

Report to Housing Select Committee

Date of meeting: 10 November 2015

Portfolio: Housing – Cllr D. Stallan

Subject: Housing Service Strategies

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Recommendation:

That the Select Committee discusses with officers of the Communities Management Team (CMT) at the meeting the benefits of producing and regularly updating the suite of Housing Service Strategies, compared to the officer time and cost involved, and determines the most cost-effective approach for the future.

Report:

1. Over many years, the Housing Service has formulated a suite of Housing Service Strategies, that individually set-out the detailed approach taken by the Council and its officers to various housing activities. All the Service Strategies are produced in a common format, and are then reviewed and updated by officers every three years and reported to the Housing Select Committee for consideration. Around the same time, those Service Strategies relating to landlord services are also reported for the Tenants and Leaseholders Federation for their view as well.

2. Following consideration of updated Service Strategies by the Select Committee and Tenants and Leaseholders Federation, the final version is then formally reported to the Housing Portfolio Holder for adoption. The latest draft Housing Service Strategy (on Harassment) is due to be considered by the Select Committee immediately before consideration of this report, so members can see the general format and type of content.

3. The Housing Service Strategies were originally introduced at the time of the former Housing Inspectorate being set up, and in anticipation of a formal Housing Inspection being undertaken. However, the Housing Inspectorate was closed down a number of years ago, yet the production, review and updating of the Service Strategies has continued.

4. The process from first setting-out to update Service Strategies to the Housing Portfolio Holder adopting them usually takes around 2-3 months and each Service Strategy takes around 10 hours of officer time to review, update, report to and attend the Select Committee and Tenants and Leaseholders Federation and finally report to the Housing Portfolio Holder.

5. There are now 16 separate Housing Service Strategies. The current list, together with the dates of their 3-year review, is as follows:

Empty Properties	- April 2015
Rent Administration and Collection	- January 2016

Home Ownership and Leasehold Services	- January 2016
Housing Advice	- April 2016
Under-occupation	- April 2016
Equality & Diversity	- June 2016
Housing Information	- March 2017
Tenant Participation	- March 2017
Social Housing Fraud	- May 2017
Private Rented Housing	- August 2017
Rent Arrears	- November 2017
Anti-social Behaviour	- April 2018
Energy Efficiency	- July 2018
Older People's Housing	- September 2018
Housing Management	- September 2018
Harassment	- November 2018

6. The Communities Management Team (CMT) has recently considered the cost-benefit of spending the significant amount of time to update these Housing Service Strategies. In so doing, the CMT has identified that, although the general principles set out in the Service Strategies are followed, the Service Strategies are hardly ever referred to by officers between the three-yearly reviews. Moreover, most of the actions included within the Action Plans had usually already been identified and planned prior to the relevant Service Strategy being updated, and are included and monitored through the Communities Directorate's Continuous Improvement Regime in any event.

7. The CMT is also aware that this approach to strategic service planning is not adopted by any of the other Directorates, Select Committees or Portfolio Holders; indeed, it is not adopted within the Community Services and Safety function of the Communities Directorate. Therefore, there is an inconsistent approach both across the Council and the Communities Directorate.

8. However, the CMT is also aware that the Housing Select Committee, with its membership changing on an annual basis, appears to find it useful to understand and review the Council's approach to the various housing functions. Sometimes the Select Committee has very little comment on proposed updated Service Strategies, whereas other times it provides lots of comments.

9. Therefore, in view of the recent move from the former Scrutiny Panel approach to the new Select Committee approach, the CMT felt that now would be a good time to have an open and honest discussion with the Select Committee on the future approach to the Housing Service Strategies. Of particular note is that, if the Service Strategies were not continued to be updated, it would free-up officer time and the time of the Select Committee to consider/review other issues that are actually of concern to officers, members and/or tenants.

10. Some options identified by the CMT for the future approach are as follows:

- Maintain the status quo;
- Cease the production and review of Service Strategies (apart from those listed at Paragraph 11 below) - and use the freed-up officer and Select Committee time to consider/review housing issues of concern to officers, members and/or tenants in more detail;
- Extend the validity of Service Strategies from 3 to 5 years – with a transitional period to eventually spread the updating of strategies to around 3 per annum, instead of the average 5 per annum;

- Continue with the review and updating of Service Strategies every 3-5 years by officers, but without the Select Committee and Tenants and Leaseholders considering them and them being formally signed-off by the Housing Portfolio Holder, either:
 - In their current format; or
 - In a shorter, more concise format – primarily covering the General Principles only
- Maintain the status quo - and recommend to the Overview and Scrutiny Committee that consideration be given to all Directorates and Select Committees taking the same approach to strategic service planning

11. It should be noted that the CMT believes that there would be real benefit to continue to review, update and maintain some of the Service Strategies in some form, due to their particular strategic importance or a legal requirement - even if they are not updated as regularly as they are at present. These include:

- Private Empty Properties
- Equality & Diversity
- Social Housing Fraud
- Anti-social Behaviour

12. It should also be noted that the views of the Tenants and Leaseholders Federation have not been sought on this issue, or their involvement in this process. However, based on comments made by Federation members over many years, the CMT believes that the majority of Federation members would rather not pore over reams of paper documents and would prefer to spend more time discussing issues of concern and interest to them - that have a real impact on the lives of tenants. Since the Chairman of the Federation is a co-opted member of the Housing Select Committee, he will be able to give his perspective on the involvement of the Federation in the process of reviewing and updating Housing Services at the meeting.