

**SOUTH EAST ENGLAND REGIONAL ASSEMBLY
PLANNING COMMITTEE**

Date: 12 October 2001

Subject: **REGIONAL HOUSING STATEMENT**

Report of: Director of Planning & Transport

Recommendation:

That the Committee agrees the comments on the draft Regional Housing Statement provisionally submitted to GOSE by the Housing Advisory Group and considers what further action it might wish to take given the importance of the affordable housing issue in the South East.

1. Background

- 1.1 Ensuring that there is sufficient, decent affordable housing is one of the most significant challenges now facing the South East. The latest Regional Planning Guidance (RPG 9) provisionally estimates that around 45 per cent of the total number of homes to be provided should be affordable: for the South East this is 12-13,000 affordable homes each year. It is estimated that in the late 1990s we were achieving about half of this. The consequences of not acting to address this shortfall are causing increasing concern, not just in terms of housing policies, but more broadly. A lack of decent affordable housing contributes to social exclusion; it impacts on labour supply and economic prosperity; and it generates longer distance commuting, exacerbating transport problems.
- 1.2 The Regional Housing Statement is part of the policy framework for addressing these concerns. Issued jointly by the Government Office and the Housing Corporation SE, the Statement has a number of purposes. It informs Housing Corporation investment decisions and allocations. It also assists local authority housing, planning, economic development and social service departments, registered social landlords and other housing providers in preparing their local housing strategies and delivering housing related services. Finally, the Regional Housing Statement aims

to provide a strategic framework within which to take forward the Government's long-term vision for housing. The Statement covers the period 2001-2004 and is due to be published early in 2002.

- 1.3 Although the Statement is a GOSE/Housing Corporation document it has been prepared under the auspices of the Regional Housing Forum. Assembly officers have provided inputs throughout the process, but at all stages it has been stressed that the Regional Assembly's Planning Committee would wish to comment further in a formal capacity during the consultation period. That stage was reached on 10 August when the formal consultation document 'Moving Forward - A Framework for Action' was published. Copies were circulated to members of the Regional Housing Forum, members of the Regional Housing Statement working groups, South East local authority housing directors and South East housing association chief executives. There was also a general invitation to circulate the Statement more widely. Responses were required by Friday 5 October.
- 1.4 Given this timetable, the Housing Advisory Group was invited to make a provisional response on behalf of the Planning Committee. Comments have now been submitted to GOSE, subject to the formal views of the Planning Committee.
- 1.5 The remainder of this report summarises the main comments made by the Housing Advisory Group. (A full set of the comments submitted to GOSE is enclosed with this report. The Regional Housing Statement is available on the GOSE website: www.GO-SE.gov.uk/infor_f/housingrhrsrf.html).

2. Summary of Key Comments

Affordable Housing

- 2.1 The emphasis in the Regional Housing Statement on affordable housing is welcome, reinforcing as it does the messages in RPG. However, the Statement needs to explain more clearly the scale of the problem in the South East, the links with key worker housing and why it so important that urgent action is taken to address the issue. This should also be emphasised in the Foreword when it is drafted and the Vision. The 'key actions' set out in the Vision should include a regional target for the provision of affordable housing within the period covered by the Statement. As it will not be possible to reach the full output required within the three year period, this needs to be a transition target demonstrating how we are moving towards the final goal. GOSE and the Housing Corporation have agreed that Assembly officers should contribute to the drafting of these sections.
- 2.2 Also welcome is the recognition early on in the Statement that unless actions are taken there is likely to be a very substantial shortfall

between the number of affordable homes required in the South East and those likely to be provided. While the Draft Statement acknowledges that the gap is unlikely to be filled by the private sector, nowhere does it address this fundamental issue further. It is important that best use is made of the funding that is available. However, if there are issues relating to the need for funding of affordable housing in the South East, these should be drawn out in the Statement.

2.3 Reflecting the priority of this issue, the Housing Advisory Group has established a Sub-Group tasked to consider obstacles to the provision of more affordable housing. The work is only in its early stages, but a long list of issues has already been identified. These can be grouped around a number of headings. The first set all relate to communications, and include:

- inter- and intra-organisational relationships
- a lack of cross-boundary working, and
- a lack of trust among those involved in the process.

A second set of barriers relates to finance, the most significant of which is the level of public funding available and the way in which the funding regime operates. The policy framework (or at least the way in which some aspects of it are interpreted) also acts as a further barrier. This includes the advice in circulars, and the increasing amount of time that it is taking to progress affordable housing schemes through to delivery. The final set of barriers all relate to a broad range of local circumstances. They include issues such as the economy, environment and infrastructure, but also political and public attitudes which are hindering the delivery of affordable housing.

2.4 A further report on affordable housing will be brought to the Committee as soon as the work of the Sub Group is sufficiently well advanced.

The Role of Land Use Planning

2.5 As the section of the Regional Housing Statement on the planning system explains, the land use planning system has an important role to play in ensuring that everyone has the opportunity of a decent home. It provides a set of tools which can help to realise the vision set out in the Statement and we should look to ways to improve its contribution to supply further. However, it is also important to recognise that planning alone cannot resolve issues relating to affordable housing, key workers and sustaining rural communities.

Implementation

2.6 The Regional Housing Statement is not a strategy. However, in the future the document is likely to be more strategic in nature and the Statement currently being prepared by GOSE reflects this. While it is recognised that this year the Statement is at a transitional stage, it is

important that it is implementation oriented and that its status is clear. Otherwise it is unlikely to be used. The emphasis on recommended actions throughout the Statement is therefore a welcome improvement from the earlier draft. However, the Statement should be improved still further so that there is a much stronger and clearer link between the issues, priorities, actions, and crucially, who is to implement them and when. Where necessary, the Statement should stress the need for action by Government.

Focus on the Region and Sub Regional Variations

- 2.7 Many of the key actions relate to national policy. More emphasis should be placed on regionally-specific actions that are appropriate within the South East context. The Statement also currently lacks any spatial dimension. The scale, intensity and nature of the issues vary across the region, and the sub regional elements of the Statement will therefore be important and should be included. Given the life of the Statement (2001-2004) and the anticipated timetable for the next RPG review, the spatial content of the Statement should take its lead from RPG 9.

Key Commitments

- 2.8 The Statement identifies key commitments for a number of stakeholders. The Regional Planning Committee, on behalf of the Assembly, should confirm that it will: strive to improve the coherence of regional policy making by identifying consistent regional priorities; make the provision of housing, especially affordable housing, a core objective of its regional strategies; monitor the supply of housing in the region, including affordable housing; ensure that urban capacity studies are undertaken in a rigorous and consistent manner; and consider how best to encourage further networking, sharing of information and spreading of good practice on key housing issues. The Affordable Housing Sub Group is an example of how the Assembly is bringing together a range of interests involved in providing affordable housing in order to help increase supply and improve its delivery. Identifying and sharing good practice, such as the work by Surrey LGA on key workers and that by Orbit HA on planning obligations, will be an important element of the Sub Group's work.

3. Conclusion

As the Draft Statement itself stresses, *'The provision of affordable housing remains the single most important housing priority in the South East'*. This emphasis, together with the recognition of the importance of the key worker issue, is welcome. However, urgent action is now required to address these priorities and this must be fully reflected in the Statement. The Regional Housing Statement must stress the importance of delivering on its objectives and priorities. It therefore needs to be implementation oriented, with a sharper advocacy role that

stresses the need for further action by a range of organisations, not least central Government.

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28 September 2001