

Extract from the minutes of the Scrutiny Panel meeting of 5 July 2022

359. Colchester's Housing Strategy 2022-27

Councillor Julie Young, Portfolio Holder for Housing and Communities, explained that it was a statutory duty for the Council to have a Strategy, which was being put in place for 2022 to 2027. This would give a vision for the future to provide access to safe and affordable housing, and to include content on private rental standards, neighbourhood improvements and health and wellbeing connotations.

Matt Sterling, Strategic Economic Growth Manager, gave a presentation on the content of the draft Strategy and explained that this would provide an overarching framework for other individual policies. The delivery plan for this Strategy was detailed and would include partnership working and Council contributions to the providing of housing by other organisations. Statistics were provided to show the extent of local needs and the demographics most in need. Key achievements were listed, including the 117 of 741 new homes built during 2020-21 being affordable housing.

Karen Paton, Housing Strategy Co-ordinator, informed the Panel of the updated evidence base and consultative work carried out to inform the Strategy. A project group had been used to examine views and evidence obtained. The draft Strategy had then been shared with officers, Colchester Borough Homes [CBH] and the Council's relevant partners. The Strategy had been drafted to align with national priorities. The Strategy's four key aims [Increased supply, Sustainability and Community Building, Improved Structure Standards, and Prevention of Homelessness] were outlined, with a separate strategy also to exist for tackling homelessness. The implementation and monitoring of the delivery plan was explained, with regular reporting to the Portfolio Holder for Housing and Communities. The Strategy would be an organic, evolving document.

The Chairman explained that the Panel would look at the Strategy and offer views as to whether it was fit for purpose. Praise was given for the clear presentation and explanation of the key priorities and how the Strategy had been formed around them. Questions were asked as to how to supply the greatest amount of necessary housing for sale and whether funding would be provided to housing associations for affordable housing developments or purchases.

The Panel discussed evictions from private rental properties, caused by landlords selling up and a variety of other reasons. Officers were asked for estimates as to the numbers of applicants joining the housing waiting list, and whether reasons were given for their needs to apply for housing. A Panel member also asked if data existed as to how many applicants were from Ukraine. The Strategic Economic Growth Manager explained that it was hard to predict eviction levels in the private rental

market. Council officers provided advice to local residents regarding the eviction process and as to how to register their housing need with the Council.

A Panel member noted that the average house price for Colchester was over £350k whilst the median income in Essex being around £27k, which made house buying unaffordable for many, thus increasing demand pressure on the rental market.

The 20% target for affordable housing as a percentage of new build properties was not met in 2020-21 and officers were asked how the Council would meet the updated target of 30%. The Strategic Economic Growth Manager outlined the range of different types of affordable housing schemes possible, with the Council striving to achieve a balance of the different types. The Council now routinely and successfully demanded that 30% of homes in new development be affordable housing. The four main avenues to increase affordable housing were to insist on it being included in developments (as planning gain), for the Council to build affordable housing itself, to buy stock (including homes sold under 'Right to Buy' provisions, and to work with non-profit deliverers (such as alms houses) to help them build more. A Panel member pushed for stronger wording than to 'seek' 30% of properties on new development to be affordable housing, and for the Council to examine why it does not achieve this 30% for all major developments. It was confirmed that the draft Strategy did call for 30% on all major developments, and that the Council sought this from all new major developments. Members discussed the instances where developers agreed to a set percentage of affordable housing, but later sought to reduce or remove requirements for affordable housing, on viability grounds. Assurance was given that the Council did its best, case by case, to hold developers to the requirement. Any request for variations to the requirement would need to be backed up by evidence to prove unviability.

The Panel discussed the possibility of prioritising local people to give them first chance to buy new affordable housing, before it is offered on the open market. The Portfolio Holder explained that, working with CBH, partnership schemes, the Council were looking at ways to offer new properties to local people first, such as the developments on sites formerly used for garages. A member highlighted a pilot trial, where an application for a village development had been granted subject to a local prioritisation scheme being tested when the properties were ready to be sold. Panel members suggested that the draft Strategy contain content that would lay out the Council's approach to prioritising sale of affordable housing to people with local connections or residency.

Caution was urged that affordable housing provision was just one part of developers' contributions to the local area and local authority. Some County Council members felt that the County Council's requests for section 106 contributions were often set at lower levels than they should be. Planning authorities such as the Council would need to be mindful of the overall financial commitment levels applying to developers and balance the requirements set upon them.

A Panel member queried the lack of environmental content, such as regarding allotments, minimising carbon output from transport options/car use, and on finding more green spaces. The Strategic Economic Growth Manager gave assurance that this would be covered in the framework and detailed in the delivery plan.

The Panel discussed whether to make recommendations regarding strict enforcement of the requirement that 30% of each new development be affordable housing and regarding prioritisation of local people and those with local links when affordable housing was completed. The Portfolio Holder emphasised Cabinet's commitment to pursuing the 30% requirement, and the other options for providing affordable housing. As a partner in Gateway to Homechoice, the Council would continue to take a sensitive but firm approach to making best use of the existing stock of housing in the social rental market.

RECOMMENDED to CABINET that the Council retains a target that 30% of the properties to be built for any major development must be required to be affordable housing.

RESOLVED that the Panel directs officers to present reports to the Panel on: -

- (a) Collection of Section 106 developer contributions
- (b) Family/local affiliation in letting and/or sale of local affordable housing and Gateway to Homechoice Allocations Policy