

PLANNING & HOUSING OVERVIEW & SCRUTINY PANEL

MONDAY, 18 SEPTEMBER 2017

PRESENT: Councillors Richard Kellaway (Chairman), Malcolm Alexander (Vice-Chairman), Michael Airey, Gerry Clark, David Hilton, Leo Walters and Malcolm Beer

Also in attendance: Councillor Ross McWilliams

Officers: Karen Shepherd, Hilary Hall and Deborah Wickham

APOLOGIES FOR ABSENCE

None received

DECLARATIONS OF INTEREST

None received

MINUTES

RESOLVED UNANIMOUSLY: That the minutes of the meeting held on 15 August 2017 be approved.

HOMELESSNESS STRATEGY

Members considered the report that was due to be submitted to Cabinet on 28 September 2017. Councillor McWilliams, Deputy Lead Member for Policy and Affordable Housing, introduced the report. He explained that the Homelessness Strategy was the first of a trilogy of important documents, alongside the Borough Local Plan (BLP) and a Supplementary Planning Document (SPD) on affordable housing. The Strategy aimed to prevent homelessness and help those who were homeless. The long-term vision was to build more homes so everyone who aspired to home ownership was able to do so. The borough was focussing on the provision of affordable housing in light of the lack of supply and high property prices in the borough. The strategy was a statutory requirement that had to be produced every five years.

Members noted that table 1 of the report set out the key objectives of the strategy and the proposed actions. In 2016-2017, 9353 approaches were made to the council for assistance with housing; 1518 households were prevented from becoming homeless.

Councillor Walters asked how the council planned to get round the issue of viability to achieve the 30% target for affordable housing. He felt that there was not much information in the BLP on this issue. Councillor McWilliams explained that once the BLP was completed, the SPD on affordable housing would be produced to advise developers on the council's strategy. The council would also advise developers and provide information on the different products available. On the Joint Venture (JV) sites this would be much easier as the council would work directly with the developers on delivery. In situations where a developer stated it would not be viable to deliver affordable housing on a specific site, the council would then work with the housing associations to find other sites to develop.

Councillor Walters commented that new builds did not incur any VAT whereas refurbishing a property did. This was illogical as 20% was usually the developer's profit level. The Chairman highlighted that the 30% target for affordable housing had been in place for some time yet was not remotely close to being met. Councillor McWilliams commented that the difference now was that the council was a partner in a number of JV sites; the 30% target was now more realistic.

Councillor Hilton commented that there were a number of significant sites in the south of the borough, the first of which had already come to the Borough-wide Development Management Panel. On the grounds of viability the hospital application had been approved with no affordable housing on a site with 220 homes. He felt this was 'robbing Peter to pay Paul' and was fundamentally wrong as both were important. He felt the government should recognise this and contribute so affordable homes could be included. A second site was a former gasholder site therefore the developer was likely to say affordable housing was not viable. The process was flawed. In the centre of Maidenhead CIL was 0% at the moment therefore viability was working against the council. However he shared Councillor McWilliams' optimism in terms of the council being a landowner and co-developer on the JV sites. Affordable housing on these sites would remain within the tenure grouping and would be revenue generating to pay for maintenance. The portfolio of up to 1000 homes would be welcomed given there were only 7000 affordable homes in the borough.

Councillor M. Airey commented that he attended a recent Adult Services and Health Overview and Scrutiny Panel at which the impact of benefits cuts had been discussed. The Housing Needs & Homelessness Professional Lead explained that the cut in subsidy was a big issue and had had an impact on the council's budget. If the council could procure more temporary accommodation this would help the situation. A new post had been created in the local authority in June 2017 to source new cheaper private sector accommodation. This involved visiting landlords and building relationships to secure lower rental costs, thereby reducing the need for temporary accommodation. The Chairman commented that the council was quite good in providing short term support; he had personal experience of a resident who had received excellent support from the Housing Options team.

Members noted that the John West night shelter had opened in February 2017 for overnight places. How long a user stayed would depend on the level of support required, but would usually not be longer than 6 months. To receive services, individuals had to have a local connection for a minimum of 6 months. The Housing Options team worked closely with a number of other departments, including Community Wardens who would provide feedback on individuals who may be rough sleepers. It was important for officers to build trust with individuals, who often refused help in the first instance. Referrals to other services such as Mental Health and the Drug and Alcohol teams were made in the interim if needed, with the ultimate aim of putting a roof over someone's head.

It was confirmed that the financial implications box in the report related to the cost of putting the strategy together, rather than the individual action streams.

Councillor M. Airey highlighted that, other than family breakdown, the second reason for homelessness in the borough was loss of private sector income. The Housing Needs & Homelessness Professional Lead explained that the Housing Options team were negotiators. When a customer informed the council that their landlord wished

them to vacate, the council would contact the landlord and educate them on their legal obligations. If the landlord was in mortgage arrears on the property, the council would also provide assistance.

Councillor Hilton commented that he felt some of the actions taken by central government had been counterproductive in terms of homelessness. Councillor McWilliams responded that there was obvious pressure on Housing Associations, but the best way to mitigate the issue was to build more homes. Opportunities needed to be created to allow those in social housing to move to affordable rented properties, then the private sector and onto affordable home ownership where possible. This would then free up social housing stock. The Housing Needs & Homelessness Professional Lead explained that the Localism Act allowed the council to discharge its homelessness duty into the private sector, with caveats including due diligence and assured shorthold tenancies for a minimum of 12 months. It was explained that a court attendance desk was proposed to enable officers to support people who were unaware of the services available from the Housing Options team. It was noted that, in line with the revised strategy, the council's allocations policy would also be reviewed.

Councillor Walters commented on the difficulty of defining 'need'. The Housing Needs & Homelessness Professional Lead commented that it was important to be ambitious but realistic, ensuring residents were aware of the services available but firstly trying to keep them in their home.

Councillor Alexander commented that his previous authority had set a target of 40% affordable housing and after three years none had been built. It then revised it to 'up to 40%' and within two years had achieved 25%. Councillor Alexander also highlighted the problem of Right to Acquire, which meant a tenant in an affordable home could, after a period of time, buy the property at a discount. The property could then be sold at the market rate.

Councillor McWilliams commented that 30% was a target and aspiration; the council would have to negotiate with developers to get as close to 30% as possible. The focus should be on what the council could do to assist, such as speeding up the planning process and looking at space options in conjunction with a developer. Councillor Hilton commented that the 30% target related to sites of 10 or more dwellings or more than 0.5 hectares. Because of Green Belt restrictions, such sites did not often come forward. Now that previously developed land and some Green Belt sites were coming forward, it was a different ball game. 30% was a common figure across many local authorities.

The Housing Needs & Homelessness Professional Lead explained that housing associations rarely had empty properties, only during maintenance after a tenant moved out. Work was ongoing in relation to privately owned empty properties; so far 14 landlords had been persuaded to rent out properties that had been empty, lowering the required subsidy for temporary accommodation. Councillor McWilliams commented that there was an ongoing national discussion about the issue of empty homes. A recent report had suggested 20,000 properties were empty in London alone. It was an expensive solution to rent privately, therefore was not sustainable in the long term.

Councillor Walters commented that terraced housing gave the same density as high-rise housing.

Councillor Beer stated that he supported the strategy and felt it should be promoted as much as possible. However, there was no reference to private rented accommodation. A large majority of people would not aspire to owning a house as they were not upwardly mobile. Rented accommodation was a pressing need. A headteacher from Windsor had reported interviewing 22 candidates for a teaching position, none of whom could afford to live in the borough. The issue affected other public services as well. As a former quantity surveyor he had worked on large developments and understood the issues. To develop an existing use site such as a gasworks incurred large costs. Almost every development could come up with a reason why it was not viable to include affordable housing. He felt that there may therefore be a case for setting an 'up to' target. He was concerned that so much affordable housing had been sold on under the Right to Buy. Only 40% of revenue from the sale price could be reinvested in housing.

It was confirmed that Exchange House was in Woodlands Park, Maidenhead.

Councillor McWilliams explained that as the council's representative on the Housing Solutions board, he had participated in lengthy discussions about what could be done to help tenants. It was clear that the issue was not supply of rented accommodation but a history of people, prior to the five year limit being implemented, with no intention of moving on. Central government had looked at different ways to change this situation, including the five year limit and the bedroom tax.

Councillor Hilton stated that he was aware of some social housing tenants who were able to afford mortgage payments and wanted to move to home ownership but did not have the deposit to do so. Councillor McWilliams commented that given the house prices in the borough, it was unlikely someone would be able to make the jump from social housing to home ownership. The more likely route would be into permanently rented accommodation or affordable rented accommodation for a longer time to build up a deposit. The Housing Needs & Homelessness Professional Lead confirmed that discussions were underway as to how this cohort of people could be helped. Councillor Alexander commented that he was aware of a number of elderly people who wanted to downsize but did not have the funds to pay moving costs and stamp duty. The Housing Needs & Homelessness Professional Lead explained that the council worked with housing associations to enable assisted transfers, but this did not apply to the private sector.

Councillor Walters commented that it was a misconception that building more houses reduced the average price.

Councillor Alexander suggested that if the 30% target was to be retained (and not altered to an 'up to' target) then a numerical figure per year should be set. The Chairman felt there may be a disconnect as planners would not have the same commitment to affordable housing. Councillor McWilliams assured Members that the Housing team worked closely with the Planning department. The Chairman also expressed concern about the new customer hubs. The Housing Needs & Homelessness Professional Lead assured Members that the move was positive in terms of service delivery for the Housing Options team. The library location provided a calm atmosphere and customers were therefore less likely to be volatile.

RESOLVED UNANIMOUSLY: That the Panel strongly recommended the report to Cabinet. The strategy was welcomed as it offered many opportunities and

identified a series of positive actions. The strategy should be promoted with the housing associations, in particular to provide permanently rented accommodation.

DATES OF FUTURE MEETINGS

Members noted the following future meeting dates (7pm start):

- 19 October 2017
- 7 December 2017
- 1 February 2018
- 18 April 2018

The Chairman requested future agenda items on CIL/S106 funding (including the CIL governance document) and an update on the speed of processing planning applications. Councillor M. Airey confirmed the second item was within his remit as Deputy Lead Member for Planning Performance.

The meeting, which began at 7.00 pm, finished at 8.10 pm

CHAIRMAN.....

DATE.....