

Braintree District Council
Housing Strategy 2016-2021

Draft for Cabinet
November 2016

Background

Braintree District Council's housing stock was transferred to Greenfields Community Housing in November 2007. The transfer secured major investment to improve the condition of the housing stock of just over 8,000 homes. It also established a significant local organisation with resources to invest in neighbourhoods and communities in the district.

The District Council has a range of housing responsibilities. There may be a number of alternative ways that we can fulfil these duties. For example, we could choose to commission some services from external providers. We regularly consider our arrangements to make sure they are effective and represent good value for money.

The following table shows the main housing duties that we have and summarises the arrangements we have made and the practical impact of those responsibilities.

Our housing duties	How we meet our duty
Responsibility for people who are homeless or threatened with homelessness	We operate a Housing Options Service with expert staff who prevent people becoming homeless whenever possible and make sure we comply with the law when we have to house people. We work with housing associations to maintain a network of temporary accommodation and supported housing schemes. We work directly with private sector landlords to help people find housing.
Maintain a policy to allocate social housing	We work with housing association partners to maintain private sector leasing schemes. The schemes may also be used to bring empty homes into use. We helped establish the 'Gateway to Homechoice' lettings scheme that covers 8 districts in North East Essex and East Suffolk. The scheme partners all use the same Allocations Policy. People given priority under the Allocations Policy can choose where they live from properties advertised on the 'Gateway to Homechoice' website. We work with providers of supported housing to make sure that we play our part in identifying people most likely to benefit from the available facilities and services.
Regulate and enforce standards in the private rented sector	Expert staff give advice to private landlords to make sure they meet legal requirements, particularly in relation to health and safety. Staff visit properties where concerns are raised by tenants and enforce standards if they are not being met. We register and licence some Houses in Multiple Occupation. We work with private owners to bring empty homes into use, including for rent.
Commission surveys of the condition of housing stock in the district	We identify locations or types of housing where we may need to direct resources to secure acceptable living conditions and promote energy efficiency measures.
Enable new affordable housing	We negotiate with landowners, builders and developers to make sure that a proportion of new housing is affordable Our policies for the number and type of new affordable housing are based on research, some of which we undertake and some we commission. Some of this work is an integral part of the Council's Planning Policy; some is aimed at informing the detail of our homelessness and housing allocations duties. We work with housing associations to secure an overall programme of affordable housing that best meets the needs we have identified.
Administer a system of grant funding to provide adaptations to the homes of people with disabilities	We visit people who need their homes adapted and, working with guidance from Occupational Therapists, fund and oversee disabled adaptations to private housing. We are also involved in some adaptations to social stock (particularly if works are substantial enough to require planning permission).
Administer Housing Benefit and Council Tax Support	The way that benefits are administered is changing as Universal Credit is implemented but we expect to continue to employ staff to collect payment of Council Tax and operate a system of payments to households and/or housing providers.

The Scope of this Strategy

As well as the legal duties set out above, we work with other agencies and organisations that help to secure better neighbourhoods, communities and environment for the district. For example, we have responsibilities that relate to community safety, safeguarding, health and wellbeing that are very important to local people. In addition, housing plays a very important part in the economic development of the district and is a vital part of our Local Plan and related agenda.

This strategy is not intended to give a detailed account of every initiative that we become involved in but will concentrate on setting out:

- What we expect to be the major pressures on local housing in the future;
- What we need to do to differently to meet identified housing needs;
- What resources are needed to meet those needs.

We recognise that we need to participate fully with other agencies and partner organisations to facilitate improvements for local people but this strategy will mainly concentrate on the housing issues for which we need to take a lead to enable changes to be made.

To maintain the focus of the strategy, we have decided not to set out actions that are covered by other strategies, such as community-focussed action or our work to prevent homelessness. There are also some areas of our work where priorities and actions arising from previous strategies have worked well and rather than pledge, for example, to 'continue to operate our choice-based lettings scheme' we felt it was better to identify these areas and focus on where we think changes need to be made. Things that are important but do not need to be covered here for those reasons include the following:

- We will continue to maintain high quality information on housing needs, through updated Strategic Housing Market Assessments, maintaining the Housing StatNav on our web-site and continuing to monitor closely the impact of housing need and homelessness.
- We will continue to participate in the Gateway to Homechoice scheme, sharing the cost of the scheme with other councils and continuing to seek enhancements that build on its success.
- We will continue to work positively with neighbouring local authorities, housing providers, statutory and voluntary agencies so that we respond effectively to change, whether the change is driven by external forces, such as economic pressures or because of legal or policy change.
- We will continue to participate fully in the District's Local Plan process to make sure our work supports and complements the way the district develops in the future.

Who is the Strategy for?

The Strategy is intended to shape the way that we develop our services for housing within the Council and the action that officers take in their work with local people but it is also intended to:

- Set out clearly our objectives so that local people can see what we are trying to achieve;
- Shape our relationships with statutory agencies;
- Inform private and voluntary sector organisations that work with us so they understand what we intend to do;
- Make sure that relevant government departments have a clear picture of our overall direction.

Structure of this Strategy

Section 1: Identifying the challenges

- Summary of our aims and priorities
- What the evidence tells us about our District
- What we have identified as the major pressures we expect to face
- The main issues we want to address

Section 2: Our priorities for action

- New affordable housing
- Vulnerable and older people
- Our relationship with the private sector

Section 3: Appendices

- Glossary and explanation of terms used in this strategy
- Background information
- Housing needs statistics

Our housing priorities for the next 5 years are:

New Affordable Housing

Overall Aim:
Maintain a consistent delivery programme of new affordable housing

PRIORITIES

- Increase the supply of affordable housing locally by using the opportunities provided by the new Local Plan and the growth the Plan sets out.
- Develop our policies for housing association mixed tenure schemes, in towns and villages so that associations can continue to develop affordable homes.
- Make sure that we are open to innovative ways to secure affordable housing including financial structures that support land purchase and housing delivery, use of our land and investment that draws in external funding.
- Publish a guide to affordable housing specification that sets out our requirements for accessibility, sustainability and unit size. Make sure this is easily accessible on our web-site and kept up-to-date.
- Agree with housing providers an approach to affordability that helps people to secure suitable housing that is sustainable for them to occupy.

Vulnerable and Older People

Overall Aim
Help vulnerable and older people to live independently for longer

PRIORITIES

- Establish a project group to plan the future of sheltered housing provision in the Braintree District.
- Work with Essex County Council to plan where new specialist housing for older people is to be built and how it will be provided.
- Work with Essex County Council to plan how new specialist housing for older people is to be let.
- Set up a project to establish a clear process for housing people with disabilities who need support or specialist housing to live independently.

Our relationship with the private sector

Overall aim
Establish how we can help people access private rented housing and find ways to improve housing conditions

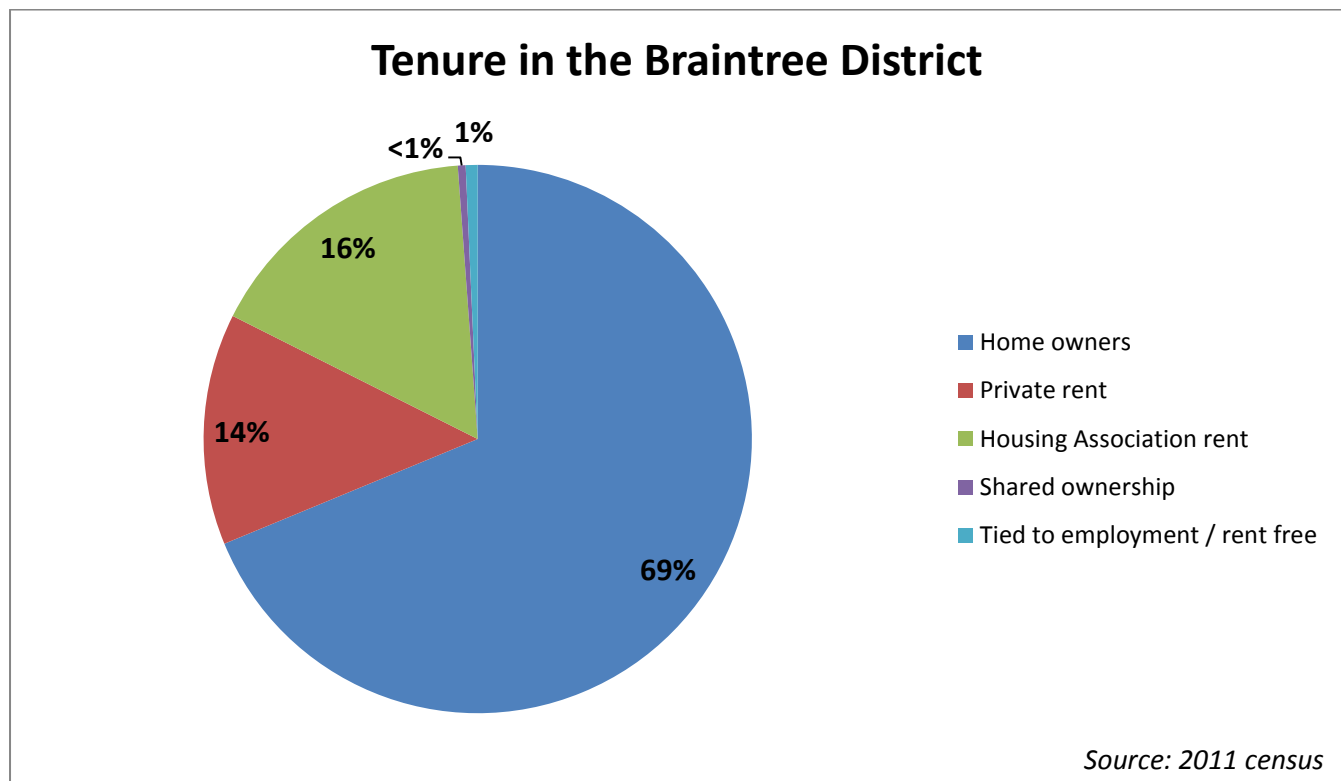
PRIORITIES

- Explore the feasibility of establishing a loan fund to help people access the private rented sector.
- Identify how to fund the Private Sector Leasing Scheme once identified funding is used up.
- Identify action plans for all properties empty over a year where there are no specific reasons for the property being empty.
- Explore joint working with neighbouring Councils to provide property maintenance and adaptation services for older and vulnerable owner occupiers and private tenants.

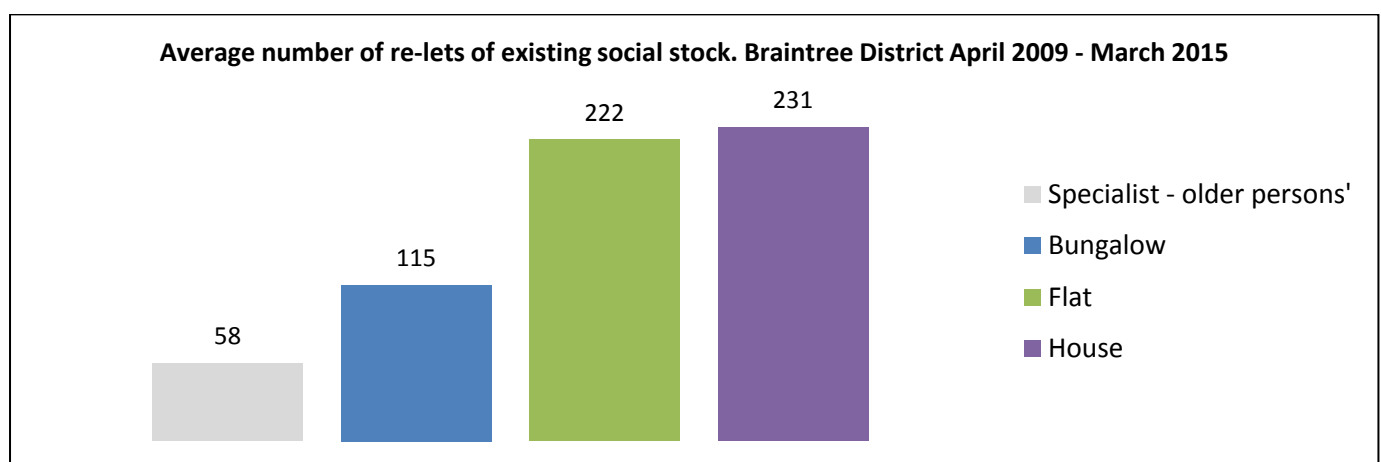
Section 1: Identifying the Challenges

The supply of social housing

There are just over 10,000 homes owned by housing associations in the Braintree District. The 2011 census indicated the following tenure mix:



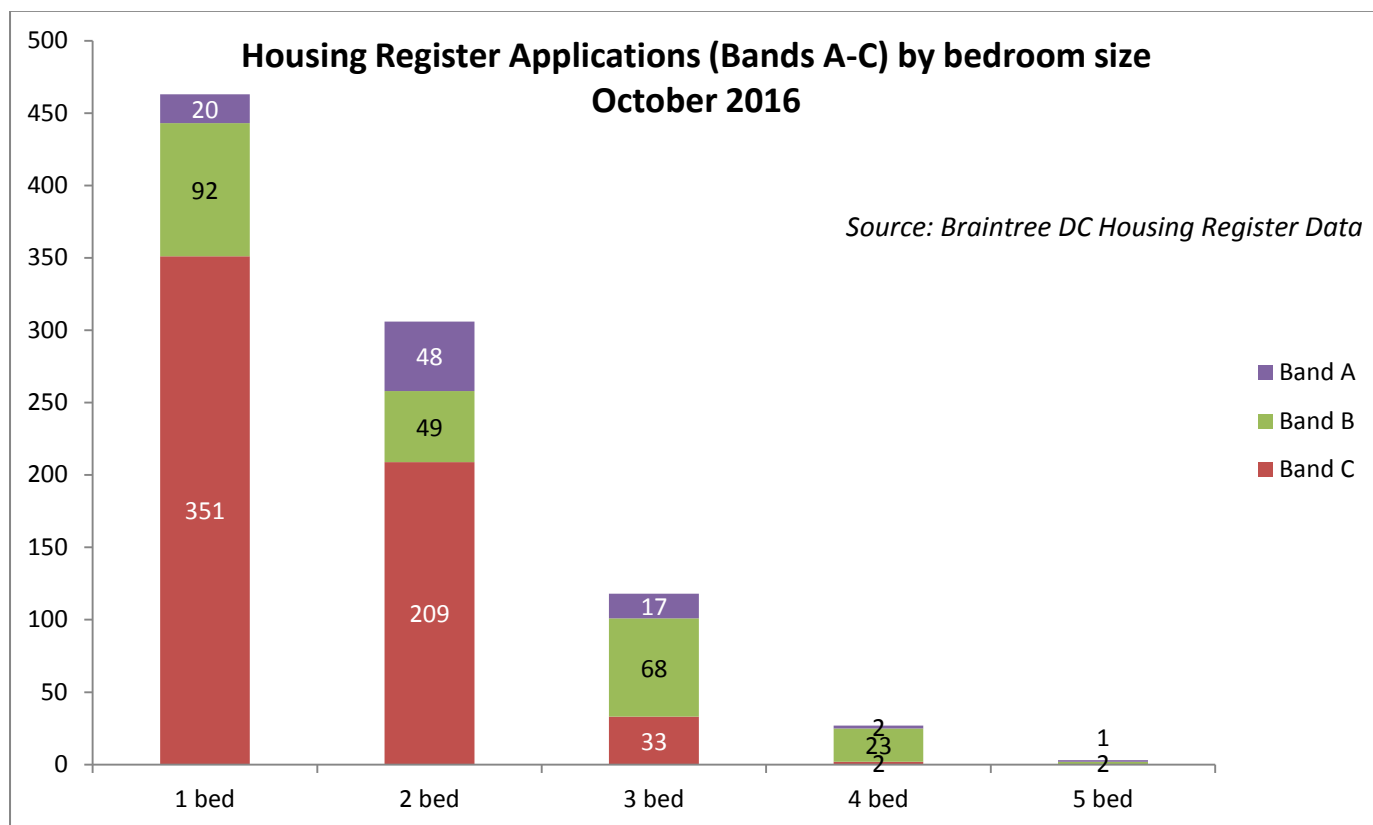
It is impossible to predict when particular properties are likely to become vacant but the overall turnover of social sector stock in the district is broadly predictable. Different types of property turn over at different rates. For example, larger family houses turn over less frequently than one bed flats. The following table shows the average number of vacancies that we expect each year:



Source: Braintree DC Lettings Data

There more than twice as many houses as flats in the stock locally but because flats turn over much more frequently, there are virtually the same number of annual vacancies as in houses.

This 'flow' of stock is really important if we are to continue to meet the need for housing that arises as new households form and grow and people's needs change as they age. A snapshot of our housing register in October 2016 showed the following needs:



Where the picture becomes more complex is that existing turnover rates fail to address the following needs:

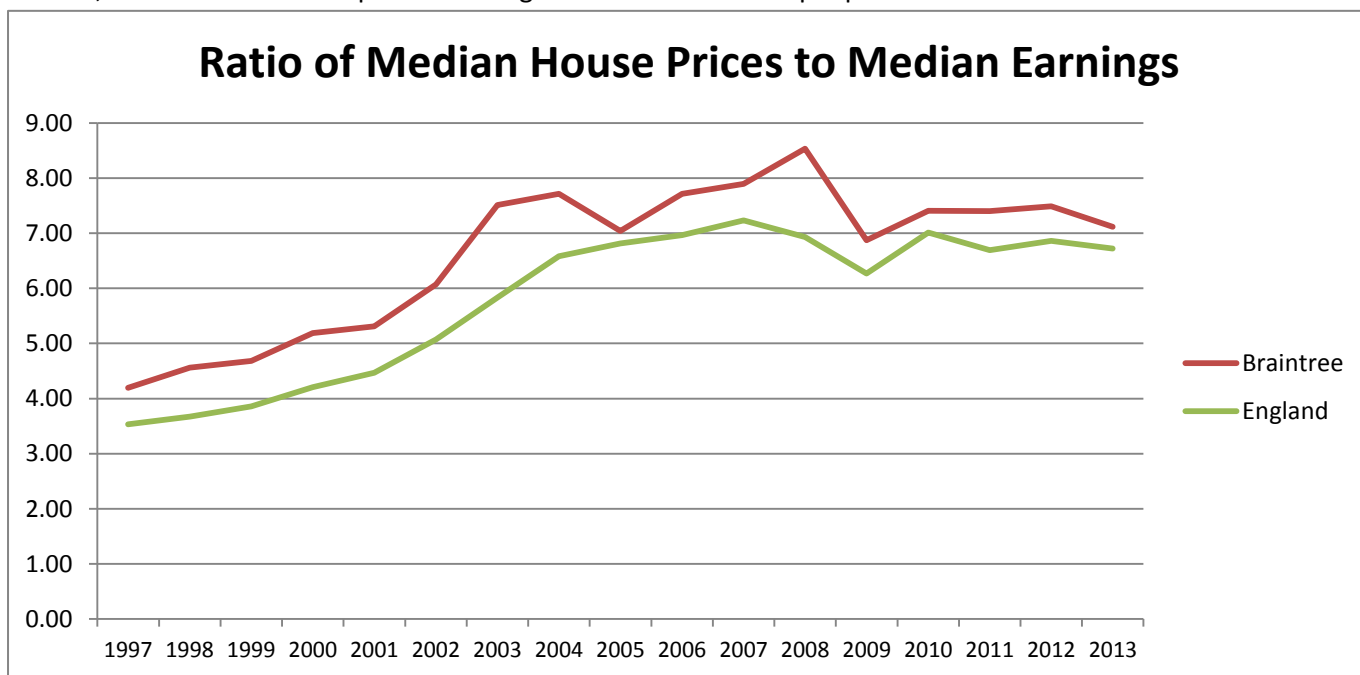
- We accepted a duty to 67 households that became homeless during 2015/16. Most of them had to be housed in temporary accommodation until suitable permanent housing became available. The length of time people have to wait in temporary accommodation dictates how much temporary housing we have to provide.
- The social sector houses a very high proportion of people with disabilities. We have a shortage of properties of all sizes that are suitable for wheelchair users but particularly properties with 3 bedrooms.
- The number of households needing 4 bed and larger homes is relatively small but the turnover is exceptionally slow, leading to very long waiting times even for households given a high priority for housing.
- The mix of houses across the district is not uniform. For example, bungalows represent a significant proportion of homes in Witham but are much less common in Halstead. Similarly, one bed flats tend to be concentrated in the towns and larger villages and are virtually absent in rural areas where the most common stock tends to be 3 bed houses and one and two bed bungalows.
- Vulnerable people, such as people with learning disabilities and older people needing some form of support or care can be helped to stay in their existing homes but may benefit from housing with support services available onsite. The need for more supported housing is identified across Essex and we expect to need to provide additional supported housing that helps people struggling to cope in their own homes but who could live independently given the right support.

New rented social housing therefore represents our opportunity to:

- boost the number of vacancies available each year, so that our need for temporary accommodation is kept to a minimum and high priority applicants to our housing register are re-housed;
- provide the overall mix of stock that will meet our needs now and in the future;
- develop the type and size of homes needed to serve the shortfalls that are specific to the location; and
- meet the need for adapted and supported housing.

Affordability

Housing is less affordable today than it has been in the past. Locally, since 2002, median house prices have been consistently between 6 and 8 times median income. If the 'benchmark' for mortgage lending is around 3 to 4 times income, it is clear that house prices are a significant issue for local people.



Source: data.gov.uk

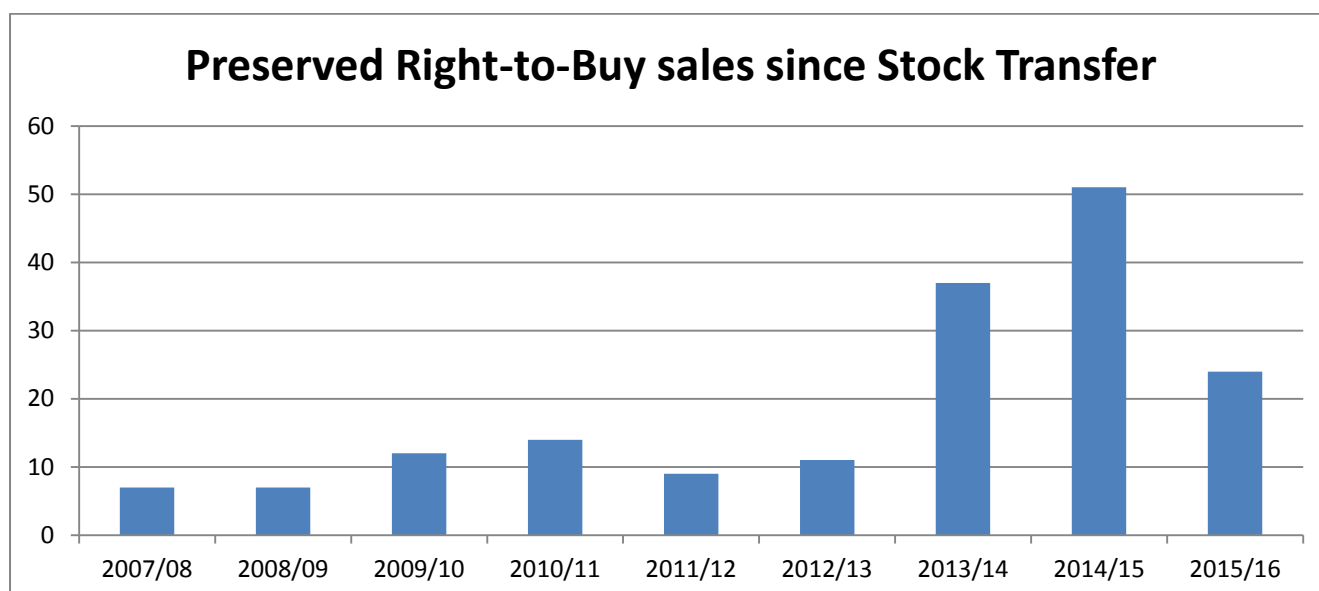
Our surveys show that there is a significant need for homes that can meet the needs of people who have a regular income and could sustain a mortgage but still cannot access the market. In some cases the main issue is the size of the deposit needed but for many, the overall cost of a mortgage is too high. Our strategy will therefore consider the extent to which we think this can be undertaken by building new homes and the resources we will need.

Setting Targets

Overall, we would like to pledge to increase available supply but it may not be realistic to do so. For example, in spite of having a programme of new development, the housing stock owned by Greenfields Community Housing in the district has actually reduced from over 8,000 to less than 7,900 since the stock transfer as:

- housing has been sold under the 'preserved' right-to-buy;
- sheltered schemes have been modernised or redeveloped with fewer units; and
- a few homes have been sold as they were not viable to maintain.

We therefore simply cannot guarantee that extra provision will keep pace with right-to-buy sales, stock disposals and renovations. The increase in the level of discount available from April 2013 saw a jump in the number of sales of Greenfields' stock.



Source: Braintree District Council

The extension of Right-to-Buy to housing association tenants is likely to have a significant impact locally. We secured around 1,500 new affordable homes in the last 15 years and many of these are now likely to be eligible for Right-to-Buy.

For several years, we have maintained a target of an average of 100 new affordable homes each year. These have been a mixture of general needs rented housing, supported homes and shared ownership housing. Our experience has been that, if we have at least 100 new properties for rent, the number of units of temporary accommodation we require has been manageable and reasonably stable. In years where we have secured 150 or more units, we have really noticed the drop in immediate housing pressures.

We would therefore like to aim to provide at least 125 rented homes per year, plus at least 25 homes for shared ownership but the timing of many schemes is outside our control and the impact of changing market conditions and changes in how affordable housing is funded mean that we cannot guarantee to maintain such a level of supply every year. In addition, the Government has indicated it wishes to target investment at homeownership, rather than rent and it is difficult to know what sort of balance between tenures we will be able to achieve.

Areas of Uncertainty: The Housing and Planning Act and Benefit Changes

The Housing and Planning Act 2016 came into force in July 2016. It is difficult to predict the impact of the Act because many of the measures in it will only start to operate when the regulations are published. Many commentators are expecting delay as the Government focusses on Brexit. In addition, the Act was drafted when David Cameron was Prime Minister. It is not known how Theresa May and her administration will seek to implement the Act.

The main measures that are particularly relevant to this strategy are:

- A duty on Councils to promote Starter Homes, which will also be adopted within the definition of 'affordable housing' used to negotiate planning permissions. At the time of writing, the exact definition of Starter Homes, the proportion of them on developments, how they are administered and how they are negotiated is yet to be defined.
- The Government negotiated a voluntary agreement with the National Housing Federation (the trade body for housing associations) under which Right-to-Buy will be extended to housing association tenants. The Act enables the Government to compensate associations, funded by the enforced sale (at the time it becomes

vacant) of high-value council housing. At the time of writing, the detail of the compensation and the implementation of the sale of high value stock has not been published.

- Councils that retain their housing stock are required to implement 'Pay-to-Stay' under which high earning tenants are required to pay higher rents. At the time of writing, the exact income thresholds, how the increase is 'tapered' as people's income goes up and how rent levels will be calculated are yet to be published. The Act requires local authorities to return any additional rental income generated by the policy (minus administrative costs) to the Treasury. The measures will be voluntary for housing associations to implement.

There have been a number of changes to Welfare Benefits over the last few years. Unlike the changes in the Housing and Planning Act, these changes are known and are being implemented. The impact of them is less certain but they will affect the capacity of affordable housing providers to develop new homes and the type of affordable homes they seek to develop. Changes will also add significant complexity to how homes are let.

In the past, we could assume that anyone securing a social tenancy would be able to meet the cost if they became unemployed. This is no longer the case as:

- Benefits are capped at £385 per week for families and £258 for single people. This means in particular that larger family homes (and particularly new homes let at 'Affordable Rents') will be unaffordable for some households.
- The Local Housing Allowance rate, which until now has set the maximum amount that Housing Benefit can normally pay, will apply to the social sector. This is a particular issue for under 35s as they are limited to the Housing Benefit rate for a room in a shared house. They will no longer be able to claim enough Housing Benefit to pay for a one-bed flat.
- Benefit claimants under-occupying have their Housing Benefit reduced by 14% for one spare room or 25% for 2 or more rooms.

New applicants for social housing are therefore likely to face affordability checks, even if they are considered to have the highest needs for housing.

The combined impact of the Housing and Planning Act and changes to benefits therefore make our predictions for delivery uncertain – we cannot be certain about tenure or about the mix of housing we can facilitate. It is more pressing that we focus on consistency of supply than on specific targets.

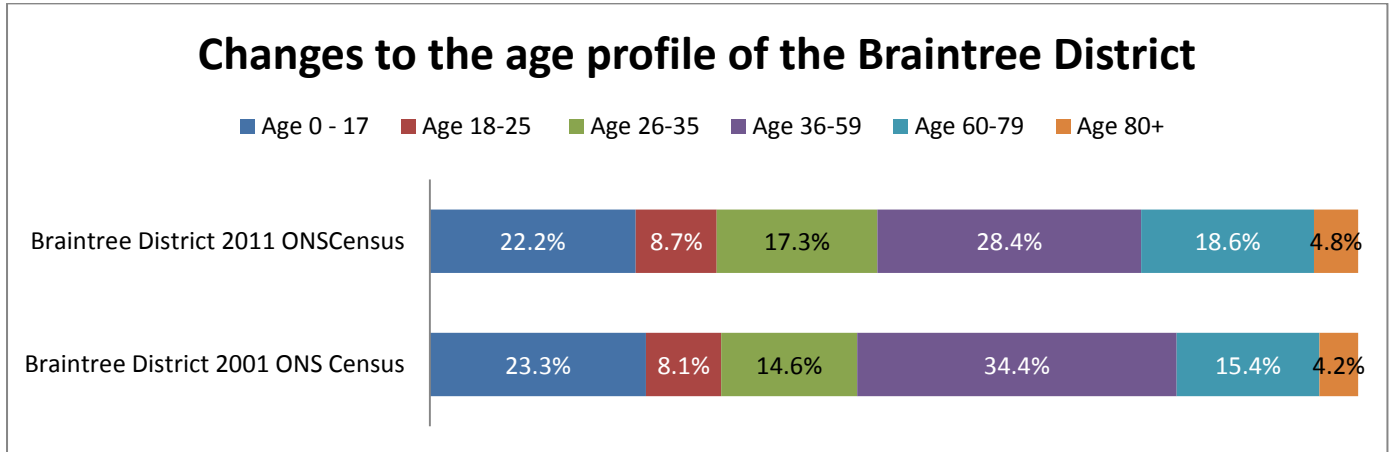
The first overall aim in this strategy is therefore:

Aim 1: Maintain a consistent delivery programme of new affordable housing

The needs of vulnerable and older people

People may be considered to be vulnerable for a variety of reasons. The Council publishes, maintains and updates a Homelessness Strategy that includes consideration of the range of short-term accommodation available for people who are homeless or at risk of homelessness. This section of the Housing Strategy focusses on the needs of people who may need some form of support to enable them to live independently and are likely to require the support over a long period of time. The largest groups that are considered here are older people and people with physical and/or learning disabilities.

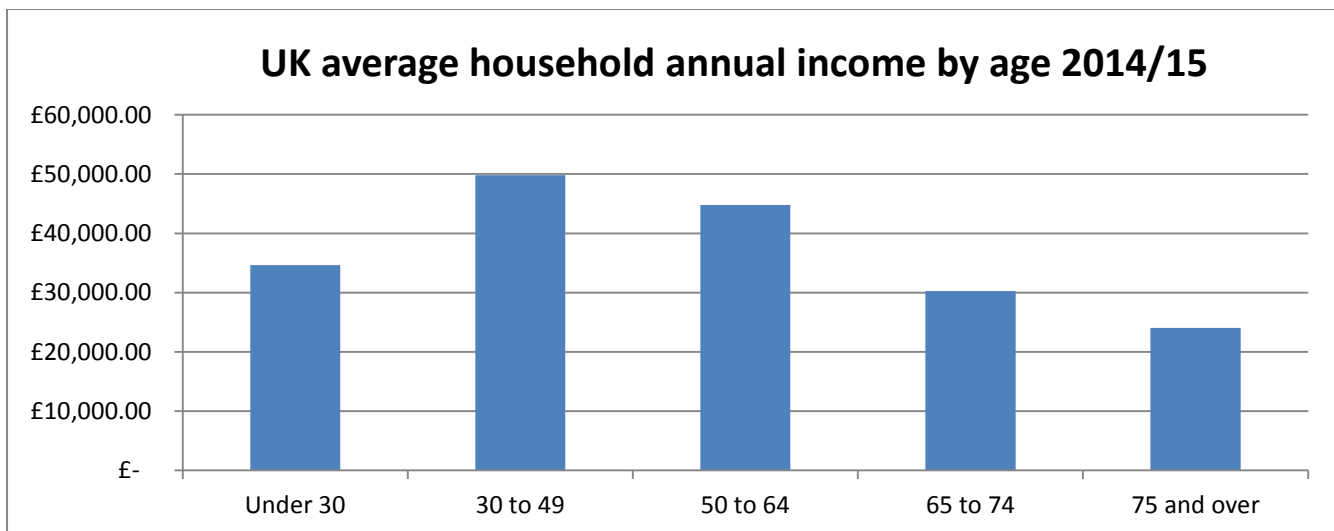
In common with national trends, the age profile of the district is changing:



Source: Office for National Statistics

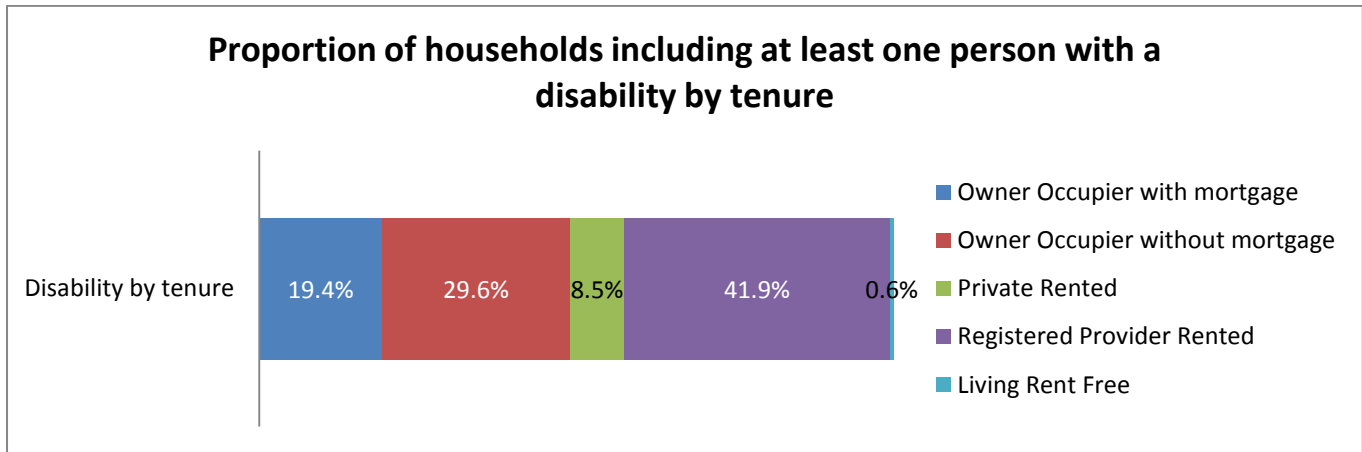
The proportion of over 60s in the Braintree District increased from 19.6% in 2001 to 23.4% in 2011. By 2021, it is projected to reach 26%.

The proportion of owner occupiers is fairly similar among older people as in the population as a whole. However, most older owner occupiers are outright owners of their property. In many cases, this leaves them asset-rich but cash-poor. Measures that are taken to help people retain their independence have to be targeted across tenures and the affordability of such measures can be just as much of an issue for owners as for renters.



Source: Office for National Statistics, 2014/15

A significant number of people report some form of disability within their household but more than 40% of the disabled population live in the 16% of properties in the social sector.



Source: Braintree District Council Strategic Housing Market Assessment Final Report 2014. Table 13-20 Disability by Tenure.

It is likely that the main reasons why a disproportionate number of people with disabilities live in the social sector are:

- On average, people with disabilities earn significantly less than the non-disabled population. This also affects their immediate family who may have to spend considerable time caring for them, rather than pursuing career opportunities.
- We give medical and welfare priorities in our housing allocations policy, so a significant proportion of our lettings are made to households with a disabled member of the family.

No single agency or organisation can completely resolve what we need to improve the lives of vulnerable and older people. What has become clear in recent years is that a reliance on residential care for people unable to maintain their independence has a number of issues. The main ones are that:

- It is very expensive;
- It does not help people to retain their independence;
- It has been used inappropriately for many people (particularly people with learning and other disabilities that could have been helped to be independent).

In two tier local authority areas, it is vital that Districts work closely with the County Council if this is to change. In very general terms, the County Council deals with care needs of individuals, assessing and providing for their needs, while the districts manage the system by which people access independent social sector accommodation. The system that has evolved has meant that measures are taken for as long as possible to keep people in their homes until they 'have to' go into care.

In post war years, councils and housing providers developed sheltered housing schemes with a broad assumption that people would 'progress' from council flats to family houses and then to bungalows or sheltered housing. Sheltered housing schemes had mainly bedsit accommodation, with shared bathing facilities and communal lounge areas. In many cases, 'wardens' would occupy a self-contained flat in or adjacent to the scheme.

Identifying the Challenges: The needs of vulnerable and older people

As time has progressed, many (though not all) schemes have been modernised with larger, self-contained accommodation and the live-in 'warden' service is no longer a feature of most rented schemes. Most have a member of support staff who visits during working hours. Much of the private sheltered housing in the district follows a similar model.

The Braintree District has two 'extra-care' sheltered housing schemes. Both have restaurant facilities and 24 hour staffing. One scheme in Braintree Town is owned and run by The Abbeyfield Braintree & Bocking Society, while the other, in Witham, is owned and operated by Hanover Housing. Access to these schemes is managed by a panel of officers from the scheme operators and care providers, the district and county councils. The schemes aim to maintain a mix of people with varying care needs.

As the County Council looks to reduce its reliance on residential care, it is prioritising the provision of additional 'extra-care' housing (although the name given to it is likely to change) and therefore needs to build partnerships with districts and providers that can help meet the need.

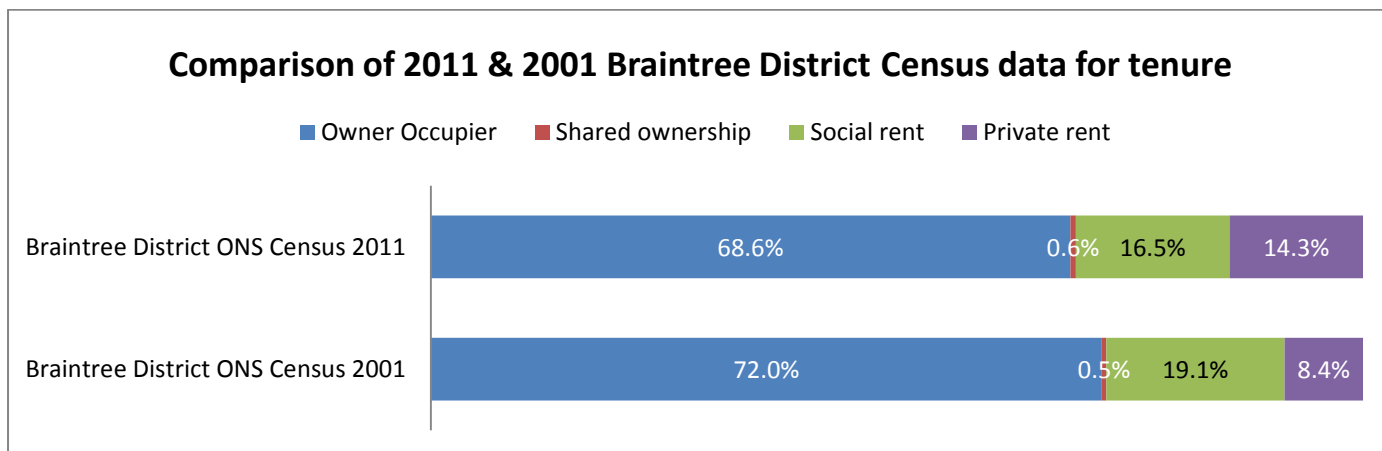
Apart from sheltered and extra-care housing, most of the district's supported housing projects in the social sector are designed to meet the needs of people on a temporary basis, such as hostels for homeless people. Longer-term supported accommodation is mainly for people with disabilities that limit their ability to live independently, such as people with learning disabilities. The supply of this latter type of accommodation is needed to reduce the County's reliance on residential care and to offer a better alternative for the individuals who need support.

It is from this background that the second priority of the strategy is derived:

Aim 2. Help vulnerable and older people to live independently for longer

Private sector housing in the Braintree District

The proportion of households in owner occupation and social rent fell, while the private rented sector almost doubled in size in the Braintree District in the period between the 2001 and 2011 census:



For many people, the private rented sector serves a very useful function:

- Provided you have the necessary deposits and references, it is immediately accessible – it is much harder to access social housing and owner occupation quickly.
- Its lack of permanence can be an advantage to people who need housing for a short period such as:
 - Students
 - People in between house moves
 - People taking up new employment or working away from home

Nonetheless, the sector poses a number of challenges for the Council:

- If the number of vacancies in the social sector is insufficient to meet the needs of people who seek our help, we have to be able to assist them to access private rented housing. One third of last year's 218 cases where we were able to prevent or alleviate someone's homelessness were resolved by an offer of private rented housing. This implies that the private sector is significant in helping us meet housing need.
- Loss of private rented housing is one of the main categories of issue for people who approach us as homeless. Over the last 4 years, it was the number one reason for homelessness. This implies that the private sector is a significant cause of problems for local people and the council.
- In a market with high demand, landlords can insist on high levels of advanced payments that many people who approach us cannot afford. We operate a mixture of bond, loan and advanced payments that can help people to access the sector but it is costly to maintain and still far too little for some landlords to consider.
- Even if we establish a good working relationship with a private landlord and are able to nominate tenants to them when vacancies arise, we have to recognise that most are renting housing as a business and our 'offer' has to be more attractive than the alternatives. These alternatives may be from operating directly in the market or may be from working with other local authorities.
- Realistically, most people who seek our help because they are homeless or threatened with homelessness need to claim benefits to help with the cost of renting privately. Changes to the rules for benefits, to the way they are paid and how they are administered can pose significant financial risk to landlords. Our 'offer' not only has to be competitive, it also has to respond to changes in the way benefits are administered.

Private Sector Leasing Schemes

One way that we have found we can work positively with private landlords is to set up schemes under which a housing association leases properties from them and undertakes their management for 3 or 5 years. In exchange for nominations to the homes, we share the risks with the housing association so that we have a shared incentive to resolve any issues over benefit payments and/or tenant misconduct. The main leasing scheme in the district is run by Colne Housing and has been running for several years.

The leasing scheme has also been the vehicle for us to bring empty property into use. Owners have been offered a package of improvements to the property and rental income for 3 or 5 years. However, the number of owners taking this up is limited, currently standing at 25 properties.

Empty Homes

It is quite common to see articles that compare the number of empty properties to the number of people waiting for social housing. In reality, these are two very different issues. Empty homes are a part of a functioning housing market. Homes become vacant for a number of reasons including:

- when people die;
- when people go into care;
- in between house moves;
- as a result of major upgrading and works;
- in between tenants.

Our concentration has therefore been on homes that have been empty for more than a year. In many cases, they are simply not owned by people who particularly want to rent them out. If they do want to consider renting, owners are put in touch with Colne Housing to see if the property can be brought up to a condition where it can be suitable for letting. Unfortunately, our experience has been that many properties that have been empty for any length of time are not affordable for us to renovate. It is important that we consider what resources are needed to bring empty homes into use and this strategy will do that.

House Condition

The English Housing Survey 2013-14 reported that most social housing in England was built in the period 1945 to 1980, with less than 15% of stock dating from pre 1919. By comparison, more than 30% of private sector stock was built before 1919. The survey indicated that private rented stock covers a wide variety of property types and covers a much broader range of sizes than the social sector.

The Survey also found that private rented homes are the least likely to be insulated and double glazed and had the highest proportion of non-decent homes (30%) in 2013 while the social rented sector had the lowest (15%). A fifth (19%) of owner occupied homes failed to meet the decent homes standard in 2013.

For many years, we have targeted financial help to vulnerable and older people to help them improve their private sector homes. We intend to continue with that work and will link it to work on our previous priority, relating to helping people maintain their independence

Our third priority for this strategy is:

Aim 3. Help people access private rented housing and find ways to improve housing conditions

New Affordable Housing

Our overall Aim:

Maintain a consistent programme of new affordable housing

Securing new Homes

We have 3 basic mechanisms for providing new affordable housing:

1. Homes are provided through 'planning gain' as a requirement of planning permission on qualifying sites.
2. Homes are built on land that is owned or controlled by housing associations.
3. Homes are built on land owned by the Council.

The proportion of new homes provided through each of these mechanisms has varied from year to year. In recent years, we have had very little supply from planning gain as there have been very few major developments through the period from 2009-2014. (See appendix 2 for details)

Planning Gain

The District is gearing up for significant growth over the next 20 years. We expect to see over 800 new homes being built each year. This is significantly more than the number built during the last 20 years.

Our policy is to seek 30% affordable housing on sites in Braintree, Witham, Halstead and Sible Hedingham and 40% in all other locations. Although on paper our policy would imply we could expect to secure at least 240 homes per year (30% of 800) our experience has been that we have only secured around 20% on average as some sites are exempt, unviable or unsuitable. Evolving planning guidance is likely to require starter homes and self-build opportunities which may be instead of some affordable housing. Conversions and some brownfield sites may be exempt. In addition, even if there is enough land identified in our new Local Plan to provide more than 800 new homes, the speed at which they are built depends on market conditions and is out of our control.

Over the last 10 years, our affordable housing programme of over 1,200 additional affordable homes has included more than 400 for some form of 'intermediate' tenure (for example, shared ownership or shared equity). The Housing and Planning Bill is likely to increase the proportion of homes for intermediate tenures, particularly through the 'Starter Homes' programme. If these homes are instead of the rented homes that we would have expected, we are likely to encounter serious issues meeting the housing needs of our residents. We therefore see no immediate justification to change our existing policies and will continue to seek 30% affordable housing on qualifying sites in towns and 40% elsewhere. Details of how this policy operates are in the Council's planning documents (available on our web-site).

We do not want to harm the viability of development – it is one of the main ways we can provide new affordable housing – but we will continue to seek affordable housing through our Local Plan policy. Our view is that organisations purchasing land for development must take into account the community benefits that form part of our policy so that the price paid for land allows the provision of homes that are affordable, of good quality and in line with our local needs.

We have developed a number of tools that help with this process, including:

Our Priorities for Action: New affordable housing

- The Housing StatNav, a web-site developed jointly with Greenfields Community Housing, which sets out affordable housing supply and demand in every town and village in the district.
<http://www.braintree.gov.uk/housingstatnav/>
- A viability 'toolkit' that we can use in conjunction with developers to consider the viability of affordable housing provision. We can provide this on request.
- Details of which housing associations are currently active locally and quick access to approximate offers so that viability can be assessed.

We need to consider how our legal agreements maintain the supply of affordable housing that we need. Our experience has been that they need to be specific enough so that the organisations we work with understand the intention of the agreement but flexible enough to deal with changing circumstances between the time of the negotiations and the units being completed.

Priority 1: Increase the supply of affordable housing locally by using the opportunities provided by the new Local Plan and the growth the Plan sets out

Housing Associations and Development

All of our new affordable homes over the last 10 years have been provided by housing associations. Our relationship with housing associations is very close as we are involved in a number of ways with each development. For example:

- We negotiate the affordable housing provision with developers through 'planning gain'.
- We co-ordinate with the Homes and Communities Agency regarding the sites and providers that receive grant funding.
- We fund and co-fund (with the HCA) some schemes ourselves through our Housing Capital Programme.
- We nominate tenants for all of the new homes developed. These nomination rights help us to meet the district's housing needs.

This is a time of significant change for social housing providers. In the Braintree District, the implementation of the Voluntary Right-to-Buy for housing association tenants is likely to result in a significant number of sales. Council tenants who were in occupation at the time of the stock transfer to Greenfields in 2007 still maintained their right to buy but that is now being extended to their newer tenants and to the other 2,500 tenants that live in other housing association stock locally.

The Government's budget in July 2015 changed the proposed social housing rental regime, reducing rents by 1% per year for 4 years. Previously, it had been set to rise by inflation plus 1%. This change makes an enormous difference to the business plans of our partner associations and we cannot take for granted that at all times they will have the capacity to develop.

In the preparation for this strategy we jointly organised an Affordable Housing Conference with Colchester Borough Council. The feedback to this was excellent and we think this is one of the ways that we can make sure that we engage effectively with the providers who can deliver the affordable housing we need. It was clear at the conference that we have to innovate in how we provide new affordable housing, including working with providers on mixes of tenure that enable them to cross-subsidise the affordable housing by building housing for sale or for market rent. This may help to secure the open market purchase of sites in towns and larger villages but also on rural exception sites (where currently we do not permit market housing).

Priority 2: Develop our policies for housing association mixed tenure schemes, in towns and villages so that associations can continue to develop affordable homes.

Most funding for affordable housing development comes from the housing providers but a subsidy is normally needed to maintain affordability. The subsidy may come from reduced land price (for example if the association already owns the land) or through planning gain, where the subsidy is from the landowner and developer.

The other main source is grant funding from the HCA or from the Council. Details of the funding used over the period are included in the appendix. Over the last 10 years, the Council has maintained a capital programme to support the building of new affordable homes, to which we have nomination rights. Funding has been drawn from a number of sources, including:

- Agreed payments from developers in lieu of on-site housing provision;
- Sale of redundant housing stock; *and*
- New Homes Bonus.

In addition, we have passed land at nil or reduced value to associations (in return for nominations rights to the homes) and have maintained a policy of 'underwriting' housing schemes so that housing associations could proceed to secure planning permission, while seeking alternative funding from the HCA.

With reduced funding for local authorities, we recognise that we may struggle to sustain a capital programme for housing. In 2016, the HCA indicated that 95% of its programme would be targeted at home ownership initiatives and consequently our capacity to maintain a supply of new rented affordable homes is likely to be severely challenged. We therefore recognise that we have to be open to innovative ways of providing new homes and may have to seek ways to exercise greater control over development opportunities. This could involve establishing or partnering with a 'Housing Company' – an organisation established to operate at arms-length from the Council but sharing our aims and helping secure the outcomes we need.

Housing Development Company

In September 2016, the Council's Cabinet approved resources to develop a full business case for the establishment of a Housing Development Company. The proposed creation of the Company will give the Council greater control over housing development locally, including:

- Increasing the supply of new homes across the District
- Enhancing the local housing offer by developing a diverse range of new homes: e.g. market sale, private rent, affordable rent, keyworker
- Making best use of under-utilised Council-owned asset sites
- Stimulating economic growth in the local construction sector
- Providing the opportunity to set the standard in housing design locally.

Priority 3: Make sure that we are open to innovative ways to secure affordable housing including financial structures that support land purchase and housing delivery, use of our land and investment that draws in external funding.

Quality and sustainability

The first section of this strategy sets out that more than 40% of disabled population of the district live in the social sector, despite the social sector only providing 16% of the homes. Our lettings policies mean that we are always likely to provide a significant proportion of our social housing for people with disabilities. We must therefore make sure that our provision suits this purpose. Our experience has been that we need:

Our Priorities for Action: New affordable housing

- a small but steady supply of fully adapted homes suitable for wheelchair users; *and*
- that we need to make sure that all other homes are as easy to adapt as possible.

Our work with housing associations indicates that there is a reluctance in the development industry (from both mainstream developers and associations) to prioritise accessibility. Although the main reason for this is cost, there are other factors that can be specific to sites or house types. For example:

- The increase in downstairs space in 3 bed houses compared to 2 bed houses makes them immediately more likely to be accessible for people with reduced mobility.
- We are much more likely to be able to develop flats than bungalows. We must make sure that we make the most of the opportunities for ground floor flats to be easily accessible. It is much less important that upper floor general needs flats are accessible.
- When we do develop bungalows, we should make sure they have level access showers built in.
- We should consider the external environment – if a site is on a significant slope, it may be unsuitable for people with limited mobility and we would be better focussing our accessible housing on other sites.

Because we need to consider each scheme on a site-by-site basis, we need to establish a procedure for considering whether schemes are satisfactorily specified so that they are accessible for people with disabilities and reduced mobility.

In the past, we have also specified the sustainability standard we expect for new affordable homes and generally, this has been higher than the minimum standard required under building regulations. This has not been completely successful because on some sites, the specific units to be provided as affordable housing forms part of the negotiation process and securing the right mix in terms of size and making pragmatic judgements about the grouping of affordable housing has taken precedence.

The Homes and Communities Agency has in the past published minimum unit sizes for different house types (which has now been withdrawn). A new guide has been drafted for consultation but this has left us with no size criteria that we can directly refer to. We therefore need to clarify our expectations, working with housing providers to make sure our guidance is realistic and achievable.

Priority 4: Publish a guide to affordable housing specification that sets out our requirements for accessibility, sustainability and unit size. Make sure this is easily accessible on our web-site and kept up-to-date.

Affordability and Tenure

Our programme of affordable housing development normally includes a mix of rented and 'intermediate' housing. All new rented homes in the last few years have been for 'affordable rent', which is set at 80% of the market rent. Our Tenancy Strategy sets out how we would like to consider affordability and suggests limits on rent levels to make sure they are affordable to people on typical local incomes. In reality, rents set at 80% of market rent are not always affordable to local people, particularly in the case of bigger family homes and yet we have little real discretion to enable homes at more affordable rent levels. In addition, welfare reforms have limited the level of overall benefits available and this too has had the most impact for bigger families.

In the past, if someone qualified for full Housing Benefit, it would cover the full cost of the rent in all social housing. This is no longer the case. This means that we cannot be certain that an applicant on the Housing Register who comes top of a shortlist for a housing association property will be able to afford it. We are encountering situations

where some larger families cannot afford any home that is big enough for their family. Housing associations concerned about the impact of Welfare Reform, reduced rent levels and the impact of right-to-buy sales are less able to take on some of the risks they may have accepted in the past.

We therefore have to work with housing associations to make sure that we discuss what opportunities are available to maintain a supply of larger family homes, whilst still maintaining affordability. This entails working through the Gateway to Homechoice scheme to agree the principles of how affordability is assessed (so that we can be confident that someone being turned down for housing genuinely cannot afford the property on offer). We will continue to review the information about housing and the way it is let so that the Gateway to Homechoice web-site sets out clear information about the likely impact of Benefit caps and other related issues. We will make sure people are aware of the alternatives available, including making links to job opportunities.

We also have to consider what we can do if we are faced, for example, with a family that become homeless and no landlord will accept them as they cannot afford any of the homes available. Ultimately, the council may have to consider securing homes on terms that enable it to make nominations regardless of the person's ability to pay and negotiate terms under which an agreed shortfall can be made up. We will therefore be looking for housing providers to model this with us so that we can plan resources accordingly.

Priority 5: Agree with housing providers an approach to affordability that helps people to secure suitable housing that is sustainable for them to occupy.

In the past a significant proportion of our programme has been to provide 'intermediate' housing – normally homes that are available to purchase either on a shared equity or a shared ownership basis. The balance between shared ownership and rented housing is considered by our Strategic Housing Market Assessment and forms part of our planning policies. However, in practice, help for home ownership is provided by a variety of means. For example:

- Braintree Council funded and participated in a 'Local Authority Mortgage Scheme' with Lloyds Bank that underwrites the deposit so that people can borrow with a small deposit on better terms.
- Every major developer offers some form of 'Help to Buy' product supported by the Government and we expect them to provide 'Starter Homes' as set out in the Housing and Planning Bill.
- Every affordable housing agreement we undertake for 'planning gain' normally has some form of shared ownership as a proportion of the affordable housing.
- It is likely that the signalled switch of Government funding from rented homes to support for home ownership will increase the proportion of affordable housing that is for purchase.

The capital payment that the occupier makes on first purchase helps the viability of new affordable housing schemes and therefore we are likely to see shifts in tenure towards shared ownership products as housing providers look to manage the cost of their provision. We will also need to assess the likely impact of 'Starter Homes' on the balance of tenures available but expect it to further increase the proportion of the affordable housing that is intended to support home ownership. In light of these factors, we consider it unnecessary to concentrate on setting a target for delivery of shared ownership housing but will concentrate on trying to secure sufficient affordable rented homes.

Housing for Vulnerable and Older People

Our overall aim:

Help vulnerable and older people to live independently for longer

Bricks and Mortar

Unsuitable housing can be a significant issue for individuals and for housing and social care providers. Some people who move into care or stay unnecessarily in hospital do so in part because their existing home fails to meet their needs.

The Braintree District has a comparatively good supply of social sector bungalows. 18% of our social stock is bungalows, compared to the national average of 9% reported in the English Housing Survey 2013-14. We will continue to welcome opportunities for development of new bungalow stock (usually this arises on sites or parts of sites where overlooking or relationship to neighbouring properties is an issue) but will focus the provision on meeting the needs of people who have mobility problems and need a property with level access and no stairs.

We have consistently provided new affordable homes that are to 'lifetime home' standard, with easily adapted, accessible downstairs toilet facilities, level access and thresholds and wide doors to access rooms big enough to enable a wheelchair to turn.

Each year the council and Greenfields Community Housing spend over £1 million adapting existing stock to meet the needs of people with reduced mobility. We hold regular meetings with Occupational Therapists from Essex County Council, plus our officers who deal with Disabled Facilities Grants, the housing register and new housing association development to make sure we can respond quickly and make best use of our resources.

We therefore consider that with our stated priority (priority 4) to publish a guide to affordable housing specification, we are taking the measures available to us to secure adapted (and adaptable) housing. This strategy will therefore concentrate on what we do about our provision of more specialised housing aimed at enabling people to maintain their independence.

Sheltered and Supported Housing

In the social sector, there are 634 properties that are designated as some form of specialist housing for older people. All of these units have a standing arrangement for people to access help and assistance. It includes traditional sheltered housing comprising mainly one bed flats in blocks (although there are still some bedsits in the stock) with visiting support workers and also modern 'extra-care' housing with on-site care staff and a range of communal facilities including restaurants. A few of the units are bungalows that are clustered near the sheltered housing schemes, with access to the scheme's support services.

Regardless of the level of support available, all the schemes are intended to help people sustain their independence. Many people are able to live a more independent lifestyle because sheltered schemes:

- reduce isolation and provide stimulus for people;
- take away issues about security and maintenance of the property and garden; *and*
- provide regular staff availability to advise and assist residents.

Greenfields Community Housing has made a significant level of investment to improve its traditional sheltered housing stock, with schemes in Hatfield Peverel, Earls Colne, Coggeshall and 3 schemes in Halstead all being modernised with self-contained facilities to all flats. The programme also included the demolition of one scheme (Park Court in Sible Hedingham) to provide family homes. The programme will continue over several years as Greenfields look to improve and rationalise its sheltered housing. Improvement programmes are also being undertaken by other providers, such as Braintree and Bocking Abbeyfield Society, with major works being undertaken at one of its schemes in Braintree Town.

As these improvements are being made, so the funding stream that pays for the support services for people who qualify for means tested benefits is being reduced. Initially, this is likely to result in a charge to the tenants who currently do not contribute towards the cost of their support. In the longer term, the whole future of the support services offered and the way they are funded is likely to change radically. We have therefore discussed with Greenfields our intention to establish a project group to consider the future role of sheltered housing in the district and we will be seeking to involve all the housing associations with sheltered housing locally, plus representatives from relevant agencies. The group will consider:

- how available accommodation is promoted and advertised;
- how people access the accommodation;
- what services are provided now and in the future.

The Government has signalled its intention to reduce the level of Welfare Benefits available and current plans appear to pose serious issues for all supported housing schemes. We therefore have to work closely with providers to make sure local provision is viable.

Although there are clearly challenges ahead, we want to make sure we are making the most of opportunities that may be available if we co-ordinate services well.

Priority 6: Establish a project group to plan the future of sheltered housing provision in the Braintree District.

'Extra Care' housing

Of the 634 specialist social sector properties let as housing for older people, 2 schemes are designated as 'Extra Care' housing. These are Great Bradfords House in Braintree (owned by Abbeyfield Braintree) and Helen Court in Witham (owned by Hanover Housing).

'Extra Care' housing has 24 hour staffing and a range of facilities for residents (and some that are made available to people in the local community). Both of the local schemes include:

- wheelchair accessibility throughout and lifts to upper floors;
- self-contained flats, each with their own front door;
- level-access showers in all flats;
- restaurant facilities; *and*
- flexible communal areas, including social space and private meeting rooms.

One of the most significant differences between the extra care housing and conventional sheltered housing is that the care needs of applicants are assessed by a social worker. All tenancies are let to households with an assessed care need.

As work continues to reduce the reliance on residential care, Essex County Council will be pursuing expanding the number of extra care schemes. (Part of their work is likely to involve a change of name from 'extra care' to 'independent living').

This is a very complex area of work as there are a number of factors that have to be considered:

- Buildings have to be big enough to ensure that the on-site 24 hour staffing provision is viable.
- The cost of providing services to residents is split between different funding streams. There is no certainty over future funding arrangements for benefits to help tenants pay their rent, nor for funding to help pay their support and care costs.
- Until now, schemes have been provided by specialist housing organisations, in most cases driven by an ethos to meet the housing and support needs of older people. As schemes are procured, it is not clear what impact that will have on the market for 'extra care' or the existing providers.
- Fundamentally, if people are to be diverted away from care homes that tend to be accessed out of necessity and into housing that they choose to access when choices are still available to them, the approach to housing for older people will have to change.

The case for developing new extra care schemes includes financial benefits to Essex County Council (ECC) and improvements in the quality of life for people needing to access care services but still able to live independently. Our challenge is to work with ECC on two main issues:

1. Identifying the right locations and putting together plans for how the schemes will be provided locally *and*
2. Planning how people access the new schemes, including
 - how they are marketed and to whom;
 - how people access the schemes from different tenures;
 - who administers and manages the process of application and prioritisation of applicants;

Identifying Locations for 'Extra-Care' housing

One challenge for ECC and the District Council is that sites in public ownership are not necessarily of the right size or in the right location and therefore we have to consider whether mainstream development sites are suitable for this type of development. If so, we have to consider how they can form a part of the provision negotiated with landowners and developers.

The District Council's housing duties are largely focussed on general needs housing to meet our legal duties to homeless households. If we plan to provide extra care housing through S.106 agreements with developers, we are almost certain to lose affordable rented housing that we would have had otherwise. In addition, to make schemes cost-effective to build and run, they are likely to have some units for sale. We need to make sure that the schemes are viable for the developer and the scheme provider, while also securing sufficient housing to meet our other needs.

ECC estimate that around 200 additional 'extra-care' flats are needed in the district. The specific location is not identified and we think it would be sensible to plan the sites where the schemes can be built. If a mainstream development site is chosen (for example on one of the agreed growth locations in the District) we would like to be clear that is the case and negotiate accordingly. In particular, we would like to avoid duplication of effort and abortive discussions with developers and to be clear about how schemes will be delivered.

Planning how people choose the housing options available

Alternative housing options that are intended to be taken up while someone can still live independently (with support) will only succeed if:

- more people are aware of the option and choose to use them;
- there is a significant cultural shift in the approach of professionals working with them.

Our experience of the 'extra-care' schemes in the district has been that the providers have had to promote the schemes themselves and work actively with the District Council to manage the nominations process because many professionals involved in care provision are not making appropriate referrals. As the numbers of schemes increases, so the process will need to be improved and roles clearly identified. We have many years of experience in designing and operating systems by which people's needs are prioritised and homes are let and would be willing to work closely with other agencies to establish a system that works well locally but we would need resources to do so. We would want our support for new extra-care schemes to be conditional on there being a clear process for how people access the accommodation.

Examples of the processes that need to be clearly defined include the following:

- how people are made aware of the alternatives available;
- how people access an assessment of their care needs;
- how homeowners' finances are dealt with;
- who helps people to move;
- who manages and maintains a register of people needing extra-care housing; *and*
- how providers can make sure that their schemes provide for a manageable balance of care needs;

Priority 8: Work with Essex County Council to plan how new specialist housing for older people is to be let

How people access specialist supported housing

When people apply to join our Housing Register, they tell us about their needs and those of their family members. To help us identify and report on the needs of people with broadly similar issues, we ask people to identify their main issues. We therefore can filter data, for example to say how many households are living in overcrowded conditions or how many applicants are living at home with their relatives.

If a person or someone in their household has a learning disability, they can indicate this to us but the action we should take and the priority given to their application may differ if they need specialist supported housing or if they are seeking mainstream housing and will access support separately. Our decision about how to treat the application will rely on information from the Social Care Team. For example, if an individual is living with their parents and wants to move to an independent property with professional support, we need to make sure that:

- the applicant has had an appropriate assessment by a social worker; *and*
- the support services are planned and ready to start once a tenancy is available; *and*
- we are giving the application an appropriate priority to make sure the person moves in a time that is appropriate; *and*
- we are liaising with the family to make sure they understand the process and likely timescale of the move.

Our Priorities for Action: Housing for Vulnerable and Older People

If the person needs more specialised accommodation, we are unlikely to be directly involved but need to know so that we treat their application accordingly (and make sure the family and professionals working with them are aware of this).

This type of approach may also be needed to help people with other physical and mental health conditions. We would be happy to pilot an approach locally if it is considered to be a helpful way to proceed.

Priority 9: Set up a project to establish a clear process for housing people with disabilities who need support or specialist housing to live independently

Our work with housing in the private sector

Our overall aim:

Establish how we can help people access private rented housing and find ways to improve housing conditions

Working with private sector landlords

People who seek our help with their housing because they are homeless or at risk of homelessness usually have low incomes and need to claim some form of housing benefit to meet their housing costs. Local Housing Allowance, the name given to housing benefit for private tenancies, is set at the 30th percentile rent for the 'market area'. (For those people now claiming Universal Credit, the calculation of their entitlement is based on the rents in the lower third of the housing market). In the 2015 Budget, the chancellor announced a 4-year freeze on LHA rates, so help towards the cost of rents is likely to fall behind market rents.

Inevitably, this means that the private landlords we are likely to work with are those with the more modest and older properties in the local housing market. Ironically, we are also likely to help people into housing that was once owned by the Council but was sold under Right-to-Buy.

We currently operate a mixture of schemes that can help meet the cost of advance payments and bonds to help people access the sector. Generally, the logic for maintaining a budget to do this is that we can alleviate or prevent someone's homelessness and if we are likely to have a duty to house someone if they become homeless, we can avoid the cost of providing temporary accommodation. We can also make sure that the number of people in temporary accommodation is manageable. The Homelessness Strategy is therefore where our work with private landlords and the resources available is set out.

Fuelled by tax incentives, the buy-to-let market increased significantly over the last 20 years. In July 2015, the Chancellor announced a number of changes that will reduce the financial advantages of buying properties to let, including increased stamp duty on purchases and reduced tax relief on mortgage payments. It is too soon to see what difference these measures will make but it would be reasonable to expect the market for new buy-to-let properties to slow to some extent and for landlords to consider raising rents to compensate for reduced tax advantages.

Most of the people that seek our help with their housing are unable to secure a mortgage. Those that are in work earn too little, have variable income and/or temporary or insecure employment. We generally have to help them either secure social or private rented housing. As supply of affordable housing is constrained, we may have to divert more resources to helping people with advance payments to secure private rented housing. One of the main differences about how people access social housing is that advanced payments in the social sector are usually restricted in line with the applicant's ability to pay.

The Council's ability to fund any such scheme is open to question as public sector grants are expected to continue to be reduced. However, it may be possible for the Council to consider a loan fund to help people with deposits tying in repayments with the collection of Council tax or other payments.

Private sector leasing scheme

The private sector leasing scheme with Colne Housing currently relies on additional funding each year to remain viable. Reductions in the level of Housing Benefit and the increasing gap between the expectations of property owners and benefit levels mean that the scheme would not be able to operate without some additional form of subsidy.

There is some flexibility in the Housing Benefit regulations to enable higher rents for properties on leasing schemes but they rely on very high rents which are a disincentive for people in work and make the rents very expensive compared to similar properties in the market. However, we may have to consider what rent levels we can support in order to keep the scheme in operation and deal with issues that arise from people's benefit being 'capped'.

Even if we find a way to continue with the scheme, the funding available for the subsidy to the scheme will run out at the end of 2017 and unless we find a way to continue to fund it, around 20 properties will be returned to their owners. The scheme also represents a useful tool for bringing empty homes into use for rent.

Priority 11: Identify how to fund the Private Sector Leasing Scheme once identified funding is used up.

Empty Homes

Owners of empty homes have the right to choose to leave them empty. As indicated in the introduction to this strategy, in most cases empty homes are brought back into use as part of a normal cycle of market activity. In addition, if people choose to own second homes, we do not want to impact on their choice to own a property locally. Our main concern is with property that causes issues for neighbours, either

- directly, for example through disrepair; or
- generally through the visual impact on a neighbourhood.

We have tended to try to work with the owner to bring the property back into use for rent (for example with the leasing scheme) but this is not always the best use of our resources. Most of the acute housing need that we have to address arises in our towns and large villages. If an empty property is in a smaller village, we could invest heavily only to find that no-one with a housing need wants to live there.

In addition, our experience has been that most properties empty for more than 12 months require significant investment to be brought to a condition where they can be rented out for 3 or 5 years. In many cases, more than £20,000 is required to secure the most common improvements needed. These are:

- decent quality heating systems;
- windows that are in reasonable condition; and
- kitchens that are likely to be serviceable for the lease period.

This expenditure is more than the average investment we would use to secure a brand new property through our development programme. Given that we secure long term nomination rights when we enable the purchase of additional affordable housing, investing in empty homes does not appear to offer particularly good value for money.

We do have some powers that can address elements of the issue. These include:

- Compulsory purchase;

- Enforced sale;
- Empty Dwelling Management Orders;
- Enforcement powers dealing with:
 - dangerous buildings;
 - securing and fencing off;
 - vermin;
 - drainage; *and*
 - general amenity;
- Council Tax charging.

The actions we currently take are as follows:

- Empty homes are charged the full rate of Council Tax from the date they are empty.
- From April 2016, property empty for 2 years or more may be charged 150% of the normal rate of Council Tax.
- We employ a part-time empty homes officer who makes contact with every owner of a property that has been empty for 12 months or more without an obvious reason.
- We follow up where there are reports from the public that an empty home is unsightly or is causing a problem for neighbours.
- We work with Colne Housing to inspect and report whether a property can be brought back into use through our leasing scheme.
- If we think that the owner of the empty home is vulnerable or unable to resolve the situation without help, we target advice and assistance to them.

We have used some of the powers available to us. In particular, the enforced sale procedure has been used where an owner is in debt to the Council and we have also undertaken works to secure property (to protect it from vandalism).

There are a number of reasons why we have not used Empty Dwelling Management Orders but the main ones are as follows:

- They are very time-consuming and bureaucratic to set up.
- They can only be used for properties empty for more than 2 years (and only then if there are significant issues of anti-social behaviour associated with the property).
- Since the Local Authority becomes the landlord of the property, renting it out to tenants, the orders effectively put the Local Authority in a legal relationship for several years with a property owner who does not want to co-operate voluntarily.

Empty homes are taken into account in the Government's calculation of the amount of New Home Bonus that councils receive, reducing our potential income. This provides a financial incentive for us to try to keep the number of empty homes to a minimum but in any event, the increase to 150% Council Tax rate does mitigate the impact.

The main reasons why we have to continue our work on empty homes are therefore:

- to resolve neighbourhood problems;
- to bring properties in the right locations into use for rent (provided our investment is value for money); *and*
- to make sure that empty homes do not undermine discussions on housing growth.

Help is available for older and vulnerable people who are living in housing that does not meet their needs or is in poor condition. The Council gives grants to help home-owners deal with disrepair that would seriously affect their lives. Major grants are available to provide or repair heating and hot water systems and minor grants can help with disrepair issues.

The Council has a legal duty to provide Disabled Facilities Grants (DFGs) required to help people continue to live independently. Grants are agreed with Occupational Therapists from Essex County Council.

Across Essex, there is a network of Home Improvement Agencies that can:

- oversee repair and maintenance works for owner occupiers;
- provide handy-person services that help people live safely;
- help people returning home from hospital; *and*
- provide advice on energy efficiency, benefits and how to access other services.

In addition, a number of voluntary agencies also provide advice and assistance to older and disabled people.

We believe that there are opportunities to combine and/or co-ordinate these services so that they provide a better, more complete service for local people. Our experience has been that some services (such as the Home Improvement Agency) have suffered as their areas of operation have been extended. In addition, some organisations (particularly local housing associations) would appear to have significant potential to extend the assistance they already provide to their own tenants to a wider community. It makes sense if these types of services are co-ordinated with the area of operation of social services and the health service. For Braintree, this means working jointly with Maldon and Chelmsford Councils. We already co-ordinate some of our services with neighbouring authorities and have strong links with them. This priority is to explore how we can co-ordinate that work more effectively:

Priority 13: Explore joint working with neighbouring councils to provide property maintenance and adaptation services for older and vulnerable owner occupiers and private tenants.

Glossary and explanation of terms used in this strategy

Types of Housing

Affordable Housing

The definition of affordable housing is set out in Planning Policy Statement 3 (PPS3). We expect it to be revised when the Housing and Planning Bill is enacted.

The current definition states: “Social rented, affordable rented and intermediate housing, provided to eligible households whose needs are not met by the market. Eligibility is determined with regard to local incomes and local house prices. Affordable housing should include provisions to remain at an affordable price for future eligible households or for the subsidy to be recycled for alternative affordable housing provision”.

In practice, eligibility relates to the rules set out in the Allocations Policy of the local authority if the homes are rented. Eligibility for intermediate housing such as shared ownership, is mainly overseen by the Homes and Communities Agency (HCA) according to government policies.

The current PPS3 definition defines affordable housing as having to be available to future eligible households or the subsidy recycled to provide affordable housing. This is likely to change as the Government has signalled its intention to move away from arrangements that secure affordable housing ‘in perpetuity’.

Social Rented Housing

Until 2010, virtually all rented social housing owned by councils and housing associations was let at social rents. Guideline target rents are set through a national rent regime. The formula for calculating rent levels, takes into account incomes and house prices in the area where the housing is located.

Affordable Rented Housing

Affordable rented housing is also let by councils and housing associations. Affordable rents are subject to rent controls that require a rent of no more than 80% of the local market rent. In practice, affordable rents locally are set at 80% of the market rent (including service charges) for the property and are considerably higher than social rents. The mechanism of setting the rent at a percentage of market rents does not take incomes into account.

Housing associations that have agreed a development programme with the Homes and Communities Agency (HCA) are expected to convert some of their existing social rented stock to affordable rent when it becomes vacant and is re-let.

Intermediate Housing

‘Intermediate housing’ is a catch-all term that includes housing for rent and for sale, where the cost is above social rent but below market levels. It includes shared ownership and shared equity homes. Less commonly, some homes have been let at an intermediate rent, although most were before the ‘affordable rent’ regime came into being.

Shared Ownership Housing

The occupier of a dwelling buys a proportion of the property and pays rent on the remainder, most commonly to a housing association. Recently, it has been common for a 40% share to be offered to the first occupier, although housing associations can sometimes be flexible, depending on the particular circumstances. The occupier pays rent to the association for the unsold equity. The rents are set so that the combined cost of mortgage payments and rents is less than the cost of outright purchase. If the occupier wants to sell, the property is re-valued and their share of the new value is advertised.

Equity Loan Schemes

Equity loan schemes are usually centred on loan conditions that fund part of the cost of the purchase (typically 20 or 30%) and have a period where there are no repayments required. Under the 'Help to Buy' scheme, people can apply for equity loans of up to 20% of the value of the property and have 5 years before repayments are required. Unlike shared ownership schemes (where the occupier is a leaseholder), occupiers become freeholders. Most 'Help to Buy' equity loans are promoted by private developers.

Help to Buy

The range of schemes for helping people to purchase a home is collectively marketed as 'Help to Buy'. Locally, the Help-to-buy agent is Bedfordshire Pilgrims Housing Association (BPHA). People who are interested in the range of Help to Buy products (including shared ownership, equity loans and other 'intermediate' products) can register with BPHA. Organisations including housing associations and developers can advertise developments and re-sales on the Help-to-Buy website.

Starter Homes

The Housing and Planning Bill set out the Government's intention to revise the definition of 'affordable housing' to include 'Starter Homes'. Starter Homes (up to £250,000 outside London) are sold to first-time buyers at 80% of the market price. The Bill indicated that provided the buyer continues to occupy the property for 5 years, they can own it outright without repaying any of the discount. Starter Homes are expected to be offered by developers without the involvement of housing associations.

Providing new homes

Section 106 agreements

Planning obligations under Section 106 of the Town and Country Planning Act 1990 (as amended), commonly known as s106 agreements, enable local authorities to place conditions on planning approvals. The conditions are normally negotiated by the landowner or developer with the District and County Council. Typical s106 conditions are provision of (or financial contribution towards):

- affordable housing;
- open space and play areas;
- works on nearby road, footpath or cycleway infrastructure;
- education facilities.
- Very large schemes can also include a range of community facilities.

Planning Gain

The term 'planning gain' is sometimes used in relation to the outcome of negotiations of s106 agreements – i.e. the community 'gain' from the planning process.

Registered Providers

Registered providers (often known as social landlords) are the bodies that own and manage social housing. They tend to be non-commercial organisations such as local authorities or housing associations. Housing associations are independent, not-for-profit organisations that can use any profit they make to maintain existing homes and help finance new ones.

It is now possible for commercial organisations to build and manage social housing, although this is not yet common practice.

Homes and Communities Agency (HCA)

The HCA is the Government agency that oversees Government investment in homes and communities and regulates housing associations. It maintains a register of social housing providers (hence the term 'registered providers').

Benefits and subsidies

Local Housing Allowance (LHA)

LHA is housing benefit that helps pay the rent for people who rent from a private landlord. Locally, it is administered by Braintree District Council. The benefit is means tested, so that people in low paid work, as well as people who are not working may be able to claim some help. The amount of LHA a household can receive depends on the maximum rent allowed for properties in the area and the number of rooms allowed for size of the household.

In the 2015 Budget, the Chancellor announced that maximum LHA rates would be fixed for the next 4 years. This means that benefit rates are likely to fall behind private rents.

Housing Benefit

Housing Benefit is administered by district councils. It helps pay the rental cost for tenants of social housing. The benefit is means tested, so that people in low paid work may be able to claim some help. For many years, a tenant entitled to full Housing Benefit would have all of their rent paid. Since 2013, working age tenants with spare bedrooms have their Housing Benefit reduced by 14% if they have one spare room and by 25% for two or more.

Universal Credit

Universal credit is a new benefit for people of working age, designed to top up income to a minimum level. Universal credit will eventually replace benefits for people who are out of work and tax credits for people in work. Housing costs will be paid as part of the Universal Credit award, and Housing Benefit will be phased out. The changeover has been much more gradual than originally planned.

Discretionary Housing Payments (DHP)

A DHP is an extra payment to help people who claim Housing Benefit and are struggling to pay the rent. The council may award a DHP to a household affected by benefit reductions because of under-occupancy or those affected by the benefit cap. It can also be claimed to pay a tenancy deposit. DHPs are only paid for a limited period. Households may have to reapply at the end of the period. The council may expect households to make long-term changes in their budgeting or housing situation.

The Council receives an award from Government with which to fund DHPs. Some councils top up the amount of DHP available (Braintree DC currently does not). For 2016/17, Braintree's budget for DHPs increased from £165,654 to £207,638. This increase is intended to help manage the reductions in benefit entitlements announced in the July 2015 budget and in particular, the lowering of the benefit cap.

The Benefit Cap

The Benefit Cap limits the total amount of benefit available to most working age households. During the financial year 2016/17, the cap will be reduced for families living outside London from £500 to £385 per week (from £26,000 per year to £20,000). For single people, it will reduce from £350 per week to £258.

For example, the non-housing benefits available for a couple who are both seeking work and have 3 children would currently be just over £350 per week. If they claimed Housing Benefit or LHA, they would only receive help with their rent up to the level of the benefit cap. When the cap is £385 per week, they will receive less than £35 per week towards their rent. A typical social rent for a 3 bed house in Braintree Town would be £100 per week, while an affordable rent could be as much as £170. Private rents are at least £185.00.

Right to Buy and Voluntary Right to Buy

In the Braintree District, Greenfields tenants who were Council tenants at the time of the stock transfer have retained their Right to Buy. Right to Buy is now planned to be extended to housing association tenants. This forms part of a voluntary agreement between Associations and the Government. At the time of writing, it is not known if there will be exemptions to the policy (such as rural housing schemes) but it is reasonable to assume that there will be an increase in the number of rented homes that are purchased by the occupier.

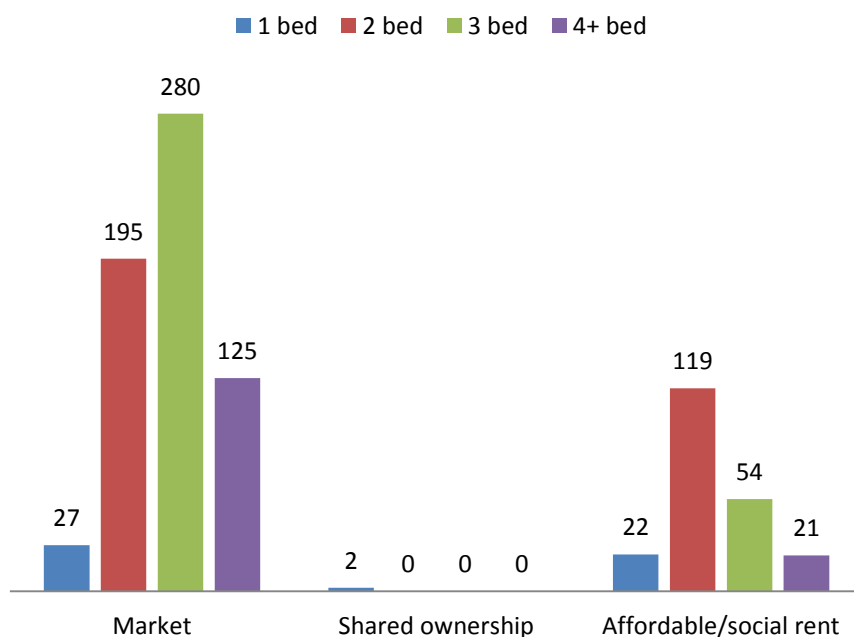
Background information

Annual requirement for all new housing in the Braintree District

Our Strategic Housing Market Assessment (SHMA) is an independent assessment of the need for additional housing in the district. The graph (right) shows the results of the 2015 update to the SHMA.

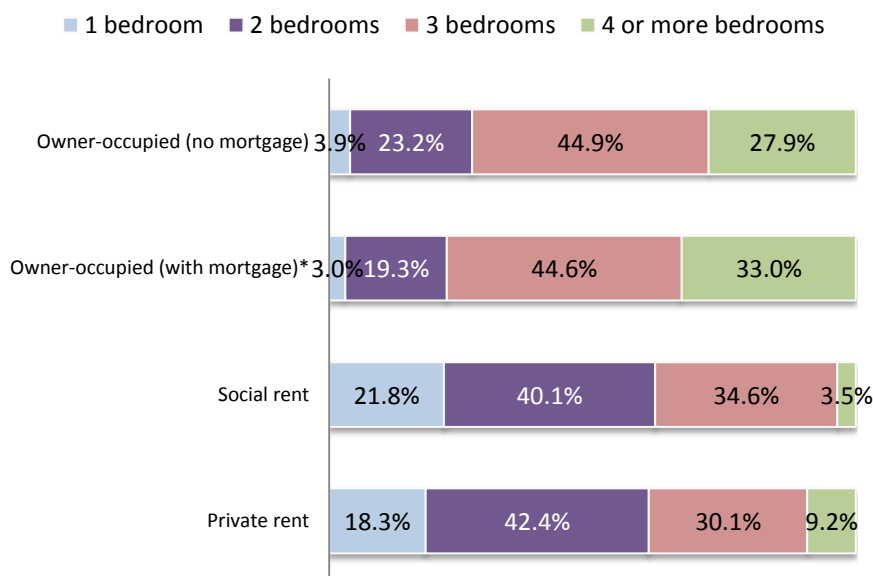
The recommended annual requirement for new affordable housing was found to be 216 units per year, with the split between house sizes as shown.

The assessment found that only two of the households we would normally prioritise for housing are likely to be able to afford shared ownership



Source: Braintree, Chelmsford, Colchester & Tendring SHMA Update 2015

Dwelling size within each tenure in the Braintree District, 2011



Existing rented housing in the district is, on average, smaller than owner-occupied properties. This is particularly true in the social sector as properties are normally let without any spare bedrooms.

Most of the owner occupiers with no mortgage are older – many are couples or single people – but more than 70% have 3 or more bedrooms.

In the social sector, 2 bed properties are the most common type of unit and according to the SHMA should represent over half of our new development of social housing.

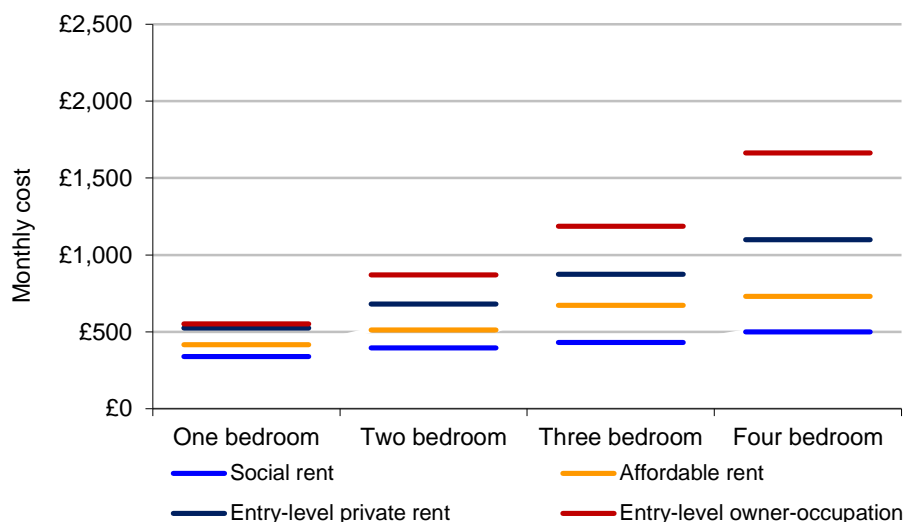
Source: Braintree, Chelmsford, Colchester & Tendring SHMA Update 2015

Monthly costs of existing housing in the Braintree District 2015

The housing 'ladder' in terms of costs for the main tenures of existing housing in the Braintree District is set out here.

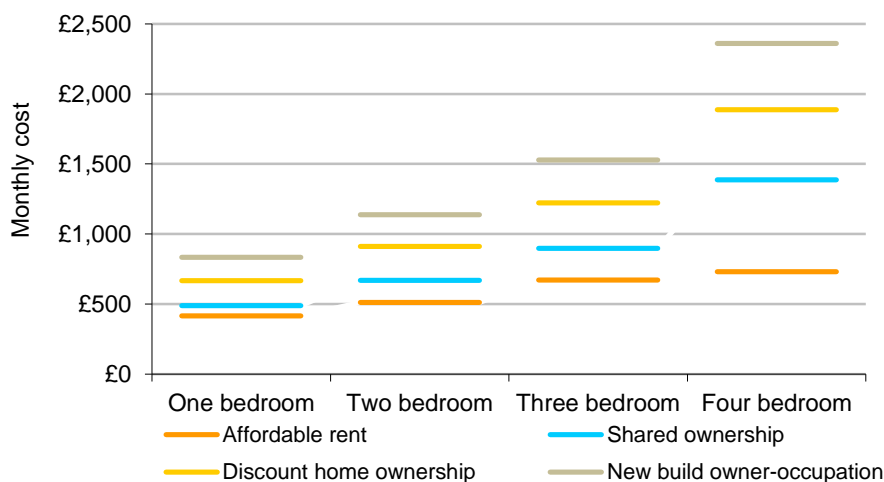
Monthly costs for owner-occupation are based on a 25 year repayment mortgage with an interest rate of 4.49%

The gap between the 'rungs' of the ladder are much wider for larger homes. The smaller the property size, the easier it is for a household to ascend the ladder.



Source: Braintree, Chelmsford, Colchester & Tendring SHMA Update 2015

Monthly cost of new housing in the Braintree District



The main tenures likely to be available on new developments are shown here.

All the rented housing is likely to be affordable rent (with little or no social rent) and the gaps between the rungs of the ladder are much more pronounced

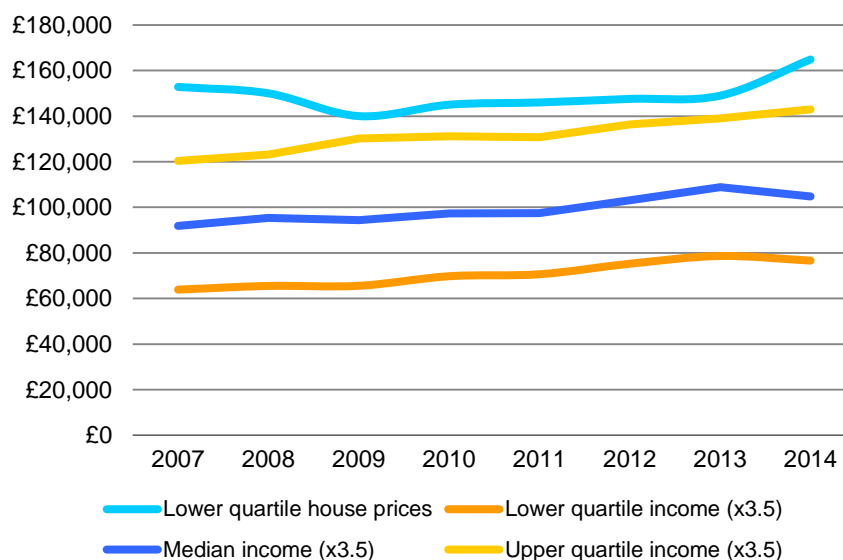
Source: Braintree, Chelmsford, Colchester & Tendring SHMA Update 2015

Earnings compared with lower quartile house prices in the Braintree District

A comparison of house prices with 3.5 times local income shows the affordability of housing for people seeking a mortgage.

The gaps between the earnings and house prices on the graph effectively shows the size of deposit that would be required.

The chart shows that even someone in the top 25% of earners would need a substantial deposit to access a property in the bottom 25% by price.

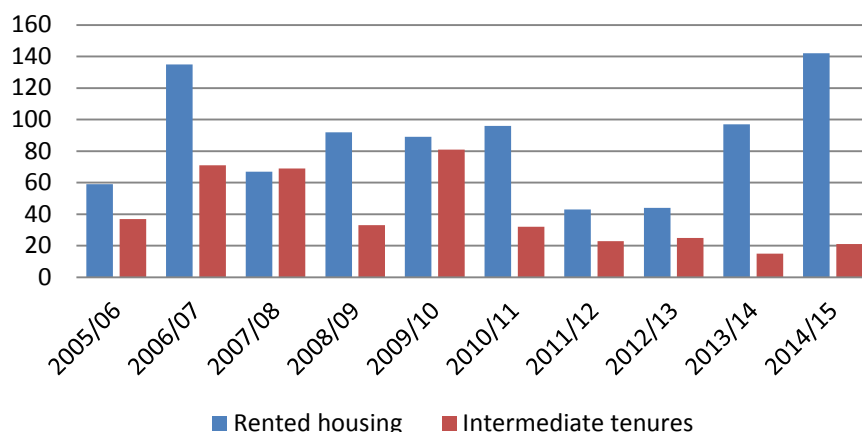


Source: Braintree, Chelmsford, Colchester & Tendring SHMA Update 2015

Additional affordable housing provision, Braintree District 2005-2015

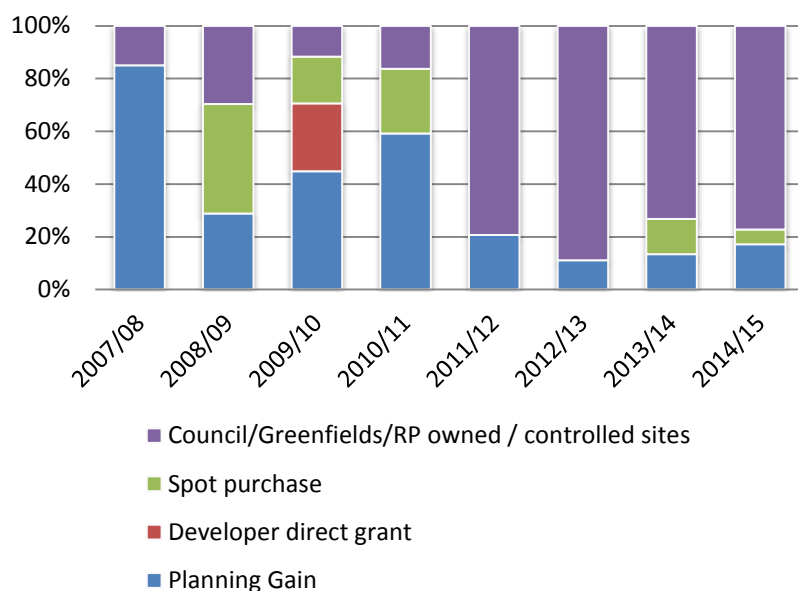
In the 10 years from 2005 to 2015, 1,271 additional housing association properties were provided. Most were new homes but a few properties were purchased on the open market during 2013/14 and the following year.

On average, there have been 86 rented homes and 40 intermediate homes provided per year. Most of the intermediate homes were shared ownership.



Source: Braintree District Council, Housing Research & Development

How affordable housing has been provided in the District



Source: Braintree District Council, Housing Research & Development

We would expect the main mechanism for providing new social housing to be through 'planning gain'. This is where the Council places a condition on the planning approval for a development, requiring that a % of the homes are affordable.

Since the downturn in the market in 2007/08, there have been few large-scale mainstream developments in the district and we have had to secure housing through other sources. In particular, Greenfields has been developing sites in its ownership and other Registered Providers (RPs) have purchased sites for development, often with investment from the Council. We have also transferred land to associations at reduced cost to facilitate affordable housing schemes.

Funding for new affordable housing

Braintree District Council (BDC) has consistently invested capital into affordable housing schemes. Because we do not own our housing stock, the funding is granted to housing associations to facilitate new homes, in return for nomination rights.

The Council has allocated capital from a variety of sources including:

- Commuted payments agreed with developers for schemes where it has not been practical to provide affordable housing on-site.
- New Homes Bonus – funding paid by the Government according to the number of additional homes in a district.
- Recycled capital from sales of land or property.

The funding makes up the shortfall between what a housing association can justify investing (depending mainly on future on rental income) and what it costs to buy or build a new home.

Year	Scheme	BDC Funding	Number of homes
2011/12	Riverside, Braintree	£ 450,000	18
2013/14	Braintree Road, Great Bardfield	£ 25,000	12
	64, Braintree Road, Witham	£ 225,000	9
	Tabor Avenue, Braintree	£ 105,674	6
2014/15	Open market purchases, Colne	£ 50,000	2
	19-21 Bocking End, Braintree	£ 30,000	6
	Riverside, Braintree	£ 825,000	55
	Open market purchases, Colne	£ 129,000	3

Source: Braintree District Council, Housing Research & Development 35

This is a sample page from the Housing StatNav website. The site includes housing needs information for every parish in the district. The following pages are relevant to the whole district.



www.braintree.gov.uk/housingstatnav

Key Housing Needs Statistics

Braintree District

Snapshot: July 2016

To be read in conjunction with the
'Guide to Key Housing Needs Statistics – Towns'

For all sources, more detailed housing needs data and a full guide to how to read this data, please visit the
Housing StatNav website.



Housing StatNav is a partnership project
between Greenfields Community Housing
and Braintree District Council



The Braintree District Boundary



Key Housing Needs Statistics

Snapshot: July 2016

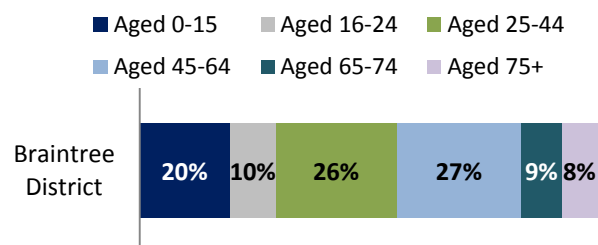
Braintree District

Key Statistics:

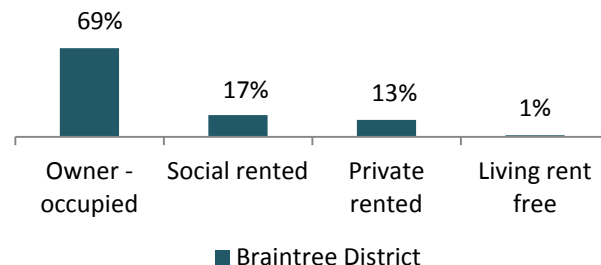
Population (Census 2011) – **147,084**

Households (Census 2011) – **61,043**

Population Profile (Census 2011)

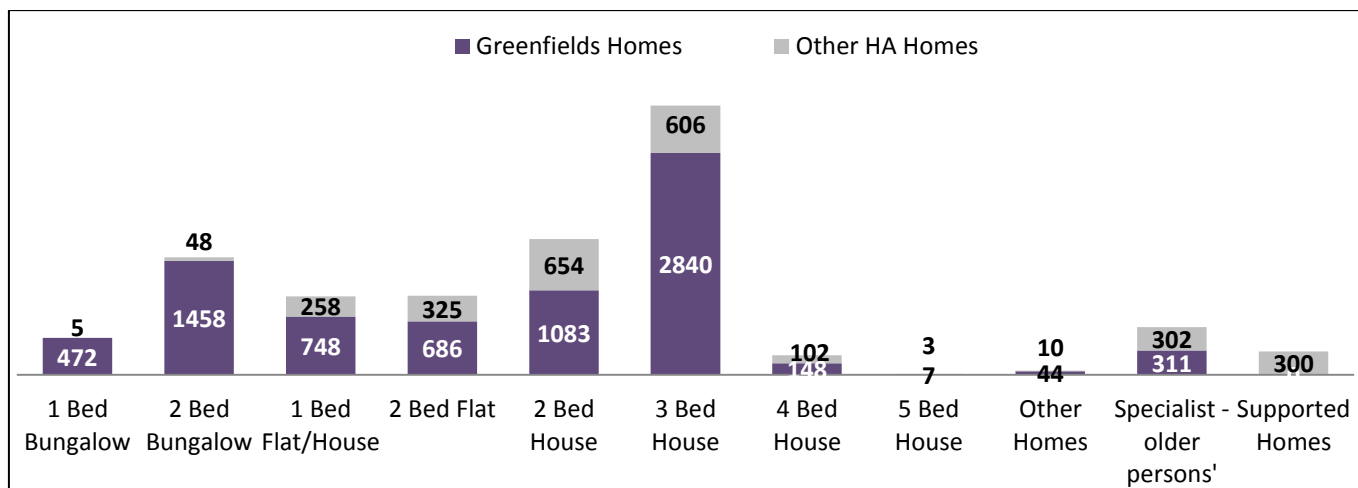


Tenure of housing (Census 2011)



Housing Association homes to rent in Braintree District

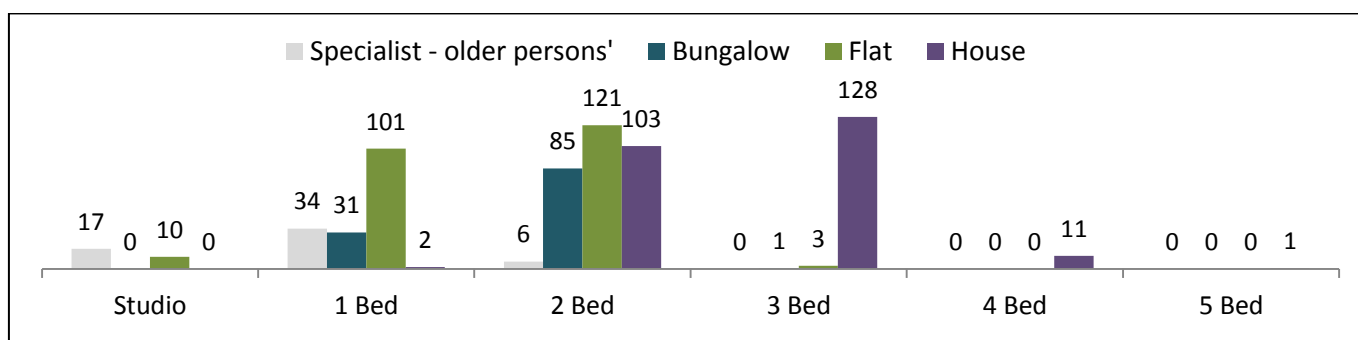
There are 10,490 existing housing association homes to rent in Braintree District as at July 2016:



Bungalows		Flats			Houses				Specialist – older persons	Supported	Other	TOTAL
1 bed	2 bed	1 bed	2 bed	Bed-sit	2 bed	3 bed	4 bed	5 bed	Studio, 1 & 2 beds	All	3 bed flats etc	
477	1506	1006	1011	80	1737	3446	250	10	613	300	54	10490

Lettings history in Braintree District

Average number of lets per year of rented housing association homes (Average from April 2009 to March 2016):



Applicants waiting for a housing association home in the Braintree District

There were **2350** households registered on Braintree District Council's system (Gateway to Homechoice) waiting for housing association homes (households with a current address in the town as at July 2016):

Priority A	Priority B	Priority C	Other bands D to F
83 Applicants	236 Applicants	626 Applicants	1405 Applicants

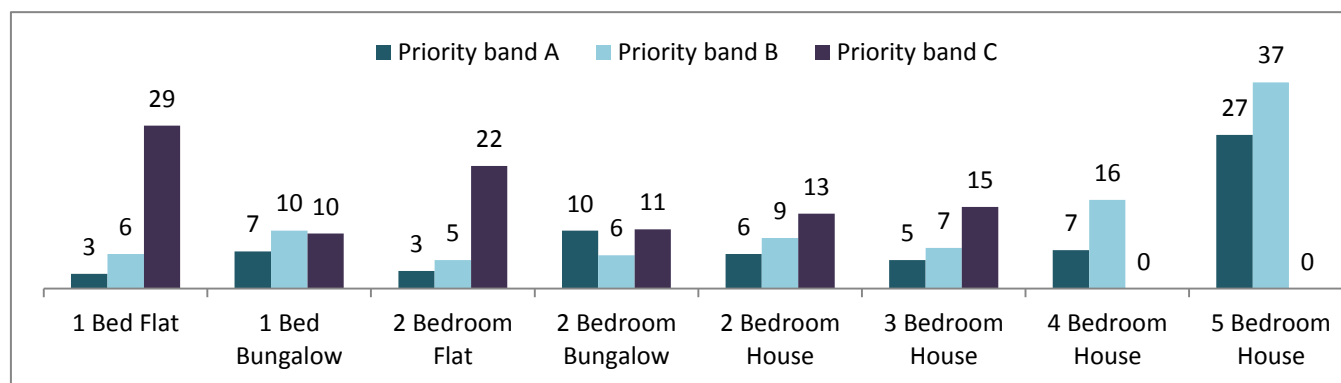
For more information about the priority ratings (A to F) for housing applications, please see the guide to the data.

The property size (number of bedrooms) needed by the highest-need households (**Priority rating A to C only**):

Age group	1 bed	2 bed	3 bed	4 bed	5 bed +	TOTAL
Age 18-39	193	222	67	21	4	507
Age 40-59	165	57	23	10	0	255
Age 60+	144	35	4	0	0	183
TOTAL	502	314	94	31	4	945

Average waiting times in months for a home in Braintree District

Average waiting times in months taken from all lets (November 2013 to March 2016) spit by the household application priority band:



Proportion of all current applicants housed in one year

Comparing the average number of people housed in Braintree District each year with the total number of households who were registered waiting in the town (at July 2016), to show a proportion for each property type.

