

Rother District Council

Report to: Overview and Scrutiny Committee

Date: 23 November 2020

Title: Review of the Housing, Homelessness and Rough Sleeping Strategy (2019-2024)

Report of: The Heads of Service

Ward(s): All

Purpose of Report: To update Members on progress of the Improvement Delivery Plan of the above strategy.

Officer

Recommendation(s):

Recommendation: It be **RESOLVED:** That:

- 1) Cabinet be requested to agree that the 'targets achieved' as listed in Appendix B be removed from the Improvement Delivery Plan and replaced with the proposed new/amended targets at Appendix C with revised Outcomes included;
- 2) the progress made against the Housing, Homelessness and Rough Sleeping Strategy included in the Improvement Delivery Plan (Appendix A) be noted; and
- 3) a review of the Housing, Homelessness and Rough Sleeping Strategy be undertaken annually.

Introduction

1. The Housing, Homelessness and Rough Sleeping Strategy (The Strategy) and its action plan is delivered across the Council's service areas. The Strategy was developed in 2019 following an extensive research and consultation exercise, with key stakeholders including health, housing, social care, support services and voluntary sectors as well as a public consultation. Recommendations from a Member 'Task and Finish Group' were also used to shape three key priorities that formed the focus of the final Strategy, including the need to increase housing supply while improving measures to address homelessness and the quality of accommodation. The Council will continue to monitor the progress of the Strategy's action plan through annual consultation with its strategic partners from across Housing, Health, Social Care and voluntary sectors.
2. This report is intended to update Members on progress made towards achieving our three strategic priorities included in The Strategy. The outcome of the full review can be found in the Improvement Delivery Plan (Appendix A). A summary of all actions achieved so far is included in Appendix B below.

The remainder of this report will focus on some of the key highlights from the Improvement Delivery Plan.

PRIORITY 1: Increasing the Supply of Housing

Alliance Homes (Rother) Ltd

3. The Strategy evidenced that development of new housing has failed to achieve housing delivery targets for the district, leading to a chronic under-supply to meet a range of needs. This has compelled the Council to intervene in the local housing market, taking a direct and proactive role in accelerating the supply of new homes, to include affordable housing. Accordingly, Objective 1.1 (Outcome 1) of The Strategy required the Council to set up a framework enabling purchasing or development of new homes.
4. In response to this in December 2019 the Council approved setting up a local authority owned housing company. Alliance Homes (Rother) Ltd is now legally incorporated and the Business Plan approved. The main priority of the company is to accelerate delivery of all forms of housing in Rother, with an ambitious target of delivering 1,000 new homes over the next 15 years.
5. The Business Plan sets out an initial 3-year delivery plan focussed on developing sites already in Council ownership with planning permission/planning potential or that have been acquired as part of other Council-led projects. Of significant importance will be the delivery of the site at Blackfriars, Battle. Members will recall that the Reserved Matters application is due to be submitted this month proposing the detailed plans for delivering 200 new homes in Battle. Development of the homes will be co-dependent on receiving the Housing Infrastructure Funding allocation towards delivery of a spine road.
6. To ensure a strong pipeline of future projects the Company will seek opportunities to acquire sites allocated for housing in the Rother District Local Plan and associated Neighbourhood Plans. Looking further ahead for delivery beyond five years of this plan, the Company will consider new opportunities to acquire sites, to include speculatively acquiring land, which could be proposed as part of any future Local Plan review of deliverable sites considered to have planning potential.
7. Growth of the Company will consequently be closely linked to the review of the Local Plan for the District. Once adopted, the new Local Plan will set revised annual development targets for the District informed by the 'standard methodology' for establishing local housing need as set out in the Plan Policy Guidance. The supply of all new housing against Local Plan targets will continue to be monitored as part of the actions included under Priority 1.
8. Additionally, Alliance Homes (Rother) Ltd has pledged to deliver all new homes to high environmental standards where feasible, taking a fabric first approach to design and maximising thermal efficiency. The Company will also act as a delivery partner with the Council in working towards achieving a number of ambitions included in the Rother District Council Environment Strategy.

9. The establishment of Alliance Homes (Rother) Ltd and implementation of the agreed Business Plan (2020 – 2023) is the fundamental mechanism for progressing all Council led development. For these reasons, the targets included under Priority 1 (Outcomes 2 and 3) have been updated to align with the delivery of the Business Plan accordingly.

Empty Homes Action Plan

10. The Strategy identified empty homes as a wasted resource in view of the chronic shortage of housing to meet need, to include affordable housing. In response to Objective 1.4 of The Strategy (Outcome 1), Environmental Health have progressed a comprehensive Draft Empty Homes Action Plan which was approved by Cabinet in February 2020 (Minute CB19/97 refers).
11. The overall aim of the Empty Homes Action Plan is to bring back empty properties into use by achieving the following objectives;
- Identify long term empty homes
 - Support for empty home owners
 - Take action against empty property owners
 - Raise awareness
12. The Action Plan is focussed on prioritising resources in Bexhill and Rye, where the largest number of empty properties has been identified and housing need is greatest. Council tax bands A, B and C will also be prioritised over other bands in view of the high housing need for smaller properties.
13. Measures proposed to tackle empty homes include informal actions such as offering advice and assistance to property owners. Sign posting to other agencies where appropriate, such as referrals to existing partners including the YMCA Downlink who offer leasehold agreements for use of accommodation as supported housing for young people. In some cases, appropriate incentives may be offered to landlords willing to let their property via the Council's Rother Tenant Finder scheme.
14. Where informal action has failed to result in a successful outcome, the Council proposes to consider enforcement options. This includes Empty Dwelling Management Orders, Compulsory Purchase Orders and Enforced Sale where deemed appropriate and resources permit. Members will note that legal action has already been undertaken successfully against one property so far this year demonstrating the Council's commitment to take robust actions where necessary.
15. Monitoring progress of the Empty Homes Action Plan will be reported in future updates of The Strategy. This is against an annual target of bringing back into use at least five empty properties a year from 2020 to 2024 included under Objective 1.4 (Outcome 2). It should be noted that targets have been cautiously set in response to the limited resources available and with the view that whilst returning empty homes into use can contribute towards increasing supply and improve the quality of neighbourhoods for our residents, it will not alone solve the need for additional housing.

PRIORITY 2: Rough Sleeping, Homelessness and Meeting Housing Aspirations

Rother Tenant Finder

16. Rother Tenant Finder was launched in October 2019 to improve access to accommodation in the private sector to reduce homelessness as required by Objective 2.3 (Outcome 1). This comprehensive service operates by incentivising landlords to consider homeless households and supporting tenants to access and sustain private sector tenancies.
17. Landlords who take part in the scheme are offered various incentives, to include financial benefits and regular tenancy sustainment visits. These visits are important to ensure tenants are fully supported to sustain their tenancies. To qualify for the service landlords must ensure the property meets required standards (including minimum energy performance ratings) and agree nomination rights for tenants.
18. Up until March this year, 55 households have been helped through the service, resulting in private sector tenancies being agreed. The COVID-19 pandemic has reduced the numbers of tenancies secured in recent months. We have been able to sustain an average of seven new tenancies per month; however, it is still unclear what the longer-term impact of COVID-19 will be on the private rented sector market. We intend to continue to increase investment in the service and we are confident in our ability to achieve the increased targets that have been proposed to increase the prevention of homelessness through the service.

Delivery of Street Homelessness Hub – Safe Space

19. Objective 2.4 of Priority 2 (Outcome 1) required proposals for a street homelessness hub to be commissioned. The Council commissioned the Homelessness Unity Group (HUG) to deliver the new 'Safe Space' service from March 2020. Safe Space is delivered from St Barnabas Church in Bexhill and is designed to support the reduction of rough sleeping through the provision of a community meeting space available twice weekly. The service is designed to improve access to a range of vital services including housing, health and social care via its own outreach support worker who operates alongside various multiagency initiatives including Rapid Rehousing Pathway (RRP) and the Rough Sleeping Initiative (RSI). Governance of all these services is overseen by the East Sussex Housing Officers Group (ESHOG).
20. The service will continue to be delivered by HUG during 2020/21 with performance being monitored by the Housing Needs Team in partnership with ESHOG. Performance against the targets included in The Strategy will be reported in future updates.

PRIORITY 3: Improving the quality and suitability of existing housing and new build housing

Improving Private Sector Accommodation

21. Services provided by Environmental Health have already exceeded targets this year in respect of Objective 3.2 (Outcomes 2) to improve the condition of five dwellings in the private sector, as a result of licensing or statutory notices being served.
22. Since Housing in Multiple Occupation (HMO) Licensing has now extended mandatory licensing to cover properties that are less than three storeys high, the Council has undertaken a number of inspections of new properties falling into this new category. This action has resulted in improvements being made by property owners to meet the necessary HMO licencing requirements, which are reviewed at least every five years. Since The Strategy was adopted in 2019, there are now 24 licensed HMOs within Rother.
23. A further 21 assessments of private sector dwellings have been carried out since the beginning of April 2020, in accordance with the Housing, Health and Safety Rating System with improvements made to property conditions required to meet appropriate standards. A number of these inspections have been a direct consequence of the increased number of temporary accommodation units secured by the council during the last couple of years, and in particular during the COVID-19 pandemic, to ensure the homes are safe for occupants demonstrating the importance of the relationship between the supply and quality of all housing.

Conclusion

24. As a local authority with no housing stock or housing management services, we are dependent on a range of partner organisations to help us achieve the strategic housing priorities we set for the district. The progress and success of many of the achievements included in this report, is testament to the strength of partnership working in Rother and ongoing commitment from all stakeholders to improve the quality of life for our residents, notwithstanding the considerably challenging impact on services due to the COVID-19 pandemic.
25. The Strategy is now in the second year since adoption, and already a significant amount of progress has been achieved to date. To support the continued progress to achieve all three priorities included in The Strategy, it is recommended that the updates and changes included in the Implementation and Delivery Plan are agreed, and the annual review and reporting of The Strategy continues.

Other Implications	Applies?	Other Implications	Applies?
Human Rights	No	Equalities and Diversity	No
Crime and Disorder	No	Consultation	No
Environmental	No	Access to Information	No
Sustainability	No	Exempt from publication	No
Risk Management	No		

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Appendices:	A - Housing, Homelessness and Rough Sleeper Strategy, Implementation and Delivery Plan B - Summary of Targets Achieved C - Proposed New Targets
Relevant previous Minutes:	CB19/97
Background Papers:	
Reference Documents:	
