

Housing Strategy 2008 – 2011

Annual Report 2008/09

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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 2008 to 31st March 2009. 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 shows the percentage of actions achieved at end of each of the last 3 quarterly monitoring periods.

Strategic Priority	Percentage of Actions Achieved at		
	End Sept 08	End Dec 08	End March 09
Strategic Priority 1: Increasing the supply of homes	88%	80%	66%
Strategic Priority 2: Developing sustainable communities	72%	72%	84%
Strategic Priority 3: Supporting Independence	100%	100%	87%
Strategic Priority 4: Ensuring homes of decent quality	77%	77%	65%
Strategic Priority 5: Providing accessible information on housing options	85%	85%	94%
Overall	83%	82%	80%

(Actions included with either an ongoing target/annual review target or target to be achieved before or by end March 2009)

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. Since the adoption of the housing strategy in April 2008, the Council continues to work in partnership with Registered Social Landlords (RSLs) to deliver high quality affordable housing in the borough. 185 units of new affordable housing have been delivered in the borough 115 social rented and 70 shared ownership. This includes 11 homes on a rural exception site for local needs housing.
 - ii. The downturn in the housing market during 2008 has reduced the number of affordable housing units delivered on large sites through section 106 agreements. Shared ownership has been more difficult to deliver due to restraints on borrowing and many RSLs are reducing the number of shared ownership units.
 - iii. The current economic climate has reduced the number of new builds but some RSLs have purchased homes originally intended for open market sale for affordable housing, but it is necessary to be mindful of the Council's aim to create mixed, sustainable communities and ensure that developments do not become top heavy towards one tenure in one place.
 - iv. To encourage greater competition, innovation and deliverability the existing RSL partnership arrangement has been replaced with a development protocol to enable a wider range of affordable housing providers to work in the borough. Members approved the principle in December 2008 and the operational detail has been developed whereby an affordable housing provider will be welcome to work in the borough provided they meet a standard set of eligibility criteria. The protocol becomes operational from 1 April 2009.
 - v. For RSL led affordable housing schemes the council officers work closely with them to ensure members and the local community are consulted and their views considered and incorporated wherever possible.
 - vi. The affordable housing supplementary planning document has been developed in consultation with local stakeholders and was formally adopted by the Council in February 2009.
 - vii. The ability for the Council to buy back homes sold under the right to buy has brought one home back into Council ownership since April 2008. Currently this scheme considers each opportunity as it arises within the capacity of the budget available for this initiative.
- b) Ensure best use of existing homes

- i. The Council has reviewed its voids procedure to ensure the quickest turnaround of property wherever practicable. The voids working group continues to monitor and where possible improve the turnaround of properties to reduce void times.
- ii. Assisted moves are implemented whenever possible. Area Managers raise awareness of the scheme with eligible tenants. Matching of tenants who have a need for a property with a specific adaption's is actively undertaken. Work with RSLs to promote an assisted move scheme across a wider number of social housing providers is being investigated.
- iii. When tenant profiling is introduced it will assist in making a more targeted approach to tenants who maybe interested in down sizing and/or open market purchase to further improve the best use of council owned stock.
- iv. Bringing empty homes back into use is a resource intensive process. The Private Sector Housing Team currently respond to complaints about empty homes on a reactive basis. Due to lack of resources a proactive approach is not feasible but the Private Sector Housing team is able to draw on the expertise of the Kent wide 'no use empty initiative' as necessary.
- c) Assess the viability of all the options available to the council in order to ensure best use of resources
 - i. An assessment of all Council land holdings has been undertaken. A number of sites suitable for housing provision have been identified and further feasibility studies will be undertaken on a site by site basis and brought forward to The Executive for consideration to develop.

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. Discussions to undertake a Sub Regional Housing Market Assessment (SHMA) jointly with Maidstone Borough Council have taken place. Ashford has an adopted Core Strategy and it's currently agreed, with planning colleagues, that a SHMA is not required until the first review of the Core Strategy. An update to the housing needs survey is being considered as a joint commission with Maidstone BC if funding is available through the housing and planning delivery grant.
 - ii. The Housing Enabling Officer works closely with RSL's and planning officers to ensure a mix of house types and tenures are developed to meet policy CS 13. Local housing conditions are discussed at the RSL development forum and detailed development and market information is reported annually to the Executive. A quarterly reporting mechanism is being developed.
- b) Ensure both new and existing communities receive the support and resources needed to flourish together

- i. The Ashford BC Tenants Forum offers opportunities for training to its members to increase and enhance skills and knowledge, enabling tenants to play a greater role in the management of their homes and local environment. Dealing with neighbourhood disputes, communication skills and holding effective meetings have been attended by members of the tenants' forum. A number of formal and informal routes for consultation have been developed to encourage Ashford BC tenants to participate in consultation, 350 tenants are now willing to be consulted through a variety of means.
 - ii. Links are being built on a continual basis to increase engagement with hard to reach groups. The Tenant Participation Officer is a member of the Diversity Forum. Tenant Forum members attend events held at Ashford International Association.
 - iii. The regeneration of Stanhope is progressing with both the refurbishment of Council owned properties and the demolition/new build PFI project underway and progressing on schedule.
 - iv. An area plans programme has been developed. Area action plans are being implemented, for example at Heathside in Appledore where there have been improvements to parking and fencing and young people are engaged in the development of a youth shelter. The level of estate management service is outlined in 'local agreements' and are being rolled out in conjunction with area plans and improvement works. The Bybrook Road estate agreement will be implemented on conclusion of the improvement works.
 - v. On RSL led new build schemes a standardised satisfaction survey has been introduced and is carried out 6 months after completion. Information will be shared to monitor the quality of build and letting/sales process of all new affordable housing.
 - vi. The refurbishment of the Chilmington Gypsy site was completed in February 2009.
- c) Increase feelings of community safety in urban and rural areas
- i. Housing managers work closely with the Community Safety Unit. Meetings held with residents and agencies such as Fire and Police to address issues of community safety in a particular locality continue. A crime prevention day was held at the Swan Centre. The Home Repairs Plus (previously Handy Van scheme) provides minor security measures for qualifying tenants and is promoted through Housing News (tenants quarterly newsletter) and awareness of the scheme is raised by Area Managers.
 - ii. The Sanctuary Scheme continues to provide security measures for victims of domestic violence and in the last year has enabled 25 families to remain in their homes. In addition the Ashford Interagency Domestic Abuse Forum runs a series of programmes providing advice and support to victims of domestic abuse.
 - iii. All new build RSL led schemes strive to meet secure by design status but site constraints will sometimes prohibit the full accreditation being met. Two recently completed schemes have met secure by design.
- 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 11 dwellings in Smeeth, a joint scheme with Brabourne. Six further schemes have been granted planning permission with three of those started on site.

The Regional Development Manager from English Rural Housing Association comments that 'English Rural has been pleased to be a partner with Ashford Borough Council and its rural communities, in the delivery of its local needs housing programme. The success of the Rural Roundtable has been demonstrated over the past year by the delivery of one completed development of 11 homes; the start on site of three further developments and planning consent granted for a further two developments.

- ii. The affordable rural local needs housing procedure has been reviewed through a working group, which included Parish Councillors, and published in September 2008.
- iii. Action with Communities in Rural Kent has, under the terms of its SLA for 08/09 with Ashford BC, progressed 3 housing need surveys and continues to work with a parish to bring forward a 4th survey.
- iv. A joint conference with planning held in June 2008 highlighted rural affordable housing and the needs of older people. This has led onto several parishes working with the housing department to investigate the feasibility of delivering supported accommodation for older people living rural areas.

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. In Council owned sheltered schemes the aim is to enhance some of the physical infrastructure when remodelling schemes to enable greater levels of independence; replacing outdated alarm systems in all haven properties with up to date equipment enabling greater range of sensors - during 2009; Impact of recession on planned works has affected our sheltered remodelling programme which includes plans to enhance our services for clients with specialist needs.
 - ii. The Council is working with KCC to provide an extra care sheltered scheme at Little Hill in Tenterden in addition to the current PFI project which is on schedule to deliver 36 extra care units at Hopkins Field by 2010.
 - iii. Work is ongoing, in partnership with other agencies, to provide supported accommodation for different client groups to meet the housing strategy target dates of 2010/11.

The Planning and Development Manager (Specialist Accommodation) from the Mental Health Commissioning and Contracting Team at KCC said 'Kent County Council is actively working in partnership with Ashford Borough Council to look for opportunities to deliver supported accommodation for people with enduring mental

health issues. This accommodation will enable service users to build their confidence and to become socially included.'

- iv. Design specifications have been developed for extra care sheltered housing, young persons accommodation and mental health clients accommodation.
 - v. The Home Improvement Agency works closely with Ashford BC and is supported by a grant from the Council. Expansion of the agency is reliant on the identification of further resources and this is kept under review. Recent central government funding has enabled the HIA to provide a handy person service.
 - vi. An award from the Regional Housing Board to the North and West Kent Private Sector Renewal Partnership, which includes Ashford, will enable the Council to work more proactively together with partner agencies to deliver decent homes, tackle fuel poverty and regeneration through a combination of loans and grants targeted at vulnerable people.
 - vii. The development of a Vulnerable Adults Housing Strategy (following a review of the Older person Housing Strategy) will be undertaken during 2009 and include a review of floating support and identify any gaps in provision.
 - viii. The Porchlight (Formerly East Kent Cyrenians) service for young people with mental health problems has been promoted to Ashford tenants and referrals to the service are ongoing.
 - ix. To increase tenancy sustainment, Area Managers are encouraged to investigate issues raised by tenants or individual concerns with tenancy sustainment. Financial statements are accessible in addition to promotion of housing benefit, Shelter, CAB and children's centres. Housing surgeries are also available across the Borough and will be reviewed and expanded in 2009/2010. A vulnerable persons protocol for all social housing tenants is under consideration.
- 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 have been developed and /or are supported for the following client groups: Mental Health, Learning Disabilities and Young People. The work of the Ashford Accommodation Forum for People with Learning Disabilities has been flagged up county wide as an example of good practice.
 - ii. The Council continues to actively participate in and support the work of the Joint Policy and Planning Board (JPPB) 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. This will be monitored and a survey will be undertaken during the forthcoming year to assess the current percentage meeting decent homes.
- b) Improve housing conditions in the private rented sector
- i. Houses in multiple occupation are licensed when identified and as required by legislation. Where necessary enforcement action is taken in line with the requirements of the licence. A strategy to identify further licensable HMO's is to be taken forward.
 - ii. The private sector renewal policy was reviewed and updated during 2008. The development of a private sector housing strategy has yet to be undertaken.
 - iii. Due to a lack of take up by residents countywide of the House Proud Scheme (equity release scheme) a countywide agreement has been made not to actively promote this initiative. The scheme is still available for residents to take up on an individual basis.
 - iv. Disabled facilities grants applications are processed and actioned as soon as practicable. During 2008/09, 51 Disabled Facilities Grants adaptations were completed. The process is kept under review and amendments made and introduced to improve service delivery wherever possible.
- c) Improve energy efficiency and address fuel poverty across all tenures
- i. The Council supports the Kent Energy Centre (now known as the 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. The Council has direct input to the development of the Kent Health and Affordable Warmth Strategy. This strategy aims to tackle fuel poverty and highlight the health implications of living in cold damp homes. The current strategy is under review and the Regional Housing Board award to the North and West Kent Private Sector Renewal Partnership should assist in the delivery of measures to tackle fuel poverty in vulnerable households.
 - iii. A supplementary question has been added to the housing register application form asking if applicants have difficulty heating their home. A process is in development to use the data gathered from this to signpost applicants to advice on energy efficiency.
 - iv. In Council owned stock there is an ongoing programme to improve energy and water conservation and is on schedule to meet the targets set for 2013.
 - v. Policy CS10 is now applied to all new build schemes and requires qualifying developments to be carbon neutral.
 - vi. Work on taking forward housing related initiatives identified in the carbon management action plan is constrained at present.

- d) Ensure acceptable management standards in the private rented sector
 - i. Currently direct engagement with private sector tenants is on a reactive basis when a private sector tenant registers a complaint. A project is under consideration to develop a property and landlord accreditation scheme to raise standards in the private rented sector.
 - ii. The landlord liaison officers run landlord events and a business club to increase engagement with and where necessary provide training to private sector landlords to improve standards.
- 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. Recently, with the changing economic climate some Housing Corporation grant has been made available to increase the number of affordable homes to allow RSLs to purchase homes that had originally been intended for private sale which do not fully meet the Corporation's standards. On all new build schemes 100% lifetime homes is sought. Monitoring is carried out through the RSL development forum.

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. Ashford Borough Council has fully participated in the development of a county wide enhanced choice based letting system – Kent HomeChoice. The Kent HomeChoice system is undergoing a phased implementation process across all districts and went live in Ashford during February 2009.
 - ii. Intermediate tenure homes can be advertised on Kent Homechoice and inclusion of these tenures is currently being developed. The Homebuy agent provides updates on intermediate tenure sales and arranges marketing events as required.
- b) Improve the quality and range of housing options advice and assistance available
 - i. Housing options information sheets are reviewed as necessary. Posters (targeted at young people) with contact details for housing options advice were developed with the Youth Forum and distributed to schools. Similar information cards were distributed at Youth Conference in March 09. Easy read web based information is being developed by the Ashford accommodation forum for people with learning disabilities. Information and drop-in sessions have been developed to assist people seeking help under the governments recently introduced mortgage rescue scheme.
 - ii. The twice yearly Homelessness Forum provides opportunities for updates and briefings on new initiatives and raises of awareness of the housing issues. Joint

training to raise awareness of housing options among key local agencies is delivered as training needs are identified and work of the various accommodation forums continue to raise awareness of housing options available to their client groups.

c) Prevent and reduce homelessness

- i. The homelessness strategy review was completed during 2008 and the Homelessness Strategy published in July 2008.
- ii. A mediation service for young people has been introduced from December 2008 which aims to reduce the number of young people presenting as homeless by finding ways of enabling them to remain at home or move on in a planned way.
- iii. Two landlord liaison officers have been appointed to work with private sector tenants and landlords to improve tenancy sustainment and reduce homelessness by enabling access to the private rented sector through the use of the prevention fund and bond scheme.

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

- i. The women's refuge redevelopment was completed in February 2009 providing 16 self contained units together with shared facilities.
- ii. Young people are particularly vulnerable and the development of a housing pathway is a priority of the young persons accommodation forum. Move on, supported, accommodation is being sought to provide 'stepping stones' to independence.
- iii. An appraisal of suitable temporary accommodation to provide an alternative to B&B for young people has resulted in 3 units of accommodation being provided by Rainer Housing (now Catch 22 Housing). Further options for accommodation to enable move on from emergency accommodation together with ongoing support are being investigated.
- iv. The private sector leasing scheme has been reviewed and brought in-house as found to be a more cost effective way of delivering this programme. At the end of March 2009, 42 households were living in accommodation provided through the Private Sector Leasing Scheme, preventing them from becoming homeless.

3. Conclusion

- i. There have been some notable successes during the last 12 months. The economic climate has increased the challenge for delivering all the actions of the housing strategy but where necessary alternative ways are being sought to meet the housing and housing related needs of residents in the borough across all tenures
- ii. Multi agency working has strengthened the approach to housing delivery and support to vulnerable people helping them to access housing and maintain their tenancies.
- iii. Within the Housing Service the Research and Development Team and the Private Sector Housing Teams have been restructured. The Private Sector Housing Team has amalgamated with the Housing Options Team which will give greater

opportunities to assist those, particularly vulnerable people, living in the private sector.

- iv. New central government initiatives that were unknown when the housing strategy was developed have been responded to positively. The mortgage rescue scheme and the enhanced housing options trailblazer extra programme are two examples.
- v. The Housing Strategy needs to evolve and adapt to new opportunities and economic pressures to ensure best use of resources to meet the housing and housing related needs of all people who live in the Borough. To respond positively to such opportunities and challenges five supplementary actions are proposed as follows.

4. Supplementary Actions to Housing Strategy 2008 – 2011

Priority 1: Increasing the supply of homes

Objective	Action	Resources	When by	Lead
Increase the supply of affordable rented and intermediate tenure homes	Support opportunities for RSLs to purchase 'off the shelf' properties where this will contribute to mixed sustainable communities	Existing staff resources	Ongoing	Housing Enabling Officer

Priority 2: Developing sustainable communities

Objective	Action	Resources	When by	Lead
Ensure both new and existing communities receive the support and resources needed to flourish together.	Ensure community consultation is undertaken where new RSL-led developments are proposed	Existing staff resources	Ongoing	Housing Enabling Officer

Priority 4: Ensuring homes of decent quality

Objective	Action	Resources	When by	Lead
Improve housing conditions in the private sector	Deliver the objectives for Ashford of the North West Kent Private Sector Renewal Partnership	Award from Regional Housing Board	2011	Housing Operations Manager (Options) with Home Improvement Agency and Energy Saving Advice Centre

Priority 5: Providing accessible information on housing options

Objective	Action	Resources	When by	Lead
Improve the quality and range of housing options advice and assistance available	Deliver the Enhanced Housing Options Trailblazer extra project	Enhanced Housing Trailblazer Housing Options Extra funding award	2011	Housing Operations Manager (Options)
Improve the quality and range of housing options advice and assistance available	Provide information and advice on Mortgage Rescue Scheme	Existing staff resources	Duration of MRS	Housing Operations Manager (Options)