

TONBRIDGE & MALLING BOROUGH COUNCIL

STRATEGIC HOUSING ADVISORY BOARD

9 November 2009

Report of the Director of Health and Housing

Part 1- Public

Matters for Information

1 BUILDING BETTER LIVES: GETTING THE BEST FROM STRATEGIC HOUSING

Summary

This report considers the Audit Commission's National Report: *Building Better Lives: Getting the best from strategic housing* (September 2009) which presents the findings of research into the strategic housing function of local authorities. It outlines the background to the report and identifies its key findings.

1.1 Background

1.1.1 Research for this study was carried out between August 2008 and January 2009 and comprised:

- an analysis of existing datasets to draw out information necessary for a good strategic housing function;
- eleven delivery chain workshops;
- telephone survey of 100 local authority chief executives;
- an email survey of local strategic partnerships (LSPs);
- an analysis of sustainable community strategies (SCSs) for references to housing; and
- interviews with strategic housing managers, LSP leads, registered social landlords, developers, planners and other stakeholders.

1.1.2 The research that underpins the report sets out to determine what local authorities need to do to deliver a strong strategic housing function and how an effective strategic housing function can help them and their partners achieve their wider objectives. It is presented in five sections which:

- explain why the strategic housing role matters (Chapter 1);

- describes the strategic housing role and how local authorities can perform that role effectively (Chapter 2);
- assesses how far they are currently doing so (Chapter 3);
- considers the impact of the credit crunch and recession (Chapter 4); and
- sets out the Audit Commission's conclusions and recommendations (Chapter 5).

1.1.3 The research has contributed to the revision of the Audit Commission's Key Lines of Enquiry (KLOE) on the strategic housing function, which was the subject of a public consultation that closed on 18 September 2009. The Commission will assess how local authorities exercise their strategic housing role to achieve their local aspirations through the Comprehensive Area Assessment (CAA) framework.

1.1.4 CAA changes the Audit Commission's approach to the assessment of the strategic housing function in three ways:

- It will be comprehensive – the question *how well is housing need met?* will be explored in every area in the country;
- It will look at success as well as failure, providing the opportunity to highlight good or innovative practice publicly; and
- It will focus explicitly on the strategic housing role – what contribution is housing making to local authorities' and their partners aspirations for their area?

1.1.5 A summary of the report is attached at **[Annex 1]**, and a full copy is available on the Audit Commission's web site:

www.audit-commission.gov.uk/housing/nationalstudies/buildingbetterlives or through contact with this office on 01732 876206.

1.2 How well do councils perform the strategic housing role?

1.2.1 Chapter three of the report examines how effectively local authorities perform the strategic housing role and concludes that excellent strategic housing practice is rare. It cites earlier research which found:

- few good examples of partnership working between local authorities and their partners;
- few local authorities with the understanding of local needs and priorities, or the skills to enable them to commission them effectively;
- few local authorities that understood their housing market well; and

- that effective performance management in the strategic housing function is rare.

1.2.2 This is underpinned by the *Building Better Lives* research which concludes that too many local authorities fail to make good use of the information they have; that housing partnerships and relationships need to be strengthened; that regulatory powers are often not used sufficiently; and that many local authorities lack skilled and competent staff. Furthermore, too few recognise the contribution of housing to objectives such as improving health and well-being, tackling worklessness or improving energy efficiency.

1.2.3 Many of the examples of poor practice provided in the report however are ones which this authority has already addressed. For example, councils with housing responsibilities are required to:

- gather information about housing needs and housing markets which is relevant to, and of adequate quality for the decisions they need to make - the Strategic Housing Market Assessment was adopted in June 2009 and provides a comprehensive sub-regional picture of housing need and demand across West Kent;
- continuously review their own land and property holdings and those of others in their area to identify opportunities to release land for new market or affordable housing – since stock transfer, all significant land has been disposed of for affordable housing, including the Council's two former depot sites;
- review and develop joint working arrangements between neighbouring councils and other partners to enhance strategic housing capacity – the Council has developed and maintained strong partnerships that enhance cross-boundary working; and
- maximise opportunities presented by the recession – Members will recall that the Board was advised in May of arrangements for support to householders affected by the economic downturn.

1.3 Next Steps

1.3.1 To accompany this report, the Audit Commission has produced a range of materials to help local authorities assess and improve their delivery arrangements for housing objectives; their housing needs and housing market information; their partnership working arrangements and their responses to the impact of the recession on local housing markets.

1.3.2 The materials include a guide to using delivery chain workshops to improve local outcomes; a self-assessment questionnaire to help improve partnership working; and guidance to help members and senior officers consider whether they have all of the information they need to take decisions around strategic housing.

1.3.3 The evaluation of the Housing Service against the reviewed KLOE for strategic housing is one of the objectives in the Housing Strategy Action Plan 2009-2012, and it is scheduled for completion in time to report to the Strategic Housing Advisory Board in May 2010. The materials outline above will also inform this process, and they will provide a good opportunity to start this evaluation process in advance of the publication of the reviewed KLOE.

1.4 Legal Implications

1.4.1 None at this stage.

1.5 Financial and Value for Money Considerations

1.5.1 None at this stage.

1.6 Risk Assessment

1.6.1 Failure to consider this research may compromise the quality of the Council's Housing Service or judgements made externally on the Service.

Background papers:

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Nil

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