

STRATEGY FOR UNDER-OCCUPATION IN THE SOCIAL SECTOR

Cabinet – 13 September 2012

Report of the: Deputy Chief Executive and Director of Community and Planning Services

Status: For Decision

Also considered by: Services Select Committee – 19 June 2012

Key Decision: Yes

This report supports the Key Aim of:

- a) Community Plan; and
- b) Housing Strategy Action Plan.

Portfolio Holder Cllr. Mrs Carol Clark

Head of Service Head of Housing and Communications – Mrs. Pat Smith

Recommendation to Services Select Committee:

- a) Members support the adoption of the attached strategy and recommend it to Cabinet for approval as District Council policy.

Recommendation to Cabinet:

- a) Cabinet adopts the attached strategy as District Council policy.
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Reason for recommendation: To support the delivery of key housing objectives contained in the Housing Strategy Action Plan; to make more effective use of the existing housing stock; and to minimise negative impacts as related welfare reform is introduced.

Background

- 1 With an acute shortage of affordable housing and the financial imperative for down-sizing as a result of upcoming welfare reform, under-occupation is a key and timely issue to consider and re-approach as a local housing strategy priority.

In-depth scrutiny

- 2 With the above in mind, District Council's Services Select Committee (SSC) agreed to undertake an in-depth scrutiny of social sector under-occupation (from September 2011 through to June 2012).

- 3 A Member sub-group was subsequently set up and tasked with reviewing existing services (aimed at encouraging and enabling down-sizing), available resources and capacity (across the public sector), and current policies/procedures.

Key findings and recommendations

- 4 The sub-group has now concluded its investigations and presents the SSC with its key findings and recommendations, as set out in the attached strategy and supporting action plan (Appendix A).
- 5 If approved, the strategy will also provide the framework for future policy development in relation to social sector under-occupation.

Monitoring outcomes

- 6 Annual progress reports will be provided to SSC as part of ongoing performance monitoring of related outputs/outcomes. This area of housing strategy will also continue to be monitored and delivered through the Locality Board's Strategic Housing Sub-group.
- 7 Housing Services will continue to identify and share good practice between partners to further develop effective tactics to tackle social sector under-occupation.

Key Implications

Financial

Some finances would be required from Housing Association (HA) partners (which was agreed, in principle, during the strategy development stage), and supported by affordable housing planning gains – which, again, was approved through the Affordable Housing SPD priority spending criteria (p19, para. 6.11).

Community Impact and Outcomes

Key objectives would help to create better household mixes and support key local services.

Legal, Human Rights etc.

There are no issues to consider.

Resource (non-financial)

If a dedicated under-occupation officer were not agreed, an option would be to allocate some of an existing housing officer's time to under-occupation duties – though, this would see an adverse impact on the District Council's long-term empty homes work programme.

Value For Money and Asset Management

- Key objectives would provide value for money for HA partners, making much more effective use of their housing stock;

- Less CO² would be generated through more effective use of existing stock by reducing the requirement for the new-build process; and
- Key objectives would create joint working opportunities and reduce financial burdens.

Equality Impacts

Does the activity have the potential to cause adverse impact or discriminate against different groups in the community?

No

Does the activity make a positive contribution to promoting equality?

Yes – more housing would be allocated to suit wider household needs.

Summary of Impacts

There are no adverse impacts to consider.

Sustainability Checklist

Completed and available from Housing Policy by request.

Conclusions

The attached strategy would go some way towards delivering future housing strategy in a restricted financial environment.

Risk Assessment Statement

There are a number of risks associated with not adopting the attached strategy, including:

- A weaker response to the current financial environment and limited affordable housing development opportunities going forward into the medium-term;
- Growing numbers on the Sevenoaks District Housing Register;
- Under-occupying households unable to pay rent shortfalls when welfare reform is introduced;
- HAs suffering significant numbers of rent defaults, impacting on revenue and future borrowing; and
- Increased homelessness as households are evicted and/or are unable to secure affordable housing to suit their situation.

Appendices

Appendix A – Under-occupation Strategy

Background Papers:

Housing Strategy Action Plan;
Community Plan; and
Affordable Housing SPD.

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