

**JOINT MEETING OF ENVIRONMENT
AND SOCIAL AND COMMUNITY
OVERVIEW AND SCRUTINY COMMITTEES**

16th May, 2005

Present: Councillors Allen, Bishop, Buckland, Mrs. Driver, Mrs. D. Hale, Mrs. Hibbert, Mrs. Ledoux, Prince, Hazel Kitchin, Tony Sygerycz, and Frans Middelkoop.

Also

Attended: Councillor Webster (Deputy Neighbourhood and Community).

Apologies: Councillors Britter, Chaplin, Mrs. Franklin, Forbes, Mrs. Holliday, Nicholson, Mrs. Regan, Mrs. Ryder and Wheeler.
(6.30 p.m. – 8.30 p.m.)

1. Appointment of Chairman

Councillor Prince was appointed Chairman of the meeting.

2. Declarations of Interest including any whipping arrangements

Councillor Mrs Hale indicated an interest by virtue of Councillor M Hale being a Board member of Cheltenham Borough Homes.

Councillor Bishop also indicated she was a Board member of Cheltenham Borough Homes.

3. Public Questions

No public questions had been received.

4. Introductions

The Cabinet Deputy (Neighbourhood and Community) in setting the context for the draft Housing Strategy reminded the committee that housing was a statutory function of the borough council. The main elements were:

- To safeguard housing conditions for social housing and certain elements of private housing, for example, houses in multiple occupation. The Housing Act 2004 had introduced a Housing Health and Safety rating system against which decency standards were assessed.
- Administration of housing waiting list.
- Provision of social housing, either directly or indirectly. The borough council owned 4,800 homes managed by Cheltenham Borough Homes. This equated to about 10% of the town's housing stock.
- Provision of support to those who need it through homelessness or supporting people.

The borough council had performed well in all activities, receiving an A rating during the comprehensive performance assessment process for its balanced housing market diagnostic, and an excellent rating for its homelessness policies and strategy. Cheltenham Borough Homes had also received a two star rating. This had attracted substantial government funding of over £30m that would enable the Council to achieve decency standards for its stock.

The issue of housing, whilst being important at a personal level had a relatively low political profile. This was however likely to change if demand for housing units and housing prices continued to increase. Greater emphasis would therefore be needed to be placed on housing in a planning and social context.

5. Housing Needs Assessment 2004

The Assistant Director Community Services informed the committee that housing needs assessments were used to inform local housing strategies, support land use planning and other processes such as community care and regeneration. The Housing Needs Assessment 2004 had been carried out county-wide on behalf of the Gloucestershire County Strategy Group representing the six local housing authorities of Gloucestershire and the County's supporting people team. The data produced had been based on face-to-face surveys with 4,200 resident households; stakeholder focus groups and a review and analysis of secondary data and literature including previous housing needs surveys.

The data from the 2004 Housing Needs Assessment for Cheltenham had been assessed statistically to have a confidence interval of +/- 3.03%.

Examples of findings from the 2004 Housing Needs Assessment were as follows:

- 4.6% of households deemed their accommodation inadequate for their needs.
- 3.7% properties were overcrowded.
- 11.8% properties were under-occupied.
- 11.2% of households experienced fuel poverty.

Other findings from the assessment were:

- Within the county Cheltenham had the second highest price for entry level properties at £151,779. This would require a joint income of £2,700 per month to fund through conventional repayment mortgage.
- Based on a complex formula the backlog in demand for affordable properties in Cheltenham showed a net shortfall per annum of £2,520 properties per annum.

The Assistant Director (Neighbourhood Regeneration) then set out for the benefit of the committee the reasons why the housing strategies had been developed. In particular was the need to take full account of national, regional and local housing policies which would help develop clear priorities and targets both for the borough council and its partners. Even in a static population the growth in new households was driven by the increased number of single persons households, longer life expectancy and the general trend for couples to marry later. Current national policies relating to housing were set out in the Office of the Deputy Prime Minister's "Sustainable Communities –

Homes For All”, which proposed locating homes where they were most needed which would therefore put pressure on existing urban regions, and the Housing Act 2004.

The County and Cheltenham Community Plan both identified affordable housing as a key priority. To that end, through the local plan, housing developments of 15 or more dwellings would be required to provide 40% as affordable housing. This was seen as moving some way toward achieving a balanced and sustainable housing market, a priority within the Council’s business plan.

The Strategic Land Use Manager then set the draft Housing Strategy into the context of current land use planning as follows:

- Regional planning guidance – 2,400 new homes per annum in Gloucestershire between 1996-2016.
- The Gloucestershire Structure Plan second review 7,350 new homes in Cheltenham between 1991-2011.

Progress in achieving these targets is monitored through an annual land availability study which checks development on the ground against approved planning permission.

The Strategic Land Manager then informed committee of implications for future land use planning arising from the Gloucestershire Structure Plan third alteration (6,050 new homes in Cheltenham between mid-2001 to mid-2016) and long-term future housing required by the emerging Regional Spatial Strategy for the South West which was consulting on a requirement of between 15,000 and 45,000 new dwellings, in the principal urban areas of Cheltenham and Gloucester.

The Chairman then invited questions relating to the Housing Needs Assessment, the policy framework and draft housing strategy and the land use planning framework.

Councillor Buckland raised questions with regard to the 2004 housing needs assessment and how detailed information was gathered. The Assistant Director (Community Services) confirmed that the housing survey included both private sector and social housing. 700 surveys had been conducted from a cross section of the housing stock in Cheltenham. The figures as quoted were statistically proven to be reliable and the methodology was in accordance with government guidance.

Councillor Mrs. Driver referred to the County Council supporting people team and expressed the view that its contribution towards delivering services may decline.

The Assistant Director (Community Services) confirmed that the borough council had no control on this issue, as funding was made directly to the administering authority, i.e. the County Council by the government. The borough council would however continue to campaign on behalf of vulnerable persons to maximise services that could be made available to them.

Councillor Mrs. Driver indicated the strategy referred to a quantity of properties but that no mention was made of quality of life e.g. play areas.

It was confirmed that the Council's own developments all had increased facilities, with advice taken to design out crime on estates. High levels of insulation were also included. Local authority schemes were designed to "lifetime homes standards", private developments were generally designed to lower standards.

Councillor Allen suggested that a higher proportion of affordable houses on a development would impact on the costs of other houses. He also suggested affordable homes were usually larger.

The Assistant Director (Community Services) indicated that affordable properties were generally "pepper potted" around estates and should not be discernable from other properties. The subsidy costs for providing the affordable units would generally fall on the land owner rather than the developer. There should not be any house price inflation as a consequence.

The Deputy (Neighbourhood and Community) expressed the view that price inflation of housing had contributed to high level of borrowing against equity which had boosted disposable income and therefore stimulated the retail sectors. If interest rate were to rise the impact on house prices could be significant.

Councillor Mrs. Hibbert noted the draft strategy priority was affordable homes but it did not say how this would be achieved. She was also concerned at standards and the lack of input to private rented properties. The Assistant Director (Neighbourhood Regeneration) acknowledged the imbalance of demand for dwellings over supply. It raised issue of lack of land for development other than in green belt which was not necessarily an option. Standards of rented property in the private sector could only be raised by enforcement. Standards would however be lower than that required by the borough council-owned stock.

Councillor Buckland expressed his concern that a non-elected regional body was able to impose housing development targets for the Cheltenham area.

The Deputy (Neighbourhood and Community) restated the borough council had a duty to meet social housing need but it did not have a statutory role to provide housing for everyone.

Mr. Sygerycz expressed his disappointment that the draft strategy did not refer more to the needs of persons with disability. He acknowledged that the disabled facilities grant could ensure properties were converted to meet needs. If the property was in an area not well served by transport or other local amenities this could be to their disadvantage. The concept of sustainable development would therefore discriminate against the disabled.

The Assistant Director (Community Services) in responding indicated that there were eight special needs strategies which were updated every two to three years. New developments were generally developed under "lifetime homes principles to full mobility standards. He indicated that twelve full mobility bungalows had been constructed.

The Assistant Director (Community Services) acknowledged that if properties were developed to full mobility standard at the outset, the additional costs

would be between £2,000 - £5,000 whereas to convert an existing property was in the region of £60,000.

Mr. Sygerycz, asked if was possible to flag up to the Regional Assembly or the Office of the Deputy Prime Minister his concerns with regard to sustainable communities and sustainable development and disabilities. He was informed that this was already being done.

Mrs. Kitchin, with reference to elderly persons, commented that many, whilst being prepared to down size to single units, such as flats, did not get any fitter. She was surprised to note that some private sector developments of four or five storeys did not contain a lift. She sought reassurance that the private sector was made aware of a need to provide facilities which matched the various needs of future occupants.

The Strategic Land Use Manager confirmed that the need for local authorities to seek mixed and balanced communities would be the subject of discussion with developers at an early stage in order to raise such issues.

Councillor Prince sought clarification as to how the statistic of 3.7% household considered their properties were overcrowded was arrived at. He was informed that this would have been by self assessment through the survey process. He was also informed that a household experiencing fuel poverty was defined as one that spent in excess of 10% of disposable income on heating.

Councillor Prince also recognised the points raised by Mr. Sygerycz with regard to disability. He was of the view also that issues regarding the private rented sector were not adequately addressed or the demand for rental property recognised.

With regard to the improvements carried out by Cheltenham Borough Homes. The benefits of the improved internal facilities of the properties was to be welcomed, there was a need for the environmental and external features to also be addressed. He was informed that the uses to which the funding provided could be put were strictly controlled by the government.

6. Delivery of the Housing Strategy

(a) Decent homes in the public sector

The Assistant Director (Community Services) informed the committee that the establishment of an arms-length management organisation had enabled the Council to apply for government funding in addition to its own investment to achieve the decent homes standards by 2010. The two star rating achieved by Cheltenham Borough Homes had meant that in total £63m of investment could be spent on the Council's housing stock. This would therefore achieve the target of delivering decent home standards to all properties by 2010 and in 90% by 2007.

(b) Decent homes in the private sector

The Assistant Director (Neighbourhood and Regeneration) informed the committee that the government target was to ensure 70% of vulnerable householders were in decent homes by 2010. The Council's priorities to achieve this were:-

- Commission new private sector stock condition survey in 2005

- Target vulnerable households with grants and loans
- Use the new Housing Act power to use a “carrot and stick” approach to return empty homes into use.
- Ensure affordable warmth for all households by 2015 in connection with the County “warm and well” scheme
- Introduce a new licensing regime for houses in multiple occupation.

c. Affordable Housing – Cheltenham and Tewkesbury Market Partnership

The Partnership had been established to look at significant development sites identified through the planning system over the next seven years, With the aim of:-

- Delivering up to 900 affordable homes
- Maximise affordable provision
- Maximise financial contributions from development partners and the Housing Corporation.
- Reduce public sector costs per unit.
- Ensure training opportunities for local people to work in the construction industry.
- To build homes wherever possible to lifetime homes standards with low energy use.

Cheltenham and Tewkesbury Borough Councils had committed, subject to annual budget setting, £400,000 p.a. each and funding would be matched by £1m from the Housing Corporation and £1.2m per annum from the selected lead partner, Gloucestershire Housing Association.

Ten sites in Cheltenham had been identified (subject to planning consent) three within the Council’s ownership. Twelve sites had been identified within the Tewkesbury area.

In concluding the presentation, the Assistant Director (Neighbourhood Regeneration) posed the following challenges which were to be addressed:

- How do we work with others to build mixed sustainable communities?
- How do we increase the supply of affordable housing?
- What’s our investment plan to deliver decent homes in the private sector?
- How best do we engage with the regional agenda?
- How do we know what’s best for Cheltenham?

The Deputy (Neighbourhood Community) made the point that house prices could be controlled through availability of land but for Cheltenham this raised the prospect of building within the green belt.

Mr. Tony Sygerycz, sought clarification on the definition of “vulnerable” in the decency standard for private sector and was informed that the definition covered elderly over 60, children under five, persons on means tested benefits and those with disabilities.

Councillor Mrs Driver sought details of the sites identified in Cheltenham and also asked about the interest-free loans and queried how these would be recovered. It was explained that the loan would become a charge on the property and would be recovered whenever the property was sold. Details of the potential sites within Cheltenham could also be provided.

Councillor Allen, in referring to sustainable communities, commented that in developing sites, a sustainable structure was put in place including transport, schools and shops.

At the conclusion of the presentation the Acting Managing Director welcomed the debate which had launched a series of consultations about a complex but key part of the social agenda. The strategy had attempted to identify “need” and to highlight the work being undertaken with regard to local people in housing need within the context of national, regional and local issues. Members should now have a better understanding of the resources available to tackle the challenges and the need to make difficult choices. The completed housing strategy would be presented to Cabinet in mid-July. It was also pointed out that the development sites in both Cheltenham and Tewkesbury were detailed in the Draft Strategy

The importance of the housing strategy was emphasised and any feedback that individual members may have would be welcomed.

The Group Director (Environment) expressed the view that this meeting had given the opportunity to air issues around housing. She also encouraged members to feedback any views regarding housing, service and its delivery. The question of density of development was one that the Civic Pride group would look at and to take the debate forward with regard to quality of green space.

The Deputy (Neighbourhood and Community) welcomed the opportunity to discuss the housing strategy working draft and to reinforce the message that housing services needed to be looked at holistically. The over-riding problem was that with the high cost of town centre land the government solution required housing to be built on new land outside town centres. The regional approach would encourage urban sprawl which would not be welcomed by many people. It was therefore necessary for a balance to be found made up of an amalgam of solutions.

Councillor Prince in summing up the debate, encouraged members to read the document thoroughly as it was their opportunity to make comments in addition to those already made which would be incorporated into the final document when taken to the Cabinet.

**COUNCILLOR D PRINCE
CHAIRMAN**

Wording in italics added following meeting of Social and Community Overview and Scrutiny Committee held on 9th June 2005.