

BRECKLAND COUNCIL

At a Meeting of the

AFFORDABLE HOUSING TASK & FINISH GROUP

**Held on Wednesday, 8 July 2009 at 2.00 pm in
The Board Room, Peddars Way Housing Association, Michael Chaplin House, Station
Road, Dereham NR19 1DA**

PRESENT

Mrs J. Ball

Mr A.P. Joel

Mr B. Rose (Vice-Chairman, in the Chair)

Mr M. Spencer

Mr A.C. Stasiak

In Attendance

Anita Brennan

Mark Broughton

Nick Moys

Darryl Smith

Elaine Wilkes

- Strategic Housing Manager
- Member Development and Scrutiny Officer
- Principal Planning Officer (Major Projects)
- Principal Housing Officer (Strategy and Enabling)
- Senior Member Services Officer

16/09 MINUTES

The minutes of the meeting held on 24 June 2009 were confirmed as a correct record and signed by the Chairman.

17/09 APOLOGIES

An apology for absence was received from Mr. R.G. Kybird.

18/09 PRESENTATIONS

Apologies were received from Lovell Partnerships as a representative was unable to attend the meeting as had been hoped. The expected representative from Bidwells also was not present. However, it was felt that good and sufficient evidence had been provided at the last meeting as part of the presentation from Andrew Savage of Broadland Housing Association.

Nick Moys, Principal Planning Officer, completed the presentations to the Group by outlining current planning policy at the national and local level covering the various issues associated with housing, such as housing design, planning standards, building for life and the Breckland Design Guide, amongst other things.

At the national level, a number of policies dealt with housing and design in reasonable detail and there was additional guidance on design related issues published by CABI (Commission for Architecture & the Built Environment), the national body for promoting good design.

Various standards existed, including eco-standards relating to water and energy use and in relation to "lifetime homes", i.e. the design of

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internal layouts allowing for future adaptation to meet changing physical needs of people. The Building for Life standard encapsulated best design practice through a checklist of 20 questions used to judge the standard of design.

At the local level, current policies were in the process of change through the Local Development Framework (LDF). Some general policies had expired and others would be enshrined in the new Strategy but were not given any weight as yet.

The Breckland Design Guide had been in existence for some five years and many of the ideas and concepts in the Guide were repeated in national guidance and were therefore still useful and could be incorporated into future guidance, either in the LDF or in other policies.

So far as the issue of affordable housing standards and design was concerned, the picture was somewhat mixed at the present time. The Government's Homes and Communities Agency (HCA) had recently completed a survey on a number of affordable housing schemes around the country and reported that standards of design ranged from average to poor. Breckland's own experience mirrored this, where designs varied from good to ordinary.

There was a need to distinguish between the different types of affordable housing provision. Larger developments were dealt with through the Section 106 provisions.

Very little difference was being seen now between affordable and open market designed housing, at least in their external appearance. Internal specifications could be different. This was a big step forward from previous years in terms of creating mixed, inclusive communities.

Housing Associations (Registered Social Landlords (RSLs)) provided affordable housing in towns and villages either on general sites or on exception sites. Design was varied, both good and bad, and over the last 18 months or so, the Development Control Committee had seen examples where design qualities were lacking.

The Development Control Committee was in a difficult position, both keen to promote affordable housing schemes but having to question whether to support schemes that were not of a good design. In some instances, the Committee had given support to some developments to meet need but where the design was not inspiring but had been obliged to refuse others on design grounds.

Areas where affordable housing could improve was for schemes to be designed to better suit the site and location rather than the use of 'off the shelf' standard designs, i.e. that thought be given to the context of the site and character of the village and that this be incorporated into the scheme in some way.

There was a focus in affordable housing developments towards a high standard and environmental performance in the type of accommodation being provided and towards sustainable homes standards above that provided through the private housing market. However, there was a question whether this focus meant that the

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providers were overlooking the other issues relating to how they fitted with location and character. It was suggested this needed highlighting.

It would be possible through continued dialogue with providers on a consensus on what was good design to help focus on these wider issues.

A general discussion then took place, with issues being covered as follows:

- Standards of development – could the Council's policies be aimed at high standards of development, such as Poundbury, or was the authority bound by Government guidance?

It was explained that Government guidance was tending to move towards that level of quality, not only through building design but also street design. Government policy recognised good design as a key part of sustainable development and would not be an obstacle to local policy promoting higher design standards.

- Prefabricated dwellings – There had been a suggestion that these could be used to meet demand but was this desirable?

The answer depended on the circumstances; for example, the type of design or extent of prefabrication for assembly on site. Standards of design and factory builds had improved over the years and such types of building could be done more quickly and at a lesser cost. Modern designs meant that such dwellings did not have to look like a 'prefab'.

- Building design – Standards of design of affordable housing could be improved across the Breckland district. While there was an issue of cost attached to higher standards of building, there were some minor improvements that could be made which could significantly improve the aesthetic appearance of a scheme.

Often the focus was on achieving high internal standards, to the detriment of the external design features. There were examples of good designs, for example the pilot homes scheme at Yaxham, but some schemes were driven by issues of numbers and deliverability.

Some Housing Associations overcame this by using different Architects for different developments, which encouraged a variety of design and fit to location. This was not the situation in Breckland, where the RSLs tended to use a single Architect for schemes across the District.

The use of the pre-planning application process could also be used to strengthen and give better direction on design to applicants to encourage schemes to meet the Council's design principles.

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However, there needed to be a consistent approach as to what was required or desirable if appropriate guidance was to be given. For example, an emphasis on the use of flint in design was not always appropriate across the district. The use of other materials and the appropriateness of design needed to be considered.

It was also explained that there was a Forum in existence for RSLs which provided an opportunity to gain a consensus on this. The point was made that, notwithstanding their concerns with cost, RSLs also needed to be mindful of the Council's requirements in this area.

It was important for Members to say what they wanted in their communities. While the Council had more control over affordable housing provision through funding requirements, it had less influence with private developers. Hence the need for Members' views on what they wanted and how the Council wished to move forward on this aspect.

In answer to a question, the application of Section 106 provisions was explained and it was noted that the Council did not hold S106 financial contributions in large sums. Most S106 provision was used in actual developments, such as open space and affordable housing provision, rather than contributions in lieu. Any contributions that were made were spent on local projects, often in conjunction with the town or parish council, to meet the needs of the area. Use of monies had to be as specified under the S106 agreement (e.g. for provision of play area, recreation use) and could not be used for anything different (e.g. redecorating/refurbishing a village hall). A proposal for collection/spending of money on a grouped parish basis was something that was currently being investigated and consulted on. There was no indication of how this would work out as yet and a member highlighted there would be problems with grouping parishes as not all would be willing to participate in that way.

A member highlighted an issue of the definition of affordable housing being commonly mistaken as meaning social housing, which she felt was a problem. In reply, it was explained that the definition of affordable housing as given in national Planning Policy Statement 3 was as follows:

"Affordable housing is:

Affordable housing includes social rented and intermediate house, provided to specified eligible households whose needs are not met by the market. Affordable housing should:

- *Meet the needs of eligible households including availability at a cost low enough for them to afford, determined with regard to local incomes and local house prices.*
- *Include provision for the home to remain at an affordable price for future eligible households, or if these restrictions are lifted, for the subsidy to be recycled for alternative affordable housing provision."*

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There was a high need in the district for social rented property and that is what the Council aimed at.

The Housing Needs Survey identified a need for smaller units to meet need. It would be important that where planning applications were recommended for refusal on grounds that they did not meet needs, that this was adhered to.

A member spoke on the need to support local families in enabling young people to remain living in their villages and that there was a need to allow for the local connection in provision of affordable housing.

The local connection issue was a contentious issue. The department totally supported keeping families together but as a District Housing Authority, the Council had to have regard to provision across the board, which included persons wishing to move in or around the district for economic or other personal reasons. The Council had, therefore, to balance the needs of all.

Local connections could be applied to exception site schemes to meet local need.

However, the Council had to take account of issues of choice and some local people had reasons to move elsewhere in the district. Mutual exchanges also overrode the local connections criteria. Some people also preferred to move to the towns away from the villages.

Therefore, it could be seen that the Council was already dealing with these issues. Many of the reasons for moving around the district were the same for those renting as for those people who were buying property.

Discussion then turned to the issue that housing need could only be met from building houses and that this was the main issue that needed to be addressed, through looking at the provision of exception sites, self-build sites, flats, etc.

Issues of land banking and avoidance of S106 provisions on affordable housing by private developers were discussed. So far as the latter was concerned, the S106 provisions had been revised to ensure the conditions were met.

It was also suggested the LDF needed to be the key to ensuring a better mix of housing provision across the district, both for one and two bedroom houses and flats, as well as three and four bedroom bungalows for which there was also a demand that was not being met in full.

There was a balance to be drawn between these competing demands.

Park homes sites were also cited by a member as another alternative way of meeting needs and it was felt there was a demand for these types of homes.

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Self-build schemes were also felt to be a good option which the Council could encourage and an example of where this was already happening was given. The Council had no written policy setting out its aspirations in this regard and it was felt it would be helpful to establish such a policy.

It was also noted that it would be helpful to developers if the Council was able to prioritise the items it wished to see in developments so that they were aware of where there was or was not any room for compromise. However, it had to be borne in mind that a priority pursued in one area, could mean that something else could not be achieved.

A further question concerned whether the Council had confirmation of where S106 infrastructure contributions (e.g. for highways, schools etc) was spent. It was replied that this was a County Council responsibility. Little information was currently available and officers were pressing for details.

A member asked for a definition of the term "lifetime homes". This was defined as homes built in a way that could alter over time to meet a family's needs for adaptation but not involving huge structural changes. The affordable housing sector was at the forefront of this work but it did come at a cost. The private sector was not so advanced in this area. It also had to be recognised that it was hard to deliver as an across-the-board policy.

It was felt that the better way to achieve lifetime homes building standards was through changes to the Building Regulations to ensure implementation rather than through planning policy. This was something that the Government probably needed to be lobbied on.

In summing up their deliberations, Members agreed the following principles of housing provision needed to be taken into account in the draft Affordable Housing Strategy:

- Alternative options as guiding principles for the use of Breckland-owned land as well as the provision of affordable housing through the use of
 - Self build schemes
 - Park homes schemes
 - Replacing lost density in schemes from the provision of bungalows with other land & Flats / mixed tenures

- Principles of design to include:
 - Quality
 - Green issues
 - A move away from the use of 'standardised' designs towards more individually designed schemes to take account of location, context and character of the area
 - Design of places as well as houses
 - Embedding existing Design Guide principles

Following on from its discussions at the previous meeting, Members also confirmed they did not support the use of public subsidy towards S106 contributions for affordable housing.

It was confirmed the Strategy would also include the issue of the local connection policy.

19/09 WORK PROGRAMME

It was agreed the next meeting would be the final one for this Group, when the draft Strategy document would be submitted for their final consideration prior to its onward submission through the Overview and Scrutiny Commission towards adoption by the Council.

20/09 NEXT MEETING

The date for the next meeting was confirmed as 29 July 2009.

The meeting closed at 3.40 pm

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CHAIRMAN