



Mr Vincent Paliczka
Director of Environment, Culture and Communities
Bracknell Forest Council
Time Square
Market Street
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RG12 1JD

Date: 13/05/2009

Dear Mr Paliczka

REVIEW OF THE COUNCIL'S HOUSING STRATEGY BY A WORKING GROUP OF THE ENVIRONMENT, CULTURE AND COMMUNITIES OVERVIEW AND SCRUTINY PANEL

The Environment, Culture and Communities Overview and Scrutiny Panel was requested by the Chief Officer: Housing to provide comments on the Council's draft Housing Strategy. The Panel formed a Working Group to consider this in detail, comprising myself as Lead Member, Councillor Mrs Fleming, and Councillor Finch.

The Working Group has met on a number of occasions and is appreciative of officers' time and cooperation with our review. We have already given officers a number of suggested changes to the draft Strategy, which we were pleased to see reflected in the revised strategy issued for public consultation.

I now attach the Group's comments on the latest version of the Housing Strategy, on which we would welcome your response by 11 June. We note that the Strategy is currently the subject of public consultation, and we therefore ask that the Working Group's comments are also taken into account as part of the response to the consultation.

As Overview and Scrutiny usually make recommendations directly to the Executive, I am copying this letter to Councillor Birch for information, as the Executive Member concerned.

With best wishes,

Councillor James Finnie
Lead Member of the Working Group

Copies to: Councillors Mrs Fleming and Finch

ENVIRONMENT, CULTURE AND COMMUNITIES OVERVIEW & SCRUTINY PANEL

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Councillor Dale Birch
Executive Member for Adult Services, Health and Housing
Chief Officer: Housing

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**COMMENTS BY THE ENVIRONMENT, CULTURE AND COMMUNITIES OVERVIEW AND
SCRUTINY PANEL'S WORKING GROUP – HOUSING STRATEGY**

Page Number	Query/Comment
General	1. The strategy contains numerous acronyms and specialised terms. It would be useful to explain what these mean in a glossary. We note that the contents page refers to a glossary in section 8.0, but this does not appear in the document.
	2. The document contains a lot of misspellings and other typographical errors. Details of these have been passed to officers.
	3. We suggest that as the document is for public consultation, it should bear the standard wording about it being available in other community languages, large print, etc.
	4. There are many references in the Strategy to the Housing Corporation. The Corporation ceased to exist on 30 November 2008, thus all references need to be updated.
	5. Paragraph numbering would be of assistance.
	6. The tables and graphs in the document could be clearer, for example in adding sources, labelling axes, and adding explanatory comments as to what the reader is supposed to be drawing from the table or graph.
	7. The Strategy contains various statements which are the principal responsibility of other departments, such as in relation to Adult Social Care and the Local Area Agreement. We would welcome an assurance that all such sections of the strategy have been checked for factual accuracy by the other departments concerned.
	8. The numerous web-links to supporting documents is understandable. However, we would welcome confirmation that hard copies of these documents have been made available during the public consultation phase.
	9. We would like to see greater mention of the issue of under-occupied and empty housing in the strategy.
	10. We note that government guidance to local authorities on Housing Strategies states that whatever format is chosen, strategies are expected to provide a strong focus on how partners will deliver their commitments. This does not appear to us to be very evident in the draft strategy.
	1. The title of the strategy might be better in the plural, 'The Right Homes'.
3.	The Introduction Section could usefully point to three other significant issues which we consider are 'overshadowing' the strategy: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> a) The Council's ability to deal with increased homelessness as a consequence of repossessions and other effects of the current recession b) The huge excess of demand for social housing over supply (as shown on page 21) which is set to widen further c) The unrealistic targets in the LAA due to the dramatic falls in house prices and stalled development schemes
5.	In the final sentence of the middle para, it is unclear whether the strategy is saying that some or all elderly BME residents require support.
5.	We understand that the ethnicity table draws on the 2001 Census. We suggest this is made clearer.
8.	The Action Plan referred to in the first para is missing from the document.
10.	It would be helpful to include the actual LAA housing targets in the table.
14.	The third para says 'Whilst a proportion of these households...' Would it be possible to be a little more precise than that, even to say whether it is a high or low proportion, for example?
14.	The Strategic Housing Market Assessment is vital to a clear understanding of the strategy. We presume this will be attached to the report before it is considered by the Executive, and the web link provided.
17.	The commentary on house prices could usefully be expanded to include some analysis, along the lines we discussed with officers: that falling house prices together with lower interest rates should help first-time buyers, but against that mortgage lending has become

	more restrictive, lenders require higher deposits than previously, and buyers' confidence has been adversely affected by the effects of the economic downturn, redundancies and a unwillingness to buy an asset whose price is continually falling.
18.	The graph at the top of this page appears very cluttered, and the meaning to be drawn from it is unclear.
18.	In the final line, we suggest that the demand for rented social housing is as strong – if not more so – than private rented.
21.	In the first para, it would be helpful to update this. With the sharp rise in re-possession, we consider the number of people on the Housing Register is likely to rise faster.
22.	We suggest that in the first para, something is said on Council policy regarding whether there is a maximum waiting time for anyone on the waiting list.
22.	We suggest this section could be clearer about whether the supply figures are new-build/acquisition or not.
22.	In the final para we suggest inserting 'anticipated' before 'demand'
23.	The second table appears to say that all the demand for housing from older people will be met. Is this actually so?
23.	In the penultimate para, also elsewhere in the document, it would be helpful to distinguish between national and local schemes run by the Council and its partners.
26.	The numbers of family units in the first para look very small, and it might help to put these in the context of the related demand figures.
26.	In the final line of the penultimate para, 'infrequent' would be a better word to use than 'irregular'.
27.	We were concerned to read the statement: 'Further work needs to be undertaken to establish more comprehensive information about the housing needs of special needs groups.' We understand that the terminology should be 'people with additional needs', also that the Adult Social Care team have done work in this area. We suggest that the current draft does not do justice to what the Council does know about these people.
27.	We would like to see more recognition of the issue concerning young people with chaotic lifestyles in this section of the strategy
28.	It would be informative to state in the table, or elsewhere, what the level of unoccupied housing is.
29.	In the first para, or elsewhere, it would be helpful to mention the separate requirement for Decent Homes in the private sector.
29.	In the section on the housing transfer, it would be worth adding that leaseholders were also in favour of the stock transfer proposals.
29.	The box at the foot of the page refers to four priorities, yet a subheading on the fourth priority is not apparent in the following pages.
30.	The opening sentence suggests that all residents are in private sector housing, which is not the case.
30.	In the bulleted section, it is inaccurate for the Council to claim to have achieved the delivery of 1,500 homes. Perhaps 'Facilitated the delivery' would be more apt.
30.	The bar chart needs amending or a footnote added, as the projected housing completions in 2008/09 must now be much lower than shown.
35.	Para below the table. We do not think there is any doubt that some households need help, and suggest the word 'may' is removed. It may also be useful to expand the comment on the schemes to describe the targeting that is applied.
35-36.	The bulleted list could also refer to adaptations and the Supporting People programme?
39.	The statement in para 4 that the loan may not be repaid at all would benefit from some explanation, otherwise it looks like planned writes-off.
43.	The penultimate para refers to 2006/07 data, which is very dated. Here and elsewhere in the strategy more up to date data should be provided.
44.	We think it is an overstatement to say that Forestcare has enabled elderly people to remain at home. It would be more accurate to say that it helped.
44.	It might be worth including the Council's impressive CPA service scores for Housing, benefits and adult social care in the section on achievements.
44.	The general points in the penultimate para (also in the final sentence on page 46) do not just apply to older people
45.	It is unclear how the 858 community lifelines corresponds to the 1,400 using Forestcare

	mentioned on page 44.
48 - 49.	The tables should make clear whether these figures are £'000.
53.	At the end of the section, we suggest it would be very helpful to bring together the various strands of supply and demand from the preceding sections, to arrive at a forecast shortfall of housing at the end of the strategy period.
54.	The section on consultation could usefully say more about the approach to contacting hard-to-reach groups, and consider posing specific questions for people to respond to.
56.	The performance section needs to be updated with the CPA scorecard published in February 2009. Given that the scorecard shows a change in both the star rating and the direction of travel, this is significant.
56.	Final para- the Public Scrutiny Commission was replaced by the Overview and Scrutiny Commission in 2005