

Housing Strategy Review 21-26

First year action plan review

Introduction

In autumn of 2021 both Councils introduced separate corporate strategies. Both Councils have included Housing as a key corporate objective. Whilst being a key priority on its own, housing is also reflected in other priorities, particularly in wellbeing, economy and environment. Both Councils have also made declarations of both a climate and housing

The corporate strategies for both Councils are underpinned by the Joint Local Plan, the housing strategy; Better Homes Better Lives and the Joint South Hams and West Devon homelessness strategy.

The 5 year Housing Strategy for South Hams District and West Devon Borough Council, was adopted in April 2021. It was recognised at the time that the Strategy was required to be flexible enough to respond to the changing housing situation, particularly in light of the impact of the pandemic on our local communities. In recognition of this impact both councils have declared a Housing Crisis and each committed to an action plan aimed at addressing the unique needs of our rural areas. These action plans both supplement and complement the existing Housing Strategy, further strengthening our approach to meeting the needs of our residents.

Foreword

We are pleased to provide an update from the first year of Better Homes, Better Lives, the joint Housing Strategy for South Hams and West Devon. At the time of adoption the world was starting to recover from the covid-19 pandemic, however this past year has seen many challenges reverberating from this and these are felt acutely in relation to housing. Both South Hams and West Devon have seen huge issues with affordability, availability of property and delays in housebuilding and the increase in short term holiday lets. This has culminated in our housing crisis declarations, and both Councils are determined, through partnership working, direct action and political lobbying to tackle the issue head on.

Judy – Better Lives for All and the Housing Strategy

We are focussed on existing Housing, our priority is to support the delivery of local homes that are affordable to local people. We want people to be able to continue living in the area that they have grown up, where their employment and support is nearby and where their health and wellbeing is acknowledged. We want to enable to live in their homes for as long as possible through the delivery of our services.

We have declared a Housing Crisis in the South Hams and this strategy will enable us to address this issue, in particular the second Homes issues and lack of available accommodation that we face and the impact that this is having to enable our communities to thrive. We want to increase awareness of the best use of our existing housing stock and how we can support people to live in more appropriate housing for their needs, whether this is downsizing or getting a foot on the housing ladder.

We also understand that energy efficient homes will be a high priority for our residents due to the rising cost of fuel bills and we want to make sure that none of our residents face homelessness and have a secure and safe roof over their head.

Barry – A Plan for West Devon and the Housing Strategy

We are driving the delivery of new affordable homes for local people in West Devon. These are homes that will meet the various different needs of our communities; the young, the older generation and those that may require specialist housing to live as independently for as long as possible. We are bringing forward a flag ship re-development of our homeless hostel which will provide safe and warm accommodation for those that find themselves in the unfortunate position of not having a roof over their head. Keeping them local to their family, support, schools and jobs.

West Devon has declared a Housing crisis and we are committed to working through the actions contained in this to ensure that our existing stock is of a good standard for our residents to live in. We will encourage those living in larger accommodation than their needs to downsize to more appropriately sized properties to allow families a chance to continue to live in the area they know and love.

Background

South Hams District Council and West Devon Borough Council adopted their new 5 Housing Strategy “Better Homes, Better Lives” in April 2021 which set out the Councils housing ambitions for the next 5 years. It was essential that the plans had maximum flexibility to ensure it could respond to the housing needs of the District & Borough. As part of the ongoing monitoring; the strategy will be reviewed annually and an updated action plan will be adopted, with a continuing focus on our themes ‘Housing for Place & Housing for people’

The Councils are pleased to report that progress on the Year 1 Action Plan is good. Despite the pandemic and response required by the councils throughout that time, very few tasks require a revised timescale for completion. Some of the slippage reported can be attributed to delays in terms of building due to the Covid-19 restrictions; which has led to national shortages in materials and a challenging year for the labour market. Similarly, some of the face to face events that were planned for year 1 will now take place in year 2. However, the Councils have an agile working policy, and so despite the rule to work from home, we have continued to work with minimal interruption and delivered our services across the housing team in as normal way as possible.

Declaration of a Housing Crisis

As a reflection of the chronic issues with affordability and availability of accommodation for local residents, both Councils have declared a housing crisis setting out steps they want to tackle the issue locally. Housing is a priority of the corporate strategies “Better Lives for All” and “A plan for West Devon” and both Councils have made their position clear, with a raft of measures which include political lobbying for legislative change, direct delivery and introductions of policies and incentives to make best use of housing stock.

The current housing market is challenging, and changes to the economy as a result of Brexit and the pandemic require the Council to react quickly to intervene and assist people in our local area. This includes lobbying for change in legislation and national policy. We can report

that people who, only a short while ago, would have been able to resolve their housing need without our assistance now are unable to do so. The lack of affordable housing to rent, while the increase in house prices for those looking to buy is having a lasting impact on our local area. The ability to get a foot on the housing ladder has become more difficult for those just starting out, as has rightsizing and adapting homes for the elderly or those with mobility problems. The Council has introduced initiatives to tackle some of these challenges and whilst it is too soon to measure their success we look forward to reporting on these in the future.

South Hams date (sept 2021)

1. The District Council will lobby government, through MPs and the Local Government Association, to allow a Council Tax charge on housing plots with planning permission if they have not been built after a specified period. This would encourage developers to get on and build their sites without delay.
2. They will also lobby Government to review all holiday accommodation. This would ensure that it is properly regulated, complying with local planning policies and taxes. This could include an extension of the 90-day short let legislation, a proper planning class for short lets and proper licencing for them. This would prevent people finding loopholes in the taxation system and prevent too many local homes being converted to holiday accommodation
3. The Council should also immediately review all holiday letting in the District to ensure that the owners are paying the correct amount for the removal of waste and recycling. Businesses should not be on the normal domestic recycling and waste collection.
4. South Hams District Council will also ask the Joint Local Plan project team to review the amounts of affordable housing in the Joint Local Plan and see if this can be increased, so that the percentage of "First Homes" on a development is in addition to the existing requirement for 30% affordable housing.
5. The District Council already runs a letting agency to encourage landlords to make properties available for local families in need. There should be further promotion of this and regular landlord forums to encourage more properties to become available.
6. The District Council works closely with registered providers on many housing projects across the District; they will now be working with them to ensure the best use of those properties, such as to encourage tenants to downsize where possible and make larger properties available for larger households.
7. In addition to this, the District Council is proposing to use some of the affordable housing revenue to increase payments made to those tenants downsizing to make the move more attractive and affordable.
8. The Council is committed to using Section 106 affordable housing contributions as soon as possible, to help fund developments anywhere in the District where the terms of the Section 106 agreements will allow.
9. The Council also wants to campaign for changes to the Broad Market Area, to better reflect the costs of rents in the South Hams.
10. The Council would encourage the development of an exemplar site of low carbon modular housing, to show that developments can be both stylish and great to live in.
11. South Hams District Council also agreed to actively seek opportunities to invest in Council owned social housing with highly sustainable specification.
12. To lobby Government to allow local councils to be able to charge 200% Council Tax on second/ holiday homes, as they do in Wales.

West Devon (February 2022)

1. Demonstrate our commitment to the wellbeing of homeless people in the Borough by providing quality temporary accommodation (such as is proposed at Springhill Tavistock) and reduce the need for less appropriate forms of temporary accommodation.
2. Act where the Council has a land holding and take an interventionist approach to the housing market over the longer- term, where there is demonstrable housing need, leading to improved long term housing outcomes.
3. Recognise the market failures locally around accommodation options for vulnerable people (exempt accommodation), work in close partnership with Devon County Council to provide alternatives – putting people before profit. At the same time lobby national government to make legislative changes to remove the incentives for unscrupulous providers and to protect the needs of this vulnerable group.
4. Recognise the need for extra care accommodation in the Borough (such as proposed at Plymouth Rd) and ensure such schemes are supported to come forward.
5. Actively contribute to 'Team Devon's' housing task force and housing commission to build the case for affordable housing as a key priority in any pan-Devon Page No devolution ask.
6. Lobby government through our MPs and the LGA to review the regulation of holiday accommodation, to ensure all holiday accommodation is suitably regulated and made subject to local planning policies and taxes. We should also appeal for an extension to the 90-day short term let legislation to be extended outside London and lobby DLUC for a separate planning class for short term lets and a proper licensing system to cater for them.
7. As the Council moves towards a review of the JLP, aspire to the highest affordable housing threshold that is sustainable and underpin it in policy.
8. Create a long term strategic partnership with a high quality Registered Provider to see the delivery of affordable-led housing at scale and over the long term in the Borough.
9. Continue to work closely with our main Registered Providers to ensure best occupancy of stock, not just by providing financial incentives for downsizing, but, where a step into home ownership may be possible, supporting tenants to make that move through a deposit grant scheme.
10. Use any Section 106 affordable housing contributions as soon as possible to help fund developments anywhere in the Borough where the terms of the Section 106 Agreement permit this.
11. As agreed at the last Hub Committee meeting, campaign for changes to the Broad Market Area to better reflect the costs of rents in West Devon.
12. Actively seek opportunities to invest in Council owned social housing with high sustainability specification (including modular housing) to support those on low incomes who are unable to afford 'affordable' rented housing.
13. Aligned with our Climate Change Emergency, continue to fund (and bid for further national funding) improvements to existing private sector houses within the Borough, recognising that housing is responsible for 40% of national CO2 emissions.
14. Lobby MPs and Central Government to provide an incentive to landowners for the provision of land specifically for Local Needs Affordable Housing. Giving landowners a

tax break when providing land for affordable housing where there is an identified need, would, it is believed, help to release land at a reduced cost to support the small scale provision of affordable housing in our rural communities.

How did we do in Year 1?

Both councils have performed well with regard to affordable housing delivery through the Joint Local Plan, however, demand for services remains high and the councils continue to work hard to resolve housing need issues cross the district and borough.

Place Priority 1 – Promote Balanced and Sustainable communities

- Achieved a planning consent for a new hostel in West Devon for use as quality temporary housing for households facing homelessness (**PIC**)
- Exceeded our affordable housing delivery target to include an additional 86 affordable homes over and above target.
- Step on scheme for South Hams approved to commence 1st April 2022
- Achieved planning on an exception site to deliver a council led affordable housing scheme delivering 8 affordable homes to be managed by South Hams District Council
- Launched our new SeaMoor Homes inhouse lettings and marketing website for homes to rent and to buy
- Review of current self-build register in progress, looking at best practice from other local authorities
- Oversaw completion of purpose built affordable rented scheme for clients with learning and mobility difficulties at Elmhurst Lodge in Dartington (ELMHURST) and worked alongside partner agencies to ensure accommodation was allocated appropriately to tenants requiring specialist accommodation.

Place priority 2 – Promote balanced and sustainable communities

- We have spent over £960000 from the better care fund in South Hams and over £480000 in West Devon
- Initiated procurement process to commence scoping of housing scheme for adults with additional needs. Working alongside Ivybridge Town Council.
- Planning granted for an Extra Care scheme in Tavistock to meet local needs.
- Commenced scoping of existing council owned stock for use as housing in Okehampton and Tavistock
- Developed a mapping system to illustrate clearly areas of housing need and where information gaps exist. To be managed and populated by our newly appointed Housing Analyst

People Priority 1 – Homes that support the health and wellbeing of our residents

- Prevented and relived homelessness for 164 households in South Hams and 97 in West Devon
- Formed a Disabled adapted panel to optimise matching of adapted housing stock to those who need it. 40 households successfully matched to appropriate housing.

- Completed 132 Disabled Facilities Grants in South Hams and 95 in West Devon – supporting 227 people to remain in their own homes.
- Committed 1/3 Green Homes Grant to increase energy efficiency in the private rented sector
- Permanently employed a dedicated Rough Sleeper Outreach officer to assist those people sleeping on the streets

People Priority 2 – Make the best use of and improve the quality of existing housing stock

- Increased our downsizing incentive for those tenants of Registered Providers who are seeking smaller accommodation, this freeing up larger properties for families on our housing register. Since the revision took place in December 21 6 households have been supported to downsize.
- Developed Landlord information and tenancy management advice packs, to be rolled out online in 2022
- Intervened in the retaliatory eviction of 3 households to prevent unlawful evictions and ensure landlords provide homes to the required standards.
- Reviewed and implemented a new Tenancy Strategy

Over the last 2 years it has been more difficult to meet some of the actions, particularly where face to face home visits, or forums were required. This is particularly of note around the Gypsy, Traveller and Van Dweller outreach work was needed. The forum previously planned for 2021 has been re booked and will take place in April 2022. Outreach staff have conducted some outreach work with gypsy and travellers where pandemic restrictions allowed. Focus on this area of outreach work will increase as restrictions are lifted and whilst staff safety can be managed.

Looking to the future – Year 2

The new action plan continues to focus on Housing for Place and Housing for People and the priorities under each area. Health and Wellbeing also remains a crucial focus on the services which this strategy seeks to deliver and this in turn is supported by a new 5 year homelessness and rough sleeper strategy that is due to be adopted in April 2022.

The Council continues to focus in year 2 on ensuring that we are not only delivering new housing of the right type for people in the right places, but that we also make best use of existing stock. More than ever we need to work hard to ensure tenants both private and of our Registered Provider partners and homeowners, live in homes that are well maintained, energy efficient and meet their health and wellbeing needs.

We will learn from the successes of our established Disabled Adapted Panel to support more people to continue to live independently for as long as possible in their own home or to empower them to move to more suitable accommodation

The new 5 year Homelessness strategy will strive to achieve delivery of an excellent homelessness service to ensure that everyone has a safe roof over their head and provide support through our 'street navigators' to assist people with advice and assistance in to a private or housing association tenancy.

We will continue to deliver affordable housing through the Joint Local Plan and through Neighbourhood Plans with an increased emphasis on community engagement to ensure that homes meet the needs of our rural and coastal communities.

As part of the work to tackle the Housing Crisis, both Councils have enhanced the Tenants Incentive downsizing scheme for tenants of our Registered Providers. South Hams additionally launched the 'Step On' pilot scheme to assist tenants of Registered Providers to gain a foot on the shared-ownership ladder by gifting a deposit of up to £5000. This innovative scheme is designed to support people into shared ownership and also to create vacancies in the rented stock to assist with households on the housing register. The scheme launches on the 1st of April, and there is appetite to explore the same initiative in West Devon

The Councils are also committed to continuing to work closely with our communities to understand and promote services, understand fully local housing need and work to improve our homes and ensure our communities are listened to and supported.