

Report to Cabinet

23rd September 2021

By the Cabinet Member for Housing and Public Protection

INFORMATION REPORT



**Horsham
District
Council**

Not Exempt

Horsham District Council Housing and Homelessness Strategy 2021-2026

Executive Summary

The previous Housing and Homelessness Strategy 2013-15 was adopted in 2013 and reviewed in 2017, however there is no current Strategy in place.

The landscape of housing and homelessness has changed significantly since the previous Strategy was adopted, with the impact of the global COVID-19 pandemic not yet fully known.

A new Strategy is needed, but to ensure the success of the Service in addressing the critical housing and homelessness issues faced by our District's residents, a multi-stage approach is proposed.

The first stage will be an information gathering period, where key areas of the Service are reviewed as well as some initial actions being taken.

The second stage will report back on the findings of those reviews and set out defined next steps to address the overall objectives of the Service.

The final stage will be where the hard work is done in helping tackle the biggest housing crisis in a generation.

This report gives more context to why this multi-stage approach is recommended as the best course of action, detailing some of the events, shifts and legislative changes that mean we need to better understand where we are, what is working and what isn't. It also sets out in brief the actions and reviews we will undertake.

We are living in unprecedented times, but we are confident that taking this person-focused and data-led approach is the best way to strengthen the Housing and Homelessness Service, achieve our objectives and deliver the aspirations and solutions the residents of Horsham district deserve.

Recommendations

Cabinet is recommended to:

- i) Approve the Council's Housing and Homelessness Strategy 2021-2026 and recommend to full Council that the strategy is adopted.
- ii) Delegate authority to the Relevant Cabinet Member to monitor performance against the Delivery Plan with periodic updates being presented to Cabinet following the Strategy's adoption.
- iii) Note that this Strategy is the first step in a multi-stage approach, as set out in section 3 of this report.

Reasons for Recommendations

- i) To ensure the Council fulfils its statutory responsibility of having a current Housing and Homelessness Strategy.
- ii) To give the Housing and Homelessness Service clear direction and objectives that will guide decision making, projects and priorities over the next five years.

Background Papers

Horsham District Council Housing Strategy Position Statement Annual Review 2016/2017
Housing Strategy 2013-15

Wards affected: All wards affected.

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Background Information

1 Introduction and Background

1.1 National Picture

Housing in the United Kingdom has become increasingly expensive and insecure over the last few decades, meaning that in general there are fewer options available to much of the population.

- 1.1.1 There is a problem with the availability and supply of housing, with a continuing shrinking of the proportion of housing rented through local authorities and housing associations. Housing is also becoming more and more expensive. The average house price across the UK is £294,299, with the average national monthly rent £984pcm, both options often out of reach for those in low-paid, insecure or no employment. There is a lack of stability and long-term options as well as options that keep pace with changing needs of residents.
- 1.1.2 Due to these affordability and supply issues with housing, homelessness continues to be a nation-wide problem. Rough sleeping is one visible form of homelessness, but many other forms of hidden homelessness such as sofa-surfing are also increasing.
- 1.1.3 There have been significant changes and events in national policy that have changed the delivery of housing and homelessness Services across the UK in recent years. There was a four-year-period of rent reduction for social housing rents, a continued decrease in Government grant funding to assist with new-build delivery and a freeze on local housing allowance rates.
- 1.1.4 Legislatively, the implementation of the Homeless Reduction Act in 2018, which significantly revised and extended the statutory duties of local authorities to assisting those with housing need, has changed the face of homeless Services across the country.

1.2 Local Picture

- 1.2.1 Horsham district is not exempt from these housing and societal pressures. The District is in a good standing in terms of deprivation, wealth, employment figures and numbers of benefit claimants. However, situated in close proximity to London in a desirable area has meant that average house prices reached £447,723 in 2021, well above the UK average.
- 1.2.2 The average monthly rent is £1,069, similarly above the national average, and there continues to be a shortfall between the maximum local housing allowance available and average private rents.
- 1.2.3 There has been a consistent delivery of new build affordable housing, averaging over 240 affordable rented and shared ownership homes every year. However, demand for affordable housing, measured by applicants on the Council's Housing Register is consistently greater (and growing) than the number of nominations to housing made.

- 1.2.4 The previous Housing and Homelessness Strategy was produced in 2013 and reviewed in 2016/17. Due to staffing changes, the implementation of the Homeless Reduction Act and various other pressures, there has not been an updated Strategy in the intervening years. However, the objectives set out in the 2013 Strategy such as increasing a supply of affordable homes, providing effective support for homeless households and helping vulnerable people access appropriate housing provision have all seen significant progress made.
- 1.2.5 The Council's Commuted Sums fund is healthy, and there is an appetite to utilise this money to deliver as many good quality affordable homes as possible. Horsham District Council is also in the process of updating our Local Plan, where new housing targets and quotas will be set.

1.3 **COVID-19 Pandemic**

The global COVID-19 pandemic has impacted on every area of life, not least housing, and we still do not know the true extent of that impact. In March 2020 local authorities were instructed by the Government to accommodate all rough sleepers in their areas under the "Everyone In" initiative, to ensure safe isolation and protection from the virus. For the majority of the pandemic a ban on residential evictions has been in place, however that came to an end at the end of May 2021, and most local authorities are expecting a rise in approaches to the homelessness Services and demand for housing support. Winter night shelters will not be able to run in the same way in the coming winter, and so the challenges from the pandemic do continue. However, there were also some key benefits of COVID-19, mainly the Service being able to understand the nature of homelessness in Horsham district better than ever before and where relationships have been built and strengthened.

2 **Relevant Council policy**

- 2.1 This report accords with the objectives of the Corporate Plan, as it will help:
- Support the delivery of housing to meet local need
 - Prevent homelessness throughout the Horsham district
 - Provide access to appropriate and affordable housing
 - Reduce the number of households placed in Bed and Breakfast accommodation

3 **Details**

- 3.1 While the background information set out above in Section 1 details some of the challenges we know we are facing; in recent years the landscape of housing and homelessness has changed significantly. However, the duty on local authorities to deliver safe, secure and affordable housing endures. Horsham District Council is proud of its strong history of innovation and partnership working to carry out its housing duties, yet in these times a forward-thinking approach is needed more than ever to address the biggest housing crisis in a generation.
- 3.2 The 2021-2026 Housing and Homelessness Strategy proposes five overall objectives that will guide the direction the Council will take in tackling this crisis:

- Ensure no-one needs to sleep rough
- Empower residents to live independently in their own homes
- Deliver the number and size of homes that our communities and residents need
- Provide and maintain an accessible and fair housing register
- Prevent all forms of homelessness for our District's residents

- 3.3 With these objectives, we are clear in knowing where we want to be by the end of the Strategy period in 2026. We also know that we want to take a person-centric approach to shaping our future, to put our residents' needs first and to be guided by the rich data our Service has access to.
- 3.4 As a result, we feel we need to take a bit of time to understand our Service as it currently stands before setting out a clear pathway of actions to achieving our objectives. We want to know what is working well, what needs to be improved, and what we think the areas ripe for innovation are.
- 3.5 We are therefore proposing that within the overall Strategy period of the next five years, there are three distinct stages. Stage One, in the first 18 months will be an information gathering stage, taking stock, reviewing Service areas and assessing what we need to improve.
- 3.6 Stage Two will involve producing an Interim Review in 2022, where we present the results of the Stage One research and set out a detailed action plan of how we are going to address our five objectives.
- 3.7 Stage Three, the final stage, will see our Service carrying out the hard work to deliver on these goals in the remaining three years.
- 3.8 The Strategy document attached to this report therefore forms part of the first stage. It sets out in more detail the national and local housing context as well as defining a limited number of clear defined actions we already know we need to take at this stage. It also contains the Service review areas we will be undertaking in the next 18 months and reporting back on in the Interim Report in Stage Two.
- 3.9 The clear actions we will begin working on immediately are:
- Working with property Services to undertake a stock condition survey and site appraisals of our temporary accommodation stock and implement findings if possible. This will support our agenda as a council to reduce our carbon footprint.
 - Roll out the Customer Portal on Housing Jigsaw to all applicants on the Housing Register
 - Produce guidelines for the spending of our commuted sums budget
 - Upscale our Housing First model
 - Maintain the homeless outreach Services developed through the COVID_19 pandemic
 - Review the allocations policy annually
 - Develop stronger relationships between Registered Providers and the allocations team

- Establish better partnership working with different departments within the Council and with other key external agencies
- Continue working closely with Turning Tides on local housing matters
- Maintain close partnership working with other District, Borough and County Council colleagues

3.10 The Service area reviews we will also undertake during Stage One are:

- Explore the viability of a Housing Pathways post/role that would provide alternative housing options and support
- Explore the idea of establishing a Registered Provider Charter
- Review and enhance our current private rented sector offer
- Review the need for a specialist rough sleeper's accommodation project in the District
- Review young people's accommodation in the District
- Review the housing register
- Review the housing application process

3.11 This approach not only enables us to really understand the Service before addressing the challenges we face, but it also provides flexibility to deal with the ongoing impacts of the pandemic which can be addressed during the next 18 months if necessary.

4 Next Steps

4.1 Having a current Housing and Homelessness Strategy is a statutory duty as set out in the Local Government Act 2003, and therefore it is necessary to adopt this Strategy as a priority.

4.2 Adopting the Strategy will also give the Housing Service a framework within which to operate and a clear direction in working to prevent and relieve homelessness and improving the housing options of those living in Horsham district.

4.3 Cabinet is recommended to approve the Strategy, which will then be presented to Council for their approval. All comments and amendments will be considered as appropriate.

5 Views of the Policy Development Advisory Group and Outcome of Consultations

5.1 The draft Housing Strategy has been presented to the Housing and Public Protection Policy Development Advisory Group on two occasions.

5.2 The first session helped shape the objectives of the strategy with the second discussion supporting the draft strategy and reinforcing the staged approach to delivery.

5.3 Comments from the Monitoring Officer and S151 officer are incorporated in the report.

6 Other Courses of Action Considered but Rejected

- 6.1 As adopting this Strategy is a statutory requirement, there are no other courses of action to be considered.
- 6.2 Do nothing and not adopting a new strategy. This is rejected given the requirement for a strategy incorporating our Housing Strategy, Homelessness Strategy and Rough Sleeping Strategy.

7 Resource Consequences

- 7.1 There are no financial or staffing consequences at this stage as the review of objectives of the strategy in the first 18 months will be met within the current staffing structure.
- 7.2 The financial or staffing consequences of any actions that may be progressed at later stages of the Strategy will be reported to Cabinet and any future budget requests will be made through full Council.

8 Legal Considerations and Implications

- 8.1 There is a statutory requirement to have a Housing and Homelessness Strategy. This strategy also incorporates our Rough Sleeper Strategy.
- 8.2 Once adopted, this Housing and Homelessness strategy will satisfy the requirements of Section 1(4) of the Homelessness Act 2002 for local housing authorities to review homelessness and publish updated homelessness strategies every five years. The final strategy will also be a material consideration in the consideration of future planning applications, alongside the requirements of the Council's Local Plan.

9 Risk Assessment

- 9.1 There are no direct risks associated with this report.

10 Procurement implications

- 10.1 There are no procurement implications.

11. Equalities and Human Rights implications / Public Sector Equality Duty

- 11.1 There are no consequences relating to Equalities and Human Rights.

12 Environmental Implications

12.1 There are no environmental implications.

13 Other Considerations

13.1 There are no GDPR/ Data Protection and Crime & Disorder consequences.