

ALMSHOUSES PROJECT

Housing and Health Advisory Committee - 8 October 2019

Report of Chief Officer People & Places

Status For Information

Key Decision No

This report supports the Key Aim of delivering the District Council's Housing Strategy 2017.

Portfolio Holder Cllr. Robert Piper

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Recommendation to the Housing and Health Advisory Committee: That Members note the report setting out progress made against Priorities 2.20 and 2.21 of the District Council's Housing Strategy 2017.

Reason for recommendation: To update Members on key activity being undertaken and which supports the District Council's Housing Strategy 2017 as well as key themes in the Community Plan 2013-2028 (including: Caring Communities; Green Environment; Healthy Environment; Sustainable Economy).

Introduction and Background

- 1 The District Council's Housing Strategy was adopted back in 2017 and includes a wide-range of objectives contained under the following three themes: 1) To provide a good mix of decent and affordable housing across tenures; 2) To improve the quality and use of the existing housing stock; and 3) To meet the needs of vulnerable and low-income households.
- 2 Under Theme 2, Priority 2.20 (p30), the District Council has committed to: *'Expand its support to almshouses charities and other small providers through a variety of means in order to improve the housing stock condition and create more effective business operations'*.
- 3 There are several reasons for this objective, including: 1) Some almshouses charities have, historically, kept accommodation fees to a minimum and not in line with inflation - the result being that revenue is insufficient to enable maintenance and repairs of properties; and 2) Many properties are old, inaccessible and in sub-standard condition (when gauged against the national Decent Homes Standard), thermally-inefficient and off the mains gas-network.

- 4 The District Council has, so far, offered its support to two almshouses charities in order to rebase accommodation fees to more appropriate levels with a view to increasing revenue for maintenance and repairs programmes etc. This was coupled with financial support through Section 106 affordable housing developer contributions to undertake essential repairs and other improvements to place those charities on a firm footing going forward. As a result, the charities are better able to build up funds for maintenance and repair programmes through increased revenue.
- 5 Members also requested that investigations were undertaken to identify any almshouses schemes with surplus land and which could potentially accommodate additional dwellings - the idea being to provide further much-needed housing for older and vulnerable people (almshouses providing for a particular need) whilst also helping to generate additional revenue to help protect and preserve the existing housing.

Progress to date

- 6 Officers have subsequently undertaken early investigations on several sites and worked with local charities, board members and local Members to explore the idea further.
- 7 This work has also been factored into the District Council's rural housing work programme whereby local housing needs studies are carried out with a view to developing new rural housing exceptions sites for households in need and with a defined local connection to the relevant parish. This can provide sufficient evidence for any subsequent planning applications.
- 8 This is all work in progress, therefore, and investigations are likely to continue for some time as this form of new provision is typically complex and untested here in the Sevenoaks District. Therefore, it is proposed to provide HHAC with a further update on this project in early 2020.
- 9 Through this work, it is also worth noting that the District Council has been able to offer other bespoke housing and other wider advice/support for older residents of almshouses schemes - all of which was outside the scope of the main project and supports several housing and health-related outcomes.

Almshouses forum

- 10 Under Theme 2, Priority 2.21 (p30), the District Council has also committed to: *'Hold a forum for almshouses and other small affordable housing providers to create a support network and to share good practice'*.
- 11 The aim of this priority is to support local almshouses charities on a range of issues, such as: 1) rebasing accommodation fees to more appropriate levels; 2) investigating any potential for new provision (as per priority 2.20); 3) exploring the benefits of mergers; 4) offering technical advice on maintenance and repairs; 5) providing advice on housing support services and welfare benefits; 6) and to provide updates on housing-related guidance and legislation etc.

- 12 This will be a new forum in the District and one which, assuming well-received and successful, the District Council would look to hold annually. A forum is to be planned for early 2020, therefore, and Housing and Health Advisory Committee (HHAC) Members will also be invited to participate. In order to maximise attendance, the forum will be held in the evening.
- 13 If another forum were then not considered as necessary, the next step would be to produce a newsletter created and distributed by the District Council. Again, the aim of this approach would be to provide information on housing standards, guidance and legislation, welfare support and wider health advice etc.

Key Implications

Financial

Any new-build projects would require funding and this would be dependent on the development model adopted. It is impossible to say at this point the level of funding required, therefore, but this could range from initial investigatory and preparatory works to land and development costs, through to ongoing repairs and maintenance programmes. Any funding required would likely come via Section 106 (S106) affordable housing developer contributions, however, and with no impact on District Council budgets. Any joint venture opportunities would be unlikely.

Legal Implications and Risk Assessment Statement.

Again, at this stage it is impossible to say - though, this would all be assessed and a summary provided in any follow-up report to HHAC.

Equality Assessment

An equality impact assessment would be carried out on any subsequent project and again provided in any follow-up report to HHAC. Generally, however, the aim of this project is to provide additional housing for older low-income households and to improve, protect and preserve the existing housing. There would be generally positive impacts on end users, therefore.

Appendices None

Background Papers *Housing Strategy: Wellbeing Starts at Home*
https://www.sevenoaks.gov.uk/downloads/file/1028/housing_strategy_2017
Community Plan 2013-2028
https://www.sevenoaks.gov.uk/site_search/results/?q=community+plan&jadu-search-type=1
Decent Homes Standard
<https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/a-decent-home-definition-and-guidance>

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