

Appendix 3 - People Overview and Scrutiny Committee

Recommendations from an Overview and Scrutiny workshop on the draft Housing Strategy

9 August 2022

1. Purpose

- 1.1 This paper is intended to set out the conclusions resulting from an Overview and Scrutiny workshop-style meeting held on 9 August 2022 to carry out pre-decision scrutiny of the draft Housing Strategy for West Northamptonshire Council. The workshop was led by the People Overview and Scrutiny Committee but was open to members of the Corporate and Place Overview and Scrutiny committees also to attend. The following councillors and officers participated:

People Overview and Scrutiny Committee

Cllr Rosie Herring (Chair)

Cllr Imran Chowdhury

Cllr Raymond Connolly

Cllr Karen Cooper

Cllr Janice Duffy

Cllr Sue Sharps

Cllr Mike Warren

Corporate Overview and Scrutiny Committee

Cllr Jamal Alwahabi

Cllr Sally Beardsworth

Cllr Rupert Frost

Cllr Keith Holland-Delamere

Cllr Ken Pritchard

Cllr Danielle Stone

Place Overview and Scrutiny Committee

Cllr William Barter

Cllr Terrie Eales

Cllr Nigel Hinch

Cllr Charles Morton

Cllr Kevin Parker

Cllr Ken Pritchard

Officers

Joanne Barrett, Assistant Director Housing and Communities

Jacqueline Brookes, Interim Head of Strategy and Partnerships

John Baldwin, consultant, 4OC

James Edmunds, Democratic Services Assistant Manager

Kathryn Holton, Committee Officer

2. Background

- 2.1 Housing and communities forms part of the remit of the People Overview and Scrutiny Committee but this is a topic that can cut across the remit of all three Overview and Scrutiny committees. Both the People and Place Overview and Scrutiny committees held workshop-style meetings during March 2022 to scrutinise work on the development of a new Housing Strategy for West Northamptonshire Council (WNC). Arising from this, the People Overview and Scrutiny Committee agreed to hold a further workshop to carry out pre-decision scrutiny of the final draft Strategy. The Co-ordinating Overview and Scrutiny Group subsequently agreed that this workshop should be open to members from all Overview and Scrutiny committees to attend.
- 2.2 This further workshop meeting was scheduled for 9th August 2022 to fit in with the timetable for developing the draft Strategy for presentation to the Cabinet meeting on 13th September 2022. The draft Strategy was circulated to Overview and Scrutiny councillors 24 hours before the workshop.

3. Scrutiny of the draft Housing Strategy

- 3.1 The Interim Head of Strategy and Partnerships gave an introductory presentation outlining the key themes of the draft Housing Strategy and how its development had been informed by stakeholder engagement and public consultation. The following points were highlighted:
- The four themes of the Strategy had not really changed since the previous engagement with Overview and Scrutiny in March 2022, which reflected the work done to develop them before that point.
 - Subsequent evidence-gathering had included engagement events with a range of internal and external stakeholders and validation workshops. The validation workshops had identified the need to strengthen the evidence-base for the Strategy.
 - Public consultation on the draft Strategy in April – May 2022 had produced over 600 responses, with most respondents agreeing with the proposed themes and priorities.
 - Feedback from stakeholders noted that the wording of priorities had seemed to focus on delivering outcomes for WNC rather than for customers and this had been addressed.
 - The key issues highlighted in responses to the public consultation were affordable housing and the provision of infrastructure supporting housing development.
 - Each theme in the Strategy had 6-7 priorities prior to the public consultation but these had since been consolidated and strengthened. The Strategy was now more focused on service users and targets had been added to allow monitoring.
- 3.2 Councillors considered the draft Strategy and introductory presentation. The following points were raised during the course of discussion:
- It was surprising that consultation responses had not given a higher priority to sustainably-built housing, particularly given current cost-of-living pressures.
 - It was questioned that the Strategy appeared to prioritise affordable housing rather than social housing.

- It was questioned whether WNC was considering further outsourcing of housing provision as part of the Housing Strategy and how WNC sought to maintain good engagement with outsourced providers.
- Partnership working was vital in relation to housing provision. Insufficient partnership working with the planning function could contribute to issues such as inadequate drainage or waste disposal facilities in flats.
- Biodiversity and green space should be given more prominence in future housing provision. Houses needed to retain heat in winter and lose it in summer.
- Some single bed homes were below the World Health Organisation (WHO) minimum space standard. The Housing Strategy could be more prescriptive on this issue and state that WNC would not accept homes below the WHO minimum standard.
- It could be necessary to raise social rents by 11-12% next year in line with the Consumer Price Index. This would not affect tenants on Universal Credit but the 29% of tenants who were working could find this situation unaffordable.
- The future Housing Strategy should include quality standards for housing that would cover problems arising from extreme weather conditions.
- Concern was expressed regarding the impact of increased fuel costs on both public and private tenants. If homes were heated less this might also result in condensation and damp that could damage buildings. WNC could consider taking a proactive approach to this issue.
- WNC should consider opportunities to make better use of existing housing supply as a whole, for example, by helping people who might wish to downsize from a home that was bigger than they needed. Shared ownership should also be available for people wanting to step down as well as to step up.
- Provision of the community infrastructure needed to support new housing development should be securely written into the Housing Strategy.
- Private sector housing was not subject to a rent cap. If landlords raised rents it could cause some tenants to become homeless and need to be housed by the local authority. The government should be encouraged to recognise the need for a more joined-up approach to this situation than just adding to demands on local authorities. At the same, it was noted that applying a rent cap could have a significant impact on private landlords facing increased mortgage costs. This could have a negative effect on housing supply.
- Concerns were expressed about developers not bringing forward existing brownfield sites for development and the potential for increased land-banking in future. It was questioned whether WNC could take a more robust approach to this issue by using compulsory purchase powers on brownfield land if it was not brought forward for development within a certain time.
- It was questioned whether WNC had information about who now owned local homes that had been purchased under the right-to-buy scheme. This would help to inform future provision and identify any issues that could result from properties ending up with private landlords.
- Effective future monitoring of the delivery of the Housing Strategy would help to address scams that could affect the housing market.
- The Housing Strategy needed to take into account that people's requirements changed over time.

- It was questioned whether WNC would have sufficient resources for functions needed to support actions set out in the Strategy, such as working with the private sector to improve standards and access.
- It was questioned whether WNC was still able to carry out small repairs for residents funded by putting a charge on their property. This approach could assist in supporting independent living.

3.3 Service officers made the following points during the course of discussion:

- The theme of delivering the homes that people need and afford was intended to recognise pressures on the cost of living. There was also very strong support in the Strategy for environmental sustainability.
- Social housing was a strong theme of the Strategy, with social rent properties to be provided where viable. The Strategy as a whole was intended to link in with and support WNC's Anti-Poverty Strategy.
- Further outsourcing of housing was not being considered as part of the proposed Housing Strategy: WNC was a new organisation and that would be a matter for the future. The financial regime that had applied when local authorities had made previous stock transfers had also now changed and a significant piece of work would need to be done to identify whether this approach would still be effective.
- WNC was currently working to re-set its relationship with Northampton Partnership Homes (NPH) following local government reorganisation, with a new governance structure to be put in place later in 2022. WNC also maintained good engagement with other local housing providers such as Grand Union Housing and Futures Housing, which had been involvement in the development of the Strategy as stakeholders.
- The creation of WNC as a unitary authority would assist with joined up working by bringing services together in one organisation. It was essential to work closely with the planning function on issues such as infrastructure provision. The Strategy proposed to create a new Housing Partnership Board, which would bring together key stakeholders.
- Minimum space standards were set out in local plans. It would be possible to incorporate standards in the Housing Strategy but care needed to be taken to ensure that this did not conflict with the local plans.
- WNC currently worked towards the national statutory definition of overcrowding. The Housing Allocations Policy was due to be reviewed in future and this work could consider whether WNC might adopt a different definition.
- Rent increases linked to inflation would be higher than they had been in recent years. WNC was working with NPH to model different scenarios. This involved balancing different factors: lower rent would result in NPH having less resources to meet other needs. Work was also being done on anti-poverty measures and signposting people to available support.
- The Anti-Poverty Strategy included actions directed at increased fuel costs.
- WNC could take some action that would help to make better overall use of existing homes through the Housing Allocations Policy but did also need to have a better offer in relation to downsizing in some parts of the local authority area.
- The intended aim of WNC taking a more proactive approach to developers not bringing forward brownfield sites for development was recognised. However, WNC

would need to consider how it could express this in practice to take into account the planning process and other relevant factors.

- The WNC Anti-Poverty Strategy included the aim of influencing the government to get a better deal for local communities. Consideration might be given to how the issue of private sector rent control could be brought into this. WNC did already seek to work with high-quality, ethical housing providers and to influence the market in this direction.
- There was not any recent work available on ownership of properties purchased under the right-to-buy scheme in West Northamptonshire.
- The West Northamptonshire Spatial Strategy informed the West Northamptonshire Strategic Plan that was due to be adopted in 2025. The proposed Housing Strategy covered the period to 2025 to reflect this: a new Housing Strategy would be developed for the period after 2025.
- WNC had sufficient capacity to meet current enforcement demands that would result from the Housing Strategy: bringing together existing locality-teams to work in a more authority-wide way would help to maximise capacity. Future demands would need to be considered as they arose.
- WNC put a charge on properties in order to carry out repair work in some circumstances, such as if a property was in a state of disrepair. However, it could be possible to look at other options that would assist residents to carry out repairs to their homes, such as ethical equity release schemes.

4. Conclusions

4.1 At the end of discussion the councillors present agreed that the following points should be represented to the Cabinet as the conclusions from the Overview and Scrutiny workshop session on the draft Housing Strategy:

- a) The importance of effective partnership working to the successful delivery of the Housing Strategy be emphasised.
- b) WNC should consider setting minimum space standards for new homes.
- c) WNC should consider reviewing the effectiveness of its existing housing stock in relation to extreme hot and cold weather conditions.
- d) WNC should consider the principle of setting a certain time by which community infrastructure relating to a new housing development should be provided.
- e) WNC should consider taking a more robust approach to land banking and cases of developers not bringing forward brownfield sites that could be developed.
- f) WNC should consider carrying out a study of the current ownership of properties in the authority purchased under the right-to-buy scheme, to assist in informing future housing provision.
- g) WNC should consider the potential to enhance local advertising of shared ownership products, including for home-owners looking to downsize.

- h) WNC should consider options for carrying out repairs on homes in the interests of supporting independent living funded by ethical equity release schemes.
- i) WNC should consider making representations to the government concerning the use of rent capping in the private rented housing sector, whilst making clear that this approach should not be used at the cost of reducing the private sector market.