

At a meeting of the ECONOMIC PROSPERITY SCRUTINY COMMITTEE held remotely on TUESDAY 12TH JANUARY, 2021 at 4.30 p.m.

Present:-

Councillor D. Turner in the Chair

Councillors Blackburn, Blackett, M. Dixon, Fagan, Foster, Jackson, and Jenkins

Also in attendance:-

Mr Jim Diamond, Scrutiny Officer, Sunderland City Council

Mr Paul Wood, Principal Governance Services Officer, Sunderland City Council

Ms Catherine Auld, Assistant Director of Economic Regeneration

Mr Gary Baker, Planning Policy Team Leader

Mr Graham Scanlon, Assistant Director of Housing Services

The Chairman welcomed everyone to the meeting and introductions were made.

Apologies for Absence

Apologies were submitted on behalf of Councillors Marshall, D.E. Snowdon, Taylor and Thornton

Minutes of the Last Ordinary Meeting of the Scrutiny Committee held on 1st December 2020

A copy of the minutes of the last ordinary meeting of the Scrutiny Committee held on 1st December, 2020 was submitted.

(For copy report – see original minutes).

1. RESOLVED that the minutes of the last ordinary meeting of the Scrutiny Committee held on 1st December, 2020 (copy circulated), be confirmed and signed as a correct record

Declarations of Interest (including Whipping Declarations)

There were no declarations of interest made.

Reference from Cabinet – 15 8 December 2020 – Supplementary Planning Documents (SPD's)

(A) Draft Allocations and Designations Plan

(B) Land East of Washington (Washington Meadows) Supplementary Planning Document Scoping Report

(C) Draft Development Management Supplementary Planning Document

The Assistant Director of Law and Governance submitted a report (copy circulated) for the Committee to provide advice and consideration of the reports that were considered by Cabinet on 8 December 2020 which sought approval to undertake public consultation on the Draft Allocations and Designations Plan, the Land East of Washington (Washington Meadows) Supplementary Planning Document Scoping Report and the Draft Development Management Supplementary Planning Document.

(For copy report – see original minutes)

Mr Gary Baker, Planning Policy Team Leader presented the report and was on hand to answer Member queries.

(A) Draft Allocations and Designations Plan

Councillor Jackson commented that she was aware of the supplementary planning document and particularly how it affects HMO's in the St Peters Ward where there were a great deal of complaints made over these. Councillor Jackson queried when we would have the powers to restrict HMO's in areas that had reached saturation point.

Mr Baker advised that in terms of HMO's they had recently adopted the HMO SPD which had been presented to Scrutiny previously and went to Cabinet in December and had been formally adopted by the Council and would be a material planning consideration going forward as a key document in considering applications.

Councillor Blackburn queried why the designation to bring forward the land at Washington had changed so quickly. Mr Baker informed the Committee that this was due to a number of issues, Firstly, they had updated their Sunderland Housing Land Availability Assessment, which looked at how much housing land we had in supply, which identified they had a shortfall of over 200 houses in order to meet their housing requirement. The other key issue in play was housing land supply in Washington where approximately only 7% of the housing land supply over the planning period to 2033 was in Washington, which wasn't commensurate with the scale as a new town to expect that only 7% of housing growth would happen there.

As part of the Core Strategy examination they did propose a number of housing growth areas within Washington and several of those had been removed as part of the examination as not being suitable for housing development so this had reduced the housing supply in Washington further. These were the key issues in the decision to the early release of land.

Councillor Blackburn queried as to the expected size of Washington when it was originally planned and if this had been designated or just expected to continue to grow. Mr Baker advised that unfortunately he was not aware of that but obviously green belt boundaries had been established around the original town now so any further development opportunities in Washington was limited by green belt boundaries surrounding it.

Councillor Jenkins enquired if there was one specific area identified for these houses or if they would be over a number of areas. Mr Baker advised that within the Allocations and Designations Plan there were a number of places with around 50

different Housing allocations proposed, which a number of already had planning permission in place and a number with applications pending. So there was a range of sites across the city so it was not just focussing on one particular area.

The Chairman enquired if there was more information relating to the proposals for the Leamside Line. Mr Baker advised that the Leamside Line was a long standing ambition to have that line reinstated for passenger services and had also been identified as a potential metro extension through the Nexus Metro future study so we had safeguarded that rail alignment through the Core Strategy and Development Plan and through the Allocations and Designations Plan with two potential new location stations. By safeguarding the alignments and locations within a Development Plan it strengthened the Councils position with neighbouring Authorities when we tried to bid for money to reinstate the line. This was part of the justification for the realignment for the land east of Washington also with the location of a large housing site next to a proposed station location helps sustain and build the business case for the reintroduction of the Leamside Line.

(B) The land East of Washington (Washington Meadows) Supplementary Planning Document Scoping Report

With regards to the Leamside Line, Councillor M. Dixon enquired if the extension of the metro etc, could not go ahead, were there any concerns over the demand and feasibility of nearby developments or would they still be able to proceed without the this. Mr Baker believed they should still be able to proceed, obviously they would be much more sustainable developments if they could secure the reintroduction of the Leamside Line to introduce such services as the Metro there. Notwithstanding that there was infrastructure that would be required such as road upgrades, schooling which evidence was being prepared to understand what upgrades were required and would be fed into the Infrastructure Delivery Plan to ensure that it was delivered as part of that development.

Councillor M. Dixon enquired if Officers were optimistic that the Leamside Line and proposals surrounding it could take place. Mr Baker advised that it was difficult to comment upon as his Transport colleagues were more heavily involved on this side but could say that there were a great deal of parties involved such as Durham Council, South Tyneside Council, Gateshead Council and Transport for the North that were all supportive in wanting the reintroduction of the Leamside Line.

The Chairman queried if the Council was confident that the development would not be adversely affect by flooding. Mr Baker informed that there were areas within the development that were subject to flood risk. They had done a strategic flood risk assessment as part of the allocations and designations plan which identified that any flood risk could be mitigated though design. When the masterplan is prepared a flood risk assessment will be done for this particular site and it would be ensured that all the development parcels sit outside of those flood zones and carefully design the scheme to avoid those areas at most risk of flooding.

(C) Draft Development Management Supplementary Planning Document

Councillor Blackburn referred to section 2 and alterations to residential houses and enquired if there had been much of a change to this as he had received a number of queries on this from residents who had stated that they were being stopped from having particular extensions that other residential properties within their estate already had.

Mr Baker advised that this guidance did not substantially change the existing guidance we had in place, in the instances that Councillor Blackburn would be referring to, this depended on when those other extensions previously took place and if done over many years ago, then another design guidance may have been in place so each planning application was based on the policy at that point in time.

Having fully considered the report, the Chairman thanked Mr Baker and Ms Auld for their attendance

2. RESOLVED that the Committee received and noted the report with all comments made to be passed on to Cabinet.

Housing Issues - Update

The Assistant Director of Housing Services submitted a report (copy circulated) to provide the Committee with an update report on a range of housing issues facing the City

(For copy report – see original minutes)

Mr Graham Scanlon, Assistant Director of Housing Services presented the report along with a PowerPoint presentation and was on hand to answer Members queries.

In response to Councillor Blackburn's query, Mr Scanlon advised that at the moment all the sites they had looked at were brownfield sites and they did not envisage moving away from this practice. The sites being looked at were small infill sites which would be previously used sites.

Councillor Blackburn referred to the empty properties and the mention that other providers had looked at these for purchase and enquired if this would result in the price being driven up on the properties. Mr Scanlon advised that empty properties were assessed under an independent IRCS valuation so no registered provider could justifiably increase the value of a property so it should not change the dynamics of the market or inflate the value of the home and would always fall back on the market valuation which was comparable with the market in that area.

Councillor Blackburn enquired if it had been a private landlord in control of Dean Street in order for it to become into such a poor condition. Mr Scanlon advised that it had been privately owned and left empty for two years. Once entered they found the quality of fixtures and fittings was poor, the roof and doors were failing and they had to go back to scratch and start again. Our Building Services Team were leading on all the refurbishments and he was pleased to say that he was undertaking a review of this at the moment which it was hoped to secure some more local jobs and

increase the work coming through to ensure we have a lot of local job opportunities coming in place.

In response to Councillor Blackburn's query of if there would be the requirement for rent offices in the future, Mr Scanlon advised that there were no plans for this as they would be falling into line with our Council Tax arrangements. Direct Debits would be encouraged in the main but there would be facilities where tenants could pay at the normal offices as such but there would not be a designated housing rent counter and would all fall as part of the wider Council payment arrangements.

Councillor Blackburn advised that he and the Chairman had been in discussions with the Director of Finance in order for the ability of Council Tax to be paid at local post offices and enquired if rents would be the same. Mr Scanlon advised that when he had spoken to the Director of Finance on this issue he had been told that he could align the payment systems for the rents with the wider Council arrangements so if any changes were to come into place then he was quite happy to look at how they could extend that also.

In response to Councillor Blackburn's query as to how the other providers had taken the Councils competition in the market, Mr Scanlon commented that he did not believe they viewed the Council as competition as the Council always planned to play a small part and fill the gaps so for example we were building 5 bungalows on a site whereas Gentoo had a big development team that probably wouldn't want to develop only 5 homes and were more set up to do 15, 20, 30 bungalows and that was the way their resources were structured.

Mr Scanlon commented that as he viewed it, Gentoo were playing their role and doing a great job, looking at bigger developments whilst we were looking at smaller developments which tended to fill a gap but still provide much needed accommodation such as supported accommodation and meet physical disability needs that will make a difference locally and if anything he wanted us to be seen as a set of partners that wanted to make a difference for the good of the City.

Councillor Fagan commented that it was great news to see bungalows being developed, which was very much needed and queried where the Council stood in terms of Right to Buy on the properties proposed, Would tenants have the right to buy in the future and would we then have a shortage of social housing once more?

Mr Scanlon advised that the Council have to follow the legal situation with this regard, bungalows were exempt from right to buy as they were classed as specific specialist accommodation, the supported accommodation also would be exempt from the right to buy process also, however the empty properties were in essence general need homes and would come under the right to buy. Tenants would need to be in the properties for two years and then they would be subject to that opportunity to purchase their properties under the scheme.

As a Council, one of the primary drivers of this was to tackle the number of empty properties within the City so if someone wants to buy their property, so long as the Council gets their money back then they can move on and buy another property to hopefully progress the wider generation from there.

In response to Councillor Fagan's query, Mr Scanlon advised that Building Services would be carrying out the maintenance of the properties along with the refurbishments. He was presently looking at a new structure within Building Services to enable all arrangements to take place and hopefully allow to employ more people going forward.

Councillor Blackett commented that as there were quite a lot of potential changes in terms of housing across the Country due to the recession, COVID and the government's planning reforms that we had been hearing about over the past few months, he enquired if the plans we had were expected to be the picture going forward within the next year or two or was it likely to be changed and if so, how did they plan to adapt if the need arose.

Mr Scanlon believed their plans were based significantly on the data and evidence of our strategic priorities and the three strands align perfectly with our major issues within the City so at this point in time he did not believe the programme would dramatically change away from the three themes and would remain for the duration of the programme, which was for the next four years.

Councillor Jackson wished to comment on an excellent, uplifting presentation and it was great to hear what was happening in the City. Councillor Jackson enquired as to who to contact about properties that were persistently being reported/complaints made about the state of a property and the behaviour of its tenants.

Mr Scanlon advised that an email had recently been issued to Members which included an attachment on Housing and contained an email address which was a direct line from Members to his team who could pick up and coordinate all enforcement or investigation actions required. If any Members needed a further copy of the email he could send this on if they get in touch.

Councillor M. Dixon thanked Mr Scanlon for the presentation and commented that it was great to see so much work going on in the city and he was very supportive of it. Councillor Dixon referred to the Call before you Serve campaign and enquired as to the general reaction of landlords when they were able to make contact with them and what the general approach had been.

Mr Scanlon advised that as many landlords as possible were contacted within the private sector and a good, positive response was received as the Council was willing to engage and support them, not realising that the Council would do that and in the main the actual engagement was positive with some of the private landlords, because of the support offered were now suggesting that they would be willing to sign up to the accreditation scheme.

Mr Scanlon advised that it was planned to change the name from Call before you serve to Pre Eviction Support Service.

Councillor M. Dixon enquired if Gentoo kept in touch with the Team when there was an eviction taking place. Mr Scanlon advised that Gentoo did keep in touch on a whole range of issues and they were not carrying out evictions at this point in time but they did speak to them regularly and evictions and situations were made known to their Housing Options Team. There was a long process and a lot of conversations to take place before an eviction occurs, so every avenue was explored before

someone was evicted and his Team was passionate about trying to avoid an eviction if possible.

Councillor M. Dixon referred to the Homelessness programme and commented that the government had provided a lot of funding towards this, which the Council had match funded for six properties and enquired if these properties would be for one person, families or multiple occupants?

Mr Scanlon advised that the properties would be one bedroomed self contained accommodation and there would be no HMO shared accommodation type buildings.

Councillor M. Dixon queried if the homelessness team would be able to target Sunderland based people as historically, we have been a very generous Council and helped people who have come from other parts of the region and even other parts of the Country. Councillor Dixon queried if there was any sort of parameter in which we would rehouse or was it just whoever needed it?

Mr Scanlon informed the Committee that every person had a completely different story where there was a point in their lives where they were ready to move on into a more independent type of living so they did closely assess and support all of the cases that they work with. Where they did have more complex cases they look at other forms of support services to try and help those get out of the cycle of homelessness and move on with their lives.

Councillor M. Dixon referred to the funding received and enquired if they had to report back in relation to targets being met on empty homes for example. Mr Scanlon advised that the Next Steps Accommodation Programme funding was on the basis of providing 6 properties, purchased, acquired and available for let by the end of March 2021 and that was their output for that.

Mr Scanlon also informed the Committee of a new Homelessness prevention fund which the Council had done amazingly well out of, obtaining around £500,000 which they could use in the coming year for homelessness support.

Councillor M. Dixon referred to Back on the Map and enquired if the Council had any input with what they did or if it was more of a watching brief. Mr Scanlon advised that they did support Back on the Map and provided a loan support scheme in the past to buy properties when needed.

With regards to 13 group, Councillor M. Dixon queried who owned the vast land that they were to develop on and why had it been empty for the last 20-30 years when it seemed ripe for development. Mr Scanlon believed the plans had come forward now as the partners who owned the land were 13 Housing Group, Back on the Map and Home Group. Home Group had indicated that they no longer wished to hang onto the land. In the past the area had suffered from a reputation of being low value and difficult. Mr Scanlon believed there had been a perfect storm of opportunity where all the groups have been able to put all of the land parcels together as one development and then secure significant funding through Homes England to enable the viability and he did not think all of these things had come together in the past.

Councillor Jenkins wished to thank Mr Scanlon for a well presented report and complimented his Team on the level of refurbishments they had carried out suggesting that other partners could learn from these standards.

Mr Scanlon commented that they always set about trying to make their properties of a standard that maybe went above what others had done and this was the right approach so he was pleased Members approved.

The Chairman commented that it was nice to see that the Council were doing as much as possible to work with the Homeless especially during these winter months.

The Chairman also commented that having these bungalows that were adaptable for people with disabilities was very good.

Having fully considered the report, the Chairman thanked Mr Scanlon for his attendance

3. RESOLVED that the report be received and noted.

Annual Work Programme 2020-21

The Scrutiny and Members Support Co-ordinator submitted a report (copy circulated), to provide options, provide support and advise Members on the development of the scrutiny work programmes for 2020/2021

(For copy report – see original minutes).

Mr Jim Diamond, Scrutiny Officer presented the report for Members information

4. RESOLVED that the information contained in the work programme for 2020-2021 be noted.

Notice of Key Decisions

The Scrutiny and Members Support Co-ordinator submitted a report providing Members with an opportunity to consider the items on the Executive's Notice of Key Decisions for the 28-day period from 14th December, 2020 (copies circulated).

(For copy report and notice – see original minutes).

Mr Jim Diamond, Scrutiny Officer reminded Members to contact him if they required further information on any of the items included in the notice.

5. RESOLVED that the Notice of Key Decisions be received and noted.

The Chairman thanked Members and Officers for their attendance and closed the meeting.

(Signed) D. TURNER,
Chairman.