



**Building Safe, Sustainable Communities:  
HOUSING STRATEGY  
2011/12 to 2014/15**



## **C O N T E N T S**

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## **1. Foreword by Councillor John A Wilson, Cabinet Member for Community and Leisure Services**



I have great pleasure in presenting Maidstone Borough Council's Housing Strategy 2011 – 2015. The Housing Strategy sets out our vision for the direction and co-ordination of housing-related activities in Maidstone. The Housing Strategy spans a number of themes including the provision of new affordable housing, making best use of the existing housing in the borough, through to how the council envisages assisting the more vulnerable members of our community.

Maidstone's communities are at the cornerstone of our approach to housing because I understand the vital role that good housing offers to improve life opportunities, educational attainment and access to employment. Housing is literally the foundation to a thriving community and it is our intention to work with a range of partners to ensure that good housing standards are maintained and Maidstone remains an area that people aspire to live and invest in. This ambition applies equally to both our urban and rural communities.

This Housing Strategy has been adopted during a period of major change following the election of the coalition government in May 2010. Whether it is welfare reform, the new funding regime for affordable housing or a number of statutory changes contained within the Localism Bill, the challenge for those involved in housing is considerable. With that in mind I have asked for this Housing Strategy to remain flexible enough to respond to change whilst anticipating a refresh during 2012.

Even so, the Housing Strategy has unambiguous themes and direction. Our ambitions for housing in Maidstone are clearly set out within the following four themes:

- Develop sustainable communities and the provision of affordable housing;
- Increase choice and improve the quality of life for vulnerable people;
- Improve our existing homes;
- Improve access to housing advice and work to prevent homelessness and rough sleeping in Maidstone.

Read in conjunction with the draft Core Strategy, Economic Development Plan and Sustainable Community Strategy we see the Housing Strategy as enabling us, the local housing authority, to partner with a range of organisations in order to deliver economic prosperity for the whole of Maidstone.

## **1. About this Strategy**

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### What is the Purpose of the Housing Strategy?

The Strategy contributes to the key aim stated in the Sustainable Community Strategy of "Developing Maidstone borough's urban and rural communities as models for 21<sup>st</sup> century quality and sustainable living". It is an overarching plan that guides the Council and its partners in tackling the major housing challenges facing the borough. The Housing Strategy is also The Strategy looks ahead for four years, covering 2011-2015 to coincide with the Homes and Community Agency's 4 year development framework and the Council's Strategic Plan.

Our ambition is to ensure that everyone in the Borough has access to good quality homes that are affordable for them and meet their needs. People should be able to live in communities that are clean and healthy, pleasant to live in and where they feel safe. In order to achieve this aim our actions will be directed not only at the affordable housing sector but on influencing the whole of the housing market. Every council has a responsibility to understand what matters most to its local communities and to respond to this through investment, service planning and delivery. We also have to take into account national and regional aspirations and sometimes this requires a balance with local priorities.

The Council cannot achieve all of the priorities contained in this Strategy without working in partnership with other statutory and voluntary organisations, including the Housing Sounding Board, elected Members and a broad range of stakeholders and partners. (A list of our partners can be found at [www.maidstone.gov.uk](http://www.maidstone.gov.uk))

## **2. National Context**

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### **New Political Leadership**

Britain has been going through a state of change, having come out of a recession and entered a new political environment. The election in May 2010 resulted in a hung parliament and a coalition government being formed between the Conservative and Liberal Democrat Parties. The coalition government has stated their top priority is cutting Britain's budget deficit, "with the main burden of deficit reduction borne by reduced spending rather than increased taxes".

In May 2010, the Government published 'The Coalition: our programme for government' which outlined the key policy areas, with an emphasis on 'freedom, fairness and responsibility' creating the Big Society, giving citizens, communities and local government a central role in creating a new approach to sustainable, low carbon economic growth. To enable some of these changes, the Government has introduced the Localism Bill to devolve greater powers to Councils and neighbourhoods and give local communities greater influence over budgets, housing and planning decisions.

Whilst in financial terms the UK is no longer in recession it is true to say that it can often take the housing market a substantial amount of time to recover from the effects.

### **Planning and Housing**

The Government is reforming the planning system with the aim of giving neighbourhoods more ability to decide what their local area should look like, within a strategic framework provided by the Local Development Framework, including the Core Strategy. It is anticipated that once the bill is passed this will lead to a number of reforms; Local people will decide where best to build the new homes and the local facilities they know are necessary to make their communities successful; the Community Right to Build will allow an application for planning permission to go ahead where there is overwhelming community support for the project; Regional Strategies will be abolished and decision making on matters such as housing targets and planning will be made by local Councils in the Core Strategy and related documents. Changes to the national planning framework for planning policies are also to be introduced in the future.

A range of significant changes are proposed to social housing tenure and other reforms to existing housing legislation, including access to affordable housing. As a result it is anticipated that changes will be made to the way social housing is delivered with public investment in affordable housing being more targeted.

### **Localism Bill**

The Localism Bill has been introduced to enable many of the changes proposed above. The bill proposes to give councils a general power of competence, meaning that as long as an activity is not unlawful, they are empowered to carry it out. Community groups and social enterprise organisations will be encouraged to have an active role, including taking over and delivering public services.

The bill also proposes changes to social housing, giving Local Authorities more freedom to set their own lettings policies and for housing providers to offer tenancies on a fixed term basis rather than the previous policy of a home for life. This would allow Local Authorities to ensure that the housing supply is used where it is most needed. The Bill will also allow Local Authorities to meet their homelessness duty by placing someone in suitable private rented housing.

The Community Right to Build would give groups of local people the right to bring forward small developments including new homes, businesses and shops, the profits from which remain in the community. The Bill also introduces a requirement for developers to consult communities before submitting planning applications for large scale developments, giving local people a real say in their area. In Maidstone the Council's Statement of Community Involvement already makes this a requirement.

### **3. Local context**

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#### **Maidstone the place**

Maidstone is an exceptionally green Borough with a number of parks, the largest of which is Mote Park, which is Grade II on the English Heritage Register of Historic Parks and home to thriving rugby and cricket clubs. There are numerous smaller parks and squares within the town and villages which have benefited from a major playground and sports facility investment programme in recent years. We recognise the importance of maintaining a quality environment for residents including our heritage and conservation areas. The attractive countryside offers high quality landscape and biodiversity and a wide range of informal recreation opportunities.

Maidstone Borough is considered a good place to live and work with high rates of employment, relatively low levels of adults claiming incapacity benefits and a higher proportion of residents who have a degree than the South East average. Larger numbers of people commute into than out of the Borough. The Borough has a very mixed business sector with large numbers of small and medium size businesses with particular strengths in professional services (law and accountancy) and construction. There is a growing media industry led by Maidstone Studios and the Kent Messenger Group. Maidstone has an extensive further education campus (Mid Kent College) and a growing higher education offer with both the University for the Creative Arts and Mid Kent College seeking to increase their range of courses and facilities. Residents living in the Borough have relatively high wages (although many higher earners commute out of the Borough to achieve these). Maidstone came out as the top destination for business in the 2010 Perception Study of locations for business in Kent carried out by Locate in Kent ([www.locateinkent.com](http://www.locateinkent.com))

Maidstone's Local Strategic Partnership has carried out work in 2010 looking at how public money is spent locally. They have identified that £602 million has

been spent in Maidstone in 2010 by various bodies including Kent County Council, Maidstone Borough Council, Kent Police and the local Primary Care Trust. Just over 35% of the money is spent on health and social well-being, nearly 17% is spent on education and 15% on housing.

### **Maidstone Sustainable Community Strategy 2009-2020:**

The Sustainable Community Strategy (SCS) is the topmost level of policymaking in the Council. Our SCS was published in April 2009, and it contains the following vision and long term objectives for the Borough agreed with our partners:

***"We want Maidstone Borough to be a vibrant, prosperous 21st century urban and rural community at the heart of Kent, where its distinctive character is enhanced to create a safe, healthy, excellent environment with high quality education and employment where all people can realise their aspirations".***

In Maidstone sustainable communities mean places where people want to live and work, now and in the future. We involve the local community in a range of ways to ensure that people can share their views on housing services and priorities for service development. We already encourage our housing services customers to tell us what they think and suggest how we can do things better, for example through stakeholder meetings, community events (e.g. annual Housing Stakeholders Event) and public consultation events for policy changes e.g. choice based lettings, housing needs review. We keep looking for new ways to improve customer involvement, particularly where there may be communication barriers. It is important that we engage with our residents and customers to ensure our knowledge remains up to date and we can respond to changes in local issues.

### **Population and household change<sup>1</sup>**

Projections indicate that Maidstone's population will increase by 15.2%, which represents an increase of 22,600 people (148,500 to 171,100).

Regeneration is vital to transform the economic, social and environmental wellbeing of the Borough and the need to integrate new developments with existing communities is critical. Two authorities close to us are the 'Growth Areas' of Ashford and the Thames Gateway: huge public and private investment in housing, the economy and the environment is being channelled into these areas and Maidstone will therefore need to ensure that its offer to entrepreneurs is attractive.

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<sup>1</sup> Unless otherwise stated, all data in this section is derived from Maidstone Borough Council Strategic Housing Market Assessment (SHMA) 2010. Go to [www.maidstone.gov.uk](http://www.maidstone.gov.uk)

Estimates of housing need are provided by Strategic Housing Market Assessments (SHMAs)<sup>2</sup>. Maidstone's SHMA was published in April 2010 and following the methodology set out in SHMA practice guidance, there is estimated to be an annual need for 1,081 affordable units in Maidstone borough area.

<b>Summary of housing needs assessment model</b>	
Current need	339
Future need	1531
<b>Total gross annual need</b>	<b>1870</b>
Total gross annual supply	789
<b>Total net annual need</b>	<b>1081</b>

### **Tenure mix**

Maidstone Borough Council has regularly kept up to date on the levels of housing need in the borough, with the most recent Strategic Housing Needs Survey being reported in March 2010. The supply and demand analysis that sits alongside the SHMA gives helpful information on mismatches between the supply of certain types of homes and the demand for them locally.

The housing market is considered balanced if the local population is adequately accommodated.

Currently about 5.5% of households are classified as inadequately housed. Lone parent households are the household group least likely to live in adequate accommodation, with multiple pensioner households the most likely.

The private rented sector almost doubled from 2005-2010 and therefore the Council needs to engage with this sector while recognising that we have limited influence on the market.

### **Affordable housing**

Affordable housing refers to a range of tenures that includes socially rented, intermediate or affordable rent and a variety of shared ownership products. The SHMA suggests that there is a need for affordable housing of all sizes, and a significant need for rural homes. Smaller (one and two bedroom) units account for almost 45% of the need, but larger (three and four bedroom) homes comprise over 55% of need. Opportunities for securing family sized accommodation (typically 3+ bedrooms) must be maximised where site and scheme particulars allow.

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<sup>2</sup> SHMAs were introduced in November 2006, with final guidance on how to undertake a SHMA published in August 2007.



Currently the Maidstone Affordable Housing Development Plan Document requires developers to provide 40% affordable housing on sites of 15 units or 0.5 hectare or greater. Within the 40%, the tenure split is expected to be 60/40 socially rented/intermediate tenure accommodation. As the Core Strategy is developed further, more flexibility concerning the proportion of affordable housing may be needed to ensure development viability.

### **Flexible tenure**

Flexible tenure allows shared owners to decrease their equity in their home, potentially selling all their equity and becoming assured tenants. For landlords flexible tenure is optional but strongly encouraged. Flexible tenure is not a legal right and is pendant on a financial assessment. The money realised through decreasing equity can only be used to clear mortgage arrears.

Maidstone Council responded to the 'Local Decisions; a fairer future for social housing' consultation document and made the following comments in relation to flexible tenure: "MBC welcomes the ability to make better use of social housing stock which should promote mobility and help to reduce under occupation; however, this should not be at the expense of creating balanced and sustainable communities nor should it act as a disincentive to tenants obtaining employment and self improvement."

### **Lifetime Homes**

A Lifetime Home is accessible and incorporate built-in or designed provision for a range of adaptations that will respond to the needs of any member of the household who has, or develops a disability or impairment, which could include the need to use a wheelchair within the home. Maidstone Council expects affordable homes to be constructed to full Lifetime Homes Standards.

Dwellings built to wheelchair housing standards are designed specifically to meet the diverse and changing needs of wheelchair users and the multiplicity of impairments that some wheelchair users experience. Lifetime Homes, while suitable and offering choice for some people with impairments will not have the additional spatial requirements all wheelchair users need to access every room and facility of the dwelling in order to maximise their potential for independence. Therefore the Council will seek a proportion of new affordable dwellings to be designed for full wheelchair use to respond to the needs of housing applicants who need them. The detailed design and specification requirements of wheelchair housing will be sourced from relevant specific guidance documents.

#### 4. The Corporate Priorities:

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The Council has identified the following three priorities and six outcomes to deliver the vision for Maidstone over the next four years:

<b>Priorities</b>	<b>Outcomes</b>
1. For Maidstone to have a growing economy	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• A transport network that supports the local economy</li> <li>• A growing economy with rising employment, catering for a range of skill sets to meet the demands of the local economy</li> </ul>
2. For Maidstone to be a decent place to live	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Decent, affordable housing in the right places across a range of tenures</li> <li>• Continues to be a clean and attractive environment for people who live in and visit to Borough</li> </ul>
3. Corporate and Customer Excellence	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Residents are not disadvantaged because of where they live or who they are, vulnerable people are assisted and the level of deprivation is reduced</li> <li>• The Council will continue to have value for money services that residents are satisfied with</li> </ul>

In accordance with our second priority, we want Maidstone to be a place where people enjoy living and a key part of this will be having access to affordable and decent housing that meets residents' needs in terms of availability, size and condition as we understand that good housing promotes educational attainment, better health outcomes and employment opportunities.

Housing in Maidstone town has traditionally been considered relatively affordable compared to the south east average, but this is not the case in rural Maidstone. For those on average or low incomes, home repossession is likely to become more frequent as a result of the recent economic climate. Maidstone has a fairly low level of households living in temporary accommodation provided under the homelessness legislation compared to the other districts in Kent and a significantly lower level than the average for England according to the 2011 Health Profile. The numbers have dropped each year. Maidstone is consistently above target for homelessness prevention.

## 5. Delivery through Partnership

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Maidstone Borough Council is committed to working with key stakeholders to assist in meeting local housing needs. Partnership is the underlying principle of community planning and fundamental to the delivery of this strategy. Over the next four years we will ensure that partnerships continue to be developed, that they focus on priorities and make effective use of resources.

Three key partnerships are:

- The Kent Housing Group, set up to represent Kent's housing bodies, providing a 'Kent voice' to regional and national bodies.
- the Kent Rural Housing Partnership, set up to enable borough and district Councils across Kent to work closely with Rural Housing Providers, and access Housing Corporation funding;
- West Kent Local Investment Plan - The Council, together with Tunbridge Wells, Tonbridge & Malling and Sevenoaks Councils and the Homes and Communities Agency (HCA) have progressed the West Kent Local Investment Plan (LIA). The LIP is an agreed sub-regional investment programme which will determine where HCA and LA investments and interventions will be made. The process has aimed to ensure that all the partners are joined up and working to the same objectives, and that these reflect the HCA's objectives. The West Kent LIP was agreed by all the partners in February 2011 and submitted in March 2011. The LIP was submitted in time to form the basis for the latest bidding round of the Affordable Homes Programme.

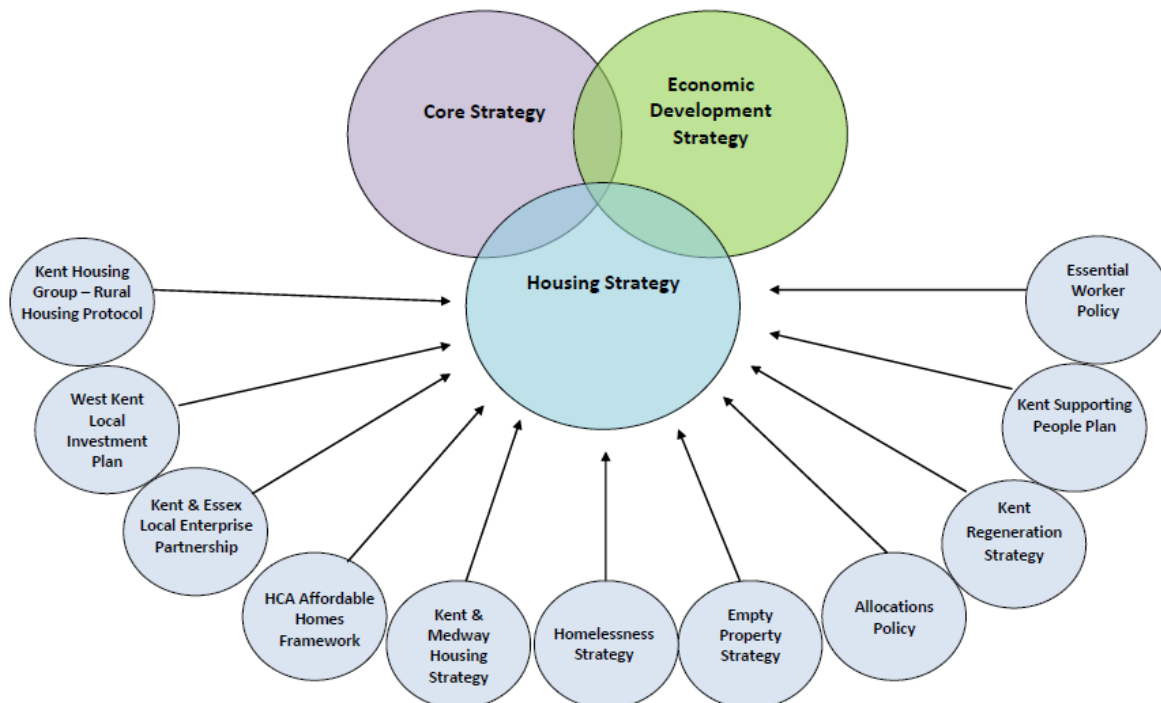
A full list of partners with whom the Council works on matters relevant to the Housing Strategy can be viewed at [www.maidstone.gov.uk](http://www.maidstone.gov.uk) .

The following schemes are firm bids that have been submitted to the HCA and will be delivered with partners. Some of these form part of the West Kent LIP.

<b>Provider name</b>	<b>Individual Site Name</b>	<b>Number of New Homes on Site that are Part of Firm Element of Offer</b>	<b>Site Location Town</b>	<b>Site Location Postcode</b>
Hyde Housing Association	George St	22	Maidstone	ME15 6NX
		<b>1</b>	<b>1</b>	<b>1</b>
Moat Homes Limited	Hayles Place	10	Maidstone	ME15 6TR
		<b>1</b>	<b>1</b>	<b>1</b>
Orbit Housing Group	Tovil Green	20	Maidstone	ME16 6RJ
		<b>1</b>	<b>1</b>	<b>1</b>
Paragon Community Housing Group	Bethersden Court	11	Maidstone	ME15 8SS
	Church Street	26	Maidstone	ME14 1DS
	Coombe Rd Ph 3	20	Maidstone	ME15 6UE
	York Road	12	Maidstone	ME15 7QX
	<b>4</b>	<b>69</b>	<b>1</b>	<b>4</b>
Town and Country Housing Group	Coxheath	32	Coxheath	ME17 4PB
	Hastings Road	10	Maidstone	ME15 7SG
	Harrietsham	20	Harrietsham	ME17 1HX
	Oakwood Park	20	Maidstone	ME16 8AG
	<b>4</b>	<b>82</b>	<b>3</b>	<b>4</b>

## 6. How the Housing Strategy links with other plans and strategies

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## 7. Our Housing Priorities and objectives

### Priority 1 – Develop sustainable communities

#### Outcomes- What we plan to achieve

- A local development framework is in place that delivers a range of market and affordable housing to meet a spectrum of need.
- The long-term balance of the housing market in the borough is improved to reflect local need and demand including an increase in the supply of affordable rented and shared ownership homes.
- The housing and related needs of people in rural areas are addressed
- The housing needs of the gypsy and traveller community are addressed

#### Why is this important to Maidstone?

The foundation of a sustainable community and a thriving economy is the supply of good housing that is attractive and desirable to existing households and those that are economically mobile.

We want Maidstone to be a place where developers want to invest and our SHMA has indicated that we need a range of housing as set out in the table below.

<b>Tenure</b>	<b>Number of households</b>	<b>Percentage of households</b>
Market	55,726	83.2%
Intermediate	2,053	3.1%
Social rented	9,234	13.8%
<b>Total</b>	<b>67,013</b>	<b>100.0%</b>

The table indicates that for the remaining period to 2026, to achieve the above tenure mix, around 62% of newly constructed dwellings should be market accommodation, around 21% social rented dwellings and around 17% intermediate housing, making a total of 38% affordable housing.

The right mix of high quality housing in the right places contributes to social mobility across and within tenures and helps generate inward investment. People have different housing needs at different stages of their lives, and we need to ensure that these changing needs are met. Good housing drives the economy both during and after construction.

The need for affordable housing is consistently a high priority in district-wide consultation. This is particularly important in the current climate where housing costs are high relative to income and large deposits are needed to purchase a property.

Nearly 28,000 households (45% of all households in Maidstone) live in our rural areas. The Council is committed to ensuring that the rural areas of the borough remain vibrant and sustainable places to live. Housing that is affordable to local people of all income levels is critical to achieving this. The 2010 SHMA showed that the highest income to purchase and private rental prices are in the rural areas in the borough and that levels of need for affordable homes are high in the rural parts of the borough, including the five main rural 'service centres'.

The affordable housing DPD incorporates the rural local needs housing policy and allows the development of affordable local needs homes outside the built confines of villages where open market homes would not normally be permitted. Homes are restricted to occupation by people with local connections.

There are 199 legally authorised gypsy pitches in Maidstone Borough (June 2011). The most recent Gypsy and Traveller Accommodation Assessment (GTAA) for Maidstone Borough was published in 2006 and was carried out as part of a wider study involving three neighbouring Local Authorities. Allowing for a certain amount of turnover on the two gypsy sites the Council owns, the GTAA recommended that 32 new pitches should be provided in Maidstone Borough in the 2006-2011 period. The GTAA also found that some gypsy households did not have the resources to purchase land privately. To help address the need for affordable as well as private

pitches, the Council in partnership with the Town & Country Housing Group will pursue a bid to the HCA's Traveller Pitch Fund to help deliver a new public site by 2013/14. In addition, the emerging Core Strategy is proposing that affordable pitches should form part of the 40% affordable housing requirement. This will require developers to make an offsite contribution from housing developments.

**Actions- What we will do in order to achieve the stated outcomes**

<b>Outcome</b>	<b>What we plan to do</b>	<b>Key partners</b>	<b>Target date</b>
<b>1a</b>	Ensure LDF/Core Strategy provides an appropriate policy framework	Housing developers, land owners	2026. Reviewed on an annual basis to ensure progress is being made
<b>1a</b>	Engage with the Spatial Policy and Development Management teams to bring forward the delivery of new housing	Housing developers, land owners	2026. Reviewed on an annual basis to ensure progress is being made
<b>1b</b>	Draft a Tenancy Strategy for the Borough in full consultation with partner Registered Providers(RPs) and other stakeholders	West Kent LIP Partnership, RPs, developers Action for Rural Communities in Kent HCA, KHG, RSLs	December 2011
<b>1b</b>	Bring forward LIP Phase 1 sites	HCA RPs West Kent LIP Partnership West Kent Development Forum	March 2015
<b>1b</b>	Consider /research formation of housing delivery vehicle e.g. Local Housing Company link to Kent & Medway strategy	As above	December 2011
<b>1b</b>	Review the Affordable Housing SPD through the emerging Core Strategy	As above	September 2013
<b>1c</b>	Ensure LDF/Core Strategy provides an appropriate policy framework for rural housing	Action for Rural Communities	10 affordable homes on rural exception sites

		in Kent Registered Providers Parish Councils HCA	by June 2013
<b>1c</b>	Ensure all rural parishes where a rural exception site is feasible and/or deliverable have had a rural housing needs survey completed.	As above	April 2015
<b>1d</b>	Ensure LDF/Core Strategy provides an appropriate policy framework to address the needs of the gypsy and traveller community	Spatial Policy HCA RPs	December 2011
<b>1d</b>	Start development of a rural affordable housing scheme.	As above	December 2013
<b>1d</b>	Bid to the HCA's Traveller Pitch Fund	RP, HCA, KCC	September 2011

### **Performance indicators**

Number of affordable homes delivered (gross)

### **Priority 2 – Increase choice and improve the quality of life for vulnerable people**

#### **Outcomes – What we plan to achieve**

- a) The elderly and disabled are able to live in their homes for longer rather than being admitted to hospital or nursing care.
- b) Homelessness in Maidstone is reduced.
- c) Housing solutions are implemented that help reduce incidences of offending and reoffending.
- d) The percentage of people suffering repeated incidents of domestic abuse is reduced.

#### **Why is this important to Maidstone?**

There are a considerable number of households in Maidstone that are unable to meet their immediate housing needs or who need support to enable them to live independently within the community. Overall there are an estimated 10,399 households in Maidstone Borough with one or more vulnerable people– this represents 17.0% of all households.

Where vulnerable households are unable to access suitable housing and support when they need it they are more likely to disengage with services and suffer ill



health. This will have a negative affect on their education and employment opportunities, resulting in further inequality and isolation.

The SHMA 2010 found that, when given the choice, an overwhelming majority of disabled persons would prefer physical adaptations to remain in their home. Disabled Facilities Grants (DFG's) are mandatory for disabled residents regardless of tenure, to enable them to gain better access, move around freely or use the essential facilities within the home.

Population projections indicate a significant increase in the retired population in Maidstone up to 2021 and beyond. Our ageing population will have an impact on private sector housing in the future and the Council has consequently identified the requirement to address the housing needs generated by an ageing population as a priority.

We aim to make sure residents are supported to maintain their independence, minimising the need for more intensive institutional or residential type care.

Key to meeting vulnerable peoples' needs is the Supporting People programme, which provides a range of services and supported accommodation. This is run by KCC but we play an active role in the development and delivery of the Supporting People Programme for Kent. As a member of the Commissioning Body and Core Strategy Group we helped develop the current Five Year Strategy, as well as increasing specialist housing such as the new teenage-pregnancy supported housing project.

**Actions- What we will do in order to achieve the stated outcomes**

<b>Outcome</b>	<b>What we plan to do</b>	<b>Key Partners</b>	<b>Target date</b>
2a	Review the role of the HIA in the delivery of Mandatory DFGs	HIA HCA Supporting People Team	October 2011
2b	Work with Kent Social Services to jointly commission new forms of temporary accommodation and provide long-term solutions to youth homelessness	Joint Policy & Planning Board; KCC; housing providers	Review annually
2c	Work with the Offender Management Unit to implement their action plan to reduce reoffending	JPPB sub group on offenders & housing; Kent Probation; Youth Offender Service; outreach	September 2012

		services	
2d	Assist the SMP in developing and delivering an action plan to support victims of domestic violence	Safer Maidstone Partnership	March 2012

### **Performance indicators**

Number of homes occupied by vulnerable people made decent  
Number of weeks taken to approve a disabled facilities grant  
Number of people helped through the staying put partnership

### **Priority 3 – Improve our existing homes**

#### **Outcomes- What we plan to achieve**

- a) Homeowners and private landlords are encouraged and supported to maintain and repair their homes; the grant programme is targeted to achieve community benefit e.g. nomination rights
- b) Use of existing stock is maximised by empty homes being brought back into use.
- c) Energy efficiency and fuel poverty have improved across all tenures

#### **Why is this important to Maidstone?**

Poor quality housing is known to have a detrimental effect on a household's health, educational and emotional wellbeing. With nearly 86% of Maidstone's housing stock in private ownership (both owner-occupied and privately rented), the borough has had to find ways to tackle poor conditions including inadequate heating, overcrowding, improving energy efficiency and enable vulnerable and disabled households to remain in their homes. At the same time we must ensure that standards are maintained in the existing private rented sector and that any investment results in a benefit to the Council and the residents of Maidstone.

The Council will take the appropriate action where a landlord's rented accommodation necessitates this, regardless of whether the landlord has a small or large portfolio of property.

The SHMA indicates that over 70% of households are in the owner-occupied sector, whilst overcrowding in Maidstone is not problematical (some 1.9% of households are overcrowded, lower than the latest national and regional estimates from the Survey of English Housing of 2.7% and 2.0% respectively), the household survey indicates that in Maidstone 39.5% of households are under-occupied. Under-

occupation is not evenly spread, with nearly half (45.4%) of all properties in rural parts of Maidstone Borough under-occupied compared to 34.7% in the urban area.

All social housing landlords operate some form of incentive scheme to enable tenants in larger family accommodation to move to more suitable properties. However, there is little incentive or support for elderly owner occupiers who find that their houses are no longer suitable for their needs and who wish to move into smaller accommodation. The SHMA indicates that relatively few older owner occupiers are intending to move to alternative housing in the next two years, due mainly to a perceived lack of choice.

New housing has to minimise its impact on the environment. As well as national targets for carbon-neutral development, and regional plans and policies which include more specific requirements for ensuring sustainability, Maidstone seeks minimum level 3 of the Code for Sustainable Homes on all new homes.

In Maidstone around 4,230 properties (8.2%) are in fuel poverty. With an average household size of 2.32 persons, there are nearly 10,000 persons (1 in 15) living in fuel poverty in Maidstone. Fuel poverty is a result of the interaction of three factors – household incomes, energy prices and energy efficiency in homes. It is estimated that nationally a 1% rise in energy prices forces around 40,000 households into fuel poverty. A household is considered to be in fuel poverty if it needs to spend more than 10% of its income on energy costs to achieve an adequate level of warmth. Fuel poverty is strongly associated with single parent, elderly and economically vulnerable households.

**Actions- What we will do in order to achieve the stated outcomes**

<b>Outcome</b>	<b>What we plan to do</b>	<b>Key Partners</b>	<b>Target date</b>
3a	Engage small landlords to work with the council to improve the condition and management of their property through the accreditation scheme	MBC Change & Improvement Team KCC OT Bureau	October 2011
3a	Start an annual Landlords Forum	National Landlords Association	March 2012
3b	Update the Empty homes strategy	No Use Empty initiative	March 2012

**Performance indicators**

Average number of days to respond to private sector housing enquiries  
 Number of empty private sector dwellings that are returned into occupation or demolished

## **Priority 4- Improve access to housing advice and work to prevent homelessness and rough sleeping in Maidstone**

### **Outcomes- what we plan to achieve**

- a) There is an improvement in the quality and range of information relating to advice services that results in more households being prevented from becoming homeless
- b) Work to prevent homelessness and end the need to sleep rough in Maidstone.
- c) Access to affordable housing is improved and the range of housing options available to applicants is increased.

### **Why is this important to Maidstone?**

The Council has a duty to provide free advice and information about housing, homelessness and the prevention of homelessness to anyone in the district. We want to ensure that everyone is able to access this advice when they need it in a way that is convenient for them.

In June 2010 the new Government announced changes to the housing benefits (HB) system, with the intention of saving £1.1b over 4 years. Housing Services monitor local market rent levels in respect of Local Housing Allowance payable, and will monitor the effects of these changes closely, including whether we experience an increase in applicants from London, or other more expensive parts of the South-East.

The Government is committed to tackling and preventing homelessness and so is Maidstone Borough Council. Activities aimed at the prevention of homelessness have a wide reaching benefit, including reducing the need for other agency services and costs to public finances as well as the obvious savings to the Council made from reduced use of Bed & Breakfast accommodation.

Kent Homechoice, the Choice Based Lettings scheme used by Maidstone Borough Council, has allowed households on the Housing Register to state an interest and 'bid' for the social housing available for rent. Priority is then given to the household bidding that has the highest level of need. In addition to advertising social rented

properties on the Kent Homechoice website, we now include homes available for low cost home ownership and new mobility indicators highlight those homes which are adapted or particularly suitable for wheelchair users. In the future we are also looking to include the private rented homes of accredited landlords through Home Choice to provide a greater range of housing to households seeking alternative accommodation. However, we need to review whether this system is working for those in the greatest need and continues to provide value for money. The Allocation Scheme will be reviewed following the enactment of the Localism Bill and this provides an opportune time to evaluate the choice based lettings approach.

We will also work closely with the **Economic Regeneration and Development** of the Local Strategic Partnership

**Actions- What we will do in order to achieve the stated outcomes**

<b>Outcome</b>	<b>What we plan to do</b>	<b>Key Partners</b>	<b>Target date</b>
4a	Review our use of IT in the provision of housing advice.	Kent Homechoice Housing DCLG stakeholders	September 2012
4a	Review how we can improve the accessibility of our housing options services.	Porchlight, Shelter, Connexions, Day Centre, Social services	December 2011
4b	Work with our partners to increase the effectiveness of the Rent Deposit Bond Scheme	Housing Benefit, CAB, National Landlords Association, Maidstone Landlords Forum	March 2012
4b	Develop and promote a Private Homeowner Incentive Scheme	KCC, KHOG	December 2011
4c	Review the housing allocation scheme	Kent Homechoice Housing stakeholders Service users	May 2012
4c	Develop Maidstone’s approach to the Kent-wide Single Assessment	As above	October 2011

	Scheme		
4c	Review whether Choice Based Lettings is still the best way of people accessing social housing	As above	October 2011

### **Performance indicators**

Average time taken to process and notify applicants on the housing register

Number of households prevented from becoming homeless through the intervention of housing advice

Number of households living in temporary accommodation on the last night of the month

## **9. Implementation and Monitoring arrangements**

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The Housing Department operates within a Council-wide performance management system which is structured around effective political and managerial leadership, a clear vision, action centred service planning, regular performance reporting and constructive challenge

To ensure that the Housing Strategy is delivered, the Council will review and monitor the Action Plan through various methods:

- The Housing Consultative Board is a Member constituted body responsible for advising Cabinet on all housing issues.
- Housing Sounding Board (HSB). The HSB will review the Action Plans and produce an annual Position Statement.
- Housing Services performance indicators reported quarterly to Senior Management Team, Portfolio Holder and Cabinet.
- Satisfaction surveys – Housing Services seeks the views of our customers and stakeholders through questionnaires.

Changes in legislation often affect both social and market housing. This strategy will be updated annually to ensure any relevant changes are taken into account and that the action plans are updated.

## **10. Risk management**

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The Council has reviewed the outcomes we hope to achieve by 2015 to identify any risks to those outcomes. Action plans to mitigate these risks will be put in place and reported to Management Team and Cabinet. This information can be found in the strategic risk register and management action plan. The performance on these will be reported regularly through our performance management processes to Management Team, Cabinet and Scrutiny.