

# HOUSING STRATEGY SUMMARY 2004 – 2007

## Introduction

The Huntingdonshire District forms the most Westerly part of Cambridgeshire and has a population of approximately 156,954. It covers 360 square miles and has its administrative centre in Huntingdon. The District falls logically into three parts, the Valley of the Great Ouse, the 'Uplands' on the West side of the Great North Road and the Fens which have their own very distinct character. The Valley of the Great Ouse contains the main centres of population; Huntingdon, St Ives, St Neots and Godmanchester. West of the Great North Road is an area of undulating countryside bordering on rural Northamptonshire. The main centre in the West is based at Kimbolton. From Yaxley near Peterborough down through the east of the District to Earith is the Fen country, which stretches for miles across the Bedford level. With the exception of Ramsey this flat area is relatively sparsely populated. In addition to the main market towns there are over 80 villages in the District.

The Housing Strategy document has seven chapters, with each chapter providing information about our Aims, Objectives and Our Future Priorities. This Summary has been produced to give a brief overview of the key messages in our Strategy.

## Strategy Development

The Council aims to provide direction for both private and social housing activity within the District. Unsuitable housing conditions or being unable to access affordable housing can affect the quality of life of local people. The Council recognises the need to make the links between housing and health, social care, community safety, social inclusion, transport, energy efficiency, sustainability, education and employment and to adopt a 'joined up' approach to these issues. Working in partnership with statutory and voluntary agencies is a vital part of the development of new housing initiatives. The Housing Strategy links with Government policy and reflects the regional objectives contained in the East of England Housing Strategy and Sustainable Communities: building for the future.

A vital factor in developing the Strategy is the local strategic partnership called the Huntingdonshire Strategic Partnership. This is a partnership of public, community, voluntary, business, educational and charitable organisations who work together to achieve progress on issues which people have highlighted as important — crime, jobs, education, environment, transport, health and housing. Housing has been identified as a key element, and in this context the Housing Strategy will both influence and reflect the priorities and activities within the Community Strategy and the local strategic partnership.

## The Need for Housing

The Strategy is based on a clear identification of needs and a forecast of possible trends that enable the Council to plan for the future direction of resources and priorities for action. The Council uses a wide range of sources of information including the Housing Needs Survey, Housing Register, Special Needs Housing Registers, Stock Condition Survey, Empty property data, Regional Planning Guidance, and the partnership work undertaken with a variety of agencies including health and Social Services.

Homelessness within the District has continued to increase year on year. In the year ending March 2003, 367 households presented as homeless compared to 304 in the previous year, a 21% increase. Of those, there was a duty towards 251 households to provide housing, compared to 192 in the previous year, a 31% increase. The number of street homeless is

estimated to be very small, less than 5, because there is a tendency to go to larger urban centres such as Cambridge and Peterborough. There are 2868 households on the Housing Register, of which 265 require special needs housing.

The Council has also investigated the private housing market in the District and the result of this investigation is published in *Reading the Housing Market 2003*. This report shows the private sector is failing to provide for households on low incomes or households who are entering the housing market for the first time. The exclusion of these households, due to the high costs of renting or buying private property, means social rented housing is the only affordable housing option available. It is further recognised that key workers may have difficulty obtaining housing in the district. Further research is to be undertaken on this issue.

An average of 4000 new homes are needed in Cambridgeshire and Peterborough, 70% of which should be in the Cambridge sub-region. In Huntingdonshire this includes the market towns of St Neots, St Ives, Huntingdon and Godmanchester. This will have an impact on the demand for housing in the District.

The Council's 100% external stock condition survey, which is now 90% complete, estimates 3599 properties in the District are in need of major repair. It is estimated that there are 274 unfit properties in the District. Most of the unfit properties were built before 1900 and are located in the market towns. The Council's survey of RSLs indicates that all social housing in the district will meet the Decent Homes standards by 2010.

The transfer of the Council's housing stock in March 2000 to the Huntingdonshire Housing Partnership is enabling substantial modernisation, improved energy efficiency, affordable warmth and greater standards of comfort from window replacements.

The work undertaken as a result of the publication of the Council's Empty Homes Strategy confirms that the current buoyant housing market clears the majority of local homes empty for above six months, without Council intervention. There is a relatively small empty homes problem in the District involving less than 0.01% of the total housing stock, approximately 60 empty properties, which could be brought back into use. These properties are now the focus of the Council's attention.

The main results of the District-wide Housing Needs Survey in 2002 showed that 2,779 households are living in unsuitable housing; 6,377 households have one or more special needs; there are 1,528 households with a newly arising housing need each year; 5,065 extra affordable homes are required to meet need to 2011; and there is a shortage of 1 and 2 bedroom homes.

### **Housing Options**

The Council provides a comprehensive advice service to assist people to remain in their own homes. Advice is also given on how to access, and the availability of, social rented housing, and other housing options available in the District. We have a specialist Housing Advice Officer for young people, whose work includes liaising with landlords, parents and giving talks at schools. We have a comprehensive range of free information leaflets available to anyone seeking advice. We also offer access to the Cambridgeshire Interpretation and Translation Service (CINTRA) for people whose first language is not English.

The Council has continued to work with local landlords to encourage and promote good practice in tenancy matters and to prevent the loss of tenancy due to the tenant or landlord being unaware of their rights and responsibilities. The Council's web site provides extensive access to information and services provided by the Council with links to related services

provided by other agencies. Advice is available on housing issues and a variety of application forms and information leaflets can also be downloaded from the web site.

There is active promotion of the Housing and Special Needs Registers. The promotion of the Special Needs Housing Register enables the matching of households who have special needs with housing most suitable for their needs and also helps us to plan future developments. The ongoing promotion of the Council's Home Improvement Agency and the services and financial help it can offer ensures that people who need this service are aware of the availability of assistance and grant aid. There is also continued promotion of the community alarm, disabled facilities and repairs grants.

### **Promoting Safe, Warm and Healthy Homes.**

A safe, warm and healthy home has a major role to play in people's safety and well being. The Local Strategic Partnership has established a health, housing and social care thematic group to lead and co-ordinate on these matters and inform the Community Strategy.

The Huntingdonshire Community Safety Partnership ensures there is a multi-agency approach to working on issues from the crime and disorder audit. Anti-social behaviour is one of the highest concerns of Huntingdonshire residents. As part of the Community Safety Strategy, 5 geographical task groups have been established as well as a specific group for violent crime.

### **Meeting The Needs Of Vulnerable People**

Housing has a key role to play in supporting community care in the District, through joint working, to maintain independent living. A Supporting People Implementation Group has been established and following the agreement on a County basis to pool administration budgets, a County Supporting People Implementation Group has been appointed. A Supporting People strategy has been produced and a series of service reviews has been programmed and is underway.

The Council's Special Needs Officer works closely with statutory and voluntary agencies for the benefit of people in housing need, and participates in established multi-agency groups. This officer also has a significant role to play in directing colleagues to other agencies and other agencies to relevant housing services.

Regular and frequent meetings take place with local team managers for physical disability and sensory impairment, occupational therapy, learning disability and mental health. There are improved links with the children's team through participation in the Huntingdonshire Children's Plan Locality Working Group. In addition, liaison meetings with the local Health Care Trust colleagues involved in hospital discharge and 'winter pressures' take place. The Special Needs Officer is the named contact for hospital discharge staff. Special needs issues are debated with RSL colleagues through the regular housing management and housing development meetings.

### **Developing Affordable Housing**

In Huntingdonshire the development of new housing and refurbishment of previously developed sites by RSLs to meet the need for affordable housing has been prioritised. The buoyant private housing market, both rented and owner-occupation, already caters for the middle to high earning households, however it does not cater for middle to low income households, benefit dependent households, and households entering the housing market for the first time. The only option for these groups is social rented housing.

The major need is for social rented housing in the market towns and larger villages. There is a need for single person housing in town centres, 2 bedroom family housing in St Neots and some 3 bedroom housing in St Ives. Housing with 4 or more bedrooms is also needed in these towns.

As the District's housing market is wider than just Huntingdonshire itself, joint working with neighbouring authorities to identify both private and social sector needs is necessary. A Cambridge sub-region Housing Strategy has been produced, which involved close working with eight other Local Authorities. A sub-region housing needs survey and keyworker study is underway.

To ensure that the standard of affordable housing schemes in the District is high, there is a select list of developing Registered Social Landlords (RSLs) for general needs schemes. This is in addition to the involvement of relevant experienced or specialist RSLs and voluntary agencies for special needs schemes. The current list contains seven RSLs.

### **Resourcing The Strategy**

Government has changed the way that money is made available to fund new affordable housing developments. From 2004 there will be 'a single housing investment pot' for the East of England. How allocations will be made from the regional pot has yet to be decided. As details emerge our Strategy will be updated.

The Council's investment planning process ensures that the resources at its disposal are targeted at schemes that will meet its long-term objectives. The Council funds private sector and disabled facilities grants. The Government funds 60% of the disabled facilities grants.

The county-wide Supporting People strategy and budget are the means of prioritising and funding supported housing schemes and support services to people.

**If you would like a copy of the Housing Strategy, Strategy Summary or Reading the Housing Market or if you have any comments on any of these documents please contact Lorraine Gardiner on 01480 388229. The documents are also available on the Council's website, [www.huntsdc.gov.uk](http://www.huntsdc.gov.uk). The Strategy Summary is also available on audio tape.**

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