

TEWKESBURY BOROUGH COUNCIL

Report to:	Executive Committee
Date of Meeting:	5 February 2020
Subject:	Housing Strategy Monitoring Report
Report of:	Head of Community Services
Corporate Lead:	Deputy Chief Executive
Lead Member:	Lead Member for Housing
Number of Appendices:	One

Executive Summary:

The Housing Strategy 2017-21 was developed by an Overview and Scrutiny Working Group and was adopted by Council in January 2017. The comprehensive Housing Strategy incorporates renewal, as well as two distinct sub strategies: the Homelessness and Prevention of Homelessness Strategy and the Tenancy Strategy.

The Strategy contains four key priorities to meet the housing needs of the borough:

Priority 1: Increasing the supply of housing.

Priority 2: Prevent homelessness.

Priority 3: Meet the housing needs of specific groups.

Priority 4: Improving the health and wellbeing of local people.

Annual action plans are agreed by Executive Committee with regular reporting to Overview and Scrutiny Committee for review of achievements and future challenges. The action plan priorities focus on developments in the service rather than service performance which is outlined in the performance tracking.

This report presents Committee with the action plan for 2020-2021 which formulates the actions to continue to meet the above priorities in line with the strategy will cover the period April 2020-March 2021; and a summary of the key activities which have been achieved in the third year of the strategy and the proposed activities for year four can be found in Appendix 1.

Recommendation:

To CONSIDER and SUPPORT the Housing Strategy Action Plan for 2020/21.

Reasons for Recommendation:

The Homelessness Act 2002 and Local Government Act 2003 require all District Councils to develop a strategy which sets out the Council's policies, commitments and programme for a wide range of housing matters. Following development of the Council's Housing Strategy 2017-21, the Overview and Scrutiny Working Group requested that outcomes identified in the strategy action plan be monitored, regular updates be presented to the Overview and Scrutiny Committee, and that the Annual Action Plan is refreshed and agreed by the Executive Committee on an annual basis.

Resource Implications:

Staff time and Member time. Resource implications will be met from existing budget allocations and, where they cannot, will be subject to a growth bid within the Council's Medium Term Financial Strategy and a separate report to Members.

Legal Implications:

The Council is required to have a Housing and Homelessness Strategy in place so that its duties under the Homelessness Act 1996 (as amended) and Local Government Act 2003 can be met. The Homelessness Act 2002 requires local authorities to publish a strategy setting out how it will address homelessness and the Localism Act 2011 places a duty on all local authorities to produce a tenancy strategy.

The Homelessness Reduction Act 2017 was implemented in April 2018. The current strategy incorporates the Homelessness Reduction Act, and the action plan is renewed annually to enable the strategy to flexibly respond to legislative changes.

Risk Management Implications:

The review of activities against the strategy action plan identifies the aims and objectives of the strategy and ensures they are being delivered in a timely way. The action plan supports the local authority in meeting statutory housing and homelessness duties, gives direction for improvement, and ensures that focus in housing development and private sector housing remains in line with housing need.

Performance Management Follow-up:

The Housing Strategy 2017-2021 and associated action plan should be reviewed in April 2020 to ensure that it remains fit for purpose in the future.

Environmental Implications:

There are positive environmental implications in the delivery of the strategy objectives e.g. the strategy supports the delivery of new energy efficient homes and energy efficiency improvements in the existing housing stock across the borough.

1.0 INTRODUCTION/BACKGROUND

1.1 The Housing Act 1996 (as amended) and Local Government Act 2003 require all District Councils to develop a strategy which sets out the Council's policies, commitments and programme for a wide range of housing matters. The Housing Strategy 2017-21 was developed by an Overview and Scrutiny Working Group and was adopted by Tewkesbury Borough Council in January 2017. The action plan has been reviewed and updated for the period April 2020 – March 2021 and is summarised below.

2.0 UPDATE AND KEY ACTIVITIES

2.1 The following is a summary of the key activities, identified within the Housing Strategy 2017-21, which will be the focus for April 2020-March 2021) (year 4 of the strategy).

Following on from the most significant legal changes to how housing services are delivered since the 2002 Homeless Prevention Act, the service has completed reorganising around the requirements of the 2017 Homeless Reduction Act. The focus for the last six months has been on service improvement within this legal framework, using a variety of change methodologies. The full detailed action plan outlining all the actions is available in Appendix 1.

2.2 This is the last year of the Council's Housing Strategy. A Member Working Group made up of the Lead Member for Housing and others from the Council's Overview and Scrutiny Committee assisted in developing this strategy. It is proposed that given the success of this in developing the current strategy that a similar approach be used for developing the new Housing Strategy.

3.0 Priority 1 – Increasing the supply of housing (for full details see action plan)

3.1 P1.1 Implement JCS housing policies through the development management process:

The Joint Core Strategy Affordable Housing Partnership made up of three Local Authorities and Register Providers (Housing Associations) will continue to work towards ensuring the first Strategic Allocations sites are delivered and managed in a positive way. This includes ensuring Providers' are committed to meeting housing need and producing sustainable communities.

3.2 P1.2 Identify TBC owned land suitable for future Affordable Housing Development and consider the use of modular housing where suitable:

Projects have commenced on two former garage sites at Staverton and Winchcombe – both of which are proposing modern build methods. The site at Staverton for seven homes is nearing completion from a September 2019 start date, and an application for the Winchcombe site has been submitted. Modular building methods are also being promoted through the Joint Core Strategy Affordable Housing Partnership and Gloucestershire Rural Housing Partnership.

3.3 P1.5 Evaluate potential for promotional activities in private sector to boost availability of homes in the borough:

As part of a Countywide partnership a successful bid was made to the Ministry of Housing, Communities and Local Government (MHCLG) to incentivise private sector landlords to take low income tenants. Due to staff changes, control of the project was passed to Publica however we have been able to access funds to begin to establish a scheme for Tewkesbury.

The department has recruited a temporary officer to focus on developing a Private Sector Rented Accommodation (PRSA) scheme, to facilitate matching applicants in housing need with landlords.

This had an initial soft-launch day on 16th January and will be run as a pilot scheme for the first six months. Initially it will work primarily with letting agents due to the administrative burden of working with individual landlords, though it is intended to widen the audience scope when possible.

The scheme is offering a variety of incentives and is structured to enable the repayment of rent in advance and deposit payments to provide good financial sustainability.

This is part of a partnership scheme with other local authorities, funded by the Ministry for Housing, Communities and Local Government.

4.0 Priority 2 – Homelessness and Homelessness Prevention (for full details see action plan)

4.1 Progress made during year three on actions associated with priority two are outlined in the action plan but activities of note are outlined below:

4.2 P2.1 Implement changes associated with the forthcoming Homelessness Reduction Act (HRA). This action has been completed and has been replaced with a new action:

P2.1 Continue to improve the proactive Homeless Prevention Programme following the successful implementation of the Homeless Reduction Act.

Over the last six months, Housing Services has embarked on a service review and improvement initiative, based on using a method of change management called Systems Thinking, which looks at the service as a whole from the customer's perspective.

A variety of tools and methods have been used to supplement this and support changing how housing advice is delivered.

Staff have been introduced to the following:

- how to use a systems thinking approach,
- how to look at the type of service demand (and mapping this),
- the use of targets vs measures,
- purpose development, what is value and waste work and how to process map services within this context.

Each of these is an area that staff have worked on and all will benefit from being revisited on a regular basis and the service and staff expertise changes and develops.

Much of the changes have been staff driven, derived from workshops rather than meetings. An improvement plan has been created with staff with areas prioritised and lead officers self selecting to work on each area.

The actions have been embedded into staff's Personal Professional Development Plans (PPD's) which are reviewed quarterly.

4.3 P2.1a Improve advice process incorporating action plans which include customer actions.

This action has been focussed on in a number of ways.

Officers have led on reviewing and updating all advice and decision letters. This helps to ensure that applicants are better informed about the process and decisions made.

Officers have also led on reviewing and reworking Personal Housing Plans (PHP's). These are now a legal obligation in the 2017 Act and can help greatly in preventing and relieving homelessness if configured well.

Each Personal Housing Plan is tailored to that individual customer's needs and ability and, rather than being done once, will now be updated and reviewed weekly as a customer progresses through their plan.

The focus of our housing interviews is now behavioural change in the applicant and staff have been supported in this change in practice from 'advice giving' interviews to coaching based interviews with training in coaching, motivational interviewing and specific goal orientated coaching, delivered by colleagues from Bromford Housing Association.

The goal of this is to improve customer's ability to help themselves and carry out recommended actions to better prevent or relieve their homelessness. It also aligns well with Bromford's use of coaching in their area managers (now called neighbourhood coaches), which will itself facilitate better joint working with customers.

Personal Housing Plans regularly include liaison with Department of Work and Pensions (DWP) staff and external agencies and this will be developed further, using the new format, over the coming 12 months.

4.4 P2.1b Reduce full statutory homeless acceptances and increase statutory homelessness preventions and reliefs.

It is recommended that this target be amended to reflect the different duties following the Homeless Reduction Act 2017 and that for the new strategy, different performance measures are investigated which more accurately indicate how the housing service system is operating. This will be informed by the service improvement work, as officers' understanding of their service as a system improves and become more able to articulate what figures might be meaningful measures.

The figures in Appendix 1 show the performance against current duties and also highlight some changes in the last six months as an initial result of the service improvement changes. The figures may show a small discrepancy as there is a low level of duplication as some cases can be recorded as more than one case type, but the numbers are not significant.

Potentially useful measures which are not currently used but it is recommended to consider adopting in the new strategy include:

- The number of unplanned presentations, to measure the impact of early and structured customer interventions. We would be looking for this to decrease initially and then remain at a stable level within low levels of variation.
- number of relief cases ending because the 56 days has elapsed. A high figure can indicate a lack of officer activity on a case. We would be looking for this to decrease initially and then remain at a stable level within low levels of variation.
- Development of statistical control charts to understand the level of variability within the system around housing applications. The goal being to establish what systems show high levels of variability and to reduce this through system interventions.
- Number of homeless applications taken. A high figure can indicate a lack of prevention or relief. Good performance at the prevention and relief stage will reduce this figure. Our current figures show no meaningful signal.
- Customer feedback showing common themes (to be developed), indicating a system artefact that may need to be addressed.

These will be worked on with a Member Working Group and developed into meaningful performance indicators for the next Housing Strategy.

4.5 P2.1c Develop solutions for homeowners with special housing needs in mortgage difficulty.

Presentations for this reason remain extremely low with only one case in 2019. As per legal requirements, mortgage lenders are referring cases to us and these households are contacted and invited to a housing options interview. Engagement however is rare. Homeowners are not a common demographic for our services and in the current climate, with interest levels low, repossessions are not at the high levels they once were. This is a wider economic factor worth being aware of as should this change, it is very likely that we would see greater numbers of presentations for this reason within a few months of interest levels rising.

4.6 P2.1d Work with county local authority partners to find solutions for high risk/high support/multiple needs homeless households

Rough Sleeping:

The most recent rough sleeper count/estimate in November 2019 found two rough sleepers in Tewkesbury Borough. They were identified as itinerant rather than Tewkesbury Borough residents and one soon moved on from the area with the other accepting assistance into supported accommodation in Cheltenham. We continue to work with County colleagues to support rough sleeping in Gloucestershire. We fund a Homeless Outreach service through P3 and a network of support is triggered during periods of severe weather.

Somewhere Safe to Stay:

The hub service is now up and running to work with vulnerable people 24/7. They are located in Cheltenham and Gloucester and provide 'sit-up' shelters for anyone rough sleeping.

The total approaches from February to July is 180. The average length of stay is 14 nights (varying from 8-19). (More recent figures still pending).

We received 72 approaches that resulted in a positive outcome, such as temporary accommodation, settled accommodation or a reconnection.

Domestic Violence:

We co-commission the sanctuary scheme to target harden homes of those experiencing domestic abuse. We are also the lead authority for the Countywide dispersed refuge scheme known as Places of Safety. This scheme is being reviewed to ensure its purpose is clear and results can be delivered in the future.

We are also supporting bids by Cheltenham Borough Council and Stroud District Council to the Ministry for Housing, Communities and Local Government. Cheltenham's bid is for a Domestic Abuse Intervention Officer to assist in complex/high level cases that can be to support through regular casework. Stroud is bidding to access funding to assist the refuge accommodation provided by Beresford Group.

4.7 P2.3a Evaluate the implications of the introduction of Universal Credit (UC) and other forms of welfare reform on housing costs.

This was a new action in year three to monitor the effects of welfare reform on residents – and in particular on homelessness.

The demand on Discretionary Housing Payments has increased significantly - largely as a result of Universal credit and demand has exceeded our allocation for this year.

It is difficult to isolate the effect of Universal Credit on housing applicants as it is rarely the single causative factor. Financial disempowerment generally is one of the strongest reasons for applicants to struggle to find accommodation.

Benefit capped larger households remain problematic because registered providers are reluctant to accept the large households who cannot afford their rents and this applies also to their ability to access accommodation in the private sector.

The only exit to this situation is for applicants to enter employment. This is something being discussed with clients although the Department for Work and Pensions shoulder the primary responsibility for this work.

- 4.8** P2.3a Evaluate the implications of the introduction of universal credit and other forms of welfare reform on housing costs.

P2.3 Establish options to minimise the risk of homelessness and costs associated with welfare reform.

Funding for Personal Budgeting Support was transferred to Citizens Advice on 1 April 2019. The Benefits team continue to provide ad-hoc advice and support to customers on request although we receive no specific funding for this.

There is some evidence that the roll out of Universal Credit may be contributing to an increase in rent arrears. This has been recognised at ministerial level and at the Spending Round 2019 the Chancellor announced additional earmarked funding of £40m for Discretionary Housing Payments (DHPs) “to tackle affordability pressures in the private rented sector in England and Wales”. This additional funding will not be received until the 2020/21 financial year and individual allocations are yet to be announced.

Local Housing Allowance impacts on the affordability of housing in the private rented sector. It has been announced that from April 2020 Local Housing Allowance (LHA) rates will be increased in line with the Consumer Price Index (CPI), ending the freeze to the Local Housing Allowance.

Housing Officers continue to work closely with the Benefits team to give appropriate support to those residents at risk of homelessness.

Housing Services will continue to encourage social landlords to notify housing if considering evicting tenants – particularly for arrears associated with welfare reform.

- 4.9** P2.4 Procure cost effective temporary accommodation within Tewkesbury Borough for accepted households with poor tenancy histories who are difficult to rehouse including properties suitable for households with mobility needs.

Members will be aware that the Property Team have taken on management of our own five temporary accommodation properties. The change will enable costs of improvements to the properties to be met through rental receipts. The properties have been managed by Home Group (Stonham) on a long-term basis up to now. Management activity and future demand for temporary accommodation will be monitored to ensure future procurement is appropriate and manageable.

- 4.10** P2.5 Stop the use of private bed and breakfast accommodation except in emergencies.

The use of bed and breakfast accommodation continues to remain low for both single and family households. Difficult situations are large families, those with substantial rent arrears or behavioural issues and those under offer where their property does not become available for a number of weeks.

- 5.0** **Priority 3 Meeting the housing needs of those who need it most (for full details see action plan).**

- 5.1** All actions from 2017-18 for priority three have been retained for the new action plan but some have been amended to reflect the progress undertaken to date. New actions can be found in the corresponding section of Appendix 1. Significant progress and actions are outlined below.

- 5.2** P3.1 Support the completion of the Local Housing Needs Assessment (LHNA) (previously known as the Strategic Housing Market Assessment.(SHMA).

We have continued to support the Local Housing Needs Assessment process and provided comments on the latest draft version. Completion is now expected to be February 2020.

- 5.3** P3.2 Establish a local connection policy which ensures rural affordable housing development, via rural exception, is prioritised for the needs of the local community.

This item will be delivered through the emerging Borough Plan so can be removed. A new activity relating to Housing Needs Surveys has been added.

- 5.4** P3.3 Work with the health and social care sectors to provide effective housing related support for vulnerable people. Evaluate the accommodation based support for specific groups.

We will continue to support the Housing with Care Project Board chaired by joint Gloucestershire County Council and NHS Commissioning. A Housing with Care Strategy will be developed to inform future delivery of accommodation with care elements.

- 6.0** **Priority 4 Improving the health and well-being of local people (for full details see action plan).**

- 6.1** All actions have been retained for 2020/21 – although the partnership working to encourage residents take up of employment has been broadened to incorporate additional partners (4.3) – significant changes/ progress are outlined below:.

- 6.2** 4.1d Identify existing houses of Multiple Occupation (HMOs) and implement new regulations concerning HMOs.

New regulations came into force in October 2018 altering the definition of HMOs which require mandatory licencing. The HMO license fee has been revised to ensure full cost recovery and 11 new applications are currently being processed.

As part of these activities an unlicensed HMO in very poor condition was identified in Tewkesbury – resulting in seven prohibition notices on individual units and an improvement notice on the entire building. Affected households needing assistance were rehoused through Housing Services and a preliminary plea hearing is scheduled for January 2019.

- 6.3** 4.3 Work with our partners to actively encourage individuals to take up education, employment or other activities to support independence and create a sense of worth.

This action has been broadened to reflect the breadth of partnership working:

The personalised housing plans associated with homeless applications involve active referrals and engagement by applicants with many community based support providers. Active engagement with support is monitored as part of our new statutory duties.

Housing Services will continue to engage with the Job Centre during applications and with the partner agencies within the Financial Inclusion Partnership. The service is also committed to developing a strong relationship with the Bromford Neighbourhood Coaches to support vulnerable individuals in housing crisis. The two teams are now beginning to work with each other on cases and a regular meeting will be set up to facilitate joint working to prevent homelessness.

6.4 A comprehensive update on the activities planned against each of the objectives outlined in the strategy, can be found in Appendix 1 (Housing Strategy 2017-21 Action Plan Update).

7.0 OTHER OPTIONS CONSIDERED

7.1 None – this is an update on forthcoming actions following progress made to meet strategy to date.

8.0 CONSULTATION

8.1 None – updates and new actions have been provided by the relevant Service Managers.

9.0 RELEVANT COUNCIL POLICIES/STRATEGIES

9.1 Housing Strategy 2017-21.

10.0 RELEVANT GOVERNMENT POLICIES

10.1 The main documents driving government housing policy and legislation are:

- The Future Home Improvement Agency (2009).
- Laying the Foundations: A Housing Strategy for England (November 2011).

11.0 RESOURCE IMPLICATIONS (Human/Property)

11.1 None directly associated with this report other than staff and Member time. Any resources associated with the actions in the strategy will form part of the Council's Medium Term Financial Strategy and Asset Management Plan. Resources implications will be met from existing budget allocations and where they cannot, will be subject to a growth bid within the Council's Medium Term Financial Strategy and a separate report to Members.

12.0 SUSTAINABILITY IMPLICATIONS (Social/Community Safety/Cultural/ Economic/ Environment)

12.1 The strategy includes considerations of sustainability and energy efficiency in addition to the social and economic implications.

13.0 IMPACT UPON (Value For Money/Equalities/E-Government/Human Rights/Health And Safety)

13.1 Housing is a basic human need. An Equality Impact Assessment was undertaken prior to the Council's adoption of the strategy in September 2016, this is still relevant.

14.0 RELATED DECISIONS AND ANY OTHER RELEVANT FACTS

14.1 The Housing Strategy 2017-21 has been approved and adopted by Council in January 2017.

Background Papers: Existing strategies and policies are available on the Council's website.

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Appendices: 1 - Housing Strategy 2017-21 Action Plan Review and proposed actions Year 4 2020/21.