

Agenda Item

Overview and Scrutiny Committee - Communities

20 January 2010

SKB



Report on the East Devon Affordable Housing Summit held on 17 September 2009

Summary

At its meeting on 24 June 2009 the Overview and Scrutiny Committee – Communities received a discussion paper and position statement on the delivery of new affordable housing in East Devon, considered the issues and options set out in the paper and identified those appropriate to take forward, to be worked up in more detail and implemented.

The committee made eight recommendations, including “that a summit be arranged with Registered Social Landlords (RSLs), the Communities Agency, the Government Office for the South West (GOSW) and Council Members with the aim to move forward affordable housing development in East Devon.

This report reviews the first East Devon Affordable Housing Summit, outlines who attended, the discussion during the day and the proposed outcomes.

Recommendation

To note the report on the first East Devon Affordable Housing Summit, consider the feedback at Annex 6 and progress made in some of the suggested areas, and to agree the appropriate way forward for each suggestion.

a) Reasons for Recommendation

To increase the output of new affordable housing.

b) Alternative Options

A number of options are suggested in the feedback at Annex 6 to contribute towards achieving our corporate objective.

c) Risk Considerations

Failure to address some of these issues could lead to failure to meet our affordable housing targets.

d) Policy and Budgetary Considerations

Policy issues are explained in the report and budgetary considerations will vary according to the direction proposed, if any.

e) Date for Review of Decision

The delivery of affordable housing needs to be reviewed annually.

1 Background to and aims of the Summit

- 1.1 The idea for an affordable housing summit was mooted during a meeting of the Council's Portfolio Holder for Communities, the Head of Housing & Social Inclusion and the Homes and Communities Agency, which took place following a recommendation of the Overview & Scrutiny Committee, Communities June 2009 meeting. A down turn in the housing market had begun to stifle our progress on making provision for the serious levels of housing need across the district and the committee had made a number of recommendations in order to redress the balance.
- 1.2 The affordable housing summit was intended to bring together stakeholders from all sides of the affordable housing delivery process to discuss current issues and blockages, share good practise and develop innovative ways forward to combat the difficulties being experienced with delivery of new homes in the current economic climate. It was also hoped that relationships between stakeholders would be strengthened, and even in some cases established for the first time.

2 Attendees

- 2.1 Invitations were sent to representatives from local housing associations, local developers and local landowners, including all contacts for the Strategic Housing Land Availability Assessment (SHLAA). Also all district councillors were invited, as were representatives of the Homes and Communities Agency, the Government Office Southwest, and neighbouring local authorities. Approximately 60 delegates attended on the day- for full list see **Annex 1**.

3 Agenda

- 3.1 The agenda is attached as **Annex 2**. Initial presentations by officers were given in the morning to 'set the scene', followed by the first 'blue sky thinking session' where all delegates were asked to think of innovative ideas for providing more affordable housing.
- 3.2 The final morning session consisted of two presentations from Graham Cridland of Michelmores on 'greater flexibility in planning permissions' and 'community infrastructure levy' (**Annex 3 & 4**).
- 3.3 The first afternoon session was a speed dating 'grumble' session. Delegates were split into five groups and each group had a 10 minutes session with 'experts' on the following topics:

- General Planning
- Rural issues
- Housing and Communities
- Private Housing and Empty homes
- Planning Policy

- 3.4 The sessions were extremely successful with a lot of lively discussion and ideas.

4 Key points raised

- 4.1 The key points raised during the morning's 'blue sky thinking session' and the afternoon's grumble sessions are listed below:
- 4.2 **'Blue sky' thinking session**
 - a) Why does affordable housing need to be built to a higher standard than open market housing?
 - b) Need to address 'nimby' and 'banana' attitudes – strong messages need to go out to communities

- c) Need to address under-occupation in council housing. Can we have a clause in the secure tenancy agreement? Improve the incentives offered?
- d) Increase the tax on 2nd and 3rd homes – probably enough actual housing in Devon for everyone but much is not properly utilised
- e) Council keen to work with anyone putting in bids for funding from HCA
- f) Difference between base rate and mortgage rates inequitable – need to raise with government
- g) East Devon a low wage economy – some people in full time work still on benefits
- h) Need a can do approach – many developments declined initially and only come through on appeal

4.3 **General Planning**

- a) Link a series of rural sites together – initial risks/costs carried by Council. Then offer to RSLs
- b) Why do needs assessments? We know there's a need. Assessments take time.
- c) Consider moving the village boundary – allow a few homes to be built with a tariff – money to an affordable housing pot for use by council
- d) Ensure community buys into the process – need strong community leaders
- e) Affordable housing needs to be around community facilities
- f) New policy – stop gap between low land values and result of SHLAA. Sites need to be viable.

4.4 **Rural Issues**

- a) Questioning of housing needs surveys
- b) Identify options within villages – work with parish councils
- c) Internal investment in experience/staff to speed up processes
- d) Interim rural departure policy – sustainable?
- e) Older people – schemes often for families – need to consider retirement issues and better incentives to downsize
- f) Parish council involvement – some very keen
- g) Bottlenecks – why do schemes take so long? Rural schemes can take up to 5 years to deliver
- h) Thresholds – 5 in local plan – some other form of financial contribution?

4.5 **Housing & Communities**

- a) Exploring non traditional methods of construction
- b) Graduated threshold, so not so many slip 'under the wire'
- c) Acquiring ready built properties
- d) CPO (compulsory purchase orders) – sites with planning permission not yet implemented
- e) Flexibility of policies – more time for negotiating individual sites
- f) Community infrastructure levy waived for RSLs?
- g) Seed funding – LA to put money into partners to do preliminary investigation work
- h) Private sector – better integration – empty homes into use
- i) Government to properly fund the cost of affordable housing
- j) Rural departure sites popular

4.6 **Private Sector Housing and Empty Homes**

- a) Empty homes – effectively bring back. Concern that not enough is being done. Council works with Empty Homes

Agency – need more resources in East Devon – large potential pool

- b) Compulsory purchase orders
- c) Speed with which process is dealt with – need to be more aggressive
- d) How can private sector help meet need – empty pubs etc – need to be more flexible/proactive

4.7 **Planning Policy**

- a) Request for more flexibility – ‘black’ lines (development boundary) to be less rigid
- b) More housing in villages – community infrastructure
- c) Land brought forward for development – brown field
- d) Housing need in all areas across district
- e) Scrap planning policy

4.8 **Some common themes coming up in several groups include:**

- a) Are Housing Needs Assessments really necessary?
- b) Under-occupation needs to be addressed
- c) Use of CPOs
- d) Delivering schemes more quickly

For further details of each topic see **Annex 5**.

5 Actions arising from the day

- 5.1 At the end of the summit it was agreed that the feedback gathered during the day would be summarised and taken to the Virtual Affordable Housing Team for consideration. The team’s input has been in **Annex 6** which outlines what actions should now be taken to follow up some of these issues. It is this table that I would ask you to give your particular attention.

6 Other progress in affordable housing development since 24 June 2009

- 6.1 We have been successful in securing social housing grant from the Homes and Communities Agency (HCA) for just over £1million to match fund the Council’s own Build Programme for 2009/10 – 2010/11. The 17 new homes are as follows:
- 4 x 2 bed 3 person houses in Waggs Plot near Axminster
 - 2 x 2 bed 3 person flats at Heals Field in Axminster
 - 1 x 2 bed 3 person house and 1 x 3 bed 4 person house in Normandy Close in Exmouth
 - 5 x 2 bed 3 person houses and 4 x 3 bed 5 person houses at Churchill Court in Lympstone
- 6.2 We have tendered for a complete design and build service, the successful tenderer being Charles E Ware, Architects based in Exeter. They are project managing all four sites, as well as the two bungalows already underway in Sidmouth, and plans have already been submitted for the four new sites on 4 December 2009.
- 6.3 Progress has also been made on undertaking a more flexible approach to planning policy pending the Local Development Framework (LDF) being agreed, an approach that will encourage land owners to still bring land forward despite low land values. The newly agreed ‘position statement’ (**Annex 7**) allows for rural departure sites (beyond Local Plan Built-up Area Boundaries) for a

mix of affordable and market housing in prescribed circumstances. The Virtual Affordable Housing Team will begin work on a similar approach for urban areas in the New Year.

Legal Implications

This is a progress report and as such raises no legal issues requiring comment.

Financial Implications

There are no financial implications at the current time. Think Tank considerations on budgetary matters should be mindful of the current budget position.

Consultation on Reports to the Executive

The two Housing Review Board Team Champions of the Housing Strategy Unit have viewed this report and any comments are attached at **Annex 8**.

Background Papers

None

Sue Bewes ext 2200
Housing Strategy Manager

Overview and Scrutiny Committee, Communities
20 January 2010