

FLINTSHIRE COUNTY COUNCIL

REPORT TO: HOUSING SCRUTINY COMMITTEE

DATE: 26TH SEPTEMBER 2012

REPORT BY: DIRECTOR OF COMMUNITY SERVICES

SUBJECT: DRAFT FLINTSHIRE LOCAL HOUSING STRATEGY
2012-2017

1.00 PURPOSE OF REPORT

- 1.1 To consider proposals within the Draft Local Housing Strategy attached at Appendix 1

2.00 BACKGROUND

- 2.1 This strategy is based on evidence from a number of sources including research commissioned by the Council comprising Flintshire's 2012 Housing Market Needs update.
- 2.2 Extensive consultation has been undertaken in developing this strategy and details of consultations undertaken are included in Section 11 of this report.
- 2.3 This strategy was jointly written with Wrexham County Borough Council, which has a similar housing profile and demographic trends to Flintshire. This partnership shared resources and highlighted opportunities for joint working in line with the Welsh Government's 'Making the Connections' principles and the Housing White Paper's promotion of effective regional collaboration.
- 2.4 Effective delivery of the strategy is dependent on responding to and complimenting other local and national policies. Locally, the strategy compliments the Flintshire Community Strategy 2009-2019 and the Flintshire Regeneration Strategy 2009-2020 where housing is seen as playing a crucial role in delivering these objectives.
- 2.5 The Welsh National Housing Strategy 2010: Improving Lives and Communities – Homes in Wales has three objectives and Flintshire's strategy has adopted these as its own. These are:
Provide more housing, more choice
Improve homes and communities
Improve housing-related services and support

The Welsh Government's Housing White Paper reinforces the national strategy.

- 2.6 As the national strategy sets the housing framework for the Flintshire Local Housing Strategy, the Council's Unitary Development Plan (UDP) frames the strategy in planning guidance. The UDP will specifically provide for the housing needs of the county through the provision of 7400 new dwellings over the plan period of 2000-2015. This provision will include a range of housing including affordable and special needs.
- 2.7 The 2008 credit crunch, subsequent global financial crisis and UK recession have created a very uncertain economic environment. This can be seen in a fall in private investment in housing coupled to reductions in mortgage finance, public subsidy and reducing public sector capital grants. Year on year reductions in Social Housing Grant will mean that the council and its housing association partners will need to find innovative ways to fund and build new affordable housing.
- 2.8 Although house prices have fallen since 2007, buying a house for the average first time buyer is not more affordable. Local wages, in the public and private sector, have seen small rises or have been frozen. As a result, an increasing number of people on 'reasonable' incomes cannot access the housing market due to limited mortgage products for first time buyers with most lenders requiring a 20% deposit. While it is difficult to get a mortgage due to stricter lending criteria and larger deposits, home ownership can still be more affordable than open market rent. There is consequently a need to carry out more research to assess the changes in aspirations and attitudes of Flintshire households to home ownership.
- 2.9 The Welfare Reform Act 2012 came into force on the 8th March 2012 and introduces significant reforms to the social security system. The act will change the way Flintshire and other local organisations provide services to low income and vulnerable people.
- 2.10 Flintshire is developing a comprehensive and long-term Welfare Reform Strategy which will link to the Housing Strategy in areas where the impact of the Act may lead to increases in: homelessness; demand for housing related support, welfare benefit and budgeting advice; evictions in both private and social sectors; demand for smaller accommodation; numbers of Houses in Multiple Occupation; and, pressure on the private rented sector as well as social rented housing.

3.00 CONSIDERATIONS

Flintshire's Strategy – A Quality Home for Everyone

Objective 1

Provide more housing, more choice

- 3.1 Flintshire's ambition is to increase the supply and variety of affordable homes by at least 740 new homes over the next five years. It will increase the number of affordable homes for purchase or rent and give more choice by broadening the range of homes and tenancy options to suit people at different stages of their lives, income levels and circumstances. This will also include increasing the supply of supported housing. Extra Care housing gives older people more choices, compliments existing sheltered housing and increases flexibility in approaches to supporting older people at home. Research shows that approximately 300 further units of Extra Care accommodation are currently needed and this is expected to increase by a further 10% by 2033. There are no extra care apartments in North West Flintshire and unmet need in North East and South Flintshire. Currently additional schemes are being considered.
- 3.2 Flintshire's Unitary Development Plan (UDP) requires 7400 new homes, 30% of which should be affordable. Flintshire's local planning guidance note LPGN9 further requires, the developer to consider affordable home types in the following preference order:-
1st Social Rented – through RSL
2nd Shared Ownership – through an RSL or other bona fide management organisation
3rd Subsidised Market Homes – provided as low cost discounted housing for sale
4th Private Rented – provided as low cost rented accommodation.
- 3.3 Flintshire offers a range of affordable housing options with developers and other partners. These are Social and Affordable Rental, Rent to Save, Shared Equity, First Time Buyer Loans, Homebuy and homes built as gifted units or using commuted sums. These continue to be developed in partnership with developers and Registered Social Landlords.
- 3.4 Flintshire will continue to explore new approaches to provide more affordable homes, designed to overcome the current financial barriers to accessing the housing market. These will be linked to investment with partners in renewal and regeneration schemes such as Flint Town Centre, the Deeside Housing Renewal Area and the Deeside Growth Zone.
- 3.5 In line with the Housing White Paper we will investigate alternative affordable housing options for people to meet their needs. This will include community land trusts, cooperative housing tenure and self-build.
- 3.6 Flintshire's current Social Housing Grant (SHG) programme, 2011-2014, amounts to £5.142 million and will build 102 new social rented homes. Uncertainty remains on future SHG funding levels beyond 2014.

Objective 2

Improve homes and communities

- 3.7 Improving the quality of the housing stock in Flintshire is at the core of ensuring the suitability and sustainability of its communities. The investment required in order to achieve the WHQS in the council's housing stock is well documented and following the completion of a private sector house condition survey in 2010 the level of investment required in private property is much clearer.
- 3.8 It is Flintshire's ambition to invest at least £49m in its own properties on WHQS improvements over the five years from 2013 to 2018. This investment will be prioritised on:
- Renewing 4880 kitchens
 - Upgrading and renewing 3550 central heating systems
 - Renewing 1300 bathrooms
 - Up grading 4667 smoke detectors
 - Investing £1m per year on disabled adaptation

This investment will generate 100 jobs and 10 apprenticeships through the use of local contractors helping to ensure that as much as possible of the investment remains within the local economy.

- 3.9 A Wales Audit Office report in January 2012 highlighted that 51% of local authority homes will reach WQHS by 2017. A new target date of 2020 for all social housing to reach WHQS has been established by the Welsh Government. Flintshire will work with the Ministerial task force established to consider options to achieve the target. Housing Revenue Account (HRA) subsidy arrangements were brought to an end in England in April 2012 and English authorities are now all self-financing. Welsh Ministers have expressed their commitment to ending the HRA arrangements in Wales.
- 3.10 Flintshire's Housing Association partners are working towards delivering WHQS across all their homes. The three housing associations in Flintshire would achieve the standard for 100% of their properties as follows:
- Pennaf by 2014/2015
 - Tai Clwyd by 2014/2015
 - Wales & West 2012/2013
- 3.11 It is Flintshire's ambition to improve the quality and standard of all existing houses and rented accommodation, including their energy efficiency. Everyone has the right to live in a home, which is in good repair, has ready access to all necessary amenities, and is free from physical hazards.
- 3.12 The Flintshire Private Sector House Condition Survey carried out in

2010 found that 32% of private property failed the Decent Homes Standard and over 24% had at least one Category 1 hazard. The council does not have sufficient funding to tackle the backlog of repair and renovation so its Private Sector Renewal and Improvement Policy, adopted in 2012, has prioritised and targeted action to support the strategy in achieving its objectives by:

- targeting action to vulnerable households living in non-decent homes, in line with Private Sector Stock Condition Survey findings
- increasing the proportion of homes that meet the decent homes standard by working with all stakeholders and service providers
- providing equity and low cost loans to vulnerable and lower income homeowners to make their homes decent
- reducing the health effects of poor housing conditions through a combination of advice, financial assistance, and appropriate enforcement action, ensuring that residents live in safe, warm and comfortable homes
- promoting the take up of a range of energy saving measures provided by a range of agencies to improve home energy efficiency and reduce fuel poverty
- promoting improvement and conversion of empty residential properties and obsolete commercial buildings to bring back in to use and increase the supply of affordable homes
- achieving a well maintained and managed private rented sector through the All Wales Landlord Accreditation Scheme by encouraging the professional development of landlords, through incentives, education, and advice

3.13 In the private sector Flintshire will offer a wide range of advice, loans and grants to owner occupiers and landlords to eliminate the most serious hazards, bring empty properties back into use and increase energy efficiency. The planned investment programme will be aligned with available funding from CESP, Arbed, Green Deal and other energy efficiency initiatives. Flintshire, with Denbighshire and Wrexham, is considering a fuel brokerage scheme to reduce the cost of heating oil to its tenants.

3.14 The Council will continue to regenerate Flintshire's existing homes through the Connah's Quay, Shotton and Queensferry Renewal Area and the Townscape Heritage Initiative.

3.15 Flintshire will review the capacity and location of the enforcement team within the organisation; raising the profile of landlord accreditation to professionalise the sector; review activity on illegal evictions; introduce additional licensing of HMOs; and, introduce fee earning services to support increased capacity within housing enforcement.

3.16 The Council will establish effective partnerships with landlords and corporate investors to increase provision of housing. The council will

protect the health, safety and welfare of private tenants through advice, negotiation, agreement and appropriate incentives. Enforcement action will be taken, if these methods have been exhausted, as a last resort.

Objective 3

Improve housing-related services and support

- 3.17 It is a national strategic priority to provide better services to make it easier for people to find suitable accommodation, particularly people from minority groups.
- 3.18 It is Flintshire's ambition to provide better services to improve people's lives through: collaboration and innovation to improve access to a suitable home; offer the best advice and support to sustain people in their home, whatever the tenure; and, promote independent living generally and specifically for an aging population by developing additional extra care schemes.
- 3.19 Good quality, local housing advice helps people make informed decisions on suitable housing provision. The establishment of a common access point for all North Wales aims to remove the barrier of multiple waiting lists and allocation policies. The Housing White Paper promotes further development of accessible housing registers. Flintshire is part of the North Wales Single Access Routes to Housing Project (SARTH). It is working with three other North Wales' councils and five housing associations to create a common access route to housing, bringing benefits to residents, local authorities and housing associations. The pilots for this project are expected to start in late 2013.
- 3.20 Flintshire will be examining options for the establishment of a social lettings agency as part of our strategy to increase the size of the private rental sector. A Lettings Agency involves letting property to a chosen tenant on behalf of the owner and dealing with all aspects of the let from then on, including the acceptance of any legal and financial liabilities. The difference between a Social Lettings Agency and a high street agency is that the target client base are people who are homeless, or may become homeless. Through this route Flintshire intends to help private landlords rent to target groups, such as young people, at affordable local housing allowance rates.
- 3.21 Flintshire is the most significant provider of Gypsy Traveller pitches in North Wales with 58% of authorised pitches. This is 15% of the total for Wales. The North Wales Gypsy Traveller Accommodation Needs Assessment found that demand for sites occurred along the main travelling routes through North Wales in Rhyl, Bangor, Colwyn Bay and Holyhead. No new locations were requested in Flintshire.

Flintshire will however continue to develop Gypsy Traveller services

by:

Managing Riverside Caravan Site

Managing unauthorised encampments

Coordinating support & welfare services to the community

Consider the expansion of the current site at Riverside, Queensferry to increase the number of residential pitches and provide short-stay transit pitches.

3.22 The Housing White Paper promotes effective regional collaboration on housing functions and services, including the Supporting People programme. From April 2012 Supporting People funding will be allocated regionally, with shared planning and commissioning of joint projects. The new North Wales regime will merge 2 funding streams, the Supporting People Grant and the Supporting People Programme Grant and be run by a new governance framework. As with other subsidies, Supporting People funding will reduce in the future.

3.23 In view of these changes, Flintshire aims to critically examine current Supporting People provision and articulate how local need will be met in the future. Over the next 12 months, Flintshire will:

- plan a number of short term pilot projects to make the best use of available funding and avoid decommissioning needed services. These will provide individual support and inform the strategic direction of its homeless prevention services
- collaborate with providers and stakeholders on a range of innovative support approaches and options to maximise much needed support from the available resources for as many vulnerable people as possible
- undertake a strategic review of accommodation based and floating support, including an assessment of need, supply and support pathways, to inform the future direction of housing support services

3.24 The overarching priorities for accommodation and services for vulnerable people are set out in the Flintshire County Council Supporting People Strategy 2010-2013. These are:

- To provide a range of support and accommodation models across all vulnerable groups and increase provision in rural areas;
- Ensure existing services are high quality and deliver positive outcomes;
- Link with the Social Housing Grant programme to facilitate new development;
- Improve access to services; and,
- Provide a mix of generic and more targeted services.

3.25

It is a national strategic priority to do as much as possible to prevent homelessness, but where it occurs Flintshire will provide efficient and effective services to help people find accommodation. The provision of

housing-related advice, guidance and support to help people stay in their homes and to help them make best use of their income is essential to achieving this.

- 3.26 The Housing White Paper contains a proposal aimed at placing a statutory duty on local authorities to prevent homelessness, ensure even better help is available for those who do become homeless and to end family homelessness by 2019.
- 3.27 Given the impact of the Welfare Reform Act and the proposals contained within the Housing White Paper it is an objective of the Flintshire Welfare Reform Strategy to review the Flintshire Homelessness Strategy to promote effective partnership working with internal and external providers, ensuring that the authority fulfils its statutory duties efficiently and cost effectively.
- 3.28 The Council will assist residents affected by the Act, to avoid it becoming a barrier to services and housing:
- It will work with other local authorities, using Welsh Government funding to proactively work with private landlords and their tenants who are at most risk of homelessness following reductions in their local housing allowance.
 - Flintshire's Income Maximisation (Welfare Rights) Service will offer specialist advice and representation to an increasing number of residents who are seeking assistance on appealing adverse decisions on their welfare benefit entitlement. Particularly, residents whose incapacity benefit claim has migrated over to employment and support allowance.
 - Flintshire's Housing Benefit Service is identifying tenants in the private rented sectors who will be affected by housing benefit reforms. Vulnerable households, for example where an adult receives a sickness benefit or children reside within the household, are offered advice and support ahead of their local housing allowance being reduced.
 - Plan to increase the number of units of temporary accommodation to house the anticipated increased homeless
 - Profiling of working age LA tenants who claim housing benefit is being carried out to assess those who would be affected by the 'bedroom tax'. Tenants will receive appropriate advice and support to overcome difficulties they may have in maintaining their contractual housing costs
 - Run awareness raising campaigns and provide training for tenants, landlords, members and officers on the Welfare Reform changes and the impact they may have upon residents, local communities and the local authority
- 3.29 The country is at a period where life expectancy is increasing. Consequently all strategies need to reflect locally the national priority of responding to the needs of an aging population. Flintshire has

already shown its commitment to helping vulnerable and older people to live independently and safely in their own homes through the Community Based Accommodation Support Service, which commenced in July 2012. Carrying out adaptations to people's homes to help people live independently will remain a priority, and the Disabled Facilities Grant programme will continue to be a key activity in the council's housing capital programme

4.00 RECOMMENDATIONS

Endorse the proposals contained within the Draft Local Housing Strategy

5.00 FINANCIAL IMPLICATIONS

There are no financial implication other than those noted within the body of the report

6.00 ANTI POVERTY IMPACT

The Strategy is designed to compliment the Council's current and emerging plans and strategies aimed at mitigating the effects of the Welfare Reform Act and current on-going anti-poverty activities.

7.00 ENVIRONMENTAL IMPACT

There are no direct environmental implications within the Strategy. The Strategy does however seek to compliment broader energy conservation initiatives and support sustainable housing development.

8.00 EQUALITIES IMPACT

The draft Strategy has been subject to the council's equalities impact assessment process

9.00 PERSONNEL IMPLICATIONS

There are no direct personnel implications from this report.

10.00 CONSULTATION REQUIRED

Ongoing consultation will be undertaken as the strategy is implemented

11.00 CONSULTATION UNDERTAKEN

Two major stakeholder consultation events were hosted jointly with Wrexham County Borough Council. The emerging strategy has been presented to the Health Social Care and Well-Being Partnership and the Children and Young Persons partnership. In addition several meetings with individual groups and representative bodies were held during 2012. Copies of the consultation draft have been circulated to many cross-sector organisations across Flintshire in addition to those operating across North Wales and North West England

12.00 APPENDICES

Flintshire Local Housing Strategy 2012-2017

LOCAL GOVERNMENT (ACCESS TO INFORMATION ACT) 1985
BACKGROUND DOCUMENTS

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