

Cabinet Response to the Scrutiny Committee Recommendations

Agenda Item 8

Housing Services Review July 2017

Cabinet Member: Cllr Ken Pugh, Cabinet Member for Housing and Wellbeing

Lead Officer: Amber Christou, Head of Resident Services

Scrutiny Recommendations	Cabinet Response
A) Cabinet should consider what more the council can do to help housing associations to provide more affordable and social housing in Swale	Agreed. The council works in close partnership with these key organisations, meeting regularly, and supporting funding bids for their homes with the Homes and Communities Agency National Affordable Housing Programme. As the scrutiny committee review report confirms, the operating landscape of social housing providers is changing, and it has become more challenging for them to provide the level of affordable rented housing that is needed within the borough. Housing association Boards are now taking difficult decision to focus more greatly on shared ownership housing, than rented housing, due to viability of house building schemes and the requirement of the lenders. This does not accord with Swale local plan requirements, or the needs of local residents and this will be fully considered within the development of the upcoming housing and homelessness strategy for Swale.
B) Cabinet should consider ways to provide housing associations a closer role in planning application for housing development, e.g. by routinely consulting them.	Agreed. Housing associations partners are engaged in the development of the local plan, and consulted in all relevant planning policies as well as discussions on a site by site basis, as housing developments come forward. We will continue to seek additional ways to provide a closer role where possible and appropriate.
C). Cabinet considers whether it should make further capital investments into selective housing stock.	The Council has agreed an investment strategy for the Council that has two criteria; financial return and strategic impact particularly from a regeneration perspective. Further investment in housing stock does not meet those objectives and there are more cost effective ways of securing alternative

	<p>accommodation that buying stock eg the Council's arrangement for use a number of Optivo properties. The main focus of the Housing Options team remains on preventing homelessness and thereby reducing the need for use of temporary accommodation.</p>
<p>D). Cabinet considers whether the council is doing enough to alleviate social housing pressures, and whether Swale should follow the lead of other councils and adopt a less risk averse approach to property acquisition.</p>	<p>Each Council is in a different financial position; for example some councils take no New Homes Bonus (NHB) into the base budget, which allows them to either buy properties direct or use the NHB to fund debt costs. This Council does take New Homes Bonus into the base and without that would have to find £2.7m of savings to fund this loss of funding annually. There is no scope within either the revenue or capital budget for further acquisition of properties.</p>
<p>E). That the housing team, supported by the Cabinet member for Housing and Wellbeing, bid for capital funding should any empty properties become available that Owners agree to let the council use.</p>	<p>Agreed. The Council supports owners and landlords to secure cost-effective loans to renovate properties to bring back to use with some success. If and when such properties become available, the council will take a proactive approach, including where possible bidding for funds to make best use of the property to meet local needs.</p>
<p>F. Cabinet should consider whether the residency criteria (i.e. living in Swale for four years out of five) in Swale's housing allocations policy is a help or a hindrance towards helping those in housing need, and if the latter, whether the policy should be reviewed</p>	<p>Agreed. With the soon to be implemented Homelessness Reduction Act, and recent case law affecting Reasonable Preference requirements the allocations policy does require a full review, and this will begin by December 2017.</p>
<p>G) That cabinet can be encouraged to write to the Secretary of State for communities and local government drawing attention to the severe pressure Swale was facing in housing homeless families</p>	<p>Agreed.</p>