

HOUSING STRATEGY

Executive Summary

The Local Government Act 2003 requires all local housing authorities publish a Housing Strategy setting out a vision for housing in its area, including objectives, targets and policies on how the authority intends to manage and deliver its strategic housing role. The Strategy provides an overarching framework against which the authority considers and formulates other policies on more specific housing issues.

Housing plays an important role in the health, social, environmental and economic wellbeing of everyone who lives in the Borough. This Housing Strategy sets out the Council's vision for the period 2021 - 2026, with an overall focus on achieving an increase in the supply of affordable housing whilst making the best use of the existing stock; improving the customer journey across the service; and enabling residents to fulfil their potential.

The Housing Strategy covers the scope of our Housing Services and is designed to complement our other policies, such as the Local Plan and Corporate Plan. The strategic priorities contained in the Housing Strategy are:

- To provide well designed, high quality homes that are affordable and meet local needs;
- To prevent homelessness and help those in housing need;
- To help people to achieve independence and wellbeing;
- To deliver an improved housing service to our tenants and leaseholders;
- To enhance choice, standards and quality within the private rented sector.

A 4-week consultation process has been undertaken with 278 online surveys received. 85.9% agreed with the overall Strategy with the key themes including the need for more coverage on sustainability/energy efficiency; support for making more efficient use of existing stock; support for the planned changes to housing management and maintenance and a clearer prioritisation of social rented homes.

The Strategy is underpinned by a more detailed action plan to outline how the Council intends to deliver its strategic housing role.

Recommendations

The Executive is requested to:

RECOMMEND TO COUNCIL That

- (i) the Housing Strategy 2021-2026, as attached to the report, be approved; and**
- (ii) the Director of Housing, in consultation with the Portfolio Holder for Housing, be delegated authority to make minor amendments to the Strategy and to update the action plan as required.**

Reasons for Decision

Reason: The Council has a legal duty to have an up-to-date Housing Strategy in place.

The item(s) above will need to be dealt with by way of a recommendation to Council.

Background Papers: None.

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1.0 Introduction

- 1.1 The Local Government Act 2003 requires the Council to publish a housing strategy setting out a vision for housing in its area and identify objectives and priorities to meet the current and future housing needs of the local population. In England, local housing strategies are currently prepared by local housing authorities.
- 1.2 Since the last Housing Strategy was adopted in 2011, there have been significant changes in Government policy and legislation that have affected the housing sector. In addition to this, there remain several consultations, strategies and policy papers that are in the process of being set out by Government, and will play a part in shaping the future.
- 1.3 A Social Housing White Paper was published by the Ministry of Housing Communities and Local Government on 17 November 2020, presenting a charter of seven commitments social housing residents should be able to expect from their landlord. The overarching themes are building and resident safety, and resident voice.
- 1.4 The Welfare Reform Act 2012 introduced a wide range of reforms with effect from 1st April 2013 aimed at reducing public expenditure on benefits and using the welfare system to incentivise people into employment. A number of these have had an impact on homelessness and the availability, and sustainability, of affordable housing.
- 1.5 There have also been a number of local policy updates and changes, including the joint Strategic Housing Market Assessment (SHMA) 2015, the emerging Site Allocations DPD, the Housing Allocations Policy and Homelessness and Rough Sleeping Strategy.

2.0 Draft Housing Strategy 2021 - 2026

- 2.1 Woking is a popular place to live. The population of Woking is 100,793 based on mid-year estimates (ONS) 2019, a 12.2% increase since 2001. However, the success of the area brings challenges. House prices in the Borough are well above the national average leading to affordability issues for local people and key workers.
- 2.2 As at February 2021, the average house price in Woking was £420,792, which is nearly double the national average of £250,341. As of March 2020, full-time employees could typically expect to spend around 10.17 times their workplace-based annual earnings on purchasing a home. This is significantly higher than the national average of 7.84.
- 2.3 As at 1st April 2021, there were a total of 1,108 applicants on Woking's Housing Register. The Housing Register shows that the greatest need is for 1 bed units at 41%, but there is also a significant need for 2 and 3+ bed homes at 31% and 28% respectively.
- 2.4 The Housing Strategy covers the scope of our Housing Services and is designed to complement our other policies, such as the Local Plan.
- 2.5 The Strategy includes five strategic priorities as follows:
 - To provide well designed, high quality homes that are affordable and meet local needs;
 - To prevent homelessness and help those in housing need;
 - To help people to achieve independence and wellbeing;
 - To deliver an improved housing service to our tenants and leaseholders;
 - To enhance choice, standards and quality within the private rented sector.

- 2.8 Progress against the Housing Strategy will be monitored by the respective teams within Housing Services and Planning, with additional monitoring provided through the Housing Task Group. The Task Group feeds into the development of a range of housing strategies and policies, while also monitoring the performance and delivery of key housing projects.
- 2.9 The Housing Strategy is underpinned by a more detailed action plan to outline how the Council intends to deliver its strategic housing role. The Action Plan is intended to be a live document, which will be subject to continuous review and updating to ensure it remains effective and current. Updates will be published on the Council's website.

3.0 Corporate Strategy

- 3.1 Improving the health and wellbeing of all residents - housing plays an important role in the health, social, environmental and economic wellbeing of everyone who lives in the Borough. Good quality, decent and affordable homes contribute significantly to health and wellbeing. Strategic Priority 1 focuses on delivering suitable housing for residents that is truly affordable and meets local needs.

Strategic Priority 3 focusses on the provision of good quality housing support services that promote independence. This is key to the Council's preventative strategies to enable vulnerable people to live successfully and independently in the community. Woking Borough Council's focus is on supporting customers not just to resolve their housing issues, but also encouraging them to improve their health and wellbeing.

- 3.2 Reducing Social Inequality - Woking has an acute need for more affordable housing of all types, sizes and tenures and the demand for affordable housing far exceeds supply, with local people finding it increasingly difficult to afford to stay in the Borough. Strategic Priority 1 focuses on delivering suitable housing for residents that is truly affordable and meets local needs, including addressing affordability issues for local people and key workers.

Strategic Priority 2 seeks to tackle homelessness and its root causes. Successful homelessness prevention has been the main aim of Woking's Housing Options approach for many years and it will need to remain so with the added duties under the Homelessness Reduction Act 2017. The team use a range of other tools to prevent and address homelessness, including family mediation, home visits, negotiation with landlords, landlord incentives, prevention funding to help with rent arrears and floating support. We will continue to prevent homelessness using a range of tools available, including the Housing Options Floating Support Service and outreach services, while further developing Personal Housing Plans (PHPs) to become more holistic and with regular reviews/updates.

- 3.3 Engaging our Communities - The draft Housing Strategy has been distributed for widespread consultation to tenants, those on the housing register and the wider population of Woking through Engagement HQ, emails and social media. The views of our residents, partners and stakeholders are very important to us, so this has been an ideal opportunity to engage with local people to help shape housing priorities for the future of our communities. Strategic Priority 4 includes a clear commitment to engaging tenants and leaseholders more in the future of the Housing Service.
- 3.4 Sustainable development - Over 97% of the Council's housing stock meets the Decent Homes standard in 2020/2021. In addition, the energy efficiency of Council owned homes has risen over the past 4 years to 69.1% in 2020/21. Strategic Priority 1 focuses on delivering more affordable homes built to high design standards. Strategic Priority 4 aims to improve energy efficiency amongst Council-owned stock through routine maintenance programmes and new development schemes. Strategic Priority 5 will ensure that our private rented properties continue to meet the revised standards around energy performance and room sizes, as per legislative changes set out in the Housing and Planning Act 2016 expanding Council responsibilities in this regard.

- 3.5 Strengthening Partnerships - This Strategy outlines how the Council will work in partnership with others to meet the targets set out in its Local Development Framework (LDF), 'Woking 2027' and Core Strategy with regards to affordable housing provision in the Borough. Strategic Priority 1 aims to deliver affordable homes through working in strengthened partnership with Thamesway, Registered Providers and developers, as well as identifying new-build opportunities on council-owned land. Strategic Priority 2 continues our working to support vulnerable residents through partnership working with local partners, including York Road Project, Women's Support Centre, Citizens Advice Woking, Your Sanctuary, local foodbanks, Surrey County Council, Woking MIND and JobCentre +. Strategic Priority 3 highlights that partnership working with other statutory and voluntary agencies is key to helping people achieve independence and wellbeing and working in partnership with a range of health and social care colleagues runs through this priority. Strategic Priority 5 details the maintaining and improvement of working relationships with Lettings Agents and Landlords, including holding a yearly Private Sector Landlord Forum to disseminate best practice.
- 3.6 Effective Use of Resources - This Strategy outlines how the Council will maximise resources to meet the targets set out in its Local Development Framework (LDF), 'Woking 2027' and Core Strategy with regards to affordable housing provision in the Borough. In achieving the aims of Strategic Priority 1, the Council will utilise its recent status as an Investment Partner with Homes England to secure grant funding to help deliver affordable housing development. The Council will also explore new funding models, such as "income-strip" finance. We will also undertake a strategic review of the Council's temporary accommodation portfolio to identify any future development opportunities, while looking for opportunities arising from the asset management strategy and property review to develop more affordable housing and exploring how to further encourage tenants who are under-occupying Council homes to move to smaller homes. Our work in the area of homelessness and rough sleeping will continue to utilise a range of tools available, including the Housing Options Floating Support Service and outreach services. A key element of Strategic Priority 4 is to bring housing and asset management services back in-house and re-tender the repairs and maintenance contracts, thereby delivering best value for tenants and leaseholders. Strategic Priority 5 seeks to make use of existing housing by bringing empty properties back into use, as well as reviewing our IT systems for Private Sector Housing to deliver a more efficient and customer-friendly service.

4.0 Implications

Finance and Risk

- 4.1 The Housing Strategy provides clear direction and focus with respect to its strategic objectives for Housing Services upon which future financial decisions can be based.
- 4.2 The Strategy itself does not commit the Council to additional costs. Any actions requiring additional budget will be presented to the Executive and/or Council for a decision.
- 4.3 The risks associated with delivering the Housing Strategy are clearly set out in the Action Plan.

Equalities and Human Resources

- 4.4 The Housing Strategy reflects the Council's ambitions to promote equality and address inequalities in Woking. An Equalities Impact Assessment has been completed.
- 4.5 The Housing Strategy will support staff in understanding the strategic direction of the Council's Housing Services.

Legal

- 4.6 The Local Government Act 2003 requires the Council to publish a housing strategy setting out a vision for housing in its area and identify objectives and priorities to meet the current and

future housing needs of the local population. In England, local housing strategies are currently prepared by local housing authorities. This strategy ensures compliance with this duty and in any event it must be good practice to devise a strategy and to involve relevant stakeholders in its preparation.

5.0 Engagement and Consultation

- 5.1 The Draft Housing Strategy has been shaped through focus groups with staff, discussions at Housing Task Group and through an Overview and Scrutiny Committee Housing Services Review during 2020/21.
- 5.2 Formal consultation on the Draft Housing Strategy was launched on 21 May 2021 for a 4-week period. The consultation used the Council's new online platform (Woking Community Forum) to host a survey, along with an Ideas Board. The consultation was promoted via social media channels and the Council's website and distributed via email to Council tenants and leaseholders, applicants on the Housing Register, partner organisations, the Residents Panel and local community groups and residents associations.
- 5.3 The consultation closed on 18 June 2021. 278 people responded to the online survey, 21 suggestions were posted on the Ideas Board and 3 responses were received via letter/email. 95.6% of respondents were residents of the Borough.
- 5.4 The survey showed that 85.9% of respondents agreed with the overall direction of the Strategy, with the strongest support being for priorities 2 (to prevent homelessness and help those in housing need) and 3 (to help people to achieve independence and wellbeing) (at 83.5% and 80.1% respectively).
- 5.5 The key themes coming out of the consultation included the need for more coverage on sustainability/energy efficiency; support for making more efficient use of existing stock (including the focus on empty homes and downsizing incentives); support for the planned changes to housing management and maintenance and a clearer prioritisation of social rented homes. There were also comments made that the Strategy needed to set clearer targets and actions.
- 5.6 A number of respondents commented on planning policy matters, including town centre development and infrastructure delivery, which are beyond the remit of this document. These matters will be picked up later this year through the Town Centre Masterplan.
- 5.7 In response to the consultation outcome, the following changes have been made to the Draft Housing Strategy:
 - A detailed action plan has been inserted.
 - Additional actions and milestones have been added around sustainability within the action plan.
 - The Strategy now states that the priority will be to deliver social rented homes where possible.
- 5.8 A statement of consultation, summarising all comments received and the Council's response, will be published on the Woking Community Forum portal and on the Housing Strategy webpage, so that consultees can see how their suggestions have fed into the strategy document.

REPORT ENDS