Strategic local authority of the year: finalist
Elmbridge Borough Council: Housing services management team

Please briefly describe the strategic role your authority has played over the last 12 months

Elmbridge consistently records the highest house prices nationally outside of London and its desirability as a place to live is also reflected in our strong and vibrant private rented sector. The potential for housing growth is heavily constrained by green belt. The flip side of this is a huge affordability problem and significant levels of housing need amongst our residents.

We are one of very few housing authorities in the Country to have a fully ‘unified’ Housing Service which includes Housing Benefit, Private Sector services, Housing Options and Strategy & Enabling which we believe really helps us to be more successful in our strategic role.

Our role over the last 12 months has been extensive and some examples include:

- Maintaining a clear understanding of our local housing market to maximise the supply of new affordable housing, make the best use of the existing social housing stock and the private rented and home ownership sector.

- Working with our ‘Affordable Housing Member Panel’ to champion delivery and influence the formulation of relevant policies and strategies including the Core Strategy.

- Maintaining quick and accurate housing benefit processing to a level where we believe we provide one the best benefit services in the Country and working pro-actively to prepare for Welfare Reform.

- Working to improve customer service in a number of ways whilst reducing our costs - for example by introducing an online benefits claim facility and a new telephone call handling system in response to customer dissatisfaction with speed of telephone answering. Customer satisfaction with our Benefit service is at an all time high.

How have you developed sustainable partnerships and what has been achieved as a result?

In carrying out our strategic housing role we have led and nurtured many different partnerships over the last 12 months, examples of which include:

- The Elmbridge Homeownership Assistance Scheme - A jointly funded
partnership with Catalyst Housing Group to help aspiring home owners who would otherwise not be able to buy locally.

- Elbridge Perfect Fit - A jointly funded partnership with our LSVT, Elbridge Housing Trust, to address considerable levels of under occupation.

- HB Changes Working Group - A partnership with our local advice agencies and officers from Benefits and Housing Options Teams to plan for and oversee the implementation of the 2011 and 2012 HB changes. This partnership will continue to oversee the future changes.

- EBC Empty Homes Officer Group - An new internal officer partnership bringing together planning, council tax and housing officers to develop a joined up approach to bringing empty homes back into use.

- Action Surrey - An energy efficiency partnership with a social enterprise company and neighbouring LA’s to help tackle one of the highest carbon footprints areas in the County. This provides independent energy advice to our residents via a website portal with access to a range of trusted installers.

- Housing & Employment Local Partnership (HELP) – a partnership with a cluster of LA’s and Babcock PLC, to provide high quality targeted employment advice to residents in housing need and social housing tenants to improve employment levels and reduce benefit dependency. This has been a huge success.

Please evidence how your approach has resulted in improved outcomes for the local area in which you work

Our approach over the last 12 months has achieved many positive outcomes. A reduction of 93 empty homes - generating additional income for Elbridge of over £700,000 over a six year period through the New Homes Bonus. We have convinced members to use some of this additional income for a dedicated Empty Homes Officer and an Empty Property Grant & Loan programme. We are confident we can continue to bring more empty homes back into use.

Tackling under occupation - our new scheme will free up at least 20 much needed family homes for rent in the first year alone.

Proactively managing HB reductions - we have been successful in minimising the impact of homelessness through our proactive approach in managing HB reductions working with affected claimants and landlords, assisting with Discretionary Housing Payments in some cases, with advice and assistance in many others and using our powers to pay HB direct.

Delivering more affordable homes – we have achieved record levels of affordable housing completions in a difficult market completing 91 homes.
since January 2011, one of the best records of all 11 councils in the County. We have responded to the new affordable housing funding regime to ensure it can meet our local needs - a very challenging prospect given we have one of the highest rent levels outside of London. The Head of Housing has provided leadership on this issue in her role as Chair of the Surrey Chief Housing Officers Group (SHOG). Elmbridge hosted a very successful Surrey wide event with the HCA with attendance of key officers from RP’s, local authorities, Government and HCA. This promoted Surrey housing market issues and provided guidance to RP’s in their bids and business planning. We have worked closely with our main RP, Paragon Housing Group, on their programme bid who has contracted with the HCA to deliver over 600 affordable homes of which a significant number will be in Elmbridge representing one the best programmes in the County and ensuring an ongoing supply of new affordable homes.

We are ahead of most Councils in adopting our Core Strategy and have gone a lot further than most in our affordable requirements. The Strategy includes an ambitious target to deliver 1150 new homes over next 15 years despite the uncertainties around the planning system and loss of regional targets. We have also delivered robust supplementary guidance on our affordable housing requirements.

The Action Surrey Partnership has assisted almost 100 Elmbridge resident in the first nine months with over half having had additional insulation measures installed in their homes.

The HELP partnership has been successful in helping many housing options clients and social housing tenants towards employment. In the first two years over 100 residents have been assisted with over 20 securing employment. Despite the ending of the trailblazer funding which kickstarted this scheme, it has now been fully funded for a further 12 months from LA’s and RP’s in part due to the active involvement of the Council’s Head of Housing and Housing Options Manager.

**Please tell us briefly why you should win this award**

We believe Elmbridge is a great example of a local authority that has a really good grasp of its strategic housing role and which has made great strides to develop its role and harness successful partnership opportunities both within and outside the organisation.

The Housing Service has a dedicated and dynamic Management Team made up of the Strategy & Enabling Manager, Housing Benefit Manager, Private Sector Housing Manager, Housing Options Manager and Head of Housing. Our unified service and Team approach makes a real difference to our strategic performance.

We are well supported by a Corporate Management Team of two Strategic Directors and Chief Executive (themselves currently shortlisted for LGC Management Team of the Year), a central Policy and Partnerships Team, an
active Middle Managers Group and Leadership Group. These corporate networks allow us to work strategically in understanding our local communities and local economy, raise awareness of housing and economic issues and deliver cross cutting solutions to meet local needs.

We have a Leader and Cabinet structure and a Cabinet Member with specific responsibility for leading on housing issues who acts as a champion within the Cabinet. What makes Elmbridge unique is that it also has an ‘Affordable Housing Member Panel’ made up of members from all political parties who act as Member champions in the delivery of affordable housing in Elmbridge.

The need for more affordable housing has continued to feature as one of the Council’s key strategic objectives and we would love to be recognised for our commitment and achievements with this award.