

**TONBRIDGE & MALLING BOROUGH COUNCIL**

**STRATEGIC HOUSING ADVISORY BOARD**

**16 July 2007**

**Joint Report of the Director of Health and Housing and Cabinet Member for  
Housing**

**Part 1- Public**

**Matters for Recommendation to Cabinet - Non-Key Decision (Decision may be taken  
by the Cabinet Member)**

**1 HOUSING STRATEGY UPDATE AND REVIEW**

**Summary**

**This report sets out proposals for taking forward the review of the Housing Strategy recommending this is deferred until 2008/09 to allow officers time to properly plan for the return of services administered by Russet Homes and to take advantage of proposals contained in the local government White Paper 'Strong and Prosperous Communities'. The report also updates Members on the good progress being made in delivering targets contained in the current Strategy action plan.**

**1.1 Background**

1.1.1 The Council's Housing Strategy 2005-2008 comes to an end at the beginning of April 2008. A review of the Strategy is currently planned to commence during 2007/08 to produce a revised document covering the period 2008-11. However, since the adoption of the Strategy a number of changes have occurred which mean it would now be better to defer the review until 2008/09. The two key reasons for suggesting deferral are connected with the return of services currently administered by Russet Homes and the Government's White Paper for local government. These are explained in more detail below.

**1.2 Taking Forward the Review of the Housing Strategy**

1.2.1 Members may be aware that it is proposed to bring the services administered by Russet Homes (housing register and homelessness) back in-house by the end of the financial year (a future report will be presented to the Board). By deferring the review of the Housing Strategy your officers will be better placed to plan for the return of these services, which will be resource intensive over the coming months. For example, a new staffing structure will need to be worked-up along with tackling logistical issues around IT procurement and the transfer of manual and computer held data to the Council's offices.

- 1.2.2 Members may also be aware that the White Paper '*Strong and Prosperous Communities*' highlights the importance of the strategic housing role and sees its primary purpose as delivering economic growth and prosperity, going far beyond achieving purely housing outcomes. Housing is also seen as making an important contribution to both social and environmental objectives such as community cohesion, reducing health inequalities and improving educational attainment. Given this central role and the need for housing to be co-ordinated with other important strategies and processes, the White Paper suggests it is no longer appropriate for the Housing Strategy to be characterised by a stand-alone document. It suggests that it should be characterised by and expressed through a number of local documents, principally, the Sustainable Community Strategy.
- 1.2.3 I can see merit in seeking to rationalise the strategy process by co-ordinating the review of the Housing Strategy in line the Council's Community Strategy. This would reduce the number of stand alone strategy documents and provide:
- opportunities for combining consultation events thereby reducing duplication, freeing up officer time to invest in actual delivery;
  - alleviate the 'consultation overload' effect with the public; and
  - more meaningful consultation with the public through covering a wider range of issues.
- 1.2.4 In view of this your officers discussed the future of local housing strategies with the Government Office for the South East (GOSE). GOSE indicated they were keen to see a greater focus on high quality action plans flowing from strategic priorities set out in community strategies. They did not see the need for local housing strategies, particularly where sub regional working on strategic issues is well developed. It was further reported that the 'Fit for Purpose' test which was the benchmark that strategies had to meet, will no longer be formally applied.
- 1.2.5 In light of these discussions, and in preparation for the return of services from Russet Homes, I am of the opinion that deferring the review of the Housing Strategy until 2008/09 is sensible. It should also be borne in mind that much of the information contained in the existing Housing Strategy is now better integrated in other documents and policies. For example, evidence of housing need and affordability is contained in the West Kent Homelessness Strategy and will be in the forthcoming Supplementary Development Document on affordable housing. In the private sector, Members recently endorsed our new Housing Assistance policy which took forward the key findings from the Private Sector House Condition Survey. Indeed, in reality on a day-to-day basis little reference is ever made to the strategy document itself, with partners' attention rightly focused on our actions and actual ability to deliver.

- 1.2.6 Members can be assured that deferring the review of the Strategy would not mean the housing service would lose touch with its stakeholders. The service has been highly active in engaging with stakeholders over the last 12 months and will continue to be so in the future. For example, extensive consultation was carried out via the development of the West Kent Homelessness Strategy, which is also on this agenda. An action plan has been developed to take forward the key priorities arising from this Strategy. Furthermore, consultation took place earlier this year on the review of the Housing Assistance policy which seeks to address non-decent housing in the private sector. Members will also be aware that the work of the Council's Home Improvement Agency will be the subject of a Scrutiny review this year.
- 1.2.7 To allow for a review of the Housing Strategy during 2008/09 it is proposed to revise and extend the existing action plan for a further year. This would ensure that robust targets remained in place to stretch performance while the review was underway. A revised action plan to cover the period 2008/09 will be brought back to the Board early in the new calendar year.

### **1.3 How Would a Combined Review of the Community Strategy and Housing Strategy Work?**

- 1.3.1 The Council's Community Strategy is not due to be reviewed until 2008/09. In partnership with the Corporate Services Manager, one option would be to seek to combine both the review processes for the Community Strategy and that for the Housing Strategy in terms of prior consultation to be undertaken and ultimately, for any broad housing strategy elements to be included in the revised Community Strategy in place of a stand-alone document for housing.
- 1.3.2 Housing issues have traditionally featured as key themes in the Community Strategy. There would be opportunities to undertake joint consultation on housing and wider quality of life issues if the two processes were to be combined. Indeed, the provision of decent, affordable housing in the Borough is already viewed by many residents and businesses as a key contributor to how people perceive the overall quality of life locally. Naturally, within a more general document, housing issues would have to take their place alongside other matters of concern to the community and as such, the scope for the inclusion of highly detailed housing policies and plans in the Community Strategy would be more limited. As noted above, however, the Council can provide such additional detail in the other housing-related plans and strategies it produces and this should therefore enable the Community Strategy to set a broad and overall housing context without detriment to realising our housing objectives overall.

## **1.4 Update on Progress in Meeting Existing Action Plan Targets**

- 1.4.1 Progress made against each target can be found in the update document at **[Annex 1]** of this report which provides a position statement as at 31 March 2007. The updated action plan will be distributed to partners this month following Members' endorsement.
- 1.4.2 We hope Members will be generally pleased with performance. Where performance has been exceeded we will give consideration to setting more challenging targets in reviewing the action later this year. Similarly, some targets will need to be revised down where we now have more up to date information – for example, Houses in Multiple Occupation (HMOs) where the Private Sector House Condition Survey and the introduction of mandatory licensing has made it clear that the number of HMOs in the Borough needing to be prioritised for an annual inspection is less than the current target.
- 1.4.3 Members are requested to note performance to date.

## **1.5 Legal Implications**

- 1.5.1 The Housing Strategy is a statutory requirement under section 7 of the Local Government Act 2003.

## **1.6 Financial and Value for Money Considerations**

- 1.6.1 None.

## **1.7 Risk Assessment**

- 1.7.1 None.

## **1.8 Recommendations**

Cabinet is **RECOMMENDED** to:

- 1.8.1 **ENDORSE** deferring the review of the Council's Housing Strategy to coincide with the review of the Community Strategy in 2008/09; and
- 1.8.2 **ENDORSE** a review of the Housing Strategy Action Plan during 2007/08 and its extension to cover the period 2008/09.

The Director of Health and Housing confirms that the proposals contained in the recommendation(s), if approved, will fall within the Council's Budget and Policy Framework.

Background papers: Nil

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