

Housing Strategy 2008 – 2011

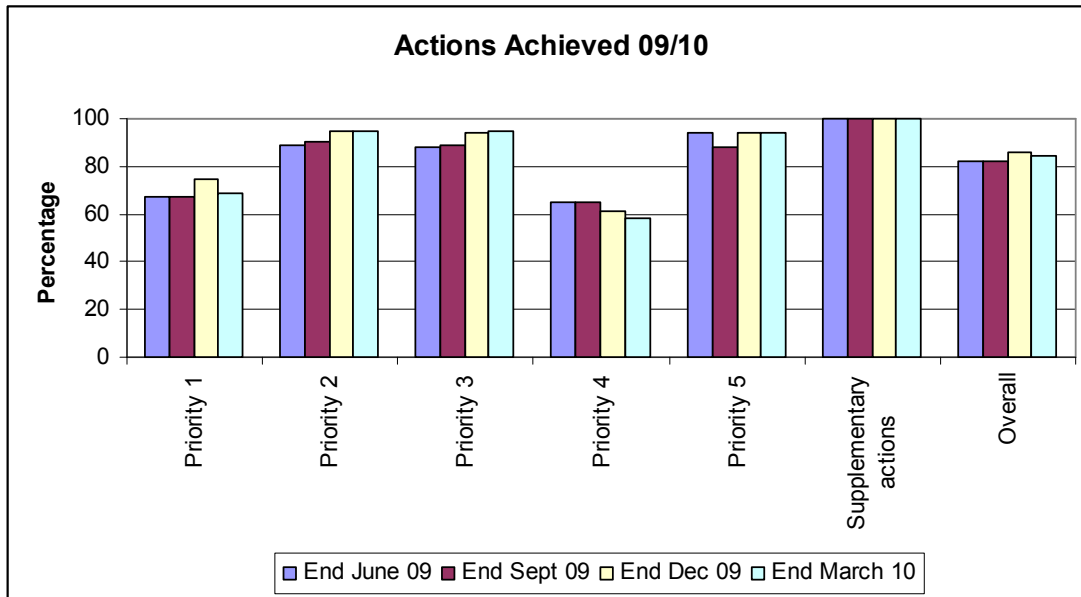
Annual Report 2009/10

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1. Introduction

- i. The Housing Strategy 2008 – 2011 was adopted by Ashford Borough Council on 17th April 2008. This report considers the Housing Strategy Action Plan and identifies areas of success and areas where targets are not being achieved. For the latter it seeks to address the reasons for non delivery and where possible consider if an alternative course of action can be taken to achieve the target.
- ii. The delivery of the Housing Strategy Action Plan requires, in many instances, joint working with a range of other agencies. Many of the successes are a result of the formation of strong, positive working relationships to enable the delivery of the action plan and improve the housing and housing related services for all residents of the borough.
- iii. This report covers the period from 1st April 2009 to 31st March 2010. The full Housing Strategy document is available on the Ashford Borough Council website at www.ashford.gov.uk/housingstrategy. The Housing Strategy has undergone the Council's equality impact assessment and is compliant meeting all six strands of diversity.
- iv. The following table and graph shows the percentage of actions achieved at end of each of the last 4 quarterly monitoring periods.

Strategic Priority	Percentage of Actions Achieved at			
	End June 09	End Sept 09	End Dec 09	End March 10
Strategic Priority 1: Increasing the supply of homes	67	67	75	69
Strategic Priority 2: Developing sustainable communities	89	90	95	95
Strategic Priority 3: Supporting Independence	88	89	94	95
Strategic Priority 4: Ensuring homes of decent quality	65	65	61	58
Strategic Priority 5: Providing accessible information on housing options	94	88	94	94
Supplementary Actions added May 09	100	100	100	100
Overall	82	82	86	84



(Actions included with either an ongoing target/annual review target or target to be achieved before or by end March 2009. Overall percentage is inclusive of any actions achieved before their target date))

2. Summary of work to date for each strategic priority

2.1 Strategic Priority 1: Increasing the supply of homes

Aim: To maximise the availability of homes affordable to local people

a) Increase the supply of affordable rented and intermediate tenure homes

- i. The Council continues to work in partnership with Registered Social Landlords (RSLs) 171 units of new affordable housing have been delivered in the borough 110 social rented, 30 shared ownership and 31 home buy direct. This includes 30 homes on a rural exception site for local needs housing, 36 extra care flats and 105 general needs, of which, 24 are in the rural area and 81 in Ashford and the growth area.
- ii. In addition a block of 9 flats, 8 residential and 1 for office/training space has been brought forward to provide supported accommodation for people with enduring mental health problems. West Kent Housing Association were able to purchase the flats, originally intended for open market sale, and in partnership with the Community Mental Health Team are helping the residents to live more independent and fulfilling lives in a mixed community.
- iii. The housing market although demonstrating signs of increased activity is still slow in terms of delivering significant numbers of units. The difficulties for prospective purchasers to access mortgages has had a negative impact on shared ownership delivery, but more developers are taking advantage of HCA funding to offer Home Buy Direct, resulting in 64% of the 171 units rented and 36% intermediate tenure.
- iv. The affordable housing developer protocol became effective from April 2009. Currently 12 social housing providers are approved to develop affordable housing in the Borough. A2 Dominion, Accent Peerless, Affinity Sutton, English Rural HA,

Housing 21, Hyde Housing, Maidstone Housing Trust (now Golding Homes), Moat, Orbit South, Southern Housing Group, Town & Country HA, West Kent HA.

- v. The Council led RSL Development Forum ensures close working with social housing providers. The forum includes representation from the Homes and Communities Agency.
- vi. The Council has extended its scheme to buy back homes sold under the right to buy to the RSL partners where it does not wish to purchase and particularly where a property is strategically located to enable additional development opportunities. There have not been any buy back opportunities in 2009/10.

b) Ensure best use of existing homes

- i. The void times continue to be monitored and used to identify particular types of property that maybe harder to let, the voids group will be seeking to improve turnaround time for sheltered units and bungalows that currently take a longer time to re-let.
- ii. Assisted moves policy has been amended following research into effectiveness of the incentives offered. The financial incentive has been amended to reflect number of bedrooms 'given up'. The Council is working with other local authorities to secure funding for an officer to assist with identification of under occupied homes and to work with tenants to help them undertake the move.
- iii. Tenant profiling is still to be implemented, but this will provide a platform for targeting tenants who maybe able to move into home ownership via the open market.
- iv. The remodelling programme of council owned sheltered stock was suspended due to budget constraints during 2009/10. A feasibility study to look at the potential for remodelling the oldest sheltered schemes will be concluded during 2010/11. The joint working with KCC through the Excellent Homes for All PFI to develop extra care at Little Hill continues.
- v. Identifying empty homes and bringing them back into use is a resource intensive process. For properties that have been empty for more than 6 months a mail shot has been sent out to owners. The information gathered from this will feed into an empty homes strategy that will form part of an overall private sector housing strategy to be completed during 2010/11.
- vi. Seven empty properties were identified from within the Councils own assets, at Brookfield Court, and transferred from the General Fund to the Housing Revenue Account from where they have been refurbished and brought back into use.

c) Assess the viability of all the options available to the council in order to ensure best use of resources

- i. Further to the assessment of council land holdings a phased programme of building new council owned homes, in part grant funded by the Homes and Communities, is being brought forward. The first phase will see 25 new affordable homes across six

sites in the Borough starting in April 2010. A second phase could see a further 53 homes built resulting in 78 new affordable homes for rent by 2012.

- ii. The sale of a Housing Revenue Account asset (a garage area) on the open market has helped fund the feasibility work to identify and bring forward sites for new affordable housing.

2.2 Strategic Priority 2: Developing sustainable communities

Aim: To ensure local communities are safe, inclusive, well located places where people want to live

a) Improve the balance of the local housing market

- i. An update to the 2005 Housing Needs Survey has been undertaken in 2009/10 and identified an ongoing shortfall of 450 affordable homes per year. An opportunity arose though the work undertaken to inform the Kent and Medway Housing Strategy to commission a Strategic Housing Market Assessment for Ashford. Both these studies will help ensure that the Council has robust information to influence the mix of housing that is required to meet local housing needs.
- ii. The Housing Service continues to work closely with Planning Services, advising on appropriate size and tenure of new affordable homes.
- iii. A quarterly newsletter, reporting on housing strategy and development, has been developed and is now circulated to a range of partners and stakeholders in an electronic format.

b) Ensure both new and existing communities receive the support and resources needed to flourish together

- i. The Ashford BC Tenants Forum, including the seniors' forum continues to identify and undertake training. A total of 450 tenants are registered to participate in consultation. Tenants were consulted extensively on the proposed shared services option and on the proposals for the Council's new house building programme. The repairs monitoring group meets quarterly, at these meetings tenants are given information about performance, monitor progress of the contracts and have an opportunity to challenge any aspect of the services provided.
- ii. Links are maintained between Housing Services and Neighbourhood Development Officer from Cultural Services to engage with minority groups. Attendance at the Ashford International Association open day provides an informal point of information for individuals to access information about Housing and Housing Options.
- iii. The Stanhope PFI is progressing well. Refurbishment of all properties is completed. Amenities works and development sites are on schedule. Moat continues to engage with the community through a range of events and activities which strengthens community cohesion and social inclusion for all residents.
- iv. A programme of 7 area plans was agreed by the Tenants Forum in June 2009. This includes projects in Newtown (community notice board and estate map), Cleves Way external work to the starblock), Priory Way (shared space, seating and garden),

Gregory Court (new bin area and landscaping), Longfield (play area improvements), St Marys (enclosed garden) and The Dene (landscaping). These projects are now drawing to their conclusion.

- v. The Planning Service is leading on the process of identifying potential gypsy and traveller sites. An issues and options report was published for consultation in March 2010.
- vi. Housing Services assisted two RSLs to hold local consultation for new developments; one for a local needs scheme and the other to discuss with a parish council the provision of the mental health supported accommodation.

c) Increase feelings of community safety in urban and rural areas

- i. Housing managers work closely with other agencies and through the Crime and Disorder Reduction Partnership. A local event was held in partnership with Accent Peerless at Nine Acres and operation 'clean sweep', a multi agency project to tackle rubbish, abandoned vehicles and illegal houses in multiple occupation was held in Brookfield Road.
- ii. At Oakleigh House window locks and security mirrors were installed to upgrade security for residents.
- iii. The Sanctuary Scheme continues to provide security measures for victims of domestic violence and during 2009 has enabled 55 families to remain in their homes, preventing possible homelessness.
- iv. All new build RSL led schemes strive to meet secure by design status. Five RSL led schemes have achieved secured by design status in 2009/10.

d) Ensure the housing and related need of people in rural areas are assessed and addressed.

- i. During 2008/09 the rural local needs housing programme has seen the completion of 30 dwellings, 6 in Stone, 12 in Smarden and 12 in Rolvenden. A further 4 schemes are under construction.
- ii. In response to Parish Council concerns about a lack of older persons accommodation a project is under way to consider the housing needs of older people living in the rural areas and how best these can be addressed through a number of parishes working collectively.
- iii. Action with Communities in Rural Kent has, under the terms of its SLA for 09/10 with Ashford BC, undertaken 1 housing need surveys and 3 'joint parish' older persons surveys. The SLA is due for review in June 2010.
- iv. Awareness raising of the need for local needs housing continues with Housing attending the Rural Conference in October 2009 and the Parish Forum in February 2010.

2.3 Strategic Priority 3: Supporting Independence

Aim: To ensure all members of the community have access to the right levels of support to enable them to live independently whenever possible

- a) Improve opportunities for independent living, in line with identified local need
 - i. A feasibility study into the remodelling of some of the older sheltered schemes in 2010 will include consideration for providing dementia care.
 - ii. 36 units of Extra Care Accommodation were completed at Joseph Hadlum Court in Ashford town. This is the result of the Better Homes Active Lives PFI project in partnership with KCC and Housing 21. The Council continues to work with KCC on the next round of PFI to provide an extra care sheltered scheme at Little Hill in Tenterden through the Excellent Homes for All project. Also through the PFI project it is intended to deliver 12 units of move on accommodation for homeless people, creating a pathway to independent living.
 - iii. An intensive supported housing scheme for people with enduring mental health problems has been brought forward in Partnership with West Kent Housing Association and the Community Mental Health team. This accommodation is supporting 8 people to live more independently in the community.
 - iv. Downland Housing Association has allocated 2 flats within a larger development for use as move-on accommodation for people with mental health problems.
 - v. Together with the RSL Management Forum, the Mental Health Team and Richmond Fellowship a scheme to make available six properties for people with mental health problems to be supported by Richmond Fellowship has been developed to be enable these clients to develop skills to enable then to live independently within the community.
 - vi. Through the Council's new build programme it is intended to provide 5 units of supported accommodation for people with learning disabilities. A survey of housing needs for this client group is underway in joint initiative between Social Services and ABC, overseen by the Learning Disabilities Accommodation Forum.
 - vii. The Home Improvement Agency works closely with Ashford BC and is supported by a grant from the Council which was increased during 2009 to further support its work with housing.
 - viii. The development of a Vulnerable Adults Housing Strategy is in progress with a workshop to develop an action plan with partners taking place in April 2010.
 - ix. Area Managers continue to refer tenants for floating support services where appropriate and promote the Ashford Gateway as a source of information and access to support services from a range of agencies to enable tenancy sustainment.
 - x. Housing Surgeries continue to be run regularly, providing a drop in facility for tenants. These are held in Children's Centres and community centres around the borough to

enable tenants to see area managers when dropping off and picking up children. Kent Police also attend some surgeries.

- xi. The Housing Plus project offers advice on housing options, employment, training and volunteering opportunities which in turn can assist people to sustain their accommodation.
- b) Further develop partnerships with key agencies and stakeholders to improve the delivery and coordination of housing related services to vulnerable people
 - i. Accommodation Forums continue for the following client groups: Mental Health, Learning Disabilities and Young People. Each forum is multi-agency and provides a platform to share good practice and explore joint working.
 - ii. Housing works closely with Supporting People and has inputted to the development of their 5 year strategy and identifying local support needs. Housing also contributes to the sub regional work of the Joint Policy and Planning Board (Housing).

2.4 Strategic Priority 4: Ensuring homes of decent quality

Aim: To ensure that homes of all tenures in the borough are developed and maintained to the highest possible standard

- a) Maintain 100% of council owned homes at the Decent Homes Standard
 - i. All council owned homes met the Decent Homes Standard in 2004. Continual maintenance keeps the stock at 100% compliance. Independent verification not progressed due to budget pressures.
 - ii. The Housing Revenue Account funds adaptations to council owned properties and in 2009/10 some 300 adaptations have been installed at a cost of around £170,000. These measures help people to remain living a more independent life in their own home.
- b) Improve housing conditions in the private rented sector
 - i. The private sector housing team has worked for 2009/10 with reduced capacity. Policy and Strategy development had been suspended but it is programmed to now bring this work forward during 2010/11. Alternative ways of collecting information about existing stock to inform the policy and strategy work will be investigated due to the prohibitive cost of undertaking a private sector house condition survey.
 - ii. During 2009/10, 59 Disabled Facilities Grants adaptations were completed at a total spend of £400,702. The process is kept under review and amendments were made following the restructuring of the Occupational Therapy Service.
- c) Improve energy efficiency and address fuel poverty across all tenures
 - i. The Council continues to support the local Energy Saving Trust Advice Centre which offers energy saving advice to all residents and directs residents to appropriate grants or initiatives to improve the energy efficiency of homes.

- ii. Housing Services is engaged in the development of a series of recommendations through the Energy Saving Trust 1-2-1 programme. This programme supports local authorities in improving carbon reduction and has superseded the Carbon Management Action Plan.
 - iii. Housing Services is a member of the Kent Health and Affordable Warmth Steering Group, however this initiative is currently on hold awaiting the outcome of a KCC project, to avoid duplication.
 - iv. In Council owned stock there is an ongoing programme to improve energy and water conservation, which is on schedule to meet the targets set for 2013. In addition funding has been secured to provide innovative energy saving elements to two system-built council owned homes.
- d) Ensure acceptable management standards in the private rented sector
- i. Landlord Accreditation Scheme has been implemented which will be able to be utilised as a mark of quality both in terms of the property advertised and the landlord. This overcomes concerns that any private rented properties advertised are suitable and do not have any serious hazards. Also a successful landlord event was held in October 2009.
 - ii. The landlord liaison officers continue to work with landlords to ensure homes are let at an acceptable standard and will work with tenants and landlords to resolve any issues to sustain tenancies.
- e) Ensure all new affordable homes are developed to the highest possible design and quality standards
- i. New build schemes grant funded by the Housing Corporation (now Homes and Communities Agency) will meet rigorous space, design and environmental standards, and must achieve Code of Sustainable Homes Level 3. On all new build schemes 100% lifetime homes is sought. Monitoring is carried out through the RSL Development Forum.
 - ii. The development of an exemplar zero carbon scheme is postponed following the decision by KCC to award village green status to the designated development site. A new site is being sought.

2.5 Strategic Priority 5: Providing accessible information on housing options

Aim: To ensure local people are aware of the housing options available to them and reduce homelessness

- a) Improve the housing options available through the choice based lettings scheme
 - i. The Kent HomeChoice, choice based lettings system has been fully operational in Ashford for over 12 months. Housing Services continues to be fully involved in reviewing and further developing this system, to include private rented homes (for those landlords who are part of the accreditation scheme) and potentially cross boundary mobility, at a sub regional level.

b) Improve the quality and range of housing options advice and assistance available

- i. Housing options information sheets are reviewed as necessary and work with the various accommodation forums highlights areas where client groups may have difficulty accessing information. Information 'kiosks' have been introduced at the Civic Centre and at both the Ashford and Tenterden Gateways.
- ii. Work has commenced to incorporate the excellent outcomes being delivered by the Housing Plus project into the main Housing and Homelessness Strategies to ensure the impetus created by the Housing Plus project is ongoing. To this end the Housing and Homelessness Strategy working group and the Housing Plus steering group have joined together to provide a more cohesive approach to updating and engaging partners through a joint forum commencing in April 2010. This will also contribute to raising awareness of and promoting the Housing Options Service.

c) Prevent and reduce homelessness

- i. The mediation service, with Stepahead Support, for young people has been reviewed and continues to engage with young people and their families. A project with Porchlight to be delivered in schools has been under development during 2009/10 and will commence shortly.
- ii. The Homefinder service has been introduced to provide households who are homeless or threatened with homelessness, with the maximum opportunity of securing and sustaining private rented sector accommodation. The scheme has introduced more options, included pre approvals for bonds, the option of a cash deposit, combining pre tenancy training with ensuring adequate support assessments have taken place. In addition a moving in pack has been introduced along with tenancy health checks.
- iii. The Council continues to operate the rent deposit bond scheme assisting people into private rented accommodation which has had the additional improvements as mentioned in ii.
- iv. The mortgage rescue scheme has assisted 2 households in the last year to remain in their homes. An additional 7 cases are currently being considered by Moat.

d) Enable the provision of suitable temporary accommodation for homeless households

- i. 2009/10 has seen the refurbishment of the 7 flats above Brookfield Court shops, 3 of which will be used as shared housing for young people with low support needs. In turn this releases supported accommodation elsewhere enabling young people at risk of homelessness an opportunity for accommodation.
- ii. 3 emergency bed spaces have been provided at the Stonham supported housing scheme.
- iii. The Young Persons Accommodation Forum held a pathway planning event in October 2009 and this is feeding into a work plan to further develop ways of preventing homelessness in young people, ending the use of bed and breakfast accommodation and increasing accommodation options for Young People.

- iv. The private sector leasing scheme continues to provide an alternative to bed and breakfast and at the end of March 2010, 65 households were living in accommodation provided through the Private Sector Leasing Scheme, preventing them from becoming homeless.
- v. A supported housing providers forum has been established to look at how to move people on in planned way into more independent living, freeing up supported accommodation for those at risk of homelessness. This forum has developed an information pack for families in B&B to help them consider other accommodation options and how to access services.

3. Conclusion

- i. The economic climate has continued to challenge the delivery of all the actions of the housing strategy. By maintaining good working relationships with a range of partners, both statutory and third sector, 84% of actions (with a March 2010 or earlier target date) have been achieved.
- ii. The fall in achievements from end of December 2009 to end of March 2010 for priorities 1 and 4, is a result currently being unable to implement an empty homes strategy or undertake a stock condition survey, both of which are to be addressed in 2010/11. The designation of the site for the exemplar zero carbon housing scheme as a village green has curtailed that development until an alternative site can be identified.
- iii. The need for accommodation to meet a diverse range of needs is ongoing. The updated housing needs survey identified a shortfall of 450 affordable homes per year and the demand for housing advice continuing to rise, with the Housing Options Team dealing with 2571 enquires in 09/10 compared to 1413 enquiries in 08/09.
- iv. The Strategic Housing Market Assessment, due for publication in 2010, will provide a comprehensive evidence base to inform and support housing and planning policies within the Borough.
- v. The Housing Strategy encompasses more than the direct provision of accommodation. This is seen through initiatives such as area improvement plans and neighbourhood activities, work to assist people to maintain their tenancies both in the social and private sectors and the promotion of grants and information about complimentary services is enabling people in Ashford Borough to live independent fulfilling lives.