

FLINTSHIRE COUNTY COUNCIL

REPORT TO: **HOUSING OVERVIEW & SCRUTINY COMMITTEE**

DATE: **TUESDAY, 10 JUNE 2014**

REPORT BY: **CHIEF OFFICER – COMMUNITY & ENTERPRISE**

SUBJECT: **FLINTSHIRE'S LOCAL HOUSING STRATEGY – A
REPORT ON PROGRESS**

1.00 PURPOSE OF REPORT

1.01 To review progress against the aims contained within the Council's Local Housing Strategy 2012-2017 "A Quality Home for Everyone".

2.00 BACKGROUND

2.01 Since its adoption in February 2012 the Local Housing Strategy has set out the Council's vision for meeting housing need in the County. The strategy was adopted during a period of major change heralding the introduction of Welfare Reform, new funding regimes for affordable housing and a number of statutory and regulatory changes contained within the Welsh Government's Housing White Paper.

2.02 The strategy established three themes which set out the Council's ambitions:

1. More Housing, More Choice;
2. Improving Homes and Communities;
3. Better services to Improve People's Lives

2.03 The Strategy identified the plans that the Council and its partners stated they would undertake to meet all the outcomes that contribute to the three themes. Provided below are the key areas of progress against the Strategy.

3.00 CONSIDERATIONS

3.01 More Housing, More Choice

Key to this objective was the need to provide greater numbers of properties through the Social Housing Grant Programme. During the period 2011/2014 the strategy stated that funding for 152 new social rented housing units would be provided. This commitment has been fulfilled with sites in Shotton, Mold, Treuddyn and Flint completed. In addition the provision of one new Extra Care facility exceeds the target within the Strategy by an additional 61 units and provides high quality accommodation for many with complex needs. During the 13/14 financial year, the council allocated its RSL partners (via WG

Funding) £4M of Social Housing Grant to support new build; this is against an original WG allocation of £1.5M and was the highest level of grant expended across the 6 north Wales councils.

- 3.02 A further objective in the Strategy was to support homeownership through the Council's shared equity scheme. In this Scheme the council holds a 30% equity stake (provided through Section 106 contribution) with the applicant from the affordable homeownership register purchasing 70% of the property value. The outcome sought was for the council to hold a 30% stake in 140 new build homes by 2013. The current number is 91 with a further 100 with Planning Permission, the majority of which are under construction or part of a larger development which has now commenced. Achievement of this target has been delayed due to slower developer start on site than originally expected
- 3.03 A first time buyer loan has also been introduced and is facilitated in partnership with Grwp Cynefin (formerly Tai Clwyd), to whom the Council provided a £100K loan for 15 years. This scheme provides loans to first time buyers of second hand homes up to 20% of the purchase price, with a maximum property value of £150K. Given that mortgage accessibility has improved since the product was launched, only 3 of the targeted 5 loans have thus far been provided.
- 3.04 The Council has also continued to accept gifted homes in lieu of a section 106 agreement on certain sites, where financial viability for development is holding back development, or where insufficient local interest has been shown for the purchase of new build property to justify a request for equity shares. The target for gifted homes was 26 by the end of 2012/13. The council already holds 10 properties with a further 20 agreed and to be built over the next 2 years. These gifted homes have been transferred to the council's wholly owned housing company North East Wales Homes to provide greater flexibility around the tenure that can be offered and the ability to guarantee they will be retained for affordable rental in perpetuity. Further information will be provided on North East Wales homes in paragraph 3.16 under the objective of Better Services to Improve People's Lives.
- 3.05 As part of the Flint Town Centre Regeneration Programme the Council is progressing its plans to empty the maisonettes and demolish the blocks. To date 4 blocks have been demolished and housing solutions have been found for most of the remaining tenants, including at the Flint House development currently under construction. There are only 11 tenants for whom the council have yet to identify alternative accommodation. This will allow for the acceleration of the demolition programme, with an anticipated completion of Spring 2015. The strategy states that 170 homes will be built on site by 2017, this may need to reduce slightly as a consequence of proposals to build a new a primary health care centre on part of the site.

- 3.06 Further to this aspiration the housing service is also supporting the planning service in its call for sites as part of its LDP process. As part of the strategic housing function research has been carried out in to the private rented sector across Flintshire. A joint housing market assessment is also underway with Wrexham to evidence housing need and plan for future provision across all tenures as the 'call for sites' continues.
- 3.07 **Improving homes and communities**
The Council's planned investment objectives to meet WHQS are ahead of the commitments made in the Choices Document. The Strategy indicates that over the 4 year period 2013/18 £49M would be made available to meet the requirements of WHQS. The annual spend against WHQS works has increased as a consequence of efficiencies derived within the HRA and leveraging in of energy efficiency funding from utility companies. This result of this is that across the following work streams in 13/14: -
- Heating upgrades – 600 promised and 977 completed
 - Kitchens – 992 promised and 1118 completed
 - Smoke Detectors – 884 promised and 804 completed
 - Bathrooms – 0 promised and 200 completed
- 3.08 The Council has been keen to ensure that the WHQS programme provides opportunities for apprenticeships. The Choices Document set a target of 10 apprenticeships by 2017. These were written in to contract documents against the above programmes and given that more work has taken place than promised, the target has been met 3 years in advance.
- 3.09 In terms of improving the energy efficiency of the Council's housing stock this continues to be an area of strong performance. In 2013/14 161 Council homes have received measures including external wall insulation and Solar PV. This is despite reductions to ECO funding following changes at Central Government level to the funding regime and reduced targets which the utility companies now have to meet.
- 3.10 In addition to Council homes the local authority also has a strategic responsibility to ensure that there is provision to improve private homes of vulnerable people and ensure safe living conditions. The council has introduced a range of new loan products and within the strategy aspires to support 50 homeowners each year to carry out major works of repair and improvement. In 2013/14 the council provided 42 loans to support vulnerable people carry out these major works. It was not able to meet the target of 50, as the cost of the works to those properties expended the budget. However, the target remains and as funds are repaid and recycled it is hoped that this target can be met going forward.
- 3.11 Flintshire Care & Repair continue to be an active partner focussing on

persons over 60 or disabled and with the support of the Council provide small scale home repairs up to £1500. In 2013/14 they carried out 71 repairs at a cost of £29K.

- 3.12 As a further part of this agenda of improving homes and communities, the council is working to return long term vacant properties back in to use. Welsh government has provided additional funding since the strategy was written and consequently Flintshire has received £950K to support the reoccupation of long term (over 6 months) vacant homes. This, in combination with support through the Council's own capital programme ensured that 33 homes were brought back in to use in 2013/14 against an outturn of 20 homes in 2012/13. As Members will be aware the council has been the lead authority for the WG Houses into Homes Loan Scheme across North Wales and has successfully distributed £4.4M of funding to the partners.
- 3.13 The council and Welsh government continue to support the Connah's Quay, Shotton and Queensferry Renewal area. The aspirational target within the Strategy stated that the Council would upgrade 300 properties via a Group Repair Programme. This has been an area of significant challenge given the reductions to Specific Capital Grant funding for Renewal Areas by WG and also (a smaller) reduction in the Council's contribution through its capital programme. However, to date over 150 homes have been improved and the target of 300 homes remains achievable given the Council's award of Vibrant & Viable Places 3 year funding totalling £6.042M, for town centre and housing regeneration. This funding will eventually replace the Specific Capital Grant for Renewal Areas.
- 3.14 **Better Service to Improve People's Lives**
The SARTH project was highlighted as an area for development within the strategy and is progressing well. A common allocations policy has been supported and a county based register is under development. To prepare for SARTH and changes to homelessness duties, the Housing Options Service is piloted the Housing Solutions approach. The difference in this approach is that service is now assisting anyone who comes forward for housing support, regardless of whether a duty under homelessness legislation exists. This builds upon Flintshire's successful homeless prevention service which is already highly regarded across Wales.
- 3.15 A key objective within the strategy is that the council consider the development of a social lettings agency. As Members will be aware the housing service has gone further and established a wholly owned property management company called North East Wales Homes, which will allow it to meet the aspirations in the strategy of increasing the number of properties available at affordable rents in the private sector. The company is now trading, holds 10 properties gifted to the council in lieu of section 106 agreements and is currently in the process of signing up landlords to its management services. The

company will be the council key vehicle to increase the number of private rented properties available at Local Housing Allowance (LHA) rates.

- 3.16 The strategy provides a commitment to develop an integrated young person's team to work with young people who are at risk of homelessness. This team has now been established and is working across housing and children's services delivering coordinated and complimentary services to young people. This service builds upon existing prevention work and is compliant with the requirements placed upon by council's by the Southwark judgement and the responsibility that children's services now hold towards vulnerable 16 and 17 year olds who have an accommodation need.
- 3.17 A further action was the development of safe and suitable short stay and emergency accommodation. This has been commissioned through a project called Night Stop, which in 2013/14 was accessed by 22 young people, 11 of whom quickly moved on to full independence, with 10 moving on with a lower level of support provided.
- 3.18 In addition there was a commitment given to develop more shared housing for people under the age of 35. This was in recognition of the welfare reforms and the application of the single room rate to this client group. Currently 3 such properties are being provided, one by the council and two by RSL partners. Further opportunities for shared accommodation will be explored in the private sector for leasing either by the council or North East Wales Homes.
- 3.19 A strategic review has also been undertaken of accommodation based and floating support provision. A key development as a result of this review was the establishment of an advice and support gateway at entry to the service. This triage system quickly identifies what short to medium term support needs a client is likely to have and ensured that all key professionals work together to support them.
- 3.20 The strategy sets out the review the council would undertake of homeless cases with complex needs. The Housing First pilot was one aspect of this, which provided a coordinated approach across housing, children's services, youth justice, the police service and the drug and alcohol team. The aim of the project was to provide intensive support for 10 individuals. The learning from this pilot has been shared across the multi agency team and again supported that clear communication and roles and responsibilities are paramount to success in preventing homelessness. This further evidenced the need for the advice and support gateway as outlined above.
- 3.21 The action plan also states that the council will launch a dispersed refuge service, specifically designed to meet the needs of larger families and those with children and pets. These family types can be

difficult to place in the current refuge provision. A consortia bid was being prepared by the 3 main providers within the county and one organisation ruled themselves out as they don't currently support men. However the consortia failed to pull together a successful bid and therefore this opportunity is about to be tendered. The intention through the tender is to provide 6 dispersed units across the County and this exercise will be completed shortly

3.22 The ageing population is reflected in the strategy, with specific actions to address their accommodation needs. The council continues to support Disabled Facilities Grants to owner occupiers and those in private rented accommodation. It also continues to support adaptations within its own housing stock and has recently put in place a new policy to make best use of its adapted housing and ensure that adaptations are appropriate to the property.

3.23 The council has now full transitioned to the Community Based Accommodation Support Service (CBASS). At the time the Strategy was prepared two hubs were operational in Shotton and Ewloe. A further 7 hubs have now been opened and the service is operating county wide. The service has also expanded from being offered to those in sheltered stock, to those in general needs council housing but with a support need. Further to that the service is now being offered to private homeowners who wish to pay for it.

3.24 Finally the Strategy gives commitments surrounding Extra Care and the need to increase provision. As Members will be aware, Llys Jasmine in Mold has now been completed and the 61 units are fully occupied. There is now a waiting list for the scheme and this supports the need for the development of additional schemes in Flintshire. Political support has been provided for the development of a further two Extra Care Schemes, one for Flint as outlined above and one for Holywell.

3.25 **Summary**

The Local Housing Strategy is a 'live' document and will be subject to change as changes are made by the Wales Housing Bill, which is expected to become law in 2015. The most significant changes which will have an impact on the Strategy are: -

- Changes to homelessness legislation – including the move towards a housing solutions approach and the ability to discharge homelessness duties in to suitable private sector accommodation. This report has spoken of how the council intends to embrace these changes. WG are also introducing a new Property Improvement Loan product to assist.
- Licensing of the Private Rented Sector – this has significant implications in terms of housing standards enforcement capacity. A business case has been submitted for further environmental health officer capacity to deal with the above

point, however this will continue to be a challenge moving forward.

- Exiting of the Housing Revenue Account Subsidy System (HRAs) – this will provide additional resources to enable the council to meet WHQS and it does offer the potential opportunity to build new council homes in the future.

The action plan will be reviewed in 2015 and reported to this Committee to ensure that it remains fit for purpose.

4.00 RECOMMENDATIONS

4.01 The Members note the progress made against the actions within the Council's Local Housing Strategy 2012-2017 "A Quality Home for Everyone".

5.00 FINANCIAL IMPLICATIONS

5.01 There are no financial implications as a direct result of this report.

6.00 ANTI POVERTY IMPACT

6.01 The Strategy compliments the Council's current and emerging plans aimed at mitigating the effects of the Welfare Reform Act and current on-going anti-poverty activities.

7.00 ENVIRONMENTAL IMPACT

7.01 The use of sustainable building materials for new build and the re-use of existing empty properties, alongside the energy retrofit of other building all have a positive environmental impact.

8.00 EQUALITIES IMPACT

8.01 The strategy has been subject to the council's equalities impact assessment process and there are no known negative impacts.

9.00 PERSONNEL IMPLICATIONS

9.01 There are no direct personnel implications from this report.

10.00 CONSULTATION REQUIRED

10.01 Ongoing consultation with Member's and other stakeholders will be undertaken as the strategy is implemented

11.00 CONSULTATION UNDERTAKEN

11.01 Broad consultation was undertaken with Member's and key stakeholders as part of the development of the strategy

12.00 APPENDICES

12.01 Flintshire Local Housing Strategy “ A Quality Home for Everyone”

**LOCAL GOVERNMENT (ACCESS TO INFORMATION ACT) 1985
BACKGROUND DOCUMENTS**

None

Contact Officer: Gavin Griffith

Telephone: 01352 703428

Email: Gavin_Griffith@flintshire.gov.uk