

Briefing Note on Motion Presented by Cllr Harper

Background

Councillor Harper has put forward the following motion:

“In the Borough of Maidstone as elsewhere in the UK we face a housing crisis. We are doing the first part to identify sites through the Local Plan suitable for housing development (the 18,560 housing units). Current Council Affordable Housing policy relating to new housing developments, adopted in December 2006, is for sites of 15 units or more to have 40% affordable housing.

However our looming housing crisis is disproportionately affecting the young and vulnerable. Whilst there are people sleeping on the streets in Maidstone, they only represent the easily identified need. Most homelessness is hidden as people are forced to remain at home with their parents, move around people’s houses to find a bed, or live in unfit and overcrowded accommodation.

Whilst recognising that the Council has been trying to tackle people sleeping on the streets, and has set up a number of emergency hostel type facilities, as the statutory housing authority for the Borough of Maidstone, this Council has a responsibility to address this.

This Council therefore resolves to do the following during the next few months:

1. Actively work with private landlords to identify empty housing units and work with them to provide bed spaces for the homeless.
2. Engage with young people in the Borough about their housing needs, via a public consultation exercise.
3. Identify over occupied property and develop procedures to work with the relevant occupiers/landlords to address the problem.
4. Organise a Housing Conference around the topic of “Where Are the Young Going to Live” of statutory authorities, local active housing associations and the voluntary sector to propose a multi-sector approach to tackling these issues in the Borough of Maidstone.
5. Request a report back to the next Council meeting on the implementation of measures 1 - 3 above and progress towards the Housing Conference in 4 above.

Response:

1. The Council continues to work with landlords and homeowners of empty properties to bring them back into use. The return of long-term empty properties back into use remains a key target within the new Housing Strategy and new initiatives are being developed that it is hoped will increase the number of dwellings that will be brought back into use.. Over the last 18 months over 170 empty units have been brought back into use through the direct intervention of the Council.

2. The formulation of the Homelessness Strategy involved young people in a consultation workshop held at the Maidstone Foyer, a housing project dedicated to housing and growing the potential of young people. The Housing Service will continue to engage with key stakeholder groups, such as young people on an issue by issue basis.

3. It is not be possible to identify all overcrowded property within the Borough. Where the Council's officers are alerted to overcrowding or come across overcrowded properties during the course of their duties there is a statutory procedure to deal with this. In addition the rules governing the Council's Housing Register acknowledges overcrowding as a point of housing need.

In response to the overcrowding issue, the Council has worked closely with its housing providers over recent years to ensure a good supply of both 3 and 4 four bedroom new affordable housing has been delivered.

4. An extensive consultation was carried out as part of the drafting of the new Housing Strategy that involved a wide spectrum of organisations. Following adoption of the Housing Strategy tonight a further workshop will be held, which will be open to all elected members who are encouraged to attend to gain a greater insight into the housing situation and to provide an opportunity for further ideas to be explored on a range of housing matters, including that of young people.

A range of housing will be delivered as part of the Housing Strategy's priority theme one, which will provide much needed housing for young and older people alike.

5. Progress on the implementation of the new Housing Strategy will be reported to the Communities, Housing & Environment Committee on a quarterly basis, which is the appropriate Committee to maintain an overview of the delivery of the Strategy.