

Rother District Council

Report to:	Cabinet
Date:	10 January 2022
Title:	Review of the Housing, Homelessness and Rough Sleeping Strategy (2019-2024)
Report of:	Ben Hook – Director – Place and Climate Change Joe Powell – Head of Housing and Community
Cabinet Member:	Councillor Byrne
Ward(s):	All
Purpose of Report:	To consider the recommendations arising from the Overview and Scrutiny Committee meeting held on 22 November 2021, regarding the review of the Council's Housing, Homelessness and Rough Sleeping Strategy (2019-2024). The report and recommendations arising are reproduced below and the Minutes of that meeting (Appendix C) should be read in conjunction with this report.
Decision Type:	Non-Key
Officer Recommendation(s):	It be RESOLVED : That the:
1)	'targets achieved' as listed in Appendix B to the report be removed from the Improvement Delivery Plan and replaced with the proposed new/amended targets at Appendix A to the report with revised outcomes included;
2)	progress made against the Housing, Homelessness and Rough Sleeping Strategy included in the Improvement Delivery Plan (Appendix A to the report) be noted;
3)	future reviews of the Housing, Homelessness and Rough Sleeping Strategy (2019-2024) be split into a Housing Review and a Rough Sleeping Review; and
4)	suitable Council-owned sites to accommodate pre-fabricated buildings to be used as temporary accommodation, be further explored.
Purpose of Report:	To update Members on progress of the Improvement Delivery Plan of the above strategy.

Introduction

1. The Housing, Homelessness and Rough Sleeping Strategy (The Strategy) and its action plan was developed in 2019 following an extensive research and consultation exercise, with key stakeholders and the public. Recommendations from a Member 'Task and Finish Group' were also used to shape three key priorities 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. The aims and objectives of the Strategy are complemented by the stated aims of the Anti-Poverty Task and Finish Group that has made recommendations for the formation of an Anti-Poverty Strategy to be governed by the Local Strategic Partnership. The Anti-Poverty Strategy is in development and a draft will be put before Members in early 2022.
3. This report is intended to update Members on progress made towards achieving the Strategy's three strategic priorities. The outcome of the full review can be found in the updated 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 achieved so far, during 2020/21.

PRIORITY 1: Increasing the Supply of Housing

Alliance Homes (Rother) Ltd

4. In December 2019, Council approved the establishment of a Local Housing Company, Alliance Homes (Rother) with the initial aim to complete 1,000 new homes by 2035 (Minute C19/59 refers). Alliance Homes was formally incorporated in August 2020 (Minute CB20/21 refers).
5. Despite issues resulting from the COVID-19 pandemic, significant progress has been made on Alliance Homes developments. An Alliance Homes board is now in place to oversee the activities of the Company and regular meetings are taking place. The Board currently includes Council Members and representatives of the Council (as sole Shareholder), as well as officers working for Alliance Homes. Recent authority has been approved to recruit external Board Members to grow the existing expertise and skills of the Board for robust governance.
6. Blackfriars is the most advanced scheme within the development programme and will be the first scheme to be delivered by Alliance Homes. The scheme will see the delivery of 200 towards the total delivery of 335 new homes committed to in the medium-term Business Plan. All the new homes have been designed to significantly reduce energy consumption and carbon emissions, whilst minimising energy costs for residents. The homes will take a fabric first approach to construction and will achieve Housing Quality Mark accreditation (minimum level 4 across the site). The Home Quality Mark (HQM) is the badge of a better home. It enables house builders to showcase the quality of their homes, and to distinguish them from other houses on the market. The scheme will deliver at least 70 affordable homes of mixed tenure to include affordable rent and shared ownership. The Reserved Matters application was approved in April this year. The Council has entered into contact with Breheny to undertake delivery of the neighbourhood road, required by Planning and funded through Homes England's Housing Infrastructure Fund (HIF) programme, to join the north end of the site (from Harrier Lane) to the south end (the Spinney). Subject to final sign-off of pre planning commencement conditions, the road will be starting on site this year. The scheme will be formally handing over to Alliance

Homes upon the land being transferred to the company. Contracts are now well advanced for appointment of a lead contractor, and construction of the housing will begin early next year with the final homes currently expected to complete during 2023.

7. The ambitious headline target of delivering 1,000 homes across the district in this first 15 years of the Company's life is still in place and a review of the Business Plan is now underway to update the development programme towards achieving both medium and long-term targets set. Additionally, to provide detailed cashflow of schemes as they have progressed to more advanced stages of development. The Company will continue to prioritise delivery of Council owned sites in the early years, to make best use of sites already in the Council's control, as committed in the current Corporate Plan (2020-2027). The Company will also start to seek appropriate new development opportunities where sites are the right strategic fit for the company, to include for example, delivery of stalled sites with planning permission, or sites allocated in the local plan (including Neighbourhood Plans) that have not yet come forward.

Affordable Housing Delivery

8. We are actively seeking to broaden the range of Registered Providers operating in Rother alongside the increased resource being put into Alliance Homes to deliver at least planning policy compliant levels of affordable Housing. Additional further resource has been allocated to increase delivery of Community Led Housing.
9. We have increased the number of Registered Providers (RP) who are expressing interest in s106 developments in the district. This is essential for keeping a good supply of Affordable Housing coming through, especially on smaller development sites. Currently, the majority of affordable housing units are being provided through Optivo, and while our strategic partnership with Optivo is of great value to our delivery programme we are actively seeking to broaden the number of active RPs in the district as current developments are being delivered by a relatively small number of RPs. There is a particular weighting towards those with whom we have a long-standing relationship but responding to the significant changes that have come through the sector at a national level, we are actively seeking to broaden our range of delivery partners. In order to continue to increase affordable housing supply on sites across the district, we are setting a target to increase the number of active RPs delivering within the District from three to six, as well as encouraging delivery through for-profit RPs such as Legal and General, Sage, and Heylo.
10. Despite the impact of Brexit and the COVID-19 Pandemic on the construction industry, we have continued to see a good rate of build-out on our schemes that are currently on-site. The larger developments at Rosewood Park and North East Bexhill in particular have progressed well. There have been three significant development schemes start on site this year at Darvel Down (Netherfield) Lily Bank (Battle) and Main Road (Icklesham). The Lily Bank development is a good example of a stalled site and one that showed little prospect of delivering affordable housing coming forward with good provision of on-site affordable housing as a result of strong partnership working and stakeholder management in the Council's development team.

Community Led Housing

11. We currently have one community led scheme delivering on site. The scheme in Icklesham is being led by the Icklesham Parish Community Land Trust with support from the Sussex Community Housing Hub (SCHH). This scheme will provide 15 homes for local people. The work of the SCHH has been instrumental in allowing this scheme to come forward.
12. Our service level agreement with Action in Rural Sussex (of which the SCHH is a part) commits them to delivering four community led schemes in the next five years. There are also targets set around the formation of community led housing groups. Through the work of the SCHH, we plan to have a minimum of 45 homes either delivered or in the delivery pipeline by 2024.
13. We have the Bexhill Community Land Trust that is looking at multiple sites for delivery in Bexhill. The SCHH have also been working with a community led housing group in Battle, alongside receiving enquiries from local groups in rural areas looking for assistance in setting up groups as well. Government have recently put further emphasis on the delivery of housing through community led schemes through the Community Led Housing Fund Revenue Programme. Our work with the SCHH and long-standing relationship with Action in Rural Sussex puts Rother in a strong position to take advantage of this.

Empty Homes Action Plan

14. The Empty Homes action plan has been finalised since March 2021. An officer group is now meeting twice yearly with two meetings having taken place in March and September 2021. The action plan is being delivered and monitored through these meetings. Visits and engagement with property owners is led by the Private Sector Housing team and supported by the wider Environmental Health service. This is underpinned by appropriate data sharing with our Council Tax team to identify long term empty properties. Promotion of the Empty Homes action plan and identification of partner agencies to bring properties back into use is undertaken through the Acquisition, Transformation and Regeneration team.

PRIORITY 2: Rough Sleeping, Homelessness and Meeting Housing Aspirations

Accommodation initiatives

15. We purchased 4 units of accommodation in February 2021 for use within the East Sussex-wide Housing First scheme. Through the Rough Sleeper Initiative (RSI) and the Next Steps Accommodation Programme (NSAP), we are providing Housing First accommodation to former rough sleepers. Housing First is recognised as best practice in settled accommodation for individuals with high level multiple and complex needs. The support is commissioned through Seaview.
16. We have identified through the RSI a gap in provision for vulnerable females, particularly in respect of female-only accommodation. This includes the findings of an earlier Safeguarding Adults Review (SAR) which noted a lack of accommodation options for women with multiple and complex needs. The proposal made by East Sussex Housing Officer Group (ESHOG) will deliver 12 respite rooms across East Sussex in a 12-month pilot. Accommodation will be

provided by established emergency accommodation providers, who are experienced in supporting our homelessness services.

17. The RSI, housing authorities and community safety teams across Sussex have been working collaboratively to prepare for the implementation of the Domestic Abuse Act 2021. Independent Domestic Violence Advisors (IDVAs), hosted by Change Grow Live (CGL) will be co-located within the local authority housing teams to support the early identification of individuals who are experiencing domestic abuse and those at risk of it. The IDVAs will also upskill housing needs staff in providing more tailored support.
18. ESHOG's bid to the Ministry of Housing, Communities and Local Government's Accommodation for ex-Offenders (AFO) scheme was successful. The aim of the project is to improve access to the private rented sector for ex-offenders who have left prison within the last 12 months. We have been awarded funding of £255,000 over 2021/22 and 2022/23. The AFO will provide funding for additional tenancy sustainment services (to be delivered through the Rapid Rehousing Pathway service) and dedicated tenancy sustainment and landlord incentive grants. This project will complement the work which is already underway through East Sussex Trailblazers and the RSI, as well as the new housing solutions role within the prison service which is jointly funded by the five local authorities.

Temporary Accommodation Purchases

19. We are currently undergoing a procurement process for a 6-month pilot to deliver support to clients in Rother-owned temporary accommodation, with an emphasis on accessing the private rented sector. We currently have 6 RDC owned properties (5x 3 bedroom and 1x 2 bedroom) and are in process of purchasing three other buildings consisting of 9 units of accommodation to complement our 4 Housing First units.

New support services

20. East Sussex County Council, in partnership with the five local housing authorities has identified a preferred provider for the new Housing Related Floating Support service. The contract has been awarded to [BHT Sussex](#) (formerly Brighton Housing Trust), who are an experienced local provider. The Evaluation Panel was impressed by the high quality of the bids tendered. The new service will begin on 23 November 2021 after an 11-week transition period. The service will offer a single, integrated model, providing support to all adults on a countywide basis. Information on any changes to the referral process will be circulated prior to the new service starting.
21. We have also re-commissioned the Bexhill & Rother Homelessness Unity Group (HUG) to deliver the Bexhill Safe Space at St Barnabus Church, Sea Road, Bexhill. HUG has remained active throughout the pandemic providing support, advice and assistance to rough sleepers and the wider street community and support the Council to reach and provide housing to some of our most vulnerable residents.

Multi-Agency work

22. East Sussex Housing Officers Group (ESHOG) is currently undergoing a restructure. The aim of the restructure is to develop a number of specialist sub-groups that facilitate greater partnership working across housing development and homelessness support services. The sub-groups will continue to be governed by the ESHOG Executive Group that will continue to lead in the strategic coordination of housing and homelessness services between wider sectors, with Rother being represented by the Head of Service Housing and Community.
23. ESHOG have developed a pan-Sussex bid to the Changing Futures Programme to review the network of services that support those experiencing multiple disadvantages, including homelessness and domestic abuse. Vulnerable females have been identified within our bid as high priority for the first phase of the programme. Through the Changing Futures programme we will review and improve the pan-Sussex governance and service structures that exist. The Sussex proposal has received a grant allocation of £4,425,000 over three years to deliver this programme
24. The inaugural meeting of Rother Homelessness Strategy Group will be taking place in December 2021. The purpose of the group will be to bring together a range of partner services to feed into the content of this strategy action plan as we seek to continuously improve it through regular review and scrutiny. The group will also be an opportunity for strategic leads in Rother to share information and service updates; and support one another to coordinate our services effectively around shared objectives.

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

Improving Private Sector Accommodation

25. For the first quarter of this year, due to the pandemic, officers were unable to inspect properties and tenants were reluctant to allow builders to enter to carry out repairs. This led to higher complaints over the summer, which are traditionally quieter months. We are working to reduce waiting times and prioritising the most urgent cases.
26. In 2020/21 a total of 111 inspections under the Housing Health and Safety Rating System (HHSRS) were undertaken of residential properties across the district. As of the end of August 2021 there had been a further 25 inspections undertaken for 2021/22. These inspections have included 75 temporary accommodation dwellings
27. The Warm Home Check service provides energy efficiency advice and financial advice around heating. The scheme is run by East Sussex County Council and households are encouraged to self-refer to the scheme. This scheme is promoted and discussed during the HHSRS inspections. Numbers of households that self-refer are difficult to be certain of, but are believed to be around 119 for 2020/21

Conclusion

28. As a local authority with limited housing stock and no 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.

29. The Strategy is now in the third year since adoption, and already a significant amount of progress has been achieved to date. To support the continued progress and 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.

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Appendices:	A - Housing, Homelessness and Rough Sleeper Strategy, Improvement Delivery Plan B - Summary of Targets Achieved
Relevant previous Minutes:	C19/59
Background Papers:	Housing, Homelessness and Rough Sleeping Strategy 2019-2024 Housing-Homelessness-and-Rough-Sleeping-Strategy.pdf (rother.gov.uk)
Reference Documents:	None

Minutes of the Overview and Scrutiny Meeting – 22 November 2021**OSC21/33. REVIEW OF THE HOUSING HOMELESSNESS AND ROUGH SLEEPING STRATEGY (2019-2024)**

Members received the report of the Director – Place and Climate Change and the Head of Service Housing and Community which provided an update on the progress made towards achieving the Housing, Homelessness and Rough Sleeping Strategy (2019-2024)'s three strategic priorities. The outcome of the full review could be found in the updated Improvement Delivery Plan (IDP) attached at Appendix A to the report. Members' attention was brought to some of the key highlights from the IDP achieved during 2020/21.

PRIORITY 1: Increasing the Supply of Housing

Despite issues resulting from the COVID-19 pandemic, significant progress had been made on Alliance Homes (Rother) Ltd (AH) developments, with the first scheme of the Blackfriars development programme due to deliver 200 homes towards the total delivery of 335 new homes committed to in the medium-term Business Plan, at least 70 of which would be affordable homes of mixed tenure to include affordable rent and shared ownership. The Council had entered into contract with Breheny to undertake delivery of the neighbourhood road; subject to final sign-off of pre-planning commencement conditions, work on the road would be starting in the current year. Construction of housing was expected to begin in early 2022, with the final homes completing during 2023.

The Council was actively seeking to broaden the range of Registered Providers (RP) of affordable housing operating in Rother, alongside the increased resource being put into AH to deliver at least planning policy compliant levels of affordable housing. Additional further resource had been allocated to increase delivery of Community Led Housing (CLH). The number of RPs who were expressing interest in Section 106 developments in the district had been increased (the majority of affordable housing units were currently being provided through Optivo) and a target of six RPs had been set to deliver affordable housing across the district.

The CLH scheme in Icklesham, being led by the Icklesham Parish Community Land Trust with support from the Sussex Community Housing Hub (SCHH), would provide 15 homes for local people. Through the work of the SCHH, the Council planned to have a minimum of 45 homes either delivered or in the delivery pipeline by 2024.

The Empty Homes action plan had been finalised in March 2021 and an officer group was meeting twice yearly. Visits and engagement with property owners was led by the Private Sector Housing team and supported by the wider Environmental Health and Housing Needs services, underpinned by appropriate data sharing with the Council Tax team to identify long term empty properties.

PRIORITY 2: Rough Sleeping, Homelessness and Meeting Housing Aspirations

The Council purchased four units of accommodation in February 2021 for use within the East Sussex-wide Housing First scheme. Through the Rough Sleeper Initiative (RSI) the Council were providing Housing First (HF) accommodation to former rough sleepers. HF was recognised as best practice in settled accommodation for individuals with high level multiple and complex needs. The support was commissioned through Seaview.

Through the RSI, a gap in provision for vulnerable females, particularly in respect of female-only accommodation had been identified. The proposal made by East Sussex Housing Officer Group (ESHOG) would deliver 12 respite rooms across East Sussex in a 12-month pilot. In addition, the RSI, housing authorities and community safety teams across Sussex had been working collaboratively to enable the early identification of individuals who were experiencing domestic abuse and those at risk of it.

ESHOG's bid to the Ministry of Housing, Communities and Local Government's Accommodation for ex-Offenders (AFO) scheme was successful; East Sussex Councils had been awarded funding of £255,000 over 2021/22 and 2022/23. The aim of the project was to improve access to the private rented sector for ex-offenders who had left prison within the previous 12 months.

The Council currently owned six temporary accommodation (TA) properties and were in the process of purchasing three other buildings consisting of nine units of accommodation to complement the four HF units.

ESHOG had developed a pan-Sussex bid to the Changing Futures Programme to review the network of services that supported those experiencing multiple disadvantages, including homelessness and domestic abuse. The Sussex proposal had received a grant allocation of £4,425,000 over three years to deliver this programme.

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

For the first quarter of the year, due to the pandemic, officers were unable to inspect properties and tenants were reluctant to allow builders to enter to carry out repairs. In 2020/21, a total of 111 inspections under the Housing Health and Safety Rating System (HHSRS) were undertaken of residential properties across the district. As of the end of August 2021, there had been a further 25 inspections undertaken for 2021/22, which included 75 TA dwellings. The Warm Home Check service, run by East Sussex County Council, was promoted and discussed during the HHSRS inspections, provided energy efficiency advice and financial advice around heating.

Members were given the opportunity to ask questions and the following points were noted during the discussions:

- the recruitment of external AH Board Members had recently been approved to grow existing expertise and skills for robust governance. Approval from full Council would be sought before any appointments made;
- Rother owned sites had yet to be transferred over to AH;
- affordable homes at the Blackfriars site would be a 60/40 ownership split;
- it was recommended and agreed that future reviews of the Housing, Homelessness and Rough Sleeping Strategy (2019-2024) be split into a review of Priority 1 (housing supply) and a separate review of Priorities 2 and 3 (homelessness/rough sleeping and accommodation quality). The proposal would enable a fuller and more detailed scrutiny of each respective priority. The Strategy itself could not be split;
- it was recommended and agreed that suitable Council-owned sites to accommodate pre-fabricated buildings be explored to be used as TA;
- Members raised concerns at the build-out rates across the district;
- discussions were taking place with Optivo regarding their 'staircasing' policy in the context of shared-ownership products;
- the nature of TA had changed to provide more supportive living in order to assist clients to live independently; and
- investment had been made with partners of the Safer Rother Partnership in officers working with offenders prior to leaving prison to secure accommodation and employment.

The Strategy was now in the third year since adoption, and already a significant amount of progress had been achieved to date. The progress and success of many of the achievements was testament to the strength of partnership working in Rother and ongoing commitment from all stakeholders to improve the quality of life for residents.

RESOLVED: That:

- 1) Cabinet be requested to agree that the 'targets achieved' as listed in Appendix B to the report be removed from the Improvement Delivery Plan and replaced with the proposed new/amended targets at Appendix A to the report with revised outcomes included;
- 2) the progress made against the Housing, Homelessness and Rough Sleeping Strategy included in the Improvement Delivery Plan (Appendix A to the report) be noted;
- 3) future reviews of the Housing, Homelessness and Rough Sleeping Strategy (2019-2024) be split into a review of Priority 1 (housing supply) and a separate review of Priorities 2 and 3 (homelessness/rough sleeping and accommodation quality); and
- 4) suitable Council-owned sites to accommodate pre-fabricated buildings to be used as temporary accommodation, be further explored.

(When it first became apparent, Councillor Barnes declared a Personal Interest in this matter as Vice-Chairman and Company Executive

Director for Alliance Homes (Rother) Ltd. and in accordance with the Members' Code of Conduct remained in the meeting during the consideration thereof).

(When it first became apparent, Councillor Clark declared a Personal Interest in this matter as Company Executive Director for Alliance Homes (Rother) Ltd. and in accordance with the Members' Code of Conduct remained in the meeting during the consideration thereof).

(Overview and Scrutiny Committee Agenda Item 5).