

HHAC Scrutiny

Report by the Portfolio Holder for Housing and Health January 2020

SDC's key priorities are:

- To provide a good mix of decent and affordable housing across tenures
- To improve the quality and use of the existing housing stock
- To meet the needs of the vulnerable and low income households.

Cllr Lowe gave an update on all of these at the Scrutiny meeting on 2nd April 2019 and progress that had been made in all areas.

Overview of housing in the District

- 1 It is important to understand the overall mix of housing in the District. There is attached at Appendix 1 an analysis of total dwellings in the District and an analysis of the Housing Register requirements, etc.
- 2 The total stock is 50,762 units, of which 15.4% are owned by housing associations and 12.3% is privately rented.
- 3 As far as the Register is concerned, the key point to note is that 81.4% of the need is for 1 or 2 bed accommodation.
- 4 Social lettings were 357 last year, giving a turnover of 4.5% per year, and on average households were on the Register for 16 months - in part due to a mismatch of stock and the effects of the removal of the bedroom subsidy.
 - i. ie average wait times:
 - ii. 1 bed 8 months
 - iii. 2 bed 18 months
 - iv. 3 bed 13 months
 - v. 4 bed 7 months

Key Current Issues - Housing Provision

- 5 The most important work being done by Housing and Health this year is bringing the Register in-house, from West Kent Housing Association, with effect from 1st January 2020. This has been done following a review of processes from the customer's point of view. This identified the importance of the link between homelessness advice, provided by the Council, and applications for the Register, formerly handled by West Kent.
- 6 Bringing the Register in house seeks to streamline the process, making it faster and removing any confusion over which organisation customers

should approach. It is also anticipated that provision of documentation to a single organisation will be easier for customers.

- 7 Officers anticipate that this proactive approach will help to reduce the size of the Register – although as Appendix 2 makes clear, SDC has the second smallest Register per 1000 population in Kent, despite the constraints of being 93% Green Belt.
- 8 Fortunately the supply of affordable homes in 2019/20 is likely to be a record, with over 200 completed, up from 71 in 2018/19, largely due to Oakley Park in Edenbridge and Ryewood in Dunton Green, but we do need a new Local Plan to increase the supply of affordable housing.
- 9 This work will be complemented by enhancing our relationships with the Housing Associations. There is attached as Appendix 3 a map of the District showing where the Housing Associations have stock. Whilst West Kent is our largest provider, there are many others in our District. We will be having a conference later this year to encourage all of them to refocus on our areas, particularly now that there has been a change of Chief Executive at West Kent Housing Association.
- 10 Clearly the housing associations suffer from the constraints of the area, but more can be done to make more effective use of land. Housing densities were much lower in the 1950s, when much of the stock was built, than now. West Kent has already recognised this by looking at garage space that they own but more can be considered to convert, eg overgrown land, convert 3 bed houses to 2 flats, etc.
- 11 This need is particularly acute because of the rise in homelessness approaches, due to the Homelessness Reduction Act, which came into effect in April 2018. The new Act created new prevention and relief duties for local authorities. Broadly it places a duty on SDC to prevent homelessness, take reasonable steps to help secure accommodation for any eligible person who is homeless and, where they have a priority need and local connections, provide interim accommodation.
- 12 Fortunately SDC is provided with 52 temporary units by WKHA (47) and Moat (5) every night and the bulk of the remaining cost is borne by reclaiming individual housing benefit and government grants. Unfortunately all of the non-WKHA/Moat temporary accommodation is outside the District, elsewhere in the County.
- 13 The need for local accommodation is recognised, but difficult to solve. SDC work hard to prevent homelessness by helping people to deal with debt to avoid eviction, working with families to encourage them not to evict younger members of the family until they have somewhere to go, seeking supported accommodation where this is appropriate and finding safe places for those fleeing domestic abuse or violence. The team also seek permanently to rehome the homeless through the housing register and through finding additional private sector accommodation.

- 14 As Appendix 4 shows, the District has the fourth fewest homeless in Kent.
- 15 In addition, there were four rough sleepers in the area (as at the end of November 2019). There are many reasons and the team work hard to place them in appropriate accommodation. Sometimes people do not wish to be housed and initially prefer to sleep rough.
- 16 Due to the constraints of the area, SDC is keen to provide modest amounts of housing in the villages, outside the main urban areas where the Housing Association stock is concentrated. There are currently eight projects underway in villages to establish local need, including local essential workers and older people.
- 17 The same rationale underpins our work with local alms houses - see attached Appendix 5 - which are often in rural areas, can need upgrading but could provide modest opportunities. A conference is planned for all alms houses in late March.
- 18 Complementary to SDC's work with Housing Associations is SDC's work with the private sector. This area has been upgraded with the appointment of a dedicated officer, and 15 people have been re-housed into private lettings from the Housing Register so far this year, with work taking place on a further seven.
- 19 We hold a biannual Landlord Forum to encourage / help private landlords and in February will run the first course to encourage / educate potential private tenants.
- 20 The private sector has also made available four homes for Syrian refugees, spread throughout the District.
- 21 The District has been less successful with bringing empty homes back into use. There are nearly 500 units which have been empty for over six months, but most are tied up with probate, family circumstances, etc. An ongoing priority.
- 22 More recently, SDC has entered the housing market itself. It has set up Quercus 7 and Quercus Housing where it now owns five private sector flats and nine affordable homes in Gladedale House, Westerham. Five of the nine are "genuinely affordable" (ie the rent is within the Local Housing Allowance rate) and Quercus housing has been asked to provide ten a year in future, initially using S.106 funds.
- 23 It should also be noted that SDC own Hever Road Gypsy site, with 16 units.

Housing Standards

- 24 Complementary to this work on housing provision is the work to upgrade standards in both the private and social sector. There have been 313 service requests for this year, and 16 Notices have been issued to date, covering problems ranging from mould to Category 1 Hazards such as electrical faults, trip hazards and excess cold and heat.
- 25 The government funds Disabled Facilities Grants totalling £1.1million this year. To date this year, there have been 69 schemes, ranging from grab rails to extensions.
- 26 The department is also upgrading its work on Housing in Multiple Occupation (HMOs) where SDC has currently licenced 15 and investigated a further 43.
- 27 The HERO service goes from strength to strength with four full-time officers. In 2018/19 they helped 616 clients - 62% re benefits, 25% re housing, 3% re employment and 5% other.
- 28 I have deliberately concentrated on Housing in this report. Daniel McDermott joined the Health team in November. The department does valuable work with health walks, yoga classes, weight loss programmes and dementia cafes, with a regular outreach programme and liaison with GPs. Health is entirely funded by KCC Public Health.
- 29 I will brief the Scrutiny Committee on the emerging Health Action Plan at our next meeting.