

PLACE SELECT COMMITTEE

A meeting of Place Select Committee was held on Monday 14 October 2024.

Present: Cllr Richard Eglington (Chair), Cllr Jim Beall (Vice-Chair), Cllr John Coulson, Cllr Kevin Faulks, Cllr Stefan Houghton, Cllr Sufi Mubeen, Cllr Marilyn Surtees, Cllr Hilary Vickers and Cllr Sylvia Walmsley.

Officers: Alan Glew (AH&W), and Michelle Gunn (CS).

Also in attendance: Karen Brown, Northern Housing Consortium and Tom Zagoria, Housing Action Teesside

Apologies: Cllr Andrew Sherris.

PLA/29/24 Evacuation Procedure

The Committee noted the evacuation and housekeeping procedure.

PLA/30/24 Declarations of Interest

There were no declarations of interest.

PLA/31/24 Minutes

AGREED the minutes of the meeting held on 9 September 2024 be confirmed as a correct record and signed by the Chair.

PLA/32/24 Scrutiny Review of Affordable Housing

The Committee received a report from Housing Action Teesside (HAT), which was a tenants union and housing campaign representing hundreds of tenants across Teesside. Their report, 'Council Housing in 'Stockton's Future' summarised the extent of housing need in Stockton-on-Tees and how they felt it could be resolved. The Chair of HAT presented the report, highlighting the key concerns which included:

- Feasibility – The report noted examples of other Councils that were building affordable housing
- Necessity – It also noted that Registered Providers, particularly Thirteen, were the main organisations building affordable housing in Stockton-on-Tees Borough but were not building enough to meet the need. The housing register was also growing, which was a national trend. It was suggested that this had an impact on private rented tenants who were not reporting issues to their landlords due to the fear that they would be evicted with no other housing options. It was further suggested that tenants that were made homeless were placed in unsuitable areas and were at risk of anti-social behaviour. The rehousing of Dawson House in Billingham added to the pressures on housing in Borough.
- Accountability – It was suggested that the current situation was not working for tenants, with them feeling lied to and ignored, and trapped in homes that were unsuitable either due to their need and/or the state of repair. It was also suggested that the situation was not working for Members, who had a responsibility to tenants when situations went wrong.

The report asked for Stockton-on-Tees Borough Council (SBC) to follow the models given as examples within the report and provide alternative affordable, council, housing.

The main issues discussed were as follows:

- It was noted that the concerns raised regarding the undersupply of affordable housing were shared by the Committee. Members had seen an increase in the number of people on the housing register and people were waiting longer for housing that met their needs, often while living in unsuitable properties. The review was looking at all options, which included building council housing, and gaining an understanding of market pressures as well as what could be influenced and changed.
- Members raised House in Multiple Occupation (HMOs) and the issues that they could create in the community with anti-social behaviour. It was noted that those who were seeking help with housing from the Council needed to be placed in suitable accommodation and support provided. It was acknowledged that people who were not able to access housing via Registered Providers due to rent arrears and anti-social behaviour would face similar barriers if SBC provided council housing.
- The stock transfer process that took place was discussed and it was noted that tenants chose to move to a registered provider rather than remain as council tenants. It was suggested that this was due to the limitations imposed on Local Authorities by previous governments to access the funding to refurbish their properties.
- It was noted that when identifying other local authority areas who had announced they were building council housing, some were not being directly built by Councils but built through partnerships with other organisations.
- The number of houses that could be provided by a Local Authority without opening a Housing Revenue Account was 200 and this was not enough to meet the need of the Borough. However, Right to Buy applies to all Council dwellings regardless of the number held unless designated sheltered or supported housing.
- The report included testimony that some homeless applicants had been advised to sleep rough when they could not otherwise be verified as homeless, and the officer in attendance requested further evidence of this so that it could be investigated outside of the meeting.
- The Renters Reform Bill was identified as a new piece of legislation being introduced that would give tenants greater protection within the Private Sector.
- Members requested further examples of areas that were building council housing.

The Committee also received a presentation from the Senior Policy Officer of Northern Housing Consortium (NHC) regarding how other areas and Local Authorities were meeting the challenge of increasing the supply of affordable housing. The presentation included:

- Affordable housing need and housing targets
- The affordability ratio of housing, noting that full-time employees living in SBC would typically expect to spend approximately 5.6 times their annual salary on purchasing a home.

- The importance of partnership working and case studies of multi-action strategies
 - Greater Manchester Combined Authority
 - Sheffield City Council
- The role of a Combined Authority in affordable housing including West Yorkshire as a case study
- Finance for Housing Associations
- Planning reform and the declining market for Section 106
- The development of brownfield sites including the following case studies
 - Railway Street, Leeds
 - Moss Nook, St Helens
- Making the most of stalled sites with Liverpool City Council as a case study
- Making the most of existing housing, highlighting that new builds only added 1% per annum to stock, along with the following case studies
 - Manchester City Council
 - Leeds City Council
 - Liverpool City Council
 - Scottish Government
- Key issues and trends for local authorities
- NHC plans

The key issues highlighted and discussed were as follows:

- It was highlighted that the private sector rents had increased over recent years, with the social housing sector unable to meet local housing needs. In addition, it was suggested that Local Authorities landlord related expertise had been largely lost within those Local Authorities who had transferred their housing stock.
- It was suggested that the golden rule proposed in the planning reforms of at least 50% affordable housing, with an appropriate proportion being social rent might not be viable in Northern England due to the lower land value in these areas.
- It was noted that brownfield/industrial sites could take 10 – 20 years to develop because of remediation works and there were time limits on when Brownfield funding had to be committed and spent.
- It was questioned whether there were any areas in Northern England providing homes via container type accommodation in car parks, which had happened in Cornwall, and Officers informed that they were not aware of any sites in the north where this was happening.
- Modular homes were raised and while these were not currently being built in the Borough, there had been built elsewhere in Northern England. It was noted that this was a relatively new product and while it had its benefits, they had to be produced on a large scale to be viable. Due to this, some companies providing modular housing had gone into receivership which led to sites being stalled, such as the Princeton site in Mandale and Victoria Ward.
- Members raised the possibility of converting empty buildings into housing. The idea of utilising empty homes to meet housing demand was a very positive action. However, it was noted that the owners of some empty buildings were unknown to SBC, or difficult to track down. Returning empty homes to occupation could be a very protracted and resource intensive process if contact and support of the property owner could not be secured.

- The Greater Manchester Combined Authority example was discussed, noting that 44% of their development plans was funded by Homes England. It was questioned where the remaining funded came from and informed that the 10 Local Authorities would be providing this. The strategy had taken several years to be developed and agreed and was seen as a trailblazer. It was believed that Combined Authorities could secure devolved powers providing them with additional housing grant funding in the future.
- It was questioned where the funding would be found if the SBC provided council housing and informed that this could be via Homes England, if they became an approved Development partner, by Prudential Borrowing, or private investors.

The Common Allocation Policy consultation was noted, and members were informed that this was due to close at mid-day on 18 November. There had been a total of 596 responses in the first week of the consultation. The Committee requested the results of the consultation to be presented at the January meeting.

Drawing the session to a close, the Committee Chair thanked HAT and NHC representatives for their contributions.

AGREED that:

- 1) the information be noted.
- 2) the further information be provided as requested.

PLA/33/24 Chair's Update and Work Programme 2024 - 2025

Consideration was given to the Work Programme.

It was noted that the Committee would pause the review, standing down the December meeting, to allow for the option appraisal to be carried out. The Committee would receive information from the option appraisal in January 2025 as part of its evidence gathering prior to being reported to Cabinet, and an additional informal meeting scheduled to consider the summary of evidence. The final report would therefore be agreed in March 2025. This would ensure that the Committee received sufficient evidence to make informed recommendations.

The next meeting would be held on Monday 11 November 2024, to consider the progress update on previously agreed recommendations for the Scrutiny Review of Domestic waste Collections, Kerbside Recycling and Green Waste Collections and an informal session to review the evidence gathered to date for the Scrutiny Review of Affordable Housing.

AGREED that the Work Programme be updated to reflect the changes agreed above.