
Housing Strategy for Oxford 2005 – 2008

Consultation draft March 2005

Text to go on inside front cover of final document:

The Housing Strategy is about Oxford's plans for housing in the city.

If you would like this document reproduced in a different form (such as tape, large print or Braille) or in a different language, please contact the Housing Strategy Adviser on 01865 252131, e mail cstubbings@oxford.gov.uk or write to Strategy & Review, Town Hall, Oxford, OX1 1BX.

(Text in minority languages to be added)

Housing Strategy 2005 - 2008

Contents

		Page
	Joint statement by Oxfordshire District Councils	3
	Executive Summary	4
Chapter 1	Housing in Oxford	5
	➤ What is Oxford like to live in?	5
	➤ What do we want to do to make it better? The Vision for Oxford	5
	➤ How do we know what's needed? Research, consultation and partnerships	6
	➤ What are we doing to make it better?	7
	➤ So what are the important things that need to happen?	12
Chapter 2	Housing Supply and Demand	14
	➤ How much housing do we have?	14
	➤ Housing need – is there enough housing to go round?	14
	➤ What is being done to meet housing need?	20
	➤ What else needs to be done?	22
	➤ Round up of key messages and actions and links to priorities	24
Chapter 3	Housing Quality	26
	➤ Private sector stock condition	26
	➤ Decent Homes	26
	➤ Houses in Multiple Occupation	27
	➤ Empty and second homes	27
	➤ What is being done to improve private housing?	27
	➤ What more needs to be done?	28
	➤ Public sector housing	28
	➤ Decent homes for Council tenants	30
	➤ Decent homes for housing association tenants	30
	➤ Round up of key messages and actions and links to priorities	30
Chapter 4	Supporting Communities – helping people with housing	32
	➤ What are the problems facing homeless people and how do we support them?	32
	➤ What are the problems facing young people and how do we support them?	33
	➤ What are the problems facing older people and how do we support them?	34
	➤ What are the problems facing Black and Minority Ethnic Communities and how do we support them?	35
	➤ How safe do our residents feel and what are we doing to help them feel safer?	36
	➤ I can't afford to buy on the open market – what can you do for me?	37
	➤ I can't afford to rent privately or buy – what can you do for me?	38
	➤ So what else are we doing for our communities as a whole?	39
	➤ I live in Oxford. How can I get new information and influence council policy?	41
	➤ Round up of key messages and actions and links to priorities	42
Chapter 5	Money Matters – Housing Finance	44
	➤ How spending is planned	44
	➤ Where does the money come from and how is it spent?	44
	➤ Round up of key messages and actions and links to priorities	49
Chapter 6	Making sure the strategy will work and will be kept up to date	50
Appendix 1	Strategic Housing Action Plan 2005 - 2008	
2	Corporate Planning Processes	
3	Links to other Council Plans and Strategies	
4	Wider policy linkages	
5	SHAP 2001- 2004	
6	SHOP structure and membership	
7	County-wide partnership structure	
8	Local Plan: Sites identified for housing/ mixed use development	
9	Lord Mayor's Deposit Guarantee Scheme achievements	
10	Best Value Performance Indicators – measuring performance against targets	
11	Scrutiny Committee work programme	
12	Contacts for more information	
13	Glossary	

Joint Oxfordshire District Councils' statement for Housing Strategies

Oxfordshire covers an area of more than 1,000 square miles (260,800 hectares) and has a population of 605,492 (2001 Census). The county consists of four predominantly rural District Councils, Cherwell, South Oxfordshire, Vale of the White Horse and West Oxfordshire, and Oxford City Council. The four rural District Councils have all transferred their housing stock. Oxford City Council is currently working through a stock options appraisal process to determine future investment in and management of the Council-owned housing stock.

Key housing issues across the county are:

- the high cost of all forms of housing;
- high demand for all types and tenures of housing;
- homelessness, especially in Oxford City
- a particular shortage of affordable rented housing;
- shortages in supported housing schemes and floating support services for vulnerable people;
- key workers and people on low and average incomes find it very difficult to afford to purchase a home or rent in the private sector. This means that employers find it difficult to attract and retain staff;
- problems of public transport and access to services and amenities for rural residents;
- planning constraints in Green Belt and Areas of Outstanding Natural Beauty;
- long term empty homes in an area of very high housing demand and need.

The Oxfordshire housing authorities have a range of cross-county and inter-agency groups designed to share information and best practice and to ensure a co-operative and consistent approach to tackling strategic housing issues. Joint statements have been agreed for our Housing Strategies, Homelessness Strategies and Private Sector Renewal Strategies. All the local authorities in Oxfordshire are actively looking for opportunities to strengthen joint working, and to undertake joint commissioning of surveys and services.

Executive Summary

There is a housing crisis in Oxford. This was true when our last housing strategy was produced in 2001. But now the problems of supply and affordability that we are familiar with are common in London and the South East and have been recognised in national housing policy. We have our best chance for many years to increase the supply of affordable housing and to improve living conditions for local people.

This document shows how we plan to make the most of that chance in Oxford for the next three years.

In Chapter 1 we look at the housing situation for people in Oxford, how the Council has prepared to improve this and what information we have used to develop the strategy. We also consider what is expected of the Council to contribute to wider priorities and how we work with partners to achieve them. In this chapter we set out our nine housing objectives for the coming three years:

- Increase the supply of housing for people in housing need
- Improve the affordability of housing in Oxford
- Increase opportunities for choice and mobility within the housing stock
- Improve the condition of housing in Oxford
- Reduce homelessness in Oxford
- Improve housing and support services for everyone who needs to use them
- Improve the environment on estates and in areas of decline
- Develop housing strategy and policy work to support service improvements
- Address the financial pressures on the Council for housing-related services.

Chapter 2 shows why housing need is so high, what we are doing with our partners to overcome this and what more we propose to do.

In Chapter 3 we describe the condition of privately and publicly owned housing, how well it meets the decent home and other standards and what further work is needed. This includes looking at stock option appraisal which will determine the future level of investment in the council's housing stock. Our recent private sector stock survey needs further analysis to help us understand where effort should be concentrated to link in with the Housing Act 2004 provisions for the private sector.

Chapter 4 focuses more closely on the needs of different people and groups within the community, highlighting what support they can obtain and what more is needed.

Chapter 5 illustrates the financial challenge we face in terms of investing in the Council stock and attracting or finding funds to invest in more affordable housing and shows how we plan to meet that challenge.

Chapter 6 sets out the arrangements we have in place to monitor and review this strategy to ensure that its action plan is delivered and the actions remain relevant.

The Action Plan shows all the actions that are planned for 2005 – 2008 to meet our nine objectives and is followed by a series of appendices giving more information on aspects of our strategic work.

Chapter 1 –Housing in Oxford

What is Oxford like to live in?

Description of Oxford and the local housing context

Oxford is a compact city in central Oxfordshire with a population of 134,248¹. The thriving local economy is based on tourism, further education, publishing, scientific innovation and manufacturing.

As a regional centre, Oxford attracts people to its services, leisure and cultural facilities and employment opportunities. Of 94,000 people who work in Oxford, 50% travel in from outside the tightly-drawn city boundaries.

The local housing market is under extreme pressure. Homelessness, constraints on the supply of land, high house prices, a large, high priced, poorly maintained private rented sector mean that housing choices are limited and very few people can afford to access the open housing market.

Table 1: tenure in Oxford

Tenure	Oxford	South East	England
Owner-occupied	56.1%	75.6%	69.9%
Council	14.9%	6.7%	13.2%
RSL	6.9%	6.8%	6.6%
Private rented	22.1%	10.9%	10.4%
All tenures	100.0%	100.0%	100.0%

Source: Private sector stock condition survey 2004

Pockets of social deprivation, high crime and unemployment are to be found in the city. Despite the creation of three Single Regeneration Budget (SRB) schemes and a Sure Start centre, deprivation has not been eliminated. 21 out of 24 electoral wards in Oxford are among the 25% nationally with greatest housing deprivation. Oxford's Northfield Brook ward is the only Super Output Area (SOA)² in Oxfordshire to appear in the 10% of most deprived SOA's in England. The SRB schemes are all nearing their end. Sure Start exists to improve the health and education of young children and their families and to promote social inclusion. Partnerships between the city council, the police and health, education and social care agencies will need to develop further to support the continued economic prosperity of the city and will only be effective if housing issues are addressed.

What do we want to do to make it better?

The Council's vision

The Council's vision for Oxford is "Building Pride in our City". It comprises two core commitments: improving the Council's performance and working with others to develop and deliver shared goals.

The vision commits the Council to improving its services in seven key areas to:

- improve the environments where we live & work
- make Oxford a safer city

¹ 2001 Census, Office of National Statistics (ONS). The Council is in discussion with ONS regarding this unexpectedly low figure.

² This is a Census area of 2000 - 5000 people

- provide more affordable housing
- create local prosperity & sustainable employment
- improve transport and mobility
- improve dialogue & consultation
- provide more & improved affordable leisure activities.

These service areas were prioritised through public consultation. The growing importance of housing issues is reflected in the selection of affordable housing as the third highest priority.

Corporate linkages

In order to improve its performance, the Council modernised its structure in 2001. It is designed to deliver the vision through a more systematic approach to business planning and performance management, linking the council's priorities to the work of individual officers. The Council's corporate planning processes are set out at appendix 2.

Asset management is fundamental to the Council's financial stability. We own public buildings like leisure centres, housing stock and commercial premises which generate income. We produce an annual asset management plan which sets out how best we believe these assets can be used to benefit the city. An important question for the next review of asset management to answer will be how those assets can best be employed to increase the supply of affordable housing.

How do we know what's needed?

Since the publication of our last Housing Strategy in 2001, housing has become increasingly important as a national issue and we have worked hard to improve our understanding of what the local issues are, how best we can tackle them and the links between national, regional and local issues.

National, regional and sub-regional policies

In preparing this strategy we have taken into account changes in legislation, national and regional policy, including:

- Introduction of public and private sector targets for the decent home standard (DHS) and the requirement to carry out a stock option appraisal
- Creation of Regional Housing Boards and changes to funding for affordable housing including the introduction of a regional single capital pot to replace Local Authority Social Housing Grant (LASHG)
- Regional Housing Strategy 2004 - 6
- Mandatory requirement for a housing strategy³ which has to meet "Fit for Purpose" criteria.
- Housing Act 2004
- Homes for All, ODPM 5-year plan, 2005

The table at appendix 4 shows the links between these national and regional policies and our local concerns.

Local changes

Not all national priorities are relevant to Oxford and we have spent 2003-5 improving our knowledge of the housing stock and the needs of the community. Consequently we know, for example, that housing market decline, rural issues and empty homes are not matters of serious concern for Oxford. This knowledge helps us to be clear about

³ Local Government Act 2003

what the priorities are for Oxford, where these are shared with neighbouring authorities and how they compare with national policy.

We have taken into account the following local changes and new data to write a new housing strategy with a sharper focus and clear objectives and actions:

- Oxford's draft Local Plan with challenging targets for affordable and key worker housing
- Survey data on housing need, the local housing market and stock condition in Oxford
- Oxford's Homelessness Strategy, published in July 2003.
- The introduction of Supporting People funding

Research/ data

We are using existing information better and have invested in research where we did not have enough evidence of local needs and conditions. All statistics quoted in this strategy are from public sources or locally commissioned research, principally the 2001 Census, the council's returns to ODPM including the HIP and P1E quarterly homelessness returns, stock condition and housing needs surveys.

What are we doing to make it better?

We are using improved knowledge to set out our priorities in a new housing strategy, consulting widely to ensure it reflects the right issues and priorities and building partnerships to help deliver the strategy.

Developing a new housing strategy

In developing this strategy during 2003-5, we have taken into account the national policy framework for housing, progress against the previous strategic housing action plan (SHAP 2001-4) and the views of partners and stakeholders to produce a set of relevant and realistic objectives.

Information on current and planned activity within the council was gathered and linked with new information from the census, survey data, government guidance and recent service reviews. These were considered in the context of the council's financial position, particularly the cost of homelessness, to establish local priorities.

The action plan contained in the 2001-4 Strategy was reviewed on a regular basis by the Strategic Housing in Oxfordshire Partnership (SHOP). It was reviewed on the last occasion in August 2003 and details of progress and achievements are shown in appendix 5. The strategy for 2005-8 was already in development at that stage and a revised, more comprehensive, draft action plan was adopted by the Council as part of its policy framework in November 2003. Progress has been regularly monitored since that time.

The key successes and challenges over this transitional period were:

Successes	Challenges
Creation of the Options team and a new approach to homelessness	Responding to the government agenda by undertaking stock options appraisal
Completion of three major surveys of stock condition and housing need	Re-prioritising investment in repairs and maintenance of council stock to meet the Decent Homes standard
Creation and strengthening of strategic partnerships to enable us to deliver and monitor our housing strategies	Reviewing the Housing Revenue Account and its assets to ensure its financial stability

This strategy will replace the adopted draft on completion in 2005. All the objectives from the 2001-4 action plan have been incorporated into the new plan, to ensure continuity.

Asking what people think

In preparing this strategy we worked with tenants, residents, partner organisations, councillors and council officers.

Tenants and residents have been involved in producing the strategy through:

- newsletters
- direct correspondence
- events held in March and August 2003 for individual council tenants and leaseholders (successfully consulting about forty people who do not usually participate in tenant consultation) and representatives of tenant and leaseholder associations.
- Presentations made to ward councillors and members of the public at meetings of all six Area Committees during August/ September 2003.
- Following the disbandment of Oxford Federation of Tenants' Associations, a new structure for tenant participation was established in 2003. Oxford Tenants' Panel was advised of the feedback from the consultation events held in 2003 so that relevant issues could be included in the Panel's work programme.
- **Following completion of all the preparatory work for the developing Housing Strategy, including stock condition and housing requirement studies, the consultation draft Housing Strategy was submitted to the OTP again as part of a formal consultation process. The outcome was....to be inserted April/ May 2005...**

Partner organisations and stakeholders have been involved on a regular basis in strategy development through SHOP including consideration of the final draft on 15 April 2005. SHOP stressed the linkages between housing and health. As a result, increased priority is being given to private sector condition and homelessness.

Councillors were regularly consulted and informed about the Housing Strategy at intervals during its development:

- Housing Scrutiny Committee considered presentations on three occasions during the development of the strategy, supporting the investment in evidence-based research to inform decision-making and considering the risks associated with the priorities identified.
- Members of the Executive Board with housing responsibilities and the chair of Housing Scrutiny sat on the stock survey steering group
- Executive Board & Council considered and adopted the draft & approved expenditure for the private sector survey in November 2003.
- **The consultation draft was considered by Scrutiny Committee on ...2005, Executive Board onand adopted by full Council on.....(to be confirmed after completion of consultation)**

Business managers contributed information and took part in regular consultation meetings to ensure linkage with their service plans.

How tenants and residents have influenced the strategy

All residents consulted endorsed the main themes as the most important issues for Oxford. Although they did not generate any major changes in the strategy's objectives, strength of feeling on the condition of the private sector came through very strongly. The 2004 CPA inspection report also identified the lack of up to date survey

information as a shortcoming. As a direct result of this feedback we commissioned a Private Sector Stock Condition Survey as the starting point for creating a comprehensive strategy to tackle poor living conditions.

Tenants of the council also voiced their opinions on: maintenance, housing management (including allocations and rents), communication with tenants, tenant participation, decent homes and stock option appraisal.

Their questions and criticisms have been answered by Business Managers and reported back to Oxford Tenants' Panel and, where relevant, included in the tenant participation action plan. The approach used successfully to engage people in consultation on this occasion plus tenants' comments on effective tenant involvement and communication have been fed into stock option appraisal and future consultation processes to improve the way we communicate with tenants.

New ideas were put forward by tenants and leaseholders concerning the installation of water meters, reward schemes, support and skill development for tenants who wish to take better care of their homes. These new ideas have been investigated and reported back to Oxford Tenants' Panel. Most comments have been picked up in developing reward and incentive schemes.

Residents' priorities expressed at Area Committees were:

- more Environmental Health inspections and enforcement work to improve standards in run down areas
- a southern extension to Oxford to increase housing supply and that the city council should work with other districts in Oxfordshire to meet housing need
- to support communities in established residential areas by resisting the trend of extending family homes and developing them as flats
- employers and colleges should be responsible for providing purpose-built accommodation
- communities should not be further disrupted by increased short-term lets or non-family households.

Tenants and residents' views on sustainable communities have strengthened the emphasis given to this aspect of the strategy, especially the importance given to improving the quality of private sector housing and the need to develop a Supplementary Planning Document to address the conversion of family houses into flats.

Working with partners

By working with partners we contribute to and develop sub-regional priorities with the main aim of developing quicker, more efficient ways of delivering affordable and decent housing and other housing services.

We understand that people do not restrict their housing choices to administrative areas and that, acting alone, we can only make a limited contribution to improving the supply, condition and quality of housing. It is therefore vital that the council explores opportunities inside and outside the city to develop relevant partnerships that can achieve this. The Council has built up partnerships within Oxford and across the county and region.

Locally

The council's Strategy & Review Business Unit develops and maintains partnerships and builds up expertise that enables us to influence regional and national policy for the benefit of Oxford and to meet government objectives.

Officers from this team support Oxford Strategic Partnership (OSP), and the Strategic Housing in Oxford Partnership (SHOP). The OSP (a Local Strategic Partnership) was

established in February 2003 and published its first Community Strategy in June 2004. OSP is considering how it can coordinate and contribute to further regeneration initiatives as the local SRB schemes come to an end.

It has four housing targets:

- Promote further land release for affordable and key worker housing within Oxford from public sector landowners, by working with partners to access previously unidentified sites by April 2006
- Encourage and support the development of an effective Landlords' Forum by April 2005 to improve housing quality and living standards in the private sector
- Reduce the average time spent by homeless households in temporary accommodation by 50% by 2008
- Maintain levels of rough sleeping at a level two-thirds below the number in 1998.

The OSP is driving these strategic priorities forward through the public, business and voluntary sectors in the city, supported by SHOP. Established in 2001, SHOP represents all public sector housing stakeholders in Oxford and was restructured in 2004 to equip it to deliver the OSP's housing targets.

OSP and SHOP plan to work together on housing issues through regular briefings by the chair of SHOP and dialogue at the annual housing strategy conference about how the OSP can add value. An OSP housing theme group (made up of housing and strategy officers with support from Government Office for the South East) meets to develop the common work programme. A review of the Community Strategy is expected to redefine the housing targets from April 2006.

Regionally

We already work well with neighbouring district councils and Oxfordshire county council as shown by the joint statement made in the introduction to this strategy, although there are inevitably tensions due to urban, rural and political differences. Joint working takes place at all levels: strategic and operational housing liaison, homelessness strategy development and training, joint commissioning of services for private sector renewal and housing advice. Beacon Council status has been achieved by all the Oxfordshire councils for their joint work on Supporting People.

These links were strengthened when Oxfordshire Affordable Housing Members Group (OMAHG) was established in 2003. Senior councillors from each district and the county council meet regularly to tackle housing issues more effectively by working together. They have already begun work on some difficult topics such as approaches to disposal of council assets and joint working with housing associations on development schemes. They are expected to commission a sub-regional housing market area assessment in 2005. We see this as a basis for collaboration on meeting housing need, developing affordable housing, developing a sub-regional strategy and an opportunity to meet ODPM requirements to assess the needs of gypsies and travellers.

The council also plays an active part in Oxfordshire Community Partnership (OCP, the County-wide Local Strategic Partnership), which has identified affordable housing as a high priority, stimulated debate and raised awareness of issues, particularly in relation to key workers. The OCP is responsible for delivery of an equity loan scheme for locally identified key workers, has commissioned innovative research on key workers and has input into OMAHG. The structure of the city and county-wide partnerships is shown at appendices 6 and 7.

In 2003, the Cities in the South East housing group (CISE), was formed by local authorities in Brighton and Hove, Oxford, Reading, Portsmouth and Southampton. Milton Keynes Council joined the group in 2005. The CISE terms of reference are:

- to meet the needs of cities in the South East

- to discuss common, urban, concerns
- to lobby (speak as one voice) where appropriate.

The group's work programme centres on common urban themes:

- Supply of affordable housing
- Homelessness
- Decent homes in the public and private sectors
- Crime/ anti social behaviour
- Regeneration/ urban renaissance.

The CISE group has met with Government Office and members of the Regional Housing Board to explore how we can contribute to the regional agenda; is recognised as a formal consultee for the regional housing strategy and has established a regional tenants' forum learning from experiences of stock option appraisal and looking at strategic issues from an urban, social housing tenants' perspective.

Table 2: positive outcomes of partnership working

Activity/ issue	Partnership	Outcome
Joint work between council and RSLs in Oxford on common issues such as allocations and mobility	Strategic Housing in Oxford Partnership (SHOP)	Housing Management sub-group meeting quarterly on nominations, choice-based lettings, common register, anti-social behaviour, review of sheltered housing provision
Key worker housing	Oxfordshire Community Partnership (OCP)	KWHAG ambition group of OCP set up; affordable housing coordinator employed; City/ County key worker housing scheme set up; county-wide needs research completed November 2004.
Housing for public sector key workers	Oxfordshire County Council	Entering into off-market negotiations for RSL developments on surplus school sites; review of asset management and land disposal policies
Increasing land supply for affordable housing	Oxford Strategic Partnership	Housing objectives included in Community Strategy
Affordable housing development, mobility and support	SHOG/ OMAHG and OxSHLOG (Oxfordshire partnership groups plus RSLs)	County wide research on housing markets; working towards county-wide development partnership, lobbying on use of council tax on second and empty homes for affordable housing
Housing needs survey	Joint commissioning with local house-builders	Large survey sample produced robust data; contributed to the 2003 South East England Regional Assembly evaluation of housing need studies; leading to revised government guidance
Meeting housing need outside Oxford	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Milton Keynes Council • LAWN - scheme developed by London authorities, enabling applicants to move to low-demand areas 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Milton Keynes undertaking research on likely demand for housing in this Growth Area • Awaiting development of new national mobility and employment scheme announced in Homes for All ("moveUK")
Develop good practice; make a common case for urban housing issues in the region	Cities In the South East Housing Group (CISE)	CISE formally recognised as a consultee on the Regional Housing Strategy; making case for funding from Regional Housing Board; CISE joint tenant stock option appraisal event

The council welcomed the creation of the Regional Housing Board and the increased involvement of local authorities in strategy development and the setting of regional priorities. The council has made detailed responses to consultation on the 2004-6 and 2006-9 regional housing strategies (RHS) both directly and in conjunction with partners. The city council sees the regional agenda as so important that it has seconded the council's housing strategy adviser to the South East England Regional Assembly. She has been able to contribute direct experience of local housing issues to the development of the RHS while communicating enhanced understanding of housing need across the region and the direction of national policy into the local arena, enabling better decision-making on the OMAHG work programme.

So what are the important things that need to happen?

Our improved knowledge and understanding and feedback from residents and partners tell us that the nine main housing priorities for Oxford are:

- Increase the supply of housing for people in housing need
- Improve the affordability of housing in Oxford
- Increase opportunities for choice and mobility within the housing stock
- Improve the condition of housing in Oxford
- Reduce Homelessness in Oxford
- Improve housing-related services for everyone who needs to use them
- Improve the environment on estates and in areas of decline
- Develop housing strategy and policy work to support service improvements
- Address the financial pressures on the Council for housing-related services.

In this chapter we have described how we developed these priorities. The chapters that follow look at three key areas:

- Housing Supply and Demand (Chapter 2)
- Housing Quality (Chapter 3)
- Supporting Communities (Chapter 4).

Each chapter sets out what we are already doing to turn priorities into reality, what further action is needed, any alternatives that could be considered and the actions that we plan to take over the next three years and beyond.

In Chapter 5, the financial position is considered and Chapter 6 looks at how progress and priorities will be monitored and reviewed. The priorities and actions are then brought together in the Action Plan at the end of the Strategy.

Detailed consideration and implementation plans for homelessness issues and the Council's landlord role are to be found in the Homelessness Strategy 2003-2008 and 2004 Housing Revenue Account (HRA) Business Plan.

Chapter 2 – Housing Supply and Demand

Introduction

This chapter looks at the supply of housing in Oxford, the level of and reasons for housing need and the effects of the imbalance between the two. It then describes current work to correct the imbalance and what more needs to be done.

How much housing do we have?

The total housing stock in Oxford on 1 April 2003 was estimated at 52146⁴ dwellings; Table 1 in Chapter 1 shows that the proportions of privately rented and owner-occupied homes are respectively significantly greater and less than the national average.

Housing need – is there enough housing to go round?

We use a wide range of information to assess, analyse and verify housing needs in Oxford. Sources include: the Housing Register; Supporting People data; partner agencies (such as RSLs, Primary Care Trust, Social & Health Care, universities, police, probation service), published data (e.g. 2001 Census, ODPM statistics, local performance data), surveys & locally commissioned research.

Homelessness

Homelessness is the most serious aspect of housing need. Currently around 1000 households live in temporary accommodation at an annual cost to the Council and the community of over £4m. The backlog has been at this level since 1998 with an average of 400 households being accepted as homeless each year since that time. Homeless presentations and acceptances showed a marked increase following the Homelessness Act 2002. The Council's Homelessness Strategy tackles this largely through preventative measures. The impact of the strategy will become apparent gradually but it was already clear by January 2005 that homelessness is being held at a stable level rather than increasing in line with the recent national trend.

The main reasons for homelessness in Oxford in 2003-4 are consistent with previous years and with the national picture. Out of a total of 382 homeless acceptances⁵, exclusions by parents, relatives & friends accounted for 38% of households, relationship breakdown 11%, and termination of assured shorthold (private sector) tenancy 10%.

⁴ Oxford City Council HIP Return 2003; Office of National Statistics 2001 Census.

⁵ P1EAS return to ODPM

Table 3 below shows that in 2002-3 the incidence of homelessness in Oxford was almost double that of any other district in Oxfordshire.

Table 3: levels of homelessness in Oxfordshire districts

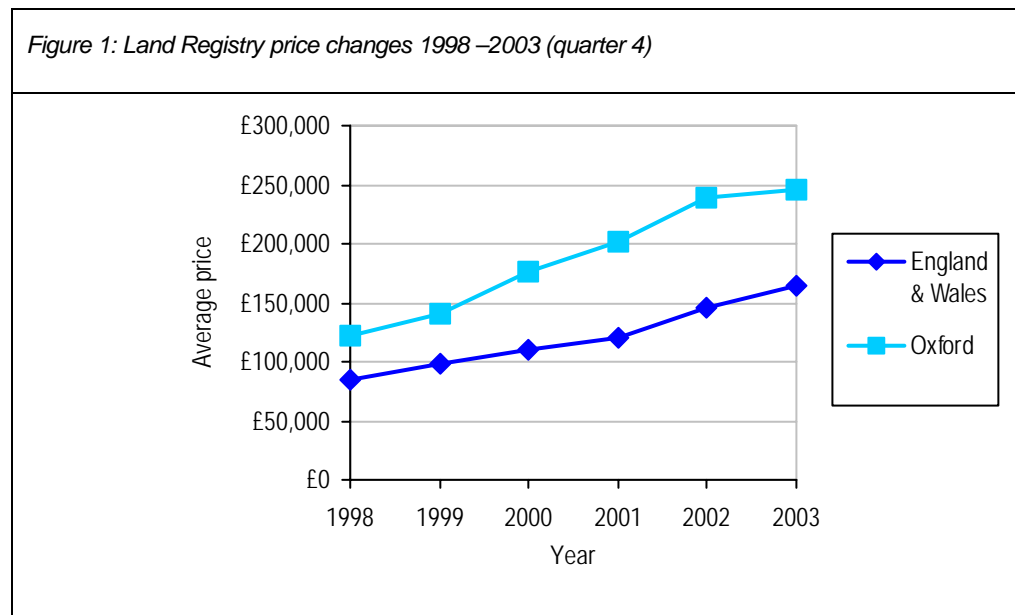
	Number of Households	Number Accepted as Homeless	Number per 1,000 households
Cherwell	53,225	266	5
Oxford City	51,732	438	8.5
Vale of White Horse	45,759	151	3.3
West Oxfordshire	38,397	61	1.6
South Oxfordshire	52,105	148	2.8

Why are so many households in housing need?

Affordability

Since 1998, the supply of new affordable rented housing has reduced and house prices and private sector rents have risen more sharply in Oxford than they have nationally, making Oxford one of the most expensive places to live in England.

Figure 1: Land Registry price changes 1998 –2003 (quarter 4)



Source: HM Land Registry, Property Price Data, 2003

Thus, by the end of 2003, average prices in Oxford were more than 50% higher than those for England and Wales.

Table 4: Land Registry average prices (4th quarter 2003)

Area	Average price	As % of E & W
England & Wales	£163,584	100.0%
South East	£205,109	125.4%
Oxfordshire	£229,674	140.4%
Oxford	£245,732	150.2%

The report "Can work, can't buy"⁶ showed Oxford as the 35th most expensive district in England for house purchase where an income of £46,018 was needed to purchase a lowest quartile property with four or five bedroom/ living rooms.

The Oxford Housing Requirement Study 2004 (HRS) found that the average household income in 2003 was significantly lower than this at £26,156 with significant variations between households living in different types of tenure as shown in Table 5. The table also shows that non-home owners did not have enough savings to meet the initial costs of house purchase.

Tenure	% of households (rounded figures)	Average gross weekly household income (inc. benefits)	Average net weekly household income (including benefits)	Average amount of savings	Average amount of equity
Owner-occupied (no mortgage)	29	£428	£358	£22,594	£268,397
Owner-occupied (with mortgage)	27	£712	£554	£10,362	£138,602
Council	15	£221	£196	£969	-
RSL	7	£224	£198	£115	-
Private rented	22	£641	£520	£3,650	-
ALL HOUSEHOLDS	100.0%	£503	£408	£10,587	£201,839

Comparing local incomes with property prices confirms that the vast majority of households in housing need in Oxford would not be able to obtain a mortgage at standard lending rates. High local property prices affect rents in the private sector as people unable to access owner-occupation compete for homes to rent. Tenancies and shared ownership of flats can also be difficult to afford as charges for additional services can be unmanageably high.

Property size	Minimum price	Average price	Average newbuild
1 bedroom	£126,500	£150,500	£158,200
2 bedrooms	£165,000	£190,500	£207,200
3 bedrooms	£177,000	£219,500	£252,000
4 bedrooms	£228,500	£298,000	£336,000
Property size	Minimum rent (£, pcm)	Average rent (£, pcm)	
Room only	£325	-	
1 bedroom	£575	£705	
2 bedrooms	£695	£820	
3 bedrooms	£805	£980	
4 bedrooms	£1,030	£1,220	

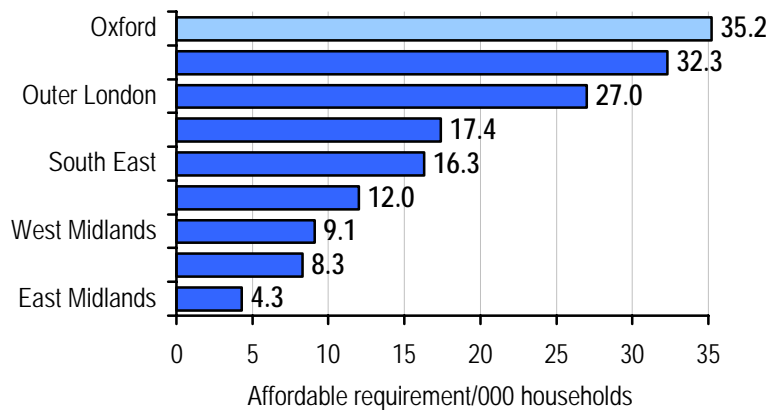
Source: Oxford Housing Requirements Study 2004

Although house prices, property sizes & tenures vary across Oxford, the city is so compact that such differences are only relative and no area of the city is truly affordable.

When the additional affordable homes required per 1000 households is considered, this represents an acute shortage of affordable housing rarely found outside Inner London. This is illustrated in Figure 2 below.

⁶ Joseph Rowntree Foundation (JRF) (May 2003) - comparing average incomes with average prices for three and four- room properties in the fourth quarter of 2002

Figure 2: Typical levels of need for new affordable housing



Source: Fordham Research Housing Needs Surveys completed since July 2000

This picture supports the conclusion of the Barker Review of Housing Supply⁷ that pressure on the housing market in the South East will continue to push up house prices unless substantial house building takes place to control affordability. During the slowdown in house price rises in 2004-5 following interest rate increases, prices in Oxford continued to rise faster than in the rest of Oxfordshire with limited impact on the house price/earnings ratio and hence on housing need.

Land supply

Many areas of Oxford are unsuitable for building due to risk of flooding and the need to protect and enhance the natural and historic environments, limiting scope to provide more housing. Planning polices are designed to get maximum benefit from this limited land supply.

Oxford's housing market has traditionally been buoyant; new houses have been built at a rate exceeding the Structure Plan target. The overall number of homes built is, however, relatively small. Limited availability of sites within Oxford's tightly constrained boundaries increases pressure on house prices & restricts ability to build sufficient homes to relieve this pressure.

The current Draft Local Plan identifies thirty-four sites suitable for residential or mixed-use development (which could include house-building), predominantly on previously developed "brown-field" sites. This approach is in line with Government guidance designed to minimise the use of undeveloped "green-field" land. The sites are listed at appendix 8. However, there is no guarantee of when these sites will come forward for development.

The Oxfordshire Structure Plan allocated 3,750 dwellings to be constructed in Oxford between 1996 and 2011. This figure had already been achieved by March 2002, demonstrating the high demand for housing in Oxford.

The current review of the Structure Plan allocates 5500 homes to Oxford during the period ending in 2016: an annual average of 366 new homes. The Council will endeavour to accommodate this and is conscious that the regional spatial strategy for the South East and the Barker review of housing supply may result in yet higher numbers of housing being required in Oxford and Oxfordshire. Through planning policies a high proportion of building has been on brown-field sites and to high densities and we seek to continue this by specifying that residential development

⁷ 'Delivering stability: securing our future housing needs', HM Treasury, April 2004

should generally be above 40 dwellings per hectare, with higher densities in appropriate areas such as the city centre.

Limitations on the supply of affordable housing

During the 1990's, a large scale affordable housing programme at Northfield Brook effectively reduced housing need but subsequent development has not kept pace with the amount of affordable rented housing lost through sale of Council homes to tenants exercising the Right to Buy (RTB).

Table 7: affordable housing completions by RSLs compared with Right to Buy sales 2001-4

	2001- 2	2002- 3	2003- 4	2001-4 Totals
New RSL rented dwellings	36	46	89	171
New RSL shared ownership dwellings	0	0	39	39
Total new RSL dwellings	36	46	128	210
Right to Buy Sales	108	129	116	353
Net increase(+)/ loss (-) of affordable housing	-72	-83	+12	-143

The reduction in maximum discount and further restrictions on the RTB are expected to reduce sales from 2004 onwards and will be monitored.

Additional units of affordable housing have been developed as Supplementary Planning Guidance has taken effect and s106 agreements have been negotiated but these have been few in number as yet.

How much extra housing is needed?

Changes in Housing Need since 1998

The 1998 Housing Need Survey and Housing Market Assessment showed a considerable shortage of affordable housing in Oxford. It was not possible to make up the shortfall due to limitations on funding and availability of sites.

A further Housing Needs Survey was commissioned jointly by the Council and local house builders in 2003 to identify and plan to meet housing need. This survey, carried out by Opinion Research Services (ORS), involved in-depth face-to-face interviews with over 2000 residents.

The survey data was analysed by Fordham Research Ltd using the Basic Needs Assessment Model⁸ to calculate the need for affordable housing in Oxford. The findings were published in Oxford's Housing Requirements Study (HRS) in April 2004. A summary of this study is available on the Council's website or from the Strategy and Review Unit.

Although the two studies cannot be compared directly (due to the introduction, in the interim, of Government guidance on calculating housing need), the table below shows that the overall shortfall of affordable housing (and hence the annual requirement) has increased substantially since 1998.

⁸ ODPM guidance, Local Housing Needs Assessment: A Guide to Good Practice, 2000

Table 8: assessed supply and demand for affordable housing 1998 – 2001 compared with 2004 - 8.

	1998	2004
Projected supply of affordable housing	1500	652 (annually)
Assessed demand for affordable housing	5826	20% of backlog need: 157 plus Newly arising need 2252 (per year) = 2409
Net shortfall in supply	4326	8785
Amount of affordable housing needed to make up the shortfall	1442 (annually for 3 years)	1757 (annually for 5 years)

What types and sizes of affordable housing are needed?

The HRS looked at types of affordable housing required and found that 81% of need is for social rented housing. Around 19% of housing need could be met through “intermediate” options (principally shared ownership). The HRS concluded that new-build low-cost market housing would not meet any housing need and that discount market rents would only meet need if they were significantly below market levels.

The table below shows the breakdown of households in housing need based on what they can afford and the size of home required.

<i>Table 9: Households' ability to afford different affordable housing options</i>				
Property size	Type of affordable housing			
	Shared ownership (50%)	Shared ownership (25%)	Social rented	Total
1 bedroom	91	213	747	1,051
2 bedrooms	0	37	621	657
3 bedrooms	0	10	346	355
4+ bedrooms	7	0	339	346
TOTAL	98	259	2,052	2,409

Source: Oxford Housing Requirements Study 2004

Given such an acute shortage of housing, the challenge for the council is to increase the supply and efficient use of the stock in all possible ways.

Housing needs of specific groups

The HRS considered:

- the needs of disabled and elderly residents in terms of type of accommodation, facilities, aids, adaptations and support they might need to remain in their own homes
- financial or other support that elderly owner-occupiers might need to move to more suitable housing.
- living conditions in the private sector: availability of basic amenities, levels of disrepair and fuel poverty
- the housing needs of black and minority ethnic (BME) households.

The final report can be viewed at www.oxford.gov.uk. This information will be analysed in more detail as policy options are developed as to how Council and community services can respond to these needs.

Competing for private rented housing

The private rented sector plays a major part in the local housing market, having expanded significantly during the last decade, partly due to the increasing popularity of “buy to let” as a form of investment. It increased from 14% of the housing stock in 1995 to 22.1% in 2004 - more than double the national and regional averages. This increase is at the expense of owner occupation and social renting which would be regarded as more stable and sustainable. Competition from the following groups adds to the pressures of supply and demand.

Asylum seekers

In September 2004, Oxfordshire County Council supported 57 single adults and 64 families under the Interim Provisions of the Immigration and Asylum Act 1999. None of these households was entitled to benefits of social housing until given leave to remain in the UK. They were therefore housed in the private rented sector.

Key Workers

Housing demand from key workers living in Oxford could not be quantified by the HRS due to varying definitions of key workers and the relatively small numbers of households in each of the Key Worker Living Programme employment groups.⁹

Key workers are seen as employees important for local services & the economy, including those who would need to move into the area to take up work. Organisations such as local hospitals have a need for key worker housing beyond what can be delivered via the planning system.

Given the difficulty quantifying housing demand from key workers, and the overwhelming level of housing need, there is concern that funding key worker housing would be at the expense of social rented housing. Planning policy attempted to resolve this by setting a separate requirement for 10% key worker housing on development sites but the proposal was not accepted by the Local Plan Inspector.

The OCP key worker study¹⁰ considered a wide range of employees across Oxfordshire, mainly working in the public sector, whose roles were described by local employers as important to the success of their service or business. It found that 4357 key workers are in housing need and unable to afford the open market. 52% of key workers surveyed work in Oxford and 82% of key workers would rather buy than rent.

Students

Our two universities bring 25,000 full time students into the city every year. The Council would not expect to assist them with accommodation but the HRS shows that they play an important part in influencing housing supply and affordability. Although the universities already supply a considerable amount of student residences on their own land, a large number of undergraduates share houses in the private rented sector. HRS data suggests that a student population of 8 -10,000 occupies some 3000

⁹ Government initiative to assist specific groups of public sector key workers to meet the cost of housing

¹⁰ The research report was published in December 2004 and is available on line at www.oxfordshire.gov/affordablehousing

properties. This represents 5.7% of the housing stock and is therefore a severe drain on housing resources.

What is being done to meet housing need?

Planning Policy

The Council requires a high level of affordable housing provision on all housing developments: a draft Local Plan target of 50% affordable housing. The Local Plan Inspector's report received in February 2005 indicated that the 50% target should apply to all sites creating 10 dwellings or more, rather than the threshold of 2 dwellings proposed in the draft Local Plan. The most substantial opportunity to deliver affordable housing through planning policy will come from the redevelopment of the city's West End.

Our policy is that units of affordable housing secured through the planning process should be located on site, to promote the diversity & sustainability of communities. Given the scarcity of sites, off-site provision is a less attractive option, with cash in lieu considered only in exceptional circumstances.

The Local Plan Inspector has supported our policy to obtain developer contributions for affordable housing from commercial developments.

Improving delivery of new affordable housing

A Development Partnership for Oxford was established in 2000 between the Council and local RSLs in order to eliminate the cost of unnecessary competition from the development process. Partners were selected in open competition as providers of general needs and supported housing, enabling the Council to set a development programme of 100 units per year.

The partners are: Catalyst Housing Association, Bromford Housing Group, Oxford Citizens Housing Association, English Churches Housing Group, Warden Housing Association.

The 2001 Strategy set out the combination of property sizes and types needed when building new affordable homes. This "strategic mix" was included in Supplementary Planning Guidance and was generally achieved, although not enough homes with three or more bedrooms were built. As at 1 April 2004, planning permission existed for 218 units (168 for rent and 60 shared ownership) plus a number of sites where the proportion of affordable housing is under negotiation.

Table 10:affordable housing delivery

	2001/4	2004/5 planned	2005/6 proposed
Additional RSL rented dwellings	171	182	180
Additional RSL shared ownership dwellings	39	59	40
Total	210	241	220

The Council's development team has been expanded. We are reviewing the workload and structure of the team to enable them to work effectively and ensure that sites are identified for future development.

Regional Housing Board funding of £18.5m has been secured for 2004-6 to produce 367 new homes.

Maximising land supply

The Council is working with partners to ensure that the maximum amount of land is made available for affordable housing, including sources that may not previously have been considered.

Small sites exist within Oxford that could potentially be used for housing but are dependent on significant investment in infrastructure. The infrastructure does exist outside the southern boundary of the city to support the construction of between 1000 and 4000 homes. This is on green belt land of low agricultural value and is the most realistic means of meeting the city's housing need in the medium to long term

Making effective use of the current housing stock

Incentives and staff support have been increased to encourage Council tenants to release under-occupied property through the removal expenses (REMS) scheme.

Council policy allocates 75% of property offers and nominations to homeless households in the continuing drive to assist households in temporary accommodation. In 2003/4, 43% of lettings were made to homeless households¹¹.

The council also supports the Lord Mayor's Rent Deposit Guarantee Scheme which assists households unable to obtain a private sector tenancy due to lack of a deposit. Recent achievements under the scheme include 40 new tenancies supported between April and December 2004. Appendix 9 gives a fuller picture of the scheme.

For new approaches to preventing or resolving homelessness to be successful, landlords must have confidence that they will receive rent promptly and in full when letting to tenants entitled to housing benefit. Improved housing benefit performance is vital in creating that confidence¹². A housing benefit officer works alongside the Options Team to ensure any benefit related issues are speedily addressed for people at risk of homelessness.

The Council has reviewed the potential to produce more affordable housing from its own assets including garage sites. Where possible at reasonable cost, dilapidated garages in popular areas have been put back into use, leaving a number of sites where repair was uneconomic and anti social and criminal activity took place. RSL partners carried out a feasibility study of these sites leading to agreement in principle in July 2003, of a programme of disposal and redevelopment for 18 sites. The sites will provide additional affordable housing or funds to improve council homes to the Decent Home Standard (DHS), either directly or by reinvesting funds realised through sales. During 2004-5, the emphasis in budget planning has been on using all available means to meet the DHS.

Tackling Homelessness and Affordability

The 2003 Homelessness Strategy set out for the first time a clear implementation plan and distinguishes between homelessness and housing need that can be dealt with on a more controlled and planned basis through a new Housing Options team. The priorities for homelessness are incorporated in the Housing Strategy Action Plan.

By treating private rented housing as an opportunity as well as a challenge, we provide good quality temporary accommodation through Oxford Social Lettings Agency. By building up a portfolio of temporary accommodation leased directly from private landlords we successfully reduced the use of "nightly paid" accommodation

¹¹ 2003/4 HIP Return (It should be noted that a proportion of the available properties would be suitable for older people and hence not available to homeless families, and that not every offer results in a tenancy)

¹² see table 13, Chapter 4 for details

and met the government target of having no families with children in “bed and breakfast” accommodation for more than 6 weeks by March 2004.

Additional funding has been provided for a homelessness prevention scheme to supplement the existing rent deposit guarantee scheme.

We have worked closely with Oxfordshire County Council to enable former refugee/asylum seeking families granted amnesty through the Indefinite Leave to Remain Integration Project to remain in their accommodation, supported by housing benefit if eligible. This partnership has been very successful: we have been able to prevent the majority of families becoming homeless.

What else needs to be done?

Increasing the supply of affordable housing

Our Homelessness Strategy recognised that the target of 100 was not sufficient to reduce the number of households in temporary accommodation. However, limited sites and resources mean that we should not be unrealistically ambitious. A new target of 150 units per year, with 70% being suitable for families, is therefore set for 2004/5 onwards.

The council must review the use of its property assets and consider whether it can make a capital contribution to financing new housing development through the RSLs. Both new affordable housing and investment in the council stock to meet the Decent Home Standard (DHS) are both extremely important for the Council¹³.

The council must also be alert to emerging new initiatives that may offer opportunities to increase the supply of affordable housing in a cost effective way. Current examples are: the Housing Corporation pilot project to give grant direct to developers and financial models for private investment such as Real Estate Investment Trusts.

However, it would not be acceptable for this to be at the expense of good, local management of the housing in the long term.

The council will continue to lobby to develop its landholding to the south of the city in South Oxfordshire district. This is a significant opportunity to develop affordable housing and to contribute to the wider economic growth of Oxford. The council has pursued this through the Structure Plan Examination in Public (EIP) and the Regional Spatial Strategy. The EIP report is critical of the removal of this potential area for housing growth from the Structure Plan.

Making effective use of the current housing stock

The council also wishes to help tenants who can afford to buy their own home to release tenancies to benefit other households in need. We will review suitable incentives and funding sources including any opportunities offered by the Homes for All Plan.

To help Council tenants who wish to transfer, we are looking at the feasibility of displaying the mutual exchange register on the Council's website. Forms are being redesigned to encourage all tenants registering for transfer to automatically register for an exchange.

¹³ see Chapter 5 - funding deficits and asset management

Tackling homelessness

The council will continue improving the quality of emergency accommodation by refurbishing some of its hostels to provide more self-contained units. Arrangements are being made to dispose of some larger hostels which are surplus to requirements and would be difficult to convert at reasonable cost. The proceeds from the sale will be used to meet the DHS.

The Council is committed to participation in schemes to assist applicants interested in moving to areas where demand for housing is lower and will take advantage of opportunities offered by the “moveUK” scheme.

Managing competing demand

The Draft Local Plan stipulates that future expansion of student numbers should be subject to the institutions providing equivalent amounts of student housing. However, as sites identified in the Plan are currently used for some other purpose, it is not certain whether they will become available. So we will encourage the OSP to initiate dialogue with the universities to investigate how student accommodation can be provided while reducing the impact on homes that can be used for families.

We will develop specific policies on key worker housing based on analysis of the OCP research and other relevant studies. We will also carry out research within our housing register to identify those who could be defined as key workers and could be helped by current or future programmes.

Round up of key messages and actions and links to priorities

In this chapter we have shown that housing need in Oxford is acute, that homelessness and affordability are serious problems and that opportunities to increase the supply of affordable housing are limited.

We **have already** begun to tackle the challenges of housing supply and demand:

Action
Developed partnerships to build new affordable housing
Provided temporary accommodation for homeless households in the private sector through a 10-year association with Oxford Social Lettings Agency (OSLA) and by direct leasing from private landlords
Intervened to help private tenants at risk of homelessness to maintain their tenancies
Worked with other district councils to limit the number of homeless households placed in Oxford on a temporary basis
Managed the transition into permanent accommodation of households given indefinite leave to remain
Supported key worker research commissioned by Oxfordshire Community Partnership (OCP).

We **will continue** to take the following actions:

Action	Objective number
Deliver at least 150 affordable new homes each year, ensuring that at least 70% of homes are for families.	1
Lobby at all levels for recognition of housing need in Oxford and the importance of developing our landholding to the south of the city	1
Obtain the maximum possible amount of affordable housing through the planning system	1
Encourage mutual exchange of tenancies by improving access to information	3
Assist 22 key public sector workers to purchase homes	2

We **will take** the following actions to further close the gap between supply and demand:

Action	Objective number
Draw up Development Strategy for 2006-10	2
Consider making a capital contribution to financing new affordable housing development	1
Create a continuous supply of development sites to meet target	1
Review suitable incentives and funding sources to assist tenants of social rented housing who wish to move on to home ownership	3
Assess opportunities for affordable and key worker housing to be developed through Housing Corporation grant to private sector developers without losing the wider community benefits of our RSL development partnership	2
Review policies on land disposal and asset management of General Fund and HRA-owned properties to meet affordable housing priorities	9
Support and develop opportunities for people in housing need wishing to move outside Oxford	3
Encourage the OSP to initiate dialogue with the universities to investigate how student accommodation can be provided while reducing the impact on homes that can be used for families	2

These actions appear in our action plan to achieve our objectives to increase the supply of housing for people in housing need, to improve the affordability of housing, to increase opportunities for choice and mobility and to address the financial pressures on housing-related services.

Chapter 3 – Housing Quality

Introduction

Very few people move into a newly built home. The existing housing stock is an important resource for meeting housing need and can only do this if it is kept in acceptable condition. This chapter looks at the condition of private and public sector housing, how well it meets current standards and what action we will take to tackle poor conditions.

Private sector housing

Decent homes

The City's exceptionally large private rented sector¹⁴ has increased by 8% since 1995. Landlords can obtain high rents with little incentive to maintain or improve standards. The importance of decent standards in private sector housing is now recognised at national level with a policy shift away from the physical condition of buildings towards their impact on the health of vulnerable people.

The government's stated aim is: "by 2010 to bring all social housing into decent condition, with most of the improvement taking place in deprived areas, and increase the proportion of private housing in decent condition occupied by vulnerable households."¹⁵ "Vulnerable households", means those in receipt of at least one of the principal means-tested or disability related benefits, including families with children in receipt of child tax credit.¹⁶

The Decent Home Standard is the minimum standard for the condition of all housing. Whether a property meets the standard depends on its thermal efficiency, state of repair, and the age and condition of facilities (particularly kitchens and bathrooms) and services. A property does not have to meet the standard in every respect but a combination of shortcomings will cause it to fail.

The 2001 English House Condition Survey (EHCS) sets the national baseline of 1.2 million vulnerable households in the private sector living in non-decent homes. The national Decent Homes Target Implementation Plan seeks to increase the proportion in decent homes by stages to:

- 65% by 2006
- 70% by 2010
- 75% by 2020.

A private sector survey was carried out in 2004 to identify key information about the physical condition of the housing stock in Oxford, and the potential for improving standards, with the health of vulnerable people in non-decent homes in mind. It will take some time for detailed analysis of the findings to be developed into a long term strategy for the Council but the key points are set out below.

The survey indicates that 30.7% of stock (14055 dwellings) in Oxford fails to meet at least one element of the decent standard and that 30% (13253) of vulnerable households are living in non-decent homes – thereby already achieving the 2010 target.

¹⁴ over 22% compared with 12% nationally in 2001.

¹⁵ Source: ODPM Public Service Agreement 7 – target for decent homes

¹⁶ ODPM guidance: A Decent Home, February 2004

This is significant for a city like Oxford with a large private rented sector and older than average housing stock. Older stock is more difficult and costly to improve, so sustained and concentrated effort will be necessary to meet the 2020 target. Many vulnerable households (70.5% or 9915 homes) do not have a decent level of thermal comfort. Developing more energy efficiency measures and targeting them at the groups in greatest need could therefore bring significant benefits in improvements to health and property condition and is likely to be a priority area for the Council.

Houses in Multiple Occupation (HMO's)

This type of property is concentrated in certain areas of the city including East Oxford which was the subject of our pilot HMO registration area. Residents of HMOs tend to move frequently and can often be vulnerable single people. Safety is of great importance in this type of property, particularly with regard to fire precautions.

Empty and second homes

Historically the level of empty homes is low: in 1995, 2% of the stock comprised long-term¹⁷ vacant homes compared with a national average of 17%¹⁸. In 2004, only 0.3% (138) of homes were vacant long term. The market for private letting is so buoyant that it is in owners' interests to make empty homes available for occupation.

The number of second homes in Oxford is also estimated to be small: 27 dwellings in 2004.

What is being done to improve private housing?

Oxford has the highest rate of fuel poverty in the Thames Valley area at 27%.¹⁹The Council therefore gives high priority to fuel poverty in its private sector renewal policy. The Council employs an energy efficiency officer and has an excellent record of success in accessing external funding and improving energy efficiency in all stock & tenure types through a range of awareness and cost-saving campaigns. Means tested grants for thermal insulation are made to qualifying low-income households living in a property with a SAP²⁰ below 60. Oxford is believed to be the first local authority to use its powers in this way to tackle fuel poverty.

The Council adopted a comprehensive policy of assistance for home repairs and improvements in July 2003²¹ including equity release loans and a plan for further action. Our recent surveys show equity release has considerable potential to assist elderly home-owners on low incomes.

The council is developing a better relationship with local landlords through the Landlords' Forum set up in 2002. The Forum's programme of meetings and advice topics included consultation on this strategy in January 2004.

East Oxford Improvement Partnership has been set up to improve standards in private sector tenancies.

Although the number of second and empty homes is already low, the council has acted to charge maximum Council Tax on them to further encourage the occupation of homes on a permanent basis.

¹⁷ long term means vacant for more than 6 months

¹⁸ 1995 Oxford House Condition Survey

¹⁹ Centre for Sustainable Energy (May 2003).

²⁰ Standard Assessment Procedure – see Glossary

²¹ The policy for the provision of assistance for the purpose of improving living conditions July 2003 complies with the Regulatory Reform Order (Housing Assistance) (England and Wales) Order 2002 and is available on the council's website.

Landlords of HMOs in the pilot registration area have received grants to improve the condition and safety of their properties.

Our private sector leasing scheme sets minimum standards for property condition and a programme of inspections ensures that these standards are maintained.

What more needs to be done?

We will use the home repairs and improvement policy action plan and the 2004 survey data to develop a comprehensive strategy for private sector housing.

Although there is therefore no need to employ staff specifically to deal with empty homes, the private sector strategy will include a policy to ensure that such properties are identified, brought up to standard and made available for occupation.

We will investigate the potential for a landlord's accreditation scheme and develop a pilot scheme on student lettings.

We will build on the success of our HMO registration area by implementing new powers for HMOs and assessing the resources needed to operate discretionary licensing of privately rented properties through powers in the Housing Act 2004.

The Council has limited staff and funds to devote to private sector improvements. It may not, therefore be possible to do all the work listed here. In developing the private sector strategy we will assess which actions should be a priority based on the areas identified in the private sector survey as most serious and which will benefit people in greatest need. Early indications of key priorities are:

- Emphasis on continued improvements in energy efficiency
- Review and monitor financial assistance policies
- Improved working with the Landlord's Forum
- Licensing of HMOs
- Help for vulnerable households living in non-decent homes.

Public sector housing

Decent homes for Council tenants

What are Council homes like now?

Council-owned housing stock has to meet the DHS by 2010. In 2003, FPDSavills surveyed the condition of the Council's stock. 20% of all property types were surveyed to provide robust data on decency levels and to plan improvement and investment programmes for 30 years. The stock was found to be 49% "decent" with all stock expected to fail the standard by 2010 if no remedial action were taken. Savills' survey included an energy survey which showed above average energy efficiency levels with a SAP rating of 60.

Detailed information from the survey is found in the Housing Revenue Account Business Plan.

What is being done to bring them up to standard?

The overriding issues for the Council, in relation to our own tenants and housing stock, are the stock option appraisal process and the drive to meet the DHS and provide value for money services. All Councils have to complete a stock option appraisal (SOA) by July 2005, to decide the most suitable approach to stock management and investment. The options are: transfer of the stock to a housing association, creation of

an arms length management company, improvement of the stock and new-build through Private Finance Initiative or some combination of the three. Stock retention is only an option if the council can afford to meet the DHS. The Council is using the survey data for the SOA and has embarked on a financial assessment²² and extensive communication and consultation with tenants to find out their priorities, the standards they want for their homes and the costs involved. The process is described in more detail in the HRA Business Plan and is on track to be completed ahead of the July 2005 deadline. A Housing Advisory Board made up of councillors, tenants and senior officers meets regularly to steer progress on this and to deal with the financial challenges associated with the housing stock.

The Council is not waiting for the SOA to be completed before starting work to meet the DHS. Most Council-owned property that was in very poor condition has been dealt with by modernisation and refurbishment:

- many sheltered bedsits have been converted to self-contained 1-bedroom flats
- defective dwellings on Barton estate have been demolished and replaced through SRB funding.

Table 11: Properties still in need of action

Property type	Reason for action	Progress to date
Orlit (Precast Reinforced Concrete) houses at Rose Hill	Defined by law as defective dwellings, maximum remaining life 15 years	Community consultation regarding options for demolition and replacement; two houses have been demolished and replaced by 2 Eco-homes.
4-storey maisonettes at Blackbird Leys	Anti-social behaviour; unsuitable for families.	The first block of 20 maisonettes at Butterwort Place, Blackbird Leys has been demolished. Negotiations are in hand on the future use of the site
550 homes of non-traditional construction	Anticipated remaining life of less than 20 years.	Maintenance costs are being considered in the financial assessment for stock option appraisal
Individual properties	Unfit for human habitation or in need of major repairs	Included in current refurbishment programmes. Where this is uneconomic, alternatives (including disposal to produce income to fund social housing) are considered on a site-by-site basis

What more needs to be done?

The HRA Business Plan describes improvement plans put in place for housing management and maintenance services. Performance is reported regularly to Housing Scrutiny Committee to ensure continuous improvement of services.

All housing-related services are preparing for a housing inspection in 2005: checking services against the Audit Commission Key Lines of Enquiry, and ensuring that policies and procedures are fully documented, up to date and well publicised.

Once the SOA has been completed we will know what the Council can afford, how that measures up to the standards that tenants want, which is the best option and what it will take to achieve it. The housing strategy action plan will be updated to reflect this.

²² See Chapter 5 – Housing Finance

Decent homes for housing association tenants

What are housing association homes like now?

Most housing associations in Oxford have relatively modern stock and all expect to meet the DHS by 2010. The 2004 stock condition survey included RSL stock and showed that 24.1% were non-decent. The findings are being shared with the RSLs.

What is being done to bring them up to standard?

RSLs are drawing up plans to improve their stock that does not meet the DHS.

What more needs to be done?

The Council will consult the RSLs through the housing management sub-group of SHOP on how progress towards the DHS targets can be monitored. Monitoring will be carried out by SHOP alongside the housing strategy action plan and through the local development partnership.

How we make sure new homes are of good quality

Through the Development Partnership, the Council expects RSLs to meet planning policy and Housing Corporation requirements to create sustainable, high quality housing that is cost-effective to maintain and to run. This will include standards for energy efficiency, accessibility, integrated design in mixed communities and modern construction techniques.

A housing scheme for key workers, let by Keystart Homes at below market rents, helps residents keep their expenses down by providing appliances and carpets.

Round up of key messages and actions and links to priorities

It is important for the Council to give priority to improving the condition of housing because of:

- The size of the private rented sector in Oxford
- the number of vulnerable people living in poor housing
- government targets for decent homes in the public and private sectors.

We will meet our objective of improving the condition of housing of all tenures in Oxford by continuing to:

Action	Objective number
Where the need arises, using enforcement powers against landlords who do not take up opportunities to improve their properties.	4
Work towards the HECA target and report annually on progress	4
Assess the range and quality of our work on sustainable energy and fuel poverty (with advice from a Council with Beacon status) and use this to develop an affordable warmth strategy.	4
Develop support and advice mechanisms for landlords through regular meetings of the Landlord's Forum (this supports the Community Strategy target.)	4
Carry out inspections to ensure that standards are maintained in properties leased by the council for use as temporary accommodation.	4
Lobby through OMAHG for the additional Council Tax revenue from empty and second homes to be earmarked for affordable housing.	9
Complete the SOA for the Council stock	4
Improve the Council stock pending completion of SOA	4
Set high standards for new RSL developments in the Development Strategy and RSL partnership agreements	4
Develop East Oxford Housing Improvement Partnership to improve conditions in private sector tenancies	7

Beyond this, we will undertake the following new actions:

Develop a private sector strategy to include: <ul style="list-style-type: none">• Continued improvements in energy efficiency• Review and monitoring of financial assistance policies• Help for vulnerable households living in non-decent homes• Improved working with the Landlord's Forum	8
Implement new powers in the Housing Act 2004 for HMOs and private sector housing; assess the resources needed to operate discretionary licensing of privately rented properties.	4
Investigating the potential for a landlord's accreditation scheme and developing a pilot scheme on student lettings.	4
Implementing the SOA decision	4
Develop a mechanism to monitor RSL progress to meet the DHS by 2010	4