

Appendix 2

Economy and Enterprise OSC

Overview and Scrutiny County Durham Plan/ Housing Strategy Workshop

4 February 2019

Overview and Scrutiny Response to the Housing Strategy

The following members and co-optees attended the workshop:

Members: Councillors E Adam, J Atkinson, A Batey (Chair), M Clarke, J Considine, G Darkes, D Hall, T Henderson, P Howell, I Jewell, P Jopling, L Kennedy, R Manchester, L Maddison, J Makepeace, O Milburn, J Nicholson, A Patterson, S Quinn, A Reed, E Scott, A Shield, J Stephenson, K Thompson, J Turnbull, A Willis, C Wilson and M Wilson.

Co-optees: D Balls, G Binney, S Errington, P Holding and R Morris.

Below are the issues raised by Overview and Scrutiny members and co-optees during the themed group work focusing on the Housing Strategy.

Group 1 – Private Rented Sector Issues/messages

- Issues identified at Ferryhill regarding absentee landlords and housing standards in the private rented sector. Concern about blight, absence of prosecutions for ASB and disrepair. Suggestions that demolition of such properties could be considered and that more council action was needed.
- Similar issues experienced at Pelton/Grange Villa but with CAT intervention and multi-agency involvement the issues were addressed with engagement of members and the local residents.
- Does the Council have registers of all empty properties in the County and also absentee landlord details? We need a register of private sector properties. There was reference to the information of this nature being pulled together as part of the application for a private sector selective licensing scheme.

- More use of estate walkabouts needed to identify empty housing or housing/environmental blight. Support for more enforcement powers and a county wide selective licensing scheme for private sector rented housing.
- Under a selective licensing scheme breach of licensing conditions or failure to register would be and has been prosecuted.
- Concern about falling/inadequate housing standards within the private rented sector.
- Where properties are inspected they need to be subject to formal inspection.
- Concerns about the number of private sector landlords that are in fact merely speculative investors.
- Concern expressed that the Council needs to tackle problem tenants in the private rented sector and their movement from 1 settlement to another.
- This is not just about landlords but also tenant responsibilities and lettings agents also.
- Lettings agents are as responsible as Landlords.
- A selective licensing scheme for County Durham should be introduced which gives the Council and Partners the appropriate opportunities for enforcement action/prosecutions.
- The Council will only know who all property owners are when the preparatory work is done for the Selective Licensing scheme.
- The selective licensing scheme needs to include the appropriate staffing resource to support and manage the scheme.
- Does the housing team have the capacity to inspect private sector rented properties?
- The Council should adopt a targeted approach to those areas which have the most obvious issues associated with private sector rented properties.

- The selective licensing scheme must adopt this approach and needs to note and manage potential tenant dispersal.
- The selective licensing scheme must be evidence based and will be a fee based scheme when introduced.
- The Council should ensure that all prosecution/enforcement action is pursued to the fullest extent and across all services. The Council and partners need to be proactive in the use of enforcement powers and ensure that statistics and information regarding such work is published and made available to Local Councillors and the public.
- What can the Fire Service do regarding fire safety standards – This can only be applied to Houses in Multiple Occupation.
- We need multi agency work addressing private sector rented properties and the work done to combat blight.
- Concern at the time taken to address ASB/Housing blight/environmental issues when reported to the Council and Service groupings.
- Concern at the siting of caravans on private sector and RSL properties.
- Important to protect tenants against illegal evictions/unacceptable behaviour by landlords.
- Problems associated with transient tenants and the associated environmental blight/ASB. Who is responsible? Landlords? Need enforcement powers to ensure that landlords remove such environmental waste.
- The landlord accreditation scheme is to be welcomed but experience of the service is not good.
- Will a fee based approach add to the risk of Landlords not registering under the scheme?
- Concern that the level of fees must be appropriate and not a disincentive for private sector landlords registering under the scheme.
- Reference made to a teams around properties approach to address associated Environmental, health ASB and Neighbourhood problems.
- It is important that assistance is available to landlords under both the Selective Licensing Scheme and the landlord accreditation scheme.

- It is important that inexperienced landlords are supported.
- Illegal evictions and unscrupulous landlords are a concern.
- Could private sector rented properties be offered to RSLs to manage? – Buy to lease/rent schemes.
- What can the LA do to attract funding to address private sector housing standards and empty homes?
- LA should take more advantage of “buy back” for private sector rented properties.
- Could a private sector landlord’s forum be established to share best practice and information across the sector?
 - It is important that the County Council secures pledges of support from landlords in the private rented sector for its Selective Licensing application.

Group 2 – Empty Homes

Issues/messages

- New builds mean people no longer want to live in old terraces; even though the terraces may be better built and actually the rooms bigger. This results in terraced housing being by-passed and no longer used as starter homes. The progression from these old starter homes “up the housing ladder” has gone, aspirations have changed.
- There is a lack of infrastructure around homes that are empty so bringing them back into use can be an issue.
- New developments can cause village and community conflict as people move into the area and take the new developments.
- The decrease in desirability of old terraces means that they go to landlords and then further problems with absent landlords and empty homes can occur.
- Need to look at whether there is any legislation to make owners bring back empty homes. The problem can be that there are whole streets empty so where do you start? Legislation may be more effective with the odd house in the street that is empty rather than whole streets.

- Legislation should look at enforced sales where there are empty homes as a result of absent landlords.
- Selective Licensing will be a positive- welcomed by all.
- The strategy focus is on long-term empty homes, which is seen as a move in the right direction.
- CPO takes a long time and that is if the owner wants to work with the council so this may not be an option to tackle all empty homes.
- There is concern that the accreditation scheme will be misused if checks aren't robustly made. The scheme is voluntary so this can be open to abuse. We need selective and focused targets to show that the council will make sure landlords adhere to it. There is the danger that the private sector will attach to this good scheme and then the good landlords will leave because of what it has become, without checks.
- There are concerns with people who have lived in their house for a long time and find themselves living next to undesirable tenants. They can't move and can't do anything.
- Empty homes have an impact on neighbours such as where an empty home has drainage issues with waste seeping into the neighbouring houses or pointing issues. If the landlord is absent then how can it be rectified and so the landlord of the neighbours have to constantly do repairs.
- How do we help housing groups and associations? There is a buy back scheme but they may not be picking it up if it is off their radar.
- What about homelessness and empty homes, could that be a solution? There is an accommodation project with this in mind as housing people in b&b's as temporary accommodation is expensive.
- Some areas are impossible to bring back and so can't be saved and the only option is demolition but some are viable. How do we decide what houses to address and not waste money on areas that are beyond saving?
- Need to be careful that initiatives don't just displace the problem rather than address it.

- Regeneration needs to be of good quality to ensure sustainability including the management of the process. Integrity of the process is key.
- DCC has 3 enforcement officers so the authority is moving forward in the right direction.
- One problem with empty houses is that they tend to stay empty for a relatively long period which brings associated problems such as anti-social behaviour.
- It is felt that another issue is that the owners of the empty properties can be difficult to contact and when you do contact them it is difficult to get them to do anything about their houses. Enforcement needs to be stepped up to combat the blatant manipulation of policies and regulations that are in place.
- Need to look at why homes are empty too- is it that there are landlords who can't afford to refurbish or let them out or is it that there are absent landlords bulk buying and sitting on cheap stock. There is a problem with finding suitable tenants, if landlords have bad tenants who damage the property, landlords won't necessarily have the money to refurbish to rent out again and so it stays empty because the landlord just can't afford to do anything with it.
- Problem with rows of terraced housing in former pit villages sold off to private landlords.
- We should look at what the breakdown of empty homes in the county, what type of houses and what condition the properties are in such as are they deemed uninhabitable etc.
- There is also the issue of low demand in areas, which explains empty homes and would question if we should bring these homes back into use and the cost and whether they are viable.
- The Accreditation Scheme is a good thing as it sets minimum standards. Selective Licensing should also help with the rental sector.
- Most landlords are desperate for tenants, a lot will let them out to people who fail credit checks and don't have good references.
- CPO could reward the worst if there is the situation whereby the council buys back at market value.

- An area based approach is not a bad thing- those that need it most should get it because it could be our area next. We need a multi-agency approach in areas with large proportions of empty homes and then regarding the odd house that is empty we can have an intervention on singular empty homes.
- We need to work with housing associations to ensure best practice with this strategy on empty homes including groups with large housing stock.
- 106's - offsite affordable housing is a positive so that areas in need of quality affordable housing get it.
- Identify hotspots and incorporate this multi-agency working.
- Share best practice - including between authorities.
- Look at the wider aspect - areas on the margins not just solely on hotspots so that we can also see progress from our investment rather than black holes.
- We should also investigate what impact new developments have on an area- with new developments do people from the terraces move into them leaving the terraces empty or are the new developments filled with people migrating to the area meaning those in the terraces can't move up?- Is this a problem or not?

Group 3 – Affordable Homes

Issues/messages

- Support for the percentages of Affordable Homes proposed in the emerging County Durham Plan (varies across county from 10% to 25%).
- Need to ensure that the distribution of Affordable Homes is equitable across the county that it varies in type of housing offered and payment options including intermediate or social rent. The Affordable Homes offer needs to meet the needs of the local communities.
- Need to consider that the Affordable Homes being developed meet the needs of County Durham residents.
- Need to look at how we can increase the delivery of Affordable Homes completed on an annual basis. The Housing Strategy will help ensure that the framework is in place to ensure that we deliver more than just reliance of private developers.

- As well as the Housing Strategy, an opportunity to explore develop an Affordable Housing Strategy or Action Plan for the delivery of Affordable Housing across County Durham. This could provide a greater understanding regarding different models of delivery to be explored. Including whether DCC could look at Chapter Homes model of delivery and consider building own affordable homes in the county for both sale and rent.
- In relation to 'Right to Buy' properties providers should be encouraged to buy back however there is the issue of additional cost to the provider as they would be required to buy the property back at full market value. Recognised that we need to control what happens to these properties and restrict the numbers going to private landlords.
- Need to look at community led development in the county and build upon work currently being done, provides a 'bottom up approach' to housing, ensuring that future development meets the needs of the local community.
- The CDP and the Housing Strategy need to have a flexible approach in relation to Affordable Homes so that it can react to the changing needs of local communities.
- Suggest comparing our performance in relation to the delivery of Affordable Homes with other local authorities in the North East.
- Agreed need to explore whether financial contributions from developers can be used to bring empty homes back into use in the county and ensure that they are affordable.
- Need to look at creating Affordable Homes in the county for people to live in for the long-term not just to get residents on the property ladder.
- Work with registered providers to provide more affordable homes for rent. In addition, look at how we can work with registered providers to bring more homes which are in disrepair back into use allowing social housing providers to take over the management of these homes.
- Need to lobby Government in relation to requiring student accommodation to pay Council Tax via Business Rates.
- Concern that Affordable Housing is often high density which creates issues in relation to parking, need to ensure that design principles are adhered to.

- Need to ensure that the running costs of Affordable Homes such as energy costs are affordable to reduce fuel poverty.
- Challenge in increasing the number of affordable homes in rural areas of the county, issue with young people leaving rural areas as they cannot afford to rent or buy property.
- Need to consider growing further the tourism offer in our rural areas such as B&B accommodation which would result in more jobs in our rural areas and increase the ability of residents to either buy or rent Affordable Homes.
- Important to continue to develop skills in the county. If residents have skills desired by employers even if they are made unemployed they will find another job quickly but need housing in place to help them.
- Need to promote the support DCC currently provides to bring empty homes or homes requiring repair and modernisation back into use.

Group 4 - Infrastructure

Issues/messages

- The Western relief road is key to the infrastructure of County Durham and it was suggested that the road should incorporate a cycle track. Members were advised that the road will be accompanied by a cycling route. Discussion arose around the number of vehicles moving from developments to areas of employment and the impact this would have.
- The employment sites will be centred on the A19 and A1 and it was suggested this should also include the A68. Members were concerned about the congestion had hoped that the relief road would help to ease this especially around the Neville's Cross area and in Durham City Centre too. Members inquired how the relief roads were financed and were advised that this was through developer contributions and funding pots.
- Members advised that while this plan would provide comfort to some with a reduction in the number of housing sites there would be others who would challenge the sites still included. Members discussed that there had to be housing to get jobs, but it was a chicken and egg situation.
- There are issues with school places especially primary schools which had resulted in some cases children could not get into the local school and would have to travel further distances to attend school.

Development was maxing out capacity at the nearest schools and parents were then directed to schools further away. The number of developments and parents' freedom of choice impacted upon the availability of school places, but members suggested that the 2 mile radius for primary schools was too big and in some cases where village schools had closed children could be travelling more than 2 miles. Members suggested that the decision should be based on the density of the area. Members were advised that guidance was given by colleagues in Education Services.

- There are threats to GP's surgeries in the county with approximately 30% under threat due to lack of staff and this would impact on infrastructure. Members were advised that the authority was in discussion with CCGs. Members were concerned that GP surgeries do not comment on planning applications as the consultation is done with a communication officer of the CCGs and GPs themselves do not get a chance to comment. Members suggested there should be stronger relationships and more engagement with CCGs.
- Members were concerned that houses are being developed in the county with no supporting infrastructure e.g. a school closed but planning permission was given to build family homes and arrangements were made for children to attend schools elsewhere. 'It feels like the infrastructure is not planned'. Members were advised that infrastructure is being planned but the challenge for officers at DCC and partners is 'how do you deliver the infrastructure?'
- Members highlighted the importance of schools, GP surgeries, retail developments and amenities especially in rural areas.
- There was discussion about how to attract GPs to work in rural locations as there was a preference from GPs to live in urban areas. It was not only about GP surgeries but accident and emergency provision in rural areas were also under-provided and too far to travel. Members suggested that a potential solution was to train nurses as nurse practitioners. Members were concerned that CCGs do not respond to planning applications although engagement has taken place there was more work to be done, there were 70 GP practices in County Durham covered by 2 CCGs.
- There were concerns in relation to transport links to schools, colleges and places of employment and suggested that infrastructure should follow development. Members highlighted issues with public transport in areas where the last bus was before 8pm and in some rural areas there was only one bus per week in each direction. Sunday service was also a

problem for people who worked on a Sunday as public transport started later and was not as regular as weekdays.

- It was suggested that the amount of parking on developments should be addressed to create more parking. Members were advised that the parking standards have been revised recently to allow more parking at residential locations. Members discussed the width of roads on new developments and it was also highlighted that older estates cannot cope with the amount traffic today as they were developed in an era when there was little traffic.
- Issues with car parking in Durham City and that when the new DCC HQ is built there will be a reduction in available parking and suggested an extension of the park and ride scheme to enable shoppers and tourists to park. Members were advised that there would be an extension at Snipey and Belmont park and ride venues and Stonebridge would be added as a park and ride venue. Members suggested that Durham City needs further regeneration to become more vibrant and increase employment in the city. Members also commented that the Bus Station on North Road was inadequate and should be more welcoming. Members were advised that work is ongoing to improve the North Road bus station on its current location.
- Members suggested that the impact of schools and GP services were inter authority/cross border issues and that we had a duty to co-operate with neighbouring authorities.

Group 5 – Homes in rural areas

Issues/messages

- Infrastructure an issue including bus routes and schools etc. together with Wifi, Internet and mobile phone connectivity. Need to ensure that the infrastructure including transport and broadband connectivity is in place to retain people within their area and support the sustainability of local businesses and services.
- Sufficient land and land value, transport and accessibility.
- Affordability of housing – Young people are unable to stay within rural communities.
- Support the focus on homes for elderly and affordable housing.
- Exceptions policy for affordable housing in rural areas supported.

- Ageing population and a need to meet needs.
- Improve quality of jobs and transport infrastructure.
- Lack of older person housing, in particular bungalows means that there are limited opportunities for older people to downsize. This means that existing housing is not available to young families. Need opportunities for young people to get on the housing market but also housing for the elderly people.
- Lack of housing and opportunities means that young people move away and then don't return. This leads to an ageing demographic within villages.
- Commuter villages/towns - Not the local employment or work for owners within recent housing developments.
- Not sufficient mix of housing within rural communities. Need sustainable mixed developments that are affordable, accessible and meet the needs of all (.local need).
- Transport links in rural communities need improving as difficult to travel between rural villages to larger areas eg Middleton-in-Teesdale.
- Transport and accessibility particularly an issue for young and older people.
- High number of 2nd home or holiday rentals.
- Resident pressures against development within rural areas
- Affordable Housing – 10% minimum, need to be more proactive to meet people's needs.
- Social Landlords – Buying houses on estates can cause conflict with short term rentals and not sustainable. Welcome the potential to address these issues.
- Within Weardale and Teesdale where there is farming heritage there has historically been generations of families operating what was the family business but now younger people seeking wider opportunities away from the area and do not return.

- Consideration needs to be given to the density of houses and car parking infrastructure, it is noted that this will be addressed through policies within the CDP.
- Concerns about the suitability of properties for retirement homes.
- Consideration of mix of developments and assisted schemes for bungalows.
- Need to understand the nature of the area in relation to design. Design needs to be attractive.
- Private landlords with short term rentals risk decline and disruption with communities.
- Use of CPOs to develop existing empty or derelict plots.
- Access to GP and Health Services.

Group 6 – Homes for older people

Issues/messages

- Lack of suitable accommodation for older people – no-one wants to build bungalows and there is little rented accommodation for older people particularly if they require improved access eg wider access for wheelchairs etc.
- It was felt that changes to age limits within the lettings policy have meant that housing which was previously limited to being older people's accommodation is now available to a wider age group – sometimes to the detriment of older people and their established community. Younger people tend to have different lifestyles and this can cause issues locally leading to older people wanting to move and losing their sense of community and facing isolation. Example given of a street where a younger person was housed amongst a group of older people bungalows. The older people used a local community centre but after the young neighbour moved in, the older people moved out and the community centre eventually closed.
- It was recognised that some people may wish to live in a mixed age community rather than all older people living in one area.
- Reference was made to small projects in Langley Moor for the deaf and visually impaired that provides specialist facilities for all age groups and are successful.

- Dementia friendly housing – specialist housing to cater for increase in numbers of the population expected to be diagnosed with dementia. Also need to make outside areas dementia friendly too.
- Housing should be designed for people with their future needs in mind - as people age their housing needs change and they may require e.g. a downstairs bathroom. If housing could be designed to be flexible people could stay in them longer.
- Older people are often reluctant to move from their homes and they need to be able to stay in them longer with necessary adaptations. It was recognised that these could be costly and social landlords are reluctant to make adaptations unless they receive funds from the local authority.
- Aged Miners homes are recognised as being very good – large, well designed and maintained. They have room for family members to stay to assist with any caring.
- There was concern that Universal Credit rules had in some instances lead to younger people being asked to leave the family home and subsequently being allocated bungalows reducing this stock for older people.
- The suitability of bungalows size and number of bedrooms was discussed, as rooms could be very small and it was suggested that two bungalows could be developed into one larger.
- Members suggested that properties should be built which can then be adapted which would make the most of the existing housing stock in the future.
- Extra Care Homes were seen as a good option for some as residents could keep their own furniture, have own space, with some meals provided and cleaning included in the rent. The Elms in Chester le Street as an example. Also recognised that some people don't want to move from their villages and communities and as people get older they are generally more reluctant to leave their homes and communities. This means facilities should be delivered across the county to cater for need.
- Transport and general accessibility to facilities is key. Not just homes to be accessible but the surrounding locality – dropped kerbs is a key issue.

- Concern that developers insist that building bungalows is not economically viable for them. DCC needs to be much firmer with them. Members suggested that in only Registered Housing Providers (Livi... was identified) are prepared to build bungalows and it was commented that DCC should offer them land to build more. Importance to enforce planning policy to ensure that developers build 10% older people housing on their developments.
- It was recognised that not all older people want bungalows as they might have difficulties with maintaining a garden.
- Important to consider the wider infrastructure – transport, access to GP surgeries, local shops etc.
- Importance of succession planning for older properties.
- People do not want to move out of a bungalow into a house once they have lived in a bungalow.
- Difficulties around ensuring who is let a property. Issues with anti-social behaviour which produces conflict with surrounding residents.
- Not just older people that may require adaptations to properties – younger people with disabilities may also need wider door frames, adequate turning circle in bathrooms etc.
- The needs of a person determines what type of property they require. Specialist facilities could be supported housing or extra care. The OT assessment determines what the needs are.
- The 10% element for older people means meeting their needs – this could include additional rooms to enable multi-generational living, level access flats, or housing for specialist needs such as extra care in Chester le Street.
- It was confirmed that level access flats do not pose more of a fire risk. A fire risk is more likely due to issues such as mental health challenges, drugs and alcohol misuse, smoking and those living alone. Domestic sprinklers can be fitted to properties where there are vulnerable people.
- Members highlighted their concerns that the viability of sites is seen as a problem and how this is determined. Members were keen to stress they could be trusted to know their own communities and felt they had to challenge the planning service. County councillors and parish

councillors had a wealth of local knowledge in terms of the needs of their community.

- It was queried why the Fire & Rescue Service were not statutory consultees on planning matters apart from the location of hydrants. It was confirmed that building regulations covered safety matters etc.
- The Council needs to be stronger with developers around affordable homes and it was confirmed that all allocations in the Plan have been tested against the policies to ensure they are viable.