

Agenda Item No: 4
Report To: Overview and Scrutiny Committee
Date: 21st July 2015
Report Title: Annual Report of the Housing Framework 2013-18
Report Author: Jennifer Shaw, Housing Strategy Manager



Summary: This report summarises the 2015 annual report of the Housing Framework 2013-18. It highlights work undertaken during 2014/15 to achieve the five priorities of the Framework and issues and opportunities presented over the last 12 months. The report recommends a review of the five priorities further to the publication of the Council's Corporate Plan.

Key Decision: NO

Affected Wards: All

Recommendations: **The committee be asked to:**
Note the annual report and agree its publication on the Ashford Borough Council website.

Recommend a review the five priorities following the publication of the Council's corporate plan.

Policy Overview: Ashford Housing Framework 2013-18
 Corporate Plan, Focus 2013-15
 Kent Forum Housing Strategy 2012-15
 Laying the Foundations, A Housing Strategy for England 2011

Financial Implications: None

Risk Assessment NO

Equalities Impact Assessment Undertaken for Housing Framework 2013-18

Other Material Implications: None

Exemption Clauses: N/A

Background Papers: N/A

Contacts:

jennifer.shaw@ashford.gov.uk – Tel: (01233) 330451

Report Title: Annual Report of the Housing Framework 2013-18

Purpose of the Report

1. To present an update on achieving the five priorities of the Ashford Housing Framework 2013-18 during the year 2014-15.
2. To provide members with a copy of the Annual Report 2015 for agreement to publish on the ABC website
3. To consider if the five priorities are still relevant and whether a review would be timely further to the publication of the Council's Corporate Plan.

Issue to be Decided

4. To note the progress towards delivery of the five priorities of the Housing Framework 2013-18 during 2014-15.
5. To agree the publication of the Housing Framework Annual Report 2015.
6. To decide whether to recommend a review of the five priorities.

Background

7. The Housing Framework 2013-18 was developed during 2013 and adopted in July that year. The document can be viewed at <http://www.ashford.gov.uk/our-strategic-approach-to-housing> The Framework details the five broad priorities to achieve over the next five years. The action plan gives the structure to develop work-streams that will contribute to achieving the five priorities.
8. The five priorities of the Housing Framework are:
 - a. Improve the supply of affordable housing to meet local housing needs in Ashford borough's urban and rural areas
 - b. Improve environmental quality of homes and address fuel poverty in all tenures
 - c. Increase availability and choice of accommodation including for vulnerable people
 - d. Increase resident satisfaction with homes and neighbourhoods and increase opportunities for resident involvement
 - e. Prevent and reduce homelessness and increase access to settled accommodation for homeless households and those at risk of homelessness

9. Last years Annual Report 2014 can be accessed at <http://www.ashford.gov.uk/our-strategic-approach-to-housing>
10. In addition to the Annual Report, Members receive a quarterly performance update from Community and Housing that provides a statistical update on performance. Previous quarterly performance reports are available on the ABC website. <http://www.ashford.gov.uk/housing-services-quarterly-performance-report>
11. This report includes
 - A summary of the Action Plan (appendix 1) with an indicator to show progress.
 - The full draft Annual Report 2015 (appendix 2) that gives further detail on achieving each of the priorities, including cases studies to illustrate the role of housing plays within wider society.

Summary of the Annual Report

12. Priority 1: Improve the supply of affordable housing to meet local housing needs in Ashford borough's urban and rural areas.

Through the Local Authority new build programme and new homes delivered by housing associations, 246 new affordable homes were completed in the borough during 2014/15, including 9 rural local needs properties. 13 empty homes were brought back into use, using HCA empty homes funding and 2 former council homes were purchased utilising one-for one (right to buy) money. The successful application to increase in the HRA debt cap enabled the purchase of 21 affordable homes from the developer of a mixed tenure site in Charing. The total number of new affordable housing delivered fell short of the identified need in the Strategic Housing Market Assessment of 368 homes per year. Shortages of materials and labour caused delays to new build completions and there was the loss of 31 Council homes through the right to buy.

A report to Overview and Scrutiny Committee in November 2014, detailed the use of s106 agreements and the associated viability issues, cited by developers, that may result in the reduction of affordable housing delivered from those set in the Core Strategy Policy for affordable housing.

The Property Company (A Better Choice for Property) was formally registered and became operational. The company had 4 properties let at end of March 2015.

As well as delivering more affordable housing, ensuring the maximum use of existing stock is also important. During 2014/15 void times were reduced to 19 days and the assisted moves scheme facilitated 35 older households to downsize, freeing up their family sized accommodation.

At the end of March the Council successfully bid for funding (together with 3 other local authorities) to provide grants to tenants to help them purchase a home on the open market. In Ashford 5 grants are available of £40,000.

13. Priority 2: Improve environmental quality of homes and address fuel poverty in all tenures.

Within the Council's own stock, a programme to insulate hard to heat homes and those which are 'off gas' to less expensive and renewable fuel options for heating and hot water continued. New build properties took a fabric first approach, together with renewable energy options, ensuring they met the Code for Sustainable Homes level 3.

In the private sector there are limited options to encourage improvements to owner occupiers homes. Two schemes linked to improving health outcomes as a result of energy efficiency improvements are available and signposted to.

Private sector landlords, signing up to the accreditation scheme can access funding for boiler replacement, but take up as been minimal.

The fuel poverty indicator remained static from the previous year at 7.6% of households in the borough being in fuel poverty.

14. Priority 3: Increase availability and choice of accommodation including for vulnerable people.

The Social Lettings Agency saw a steady increase in the number of properties on full management option, particularly following the promotional event held in the town centre. There were 67 properties on full management option at end of March 2015. The private sector leasing scheme also provides an average of 64 properties per month. These homes are generally used for households who are or are at risk of homelessness. A general rise in the demand for private rented properties has seen a decrease in the number of rents below the LHA rates and an increase in the number of landlords unwilling to take tenants who are in receipt of benefits.

Disabled adaptations enable people to remain living independently at home. Both in the Council's homes and in the private sector there continued to be waiting times in the region of 12 months for an adaptation to be carried out. For tenants a prioritisation policy was introduced to better manage the process and provide transparency on waiting times.

Supported housing helps to maintain independence for vulnerable people. During 2014/15 the young person scheme started on site at The Limes, and move-on accommodation is being developed as part of the Kent PFI project. The Council's sheltered remodelling programme continues with a second scheme (Danemore) being consulted on. The Little Hill scheme is progressing under the Kent PFI and two extra care developments, led by Housing 21, were under construction in Ashford and Aldington.

15. Priority 4: Increase resident satisfaction with homes and neighbourhoods and increase opportunities for resident involvement.

The Council maintained its properties at 100% decent homes standard and gas safety certificate compliance. Rent collection was consistently high and the number of tenants in arrears was lower than the previous year.

The tenants' panel have greater involvement in scrutiny and the development of the Ashford Promise continued. Estate inspections have been reviewed and new ways of working introduced, the PSCOs now attend along with residents. A number of neighbourhood initiatives took place that also engaged with the wider community.

16. Priority 5: Prevent and reduce homelessness and increase access to settled accommodation for homeless households and those at risk of homelessness.

Prevention of homelessness continued to be the focus and a review of the housing options team identified that the team was working effectively and all services are geared towards prevention. Proactive work through the Welfare Reform Officers and at The Hub at Job Centre Plus is assisting people to respond to changes to benefit and wherever possible help them gain employment.

The refurbishment of Christchurch House was completed and this provides accommodation for 8 families, reducing the need to use Bed and Breakfast accommodation

The Homelessness Strategy commenced a review and a consultation event for stakeholders was held. The Review is informing the refresh of the Homelessness Strategy that will come before Members during 2015.

Review of the Five Priorities

17. The report to Overview and Scrutiny in 2014 noted a review of the Housing Framework be undertaken in 2015 further to the general election. It is suggested that this focuses on the five priorities and is commenced following the publication of the Council's Corporate Plan to ensure they align to the wider vision for the Borough.
18. Additionally with the expectation of new legislation emanating from central government a review of the five priorities will assist in planning for any impacts, either positive or negative that may result from new legislation or changes to existing legislation.

Handling

19. Following Members agreement the annual report will be formatted to meet ABC communications criteria and published on the ABC website.

20. A link to the published document will be circulated to all members and relevant stakeholders.
21. If agreed, a working group will be formed, to review the five priorities and update the action plan.

Conclusion

22. The Housing Service continues to deliver positive outcomes to its tenants, the wider community and the stakeholders it engages with.
23. The benefit of living in good quality housing that is affordable by the household contributes to wellbeing, health and prosperity for the individuals and the wider community.
24. The number of affordable homes available each year falls below demand, creating pressure on the housing register and homelessness' services. Rising demand for private rented properties, escalates rental prices making them unaffordable to many working households earning average or below average earnings and those receiving part or full benefits.
25. A review of the five priorities will ensure they are appropriate to best meet the housing needs of existing and future residents of the Borough and contribute to the overall economic prosperity of Ashford.

Portfolio Holder's Views

26. This is a good report and brings everyone up to date with current achievements. Future provision may need to be reviewed in light of the availability of resources.

Contact: Jennifer Shaw, Housing Strategy Manager

Email: jennifer.shaw@ashford.gov.uk

Appendix 1 - Housing Framework 2013-2018 Action Plan

Timeframe: Short = within 2 years, Medium = 3 – 5 years, Long = more than 5 years

Status Achieved ✓
 On target ◇
 Missed ✕
 To be progressed *

Priority 1: IMPROVE THE SUPPLY OF AFFORDABLE HOUSING TO MEET LOCAL HOUSING NEEDS IN ASHFORD BOROUGH'S URBAN AND RURAL AREAS			
Action	Timeframe	Summary update	Status
a) Wherever possible maximise the number of section106 sites achieving 30 or 35 per cent affordable housing in urban and rural areas respectively	Ongoing	Housing services continues to liaise with planning colleagues to maximise the affordable housing delivery on s106 sites. Majority of sites granted planning permission in 14/15 achieved policy target, exceptions are Kent Wool Growers site and Conningbrook Lakes which were granted with no affordable housing requirement due to viability issues.	◇
b) Deliver a minimum of 59 new homes through the local authority new build programme	Medium (by 2018)	Programme for 11-15 = 39 homes completed and 20 due late summer 2015	✓
c) Create a local housing and regeneration company	Short (by 2015)	Company formed and operational from April 2014	✓
d) Housing company to develop private and affordable housing to an initial value of £10 million to meet local needs	Medium (by 2018)	Currently seven private rented properties in housing company portfolio	◇
e) Make best use of existing stock including ensuring appropriate accommodation	Ongoing	Void times reduced on previous year. Assisted moves continue to assist older tenants to downsize. Tenancy fraud investigations continue.	◇

used to meet housing needs, reduce under occupation and meet void targets, continue tenancy fraud investigations		Successful bid made with neighbouring authorities to offer cash incentive to tenants to purchase a home on the open market.	
f) Support Housing Association led developments to create mixed communities in urban and rural areas	Ongoing	Local Lettings plans and use of the Kent Housing Group Sustainable Communities protocol are used to aid creation of mixed communities.	◊
g) Develop innovative ways to improve delivery of local needs housing, including a cross subsidy approach and land purchase options	Short (by 2015)	Cross subsidy procedure developed. Affordable units purchased from developer of mixed tenure site at Charing	✓
h) Utilise receipts from the right to buy to develop more affordable homes	Medium (by 2018)	None delivered to date but use of 1 -2 -1 monies planned for new affordable homes during 2015. Two previously sold council homes were bought back using one for one money.	◊
i) Support self - build homes	Ongoing	No self build units progressed in 14/15. Investigating use of small council owned plots during 2015	◊
j) Identify and return to use long term empty properties	Ongoing	HCA empty homes funding enabled purchase of 13 empty homes. Targeted work being undertaken in relation to empty properties at Court Wurtin. Identification of empty homes and targeted work with long term empty private sector properties through Private Sector Housing team	◊

Priority 2: IMPROVE ENVIRONMENTAL QUALITY OF HOMES AND ADDRESS FUEL POVERTY IN ALL TENURES			
Action	Timeframe	Summary update	Status
a) Develop and implement a private sector housing strategy	Short (by 2015)	Not progressed as now not required. Policy documents need to be updated and a PSH section to be included within the housing framework document	✗

b) Promote uptake of energy efficiency measures across all tenures	Ongoing	Upgrades to tenants boilers, insulation and reducing use of oil and LPG in off gas properties by replacement with renewable energy sources. New build homes delivered by the Council in 14/15 built to code for sustainable homes level 3. In private sector, landlord accreditation scheme has resulted in three boiler replacements.	◇
c) Work to reduce fuel poverty across all tenures	Ongoing	Fuel poverty indicator remained constant from previous year at 7.6% Signposting to schemes available – Winter Warmth Grant and Public Health Winter Warmth programme 17 referrals to the Warm Homes programme.	✗
d) Continue trial to insulate hard to heat homes in ABC stock and roll out main programme in 2015	Long	Programme now being rolled out with expected completion of insulation for between 15 and 20 hard to heat properties during 15/16.	◇
e) Promote uptake of renewable energy measures	Ongoing	In local authority and housing association homes renewable energy measures are installed where appropriate. No renewable energy measures were grant funded in the private sector	◇ ✗
f) Undertake private sector stock condition survey	Short (by 2015)	Not progressed due to high costs involved. Enquiries being undertaken into the use of BRE data to identify stock condition in the area.	✗
g) Maximise resources by linking with other agencies	Ongoing	Disabled Facilities Grant being reviewed with Occupational Therapy service and other Kent LA's to consider centralisation of aspects of service delivery Joint workshops on welfare reform delivered together with DWP to social landlords and private sector landlords	◇

Priority 3: INCREASE AVAILABILITY AND CHOICE OF ACCOMMODATION INCLUDING FOR VULNERABLE PEOPLE			
Action	Timeframe	Summary update	Status
a) Increase availability of well managed private rented homes	Ongoing	Increase in homes under Social Lettings Agency. Private sector leasing scheme provides on average over 60 properties. Landlord liaison officers and private sector housing team identify and resolve issues in private rented sector and regular landlord working group and forum held.	◊
b) Continue to increase the number of homes within the Ashford Better Choice social lettings agency portfolio	Ongoing	Increased from 51 to 67 during 14/15 including 13 taken into management as a result of the expansion into the Shepway area.	✓
c) Identify and develop bespoke properties for disabled families through local authority new build programme	Medium (by 2018)	14/15 LA new build programme delivered 3 wheelchair standard properties including 1 bespoke design.	✓
d) Provide disabled adaptations for ABC tenants	Ongoing	262 disabled adaptations completed, increase in budget agreed and prioritization policy implemented.	◊
e) Work with partners to identify and increase range of supported housing for vulnerable people to meet local needs (including ex service personnel), seek alternative ways to generate revenue funding	Ongoing	Supported housing scheme for young people commenced construction. Move on accommodation commenced through Kent PFI Two extra care schemes under construction with Housing Association partners	◊
f) Manage the Disabled Facilities Grant budget to maximise assistance provided	Ongoing	53 adaptations provided	◊
g) Remodel and improve council-owned sheltered	Long	Programme of remodelling Farrow Court continues with phase 1 under construction. Plans for second scheme being developed	◊

housing accommodation		(Danemore)	
h) Provide increased provision of gypsy and traveller sites	Medium (by 2018)	Number of plots on Council owned site remain constant. Further provision most likely to come via planning policy.	✱
i) Develop Older Persons Framework	Medium (by 2018)	To be progressed and link to KCC Accommodation Strategy	✱
j) Increase the number of well planned and managed shared houses (HMOs)	Long	Small increase in number of applications for licensed HMOs. Work ongoing with the Private Sector Landlord Working Group.	◊

Priority 4: INCREASE RESIDENT SATISFACTION WITH HOMES AND NEIGHBOURHOODS AND INCREASE OPPORTUNITIES FOR RESIDENT INVOLVEMENT			
Action	Timeframe	Summary update	Status
a) Encourage housing providers to be actively involved in good housing management	Ongoing	Continued liaison with Housing Associations to deliver high quality housing and neighbourhood management	◊
b) Regenerate Brookfield Road and Bybrook areas	Medium (By 2018)	Bybrook scheme stalled due to difficulties financing community improvements from new build proposal.	✕
		Brookfield Road – being progressed through a number of individual projects, 5 new homes completed and other projects under consideration (e.g.The Poplars and Halstow Way)	◊
c) Review sheltered housing service	Short (By 2015)	Completed 13/14	✓
d) Joint working with agencies to deliver neighbourhood improvements	Ongoing	Range of community activities undertaken, including 3 ‘clean sweep’ days covering 6 areas.	✓
e) Address poor standards in private sector, including park homes and investigate options	Ongoing	Where necessary enforcement action taken to improve private rented properties. Park homes monitored and complaints addressed through	◊

for self funded improvements e.g. equity release		appropriate action. Charging Policy introduced. Equity release to be progressed	*
f) Maintain decent homes standard in council-owned stock	Ongoing	ABC stock 100% compliant	✓
g) Increase tenant involvement and responsibility through tenant panel and tenant scrutiny	Ongoing	Tenant panel taking a greater role in scrutiny	◇

Priority 5: PREVENT AND REDUCE HOMELESSNESS AND INCREASE ACCESS TO SETTLED ACCOMMODATION FOR HOMELESS HOUSEHOLDS AND THOSE AT RISK OF HOMELESSNESS			
Action	Timeframe	Summary update	Status
a) Implement the homelessness strategy focus on: Preventing homelessness wherever possible Providing quality housing services and suitable accommodation for homeless people Homes with support, settled and sustainable homes	Short (by 2015)	Strong focus on prevention of homelessness as an invest to save measure adopted and implemented resulting in savings in B&B costs. Homelessness Strategy review being undertaken 14/15 with updated homelessness strategy to be adopted during 2015. Short stay temporary housing developed at Christchurch House, Christchurch Road, Ashford.	◇
b) Raise awareness of the implications of welfare reform to tenants	Short (by 2015)	Local media and Tenants newsletter used to update tenants and provide information on where to seek advice Joint workshops with DWP for Social Landlords.	✓
c) Identify tenants who will lose benefit and advise of choices to	Short (by 2015)	Area managers identify tenants who may face difficulties due to welfare reform and work closely with the Welfare Reform Officers.	✓

manage reduced income		Landlord Liaison Officers and Housing Options team have offered advice in the private sector	
d) Monitor external influences, identify pressures on meeting housing needs and respond to minimise any negative effects	Ongoing	Changes to legislation and policy affecting housing considered and opportunities for joint working investigated where a collaborative approach would be beneficial.	◊



Housing Framework 2013-2018

Annual Report 2015

Jennifer Shaw

Housing Strategy Manager

July 2015

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Introduction

This report provides an update on progress towards meeting the five priorities set out in the Housing Framework 2013–18. Achieving these priorities will make a significant contribution to the Corporate Plan (Focus 2013-15) aim of ‘Quality Homes and Places To Live’.

Adopted in July 2013, The Housing Framework’s five priorities are:

1. Improve the supply of affordable housing to meet local housing needs in Ashford borough’s urban and rural areas
2. Improve environmental quality of homes and address fuel poverty in all tenures
3. Increase availability and choice of accommodation including for vulnerable people
4. Increase resident satisfaction with homes and neighbourhoods and increase opportunities for resident involvement
5. Prevent and reduce homelessness and increase access to settled accommodation for homeless households and those at risk of homelessness

The Housing Framework 2013-18 document is available at <http://www.ashford.gov.uk/our-strategic-approach-to-housing>

Many of the activities undertaken by the Housing Service have positive social benefits to both the recipient and the wider community. This report seeks to highlight actions that have made or are making a difference to residents’ lives. Given the diverse range of work undertaken across the breadth of the Housing Service, many activities contribute to achieving more than one of the Housing Framework’s priorities. Similarly other agendas benefit positively from housing related interventions, such as health and wellbeing, the local economy and employment, prevention and fear of crime, education and skills. This is recognised by the Ashford Health and Wellbeing Board where Homelessness is one of the key priorities. Similarly good quality appropriate housing can make a significant contribution to other priorities of the HWB such as dementia and falls prevention.

The Housing Service continues to seek more effective ways of maintaining a high standard of service across its mandatory and discretionary areas of work. Performance is monitored and reported to members through the Community and Housing quarterly performance reports which can be accessed through the Council website at <http://www.ashford.gov.uk/housing-services-quarterly-performance-report>

New legislation and government policy will need to be considered and any impact on delivery of the housing framework's priorities monitored to ensure they are still relevant to meeting local housing need across the borough.

1. Priority 1: Improve the supply of affordable housing to meet local housing needs in Ashford borough's urban and rural areas

1.1 Local Authority Initiatives:

LA new build programme – During 2014/15 the new build programme completed 39 new homes for affordable rent. Three of these properties have been designed to wheelchair standards. These 39 homes have provided a home for 129 people including 77 children.

One home completed under the 2011-15 Local Authority new build programme was designed specifically for a large family with a severely disabled child. Emily suffers from both mental health and physical disabilities and previously lived with her family of 9 in a 4 bedroom property. Emily had been sharing a bedroom with a sibling which was becoming increasingly difficult for both Emily and her sister due to Emily's behavioural issues. There was a need for Emily to have her own room and most importantly the need for a level access shower room to enable her parents to be able to wash and bathe their daughter far more easily taking into consideration her behavioural and physical disability issues.

To accommodate this large family and meet the needs of Emily, as prescribed by KCC Disabled Children Services, it was decided that a bespoke 6 bedroom house would be the answer and the Council included this in its successful bid for funding to the Homes and Community Agency.

The house includes a wet room facility for Emily and a separate family bathroom upstairs. To help manage family life and Emily's behavioural problems, a separate family lounge was created with an open plan kitchen and dining room, creating the space the family need.

The house is effectively 2 properties combined into one. The services to the property and internal design have been configured to ensure the property is future proof and could be converted into two separate homes should this ever be required. The property was completed during March 2015 and the family have settled in well.

The eight new homes in Hawthorn, Appledore, have been built for people with a housing need and priority given to those with a proven local connection. Alongside the development work the council was able to improve the parking in the area, with the addition of new bays that will benefit the local community. Building rural affordable homes is important so that people can continue to live where they grew up and where their support networks are. Often prices in rural areas are beyond first time buyers and rents can be high – so rural affordable homes are vital. One resident was an integral part of the development, having agreed to the scheme using part of her garden for the build. Having previously lived in a three bedroom house on the site, Daphne has subsequently moved into one of the new bungalows and is thrilled with her home, saying: “It’s absolutely brilliant. It’s lovely!”

Empty Homes – 13 empty homes were purchased utilising the HCA empty homes funding, 9 were previously sold council properties and 4 private homes.

Utilising right to buy receipts – two previously sold council properties have been bought back using 1 for 1 money.

The Property Company – On the 17th April 2014 A Better Choice for Property Limited was formally registered with Companies House. The company has been set up to help the Council become a more commercially led organisation. During 2014/15 the company let 4 properties at below market rents, at or above the local housing allowance rate. More information on the property company is available on the web at www.abcproperty.org

Housing Revenue Account debt cap – By successfully applying to the government for an increase to the level of borrowing available to the Council under the Housing Revenue Account, the Council was able to negotiate the purchase of 21 homes for affordable rent and shared ownership at Poppyfields, in Charing. This is a mixed tenure development being brought forward by David Wilson Homes and will be the first time the Council has procured shared ownership properties. BPHA (the Help to Buy agent) has been engaged to assist with marketing and sales. A local lettings plan will be implemented, giving priority to applicants with a connection to Charing.

1.2 Registered Providers (Housing Associations):

Update on delivery – Over the last year 107 homes were built in the borough by Housing Associations. The conversion of the Crown Building (former tax office) by Moat contributed 25 affordable rented homes to this total.

There were 2 local needs housing schemes completed one of 4 homes in Pluckley (by English Rural Housing Association) and one of 5 homes in Kenardington (by West Kent Housing Association).

Westfields, Pluckley: Four homes for affordable rent; 2 x 1 bed flats and 2 x 2 bed flats. One resident, moved from a 3 bedroom house in the village, owned by Sanctuary HA, where she had lived for 30 years. She'd been living on her own in the house for many years and was delighted to now have an easy to maintain, economical to run, ground floor flat with wonderful views and lots of storage! This move has 'freed up' her previous home to let to a family. All occupiers of the four local needs flats know each other and have quickly settled in to their new homes. There is a small area of communal land which the residents are looking after and have themselves installed a couple of picnic tables and benches.

1.3 Site viability:

On mixed development sites (s106 sites) the percentage of affordable housing provision is negotiated with developers to achieve the policy target of 30% or 35% in urban and rural areas respectively.

A number of planning applications granted during 2014/15 on sites that meet the criteria to provide affordable housing are meeting the policy target. However the conversion of Trafalgar House from office to residential did not yield any affordable housing due to national policy overriding local requirements in such conversion. The decisions granted for the Kent Wool Growers site and Conningbrook Lakes development did not yield any affordable housing, with a loss of up to 137 affordable homes.

A report was presented to Overview and Scrutiny Committee on 25th November 2014 regarding the use of s106 agreements and affordable housing delivery. Minute number 247.

1.4 Maximising use of stock:

In addition to build new affordable homes and bringing empty homes back into use, the efficient use of existing homes to meet housing needs is vital to address the shortage of affordable housing in the borough.

Void turn around – The average void turn around time continues to decrease, to 19 calendar days in 2014/15 compared to 21 days in 2013/14. During 2014 weekly meetings with staff involved in voids and the contractor were instigated, this has led to a greater understanding of roles and responsibilities and the ability to plan the work required to forthcoming voids in addition to reviewing work undertaken. Performance monitoring criteria of turn around time, rent loss and resident satisfaction are measured. Clarification of properties excluded from the void monitoring has enabled a better void management. Such properties would be those

that require major works, such as a bathroom replacement or have a particular issue that would be above normal void works e.g. treating an infestation.

Reducing under occupation – The Council continues to offer its assisted moves scheme to older tenants who occupy homes larger than their needs. In 2014/15 35 assisted moves were facilitated, freeing up family homes for re-letting.

Mutual exchanges – 98 people undertook a mutual exchange, with 13 of those being from outside the borough. The mutual exchange scheme enables tenants to move to more suitable property and /or area.

Tenancy fraud investigations – Housing Services and Revenues and Benefits staff continue to investigate cases of tenancy fraud as required to make sure homes are lived in by the tenant and not sublet.

Social mobility fund – The Council successfully bid, in March 2015, in partnership with 3 other local authorities for funding to assist tenants, who would qualify for the right to buy, to purchase an open market home by offering them a cash incentive. The government grant offers £20,000 this will be match funded from the Council. In Ashford a total of 5 grants of £40,000 each are available. The scheme is operational from April 2015 for one year.

1.5 Strategy and Policy:

The Housing Service continues to work closely with the planning policy team to assist with the development of affordable housing policy for the evolving local plan.

The Housing Service is represented at both Kent Housing Group and the Kent Joint Policy and Planning Board (Housing) where joint approaches are developed, such as Think Housing First which sets out a Kent wide ambition to reduce health inequalities through the benefits brought to health and wellbeing by good quality housing and housing management.

1.6 Issues and Opportunities

Shortages of materials and labour resulted in delays to completion dates for new build projects and risk of losing grant funding. Delays caused by utility companies have been recognised by the HCA and waivers agreed to allow for an extension for grant funding to be drawn down where lack of a utility connection prevented completion by end of March 2015.

There were 31 council properties sold where tenants exercised the Right to Buy, this represents a loss of affordable housing available to applicants on the register and a council asset. Although a proportion of the capital receipt is available to replace the homes sold this has so far only delivered 2 replacement homes through the buy back of previously sold council properties.

The number of affordable homes built in 2014/15 increased on the previous year but is still lower than the number required to meet local housing needs as identified in the Strategic Housing Market Assessment of 368 homes per year.

The social mobility fund has potential to free up 5 Council properties for letting if their current tenants are able to purchase a home on the open market.

The extra care housing schemes will create movement in the housing stock, by enabling older people to move from their current accommodation and potentially free up family housing.

2. Priority 2: Improve environmental quality of homes and address fuel poverty in all tenures

2.1 Increasing energy efficiency and reducing fuel poverty:

Fuel poverty indicator – The percentage of fuel poor households in Ashford borough has remained static at 7.6% according to the data sets issued by Department of Energy & Climate Change for 2013 (updated 2015) and 2012 (updated 2014), but with a slight increase in the actual number of households, estimated at 3730 households and 3613 household for those respective years.

<https://www.gov.uk/government/collections/fuel-poverty-sub-regional-statistics>

Energy efficiency for tenants – As part of the on-going Affordable Warmth Programme the council continues to assist tenants to reduce their energy bills by installing 'A' rated gas boilers with system upgrades to meet Part L requirements. The approach to off-gas properties (to phase out the use of expensive and volatile fuel types such as oil and LPG heating systems) is to fit high efficiency storage heaters and renewable energy sources where appropriate.

The on-going insulation programme continues to address hard to insulate properties. In addition to regular cavity and loft insulation improvements further steps have been taken to address those properties that have no wall insulation such as 'airey' houses and solid wall types.

Energy Efficiency in ABC new build – The homes completed in 2014/15 phase of the programme meet the Code for Sustainable Homes Level 3 standard by using a fabric first approach. Complementary sources of renewable energy were then added together with elements to enhance the green credentials of the build. The walls are of a thin joint masonry system with fully filled cavity walls, the floors and roofs are highly insulated making the properties extremely airtight and thermally efficient which reduces heat use and heat loss. The objective was to build high quality houses that will last for decades, able to withstand the rigours of a number of different tenant families over time. This approach ensures the homes are easy and comfortable to live in, whilst delivering excellent U-values and airtightness in the process. To

supplement the inherent thermal and energy efficiency of the build, solar PV panels were used on the roof of some dwellings and in rural areas, where there was no gas, air source heat pumps together with under floor heating and pressurised water system. Where gas was available, highly efficient boilers are installed. This was coupled with rainwater collecting and permeable external hard surfacing to create more sustainable drainage systems.

Energy efficiency in the private sector – the landlord accreditation scheme provides funding for landlords, who are accredited, of up to £2,000 towards boiler replacements. This enabled three boiler replacements. The accreditation scheme is to be reviewed as there has been low interest from landlords wanting to become part of the scheme.

The Warm Homes scheme continues to provide subsidised insulation and heating improvements to eligible residents and there were 17 referrals to this scheme.

There is a small amount of money through the Winter Warmth Grant to fund heating improvements for elderly people with health issues. Referrals come from care professionals and doctors through the Home Improvement Agency. The Councils involvement is to pay for the works. Total number of referrals were 5 of which one applicant has recently had heating improvements carried out and one other has been given approval to start works.

In addition residents can be signposted to the KCC Public Health Winter Warmth programme which aims to reduce the risk to the escalation of health conditions due to cold weather and cold homes in particular. This programme provides emergency warmth solutions, but also some financial support, in the form of a repayable grant for heating or insulation for those not eligible for the Government Green Deal and Energy Company Obligation.

2.2 Issues and Opportunities:

The local authority housing stock is maintained to a high standard and cyclical maintenance programme enables the upgrading of fabric and systems to ensure tenants homes are easier and cheaper to heat.

In the private sector, improvements are ad hoc, dependent on residents coming forward for advice or referrals into a scheme to help those meeting certain criteria. There are few incentives to encourage owner occupiers, particularly those with limited resources, to improve their homes. Comprehensive information on the standard of the housing stock would be required to formulate a targeted approach to improving the energy efficiency and disrepair of homes, together with updated policies to ensure a consistent approach.

The review of the landlord accreditation scheme provides an opportunity to consider how this initiative could encourage greater take up of improvement measures, which would benefit both landlord and tenants.

3. Priority 3: Increase availability and choice of accommodation including for vulnerable people

3.1 Utilising the private rented sector:

Social lettings agency – There was a steady increase in the number of properties on the full management option, from 51 in April 2014 to 67 in March 2015. 10 properties were taken on during February 2015 likely to be the outcome of the promotional event in the town centre, to recruit more landlords into the scheme, where an empty shop was used as a lettings agency for one week. This resulted in over 30 landlords calling in to gain more information and many landlords expressing interest in the scheme.

For more information <http://www.ashford.gov.uk/abclettings>

Private sector leasing – This scheme continued to provide accommodation for an average of 64 households each month during 2014/15.

3.2 Increasing the availability of well managed private rented homes:

There are a number of initiatives to positively engage with private sector landlords on an informal basis; the landlord working group is held quarterly and there have been landlord forums, in July 2014 and March 2015. The event in March focused on Universal Credit and included speakers from Job Centre plus, the Valuation Office Agency, Kent Savers and the National Landlords Association.

Houses in Multiple Occupation (HMOs) – during the last year a slight increase was noted in the number of licence applications for HMOs. In terms of enforcement action there was 1 Improvement Notice, and 1 Sec 80 under the Environmental Protection Act 1990 resulting in the landlords rectifying problems with heating and hot water, that tenants had previously been without. Two Hazard Awareness Notices, for issues with heating, have brought to the landlord's attention that there were issues that need to be addressed. These will be followed up and if the landlord's have failed to act further action will be considered.

3.3 Disabled adaptations:

Adaptions in Council homes – the Council continues to provide adaptions to tenants' homes to increase independence for those with a disability or long term limiting condition. In the last year 262 adaptions were installed at a cost of £364,816. To better manage the adaptations process and provide greater transparency to residents regarding waiting times a prioritisation policy was introduced in July 2014. In summary, all tenants requiring major works (estimated to cost over £1,000) complete a questionnaire. The questionnaire gives points to tenants based on their level of need and the difficulty they have with their present home. Additional points are awarded based on length of time on the waiting list (1 point per month waiting) so that someone with low points from the questionnaire will accumulate points over

time, as those with the highest points are given priority. The budget has increased each year since 2012, to reduce waiting times and ensure tenants do not wait longer than a year for major works.

To provide best value a policy has been introduced to refuse disabled adaptations in certain circumstances, most specifically where there is significant under-occupation of a council home. Instead, such tenants will be supported to move to more appropriate accommodation.

Disabled facilities grants – in the private sector a total of 53 adaptations were completed, with an average waiting time of 12 months. There has been an increase in the number of flush floor showers required.

3.4 Supported Housing:

Young people – the eight unit scheme reported in last years report is under construction, but completion has been delayed due to archaeological remains being discovered on site. Improvements to the neighbouring play area have been completed further to a consultation event with residents.

Move on accommodation – The 11 units of accommodation under the Kent PFI, Excellent Homes for All are progressing.

Sheltered and extra care accommodation – The redevelopment of the Farrow Court scheme continues and an update is included the members Housing Quarterly Performance Report. The second Council sheltered scheme to be redeveloped to bring up to modern, standards is Danemore in Tenterden. Two resident consultations have been held both with tenants and neighbours. The scheme design is currently being reviewed in light of comments received at these events; however the principle of the redevelopment was broadly welcomed. The Council's Little Hill sheltered scheme, at St Michaels, has been demolished and the site is being redeveloped through the Kent PFI. Housing 21 are building two extra care schemes in the borough, Chamberlain Manor was due for completion by March 2015 but delayed due to a wait for utility connections. The 67 flats of affordable rent and shared ownership will now be ready in July 2015. The rural scheme in Aldington started on site in January 2015 and will offer 33 flats of affordable rent and shared ownership with priority to older local people. A public consultation event was held in October 2015 to gain local opinions on the design and layout of the extra care scheme proposed for Charing. Subsequent to the planning application being submitted a number of local concerns were raised. The application has been deferred to allow time to consider these and review the design accordingly.

3.5 Issues and Opportunities:

Accessing the private rented sector for people on a low income can be difficult as there has been a reduction on the number of properties available to rent below the

Local Housing Allowance rates. Increasingly advertisements for private rented homes stipulate that they will not accept people in receipt of benefit.

The extra care schemes will facilitate downsizing and help maintain independent living for older people. In turn this frees up family sized homes. Current extra care schemes mainly cater for older people from social housing or homes with lower values. There is a need to consider how to meet the needs of more affluent older people with higher levels of equity in their property.

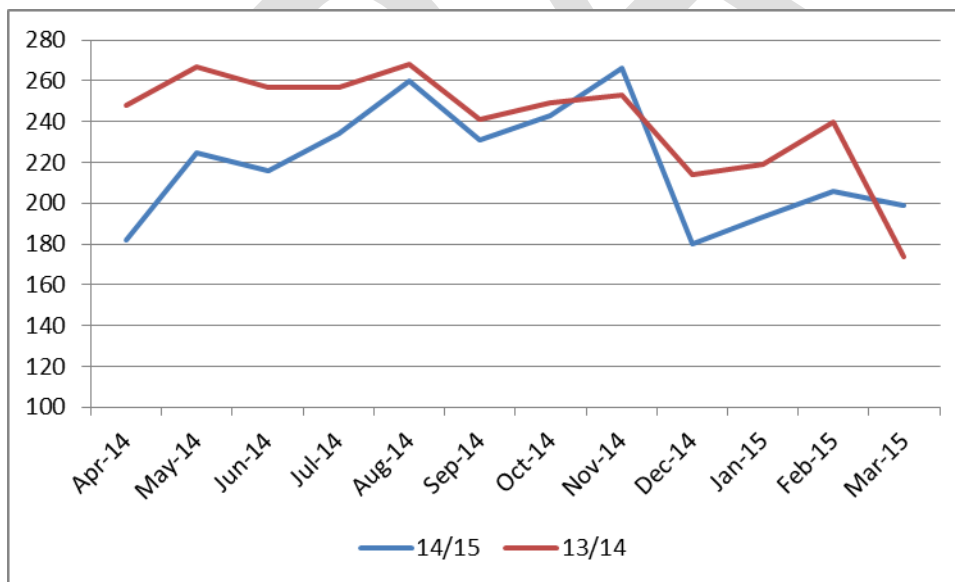
4. Priority 4: Increase resident satisfaction with homes and neighbourhoods and increase opportunities for resident involvement

4.1 Good housing management:

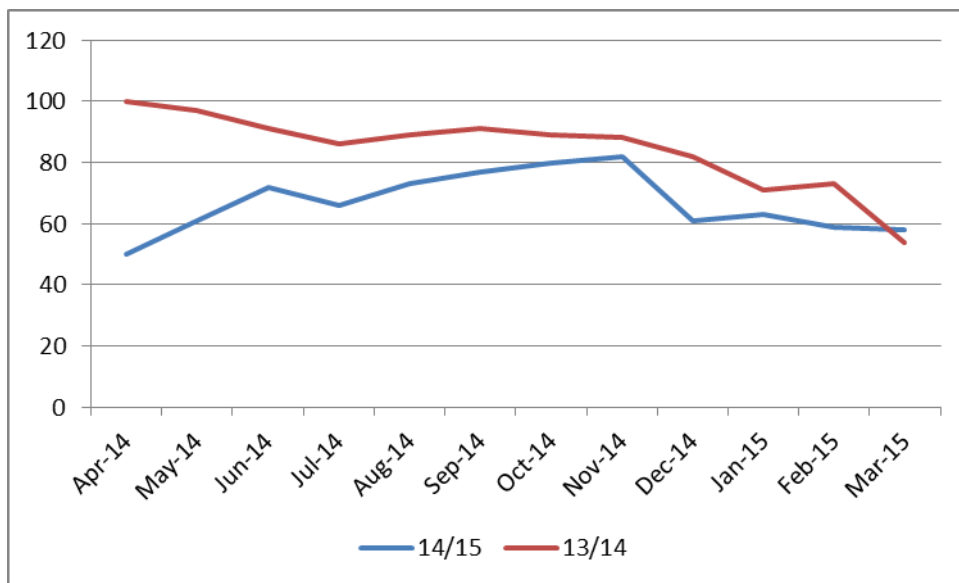
The Council facilitates the Housing Association Management Forum to encourage sharing of good practice and to engage the Housing Associations with homes in the borough in local initiatives.

Rent collection for ABC owned and managed homes stood at 99.55% in March 2015. The graphs below show the number of tenants more than 7 weeks in arrears and more than 13 weeks in arrears was consistently lower in 2014/15 than 2013/14

More than 7 weeks arrears



More than 13 weeks arrears



ABC Tenant Panel – the panel is taking a more active role in how their homes are managed, with an emphasis on scrutiny. The panel’s first project was to consider the policy regarding the improvements tenants can make to their own homes. Secondly they have inputted to the new tenants handbook. Further to undertaking a training course, tenants make up the complaints panel, as the ‘designated person’ in the complaints procedure.

Two long serving Ashford tenants panel members each received highly commended certificates from the Kent Housing Group for the tireless work they do for resident engagement in the borough.

A new tenant panel member said “prior to joining the panel I was not aware that such a provision existed in which council tenants and staff can talk and negotiate many different matters relating to social housing. The panel enables a real ‘voice’ to council tenants and is very helpful in both solving potential problems and avoiding them.

Tenant engagement – A new monthly e-newsletter was launched in February 2015, ‘Tell-us’ asks for tenants views on specific areas of work and encourages greater engagement. The garden competition was again run during 2014 and highlighted some very well cared for and imaginative gardens.

A home contents insurance scheme has been negotiated and introduced for tenants as it was found that many tenants were not covered and did not appreciate they had to take this insurance out themselves. This initiative went live on the 1st February 2015.

Sheltered housing – Several sheltered scheme managers have completed Dementia Champions training and are rolling out a programme of dementia friends training to

sheltered scheme residents and local groups. The sheltered forum is made up of representatives from the borough's sheltered schemes and is working with scheme managers to rejuvenate itself. The group has met to start the process and has already discussed some really positive ideas to increase membership, work with sheltered groups for other housing organisations, and seek funding for projects.

Chilmington gypsy site – The Council owned site of 16 pitches is managed by staff from Housing Services. In 2014 smart meters were installed to monitor electricity use and assist residents to understand their electricity consumption.

Anti social behaviour - The successful programme of 'clean sweeps' continued in 2014/15. This initiative is a multi agency approach to the problem of dealing with various aspects and types of anti social behaviour with both the voluntary and public sector involved. In the nominated area partners will, identify, process and where necessary remove vehicles which appear to be abandoned, remove rubbish and graffiti, deal with any offences revealed and take any other enforcement action that is applicable with regard to the premises visited either against the owners or tenants. This demonstrates that the partners represented can work together, to improve the environment, reduce crime and anti-social behaviour, improve public safety, provide reassurance for the people of the specific area and improve their confidence in the ability of the partners represented to deal with problems that cause them concern. Also to ensure that people live in good quality housing, and to take action if it is found that premises are sub standard. There maybe the opportunity to gather evidence and intelligence during the event, to support prosecutions and to facilitate further action by the appropriate enforcement agency. There were 'clean sweeps' in Wye and Hothfield, Singleton and Brookfield and Newtown and South Willesborough.

Ashford Promise - Development of this initiative to use existing services to encourage tenants to take greater personal responsibility and engender an improved relationship with The Council, as their landlord, continued through out 2014/15. Testing of systems to support The Promise will be concluded with an anticipated launch in late summer/early autumn 2015.

4.2 Neighbourhood Improvements:

Estate inspections - To improve estate inspections a new computer system has been installed which will allow all aspects of an estate inspection to be carried out electronically on a tablet. This will save time which can be used to do better quality inspections. The area managers and residents will be joined by PCSOs to promote community working and to help tackle anti-social behaviour. It became apparent that some areas need more inspections than others. As a result a new three tier system has been introduced. This ranks all areas resulting in either, one, two or three inspections per year.

Project Purple launched on 30 September 2014 with over 60 year 5 pupils from Ashford Oaks Primary School in South Ashford embarking on this exciting project. Each child gives 10 hours of their time to help in their community. The first project is turning an area of rather neglected land by Crownfield Road, South Ashford into a useful space to benefit the whole area. The project is supported by parents, the police, Hang 10 and The Council.

Responsible dog ownership was promoted through a joint initiative with the Dogs Trust. In total over 50 dogs were 'chipped' in Rolvenden, Biddenden, South Ashford and Newtown.

Residents in the sheltered schemes continued to plan and hold a range of activities throughout the year. At a strawberry fayre at Monypenny, Rolvenden, friends and family joined residents to celebrate the scheme's 40th anniversary. Led by a resident (with help and encouragement from the handyman and scheme manager) the successful event raised funds, to put towards improvements in the communal lounge. This will enable more local groups to make use of the room for their events and help to bring the communities closer together.

A new lounge at Luckley House in Wye was completed in November 2014. Since it opened events have included live entertainment, a fish and chip supper, a Saturday dance night, hosted by one of the tenants, and regular bingo and whist, as well as weekly arts and crafts, darts, coffee morning, breakfast club, gardening club and a film club.

At Luckley House, one tenant commented "before moving to Luckley House three years ago I had spent 44 years living in an area in which I could only name a couple of neighbours. I now know over 40 people who I can call friends. I look forward to the social activities at Luckley and can honestly say that moving here was the best thing I have ever done. I regularly see my family and friends, living here has really changed my life, everyone is so friendly and the community spirit is great."

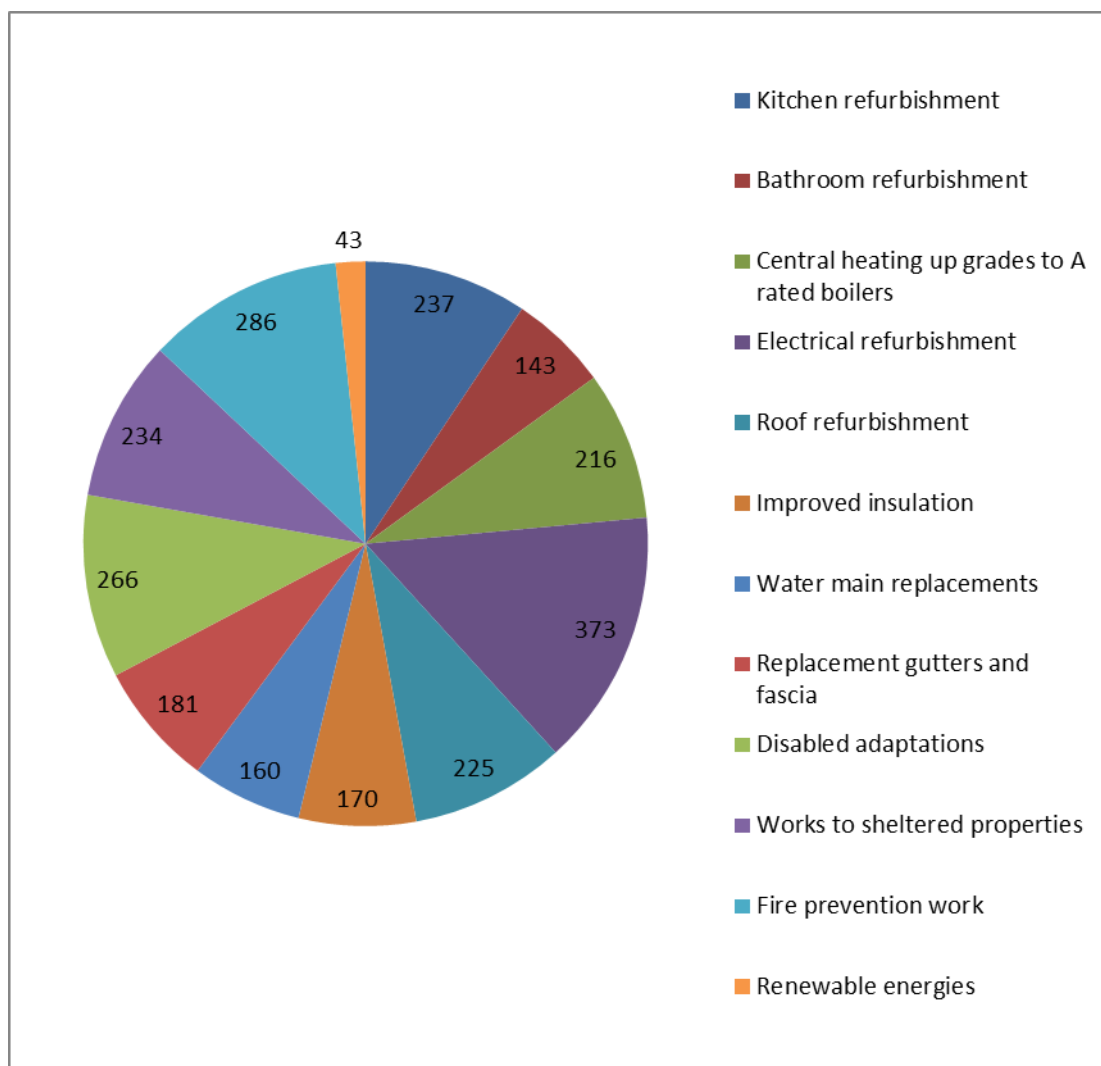
Community integration is key to the to maintain a vibrant sheltered scheme and at Gerlach House a project to teach isolated women craft and business skills is run with residents able to join in to learn a new craft or to pass on their own skills.

Bridging the ages took place when the Ruckinge Rainbows visited Cotton Hill House in Hamstreet in March 2015 with good interaction between the residents and the Rainbows.

4.3 High quality homes:

Decent homes standards – The planned maintenance programme continues to maintain the Councils own stock to a high standard meeting the Decent Homes Standard. 100% of homes had a gas safety certificate at March 2015. The chart below show the main areas of the works completed during 2014/15. Some properties may have received more than one area of work.

Number of properties that received planned maintenance works 2014/15



Park Homes – Further to the Mobile Homes Act 2013 a report was brought to Cabinet in September 2014 (minute number 123) setting out the new licencing regime and greater powers for monitoring and enforcement of licence conditions on relevant protected sites. This provides an opportunity to improve the service offered to residents. The Charging Policy was approved at Cabinet in October 2014 (minute number 187).

4.4 Issues and Opportunities

Maintaining a high standard of living and neighbourhood environment can instil a sense of pride of place in residents and help to develop community spirit. This is developed through a number of initiatives, some of which are noted in the section above. A challenge is ensuring residents are aware of services available to them and are confident to access those services independently. For instance, a promotion campaign will be undertaken to increase understanding of the importance of home contents insurance and encourage uptake by tenants.

Working together with other agencies, for example the PCSOs joining estate inspections and the multi agency clean sweep projects, helps to increase confidence in the services and foster better community relationships.

5. Priority 5: Prevent and reduce homelessness and increase access to settled accommodation for homeless households and those at risk of homelessness

5.1 Preventing homelessness:

An independent review of the Housing Options Service was undertaken in 2014. This identified a number of strengths and that the team is working effectively. All services are geared towards prevention of homelessness. This includes clients being advised of all their housing options, an income and expenditure assessment to assess affordability together with a 'whole needs' assessment to see what other support may be needed and can be referred or signposted to.

Working with DWP a multi agency hub runs from Job Centre Plus to facilitate joint working to assist people into employment. The welfare intervention officers continue to assist people affected by changes to their benefit. They had 270 referrals but also assisted a number of additional residents where their queries were easier to resolve. The officers have noted an increase in people coming to them with mental health problems.

Each housing option officer works generically with a specific responsibility for a particular client group; mental health, young people, ex-offenders and domestic abuse. This enables close working relationships to be formed with a range of agencies and personnel as well as the wider Housing Options Team to look proactively for suitable options within the private rented sector. The specific officer approach has been well received by agencies as they now have a recognised named contact to get in touch with when they are working with a client who needs housing assistance. This has resulted in a reduction in the number of "homeless tonight" cases approaching from these areas

5.2 Accommodation for homeless households:

Temporary accommodation – The purchase of Christchurch House was reported in the last Annual review. The refurbishment is complete and Christchurch House now provides quality short-term accommodation, reducing the use of bed and breakfast , for 8 families.

One resident staying at Christchurch House with her mother and three children, said "we were dreading going into B&B but when we walked into the house everyone was really friendly. The facilities are lovely; it's great to be able to cook a proper meal for everyone. The children are happy, they all play outside in the courtyard. We even held a birthday party in the kitchen".

Properties managed under the social lettings agency and the private sector leasing scheme all contribute to the prevention of homelessness.

During 2014 there has been an ongoing review of homelessness, including a stakeholder consultation event. This will feed into the development of a refreshed Homelessness Strategy that will come forward during 2015.

Homelessness is one of the priorities of the Health and wellbeing Board and in relation to young people is included within the What Matters Forum.

5.3 Issues and Opportunities:

Although reduced on the previous year the number of households in bed and breakfast continues to fluctuate each month, ranging between 2 and 11 households a month during 2014/15. Further provision of quality temporary accommodation such as Christchurch House is needed together with suitable accommodation to move to permanently.

The cost of being homeless to health services is well documented; further engagement with health is needed to encourage the recognition of the role of housing and associated services in reducing pressures on the NHS.

Conclusion

During the last twelve months the Housing Service has continued to deliver a range of initiatives whose outcomes have contributed to achieving the five priorities both in the short, medium and long term.

Many of these are day to day activities of the service: good housing management, upkeep of council owned homes, prevention of homelessness, management of the housing register, the allocation of housing, supporting vulnerable people into settled accommodation and helping people to maintain their independence.

Projects to increase the availability of affordable housing, through new build projects and schemes such as the social letting agency (to improve access for lower incomes households to the private rented sector) are providing much needed accommodation but this is tempered by losses through the right to buy and increasing private rental costs.

Joint working and liaison with a range of other organisations is critical to achieving the five priorities. Across all housing teams there is a willingness and ability to work cooperatively with others to gain better outcomes for residents whether this is with statutory bodies, voluntary organisations or contractors.