

Affordable Homes Service Plan 2013/14 – 2015/16

March 2013

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 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	Deliver housing landlord services and tenant involvement and promote sustainable communities
Property Services	Property surveyors, capital improvements programme, responsive and void maintenance management, leaseholder services, property sales	Provide decent 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 and resident involvement	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

		<p>emerging needs are properly identified for future provision. To track policy changes and good practice and ensure that the housing service is operating efficiently and effectively.</p>
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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 2013/14:

“South Cambridgeshire will continue to be the best place to live and work and study 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:

- Set up a new way of delivering equity share, market sale and private rented properties.
- Delivering a range of homes that are affordable and where people want to live in areas that support economic growth
- Increase the supply of temporary accommodation
- Establishing projects to consider the options for upgrading and improving Council homes
- Addressing the needs of Gypsies and Travellers

- Building the first of the new Council houses in the New Build Strategy 2012-2015

And as part of a corporate project taking a leading role in:

- Establishing a Council 'back to work' project and promote apprenticeships across the district to equip all our young people for productive life.

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 were 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.

'Performance at a glance' categories
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 and Tenant Participation Group quarterly and in the case of the asset management PIs annually. These are:

Strategic Performance Indicators
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:

Council Aim	Service Plan Action	Objective	Lead Officer	Timescale
1	1. Increase supply of temporary accommodation. *	To reduce the use of bed and breakfast accommodation by the Council. The project will need to link with other initiatives such as the Empty Homes Strategy and the New Build Strategy but also needs to explore all available options and develop an action plan.	Sue Carter/Heather Wood	Activities will run throughout the year. There will be an initial review in November 2013 to assess the effectiveness of the programme and identify the strategy being taken.

1	2. Improve joint work on homelessness with the County Council.	To seek ways to better communicate with the County on the issues of mutual concern relating to homeless households. To identify improved ways of using budgets to improve the quality of service to households and potentially reduce cost for both Councils.	Sue Carter/Heather Wood	A review of progress made will be undertaken by December 2013.
2	3. Explore the setting up of a new delivery vehicle to deliver equity share, market sale and private rented properties.*	To address un met housing need from across a wider set of incomes bands than those identified by affordable housing products. This is important to meet the needs of those on the lowest banding of the housing register and to meet the needs of the growing economy within the district. The Council will need to work in partnership with other public sector bodies which may include the County Council.	Stephen Hills	South Cambs Holdings Ltd established January 2013. A scoping paper will be produced for Cabinet, June 2013
2	4. Establish a Council back to work project including a Council led apprenticeship scheme.*	To try and mitigate the impact of welfare benefit changes. To promote positive practice amongst all employers within the district.	Anita Goddard	Strategy to be completed by June 2013. Review of progress scheduled for November 2013.
3	5. Complete the build of the Council's first new Council house in the new strategy*	The first of the 200 houses in the 2012-2022 period identified in the New Build Strategy.	Schuyler Newstead	Completion between December 2013 & March 2014.

3	6. Project to consider the options for upgrading and improving the Council homes at Wilford Furlong, Willingham.*	To consider the potential redevelopment of the area to improve the energy efficiency and overall quality of the homes.	Schuyler Newstead	Project feasibility to be reported February 2014
3	7. Robson Court, Waterbeach hostel development	Work with Sanctuary Carr-Gomm to redevelop the hostel site to provide new provision in the form of self-contained units whilst still providing a supportive environment for homeless families and single people	Schuyler Newstead	Planning permission approved. Anticipated start on site Autumn 2013 with an 18 month build out programme.
3.	8. Redevelopment of Robinson Court, Gamlingay	Current properties not fit for purpose and difficult to let. Scheme to be redeveloped to provide good quality affordable homes through a shared equity scheme.	Schuyler Newstead	Residents consulted. Progress on scheme reliant on moving tenants out.
3.	9. Bidding for/ implementation of new Supporting People contract for older people*	To ensure we are in the best position to bid/tender for the SP contract so that our sheltered housing schemes remain attractive places to live and are sustainable	Tracey Cassidy	Service restructured in preparation for SP contract. Contract to commence Jan 2014.
3.	10. Communal Room and Alarm System Review	To consider best use of the council's assets, including charging for use, usage and identifying efficiency savings and reviewing the alarm system	Tracey Cassidy	March 2014
3.	10. Homelink developments including the private sector module	To ensure the Homelink system is fully operational to take into account policy changes from April 2013 and work towards a private rented sector module	Sue Carter/ Heather Wood	Changes to the Locata system to be completed by March 2013. Private Rented Sector Module to be investigated as

		to advertise private rents		part of project work around access to accommodation for single people
3.	11. Warm Homes Strategy Delivery (including EU project)	Continue to access grants to improve the thermal efficiency of the Council stock and introduce innovative sustainable energy efficient heating solutions. To continue installation of solar panels whilst the feed-in tariff is still attractive to funders	Anita Goddard	Delivery of Warm Homes Strategy up to 2016.
1.	12. Develop tenant engagement in particular the setting up of tenant led scrutiny*	To work with the newly elected Tenant Participation Group and other tenants to set up an Independent Tenant Scrutiny Panel, as set out in the Localism Act 2012. Review the Resident Involvement Strategy.	Gill Anderton	April 2014
3	13. Gypsy and Traveller accommodation Project *	To seek funding and sites to help deliver the Council's obligations for Gypsy and traveller accommodation.	Stephen Hills	Progress review scheduled for March 2014.

*Linked to delivering specific 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.

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 Homes & Communities Agency (HCA) became the regulator of council housing services from April 2012 in addition to its role as regulator of housing associations. As part of meeting the HCA standards the Council publishes an Annual Report to Tenants. This sets out how well we have met the national 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 changes to regulation from April 2012 put greater emphasis on Tenant Scrutiny. Landlords are required to be more pro-active in self- regulation and in involving tenants in the scrutiny process. Tenant Scrutiny aims to give tenants more power in holding their landlord to account for their decisions, performance and conduct. A specific action is identified within the Service Plan to help achieve this change in policy.
- 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 sites.
- 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.
- Changes to the HRA subsidy system from April 2012 to a self financing regime has seen the Council take on a debt of £205M. In return for taking on this debt the Council is now able to keep its rental income in full and gives us the freedom to plan investment, with increased financial capacity to reinvest into our existing housing stock and provide new affordable homes – as set out in the HRA Business Plan and New Build Strategy.
- 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/Broad Rental Market Areas may lead to increased demand on mediation services and has the potential for increased levels of homelessness.
- Housing Benefit changes for existing social rented tenants of working age that are considered to be under-occupying. Already seeing an increase in demand for smaller accommodation (1 and 2 bed properties). Potential for increased rent arrears for those considered to be under-occupying

- Implementation of direct payments of housing benefit. Currently being piloted ahead of Universal Credit, but early indications show an expectation for increased rent arrears. Early figures released show on average payment collection rates of 92% (with figures ranging from 88%-97% across the different areas).

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 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 improve 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 polices 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. In February 2012 the Council undertook a STAR survey and 'Your Service' questionnaire. This information has helped to inform our performance monitoring and also start to build up our customer knowledge on the range of profile characteristics amongst our tenant base. This work will continue to evolve into a rolling programme to enable us to capture the profile of all tenants. Work is also underway as part of the Housing Register review to ensure we are collecting more information on housing applicants, such as financial circumstances and disabilities, this will be updated through an automated system.

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. In addition there is a Resident Involvement Strategy 2010 which will be

reviewed in 2013. The Resident Involvement Team continues to work with the Tenant Participation Group, all other tenant forums, as well as internal and external stakeholders and partners 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 Elected Tenants Participation Group, which includes representation from the three sheltered housing forums, the leaseholder forum, resident groups, and Village Voices.

From 2013 tenants and leaseholders will receive regular newsletters rather than rely on the housing pages of the Council magazine which will now only carry housing stories that are newsworthy for the whole district. This will enable more detailed information to be shared with tenants and leaseholders.

The website contains information on resident involvement and how residents can be involved. The Tenants Handbook is 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 currently drafting an Ageing Well Strategy outlining the key issues affecting the health and wellbeing of older people.

d) Our Resources

The primary resources for the Housing Revenue Account (HRA) come from rents and charges. The market value of Council housing stock is around £960M. Additional resources also come from supporting people grants to help residents of sheltered housing in low incomes to pay for the support element of their service charge. These issues are detailed within the HRA Business Plan.

The Council's main capital asset is the housing stock. There are three types of valuations commonly used. The resource accounting valuation is that required by the CLG for their statistical returns and represents the market value of the stock with sitting tenants. The resource accounting valuation is shown below:

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

Service area	Specialist teams	HRA/General Fund
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 &	Housing advice, homelessness team,	Mostly General Fund

Options	housing allocations/Choice Based Lettings	
Housing Strategy & Enabling	Enabling function, housing strategy development	Mostly 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 has been refreshed during 2012.

The Annual Report to Tenants includes a VfM statement and VfM forms one of the service standards of the housing regulator.

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.

The appraisal process is the primary mechanism through which to identify training and support needs. However a more systematic assessment of training and skills gaps is required to plan a more targeted strategy for staff development. Investors in People accreditation was successfully secured by the Council during 2009 and silver level awarded in 2012.

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.

As part of the 'Our Staff' project we have entered into a strategic partnership with the Chartered Institute of Housing. This offers a tailored programme of training, policy and practice advice to ensure our staff have the knowledge and expertise required to deal with the day-to-day challenges. So far the CIH have provided briefing sessions on tenure reform, specific training around supported housing and also direct access to a Policy Officer to support the Strategic Housing Team, as well as supporting individual training requirements. We are also a member of a number of organisations that promote good practice, including Housemark, Housing Quality Network and the Eastern Region Benchmarking Club.

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.