

**SOUTH EAST ENGLAND REGIONAL ASSEMBLY
PLENARY MEETING**

Date: 17 October 2008

Subject: **Regional Housing Board**

Report of: Chairman of the Regional Housing Board

Recommendation:

That the Regional Assembly notes the report.

Purpose of Report:

To report on the activities of the Regional Housing Board since the last plenary meeting and to identify key areas of activity for the coming months.

Key Issues:

Since the last plenary meeting the Board has met once. Our main areas of activity have been:

- Consideration of the effect of the housing market downturn on the Board's work and investment.
- Continued monitoring of investment across all funding streams.
- Advice to Ministers on bids for Gypsy and Traveller site grant.

The focus for the coming months will include input to the Housing Revenue Account subsidy review and Regional Funding Advice submission and tailoring our programme to tackle barriers to affordable housing delivery to respond to the housing market downturn.

1. Review Day

- 1.1 Since the last plenary meeting the Board has met once, on 3 September. We visited the Building Research Establishment (BRE) and enjoyed a fascinating tour of their innovation park of demonstration homes built to the higher levels of the Code for Sustainable Homes.
- 1.2 In workshop session BRE gave us insight into their role in developing the Code and what more needs to be done to embed use and compliance with the Code in the construction industry. The gulf between the sustainability of new and existing homes is extremely wide. If we are to meet the challenges of climate change it is essential that new, inexpensive measures are developed and promoted to improve the existing stock.
- 1.3 A workshop on the impact of the 'credit crunch' helped us to understand how the delivery of affordable housing has been affected by the restrictions on mortgage lending and can be sustained to provide a springboard for the recovery of the market.

2. Board Meeting

- 2.1 I was delighted to be re-elected as Chairman and look forward to working closely with you to raise your concerns at regional and national level.
- 2.2 In approving applications for grant to the value of £7.7m to provide 120 new and refurbished pitches for Gypsies and Travellers, we noted that many applications are proving to be very expensive due to the need for additional infrastructure and services. I shall be writing to Ministers to point out that additional funding will be required in the South East to improve existing pitches at the same time as providing for new pitches to meet the current backlog of need.
- 2.3 We considered the main proposed changes to the Draft South East Plan relating to housing and are concerned that there is no commitment to additional public investment to support the higher level of affordable housing provision now proposed. We will consider the financial implications as part of our input to the preparation of Regional Funding Advice. The proposed targets for affordable housing and the policies on housing type and size, density and design, use of the existing housing stock and the ageing population are, however, welcome.
- 2.4 Investment in new affordable housing in the first three months of 2008/09 has been low but this is quite typical of the quarterly cycles. The Housing Corporation is confident that all resources allocated for this year will be used. In view of the current downturn in the housing market we will be monitoring this closely. We are looking at what more we can do to support the recovery of the housing market through targeted investment in new affordable homes and infrastructure and tackling barriers to affordable housing delivery.

- 2.5 In response to the Assembly's concerns that over £180m is being redistributed from the housing revenue accounts of South East local authorities, I have written to the Housing Minister to encourage her to ensure that the Government's review of local authority housing finance enables those funds to be retained within the region to provide affordable housing and reduce the impact of climate change. More detailed proposals are being developed and will be considered at the next Board meeting on 20 November.
- 2.6 Monitoring of our Private Sector Renewal programme for 2006-08 highlighted the time required to get schemes off the ground, the importance of continuity of funding and of regular monitoring and speedy intervention to make effective use of funds allocated by the Board. We will be working with local authority partnerships to provide support in delivering our 2008-11 programme.
- 2.7 Prompted by growing concerns regarding fuel price rises, fuel poverty and recent work on actions to reduce and then stabilise the region's ecological footprint, we have agreed to bring forward our planned activity on sustainable development to the current financial year. Proposals relating to the provision of resource efficiency measures to the existing housing stock will come to our next meeting.
- 2.8 I have already referred to Regional Funding Advice which is so critical for all aspects of our future work. In preparing our Advice we propose to involve the Housing Corporation and English Partnerships to take advantage of opportunities offered by the formation of the Homes and Communities Agency. The business case for housing investment in the Regional Infrastructure Fund will be informed by current work to identify suitable projects across the region. We will also continue to make the case for an approach to calculating regional funding shares that does not penalise the South East for its success in meeting Government homelessness targets.

Cllr Elizabeth Cartwright
Chairman of the Regional Housing Board

2 October 2008