

## Kent Chief Executives Meeting – 1 June 2009

### Housing Strategy for Kent

#### Background

The Housing sub group of Kent Economic Board has been requested to co-ordinate the production of a housing strategy for Kent and Medway. It is proposed that this piece of work, externally commissioned with the sub group acting as client, will be an inclusive process with relevant and wide stakeholder involvement.

In summary, the aim of the exercise is to provide strategic direction to the huge diversity of housing need across the county. The overarching statement of purpose formulated by the sub group is: a strategy that enables us to achieve sustainable and balanced communities, simultaneously addressing housing management issues, and the co-ordination and better use of resources. Inherent in this will be the principles of high-quality design, the appropriate mix of housing, accessibility of services, leverage for additional funding, and links with other strategic drivers (transport, skills and employment); all of which will be paramount.

#### Some key facts and figures

- Some 138,400 houses to be built in Kent by 2026 (SE Plan)
- Again, SE Plan expects 8% growth in population and 20% growth in households
- Major growth areas (Thames Gateway, Ashford, Maidstone, Dover inter alia)
- Target of 6,000 new houses per annum in the Kent Agreement 2
- Empty properties presenting significant challenges in certain parts of the County (specifically Gravesham, Medway and Thanet)
- Some 83% of new homes provided by private sector for owner occupation, with 17% of new homes occupied by public sector/RSL's clients
- Maidstone, Sevenoaks, Swale, Tonbridge & Malling, and Tunbridge Wells have no housing stock with large RSL presence
- Large housing waiting lists for some areas. April 2008 statistics suggest aggregate list of 38,400 across the County (30,503 in Kent and 7,900 in Medway)
- Of those on the waiting list, the need is diverse - 53% require 1 bed, 27% require 2 bed, 15% require 3 bed, and 5% need 4+ bed accommodation.

This is merely a snapshot; there are a number of other pertinent facts and figures.

#### Housing sector pressures

- Demographic pressures with increasing age of population and numbers of single households
- Government policy direction and recent funding opportunities. Prospect of limited investment in next spending round
- Economic downturn /credit crunch impact on housing completions. House building appears now to be mainly by speculative private sector developers with mixed and variable RSL activity.
- Need for an integrated approach – social regeneration initiatives, transport investment, key sector(s) growth, skills and jobs
- Lack of access to affordable housing and inconsistent application of the term. Statutory obligation associated with homelessness.
- Service issues around key workers, accessibility for disabled, sheltered and lifetime housing

## Tenets supporting the Strategy

It is apposite to draw on district council planning policies and LDFs to determine the appropriate type and mix of housing across the county. It will be a document that consolidates existing housing data and information to form a view of housing investment priorities across the county over the medium to long term. Value will only be added if it is sufficiently comprehensive analysing all tenures, public and private, new and existing housing to form a picture across Kent. Analysing existing housing stock is essential as this has the largest impact on overall quality, condition and affordability. This can be aligned against market and needs assessments.

Consideration of new and exciting delivery vehicles (public or private) that can be applied on a differentiated basis across Kent to support existing or new housing development schemes. This strand of work may offer benefits, by enabling us to more readily take advantage of the Government's new funding initiatives to maintain housing development.

It will emphasize the importance of high-quality design, by seeking to ensure that new homes are built to the very highest standards. It may be possible to achieve greater consistency with a revised Kent Design Guide, assisting in our response to demographic changes, the Government's sustainability agenda and the needs of the elderly and disabled.

Sustainable communities and community cohesion more generally will be a key feature, namely:

- encouraging the right mix of housing (for example affordable, lifelong homes and sheltered accommodation). Local determination will be paramount;
- addressing the need for a range of housing provision including equity sharing, sheltered housing and family homes. In this context, extend housing options by widening the opportunity for equity sharing to attract more young professionals to Kent, get more families on the housing ladder;
- promoting supported and lifetime homes along with an increase in the choice and variety of sheltered housing. This will need to reflect the variety of housing need across the county and disparities in affordability;
- assessing the accessibility and impact on the environment and green field land. As part of this strand, also encouraging home improvement and energy efficiency measures to reduce living costs; and
- maximising economic and social opportunities, simultaneously incorporating housing related measures to overcome spiralling social decline, as well as providing independent living as far as possible for all ages.

Linkage with other key policy and economic drivers has already been emphasized, but it will aim to:

- Influence and encourage the provision of essential infrastructure necessary to support a mix of housing for future communities.
- Support thriving communities by securing the provision of essential public services, including preventative services alongside new housing to minimise social risk and encourage the growth of healthy prosperous communities.
- Update *What Price Growth?* to lobby Government to properly fund the infrastructure required to accompany centrally prescribed housing targets
- Also it must coherently link to other related strategies, either extant or emerging. Typical examples being, KCC Regeneration Framework, the LAAs for Kent and Medway, district housing and homelessness strategies, Strategy for Later Life, East Kent Housing Partnership, KASS regarding Kent wide support for housing and care, Housing Kick Start funding initiatives, North Kent MAA, the single conversation for Kent, etc. Much of what is proposed in terms of data collection and policy is already in place (or is work in progress). The inherent tendency to duplicate existing work streams must be avoided.

Inevitably the strategy must be inclusive and reasonably wide ranging, however it should not be too wide as to be cumbersome or unachievable. To be of value, it should have a longer term vision with a series of proposed outcomes, with the finished product articulating short, medium and longer term actions with some visible quick wins.

### Way Forward

The way forward proposed by the sub group is as follows:

- an integrated Housing Strategy Task Group be set up to include district councils, KCC and HCA. This group to build upon the proposal outline above to develop a more detailed scope for the strategy;
- to share the proposed approach and obtain broad support from key stakeholders;
- from the outset, to engage with key interested partners (districts councils and other key players via Kent Housing and Planning Officers Group, Kent Housing Group). Where appropriate to draw on the work of key partners and other stakeholders to simplify the process;
- as David Edwards is a member of the sub group, to share the proposed approach with the HCA. To do this as a matter of courtesy but also to benefit any emerging single conversation and future funding opportunities;
- to consult with RSLs and a selection of private sector developers as appropriate;
- to develop a technical brief for work to be commissioned by KCC with the sub group acting as the client. Existing district council members of the sub group to be involved in this exercise; and
- to complete the strategy within approximately six month, with interim to progress reports to KEB (principally) but other interested group as appropriate.

Good collaboration and the support of all stakeholders are essential particularly since it is largely consolidating documents and actions developed elsewhere. The benefit of a Kent wide integrated strategy lies in the accuracy and success of the consolidation – essentially it can be an over-arching document that captures key data and messages (already assembled by partners), but could also signpost the reader to existing strategies and data should they require more information. If the strategy can be produced as envisaged it will be a key document, valuable to all.