improvement Agency (HIA) is also under review and CDC is in on-going discussion to ensure this high quality service is maintained. This is an important service to act as a gateway to Disabled Facilities Grants and other grants for vulnerable people in the district.
 - 3.3.3 Funding from Government (CLG) for 2014/15 has been confirmed for Disabled Facilities Grants (DFGs). This arrangement is to transition to the 'Better Care Fund' in 2015/16 which is likely to be devolved to Oxfordshire Clinical Commissioning Group and Health Improvement Board to administer/allocate. It is therefore crucial that CDC retains active involvement at a County level. CDC Officers have worked hard over a number of years on partnership working with OCC, resulting in a jointly funded Occupational Therapist (OT) to support this work. To date 83 households have been supported by DFGs this financial year, enabling them to remain living in their family homes.
 - 3.3.4 Through its Build! ® programme and RP status, the Council has secured HCA/Department of Health Funding to deliver 12 supported and specially designed homes for people with autism and 10 supported and specially designed homes for people with physical disabilities.
 - 3.3.5 This year a new extra Care schemes has been completed in Yarnton, providing 50 new homes for rent and shared ownership for people aged 55+. Another scheme is on site in Kidlington which will deliver a further 52 homes, again for rent and shared ownership for people aged 55+.

3.4 Strategic Housing Priority Four: Ensuring homes are safe, warm and well managed

- 3.4.1 The Council's recently completed Stock Modelling exercise has estimated that 17% of the stock (more than 10,000 homes) have a serious health hazard¹ (this compares with 21% nationally). The Council has a statutory duty to take action to resolve those hazards. In addition, 4% of homes in the district suffer from general disrepair.
- 3.4.2 The private rented sector makes up 16% of the housing stock locally and it is generally accepted that the very worst accommodation tends to be found in the private rented sector and that houses in multiple occupation can present particular problems².
- 3.4.4 CDC is now an active partner (with a Director's position) on a Green Deal Community Interest Company which facilitates grants and loans and advice to households to improve affordable warmth.
- 3.4.5 CDC Officers have been very involved in the 'Eco Bicester' Agenda which includes a project to retrofit houses to make them more sustainable. There has also been an intensive focus on retrofitting of RP owned housing.
- 3.4.6 CDC Officers are actively involved in JTAC which is an interagency strategy group to work jointly with people who are known to multiple statutory services including the police, local authority, social services and health. In the context of housing this is useful as it can ensure landlords are using the measures available to them to deal with and prevent anti-social behavior and work in a coordinated way with statutory bodies.
- 3.4.7 CDC Housing staff facilitate a RP Housing Management Forum to promote best practice in housing management and to work collaboratively on issues such as the impact of welfare reform, anti-social behavior etc. This Forum is well attended by stock-holding RPs in the district.

3.5 Strategic Priority Five: Preventing Homelessness

- 3.5.1 Since it tackled the 'peak' in homelessness back in 2006, Cherwell has been recognised by Government and other agencies for its partnership approach and innovative methods in preventing homelessness. This robust 'package' of interventions has enabled the district to be resilient during the economic downturn and the reforms to the welfare system of the past two years. At the time of writing this report only 26 households are placed in temporary accommodation, which is incredible given the context we are working in. This context is one of less public subsidy, many households experiencing reduced income (due to welfare reform) and increasing house prices and cost of living. This is also in spite of a couple of emergency situations including a serious fire and a serious flood which necessitated placing households in temporary housing in an emergency. This performance is,

¹ A serious hazard is one which, assessed using the HHSRS process, is likely to cause harm within the next 12 months.

² For that reason mandatory HMO licensing was introduced in 2006 (but for larger HMOs only)

without a doubt down to the excellent partnership work that continues to operate across the public, voluntary and private sector and down to the dedication and commitment of people working in the field of housing in our district.

3.5.2 A crucial element of maintaining this performance is to ensure complacency does not set in. To this end Cherwell has signed up to follow the national 'Gold Star' Initiative to ensure it is at the forefront of best practice. This, along with a raft of other prevention measures is set out in the updated Housing Strategy Homeless Action Plan, which partners have signed up to and is being monitored through a Homeless Action Plan Steering Group. The raft of prevention measures in place in the district that are provided by a range of agencies include:

- Advice and information
- Support to people in their own homes (floating support)
- Supported housing
- Homeless prevention education in schools
- Drop-in centres (e.g. Beacon Centre)
- Practical support to homeless people when they are housed (furniture projects)
- Interventions for victims of domestic abuse
- Group work and training
- Mediation
- Mortgage rescue

3.5.3 On the 'radar' of agencies working in the field of homelessness is the possible impact on single homelessness due to the likely reductions in funding for this group. The 'No Second Night Out' national initiative aims to intervene to prevent sustained rough sleeping, however for this to be a success it is crucial to have 'second stage' accommodation for people with a Cherwell Connection who have needed to access one of the emergency hostels in Oxford. To this end CDC secured funding from the HCA to deliver 20 units of shared (en-suite rooms with a shared kitchen-diner) for people at risk or with a history of homelessness. Residents are expected to engage in training or employment so this is more than 'a room over people's heads'.

3.5.4 The Regeneration and Housing is also seeking approval through the budget setting process for a Tenancy Relations Officer to help foster stronger relations with landlords, intervene in tenancy disputes to sustain tenancies, but also to help prevent the risk that some landlords will seek to short-cut the legal eviction process as welfare reforms continue.

3.6 **Strategic Priority Six: Maximising resources: Investment Ready Council**

3.6.1 CDC and partners are proactive in securing inward investment. CDC applies for grant funding itself and supports partner agencies as they apply for funding. This has included accessing private loan finance, funding from the Department of Health, Homes and Communities Agency and Charitable Trust funding.

3.6.2 Much of this success in securing investment has been through innovative approaches to service delivery. Going forward CDC officers in Housing Services are researching new models for financing development and service delivery. The spirit behind this is to ensure we maximise all forms of investment and in turn work with partners to offer the best possible range of housing opportunities to local people.

4.0 Conclusion and Reasons for Recommendations

4.1 The Overview and Scrutiny Committee are recommended to approve the recommendations in this report and to provide feedback and observations. Specifically these recommendations are:

- To note progress to date in preventing homelessness, delivering and enabling housing development, improving housing standards and commissioning housing related services
- To note the challenging financial context in which services are being delivered.

5.0 Consultation

Though there was not a specific consultation for this report, there is ongoing consultation on the delivery of the Council's Housing Strategy through engagement with partners and customers and through the range of forums that the Council facilitates, including the RP Development Forum, RP Management Forum, Homeless Action Plan Steering Group, Young People's Accommodation Panel and Landlords Forum.

6.0 Alternative Options and Reasons for Rejection

5.1 The following alternative options have been identified and rejected for the reasons as set out below.

Option 1: To not approve the recommendations in this report. This is not recommended as this is simply an update report, providing factual information about progress and the context in which services are being delivered.

7.0 Implications

Financial and Resource Implications

7.1 This is an update report and therefore there are no financial implications from this report.

Comments checked by:

Tim Madden, Head of Finance and Procurement

0300 0030106

tim.madden@cherwellandsouthnorthants.gov.uk

Legal Implications

7.2 This is an update report and there are therefore no legal implications from this report.

Comments checked by Kevin Lane, Head of Law and Governance

0300 0030107

Kevin.lane@cherwellandsouthnorthants.gov.uk

8.0 Decision Information

Wards Affected

All

Links to Corporate Plan and Policy Framework

District of Opportunity

Lead Councillor

Councillor Miss Debbie Pickford, Lead Member for Housing

Document Information

Appendix No	Title
One (restricted)	Build Programme Update
Background Papers	
Cherwell Housing Strategy	
Report Author	Helen Town, Regeneration and Housing Development Team Manager
Contact Information	01295 227991 Helen.town@cherwell-dc.gov.uk