

Affordable Housing Task and Finish Group Report back on conclusions and recommendations

Summary of issues raised at Communities Scrutiny meeting 28th May 2015

The Committee was advised that the Task and Finish Group had made a total of 20 recommendations, all of which were detailed in the report. Issues raised by members at a recent Council Briefing session at which the Task and Finish (T&F) Group's report had been discussed were listed in appendix II, along with the relevant recommendations in the report that would address these issues. Whilst, the recommendations from the Task and Finish Group's work would be used to inform the new draft housing strategy, and would form part of the delivery plan for that strategy, some actions had already been commenced with a view addressing identified problems e.g. pending Welsh Government legislation and guidance permitting partial reviews of Local Development Plans (LDP) a Supplementary Planning Guidance (SPG) had been submitted and approved by the Council's Planning Committee with respect to permitting the conversion of redundant rural buildings for market housing.

Responding to members' questions the Lead Member for Public Realm and officers confirmed that:

- the Council was obliged to undertake a comprehensive review of its LDP four years after its adoption. Denbighshire's review would be due in 2017;
- latest indications from the WG suggested that the legislation required to permit partial reviews should be in place sometime during the summer of 2015, and that the associated Guidance would be available at the same time. This would hopefully enable the Council to implement some of the T&F Group's recommendations;
- the process relating to applying and permitting planning applications in hamlets was extremely onerous, however this process may be able to be reviewed as part of the partial review - subject to the provisions of the new legislation;
- the new Housing Strategy, which would be presented to scrutiny in September and full Council in October 2015, would have 5 main themes. Affordable Housing would be theme two of the Strategy, but matters relating to affordable housing would also feature in the majority of the 5 themes;
- with respect to landbanking, time limits for developing a site following planning permission being granted could not be changed locally. The rules in relation to this were subject to WG legislation. It would be too late now to make representations with respect of amending the time limits as part of the consultation on the new Planning Bill. However, the Council would continue to lobby WG with respect to the matter;
- the new Interim Head of Finance and Assets would be exploring the options for realising the optimum value for the Council for re-investing the £500K that was estimated to be realised following the Council's exit from the Housing Revenue Account Subsidy (HRAS) system - options which would be considered would include the building of new council housing (possibly in partnerships with a third party); undertaking further improvement work on the Council's current housing stock (e.g. exterior or environmental work - work which was not covered under the Welsh Housing Quality Standard (WHQS) scheme, utilising the money saved for the purpose of drawing down external funding etc.);
- work had commenced on a review of the Council's land holdings to assess whether any holdings were located in areas of highest need for affordable housing. In future work would need to be undertaken in partnership with other public sector bodies to identify whether they had any land holdings that would be suitable for the development of affordable housing. Detailed and constructive discussion would be need with all parties if land was to be secured for affordable

housing as in the majority of cases land earmarked for this type of housing would not realise its full open market value;

- the Affordable Housing Action Plan, which had been developed with a view to delivering the T&F Group's recommendations and included target dates for the delivery of each recommendation, would form part of the Council's overall Housing Strategy in due course

Councillors emphasised :

- that future affordable housing provision should include a mix of two, three bedroom family dwellings which would provide opportunities for families to move up the housing ladder and enable first-time householders to enter on to the housing ladder, be they tenants, shared-ownership or owner-occupiers;
- the need for any future social housing that is built to include a caveat that they are exempt from any 'right to buy' scheme in order to reduce the risk of a shortage of such housing in the medium to long-term;
- the need to focus on the housing needs of residents and the value for money aspect for ratepayers - investing in good quality affordable homes for some of the County's most vulnerable residents would in the long-term realise financial benefits for the Council, as less of the ratepayers money would be used to supplement excessive private sector rents through Housing Benefit;
- the need to raise awareness of the affordable housing register and the process for registration without raising people's expectations. Officers advised that they were currently working with estate agents and other local authorities in North Wales to develop a more streamlined approach to this process, with a view to avoiding duplication and the need to complete lengthy registration forms until much later in the allocation process

Councillors who had been members of the T&F Group commented on how well both members and officers had worked together during this review, it had been a truly worthwhile and constructive process. They now hoped that the momentum could be kept and that the recommendations could be delivered as soon as possible for the benefit of residents. Officers agreed to send members a briefing note updating them on the progress to date, and members agreed that the draft Housing Strategy be presented to the Committee for examination in September 2015. It was:

Resolved:

(i) subject to the above observations, to receive the conclusions and recommendations put forward by the Affordable Housing Task and Finish Group; and

(ii) that the Council's draft Housing Strategy be submitted to the Committee for examination at its September 2015 meeting, prior to its submission to County Council for approval and adoption in October 2015