

TEWKESBURY BOROUGH COUNCIL

Report to:	Executive Committee
Date of Meeting:	5 January 2022
Subject:	Interim Housing Strategy 2021-2022 Monitoring Report
Report of:	Housing Services Manager
Corporate Lead:	Head of Community Services
Lead Member:	Lead Member for Housing
Number of Appendices:	Three

Executive Summary:

“At home in Tewkesbury Borough” is our interim housing strategy for 2021-2022 and it set out our vision and plans for housing and homelessness in the borough for the year. As our plans for 2020-2021 had seen a considerable amount of disruption, a ‘refresh’ to the Housing Strategy was conducted. It was an updated version of the previous strategy and work for a new longer term strategy from 2022-2026 began earlier this year.

We know how important it is for residents to be able to access good quality housing and housing related services that make a real difference to their lives. The strategy identifies four key housing priorities and key objectives for Tewkesbury Borough Council:

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 well-being 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 2021-2022 which formulates the actions to continue to meet the above priorities in line with the strategy will cover the period April 2021-March 2022.
- A summary of the key activities which have been achieved during the year can be found at Appendix 2 – Interim Housing Strategy 2021-22 Action Plan Progress.

Recommendation:

To CONSIDER and NOTE the Housing Strategy Action Plan progress for 2021-2022.

Reasons for Recommendation:

The Homelessness Act 2002 and Local Government Act 2003 requires 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 Interim Housing Strategy 2021-2022, it was agreed that outcomes identified in the strategy action plan be monitored, regular updates are 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 2022-2026 and associated action plan are currently being produced and will be reviewed to ensure that they remain 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 Interim Housing Strategy 2021-2022 was approved by Tewkesbury Borough Council in February 2021. The action plan was reviewed and updated for the period April 2021 – March 2022 and is summarised below.

2.0 UPDATE AND KEY ACTIVITIES

- 2.1** The following is a summary of the key activities, identified within the Interim Housing Strategy 2021-2022, which have formed the focus for April 2021-March 2022.

Following on from service improvements to help meet the requirements of the 2017 Homeless Reduction Act, the focus for 2020-2021 had been to continue with improvements such as engaging with customers through home visits and using alternative venues across the borough for housing appointments.

Prevented from taking these opportunities the department was hugely successful at responding to the very difficult conditions the COVID-19 pandemic presented. The effects are still felt by the team with some restrictions on resources such as accommodation options and working remotely.

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

- 3.1** P1.1 Investigate how Registered Providers can be encouraged to consider alternative construction methods and deliver homes to a high build standard.

Improved build standards have been achieved by working closely with Registered Provider (RP) partners and supporting development with commuted sums funding. RPs are committed to using alternative construction methods but still learning from pilot projects. Different products, suppliers and ways of arranging contracts mean that, compared to traditional build methods, RPs are still working to find the best ways of employing new construction methods.

- 3.2** P1.2 Produce a guidance note and bid pro forma that assists with the use of commuted sums (financial contributions in lieu of on-site affordable housing) and seek Executive Committee approval.

A guidance note and bid pro forma have been produced to help assess proposals from RPs. Funds have been committed to schemes that will support 68 new Affordable Housing units in the borough.

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

- 4.1** P2.1 Improve advice processes to assist in supporting customers while working remotely including personalised plans that agree customer actions.

Improvements to our processes have been influenced by working remotely and work on customer contact and homelessness applications has helped maintain our service. Working remotely has generated some other benefits with more paperless working options saving money and reducing, if only modestly, our impact on the environment.

4.2 P2.2 Contact all housing associations and private landlords who have worked with us to prevent homelessness to develop an eviction/ prevention protocol.

By improving relationships with our RP partners through meetings with managers and joint team meetings we have encouraged better communication. This has led to opportunities to improve tenants' situations e.g. reduce rent arrears and assist in moving tenants to more suitable accommodation.

We have also contacted private sector lettings agent across the borough to raise the profile of another funding source allocated to us by Department Levelling Up, Housing and Communities. The fund is available to help support vulnerable, low income tenants to reduce rent arrears and/or support them to move into alternative private sector accommodation options. We hope that this can help develop prevention of eviction processes and give us opportunities to work with tenants at risk of homelessness.

4.3 P2.3 Improve housing services website and include a landlord advice section

Changes to how we all live have led us to review how customers interact with our service. Part of this is helping customers to 'self-serve' when they access our website and not have to click too many times to get the information they need. The Business Transformation Team is supporting the Housing Advice Team to map its customer contact channels in order to further assess how customers interact with us. We will then be able to consider if we need to make changes and use new tools to improve the customer experience such as online contact forms.

Although engagement with private sector landlords and agents has proved difficult due to a buoyant housing market, we have still had some success in securing tenancies for customers. We have updated the relevant web pages to encourage landlords to work with us.

4.4 P2.4 Update the housing services housing options/homelessness form and investigate online solutions to support this.

The online platform that records our homelessness data has been improved through feedback from our team and is now used to record our housing options/homelessness application cases without the need for paper forms.

Information is now recorded more consistently and more fields can be used to produce reports on housing advice/homelessness cases.

4.5 P2.5 Reduce the use of private bed and breakfast accommodation except in emergencies.

Changing conditions across homelessness and rough sleeping in the last two years has meant comparing use of B&Bs across different periods has been difficult. Many variables have affected the numbers requiring temporary accommodation and the availability of suitable options.

Discussions with RP partners about potential solutions have been positive but no firm options have been identified so far.

4.6 P2.6 Work with county local authority partners to find solutions for high risk/high support/multiple needs homeless households.

In the last year the housing partnership networks across the County, born out of the COVID-19 response, have been developed further. Information and resource sharing have improved and we have access to a greater variety of options for complex cases.

The partnership also secured £382,500.00 from the County Contain Outbreak Management Fund (COMF). As of 10/12/2021, it had spent £17,821.08 on homelessness prevention activity that will help customers have the ability to self-isolate if needed and reduce rough sleeping and the use of shared temporary accommodation options.

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

5.1 P3.1 Support the evaluation of the accommodation needs of Travellers and Non-Travellers (as determined by the 2016 updated Gypsy Traveller and Travelling Showpeople Accommodation Assessment (GTTSA)).

Planning Policy is supporting the development of the assessment. The full report is due February 2022.

5.2 P3.2 Continue to play an active role in the Housing with Care Project Board to build relationships and create a joined-up way of working to better support vulnerable residents.

Benefits of our department engaging with the Housing with Care Project Board, now HEAT Partnership Board (Housing, Equipment, Energy, Adaptations, Aids and Technology) include influence on the previous development of the Housing with Care Strategy and connections between the Partnership and RPs, particularly in relation to Disable Facilities Grants (DFGs).

DFGs benefitting RP tenants have usually been from an adhoc, individual application basis. We have asked RPs to identify larger projects, such as making communal areas more accessible or improving home technologies, that would benefit whole sites and impact on a wider scale.

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

6.1 P4.1 Encourage landlords wanting to work with the Council on improving housing standards and be better trained to provide quality accommodation and management.

The Environmental Health service is undergoing a trial with officers moving to focus on specialist areas instead of working generically e.g. across food, housing, enviro-crimes. A Private Sector Housing team will be upskilled through training and will then be in place to provide support and enforcement options with private sector landlords.

This dual approach, alongside the stock condition survey below, will help to improve the management by landlords and physical standards of properties to the benefit of tenants in the borough.

6.2 P4.2 Work in partnership with district colleagues to commission a 'Stock Condition Survey'.

The procurement process is underway with a provider to be selected with a contract start date of 10 January 2022. Survey results due October 2022 will help inform the actions for Year 2 of the new Housing Strategy around improving private sector housing standards.

6.3 P4.3 Respond within 3 working days to customer complaints about housing conditions.

The service has maintained a high rate of responses made within three working days with an estimated figure of 80%. Reporting systems will be put in place to assess this in more detail.

While still relatively low overall, complaints on housing conditions have doubled in the last 12 months.

6.4 P4.4 Reduce poor quality housing by taking appropriate action to deal with identified Housing Health and Safety Rating System Category 1 hazards.

A specialist team is now in place to take enforcement action with Improvement Notices now subject to a charge. An Enforcement Policy has been refreshed and approved in November 2021.

6.5 P4.5 Current warm and well contract expires in March 2022. Review performance of current provider and participate in joint procurement with other Gloucestershire local authorities.

The existing contract with Warm and Well is proposed to be extended for two years with an option to extend for a further three years. Final agreement will be by end of March 2022.

The Sustainable Warmth Fund is to assist those in fuel poverty living in homes with Energy Performance ratings of E or lower and is in two parts:

- £1,030,000 for Local Authority Delivery Scheme (LADS) phase 3 for insulation and heating (non fossil fuel types) for those on the gas network
- £4,217,985 for Home Upgrade Grant (HUG) phase 1 for insulation and heating for homes off the gas network.

Severn Wye will be delivering this fund on behalf of all Gloucestershire Districts.

6.6 P4.6 Regulate the standards of larger houses in multiple occupation (HMOs) and caravan sites by enforcing mandatory license conditions.

A number of new policies and procedures are in place to support this action:

- HMO Policy.
- Civil Penalty Policy adopted July 2021.
- Enforcement Policy approved November 2021.
- Mobile Homes and Caravan Site Policy adopted October 2021.

Notices for enforcement action under the Housing Act are now subject to charge within Fees and Charges.

As well as arrangement being in place for updating our web pages, other future activity will continue to identify unlicensed HMOs. The service will also plan a programme of inspections of caravan sites and continue to address substandard conditions in both the private and social sectors.

6.7 P4.7 To explore how housing applicants supported by Tewkesbury Borough Council can benefit from the 'Going the Extra Mile' (GEM) Project.

Joint meetings firstly between Housing Services and GEM and then another with Bromford Neighbourhood Coaches helped to share experiences and inform each other of how we would interact with potential shared cases.

It was important to include Bromford in discussions as they can be better placed to refer cases to GEM. As an applicant needs to be focussed and committed to the GEM project, it was noted that this can be difficult when also having to resolve a level of housing need. A more stable base once accommodation issues are resolved provides a better opportunity to engage with training and employment.

7.0 Housing Strategy 2022-2026

7.1 Work on the new Housing Strategy is progressing and on target. The public consultation has opened and we looked forward to receiving thoughts on the challenges and opportunities we have presented.

7.2 Some priorities for the new strategy include –

- Producing an Empty Homes Strategy to bring different departments within the organisation together and reduce the number of empty homes in the borough.
- Using our latest evidence base to deliver more homes at Social Rent levels to help address problems around affordability.
- Further promote and allocate our commuted sums funding to increase Affordable Housing delivery and improve build standards.

7.3 To support the aims of the new strategy, Environmental Health and Housing Services will be working more closely together to avoid duplication of work, ensure the right advice/enforcement is provided to landlords and deliver better outcomes for customers.

8.0 OTHER OPTIONS CONSIDERED

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

9.0 CONSULTATION

9.1 None – updates and have been provided by the relevant Service Managers.

10.0 RELEVANT COUNCIL POLICIES/STRATEGIES

10.1 Interim Housing Strategy 2021-22.

11.0 RELEVANT GOVERNMENT POLICIES

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

- The Future Home Improvement Agency (CLG 2009).
- Fixing the foundations: Creating a more prosperous nation (July 2015).

12.0 RESOURCE IMPLICATIONS (Human/Property)

12.1 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. 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.

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

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

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

14.1 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.

15.0 RELATED DECISIONS AND ANY OTHER RELEVANT FACTS

15.1 The Interim Housing Strategy 2021-22 has been approved and adopted by Council in February 2021.

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

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Appendices:

- 1 – Interim Housing Strategy 2021-22.
- 2 – Interim Housing Strategy 2021-22 Action Plan Progress.
- 3 – Bid Pro forma for TBC funds.