



# Local Action Plan - Medway

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# Local Action Plan for Medway

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When taking the decision to join the URBACT project SUITE – the Housing Project, Medway Council decided to use the opportunity to benchmark it's housing services to those of similar sized cities within Europe.

Medway Council developed several objectives for the duration of the project. These are shown below.

1. Identifying and making use of good practice methods from other EU city partners as regards the management and delivery of housing renovation programmes.
2. Linking the EU URBACT project funding / focus into community consultation and liaison re: the Private Sector Renewal Programme to benefit those most in need.
3. Looking at good practice achieved in other EU city areas re: achieving an effective "social mix" of affordable housing and other forms of housing (from new regeneration zones).
4. Exchanging good practice and agreeing common approaches to alleviating fuel poverty amongst housing stock in disadvantaged neighbourhoods.
5. Benchmarking our housing strategy, policy and management against other cities in the partnership.

It was decided that Medway Council would develop an existing local project through the Local Action Plan mechanism provided by URBACT.

# Background and Challenge

**Most UK local authorities have completed significant work in order to increase energy efficiency, alleviate fuel poverty and improve the state of repair and thermal comfort of the housing stock.**

An enormous amount of work has already been completed and many 'quick win' measures installed, leaving a dispersed mix of potential measures across housing stock.

There is difficulty in measuring and monitoring progress in areas such as CO<sub>2</sub> reduction. One of the UK's official measurements for CO<sub>2</sub> reduction is National Indicator 186, which uses sophisticated data collection and modelling techniques to measure actual changes in energy use. However, they are produced with a two-year time lag and as a result it is difficult to observe if activity is having an effect on energy usage.

Through the '**In Focus**' project Medway Council seeks to undertake targeted housing research in relation to energy efficiency across all of Medway, which can be used to provide information on overall conditions and trends but can also be interrogated down to an individual property level. Working in association with the Energy Savings Trust Advice Centre and the Creative Environmental Network we have developed a detailed Medway-wide house-by-house database. This draws together a wide variety of information including data about:

- House type and tenure
- Home Energy Check data,
- Council Tax band
- Income and benefit entitlement



The information gathered was used to model the possible impact of improvements to housing stock and in particular it will allow us to focus on the impact of work to improve energy efficiency.

The main aims for the project are to:

- Improve housing standards, choice and affordability
- Improve health, well-being and reduce health inequalities
- Reduce Fuel Poverty
- Bring empty properties back into use

This work is at an early stage and will be delivered over a 5year+ period. Further consultation is currently underway with the community to help inform the development of specific projects in addition to work already underway in the area, which is now being picked up under the overall *In Focus* umbrella.

# Problem

The Luton and All Saints area in Chatham is an area of approximately 2,500 closely packed 19<sup>th</sup> Century terraced houses and 1970s built social houses. The steep narrow streets are isolated from the centre of Chatham by a dual carriageway. Overall the housing within the ward of Luton and Wayfield is primarily owner occupied (41%). 39% of the properties are rented of which 25% are tenants of a Housing Association, the largest of which is MHS Homes, with 14% of the total stock.

In line with good practice and building upon previous experience we are targeting resources into priority areas, which have been identified using a range of data sources. This approach complements the council's Social Regeneration Strategy, which identifies target areas for more widespread action. As part of the development of this approach, research was shared and consultation and stakeholder engagement from particular communities helped shape and inform the approach taken. Luton and All Saints has been identified as a priority area in the 2006 Stock Condition Survey, the 2008-11 Housing Strategy and the Social Regeneration Strategy. This is due to a number of issues including a large number of empty homes, poor energy efficiency, disrepair, homelessness, fuel poverty and a large number of Houses in Multiple Occupation (HMO), that is a house in which more than one household shares and amenity.

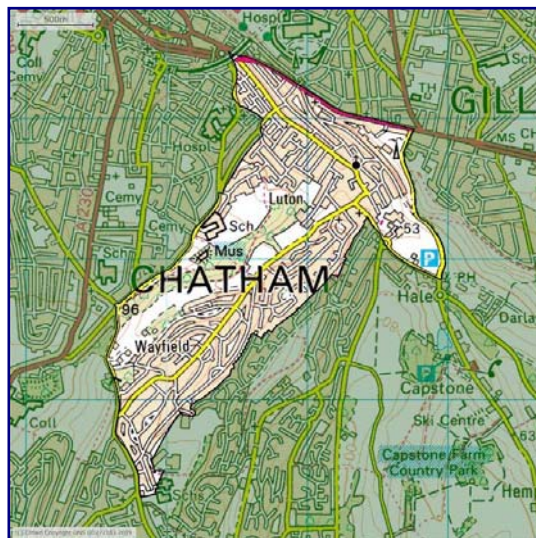
Through local survey work it was found that in 2009 there were 100 households from the new arrival Slovak community across Medway of which forty-eight are clustered close together in the All Saints and adjacent Luton neighbourhoods (this constitutes approximately 0.1% of the total dwellings in Medway). There are an average of six Slovak people living in each of these small two/three bedroom properties and some of these households include more people – extended families as well as children and parents. This has created a significant and growing pressure on Medway's Housing Services to address and manage issues arising from increased numbers of houses of multiple occupations and overcrowding in the Luton and All Saints neighbourhoods.



# Action Taken

The main strength of the In Focus project is the pooling of resources to build on existing work in the area so that shared goals are achieved. The project is supported by the Medway Strategic Housing Partnership Board (SHPB); a dynamic forum of key public and private players involved in housing that are brought together to help deliver decent and safe homes for all residents living in Medway. A sub-group of the board, the Private Sector Housing Strategy Monitoring Group, is leading on the project and meet on a quarterly basis with progress reported back to the SHPB. The Private Sector Housing Strategy Monitoring Group is chaired by the county level representative of the National Landlords Association, which has helped to ensure that this is not just a Local Authority led project. Co-operation between various council departments and external agencies through this group has been very productive. So far public and political support has been strong and helpful. The Council's member of cabinet who has responsibility for Housing has a seat on the SHPB and is therefore closely involved in the project.

Key to the success of the project is a clear understanding of local needs and ensuring that the community is engaged and has the opportunity to help shape and influence local delivery. As part of this project we are liaising with the Partners and Communities Together (PACT) group which was set up as a neighbourhood owned approach allowing local people to identify those issues which impact upon the quality of life on their doorstep and to work alongside the police and local agencies to find a resolution. The "In Focus" project was introduced to the Luton PACT group in May 2010 where ward councillors, residents, the police and landlords were present.



In July 2009, Medway Council was awarded £88,103, from the Government Office for the South East (GOSE) who represent central government in the region. This was to help manage the transitional impacts of migration throughout 2009/10. The funding was used to provide new Slovak arrivals with better access to housing advice and solutions and to ensure the availability of safe and decent homes in the private sector. A dedicated housing services adviser, who had the appropriate language skills, was appointed to operate in a neighbourhood outreach capacity. The adviser monitors and ensures that new arrival migrant communities residing in primarily private rented accommodation have access to equitable services and that the standard of accommodation is in line with Decent Homes Standards and HMO regulations. A neighbourhood housing information and advice service for new arrival migrant communities was also established, offering support services in relation to housing, employment and welfare entitlements as well as informal legal advice and financial management expertise offered by partner voluntary and community organisations.

Action	Outcome achieved 2009/2010	
In Focus Project	Project plan approved by the Strategic Housing Partnership Board	Quarterly updates provided to the Board
Empty Properties	42 empty properties brought back into use in the area	£2.5 million worth of funding secured from the HCA
Overcrowding Scheme	23 overcrowded households from the area were re-housed	
Private Sector Renewal	Nearly £400,000 out of a total budget of £1.2 million spent on providing assistance to repair and improve properties	49 properties have been improved
Migrant Housing assistance	A dedicated housing service officer provides outreach to the Slovak migrant community	£88,103 from Government Office for the South East

# Outcome

In 2009/10, 42 empty properties were brought back into use in the area with the help of £2.5 million worth of funding from the Homes and Communities Agency the national housing and regeneration agency, representing 15% of all of the empty properties brought back into use throughout Medway.

23 households were re-housed to suitable accommodation via the overcrowding scheme and nearly £400,000 out of a total budget of £1.2 million was spent on renewing 49 properties in the private sector.

Action	Activities	Timescale	Funding
Targeted Energy Advice	Mail out to 5,000 residents in the In Focus Project area and neighbouring wards whose property shows a good potential to install energy saving measures	September 2010	Creative Environment Networks and Medway Council
	500 properties will be further targeted by an Energy Saving Trust advisor who will provide doorstep assistance on energy saving measures	September 2010	Creative Environment Networks and Medway Council
	Funding has been secured from the Department for Business, Innovation and Skills (BIS) to deliver a Fuel Bill workshop offering advice on reducing energy bills among low income households	September 2010	Department for Business, Innovation and Skills
Local Project Proposal	Present justification and evidence base for the project proposal	October 2010	Medway Council
	Neighbourhood Launch event		Medway Council
	Circulate newsletter to residents/stakeholders/wider community		Medway Council and Creative Environment Networks
	Press releases		Medway Council
Final Medway Proposal	Undertake consultation on final proposal	November 2010	
	SHPB approval for the project	November 2010	
Action Planning	Draw up and action plan for the delivery of the project with key stakeholders	November 2010	Medway Council
Delivery of Project	Delivery in phases	As per action plan	Medway Council and Medway Housing Associations
	Regular communication with residents and stakeholders	Ongoing	Medway Council
Monitoring and Review	Feed back to the PSH Strategy Monitoring Group and SHPB on a quarterly basis	Ongoing	Medway Council through the Private Sector Housing Group

In September 2010, we carried out a targeted energy advice campaign when a mail out was distributed to 5,000 residents in the **In Focus** project area and neighbouring wards whose property showed a good potential to install energy savings measures. An Energy Savings Trust advisor provided doorstep assistance on energy savings measures by targeting a further 250 properties. Funding of just over £2,200 was secured from the Department for Business, Innovation and Skills (BIS) to deliver a fuel bill workshop offering advice on reducing energy bills among low-income households.

## Outcome continued

Between January and July 2010, 167 people were given advice at the housing advice surgeries with the majority of queries being Child Tax Credits (benefits for families who are responsible for at least one child/young person), Housing Benefit and Private Sector issues. For the same time period, inspections were carried out in 23 private sector properties and followed up with joint visits with the Fire Service and health workers.

The main challenge for the project is funding.

The Council has agreed to a £23.5m programme of revenue savings in 2011/12 in response to cuts in Government grants and other budgetary pressures. Services are being reviewed to improve efficiency and to reduce areas of discretionary spending. The second year of funding under the Migrant Impacts Fund was withdrawn by central government for 2010/11 and we have had to find additional resources within existing services to fund the specialist housing adviser services. Funding for the work carried out by Creative Environmental Networks has not yet been guaranteed for 2011/12 and so this element of the project may not be able to be delivered.



Nationally, welfare benefits are undergoing radical changes. These could affect the affordability of housing in Medway for those with low incomes, particularly in the private rented sector and is likely to result in people moving into Medway. This will lead to overstretched services with less resources available, increased pressure on housing in the Private Sector and vulnerable people being hit the hardest. The challenge will be to retarget our resources to ensure that momentum for this project is maintained.



# In Conclusion

**We must be realistic about what we can achieve in the current challenging climate, which shows no signs of changing.** It is more important than ever that we focus our efforts and resources in the right places and that the services we do offer operate efficiently and make a real difference.

Government proposals to change the council housing finance system may give local authorities greater control over their finances in the future, allowing them to reinvest income from their homes to meet local housing need.

## Challenges

The main challenges to implementing the Medway Council Local Action Plan are:

- o A lack of dedicated personnel
- o A lack of financial resources
- o Government funding schemes withdrawn
- o The restructuring of the Regional Development Agencies
- o The restructuring of UK Local Authorities and therefore Medway Council resources
- o A lack of support from the Managing Authority and Government

## Future issues

Identification of the opportunities in the future remains difficult whilst the future of EU Programme Budgets is still under review.

## SUITE Network Impact

Involvement within the SUITE network provided a boost to the development of the Local Action Plan (In Focus Project). It became clear that the improved working methodology of the URBACT Local Support Group led to the successful advance of the plan.

Lessons learned and knowledge shared between partners in the project led to an improved Housing Strategy, which is expected to receive Medway Council Cabinet approval later this summer.

## Finally

The **In Focus** project will be re-evaluated when the Council's budgets are secured for 2012. The URBACT Local Support Group will not continue to meet on this subject, although Rachel Britt, Senior Housing Strategy and Enabling Manager for Medway Council will continue to monitor EU housing issues and URBACT developments in particular.

## Contacts

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AN URBACT II PROJECT

URBACT is a European exchange and learning programme promoting sustainable urban development.

It enables cities to work together to develop solutions to major urban challenges, reaffirming the key role they play in facing increasingly complex societal challenges. It helps them to develop pragmatic solutions that are new and sustainable, and that integrate economic, social and environmental dimensions. It enables cities to share good practices and lessons learned with all professionals involved in urban policy throughout Europe. URBACT is 181 cities, 29 countries, and 5,000 active participants. URBACT is co-financed by the ERDF Funds and the Member States.

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