

**Item 5(a) – West Kent Homelessness Strategy 2011-2016**

**Cabinet’s Recommendation to Council**

At its meeting on 15 September 2011, the Cabinet considered the matter as follows:

“The Portfolio Holder for Housing and Balanced Communities introduced a report which recommended that the Council should be asked to adopt the West Kent Homelessness Strategy as Council Policy. The report explained that although authorities which had achieved “excellent” status had been relieved of the duty to produce a Homelessness Strategy, which had been introduced by the Homelessness Act 2002, the Department for Communities and Local Government still recommended that authorities should have one. The draft Strategy had been developed in consultation with a wide range of service users and partners across various sectors and updated the Joint Homelessness Strategy 2007, although the new draft Strategy was significantly different from the 2007 document. The Portfolio Holder for Housing and Balanced Communities explained that Equalities issues had been fully considered during the development of the Strategy. Key themes that had emerged from consultation included a desire for more commonality in how the three West Kent local authorities (Sevenoaks District Council, Tonbridge and Malling Borough Council, and Tunbridge Wells Borough Council) worked. This included a need for more shared services, more innovation and sharing of knowledge, information and good practice, and opportunities to streamline services, processes and information. The draft Strategy provided the national, regional and local policy context, methods of consultation and key findings along with the five key strategic objectives and conclusions. Members were informed that the Strategy had already been adopted as policy by Tonbridge & Malling and Tunbridge Wells Borough Council’s which was the reason that the Strategy had been brought directly to Cabinet.

The Leader of the Council sought clarification on the likely impact of the change to limit payments for people under 35 (up from 25) to the shared room rate, how many people would be affected by the change and whether there were sufficient Homes in Multiple Occupation (HMO) to cope with the demand for housing. The Head of Housing and Communications explained that this data was not available yet but that the Council would be looking at HMOs to help to meet demand along with other initiatives. The Leader of the Council also asked what the anticipated impact of direct payments was likely to be and how many people currently defaulted on rent payments. The Head of Housing and Communications explained that currently around 3% of tenants in social housing were in arrears but that it was anticipated that this could rise to 6% or more. The Leader questioned the impact of the new levels of benefit payment and how these would enable people to secure housing given the vibrant private housing rental sector in Sevenoaks and how many single people were likely to be in housing need. The Leader raised concerns about

providing sufficient affordable housing and the Head of Housing and Communications explained that the Council had several initiatives to maximise the private sector provision and would be working in partnership with Tonbridge & Malling Borough Council, Tunbridge Wells District Council and Maidstone Borough Council and the Homes and Communities Agency to maximise funding to provide affordable housing as well. This would include measures to bring empty properties back into occupation.

The Cabinet congratulated the Head of Housing and Communications and her team for an outstanding piece of work to tackle homelessness across West Kent.

The Portfolio Holder for Planning and Improvement informed the Cabinet that the Council would be sharing a consultant with Maidstone Borough Council to develop a brief on provision for gypsy and travellers.

**Resolved: That it be recommended to Council that the West Kent Homelessness Strategy be adopted as District Council policy.”**

Text in bold relates to the Cabinet recommendation to the Council.