

Rother District Council

Report to:	Cabinet
Date:	5 February 2024
Title:	Review of the Housing, Homelessness and Rough Sleeping Strategy (2019-2024)
Report of:	Joe Powell, Head of Housing and Regeneration
Cabinet Member:	Ruairi McCourt
Ward(s):	All
Purpose of Report:	To update Members on progress of the Improvement Delivery Plan of the above strategy.
Decision Type:	Key
Officer	
Recommendation(s):	It be RESOLVED: That the revised Housing, Homelessness and Rough Sleeping Strategy Improvement Plan 2024 be approved (Appendix A) and the 'targets achieved' detailed within Appendix B be noted.
Reasons for Recommendations:	To approve the revised Housing, Homelessness and Rough Sleeping Strategy Improvement Plan 2024.

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. The Anti-Poverty Strategy was adopted by Council in July 2022 (Minute CB22/18 refers).
3. An annual review of the Strategy action plan is completed by officers and reported to Members annually, so that progress against the Strategy objectives can be monitored and key actions reviewed and updated for the year ahead. The new revised Improvement Delivery Plan 2024 can be found at Appendix A. A summary of all actions achieved since the Strategy's inception in 2019 is included in Appendix B.

4. The current Housing, Homelessness and Rough Sleeping Strategy is coming to an end in 2024. A new Housing Development and Enablement Strategy Task and Finish Group has been formed (OSC23/22 refers) enabling the Council to establish revised housing development objectives in a standalone strategy. The Housing Development and Enablement Strategy will be complemented by a separate Homelessness and Rough Sleeping Strategy (HRSS). The development of the HRSS is also underway with a formal Service Review being conducted by Shelter presently.
5. Members should also note that the multi-agency East Sussex Housing Partnership Executive (of which the Council is a founding member) is presently developing a Housing, Homelessness and Rough Sleeping Strategy for the whole of East Sussex. The approach will allow the East Sussex Housing authorities to interface with partners across the Health, Housing, Social Care, Criminal Justice and Voluntary sectors, while enabling each to take autonomous local approaches through our respective local strategies.
6. The remainder of this report will summarise key highlights from the Improvement Delivery Plan achieved so far throughout 2023.

PRIORITY 1: Increasing the Supply of Housing

Rother Housing Company

7. Rother DC Housing Company Ltd Business Plan (2022 to 2025) adopted in February 2022, commits to deliver 1,000 newbuild homes over 15 years. Blackfriars forms the first site of the housing company development programme. This 200-dwelling scheme demonstrates significant progress towards achieving the 1,000 home target.

Affordable Housing Delivery

8. The year to April 2023 and beyond has been very challenging for affordable housing development; although, we have continued to see the delivery of wholly affordable housing schemes in the district.
9. Our main delivery partner, Southern Housing (formerly Optivo), has significantly reduced its new development activity to 2027. We still have sites under construction with Southern who continue to focus on the Rother area for new development opportunities, along with other Large Scale Voluntary Transfer (LSVT) districts and boroughs.
10. We saw delivery of affordable housing on seven different sites and with five different affordable housing providers in 2022/23. This included three sites in Bexhill (Worsham Farm, Rosewood Park and Preston Hall Farm), three sites in Battle (Tollgates, Nightingale Place, Lily Bank) and one in Icklesham (Orchard Close). All sites other than Worsham Farm have now delivered their affordable housing obligations.
11. We have not seen significant new housing starts take place in 2022/23 which will have a knock on-effect for delivery of new housing in 2023/24 and beyond. However, we do have three wholly affordable schemes active on site that will deliver some 84 affordable homes across 2023/24 and 2024/25.

12. It has been a disappointing year in terms of development viability, as the presiding economic downturn has led to an increase in the submission of viability appraisals, that seek to remove or reduce on-site affordable housing delivery. This includes three sites currently under development at The Paddock, Northiam; Hillbury Field, Ticehurst and Moleynes Mead, Bexhill. Had these sites delivered policy compliant affordable housing we would have secured a further 34 affordable homes.
13. The Housing Delivery Team is working closely with developers and the planning service to challenge viability appraisals that show provision of affordable housing is not viable. Unfortunately though, with high finance and inflationary pressures, coupled with materials price increases, delivery of affordable housing on smaller sites is very challenging.

Community Led Housing

14. We celebrated the opening of the Orchard Close, Icklesham scheme in July 2023. This was the first Community Land Trust (CLT) led scheme to be completed in East Sussex.
15. Whilst work has continued on the Cemetery Lodge project, known as Parker Place, due to viability issues and the contracted developer going out of business, a re-appraisal of the scheme has been undertaken. Bexhill CLT are currently engaged in a re-tendering exercise for the project.
16. The Guestling, Fairlight and Pett project that is headed up by Marsham CLT has progressed well. The group became legally incorporated in September 2023 and initial topographical surveys of the Rother District Council owned site, land at Fairview have been carried out.
17. There has been no further round of Community Housing Fund (CHF) grant or similar from Government, so we continue to seek best value from the remaining CHF to support revenue costs for early stage community led housing schemes, where funding options are very limited.

Planning policy

18. Work on the new Local Plan is continuing at pace and it is anticipated that the Regulation 18 consultation for this will take place in Spring 2024.
19. Planning policy have been collating the evidence base to inform this. This has included a new Housing and Economic Needs Assessment (HEDNA) and Affordable Housing and CIL Viability Assessment. As of January 2024, both assessments are nearing completion.

PRIORITY 2: Rough Sleeping, Homelessness and Meeting Housing Aspirations Temporary Accommodation Purchases

20. We have secured an additional 19 properties in 2023 which is a total of 42 units of accommodation, with 39 occupied and three under refurbishment. There are a further five units under offer, for completion by end of March 2024. Although we have not appointed a Registered Provider (RP) to deliver our supported accommodation, we deliver the support in-house through our Housing Management Officer. We were allocated further grant funding from the Department for Levelling Up, Housing and Communities (DLUHC) for purchases under the Local Authority Housing Fund (LAHF) grant for temporary

accommodation, and to support the housing demand in relation to Afghans and Ukrainians. By the end of March 2024, we will have 15 units of LAHF accommodation. For LAHF accommodation we also have the Resettlement Team to support tenants.

Accommodation initiatives

21. We purchased an additional four units of accommodation in 2023 for use within the East Sussex-wide Housing First scheme through additional grant funding. This brings the total number of rough sleeper accommodation owned by Rother to 12. Housing First is recognised as best practice in settled accommodation for individuals with high level multiple and complex needs. Through the Next Steps Accommodation Programme (NSAP) and the Rough Sleeping Accommodation Programme (RSAP) we are expanding the range of temporary and settled accommodation options for former rough sleepers requiring a high level of ongoing support.
22. As part of the Rough Sleeping Initiative (RSI) bid, Rother was allocated funds for an 'off the street accommodation offer'. We have now completed works for this property and there will be three units available to use from January 2024. The units will enable outreach to offer accommodation for those verified rough sleepers while they await a housing assessment. Those accommodating the units will have access to outreach and move on workers, as well as the Multi-Disciplinary Team from the RSI. The placements will be for 28 days and then move on options will be provided.

Private Rented Accommodation Schemes

23. After the recent successes of the Rother Tenant Finder scheme, an additional Private Sector Procurement Officer was recruited. A wide range of landlord incentives are offered including rent guarantor, rent and legal insurance, and bedroom incentives. The support does not stop after the tenancy is signed as Officers also deliver tenancy sustainment and are available for landlords or tenants if there are issues further down the tenancy period. Rother Tenant Finder are on track to achieve 100 new tenancies in the 2023/24 financial year.

New support services

24. We have recruited three new Prevention Officers – one to work with Ukrainians and two for general homelessness. The new roles are proving a success with homeless preventions up 61% this year from the same period 2021/22. Prevention Officers are involved with households from the earliest opportunity and assist with looking at sustaining their current accommodation or moving to new private rental accommodation.
25. Alongside the UK Shared Prosperity funding that is focussed on employability, we have a co-located Employability Broker within the housing department. They are employed by East Sussex County Council (ESCC) Employability for Supported and Temporary Accommodation and Refuges (ESTAR) programme with a focus on people at risk of homelessness with an employment or training need. The role will support individuals to maximise and stabilise income, as well as enabling access to education, training and employment. The aim of this is to enable better access to private rented sector for all.

26. As part of the wider support offered to housing customers, we also have access to East Sussex Public Health funded Wellbeing Co-ordinators. We have been sharing this resource with Hastings Borough Council; however, more Wellbeing Co-ordinators are being recruited so that Rother has its own co-located co-ordinator. The aim of the service is to provide holistic support to people who are homeless or at risk of homelessness, this includes addressing underlying poor mental or physical health, social isolation and substance dependency needs.
27. A new housing specialist role has been recruited in partnership with Sussex Partnership NHS Foundation Trust. The role will be co-located with the housing team at Rother and will receive referrals for people using mental health services who also have an identified housing need. The housing specialist will be responsible for delivering housing advice, assistance and intervention in a way to prevent or relieve homelessness or improves poor housing quality.

PRIORITY 3: Improving the Quality and Suitability of Existing and Newbuild Housing

28. In 2022/23 15 enforcement notices were served. This year by the end of quarter three 17 enforcement notices have been served.
29. Significant work has also been undertaken on Empty Homes with over 70 Empty Homes investigations undertaken from April - December 2023.
30. Officers across the Housing and Corporate Policy and Projects teams are continuing to explore delivering residential schemes using Modern Methods of Construction (MMC) techniques. Planning permission was obtained in December 2023 for a Temporary Accommodation unit to be constructed on council owned land using Modern Methods of Construction. This will be a two-storey 1 bedroom unit that will provide suitable accommodation for a vulnerable homeless household.

Conclusion

31. 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, are testament to the strength of partnership working in Rother and ongoing commitment from all stakeholders to improve the quality of life for our residents.
32. The Strategy is now in its final year, and although the housing landscape now is very different from 2019 when the Strategy started, a lot has been achieved and continues to evolve. There is a much larger emphasis on homelessness prevention, property acquisition and development and looking at new innovative projects to support the homeless assessments.
33. During this final year of the strategy the Housing Development team will be working with the Housing Development Strategy Task and Finish group on a Housing Development Strategy. Exploring new means of increasing housing supply is a clear priority for the council and a new strategy with its attendant action plan will be essential to this.

Financial Implications

34. The financial impact of rising homelessness and TA use will be familiar to Members. The draft Temporary Accommodation budget for 2024/25 is proposed at £1.97m, compared to £1.35m in 2023/24. The Council’s strategic approach to managing both the causes and symptoms of the present housing and homelessness crises is therefore a priority for the organisation. The Council continue to perform well, both in terms of its rate of affordable housing supply, temporary accommodation costs and homelessness prevention measures. However, officers recognise the need for further improvements in order to minimise costs in future years.

Legal implications

35. The Strategy will enable the Council to continue to meet its statutory obligations under the Housing Act 1996 as amended.

Environmental

36. The impact of housing development, as well as existing housing use, on the district’s carbon output is significant and this strategy, as well as future iterations, will continue to include the objective of promoting measures that minimise the impact of housing on the environment.

Equalities and Diversity

37. There is an Equalities Impact Assessment that accompanies the original strategy inception in 2019. The measures within the strategy and the successes to date continue to have a net positive socio-economic impact on the lives of some of the most vulnerable people in our community.

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

Chief Executive:	Lorna Ford
Report Contact Officer:	Joe Powell
e-mail address:	Joe.powell@rother.gov.uk
Appendices:	A - Housing, Homelessness and Rough Sleeper Strategy, Implementation and Delivery Plan B - Summary of Targets Achieved
Relevant previous Minutes:	CB22/79 CB22/80
Background Papers:	Housing, Homelessness and Rough Sleeping Strategy 2019-2024
Reference Documents:	None.