

REPORT TO: Scrutiny Community and Executive
Date of Meeting: 1 March 2016 and 15 March 2016
Report of: Assistant Director Housing
Title: Housing Strategy 2016-2020

Is this a Key Decision?

No

Is this an Executive or Council Function?

Council

1. What is the report about?

3. Reasons for the recommendation:

The new Housing Strategy provides a high level overview of the City Council's key housing objectives and will provide a framework and give overall direction to our future work in this area.

4. What are the resource implications including non financial resources.

No additional resources will be required to implement the strategy.

5. Section 151 Officer comments:

The report contains no specific financial implications. Any requirement for further resources will require an additional report or be presented during the normal budget cycle.

6. What are the legal aspects?

None Identified.

7. Monitoring Officer's comments:

The Council is no longer statutorily required to have a housing strategy. However, it seems prudent to have a strategy governing the strategic approach to housing.

8. Report details:

Local authorities are no longer required by Government to have a Housing Strategy as such. However, production of such a strategy is an objective of the current Corporate Plan and as a Council we are expected to show that we have a strategic approach to housing in our local area.

In the past 'strategic direction' has mainly focused on enabling the delivery of social housing but in the current context of increasing demand, inadequate supply, reduced revenue and concerns around affordability and vulnerability we need to shape and respond to wider issues and trends that impact our city.

We also need to articulate our vision as the largest landlord in Exeter: why we are here; what we want to do; and how we intend to do it.

Background

There are a number of significant factors that have informed the new Strategy:

- National Government is promoting owner-occupation as the solution to housing problems, arguably at the expense of recognising the importance of other tenures
- Yet home ownership is in long term decline nationally and the only tenure which is growing to any extent (both absolutely and relatively) is the private rented sector
- Social housing itself is seen as a problem rather than a solution to housing need despite its popularity
- Social landlords are being compelled to cut their rents which, for us, will mean a loss of income of some £7.9 million over four years
- A 'high value asset levy' will be imposed on us (the details have yet to be confirmed) which will again reduce the resources we have to invest in our stock
- The 'Pay to stay' programme will increase the rents of those affected dramatically
- Welfare reform continues to affect some tenants incomes
- Rough sleeping numbers are increasing in the city and homelessness remains a serious issue
- The report we commissioned from the University of Exeter has shown that there are significant problems around vulnerability and affordability, particularly in the private sector
- The supply of new housing in the city is limited while demand is rising (numbers registered on Devon Home Choice are increasing)
- At the same time we are losing large numbers of our own housing stock through the Right to Buy (a policy that is now being extended to the housing association sector) despite our own Council Own Build (COB) programme

As a landlord we have also faced a number of more particular issues over the last few years:

- We need to better understand the nature of the demands placed on the service and what we ought to do (if anything) to meet these demands
- We need to have better knowledge of both our customers (principally our tenants) and our assets (our housing stock)
- We need to improve our performance in some key areas (for example void times and tackling anti-social behaviour)
- We need to control our costs
- We need to fully implement our Tenancy Strategy (which initiated Flexible Tenancies and which implies a much closer working relationship between us as landlord and our tenants)

Many of these issues have already been addressed (and will continue to be addressed) through the change of emphasis in the Housing Service over the past two years or so and a different, more pro-active way of working.

Our new Strategy articulates what we have done and what we intend to do (working within the constraints of the national policy framework and our own powers and resources) to respond to the realities of Exeter's housing needs and housing market over the next four years.

What the new Strategy says

The Strategy has three priorities:

1. Address housing need and vulnerability - by providing housing options, advice and support to all residents

2. Provide more housing - in particular by exploring ways of delivering new affordable housing across a range of tenures
3. Be a good landlord - by raising the standards of our own stock and landlord services, and by influencing the improvement of standards in the private rented sector

1. Address housing need by providing housing advice and support to all residents

We have a separate Homelessness Strategy (written with Teignbridge District Council). This gives more detail on our approach to addressing homelessness and housing need in both districts.

Key action points

- Take a strategic leadership role in our relationship with housing associations and private landlords in Exeter
- Provide quality housing and financial advice to all who require it
- Provide a holistic approach to personal debt management through the Council's Payments and Collection Team
- Work with the Integrated Care Exeter (ICE) Project to address health needs in people's own homes
- Streamline our Allocations Policy to simplify the system and to encourage the engagement of those registered on it
- Introduce a Tenant Finder Scheme managed by Plymouth Access to Housing (PATH)
- Continue to provide suitable disabled adaptations to enable households to live independently

2. Explore ways of delivering new affordable housing across all tenures

We aim to accelerate the delivery of new housing of whatever tenure.

Key action points

- Continue to negotiate with developers, and work closely with neighbouring authorities and other agencies to increase the supply of affordable housing both to buy and to rent across the city
- Explore the viability of setting up a Council-owned Housing Company which would aim to develop and finance a house building programme outside the Housing Revenue Account
- Build a 53 unit Extra Care home at St Loyes as part of the Millbrook Care Village development
- Continue to bring empty homes back into use
- Acquire properties on the open market

3. Be a good landlord

We want people to live in decent and secure housing. We are the largest landlord in Exeter and have an important role to play both in being a good landlord to our tenants and in being an example to other landlords in the city.

Key action points:

- Continue to actively visit all our properties on a regular basis
- Improve the effectiveness of our asset management service
- Carry on with the review of services and housing-related support for older tenants

- Maintain improvements in service delivery (we aim to be a top quartile performer in key service areas, including void times, rent arrears and anti-social behaviour)
- Review our anti-social behavior policy and procedures
- Continue to support the Performance Scrutiny Partnership (PSP)
- Review our Resident Involvement Strategy
- Benefit from the work of the new Housing Community Partnerships Officer to lead on community development initiatives for the Service
- Continue to support private landlords in tackling poor housing in the private rented sector and to improve energy efficiency

Consultation

At the very earliest stages of planning the new strategy some time ago, extensive consultation took place. This included:

- **Royal Albert Memorial Museum (RAMM) event**
- **Documentary screening at The Phoenix**
- **Public consultation at St Stephen's Church**
- **Belmont Chapel council tenant and leaseholder event**
- **An online and paper survey of Exeter citizens**
- **Discussions with Members**

Most of the points that came out of these events are still very relevant, and so it is not felt necessary to undertake further consultation. However, further discussions have been held with the relevant Portfolio Holders to 'refresh' the key themes in the strategy.

9. How does the decision contribute to the Council's Corporate Plan?

The Strategy contributes to the Corporate Plan in the following areas:

- **Provide services to meet customers' needs** – the Strategy aims to help meet the citizens of Exeter's housing needs by providing a range of opportunities and services
- **Reduce operating costs** – our new way of working in housing (concentrating on meeting real demand within restricted or declining resources) will help drive costs out of the system
- **Invest in the city** – we intend to build and facilitate the construction of as many affordable homes as possible in the city
- **Grow the economy** – new businesses arriving in the city will require staff to work in them who will need somewhere to live. A successful housing economy supports the Council to deliver its growth agenda
- **Support Exeter's communities** – this is at the heart of the new Housing Strategy. Being a better landlord will involve playing a greater role as a community developer and instigator of local health and well-being initiatives

10. What risks are there and how can they be reduced?

The risks are in not having a clear strategy for the future development of housing and housing-related interventions in the city. We need to address housing need and demand; we need to build and acquire as much new affordable housing as possible; and we need to improve our performance as a landlord in providing services. All of these the new strategy is designed to deliver.

11. What is the impact of the decision on equality and diversity; health and wellbeing; safeguarding children, young people and vulnerable adults, community safety and the environment?

Decent, safe, affordable & well maintained housing is essential to meeting the Council's responsibilities & objectives in relation to all of the above..

12. Are there any other options?

We do not need to have a Housing Strategy but are recommending one to Members for the reasons detailed elsewhere in this report.

Assistant Director Housing

Local Government (Access to Information) Act 1972 (as amended)

Background papers used in compiling this report:-

None

Contact for enquires:
Democratic Services (Committees)
Room 2.3
01392 265275