

Cabinet Report



Listening Learning Leading

Report of Head of Housing and Environment

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To: CABINET

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Housing Delivery Strategy update and Action Plan 2024/25

Recommendation(s)

- (a) That Cabinet notes the changes in the national housing guidelines (or legislation) since the housing delivery strategy, and action plan, was adopted in 2022 and the associated impact that this has on the housing delivery strategy.
- (b) That Cabinet notes the latest progress against the action plan, as well as the significant efforts made in purchasing of property under the LAHF scheme.
- (c) That Cabinet adopts the proposed new housing delivery strategy action plan for 2024/25.

Purpose of report

1. To provide an update on the progress of the housing delivery strategy and its associated actions for 2022/23 and 2023/24. To propose a new action plan for 2024/25 to continue the ongoing work to increase affordable and suitable housing.

Corporate objectives

2. This strategy meets the following themes within the Corporate Plan 2020-2024.
 - Action on the Climate emergency
 - Improved economic and community wellbeing.
 - Homes and infrastructure that meets local needs.

Background

3. In November 2022 the Cabinet agreed a new housing delivery strategy (Item 45). This was a first of its kind for the council and indicated the positive direction the council wished to take regarding the provision of affordable and suitable housing (both directly and indirectly) across the district. The stated aim within the document was that “Everyone needs a home. The availability, affordability, location, and quality of housing have a major impact on people’s lives and their sense of wellbeing. This joint housing strategy considers the housing opportunities and challenges for the areas covered by our two districts councils and sets out our ambitions for the future”. In doing so the strategy laid out four key objectives:
 - Providing homes to meet current and future local need.
 - Delivering housing that is truly affordable.
 - Valuing and supporting council and community led housing initiatives.
 - Planning for well-designed net zero carbon housing.
4. From this strategy an action plan was developed for the council with input from a wide range of council areas all focussed on provision of more suitable housing. This action plan outlined a range of actions designed to meet the strategy for years 2022/23 to 2024/25 onwards.
5. The strategy, and associated action plan, is a corporate wide document with ownership for the delivery of the strategy and actions taken by several services, all working together to take on a range of tasks. Whilst this work is coordinated by the housing delivery team, the action plan recognised that the responsibility for delivery was cross-council.
6. Since the approval of the strategy and action plans several events have happened which have influenced the work in this area, and created unforeseen challenges for the council, which it has risen to. These include:
 - Government have placed a greater emphasis on local authorities supporting the housing of asylum groups. This led to the Local Authority Housing Fund (LAHF) which both councils have taken part in. This has accelerated the process for the councils becoming direct landlords. More detail on these schemes is available in reports to councillors in July 2023 (Items 16 and 17)
 - The sad death of a two-year-old child (Awaab Ishak) in December 2022 highlighted to the public, and the government, the poor conditions in some rented properties, with a focus on social and affordable housing.

- Cost of living crisis has continued, especially the rise in fuel bills.
 - The sharp rise in interest rates has made it much more expensive for homeowners, but also for developers and Register Providers of affordable housing (RPs) to borrow to buy/build housing.
 - Political and economic uncertainty has added risk to the housing system, making many developers and RPs more cautious about investment, and slowing the delivery of some schemes.
 - Locally, RPs have raised concerns about financing clauses with Section 106 agreements that may impact their ability to buy/build/develop on the districts.
 - The Housing Ombudsman New Complaint Handling Code comes into effect from 1st April 2024.
7. In addition, several internal matters have been progressed as planned. These include:
- Staff resources have been assessed and, via the last budget, resourcing of the team to address historic skill and knowledge gaps created by outsourcing have been addressed via recruitment.
 - A specific post to lead on support self-build and community-build schemes has been recruited to within the affordable housing team.
 - Focus of the housing delivery team on support the setting up of the LAHF scheme, including obtaining and overseeing the repairs, maintenance, and tenancy contract.
 - Consideration was given to whether now was the appropriate time to more widely review the housing delivery strategy. However, this is not recommended currently for the following reasons:
 - The impending general election in 2024 is expected to exert a substantial influence on national housing strategies and related issues. Modifying local strategies in isolation from this national context could result in the local strategy becoming immediately outdated and significant avoidable work being undertaken by officers.
 - There is a desire from councillors and officers to focus on delivery of actions.
8. This makes it important that the progress of the current action plan is reviewed and communicated, and an updated action plan for 2024/25 is adopted.

Review of performance of the previous action plan

9. Appendix 1 shows the existing action plan, along with the progress that has been made on each of the actions. The key achievements have been summarised here as follows:

- S106 Funding: An updated Section 106 grant application policy and process has been formally approved. The new process has been published on both councils' websites. In addition, all registered providers and other interested parties have been sign posted to details of the new process.
 - Appoint Housing Delivery Manager: A new Housing Delivery Manager has been appointed with affect from 2nd January 2023, taking responsibility for affordable housing, mobile home parks and housing landlord functions.
 - Increase social housing directly provided by the council: The purchasing of properties has been rolled into the LAHF initiative in order that funding can be prioritised in the order that maximises overall delivery.
 - A closer working relationship with registered providers. A strong dialogue has been achieved over the past 12 months with regular meetings with individual registered providers, and resolution to concerns about mortgage exemption clauses in Section 106 agreements.
 - Data collection from registered providers along with understanding registered providers activities. A significant amount of work has been completed to capture the required information and a summary of this is shown in Appendix 3.
 - Increase social housing on council owned sites: The council have reviewed various sites which are now with planning for pre-planning comments.
 - Increase social housing on non-council owned sites: Liaising with RPs, developers, CLTs and other stakeholders to maximise the opportunities for others to develop affordable housing. Also reviewing Section 106 delivery responsibilities, reviewing planning applications that have stalled in development.
 - Joint Local Plan: The joint local plan is being developed and is now at the consultation phase.
10. In addition to the progress of the original action plan there have been several other pieces of work undertaken by the council that were not in the original action plan but have contributed towards the delivery of the strategy. These arose since the action plan was agreed and examples are as follows.
- The council has taken part in the Local Authority Housing Fund (LAHF) scheme which has meant it has undertaken a large and complex purchasing programme which is resulting in property completions during spring 2024 and properties being available for Q1 and Q2 of 2024/25.
 - To support all the various housing streams, the council has entered into a planned short term 18-month agreement with Soha to undertake repairs and maintenance on all council-owned and leased property which is working as intended. It is intended that this arrangement will end in Spring 2025 and officers are working on plans to deliver this function in-house beyond that date to better support longer term objectives as envisaged by the Corporate Landlord model adopted by the Council. This move to build further in-house capacity, which will be achieved

within previously approved budgets, is essential to continue to support the outcomes identified within the strategy.

- The council formally registered as a housing provider along with registration with the relevant ombudsman, completing the work to become fully compliant with the appropriate legislation. Through the LAHF schemes the council will be able to support many vulnerable families into affordable accommodation. This will be significantly better for the families, reduce the burden of expensive emergency temporary accommodation on the taxpayer and increase the amount of affordable housing stock that the council controls.
- A new Section 106 agreement mortgage exception clause has been agreed with the RPs. Based on the various meeting with RPs it is anticipated this change will support the continued activities of a range of RPs in both districts.

Updated action plan 2024/25

11. Following a review of the current action plan and taken account of the issues identified within this report, officers have developed an updated action plan for 2024/25. This is shown in Appendix 2, and contains a number of priority areas for work:

- Utilise our stakeholder relationships with RPs.
- Maintaining and using accurate data on housing needs across the district to help affordable housing developers bring forward more targeted housing
- Seek opportunities to continue to expand the volume of affordable housing across the district.
- Continue to seek opportunities for council acquisitions and developments to deliver more affordable housing.
- Ensure that the new Joint Local Plan and housing policies work in harmony.
- Review and analyse government initiatives on affordable housing.
- Ensure that the approach to council delivered affordable housing complies with best practice and fully compliant.
- Enhance available information on affordable housing to the public.

12. Each priority area has a number of actions, along with measurable output and approximate timescales for delivery. Some of the key actions and outputs include:

- The successful continuation of the process to reach agreement on the new Joint Local Plan.
- An annual information report providing an overview of social and affordable housing in the district. This will include information on volumes, types of

housing, age of stock and plans to ensure that properties are appropriately decarbonised.

- A review of the Section 106 affordable grant policy and process that was agreed in 2023, and how many bids have been received and progressed.
 - Regular updates to RPs to provide information on current and needed housing types in the districts to help ensure that new developments meet the needs of the housing register.
 - A report which will set out the approach of the council towards the private rental sector strategy, and how it can be supported to work for both tenants and landlords. This will include information on mean private rents in key areas, and how they compare to Local Housing Allowance (LHA) rates.
 - Continued work to support empty homes to come back into use, aimed at creating more stock that can be used by those who are in most need.
 - A report which will set out the approach of the council towards stock ownership. One example of the work that is also taking place in this area is the development of housing at the Broadway site in Didcot, which is subject to a separate report.
 - Ongoing monitoring of the Section 106 balances to ensure that as many suitable schemes are supported as possible. Officers have established a working group to review the income and expenditure of the Section 106 affordable housing balance and assess potential projects as per the policy. Regular updates will be given to members on pipeline projects.
 - A review of the impact of First Homes and Shared ownership initiatives in the district.
 - Maintaining compliance with our obligations as a landlord, including ensuring that policies and processes are up to date and made available for tenants.
 - Maintain a wide range of useful information for tenants and the public on our webpages and other communications channels.
13. The progress of this action plan will be monitored by individual services, and feedback provided through a range of formal and informal communications methods. A Cabinet report on the progress of this plan will be provided in early 2025.

Financial Implications

14. The budget for officer resources to deliver each of the actions has already been approved within council budget. Any other resources to deliver actions will either already be within existing budgets or be subject to specific decisions taken separately.

Legal Implications

15. There are no specific legal implications as a result of approving the Action Plan but as projects are taken forward there are likely to be legal implications arising and the legal team will be consulted as work progresses.

Climate and ecological impact implications

16. The council have set ambitious district-wide net-zero carbon targets and tackling the climate emergency is a key priority of the Corporate Plan. Homes are the second biggest source of carbon emissions in the districts, so the council urgently needs to encourage homeowners to improve energy efficiency and decarbonise them. This will have the added benefit of reducing energy bills and making homes more comfortable to live in, which is particularly important for vulnerable groups.
17. The council recognises the opportunity to enhance the energy efficiency of council-owned accommodation through the Planned Maintenance Programme, as outlined in the Repairs and Maintenance Policy. This commitment is in line with the council's Climate Emergency targets, as stated in policy.
18. All maintenance and renovation work will adhere to the council's Energy Efficiency Standards and Government Standards to reduce carbon emissions. The planned maintenance schedule will consider and cost low carbon options to allow informed decisions to be made.
19. Collaboration with Registered Providers is a crucial component of the strategy. The aim is to ensure that all properties, including those managed by Registered Providers, meet or exceed minimum government standards for energy efficiency.
20. Regular meetings with Registered Providers are being held to provide support for their long-term climate ambitions regarding their housing stock and discuss external funding opportunities such as the Social Housing Decarbonisation Fund
21. This revised carbon action plan underscores our commitment to improving energy efficiency and reducing carbon emissions in council-owned accommodation. The council is dedicated to aligning its efforts with climate emergency targets, Corporate Plan objectives, and government standards, while also fostering collaboration with Registered Providers to achieve sustainable housing solutions.

Equalities implications

22. This report is for information only and therefore there are no equalities implications associated with the update. When reviewing the strategy and action plan in the future it would be good to see more narrative and actions related to ensuring there is sufficient accessible housing provided for homeowners of all ages.

Risks

23. Failure to deliver on the action plan will impact on the availability of affordable homes in the district.

Other Implications

24. None

Conclusion

25. In conclusion, the report recommends that Cabinet notes the significant changes that have occurred in the national housing system since the approval of the Housing Delivery Strategy and Action Plan in 2022. It also asks cabinet to note the progress made under the existing action plan, and additional actions taken by the council to deliver more affordable and suitable good quality housing. Furthermore, it is recommended that the Cabinet adopts the proposed Housing Delivery Strategy action plan for 2024/25, confirming the council's strong commitment to continue working towards the goal of delivering more affordable housing in the district.

Background Papers

- [Housing Delivery Strategy 2022-2024](#)
- [Housing Delivery Strategy Action Plan November 2022](#)
- [Social Housing \(Regulation\) Act 2023](#)
- [Oxfordshire Net Zero Route Map](#)
- [Section 106 affordable housing policy and process](#)

Appendices

- Appendix 1 – Review of performance of current action plan
- Appendix 2 – New Action plan for 2024/25
- Appendix 3 – Registered Providers information Vale