

SOUTH CAMBRIDGESHIRE DISTRICT COUNCIL

REPORT TO: Leader and Cabinet
AUTHOR/S: Executive Director / Housing Strategy Manager

9 July 2007

HOUSING STRATEGY DOCUMENT 2007/8-2010/11

Purpose

1. This report presents a draft Housing Strategy document for the period 2007/8-2010/11 for recommendation to Council for approval. The document was recommended for approval by the Housing and Environmental Services Portfolio Holder on 22 June 2007.

Executive Summary

2. Since the late 1970's local authorities have been required by government to produce Housing Strategy statements. The contents and format have changed considerably over time as government agencies have used this process to influence local authority policies, to regulate their actions and to inform decisions about capital and revenue resource allocations. Until recently a new strategy document was an annual requirement but this was initially amended to every 3-5 years, and now the obligation to produce and submit a local strategy is again under review (for reasons which are spelled out later in this report)
3. However, even though the document is not formally required at this stage and could be replaced by a contribution to a Sub-Regional Strategy, it can still fulfil useful purposes and the current Housing Strategy document which covers the period 2004-7 is reaching the end of its useful shelf life. Its action plan has been largely achieved and it does not contain details of the important strategic decisions that have been taken since it was drawn up in 2004.
4. The document presented here for Cabinet's approval has been completely revised from the 2004 version, and although it is no longer automatically required by government, it follows the most recent government guidance on content and format. This guidance provides a useful structure and means it will be familiar to anyone used to previous strategy documents. More importantly, it aids comparisons to be made with other local authorities where required, and it has a format and contents that will be familiar to any regulators carrying out inspection visits.
5. The draft document is attached in full to this report as **Appendix 1**. This report explains how it was drawn up and outlines the government guidance.
6. It should be stressed that this report concerns the production of a strategy **document** which brings together details of strategic decisions which have already been made. It does **not** attempt to create or review any policies or strategies itself. It would be inappropriate and unrealistic to try and review all of an authorities strategic decisions in one report and members who have been involved in any strategic decisions in recent years (e.g., the Stock Option appraisal, review of sheltered housing, the Local Development Framework, the move to Choice Based Lettings etc) will appreciate the amount of time and effort that are required from all stakeholders to achieve a successful outcome. This report simply brings those decisions together in a

consistent fashion across a range of housing related issues, together with explanatory background information.

Background

7. The last requirement from the government for local authorities to prepare and submit Housing Strategy documents was in 2004 when the South Cambridgeshire document was judged to be “fit for purpose” by Go-East (the government regional office). Prior to that, a document was required every year and the government issued a series of letters and guidance documents detailing what should be covered in strategy documents, and what specific current issues were to be added each year. From the government’s perspective this achieved a number of objectives:
 - it enabled regional government offices to judge local authorities in relation to government priorities and, together with an objective assessment of needs, to make recommendations to Ministers about how much capital expenditure each authority would be allowed to make (by adding borrowing power and grants to revenue streams and spendable capital receipts)
 - the accompanying statistical return provided government with information about outcomes (new homes built, lettings made, properties improved, grants given etc)
 - it enabled the government as regulator to express judgements about local authority performance, outcomes and the quality of their strategic decisions, because feedback on documents was provided after each submission.
 - it was, at least in its earliest days, one of relatively few public documents explaining and summarising the housing role of individual local authorities.
8. However, the government’s role as regulator, allocator of resources and monitor has evolved to the point where local Housing Strategy documents are no longer essential for these purposes.
9. Firstly, housing strategy documents brought together both public and private sector stock issues but in recent years the regulation of public sector stock issues has become far more rigorous with the requirement to produce Housing Revenue Account Business Plans together with the Business Plan monitoring return. This was further developed with the requirement that all stock holding authorities undertake comprehensive Options Appraisals to identify their capacity to achieve and maintain Decent Homes standards. These appraisals were tightly regulated by regional government offices who had to “sign off” the outcomes. The agreed outcomes were then used to influence future resource allocation, rather than housing strategies.
10. Secondly, regulation has moved away from annual strategy submissions to include focussed inspections by the Audit Commission, and the requirement to get specific activities signed off at regional office level, e.g., Homelessness Strategies. The inspections by the Audit Commission involve site visits and user/stakeholder involvement and are far more detailed than any judgement based on general strategy documents.
11. Thirdly, some of the focus of government attention has started to move away from individual local authorities towards Sub Regional and Regional issues. This has led to the development of Sub Regional and Regional Housing Strategies with corresponding resource allocations from the Regional Housing Board / Sustainable Communities Panel reflecting this wider geographical focus. Members will note from

the Action Plan in the draft strategy that although many of the actions **involve** other partners to some extent, over a third are **dependent** on formal partnership arrangements, e.g., Sub Regional Choice Based Lettings, selecting a partner for strategic sites (“Cambridge Challenge”), etc.

12. Fourth, in terms of service delivery, direct provision of new affordable housing is almost exclusively delivered by housing associations who cross local authority boundaries and have their own regulatory systems. Increasing numbers of council properties are transferring into this sector. Other aspects of services such as Choice Based Lettings, Supporting People services, Local Area Agreements and the development of large strategic sites are increasingly organised across local authority boundaries. Some of the focus of government attention is therefore moving away from individual local authorities towards cross border partnerships and delivery arrangements.
13. Lastly, a wide range of other detailed strategies are now produced which cover issues that would once have been touched on but in less detail in housing strategies. Obvious examples include the Community Strategy, the Homelessness Strategy, the Supporting People Strategy, the Race Equality Scheme, the Capital Strategy, the Community Development Strategy, the Community Safety Strategy, the Housing Renewal Strategy, Sub-Regional Housing Strategy etc.
14. The government is also considering the option of merging local housing strategies with Community Strategies post April 2008.

Considerations

15. The current Housing Strategy document 2004-7 is now out of date and the summary outcomes of its action plan (included in the draft new document) show that objectives have been achieved and no longer represent the current housing activities of the Council.
16. Correspondence from the government regional office-GO-East- in January 2007 indicates that in future local authorities will have the options of producing either local Housing Strategies or of contributing to a Sub-Regional Strategy. The letter makes it clear that GO-East will be concentrating their resources on the Sub-Regional strategies with an emphasis on the delivery of their action plans. However, there seems no logical reason why authorities should not produce local strategy documents whilst also contributing to Sub-Regional working and in essence this is exactly what all the districts in the sub region are currently doing. The draft strategy being presented to members has an appendix identifying connections between local activities and the current Sub-Regional Housing Strategy action plan. The important point is that the commitments made at each level of working-local and Sub-Regional-should be compatible.
17. A recent publication from the Department for Communities and Local Government (part of the *Process Evaluation of Plan Rationalisation and Formative Evaluation of Community Strategies Project-April 2007*) still lists the local Housing Strategy as “required” but with additional freedoms for excellent authorities.
18. The current Sub-Regional Housing Strategy does not have a particularly comprehensive or robust action plan and it will be reviewed beginning January 2007. At the time of writing this report there is no agreed date for when the Sub-Regional Strategy review will be completed. Once it is finalised, it will need to be reported to members and any conflicts between the local strategy and the proposed Sub-Regional Strategy can be addressed at that point. Since the draft strategy being

presented with this report is based on already agreed policy, any future conflicts between sub-regional and local policy will emerge whether or not a local strategy document is produced.

19. Since the timescale for the production of the Sub-Regional Strategy is uncertain, and there is merit in having a detailed summary of local housing issues with a future action plan for a “local audience”, officers have therefore revised the strategy document using DCLG guidelines and Audit Commission Key Lines of Enquiry publications. That guidance recommends that the document should not be more than 30 pages in length and prescribes both the format and contents. The attached draft document therefore draws heavily from other material to provide a concise summary. The intention is that the document should be reasonably concise since the recommended 30 page maximum length applies to all authorities across the country, including the largest metropolitan districts. It does not duplicate all the detailed information that would be found in Service Plans etc.

Options

20. The draft strategy document does not create or amend policy and therefore this report does not present the range of alternatives that would have been considered in reports when policy decisions were considered. Members can amend the presentation but are asked to note that the current version follows overall government guidance.
21. Any document of this type will have the inherent problem that it is a snapshot of a moving picture and inevitably some elements will constitute “work in progress”. The Housing Futures option appraisal is a good example. The danger is that in waiting for results in any one area, other processes will be started but not finished and the current Housing Strategy will become more out of date.
22. Alternatively, it would be possible not to produce a new local Housing Strategy but to rely on a contribution to the proposed review of the Sub-Regional Housing Strategy.

Implications

23. Since the document is no longer formally required by the government, the implications for not having a current local strategy are less significant than in previous years **providing** that there is a robust Sub-Regional Strategy in place. However, an up to date document which reflects government guidelines has the capacity to influence future inspections or judgements and the review of the Sub-Regional Housing Strategy has only just begun.

24.	Financial	Capital resources are no longer influenced by annual Housing Strategy submissions. However, in making bids for any earmarked resources that might become available, it may help to demonstrate best practice by having an up to date strategy document conforming to government guidance
	Legal	none
	Staffing	none
	Risk Management	The current document is nearing the end of its useful life and it will help promote a good image for the authority to replace it with an up to date version which also highlights the progress made since the last document was compiled.

Equal Opportunities	<p>The production of a document summarising previous policy decisions does not review, alter or create any policies and as such does not require a race equality impact assessment. The attached draft is not one strategy or policy-it is a document summarising a wide range of strategies and policies. Impact assessments are relevant when policies are being considered and agreed.</p> <p>It is worth noting the following issues which are contained in the document and demonstrate that the Council has taken its responsibilities in this area very seriously since the last strategy document was produced:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • the Travellers Needs Survey and the steps to produce a Gypsy and Travellers Development Plan document • the positive results shown by the improved monitoring of BME households access to services • the review of services in the light of the revised CRE Code of Guidance • the prioritisation of disabled and vulnerable people in the allocation of scarce resources available for grants • commitments to Equality and Diversity training
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Consultations

25. Individual policy decisions which together make up the contents of the Housing Strategy document were subject to appropriate consultation at the time they were being considered. It will be appreciated that in the case of important decisions (e.g., Options Appraisal, developing the LDF etc) many of these consultation exercises were extensive and detailed.
26. In addition, widespread consultation was carried out on the draft strategy document itself. Staff across the Council were consulted and the document (together with an explanatory letter and a feedback form) was sent to over 140 organisations, partnerships and individuals.
27. These included all Parish Councils, members of the Housing Partnership (RSLs, PCT, Housing Corporation, etc), the Local Strategic Partnership Board (Cambridgeshire Constabulary, County Council, voluntary sector rep, GO-East etc), the CRE, tenant representatives, Ormiston Trust, all local authorities in the sub region etc.
28. **Appendix 2** lists some examples of issues contained in the draft strategy that have been tangibly influenced by previous consultation exercises. In practice, consultation helps to shape proposals in the first place and it is usually unrealistic to try and identify exactly how each individual viewpoint influences eventual outcomes.
29. Comments made by consultees were reported to the Housing Portfolio Holder when she considered the draft document.
30. In order to structure the consultation the consultees were asked to consider the following points:
 - *does the document meet the government objective for a successful housing strategy?*
 - *do any sections need to be revised or clarified?*
 - *in relation to the allocation of scarce resources-are there areas where we should spend **more** and areas where we should spend **less**?*

- are there areas of activity that should be a priority for future review?
- any other comments?

Effect on Annual Priorities and Corporate Objectives

31.	Affordable Homes	This report, and the production of a Housing Strategy document, do not themselves directly affect the achievement of any of the Councils Priorities or Objectives. The document does however highlight the important housing related activities that are critical to both Priorities and Objectives
	Customer Service	
	Northstowe and other growth areas	
	Quality, Accessible Services	
	Village Life	
	Sustainability	
	Partnership	

32. The draft strategy includes reference to the links between the housing policies of the Council and the emerging revised Sustainable Community Strategy 2007-10 and the new Corporate Objectives 2008/9 onwards.

Conclusions/Summary

33. The draft document brings together a wide range of housing related issues and demonstrates that, despite severe resource constraints, South Cambridgeshire District Council has effective strategies in place that address important national, regional and local issues. The involvement of a wide range of stakeholders and consultees in formulating strategies ensures that the diverse needs of the district are reflected in the decisions that members have made.
34. It would be possible to work towards a local contribution to a Sub-Regional Strategy instead of producing a new local strategy, but in that case the existing local strategy would become increasingly out of date with no certainty about when a new Sub-Regional version would be finalised. In addition, a Sub-Regional contribution would inevitably not contain the degree of local detail that can be incorporated in a local strategy document.

Recommendation

35. Cabinet is recommended to recommend to Council the approval of the draft Housing Strategy document for the period 2007/8-2010/11.

Background Papers: the following background papers were used in the preparation of this report: Cambridge Sub Region Housing Strategy, Performance Plan 2006, Evidence to LDF Enquiry, South Cambridgeshire Community Strategy, Housing Strategy 2004-7 Available at www.scambs.gov.uk

Housing Strategies : Assessment Questions, Housing Strategies :Fit for Purpose Criteria, Housing Strategies : Guidance, Sustainable Communities in the East of England, Process Evaluation of Plan Rationalisation: Formative Evaluation of Community Strategies
All available from www.communities.gov.uk

Correspondence from GO-East-January 2007- available from Mike Knight

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