

Cabinet – 16 December 2009

Affordable Housing Working Group

Portfolio: Councillor Adrian Andrew, Deputy Leader and Regeneration

Service: Housing Strategy and Partnerships

Wards: All

Key decision: No

Forward plan: Yes

1. Summary of report

- 1.1 The Council's Health, Social Care and Inclusion Scrutiny and Performance Panel in partnership with the Regeneration Scrutiny and Performance Panel have worked together investigating affordable housing within the borough and related issues.
- 1.2 In September 2009 the Affordable Housing Working Group reported on the outcome of the work undertaken across the two scrutiny panels and this report was submitted to Cabinet on 18 October 2009.

2. Recommendations

That Cabinet

- 2.1 commend the Affordable Housing Working Group for their thorough report
- 2.2 support the recommendations of the group (paragraph 3.3), subject to the final recommendation also relating to affordable housing and request that they are considered by services in their development of service plans.
- 2.3 request that Registered Social Landlords (RSLs) promote the recommendations of the group in their future business plans and that progress is reviewed through Walsall Housing Partnership (WHP)

3. Background information

- 3.1 The Affordable Housing Working Group was set up in 2007/8 to consider the boroughs Housing Strategy, Supplementary Planning Document and Choice Based Lettings. Following an interim report in October 2008 it was decided that the group continue with a work programme which included a review of Walsall Housing Group (whg) performance against commitments made at the time of transfer in 2003.
- 3.2 In comparing the transfer targets and promises, against delivery there was opportunity to look at issues that had not been resolved as a result of transfer. There was also the opportunity to look at factors which had a significant impact on how residents felt about their homes in the public and private sector.
- 3.3 The Working Group recommended:
- Work to increase heating and warmth packages for elderly residents
 - Work with housing associations to address the issues of long term void flats above shops
 - The development of a strategy to deal with limited off road parking in mixed tenure areas
 - Work to address the issues related to entrenched anti social behaviour
 - Work to improve community engagement
 - Work to meet the demand for social housing for rent within the borough.

Work to increase of heating and warmth packages for elderly residents

- 3.4 During the term of the group there was a significant rise in fuel costs which saw an increasing number of residents fall into fuel poverty. The most widely accepted definition of a fuel poor household is one which needs to spend more than 10% of its income on all fuel use in order to heat its home to an adequate standard of warmth. Fuel poverty contributes to poor health, and financial hardship which reduces the quality of life of our residents.
- 3.5 The Private Sector House Condition Survey 2007 found an estimated 14,621 dwellings (19.1%) in Walsall where fuel poverty was present. The private rented sector has by a substantial margin the highest rate of fuel poverty at 25.4% (2,130 dwellings). The figures reflect both the low incomes of residents in the sector and the poor energy efficiency of many properties. The survey found fuel poverty linked with the age of the head of household; older heads of households are far more likely to be in fuel poverty. In the entire Borough 6,181 (29.9%) of older heads of household are in fuel poverty. There is also a clear correlation with receipt of benefit. Across the borough 60.6% of residents receiving benefit are in fuel poverty compared to the borough wide percent of 19.1%

- 3.6 As a result of this need the council has made fuel poverty a priority within the Walsall Partnership and significant work is ongoing to bring much needed resources into the borough. For example Centrica have announced that following joint work by Walsall Council and whg, Walsall has been selected as one of 8 national Community Energy Saving Programme (CESP) areas. The external investment this selection will attract will help to tackle home energy efficiency including hard to insulate properties. The project is due to start in Quarter 3 2009/10.

| | Voids over 6 months | Total Private | % void |
|---------------------|---------------------|---------------|--------|
| As at 31 March 2007 | 1,748 | 81,118 | 2.2 |
| As at 31 March 2008 | 2,102 | 82,254 | 2.6 |
| As at 31 March 2009 | 1,742 | 82,818 | 2.1 |

Work with housing associations to address the issues of long term void flats above shops

- 3.7 Walsall as with many parts of the UK has had a series of contributing factors which have unfortunately tended to increase the number of empty dwellings particularly in the private sector. This has included the overall impact of the recession, decline in house prices, impact on buy-to-let owners.
- 3.8 Full Council in November 2008 agreed to remove the 50% council tax discount for properties empty for more than 6 months (with certain exceptions e.g. deceased estates etc). Whilst this was implemented as of 1st April 2009 significant proactive early publicity and other proactive work by the council has led to a reduction in both the number and percentage of vacant private properties in the borough. This can be seen by the following details:
- 3.9 A multi-agency void property task group exists, which reports to a Joint Enforcement Board, chaired by the Head of Public Safety. The group has been targeting problem void properties, to secure them through works in default. This is funded through the Borough Tasking Group which is also chaired by the Head of Public Safety as part of target hardening measures around arson, fly-tipping and ASB. Both groups exist to address crime and disorder. Having addressed the target void properties further enforcement routes are being explored using powers under planning and building control legislation to impose new sanctions such as enforced sale or demolition as part of the debt recovery process. In addition partner agencies are sharing a void property referral form to tackle ASB issues related to void properties including litter, fly-tipping etc. The council is also investigating the possibility of using Regional Housing Pot Funding to undertake proactive work in 2010/11 to tackle private properties that have been void for more than 6 months. This includes consideration of enforced sale procedures and Empty Dwelling Management Orders.
- 3.10 The group also noted the impact of long term voids in flats over shops. Whg own 9 vacant maisonettes above the shopping precinct at Stephenson Square. All of the maisonettes have been empty for a considerable time and are in a poor standard of repair and would require significant investment to bring them up to decent homes standard. Since 2003, whg has regularly discussed the future of these properties with representatives of BCHA (Beechdale Community Housing Association). BCHA has previously indicated that as the majority landlord in the

area and given the location of the shops, they would like to develop a master plan for the area. Whg has indicated a desire to work in partnership with them on this however, unfortunately to date this has not been possible. It may still be the case that an option would be for BCHA to develop the site in partnership with Walsall Council and whg, however, given that the maisonettes continue to blight the area, whg is to undertake an independent options appraisal, to establish a practical and achievable way to resolve this problem.

The development of a strategy to deal with limited off road parking in mixed tenure areas

3.11 Indiscriminate use of verges and pavements for parking is a regular source of complaints from a wide cross section of the community. The problem is obviously not just restricted to Walsall but is generally endemic throughout the country and often:

- causes environmental damage
- affects the visual amenity of the street
- can damage underground apparatus and disperses mud on to the footway/carriageway
- can cause neighbourly disputes
- can endanger pedestrians causing them in some cases to walk in the carriageway

3.12 Clearly there are many reasons associated with the practice of verge parking, however the most common reason relates to the lack of appropriate off street parking facilities resulting from the increased and rising trend of car ownership. The council does not have the resources to meet the full demand of residents across the borough. A report went to Cabinet in July 2007 about the verge parking framework and it is recommended that this report be updated as a result of the on going issues.

Work to address the issues related to entrenched anti social behaviour

3.13 The former Neighbourhoods Scrutiny and Performance Panel appointed an Anti Social Behaviour working group in 2008. Their report was presented to Council in July 2009 and there were 22 recommendations made which have now been addressed in an action plan recently presented to Cabinet. There are clear connections between the recommendations of the ASB working group and the recommendations by the Affordable Housing working group. There are currently close working relationships between the social landlords, the local authority and police and fire services, and ASB issues are considered as part of the monthly Borough Tasking process which is chaired by the Head of Public Safety. The Borough Tasking Group considers hotspot ASB issues and other crime and disorder matters, based on intelligence from all partner's perspectives, and agrees joint actions to tackle these issues. On a local neighbourhood basis, and underpinning the work of the Borough Tasking Group, there are currently 9 Community Action Tasking groups, based on the Local Neighbourhood Partnership areas who also meet monthly, and who coordinate locally based initiatives between police and fire services, local authority services and social landlord representatives. It is foreseeable that these close relationships will be strengthened as the new neighbourhood management model is implemented

from May 2010. Recently a joint protocol has been launched between WHG and Environmental Health around public nuisance which provided a firm foundation for closer working around ASB.

Work to improve community engagement

- 3.14 Walsall Partnership has conducted a review of Local Neighbourhood Partnerships (LNPs). As a result of this a proposal to transform radically community engagement across the borough has been developed. This proposal sets out a Walsall approach to Neighbourhood Management in which partners will work together to engage and respond to communities in innovative ways. Front-line workers will be used as referral points. Communities will be engaged and consulted by being approached by front-line workers wherever people naturally congregate: at schools; supermarkets; on doorsteps.
- 3.15 The details of the new proposal are being consulted upon widely. It is anticipated that the proposal will be implemented in May 2010.

Work to meet the demand for social housing for rent within the borough.

- 3.16 Walsall Council commissioned Fordham Research to do a Housing Needs and Demand Study Update in 2007. This research confirmed the clear need for new social rented housing in the borough. Accordingly, when Walsall's Housing Strategy was reviewed in 2008, the new strategy contained a clear emphasis on new affordable housing being social rent, rather than shared ownership. The same change in tenure was implemented in the review of the Affordable Housing Supplementary Planning Document (SPD), published in April 2008. The SPD guides developers to provide a 25% on site affordable housing contribution. The SPD guides that this contribution should be 75% social rent (and 25% shared ownership) in the West of the Borough and 100% social rent in the East. Unfortunately, due to the downturn in the housing market, minimal social rent units have been achieved through this route. However, the council has agreed a number of Deed of Variations to convert developer obligations for affordable home ownership, to the provision of social rent instead.
- 3.17 The vast majority of Walsall's new affordable housing is provided through a range of housing providers who have made successful funding bids (supported by the Council) to the Homes and Communities Agency (HCA). Walsall Council have an excellent relationship with the HCA, due to our clear strategic direction around priority intervention areas of the borough, through the:
- Strategic Regeneration Framework,
 - Walsall Regeneration Company Prospectus for Growth,
 - Housing Strategy 2005-2008 and 2008-2011
 - Older Person Reprovision programme
- 3.18 We have also demonstrated excellent working relationships with housing providers, particularly whg, and have a reputation for deliverability. As such, over the 3 years (2006/2009) we have achieved 619 affordable housing completions, with the majority (314 / 55%) being social rent. As outlined above, we have reacted to changing need for a proportional increase in social rented units, and this is reflected in the outstanding HCA funding commitments for the next 2 years

(2009/11). There are currently commitments to fund 813 affordable units, of which 591 (73%) are social rent and 222 (27%) are affordable home ownership.

4. Resource considerations

4.1 Financial:

- 4.1.1 Most of the proposed actions can be delivered within existing resources other than the off street parking requirements. Some require further investigation, often in conjunction with partners, and, should any proposals emerge that cannot be implemented within existing budgets, they will be brought forward for Cabinet consideration within the context of future years' budget processes.

4.2 Legal:

- 4.2.1 No recommendations are directly related to legal issues. However, there are areas where issues such as relevant Housing Legislation, the Human Rights Act, as well as information sharing and data protection would need to be considered especially around the anti social behaviour work.

- 4.3 **Staffing:** There are no staffing implications.

5. Citizen impact

The aim of the group is to ensure residents have access to a range of affordable housing options and that whilst in the home they are safe, secure and warm.

6. Community safety

The recommendations of the group are intended to make a positive contribution to the broader community safety agenda by reducing incidents and fear of antisocial behaviour.

7. Environmental impact

Parking of vehicles on verges causes a great environmental impact as a visual impact and problems also arise from the operation of grass cutting and street cleansing.

8. Performance and risk management issues

- 8.1 **Risk:** None

8.2 Performance management:

- 8.2.1 The advantages of implementation would need to be balanced against impact on resources and any resultant improvement in performance. It would be necessary to consider current capacity issues within the partnership and the impact any significant demands may place upon its services.
- 8.2.2 The ongoing work to increase the amount of affordable housing will be monitored to ensure we achieve both current and future strategic objectives. The multi agency Walsall Housing Partnership (housing associations, council and Homes and Communities Agency) plays an important role in monitoring and will enable the provision of the right type of affordable housing and contribute to 'Number of affordable homes delivered' (NI155), NI187 'tackling fuel poverty' and NI154 'net additional homes provided'.

9. Equality implications

An increase in new housing and improved standards in new and existing homes will create wider housing choices in the affordable and private sector and will increase social and economic inclusiveness by making housing accessible to people with lower incomes.

10. Consultation

The final report of the Affordable Housing Working Group has been distributed amongst partners and discussions are continuing between the council and key agencies.

Background papers

Affordable Housing Working group September 2009.
Draft Neighbourhood Management Document

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