

SLOUGH BOROUGH COUNCIL

REPORT TO: Slough Wellbeing Board **DATE:** 25th March 2014
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PART I **FOR CONSIDERATION & COMMENT**

HOUSING UPDATE

1 **Purpose of Report**

The purpose of this report is to provide members of the Wellbeing Board with an overview of the current service status highlighting both concerns and achievements to date in terms of improving the living conditions of residents across the borough.

2 **Recommendation(s)/Proposed Action**

The committee is requested to note the report.

3 **The Slough Wellbeing Strategy, the JSNA and the Five Year Plan**

The quality of and access to housing is a key priority for the council. Slough's Wellbeing Strategy names housing as one of five priorities with the vision that:

“By 2028 Slough will possess a strong, attractive and balanced housing market which recognises the importance of housing in supporting economic growth.”

Housing is central to the health and wellbeing of the population; it gives the ability to access work and for older residents suitably located and adapted dwellings provide a safe environment for retained independence.

Joint Strategic Needs Assessment (JSNA)

Housing is a contributory factor to the wellbeing of Slough residents, and the provision of any form of housing to those in need supports the priorities in the JSNA and it contributes to reducing inequalities in health by avoiding the occupation of poor quality sub-standard housing.

Corporate Plan

The project contributes to the priorities in the Corporate Plan by improving the customer experience by ensuring that the available services and facilities are responsive to the demands of local residents.

Five Year Plan

Providing more homes and improving the quality of existing homes, across all tenures is one of the outcomes of the Five Year Plan within the changing, retaining and growing themes. The council will deliver this outcome through a number of key actions, including:

- Improving the quality of private sector homes to reduce health problems
- Making best use of existing housing stock
- Utilising land and resources in and outside of our control to deliver housing
- Making better use of land and resources to deliver high density development
- Use early intervention to prevent homelessness

The council will measure success against this outcome through an increase in the council tax base of 1.5% per annum and increased new homes bonus income, and through increasing the target for delivery of new homes from 315 per year to 550.

A number of the projects, updates and progress reports within this report contribute to delivering this outcome.

4 Other Implications

Financial

There are no additional financial implications relating to this report.

Risk Management

As an updating information report there is no risk management associated with the specific content of the paper.

Human Rights Act and Other Legal Implications

There are no human rights implications for this report.

Equalities Impact Assessment

As a reference report this does not make any recommendations as to future operation of the service or of policy change. Should changes be proposed in future an EIA will be completed at that stage.

Workforce

There are no workforce implications within this report.

5. Supporting Information

5.1 Private sector regulation

5.1.1 The majority of action taken by the team in relation to private sector housing regulation is collaborative between the council and the landlord. The majority of issues are resolved on an informal basis, with the serving of notices being a last resort.

5.1.2 In 2014 63 notices were served across all forms of private sector housing, requiring work to be carried out relating to disrepair, failure of central heating

and category 1 hazards. Seventeen prohibition orders were made preventing occupation of a property. One of the largest sources of complaint and action is the failure of central heating. In January and February 2015 70 cases were received where heating had failed or where there were problems with damp and mould. The majority of these cases were dealt with swiftly and informally. While addressing an issue such as this staff may of course highlight other issues of concern in the property. Cold and damp housing can have an impact on the health of inhabitants, and while damp and mould can be caused by poor quality housing it can also be caused by tenant behaviour.

- 5.1.3** The department is also working with HECA to identify properties with low heat retention based on the aerial thermal mapping carried out. Properties which meet a certain threshold will be given advice on how to better insulate their properties, but this work must be arranged by the tenants.
- 5.1.4** The council is considering re-establishing the landlords forum which could support the social lettings team's work in improving the quality and availability of private sector accommodation for the council's needs.
- 5.1.5** The department has also carried out more than 70 pre-inspections in the last six months on private rented sector properties due to be let to households requiring temporary accommodation.

5.2 Houses in multiple occupation (HMO's) – licencing and inspection

- 5.2.1** There are 76 mandatorily licensed HMO's in the town, and an additional 40 licensed under the Chalvey additional licensing scheme which has been in operation for almost five years, and must come to an end in 2016 at which point a decision will be taken as to whether additional licensing will continue in Chalvey and indeed elsewhere in the town. Licensing improves the quality of HMOs in the town and reduces anti social behaviour and the impact HMOs can have on communities. Where businesses operate a number of HMOs, there is an incentive to abide by the licensing rules as otherwise they could be forced to relinquish all of their housing stock.
- 5.2.2** This month the council has been successful in prosecuting Sundeep Jaswal and Alexandra Partnership for operating an HMO without a license and failing to comply with various duties under the Management of Houses in Multiple Occupation (England) Regulations 2006. Last week at Slough Magistrates Court Sundeep Jaswal pleaded guilty and was convicted of 6 offences and ordered to pay £4000 and Alexandra Partnership pleaded guilty and were convicted of 6 offences and ordered to pay £9012 in total. This case is of particular interest as the company has around 100 properties across the local area.

5.3 Sheds Project

- 5.3.1** As mentioned in last years report, in June 2014 the council agreed to invest £150,000 in a fixed term inspection team to inspect the majority of the 9,000 outbuildings identified in the previous fly-over.
- 5.3.2** 4,678 sheds have been inspected though many of these were found not to be residential. Throughout the duration of the project 117 properties have been referred to the Valuation Office Agency, with 69 of these found to be liable for council tax with most contributing around £1000 per annum. A small number of

category 1 hazards were identified in these properties and have been remedied. The council has built up a very good relationship with the Valuation Office Agency over the referral and rating of identified properties. Officers have become adept at identifying properties which are likely to be rateable and have become experienced at providing the correct information to the VOA.

5.3.3 The project will probably conclude in March 2015 having identified that the much lower levels of occupancy and the small proportions of sub standard outbuildings generally mean that there is not the significant hidden household community that was perceived in the beginning.

5.4 Enforcement

5.4.1 The council's Neighbourhood Enforcement Team operates across the town, on a tenure blind approach (i.e. both private and council residents). Upon receiving a complaint the team will take informal action in the first instance, issuing notices as a last resort or where the issue is particularly bad. There has been a notable increase in reports of fly tipping, which the team attributes to higher levels of reporting through member casework.

5.4.2 Noise complaints commonly arise from loud music and dog barking, while waste related complaints arise from fly-tipping, messy gardens and land which attracts rats and mice.

	2013/14	2014/15 to date
Total number of noise complaints	588	524
Notices served in relation to noise	33	34
Total number of waste complaints	790	825
Notices served in relation to waste	45	55
Number of abandoned & taxed vehicles reported	375	288

5.5 Fraud

5.5.1 One of the key actions of the Five Year Plan is to make best use of the existing housing stock, and part of this is ensuring housing is allocated to, and occupied by those eligible to do so and in the most need.

5.5.2 Since January 2014 the council has recovered nineteen properties that were being sublet. The Audit Commission estimates that each sublet home costs an authority £18,000 through the provision of alternative temporary accommodation, and by using this figure the savings to the authority since January 2014 are in the order of £300,000.

5.5.3 The housing investigation officer also now works with the Right to Buy team to examine applications, as it is believed a number of these have fraudulent

aspects to them. Investigation of applications for housing allocation also takes place to identify fraud.

5.6 Adoption of a new Housing Allocation Scheme

5.6.1 The council's new Housing Allocation Scheme was introduced in January 2014 in response to changes brought about by the Localism Act which allowed council's to define eligibility for housing allocations in a different way. This allowed the council to develop an allocation scheme which promotes responsible behaviour and prioritises local residents who make a contribution to the community. The changes were also expected to reduce the housing list which had reached unsustainable levels demanding substantial resources to manage, and giving households unreasonable expectations of their likelihood of obtaining a council house.

5.6.2 At the time the scheme was introduced there were 7,974 households on the housing waiting list. All existing applicants were requested to re-apply, and of these 1,614 were admitted to the new list. Of the applicants on the list 2,877 failed to contact the council to re-activate their application. A further 3,483 failed to meet the eligibility criteria, either being homeowners, having only recently moved to the borough or residing outside of the borough. Taking into consideration new applications, as at December the housing waiting list contained 1,824 applicants.

BAND A (urgent need for re-housing)	16
BAND B (reasonable and additional priority)	55 4
BAND C (reasonable priority)	12 54

5.6.3 A number of amendments were made to the policy in January 2015, including additional priority for households in part time or full time work, simplifying the training/volunteering criteria, clarifying that no applicants who own a property are eligible, removing the automatic qualification for those leaving young people's accommodation and introducing a local lettings policy for new build accommodation.

5.7 Responding to benefit reforms

5.7.1 The council is preparing changes to the Tenant Incentive Scheme (TIS) which encourages those who are underoccupying social properties to move to properties of a more appropriate size. The changes are intended to extend the scheme so that more tenants will be eligible as it is recognised that larger properties are a great asset and valuable to be retrieved. Facilitating moves from oversized homes frees these up for larger households requiring housing (who often wait much longer) and for whom costs of renting in the private sector are likely to be substantial. Discretionary Housing Payment (DHP) is a government fund devolved to local authorities which can be used to top up housing benefit. As the DHP fund is reducing the council will be unable to subsidise those living in properties larger than their needs (those caught by the removal of the Spare Room Subsidy) so the TIS will also be targeted at these households. Fourteen TIS moves have been arranged since April 2014.

- 5.7.2** Reducing DHP spent subsidising households in oversized properties can then be used as a deposit for those threatened with homelessness, who can then remain in the private rented sector and not be housed in B&B at crisis point which is extremely costly for the council and wholly unsuitable for households.
- 5.7.3** With the reduction in Local Housing Allowance rates, London properties are effectively out of reach for many housing benefit recipients. London authorities are responding by procuring more affordable properties in Slough, and the council has received a number of enquiries.
- 5.7.4** The council may have to make a homeless decision on households with no local connection, and who therefore are ineligible for housing under the council's Allocation Scheme. In these cases the council is exploring other parts of the country the household would consider. Twenty households have been interviewed but no offers have yet been made as sourcing properties in other parts of the country is proving challenging.

5.8 Homelessness and temporary accommodation

- 5.8.1** Localism Act changes broke the link between statutory homeless decision and automatic qualification for local authority housing.
- 5.8.2** Homelessness acceptances have increased sharply which is likely due to reduced availability and affordability of private rented sector accommodation available.
- 50% of all homeless decisions were accepted as being homeless and in priority need (15% last year)
 - 22% of all homeless decisions were found eligible but not homeless (43% last year)
 - The highest priority need category for agreed homeless cases is 'households with 3 or more dependant children' (33%)
 - 26% of homeless households were housed within SBC stock (3% last year)

5.9 Developing new social/affordable Housing

- 5.9.1** As predicted in last years report schemes are now coming on line at Castleview, Middle Green and St.Bernard's Convent, either underway or soon to be, providing a total of 170 rented and 46 shared ownership units. In addition, for the first time in a generation the council is able to construct new council houses and the first 33 in Britwell are now occupied by families.
- 5.9.2** Construction is also underway on the Britwell Regeneration scheme both in Wentworth Avenue and on Kennedy Park which will deliver a further 107 council and RSL properties (including 44 shared ownership) over the next three years. Legders Road and Wexham schemes with Slough Regeneration Partnership are now progressing and this will produce at least 57 new council homes to be let in accordance with the new local lettings policy.
- 5.9.3** Sovereign Housing Group has taken handover of 16 new units for rent on the former Wyeth Laboratories site in Huntercombe South. And as part of the

council's garage re-development strategy Bucks Housing Association are developing 9 units on former under-utilised garage courts.

5.9.4 There are more than 70 new properties ranging from one bed bungalows and flats to four bed houses over seven sites for which planning permission is being sought on both council owned and Housing Revenue Account owned land. It is likely that a decision on planning permission will be made on these over the next six months.

5.10 Right to Buy

5.10.1 In 2012 the Government increased the maximum discount for Right to Buy sales from £38,000 to £77,000 which appears to have had an impact on the number of sales of council properties since. The discount will increase each year at the rate of the Consumer Price Index, to £77,900 this April.

Financial Year	Properties sold
2011/12	16
2012/13	32
2013/14	67
2014 to date	60

6 Comments of Other Committees

None

7 Conclusion

7.1 This report outlines not all but the major initiatives currently underway within the comprehensive housing service. Naturally in a re-active front line service some initiatives have made more headway than others but collectively there is demonstrable evidence that the Council is continuing to enhance the quality of life for our residents and improve housing conditions which are fundamental to enabling residents to thrive.

8 Background Papers

None