

2. National, Regional, Sub-Regional and Local Strategic Context

This Housing Strategy has been developed within a framework set by national, regional, sub regional and local policy, a summary of this policy context follows.

National context

The Homelessness Act 2002 placed new duties on local authorities to carry out reviews and to publish strategies to tackle and prevent homelessness in their area, Ashford Borough Council produced our first Homelessness Strategy in July 2003. We will review the Strategy and produce an updated version by July 2008.

In 2005 the government produced its strategy document 'Sustainable Communities: settled homes; changing lives,' which sets out the governments aim to halve the number of households living in insecure temporary accommodation by 2010, by:

- Preventing homelessness.
- Providing support for vulnerable people.
- Tackling the wider causes and symptoms of homelessness.
- Helping more people move away from rough sleeping.
- Providing more settled homes.

The Sustainable Communities Plan: Building for the Future 2003 set out the government priorities for investment for the following 3 years and an agenda for action for the longer term of 15-20 years. The overarching aim is to create places where people want to live and can afford to live.

The plan set key objectives:

- Provide everyone with a decent home and place to live.
- Tackle areas of low demand and abandonment.
- Tackle the housing shortage across all tenures and make best use of existing housing stock.
- Protect the countryside and address housing needs of rural communities.

- Provide for major growth in four areas.
- Ensure the right framework for law, structures and decision-making process supports the agenda of the plan.

The Sustainable Communities Plan was highly significant for Ashford as it confirmed the status of the Ashford urban area as a designated housing growth area. The growth of Ashford is intended to provide 31,000 new homes and 28,000 new jobs by 2031. Ashford Borough Council has been clear that this is achievable provided a package of measures to support the growth of the area are implemented. The headline information contained in the Sustainable Communities Plan about Ashford was based on a locally produced capacity study, which in turn was a response to proposals contained in the Regional Planning Guidance for the South-East (RPG9) produced in 2001.

The Sustainable Communities Plan: Homes for All 2005 sets out the next phase in delivering the Sustainable Communities Plan.

Covering five years, the key objectives are to:

- Offer everyone the opportunity of a decent home at a price they can afford.
- Promote choice, fairness and the opportunity to own or rent a good quality home that meets needs.

This will be achieved by:

- Helping first time buyers by providing new housing and driving down building costs.
- Introducing the HomeBuy scheme to encourage council and housing association tenants the opportunity to buy a stake in their home.
- Increasing the supply of new social rented homes.
- Expanding Choice Based Lettings.
- Introducing Move UK to bring together information about jobs and homes, giving people the opportunity to move to a new area.
- Improving the quality and availability of private rented accommodation.

Local authorities will have a new role encompassing:

- A more strategic approach to housing and planning.
- Investing the receipts from HomeBuy in new or improved housing.
- Exploring all available options for funding new affordable homes.

The Housing Act 2004 came in to force in November 2004 and contains key legislation to help protect the most vulnerable members of society while creating a fairer housing market across all tenures. The Housing Act 2004 introduces:

- The Housing Health and Safety Rating System to replace the Housing Fitness Standard.
- A mandatory licensing scheme for houses in multiple occupation.
- The selective licensing of private landlords in areas of low demand.
- New powers for local authorities to lease long-term empty homes compulsorily
- Home information packs.
- Reforms to the Right to Buy scheme, to prevent its abuse and exploitation.
- New powers to extend the length of an introductory tenancy to 18 months.
- A national Tenancy Deposit Scheme, to protect private tenants deposits.
- New rights for gypsies/travellers, including a requirement for the local authority to assess their accommodation needs.

The White Paper, Strong and Prosperous Communities sets out the government's vision to give local people more power and influence to improve their lives. This will require greater community involvement to create strong, prosperous and cohesive communities. The Sustainable Community Strategy and the Local Area Agreement set out the strategic vision and delivery plan for the local area and are developed in consultation with local partners.

The White Paper states that local authorities' Housing and Homelessness strategies should be incorporated within the unitary or borough Sustainable Community Strategy, wherever possible. In turn the Housing Strategy will respond to local priorities identified in the Sustainable Community Strategy to ensure coherence between all plans for the borough.

The government launched a consultation on its housing Green Paper, 'Homes for the future: more affordable, more sustainable,' in July 2007. This Green Paper sets out ambitious plans for more housing, setting a new national target of 240,000 new homes a year. A strengthened strategic housing role is central to this vision, which includes:

- More homes to meet growing demand that meet the needs of all residents, including different affordability levels and meeting the needs of an ageing population.
- Well-designed and greener homes, linked to good schools, transport and healthcare.
- Improved use of existing stock, including bringing empty properties back into use and improved energy efficiency.

The government identifies that local authorities have a critical role to play in achieving a major increase in new homes and stepping up to play a stronger role in addressing the housing needs of all their residents.

Planning Policy Statement 3 Housing, sets out the national planning policy framework for delivering the governments housing objectives and should be taken in to account in the preparation of Regional Spatial Strategies and Local Development Documents. The specific outcomes that the planning system should deliver are - high quality housing, a mix of housing both market and affordable to support a variety of households in all areas, sufficient quantity of housing taking into account need and demand, housing developments in locations that offer a good range of community

facilities, access to jobs and services and a flexible, responsive supply of land including reuse of previously developed land where appropriate.

Regional context

The **Regional Housing Strategy 2005** sets out the region's priorities for funding allocation. To ensure the advice remains up to date and takes account of more recent research and information the Strategy is under review in order to set the funding priorities for the period 2008–2011.

Regional Housing Board's proposed priorities for funding in the period 2008-2011 are as follows:

- Maintain a strong focus on delivering affordable housing.
- Maintain a commitment to provide funding for improvements to ensure decent homes.
- Maintain focus on investment in urban areas
- Increased emphasis on providing the right size and type of housing.
- Maintain support for programmes that assist key workers.
- Invest in pump priming, innovative delivery mechanisms, such as Brownfield Land Assembly Trust and the Regional Infrastructure Fund, that will unlock housing potential.
- Maintain a commitment to invest in accommodation for gypsies and travellers.

The Regional Housing Board is recommending, in line with the SE plan that 10,550 homes be built each year in the region with an increasing priority for affordable three bedroom homes rising from 20 to 25% with a strong emphasis on sustainable development.

The Regional Housing Board seeks that local authorities and their partners look at the eligibility criteria for key workers and redefine them to reflect local needs and circumstances.

The **draft South East Plan 2006–2026** (also known as the Regional Spatial Strategy) set a target for affordable homes within Ashford Borough of 5938. The policy in the Core Strategy of 30% affordable housing in the growth area and 35% affordable housing elsewhere in the borough on eligible sites will contribute to meeting the regional target. The Planning Inspectorate's report on the draft South East Plan in August 2007 advised an increase in the total number of homes to be built across the region in the Plan's time frame; 32,000 instead of the proposed 28,900. There are no proposed changes to the level of development in Ashford. There will be a further period of consultation on the South East Plan concluding in the publication of the final version in summer 2008.

Housing is recognised in the **Regional Economic Strategy 2006–2016** as an essential part of supporting the regions economy and achieving sustainable prosperity. The level of housing provision needs to support an average annual increase in economic growth of at least 3% per head. Affordable housing is seen as an essential component of that vision.

Sub regional context

Sub regionally the council works at a more local level to participate in partnership working that will bring benefit to the borough and to ensure that wider county aims can be reflected in delivering local priorities.

The **Kent and Medway Structure Plan 2006** covers the period 2001–2021 although its housing provision relates to the period 2001–2016. The Plan identifies that it is necessary to provide sufficient housing while protecting Kent's countryside and enhancing the quality of urban and rural environments. The Structure Plan recognises that people in Kent should have access to a range and diversity of good quality housing and that the ability to purchase or rent affordable housing is very important.

The Structure Plan allows for local needs and circumstances, through local development documents and development proposals, to secure a mix of dwelling sizes and types which will contribute towards meeting the identified needs of all sections of the community and the proportion of affordable housing.

The Kent and Medway Structure Plan will be superseded by the South East Plan, once the latter is adopted.

'Vision for Kent' is the county's community strategy. The theme 'High Quality Homes' sets out the vision for housing 'where housing needs are met and decent, high quality homes help create attractive, safe and friendly communities clustered around neighbourhood centres, with open spaces and community facilities'. The Housing Strategy reflects both the short and long term goals of this vision. The themes of the Vision for Kent are being further developed to form the basis of the new Local Area Agreement called the Kent Agreement.

The Kent Agreement is the county's Local Area Agreement (LAA) and also combines the Local Public Service Agreement phase 2. The current Kent Agreement sets targets that have been jointly agreed between Kent partners and government. There are currently two outcomes directly relevant to housing and these are:

- Kent residents have access to homes of excellent quality, in the right place at the right time and at the right cost (outcome 17)
- To promote independent living for all, focusing on vulnerable people (outcome 18).

The next Kent Agreement is being developed during 2007/08. A consultation took place during September 2007 on suggested new outcomes and these outcomes were developed by the Kent Partnership Support Group, which has responsibility for overseeing the Agreement. The outcomes were derived from; the last Kent Agreement, district and borough Sustainable Community Strategies, the Regional Economic Strategy and other partnership strategy documents. Ashford Borough Council fed into the consultation and supported the inclusion of additional outcomes focusing on housing.

The Kent 5 year **Supporting People Strategy 2005–2010** sets out the aspirations for the Kent Supporting People programme for 5 years to 2010. The vision of the Kent Supporting People partnership is to provide high quality, cost-effective and flexible housing-related support services for the vulnerable people of Kent which promote independent living, facilitate social inclusion and keep them safe and secure. It is envisaged that housing-related support services will in time complement other service provision across the county.

Sub Regional Partnership Working

The Joint Policy and Planning Board (JPPB) is a strategic partnership between local housing authorities, health and social care organisations including; social services, probation and supporting people. The council has been fully involved in developing and achieving the action plan for the JPPB, which has included; a young persons homelessness protocol for Kent and the development of 6 schemes providing intensive supported housing for people with mental health problems across East Kent.

The council works with **neighbouring authorities** to undertake a range of assessments and studies to improve our understanding of the local housing market and needs of local residents, including:

- Joint commissioning of the Housing Needs Survey 2005 with Maidstone Borough Council.
- Joint Gypsy and Traveller Accommodation Survey 2007 with Maidstone Borough Council, Tunbridge Wells Borough Council and Tonbridge & Malling Borough Council.
- Travelling Showpeople Accommodation Assessment, with 9 other local authorities to complement the Gypsy and Traveller Accommodation Survey.
- Choice Based Lettings working towards a protocol for providing greater cross-boundary housing options to residents seeking a rented property in a neighbouring area.
- Currently discussing with neighbouring authorities undertaking a joint Housing Market Assessment in 2008.

Local Context

The council's mission statement is 'to protect and improve the quality of life of every resident in the borough now and in the future'. Good housing is a key component of achieving this aim.

The Community Strategy 2004-2014 is produced by Ashford Local Strategic Partnership (LSP) and sets out a shared long-term vision for the area reflecting local aspirations and setting out shared objectives to help partners work together to achieve the best quality of life for all who live, work and visit the borough.

The current Community Strategy is being reviewed during 2007/08 and will become the Sustainable Community Strategy. The Head of Housing Services is a member of Ashford LSP and is involved in the review, which will see the Strategy realigned to take close account of the Kent Local Area Agreement including a specific housing theme with a set of objectives and actions.

The current Community Strategy includes, among other challenges and issues:

- To achieve a realistic balance between new homes and new jobs.
- Provide a wide choice and mix of housing throughout the borough.
- Ensure an affordable housing policy is implemented to provide an adequate proportion of affordable homes and accommodation for key-workers.

The Corporate Plan sets the overarching vision of the council from 2007 until 2010 and has 8 themes, one of which covers housing and sets the following objectives:

- Work with partners to provide 968 homes of excellent quality at an affordable cost to meet the range of housing needs within the community.
- Complete 75% of the regeneration works at Stanhope.
- Provide a tenant led housing service to improve choice and satisfaction levels, deliver new services, retain decent homes standards and regenerate existing council housing areas.
- Promote an effective housing service to reduce homelessness and temporary accommodation.

Other housing related Corporate Plan objectives include:

- Protect the health of the community and address key health issues.
- Develop a new 'Sustainable Community Strategy' to promote the economic, social and environmental wellbeing of the area.
- Tackle crime and antisocial behaviour.
- Finalise and implement a social inclusion strategy with guidance on how to liaise with 'hard to reach' groups.
- Require that all new homes built in the borough meet challenging standards in environmental sustainability.
- Protect the character and viability of rural areas of the borough.

'Ashford's Future – a Handbook for Change' is the capacity study prepared in 2002 in partnership with the council's key regional and local partners, including the Government Office of the South East (GoSE) and the Housing Corporation. The study considered the scope for growth and the associated social, economic and environmental factors. It concluded that between 2001 and 2031 Ashford could accommodate an additional 31,000 homes and would need to attract an extra 28,000 jobs. This conclusion was reached dependent on Ashford receiving priority for economic development, planning and transport strategies, together with the necessary capital investment in infrastructure. The study's conclusions were reflected in the Sustainable Communities Plan (ODPM 2003) and the amended RPG9, chapter 12, for Ashford (July 2004).

The Greater Ashford Development

Framework (GADF) is the master plan for the strategic growth of Ashford with a phasing strategy to deliver the expansion of Ashford by 2031 and meet the capacity targets of RPG9 and the Ashford's Future Study. The GADF underpins the council's new Local Development Framework, which provides more detail on the planned growth of the borough up to 2021.

The Local Development Framework – This replaces the Local Plan and is made up of a suite of planning documents, including a Core Strategy. The Housing Strategy must have regard to planning policy to ensure the aims of the Housing Strategy can be effectively delivered and are consistent with national and regional policy for an increased supply of housing. For more information on the links between local housing and planning policy see appendix 4.

Housing Revenue Account (HRA) Business Plan – the Housing Revenue Account is held by Ashford Borough Council Housing Services and contains the money collected from tenants' rents. This money is spent on services to tenants and on improving council owned homes and their surrounding environment. The HRA Business Plan sits alongside this Housing Strategy for the borough and sets out how Ashford Borough Council Housing Services will manage and develop its landlord services. The HRA Business Plan contains detailed information on what will be done and how money will be spent and as such has close links with this overarching Housing Strategy.