

Report of: Strategic Director, Housing, Health & Communiy

To: Executive Board

Date: 19th March 2007

Item No:

Title of Report : Response to Housing Scrutiny Affordable Housing Review



Summary and Recommendations



Purpose of report: This report was requested by Executive Board to provide officer comments on the recommendations arising from the Housing Scrutiny Committee's Review of Affordable Housing Development



Key decision: No

Portfolio Holder: Councillor Patrick Murray (Improving Housing)

Scrutiny Responsibility: Housing Scrutiny Committee



Ward(s) affected: All

Report Approved by



Portfolio Holder: Councillor Patrick Murray

Legal: Jeremy Thomas



Finance: Sarah Fogden

Strategic Director: Michael Lawrence



Policy Framework: This report supports the Council's vision statement 'provide more housing for Oxford, better housing for all'.



Recommendation(s): That the Executive Board endorse the actions proposed in the officer responses set out in this report.



Introduction

1. At their meeting on 19th February the Executive Board asked for an officer report of the recommendations contained in the Housing Scrutiny Committee Report on their review of Affordable Housing Development

Background

2. A review of affordable housing development involving the Council has been carried out by the Housing Scrutiny Review Group, which was endorsed by the Housing Scrutiny Committee. The report contains 19 recommendations to be considered by the Executive Board. Prior to adopting the recommendations the Executive Board asked for the opinions of officers. The recommendations have been considered by the Strategic Director for Housing, Health and Communities, Business Unit Managers, and other officers of the relevant services.

Recommendations & Responses

3. The target of 150 affordable homes is reviewed and assessed so that a more realistic figure of affordable unit completions is set. This new target is to be based on robust evidence such as site availability, known development projects and an estimate on the number of windfall sites coming forward.

Response: Agreed, implement new target in 2008/9. This work will be taken forward by the Affordable Housing Group over the coming months. There are clear linkages with the work of the Oxfordshire Housing Partnership and the LAA Target for affordable housing, which will be of benefit in gaining a clearer picture of potential developments.

4. A site register to be developed by July 2007, with the Council's partners, Planning and Asset Management to help enable the affordable housing development process. This was also a HQN recommendation.

Response: Agreed but timing to be reviewed and agreed by Affordable Housing Group. This work will be taken forward by the Affordable Housing Group over the coming months. There are clear linkages with the work of the Oxfordshire Housing Partnership and the LAA Target for affordable housing, which will be of benefit in gaining a clearer picture of potential developments.

5. A representative from the Asset Management Team should be a member of the regular affordable housing working group meetings to provide guidance on site opportunities.

Response: Agreed and implemented. A representative of the Asset Management team attends the Affordable Housing Group as appropriate.

6. The Housing Development Team to facilitate quarterly RSL partnership meetings to get the most from the development partnership.

Response: Agreed, Quarterly meetings will be arranged.

7. The Housing Development Team should be involved in early pre-application discussions with planners to ensure that the Council requirements for affordable housing are agreed before negotiations are started with developers. The importance of affordable housing needs to be reinforced when applications come forward. The Housing Scrutiny Committee will revisit this issue in July 2007 to ensure that the working arrangements are working well.

Response: Agreed, The appointment of an Affordable Housing Planner and the regular meetings of the Affordable Housing Group have helped to improve co-ordination between HDT and Planning colleagues. Formalised procedures for involving HDT at the earliest possible stage of significant applications will be put in place by May 2007.

8. An affordable housing framework / strategy should be developed in partnership with all internal teams involved in the function and RSL partners. This is a requirement for the Council's Housing Strategy and should be progressed. This should be taken forward by a high level project board

Response: Agreed with amendments, The Affordable Housing Group will review the progress in setting up the strategic framework as set out by the HQN report. It will also review the links to a development strategy for affordable housing and set up a sub group to deliver the Housing Strategy objective. This will include the communication with local communities on development proposals

9. The Council should confirm whether S106 contributions can be used to fund affordable housing on sites where social housing previously stood. HQN recommended that this was clarified and the review group endorses this.

Response: Further review and advice required. Officers will discuss this question internally, and will seek external validation of their interpretation. The outcome will be reported to the Housing Scrutiny Committee.

10. Effort is made to ensure that the Housing Portfolio Holder and Chair of the Housing Scrutiny Committee are able to attend the affordable housing working group at least quarterly to be kept informed and influence the direction of affordable housing development.

Response: Agreed, Officers will ensure that sufficient notice of meetings is given, and that times are arranged which enable relevant members to attend at least quarterly.

11. Local councillors are informed in a timely manner of up coming housing developments in their ward to improve communication with local people.

Response: Agreed, See paragraph 4. above

12. The Council should consider the need for the RSL partnership in its current form based on the changes to the way grant funding is allocated by the Housing Corporation and the proposal for a countywide development partnership. The Housing Scrutiny Committee should receive a report back on progress in July 2007.

Response: Suggest recommendation is modified to focus on improving the Oxford Development Partnership (link to paragraph 13). The proposal for a county-wide development partnership focusing on strategic sites was rejected by OMAGH (now OHP). It is therefore essential to maintain the Oxford Development Partnership, though work needs to be done on the form and focus of activity, and this will be taken forward by the Affordable Housing Group, and with the assistance of KPMG as part of the Internal Audit Programme.

13. A cost benefit evaluation of the RSL partnership is carried out at the earliest opportunity looking at its development record and ways to tackle an agreed set of challenges, such as addressing the issue of sustainable communities and housing need. The points made in the HQN review would be a good starting point for discussion.

Response: Agreed, Officers expect that this will be the main focus of the KPMG involvement in the RSL Partnership Review.

14. Legal Services are involved at an early stage in affordable housing development work to help identify and resolve issues in a timely manner. The Housing Scrutiny Committee should monitor this and receive an update on this in July 2007.

Response: Agreed and implemented, a representative of Legal Services now attends the Affordable Housing Group (as required). Officers are keen to involve Legal Services at the earliest possible stage in problematic or complex developments, and have developed a good working relationship with the relevant officers.

15. The review group recommends allowing a period of monitoring before making further judgment on the current arrangement [for managing the Affordable Housing Development function]. Another available option, which could alleviate the burden on the strategic director's time, would be to allow him to employ consultants for negotiations on specific projects, where appropriate.

Response: Agreed, the current arrangements will, of course, be monitored closely by the Strategic Director. Employment of consultants may be helpful in specific cases (e.g. the Foyer evaluation project) but Would need to have funding agreed as part of the budget process.

16. If, following an evaluation it is decided to maintain the RSL partnership, work is done to raise its profile with developers, including putting together an RSL partnership prospectus.

Response: Agreed with amendments as follows, This activity will fall partly within the remit of the Oxfordshire Housing Partnership, which will be organising six-monthly forums with developers, RSLs, and other interested parties. We will develop an RSL Partnership Prospectus if all members of the Partnership feel that this would be a useful expenditure of time and resources.

17. The Council reports one affordable housing unit completion figure publicly.

Response: Agreed and implemented, this is already the case – Review Group members seem to have misunderstood the process involved in generating a final figure for affordable housing completions. All statistics relating to housing completions in general are now co-ordinated and reported by the Community Housing Business Unit.

18. The Council uses the Planning collection method to measure affordable unit completions. The Planners collect information from four sources to record completions and so is likely to be more accurate than a method that uses one source.

Response: Duplicated, See previous paragraph.

19. To avoid duplication of effort, it should be the responsibility of one team to collect this data (the review group suggests Planning Policy).

Response: Duplicated See paragraph 17.

20. The Planners and the HDT decide whether to net off affordable housing completions and report their decision to members. The key factor is that a consistent approach to monitoring is adopted.

Response: Agreed with amendments as follows, Whilst agreeing to the spirit of this recommendation, officers are aware that different reporting regimes require different reporting methods – officers will, however, ensure that figures reported to members will contain sufficient detail to enable them to judge the impact of individual schemes and overall activity in this respect.

21. The review group feels it was an oversight not to keep Housing Scrutiny Committee aware of the reasons for delays to the garage site developments, such as state aid and value for money considerations. In future, particularly with developments of interest to the Committee, they are kept up to date with matters such as this as a matter of course.

Response: Agreed and implemented, Officers will continue to report any significant delays to schemes through the regular updates on the Development Programme, which is now a standing item at Housing Scrutiny Committee, and by ad hoc reports in exceptional cases.

Recommendations

22. That the Executive Board endorse the actions proposed in the officer responses set out in this report.

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Background papers: None.

