Welcome to the second edition of the Strategic Housing Newsletter. It has been very busy since the last newsletter due to numerous government announcements and in particular relating to changes in the way in which affordable housing is funded. The Homes and Communities Agency (HCA) published the Affordable Homes Programme Framework for 2011 - 2015. From April 2011, new affordable housing supply, with any form of HCA funding, will be provided as Affordable Rent. Affordable Rent Tenure (known as ART’s) will be let at up to 80% market rent levels. The aim of the Government is to reduce the amount of capital funding, in the form of HCA grant and the shortfall being made up by enabling housing associations to charge higher rents. This is a completely new way of funding affordable housing and most housing associations are taking a fairly cautious approach to the new funding regime. The article on page five explains the new system in more detail.

On the Private Sector Housing front, this newsletter features an article on Empty Homes and the work of the team to bring more properties back in to use. The Council continues to offer a number of grants to individuals to assist with disabilities, energy efficiency measures, and property renovation grants for landlords. If you want any information on the grants we can provide please contact Private Sector Housing on 01449 724716.

The next Newsletter will be in a different format as integration work with Babergh District Council progresses. A new joint newsletter is scheduled for the autumn.

How can Parish Councils help provide housing for local people?

The Parish Council has an important part to play in the provision of affordable local needs housing in the following ways:-

- Evaluating whether local needs housing is required in the parish.
- Carrying out a Local Needs Survey within the parish in partnership with the chosen Housing Association or the Rural Housing Enabler.
- Choosing a Housing Association to develop a housing scheme.
- Working with the District Council and Housing Association officers to identify suitable sites.
- Influencing the design and appearance of the scheme.
- Encouraging local people to register for housing with the Council.

For more information please contact your Housing Enabler:

**Contact for parishes A-J**

- Anne Bennett
- Telephone: 01449 724773
- e-mail: anne.bennett@midsuffolk.gov.uk

**Contact for parishes J-Z**

- Nigel Brett
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Affordable Housing Scheme Status
Jan - March 2011

Affordable Housing delivered:
- Royston Drive, Thurston, 19 bungalows; Flagship Housing
- Norton Road, Tostock, four HOLD bungalows; Saffron Housing
- Steele's Road, Woolpit, eleven homes (Phase 2); Flagship Housing

The following schemes have started this year:
- Barretts Lane, Needham Market - seven flats; Iceni/Suffolk Housing Society
- Finborough Rd, Stowmarket - four general needs flats + eight flats for people with mental health problems; Orbit
- Fitzgerald Rd, Bramford - two 3 bedroom houses; Orwell Housing
- Steelees Road, Woolpit - eighteen homes (Phase 3); Flagship Housing

Affordable Housing schemes planned to start this year:
- Church Close, Wilby; Orwell Housing*
- Oak Crescent, Eye; Orwell*
- Steele's Road, Woolpit Phase 4
- Snoasis Housing site, Great Blakenham

*Subject to funding & planning permission.

Housing Needs Surveys have recently been undertaken in:
- Mendlesham; recently held a beauty parade to select a Housing Association to work with.
- Stoke Ash; parish council will arrange a beauty parade.

Housing Needs Surveys are being planned in:
- Beyton;
- Claydon & Barham
- Combs, part of the parish plan process

Parishes looking for sites following housing needs survey:
- Felsham and Gedding; Orwell Housing
- Thurston; Flagship Housing
- Tostock; Orwell Housing
- Laxfield; Flagship Housing
- Stradbroke; Flagship Housing
- Wattisfield; Flagship Housing
- Stowupland; Hastoe Housing
Royston Drive formerly Cracknells Garage Site - Thurston

The site located adjacent to the garage on Beyton Road, Thurston, was completed at the end of March 2011. It has provided 19 affordable homes for the residents of the District comprising of 15 for rent and four for shared ownership. Two of the rental properties are full wheelchair accessible bungalows. The site was originally intended for market homes with an affordable housing contribution; but a fall in the housing market and keenness to progress the site by the construction company Baker Homes, saw them work in partnership with Flagship and Mid Suffolk District Council to bring forward this fully affordable scheme.

Barretts Lane, Needham Market

Work has started on re-developing a block of 12 council garages in Barretts Lane, Needham Market to provide six one bed flats and one two bed flat for Suffolk Housing Society; who also own the two adjacent bungalows. They will be built to Sustainable Homes Code level four, including solar panels and secure cycle storage. There was a short window of opportunity to get funding from the HCA before the end of the financial year. It took only three months from submitting the planning application to starting on site; this did mean that the consultations took place over a short time scale, but thanks to efforts from the Town Council, MSDC planning, legal and housing teams, a satisfactory design is now being built that makes best use of the small sloping site. The new flats will provide much needed affordable homes in Needham Market.
Completion of Phase 2 Steele’s Road, Woolpit

The original site comprised of 34 x one and two bedroomed bungalows for mixed use that were in a poor condition. The new development makes best use of the land to a higher density level that the local community has been active in designing.

Before the start of the work …

Completion of Phase 2…

Demolition continues and Phase 3 should complete by the end of 2011…

The new scheme is being built by Persimmon Homes working in partnership with Flagship Housing, Mid Suffolk District Council, Woolpit Parish Council and local residents and it will provide the following 51 units of accommodation:

**Phase 1** - 3 x two bed bungalows for rent (phase also includes 1 x two bed bungalow, 2 x three bed bungalow & 2 x three bed house as replacement properties for the owner-occupiers)

**Phase 2** - 4 x two bed bungalows, 6 x two bed houses and 1 x three bed house all for rent

**Phase 3** - 6 x two bed bungalows, 1 x two bed bungalow (wheelchair standard), 1 x three bed bungalow (wheelchair standard) and 2 x three bed houses for rent - 2 x three bed bungalows, 2 x two bed houses and 4 x three bed houses for shared ownership

**Phase 4** - 2 x two bed bungalows for rent

**Phase 5** - 8 x one bed flats for rent

This will provide the District with a net gain of 17 properties, whilst ensuring the improvement of living conditions for existing tenants. Built to modern standards, all ongoing running costs should also be reduced.
New funding arrangements for affordable housing schemes

The Coalition Government’s Comprehensive Spending Review in autumn 2010 has had a large impact on the future funding of affordable housing. The funding that the Homes and Communities Agency (HCA) will have available to support new affordable housing schemes is significantly reduced; down from £8.4 billion to £4.5 billion over the next four years. £2.3bn of this funding is committed to the delivery of 67,000 homes already in the national development pipeline. The remainder is for the delivery of a further 83,000 affordable homes between 2011 and 2015, together with initiatives on empty homes, places for change and Gypsy and Traveller accommodation, and mortgage rescue schemes.

On the 14th July the HCA announced the successful bidders who had been allocated funding through the Affordable Homes Programme. A total of £230 million has been allocated for the East and South East HCA area. All of the housing association partners this Council works with were successful but we have yet to confirm individual allocations and which schemes have been funded within our affordable housing programme. We will be working with our partners over the coming weeks to establish which schemes can be progressed and moved forward. We have prioritised a number of local housing needs schemes in our villages for the next four years so we are hopeful there will now be funding to deliver them.

This funding will be available until 31 March 2015 and will be linked to the delivery of the Government’s new Affordable Rent Tenure (ART) model for affordable housing, see below.

Affordable Rent Tenure

Under government plans, a proportion of existing Social Rent dwellings owned by Housing Associations will be converted to the new Affordable Rent Tenure (ART) when they become vacant. Existing "sitting" tenants should not be affected. In May, Housing Associations that wished to apply for grant submitted their proposals explaining how they will implement ARTs and how this will fund potential new developments. Once these proposals are agreed with the HCA, (planned for the end of July), the majority of affordable housing schemes will be for a new type of tenancy called 'Affordable Rent'. The current affordable housing tenancy, which is termed 'Social Rent', is set by the HCA at levels based on local income.

Affordable Rent Tenancy properties will be let at up to 80% of local open market rents, taking into account Housing Benefit eligible rent levels. The new tenancy will also be for a fixed term of at least two years. The right to buy or acquire remains. The Government's intention is that the additional income raised from the higher rents will be used to fund the development of new affordable housing, reducing reliance on Social Housing Grant.

We are now discussing with our partners what the full impact of these proposed changes will be on future schemes and the ability of local people to pay the new rents. We will also be investigating how Social Rent tenancies may still be provided where required. Existing tenants should not be affected.
Gypsy and Traveller Update

Gypsy and Traveller funding is back on the agenda with the Homes and Communities Agency's announcement in their Affordable Homes Programme Framework document published in February 2011. It has announced that up to £60m will be available for the provision of good quality public sites from 2011 - 2015. This is a welcome step as this District has the highest population of Gypsy and Travellers in Suffolk and already has 97 authorised pitches on private sites and the busiest in terms of the number of unauthorised encampments. The Gypsy and Traveller Accommodation Assessment (GTAA) published in 2007 states that MSDC needs to provide a further 42/43 pitches by the end of 2011. Since the survey was published a further 28 pitches have been provided on private sites, leaving a shortfall of 14/15. Officers are actively working to look for opportunities to meet the shortfall and to help reduce the incidence of unauthorised encampments.

A report written by the Equality and Human Rights Commission shows investment in adequate site provision can generate income for local authorities, improve community relations and provide safe and decent accommodation for Gypsy and Traveller communities. Gypsies and Travellers: Simple Solutions for Living Together says as little as one square mile of land across all of England would be enough to provide all Gypsy and Traveller families with sufficient authorised sites.

If any Parish Councils wish to get in touch about the provision of sites or general Gypsy and Traveller accommodation issues, please contact Anne Bennett on 01449 724774.

Private Sector Housing notes

Compulsory Purchase

The Council has recently had to resort to what is arguably the ultimate sanction to deal with two long term empty homes in the district. In each case, the owners had allowed their respective properties to become neglected to the point that they had fallen into extensive disrepair, had become eyesores affecting their respective neighbourhoods and were the cause of widespread complaint from local residents. Years of effort by the Council to try to work with the two owners to bring these homes back into use, ultimately the Council decided that intervention by Compulsory Purchase was necessary to protect the interests of the communities concerned. The Council's actions had the desired effect in the case of one of the properties, prompting the owner to auction it on condition that the purchaser enters into an agreement with the Council to renovate it. For the second property, the Secretary of State has notified the Council that it may now confirm a Compulsory Purchase order, this will enable the Council to acquire the property and auction it for renovation so that it may offer accommodation for a family in need.
Empty Homes

There are some 288,000* long term empty homes across the country, a national scandal at a time when there is continuing unmet need for additional housing in almost every district.

Mid Suffolk is no exception to this: across the district there are approximately 2000 people currently in need of housing, while there are 637* homes recorded as long-term vacant, many of which would, contribute to meeting that need. Long term vacant homes are those that remain empty for longer than six months. Returning existing empty homes to use is generally more cost effective and more environmentally efficient and acceptable than building new homes from scratch, and may go a long way towards reversing the blight, nuisance, anti-social behaviour, environmental impact and neighbourhood decline that are to varying degrees associated with abandoned or neglected, vacant homes.

The Government is keen to support action on empty homes as a key way of improving housing supply and will reward councils financially with New Homes Bonus for any long term vacant homes that are brought back to use as a result of their intervention. The Council is using all the information it can to identify long term empty homes and engage with their owners, offering them grants to help with the cost of bringing the properties up to standard where they are willing to do the work and make them available for letting.

Sometimes these incentives are not enough, however, and it may be necessary for the Council to intervene and use its powers either to ensure that owners take action over their properties, or in the most extreme cases, opt for compulsory purchase. Of course, not all long term empty homes require intervention as many may be in the process of, for instance, sale, renovation, or probate. It is the Council’s job to focus on the empty homes that are becoming neglected, or have been abandoned, or are in some way affecting their local neighbourhood. Last year, the Council succeeded in ensuring that 31 homes were returned to use across the district, and led a partnership of four councils locally in supporting schemes to return 43 homes to use in Suffolk Coastal, Ipswich, Mid Suffolk and Babergh using £460,000 in regional funds to secure improvements worth £880,000

Is there a long-term empty home in your parish? If you wish to report an empty home you can do so by contacting the Council’s Private Sector Housing team on 01449 724716 or by emailing the team on privatesectorhousing@midsuffolk.gov.uk.

The Orbit East Care and Repair HandyHelp service can help with minor repairs, or odd jobs around the home, for those home owners or private tenants who are over the age of 60, or who have a disability or who are otherwise considered vulnerable. The service offers a whole range of minor repairs, tidying gardens and redecorating on the basis that the customer pays for the materials and a small hourly charge of £10 plus VAT for labour. This handyperson service is offered by Orbit East Care and Repair Home Improvement Agency, a not-for-profit organisation supported by the Council. More information may be obtained by contacting the Handy Help service on freephone 0800 121 7711 or emailing suffolkhia@orbit.org.uk.

Over the last financial year April 2010 to March 2011, the Council was offering grants to eligible private homeowners and tenants to help them repair, improve, or adapt their homes or to make them more secure or energy efficient. The Council paid out more than £280,000 in Disabled Facilities Grants, helping 35 people with disabilities adapt their homes, whilst it also paid out some £110,000 to more than 40 homeowners or tenants on improvements, repairs or empty homes grants. More than £120,000 was paid to 333 applicants for grants for energy efficiency improvements and a further £31,000 paid helping more than 100 vulnerable applicants improve the security of their homes. For more information about housing grants and eligibility, please call the Council's Private Sector Housing service on 01449 724716, or email privatesectorhousing@midsuffolk.gov.uk.

The Council offers certain grants designed to help older home owners and private tenants make their homes more secure and energy efficient. Energy efficiency grants, worth up to £250, are available to help with the cost of installing cavity wall and/or loft insulation. There are also grants available under the Council's Safe and Secure scheme to meet the cost of replacing or improving door and window locks and a range of other security measures. In both cases the grants are available to homeowners and private tenants who are aged 60 or over, or who have a disability, or who receive income based benefits like income support. For more information, contact the Council's Private Sector Housing team on 01449 724716 or email privatesectorhousing@midsuffolk.gov.uk.