

Housing Strategy consultation event 5 June 2014

Fifty-seven people from more than thirty different statutory, private and voluntary organisations helped to identify strategic priorities for the new housing strategy at a partner consultation event on 5 June 2014.

The chair was John Wilde. John is the Service Manager for South Warwickshire Bromford Support and also chairs the multi-agency District Housing Forum which focuses on helping people in housing difficulties.

Attendees included members of the District Housing Forum, private landlords, District Council councillors and staff, housing association development staff, someone who formerly slept rough and people from other organisations.

The first half of the event was scene setting. Councillor Chris Saint, Leader of the District Council, welcomed people and stressed the importance of good housing to people's lives. John Wilde and Renata Mosz, District Council, ran a "know your district" quiz and then set out past achievements and future challenges.

Graham Spencer, Deputy Head of Development, Orbit Homes, and Neil Gilliver, Development Officer, Warwickshire Rural Housing Association, explained what it took to build high quality affordable homes. Neelam Sunder, Strategy and Partnership Manager, Homeless Link, talked about preventing homelessness and recent best practice. Questions followed.

People then went to one of three workshops led by District Council staff to consider what we jointly need to do in the next five years and how to do it. Notes from the workshops are set out below.

Building affordable homes

Notes from Workshop A led by John Gordon

Key points

1. The context of reduced grant rates and the need to not prejudice long-term commercial survival was noted.
2. In the above context, there is probably little prospect of housing associations being able to buy much development land on the open market. Hence the importance of delivery of affordable housing from "S.106" sites or discounted public land.
3. Ensuring clear requirements for provision of Social Rent housing is written into relevant S.106 Agreements for non-grant sites is important.
4. The future direction of building standards is uncertain. Future minimum space standards need to be set in SDC policies.
5. Housing associations are happy to work on an open book/profit share basis on individual sites.
6. Scope exists to redevelop brownfield site (e.g. vacant offices) in preference to greenfield sites.
7. Importance of "pepperpotting" of affordable housing within market-led schemes noted.
8. Critical issue for SDC itself to consider is whether it can deliver against housing volume requirements of emerging Core Strategy.
9. It is important for SDC to sustain its affordable housing requirements in emerging Core Strategy. In this respect, the recent PBA Viability Study is useful, in that it establishes that our proposed requirements are broadly viable.
10. Recent build cost inflation is an area of concern, although it is unclear whether this is a shorter-term (cyclical) problem or more of a longer-term problem.
11. There is a need for greater flexibility regarding materials [in the context of discharge of planning conditions] to assure timely delivery of schemes.
12. There can sometimes be conflict between different priorities, e.g. archaeology/ecology. Perhaps improved education/awareness amongst planning consultees of the issues involved would help.

13. Although reduced grant rates are a universal problem, the problem is particularly acute with specialised schemes – on account of the typically very low incomes of clients.
14. Delivery of Warwickshire County Council's Extra Care Housing programme is progressing. WCC is particularly pleased with progress on a range of Orbit and Housing 21 schemes across the county.
15. Caution should be taken when mixing affordable and outright sales units within Extra Care Housing schemes.
16. The scope for older owner-occupiers to self-fund moves to purpose-built Extra Care Housing was discussed. Such a housing offer needs to be sufficiently attractive to this sector of the market to incentivise "downsizing".
17. Rural housing needs surveys now routinely seek to identify the need for local market housing, as well as affordable housing, enabling a more holistic view of local housing need to be formed.
18. There was generally considered to be a high need/demand for bungalows, and a shortage of such properties to "downsize" to.

Improving existing homes and independent living

Notes from Workshop B led by Paul Chapman

1. Living with dementia

This is a current issue and likely to increase significantly.

Extra Care is part of the solution – but this may not be the best option for all. The key is to create CHOICE – a range of options.

Correct help should be made available to help people to live as independently as possible for as long as possible. There are a number of international projects that provide learning for us. One such is in the Netherlands, where complexes are built that enable carers to live in very close proximity to their client, but within their own apartment.

The Health Service need to engage with this issue now.

2. People who want to stay in their own homes

Low cost adaptations are possible. These can avoid the high cost of residential care in many cases, and also avoid putting a strain on extra care. This led to comments about under-occupancy – and whether other housing need could be met by releasing 3/4/5 bedroom houses occupied by single (older) people.

This generated a discussion highlighting the following issues.

2.1 Providing options for downsizing

To encourage people to consider downsizing – there needs to be housing that is both suitable and desirable. There was an acknowledgement that people would not want to move away from a supportive community/their network of contacts.

2.2 Educate on downsizing

People in their 50's and 60's should consider downsizing – as this is an easier age at which to move.

2.3 Access to simple repairs

Some housing becomes unsuitable as some vulnerable householders are unable to maintain their property. This can lead to health issues requiring costly assistance and, eventually, to more expensive repairs.

2.4 New Housing should be “designed for life”.

Some properties are built in such a way as to make future adaptations problematic. For example – some staircases are unable to accommodate a stair lift. New homes should be developed to enable future adaptation, so called “Lifetime Homes”.

2.5 Pressure on the Voluntary Sector.

Many of the services and support for people to enable them to live independently come from the Voluntary Sector. Future housing provision will be affected by the resources the Voluntary Sector is able to secure from various sectors, including the public sector.

3. Current housing stock provision.

Creative thought should be given to making the most of the housing stock that is currently available. This could include:

- the use of short-term providers (such as “Ad-hoc Housing Ltd”);
- remodelling other stock such as offices and commercial stock;
- generating one/two bed units from larger stock.

4. Investment in stock

There was a debate about the affordability of living – especially with the need to invest in insulation and other energy saving measures in order to enable more affordable living.

The difficulty of engaging with the Private Rented Sector was noted – as Landlords in SOME cases do not see the return on the investment they may be asked to make to energy saving measures. (They pay the capital cost with the Tenant recouping the revenue benefit). The Green Deal has not yet addressed this situation.

Housing stock should be built to high levels of insulation and energy efficiency.

5. Detailed research

Seemingly, a lot of decisions are made on the basis of assumption rather than evidence.

Preventing homelessness and vulnerable people

Notes from Workshop C led by Martin Cowan

Discussion

- 1) Discussion about "what is homelessness"; it was agreed that there were two main categories:
 - 1) Households to whom the Council owes a statutory duty;
 - 2) Households (usually singles) where there is no statutory duty.
- 2) Early intervention is key if homelessness is to be prevented.
- 3) What additional promotion can be done to encourage people to seek advice and assistance at the earliest opportunity? Discussion about people who can't or won't get help. Some people who have been rehoused via the homelessness route before seem to think it doesn't matter if they lose their accommodation as the Council will help them again. There are also people who think they won't actually be evicted (if for instance they have children).
- 4) Need to change people's perceptions around assumptions about rehousing, and to have honest conversations with tenants e.g. if they are already Orbit tenants they need to ensure they don't lose the tenancy because Orbit are our biggest landlord, and would be unlikely to house them again if they have evicted them.
- 5) Consider the benefits of developing a Homeless Prevention Policy that all the housing association landlords with properties in the District could sign up to.
- 6) It was identified there was a lack of accommodation in the District for people who were non-statutorily homeless.
- 7) While there was no emergency access accommodation in the District, it was also noted that it has become increasingly difficult to place such individuals out of area because other areas are now enforcing local connection policies.
- 8) While such households may initially not be vulnerable from a homeless legislation point of view, they can begin to spiral downwards due to a lack of options.
- 9) Discussion about risks to Supporting People services due to funding cuts.

- 10) It was observed that we seem to be moving into a situation where services were being cut and yet the Council was having to deal with more individuals with vulnerabilities.
- 11) Concern that the District Council would end up picking up the costs due to County Council cuts, and was the District Council prepared for this?
- 12) Can something be included in the housing strategy to explore other funding solutions e.g. via Health / the police / education, and to co-ordinate funding streams?

Key priorities

1. With regard to those currently in tenancies, more should be done to intervene sooner when there is a housing difficulty, and some work needs to be done to look at better ways of engaging with these households.
2. With regard to single people, we need to look at ways of developing more shared housing in the District, along with enabling some emergency access housing for non-statutory homeless households.
3. There were considerable risks posed by potential Supporting People cuts and new funding models/solutions should be considered for running support schemes in a post Supporting People world.