

# **Affordable Homes Service Plan 2012/13 – 2014/15**

**March 2012**

## 1. About Our Service

This service plan covers both the strategic housing functions of the council and also its landlord role. The service plan for Affordable Homes should be read in conjunction with the Housing Strategy 2012/13 to 2016/17 and the Housing Revenue Account (HRA) Business Plan.

The Housing Service has three primary functions:

- A landlord service providing housing management and property maintenance services to tenants.
- As the strategic lead for housing issues within the District. This includes an enabling service working in partnership with other local authorities and housing associations to ensure the development of new affordable homes within the District and in partnership on strategic sites in the close to Cambridge City
- Housing advice and options service seeking to prevent homelessness and to provide accommodation for those in housing need (including those who are already homeless), through a new choice based lettings scheme and other housing options. The provision of this service delivers several statutory requirements for the local authority.

The structure of the Housing Service therefore reflects these primary functions and consists of four main service areas:

### Housing Services Structure

Service Area	Specialist Teams	Objective
Housing Services	Housing management, sheltered housing, Carecall, Gypsy & Traveller management	Improve housing services and tenant involvement and promote sustainable communities
Property Services	Property surveyors, capital improvements programme, responsive and void maintenance management, leaseholder services, property sales	Providing decant housing through the delivery of effective maintenance & improvements
Housing Advice & Options	Housing advice, homelessness team, Choice Based Lettings	To provide housing advice to enable people to understand their housing options to sustain & improve their current home or access alternative good quality & suitable housing.
Housing Strategy & Enabling	Enabling function, housing strategy, development, policy development and service improvement	To ensure that sufficient new schemes are identified for future development, approved schemes are delivered to meet identified needs and to ensure that new or emerging needs are properly identified for future provision.

The Council's housing stock comprises of nearly 5,800 dwellings, and over 1,100 garage units. The stock is spread over 102 villages of South Cambridgeshire. The stock is mainly traditional low-rise house and bungalow construction, but there are a small number of non-traditional property types. There is a relative high proportion of sheltered accommodation at approximately 25% of all homes spread across 43 schemes. There are around 500 leasehold properties.

The Housing Service Plan is guided by the Council's corporate objectives. The Council has adopted the following vision for 2012/13:

*"South Cambridgeshire will continue to be the best place to live and work in the country. Our district will demonstrate impressive and sustainable economic growth. Our residents will have a superb quality of life in an exceptionally beautiful, rural and green environment.*

*The Council will be recognised as consistently innovative and a high performer with a track record of delivering value for money by focusing on the priorities, needs and aspirations of our residents, parishes and businesses."*

This is supported by three guiding aims and a number of specific actions. The aims are:

*"We will listen to and engage with residents, parishes and businesses to ensure we deliver first class services and value for money.*

*We will work with partners to create and sustain opportunities for employment, enterprise, and world-leading innovation.*

*We will make sure that South Cambridgeshire continues to offer outstanding and sustainable quality of life for our residents."*

For Affordable Homes there are specific actions to:

A11. Work with the newly elected Tenant Participation Group and other tenants to set up an independent Tenant Scrutiny Panel.

B8 affordable to all and where people want to live that will support economic growth and economic activity.

C9 housing service for the Council's sheltered housing residents.

The overall service objective for Housing is as follows:

*To be the best housing service by providing good quality housing across all tenures that is accessible to all that enhances residents' quality of life, their health and wellbeing, that supports economic growth and social opportunities, alongside improved energy security and reduced carbon footprints.*

In essence we want to promote the Council housing service as putting the HEART into housing:

**Heath & wellbeing**  
**Economic Growth and development**  
**Affordable housing**  
**Reducing fuel poverty and promoting energy efficiency**  
**Tackling homelessness**

## 2. Our Performance and Plans to Improve

The relationship between the service specific objectives and the corporate priorities are demonstrated in the 'golden threads' that run through the Service Improvement Plan and which inform individual appraisals and work plans.

An essential part of affordable Homes is the role that tenants and leaseholders play in helping to shape the service. All sections of Affordable Homes have a role to play in supporting resident engagement and the lead officer is based within the Housing Strategy & Enabling team.

Performance in housing is currently measured in three ways:

- The set of SCDC performance indicators selected for measurement using CORVU, adopted in 2008/09. These incorporate the relevant national indicators as well as local indicators. All the indicators have been refreshed in 2011/12 following consultation with frontline staff and tenants.
- Housing service managers use key 'heartbeat' indicators to monitor service performance in key areas: rent arrears, repair times and satisfaction, relet times and gas servicing. The indicators are a monthly snapshot. All of these key indicators are benchmarked using Housemark. This information is also used to produce 'performance at glance' for the residents' consultative forum and the Portfolio Holder. The 'performance at a glance' uses traffic light indicators and 'direction of travel' arrows to visually express the trends.

<b>'Performance at a glance' categories</b>
Emergency repairs attended to within 24 hours
Urgent repairs completed within 5 days
Routine repairs completed within 23 days
Average time to complete a repair
Satisfaction with repairs service
Average to relet a property (general needs minor repairs) BVPI 212
Number of overdue gas services
Level of current rent arrears
Rent loss through empty dwellings

In addition there are a number of strategic housing performance indicators that are reported to the Portfolio Holder quarterly and in the case of the asset management PIs annually. These are:

<b>Strategic Performance Indicators</b>
Average length of time for families with children in hostel accommodation
Homelessness prevention
Numbers on temporary accommodation
Number of affordable homes delivered (gross)

For Affordable Homes a key part of our work is to manage performance in housing maintenance. Around 2/3rds of the total budget is spent on housing maintenance so the five year Housing Maintenance Plan (HMP) is a key document. This forms part of the HRA Business Plan.

## Service Improvement Projects

This Service Plan identifies a number of key drivers for change. The following projects are designed to address these:

Service Plan Actions	Target date(s)
Our staff – set up revised induction programme for housing staff	May 2012
Development of new build strategy (Northstowe, Growth sites and new council houses)*	November 2012
Your Service: establish neighbourhood teams	November 2012
Home Improvement Agency – monitor implementation and review of options for working better with Occupational Therapy	February 2013
Allocations – development of Homelink to meet demands of policy changes	February 2013
Resident involvement development – Tenant Scrutiny Panel*	March 2013
Homelink: Private rented sector landlord accreditation scheme project	March 2013
Sheltered housing implementation of restructuring & bidding for revised contract*	July 2013 & December 2013
Warm Homes Strategy delivery (including EU project)	March 2013 & March 2014
Value For Money action plan refresh	March 2013
Robinson Court equity share development	September 2014

\*Council actions

In addition to these key projects there are various other pieces of work which include participating in corporate and cross agency work monitoring and responding to the changes in welfare benefits. The new shared service for the Home Improvement Agency will also be monitored through the year.

### 3. The Context of Our Plan

The main context is provided by the Housing Strategy 2012/13 to 2016/17.

#### a) External drivers

##### Political

- The tenant Services Authority (TSA) became the regulator of council housing services from April 2010 in addition to its role as regulator of housing associations. The service standards published by the TSA provide a more direct and challenging regulation function to that which the Council housing sector previously experienced from the CLG. This has placed fresh demands upon the Council to ensure that

service standards are maintained. The TSA has the power to order an inspection at short notice. As part of meeting the TSA standards the Council publishes an Annual Report to Tenants. This sets out how well we have met the TSA standards to date and also identifies how these standards are to be adapted to reflect a 'local offer' to tenants. The actions required to meet that local offer are included within the service plan. The regulatory function of the TSA passes to the Homes & Communities Agency from April 2012.

- Community empowerment – the Localism Act 2011 seeks to encourage public service delivery to be rethought in conjunction with the local people.

### **Economic/Social**

- The Cambridge Sub Region Strategic Housing Market Assessment demonstrates clearly that South Cambridgeshire has an affordability problem that not only affects many current households but will be a problem for emerging households, despite the increased building rate expected through the strategic growth site.
- Private rented sector restructuring in response to economic conditions and welfare benefit changes. The demand for rented homes has increased and landlords are increasingly able to charge higher rents and move away from schemes to provide homes for people in receipt of housing benefit
- The welfare of children, young people and vulnerable adults. The Housing Service is committed to safeguarding and promoting the welfare of children, young people and vulnerable adults
- Public Funding for New Affordable Housing the resources available for new homes have been cut back by 60% in the Comprehensive Spending Review period starting 2011. It is too early to understand how the use of 'Affordable Tenancies of up to 80% of market rents will impact upon the ability of housing associations to develop new homes.

### **Technical**

- Housing Benefit changes – Local housing allowance/Brad Rental Market Areas may lead to increased demand on mediation services and has the potential for increased levels of homelessness.

### **Environmental**

- Geography of district – the essentially dispersed and rural nature of the district with no central market town as a natural focus has a significant bearing on service delivery e.g. providing a focus for tenant participation activity, co-location of services etc.
- Climate change issues may lead to increased costs or delivery problems – e.g. off site construction methods may not suit small village development needs.

#### **b) Our Key Partners**

The housing service is delivered in partnership with a range of other organisations. The major partnerships are listed below.

The impact of these partnerships is maximised by a combination of activities including the hosting of events and meetings, regular attendance at liaison meetings, attendance at sub regional bodies, some service level agreements, the provision of information to partners and engagement in forums as well as direct funding of partners via cash (commuted sums) or other resources (e.g. free land). Joint procurement is adopted where this provides better value for money.

- Other local authorities
- Supporting People

- Various housing associations
- DAAT & CDIP
- MAPPA
- Homes & Community Agency
- County Council
- Probation & Youth Offending Team
- DIS Learning Partnership
- Connexions
- Office of Children & Young People Services
- Parish councils
- Various contractors
- Tenant Participation Group
- Various developers
- CAB & voluntary organisations
- Cambridge sub-Regional Housing Board
- Local Safeguarding Children's Board

This list is not exhaustive as there are at least 50 groups, working parties and liaison for a where housing services work with external partners. The Council has adopted a more vigorous risk management process for all partnership working from 2008 onwards. This has identified Supporting People as one of the Councils key partnerships.

### **c) Our Strengths & Weaknesses**

There are a number of factors affecting the ability of the Housing Service to deliver its service obligations. These are shown below as strengths and weaknesses.

#### **Strengths**

- Affordable Homes has a measurably low cost base and overall high performance
- There is a strong commitment to team working across the service and a focus on working with other services areas within the Council and external partners.
- Customer focus – The staff are committed to providing the best service they can
- There is good self awareness of what needs to improve

#### **Weaknesses**

- Need to improve transparency of value for money
- Need to improve performance management
- Need to develop customer profiling

#### **Opportunities**

- Opportunities include sub regional working, and partnership working with Cambridge City, continues to afford opportunities to share service delivery.
- An improved focus on resident engagement and tenant participation
- The opportunity to increase efficiency arising from the implementation of new web based systems such as ADAPT for all policies and procedures.

#### **Threats**

- Supporting People tendering – the proposed changes could have a significant effect on the resources allocated to meet the cost of running our sheltered housing schemes and the future of the staff involved.
- The overall economic downturn may significantly increase the demand on the Council housing advice service and the cost of providing temporary accommodation may rise.

#### **4. Are we meeting the diverse needs of all our customers and communities?**

The customers of the Housing Service incorporate the following groups:

- Tenants of SCDC
- Leaseholders
- People applying as homeless
- People seeking to be housed by SCDC or housing associations
- People seeking housing advice
- Gypsies and Travellers living on sites managed by SCDC
- Parish Councils
- Housing associations
- Internal customers e.g. Planning Service

The list shows that the customer base is much wider than just the existing tenants. More work is needed to understand the profile of this customer set including issues of diversity. Better use of customer profiling was a key action identified by the independent assessment of the Housing Service carried out by Savills in July 2008. A full survey of tenants was carried out during December 2009 – January 2010. This resulted in a 40% return which has helped to inform the development of the Customer Service Excellence Project and the development of the Your Service theme.

Customer Satisfaction is measured across the Housing Service in a number of ways.

There is a Tenant Participation Agreement (Compact) in place. This is an agreement with the Council and its tenants to work in partnership to ensure the best possible service is delivered to tenants. This is currently being reviewed and the Resident Involvement Officer is working with the Tenant Participation Group to deliver the Resident Involvement Strategy action plan.

The review will propose improvements to the framework, our agreements and associated documentation. The review will incorporate staff and tenant views. It is envisaged that this work will shape the strategy and resulting action plan and also provide direction to maximising resident engagement.

The basic framework at present consists of an overarching Tenants Participation Group, which includes representation from the three sheltered housing forums, the leaseholder forum, resident groups, and Village Voices.

The Council's magazine contains a section called Key Issues that is for tenants. This section is used to try to encourage resident involvement in all aspects of our work in any way that they feel that they want to be. The section is used to advertise resident issues and forthcoming items of interest.

The website contains information on resident involvement and how residents can be involved. The Tenants Handbook will soon be available on the website and in hard copy for those who want it and this contains further information on how residents can be involved.

The Council is participating in the development of both an older persons strategy and a disability strategy that is being led by the County Council. There is also annual monitoring of BME housing issues that are reported to the Portfolio Holder.

#### **d) Our Resources**

The primary resources for the Housing Revenue Account (HRA) come from rents and charges. These issues are detailed within the HRA Business Plan. Appendices A & B provide summaries of the Housing General Fund and Capital accounts.

Whilst the main landlord activity is funded through the HRA the Council also carries out a number of strategic housing functions, which are mostly funded by the General Fund. The table below summarises.

<b>Service area</b>	<b>Specialist teams</b>	<b>HRA/General Fund</b>
Housing Services	Housing management, sheltered housing, leaseholder services, Gypsy & Traveller management, Carecall, house sales	Mostly HRA
Property services	Property surveyors, capital improvements programme, responsible and void maintenance management, Direct Labour organisation	HRA
Housing Advice & Options	Housing advice, homelessness team, housing allocations/Choice Based Lettings	Mostly General Fund
Housing Strategy & Enabling	Enabling function, housing strategy development, Home Improvement Grants (delivered via the Home Improvement Agency shared service)	General fund

#### **e) Value for Money Overview**

Affordable Homes worked with a Scrutiny 'task and finish' group during 2010, to carry out a full review of value for money within housing. This group included three tenant representatives. The product of this review is a greater awareness of where VfM activity is currently in place and an action plan for how gaps in the approach to VfM are to be addressed. This action plan now needs to be refreshed during 2012.

The Annual Report to Tenants includes a VfM statement and VfM forms one of the service standards of the housing regulator. The 2012 refresh will ensure that the action plan adequately reflects the regulatory expectations although their standard does not apply directly to council landlords.

#### **f) Workforce Overview**

There are around 100 staff delivering the housing service. The roles are diverse and include many customer facing roles as well as office based staff and staff with technical roles. There are few problems with recruitment and retention.

The workforce is diverse and contains people across a wide range of ages, people with different disabilities, people with family commitments and an overall balance of male and female staff. There are however few staff from BME backgrounds.

The appraisal process is the primary mechanism through which to identify training and support needs. Investors in People accreditation was successfully secured by the Council during 2009.

The 'Our Staff' project is being launched in 2012 to ensure that the needs of the housing staff are catered for and to connect with the corporate programmes such as the leadership Programme, the Organisational Development Strategy, the induction programme and other corporate HR initiatives. This will help to develop a more systematic assessment of training and skills gaps and to plan a more targeted strategy for staff development.

#### **g) Risk Overview**

The major risks associated with the Housing Service are identified in the Affordable Homes Risk Register which is updated quarterly by the Housing Services Management Team and reviewed annually by the executive Management Team. High scoring risks may also be reflected in the Corporate Risk register. Individual projects often have a separate risk register associated with the delivery of that project.