

Communities and Environment Scrutiny Committee

Report by Michael Hanley.

1. WAFG Local Plan, Housing Focus.

V Taylor (VT, LD): Discussed the Local Plan and where and what will be built. Currently there are five local plans. We are required to have a new local plan within five years. There will be a single local plan for Eden, South Lakes and Barrow. Housing numbers considerably larger than the previous government required.

Rachel Armstrong (RA, Planning Policy Manager): We are at a very early stage. How will the area change over the next 15 years. How much development and new infrastructure will there be? An increase of 520% in housing is expected by the government (650 affordable homes).

As for sites, over 400 have been received. A “design code” is setting up standards for new residential development. This will be ready from spring 2025. There is a need to ensure that new developments are of high quality. We will also be able to refuse poor quality developments.

There will be a public consultation on the Local Plan.

E Hennessy (EH, Chair, LD): The membership of the steering group is very limited. Asked about communication with other councillors.

VT: We cannot expect the officers to do a great deal more. There is information on the members’ portal (internet).

B McEwan (BME, L): Asked about members of the working (steering) group reporting back to the locality boards.

RA: The leader of each locality is on the group.

L Baker (LB, LD): There are 450 (potential) sites, is that good?

RA: We don’t know. Teams are working through those sites. Some are very large sites. We don’t know what constraints there are...flood zones etc.

B Cooper (BC, C): There will be a doubling (of developments). We will have to approve a lot more planning applications. How likely are we going to meet these targets?

VT: It’s scary as to how we are going to deliver this. We need lots more affordable houses, especially in rural areas. It’s a tall order. We hope that the developers will cooperate with what we want to do. All we can do is try.

J Derbyshire (JD, LD): The goal posts are moving and the ground underneath is also changing. There is a huge amount to do.

BME: Some of these developers take the Micky. They come and say they can’t afford to build affordable housing. Angela Raynor wants to build more social housing.

VT: The new government is very active in this space. We hope that they will be able to provide the tools to do this. It isn’t the planners that are holding up development, it’s the economics.

BME: The the Right to Buy, you (councils and housing associations) sell them off but you are not allowed to build any more, that’s not right.

J Boak (JB, LD): Asked about brown-field sites.

RA: We will be looking at brown-field sites that may be suitable. There 30-40 brown-field sites.

G Simpkins (GS, LD): Asked about the closing date for applications.

RA: The date was the 30th of September. We have extended it to 30.10.24.

GS: Once closed, is that it for 15 years.

RA: No, there may be a further call for sites depending on need. All sites will have to be assessed.

LB: Asked about house types: bungalows, two and three bedroomed two story houses. Could this form part of the viability assessment.

Laura Chamberlain (LC, Specialist Strategy): Yes, this will be a key issue.

EH: How do you plan for the infrastructure, the roads, GP surgeries, schools etc.

LC: There is the CIL (Community Infrastructure Levy) in South Lakes, this might be rolled out in other areas. Also there is the Infrastructure Delivery Plan.

RA: Section 106 is expected to contribute to the infrastructure.

BC: Asked about changing village boundaries.

LC: Yes, this might happen.

3. Housing Strategy.

JD: This is about what we are going to do about various things such as empty houses, temporary accommodation, homelessness etc.

Caroline Wagstaff (CW, Assistant Director of Housing): Discussed reducing homelessness, the ageing population, affordable housing, rural housing crisis, neighbourhood regeneration, decarbonising, increased energy efficiency (of homes), reducing fuel poverty and reducing housing in poor condition. The London boroughs are spending £4 million per day on temporary housing (for the homeless).

Amanda Yellowlees: (AY, WAFC officer): Discussed the elderly. One in three will be 65 or older by 2043. We will need to develop a special housing officer for the over 85-year-olds. New types of housing especially for the elderly will have to be developed. 18% of the population have some form of disability for whom Disabled Facilities Grants (DFGs) are available. It is important that they have the right support so that they can live independently. With regard to temporary accommodation, some residents are staying there longer than needed and we need to find alternatives (moribund properties, hard-to-let units).

Jeremy Hewitson (JH, Strategy Lead, Development and Enabling): Some parts of WAFC have the least affordable housing outside the south-east of England. 37% of the population's income is less than £30k per annum. Less than 11% of the population is in social rented accommodation (council and housing association). The English average is 16%. There is a chronic lack of affordable housing. There needs to be an increase in short stay lets and reduced private rentals. In sparsely populated areas, residents experience physical and digital isolation.

CW: Discussed areas with more poverty such as Barrow which is within the 10% most deprived area of England. Barrow needs to develop a holistic neighbourhood renewal approach. £200 million is coming in the form of the Barrow Transformation Fund which will be used to build more houses, develop transport and local schools. There will be a further £15 million for growth and regeneration.

AY: Discussed the strategy for empty homes. Residents can report an empty home.

CW: Discussed decarbonising homes. 15% of households in fuel poverty in 2020. The English Housing Survey shows 14% of all homes to be non-decent, within the private rented sector this is 23%. There is a need to ensure all new homes have a high energy efficiency. We have to manage the 2600 council homes (mainly in Barrow). Poor quality housing is mainly in the private rental sector and the main problem is damp and mould. We are tackling private landlords to deal with this.

There is the Regeneration Reform Order which will help private owners with repair, adaptations etc and include DFGs.

EH: Is it true that if we used all the empty properties, that would solve our housing problem? How successful is compulsory purchase (of empty properties)?

CW: We wouldn't go in with enforcement as the first thing. We would investigate first.

AY: Some residents may be going through probate which means that a property may be empty for 6 months.

M Hanley (MH, L): CW had mentioned new building when talking about maintenance of council houses. Did this mean that WAFC might start building council houses in the future?

CW: Yes, we hope to be able to build new council houses in the future. We will have to develop a new team and it depends on what comes in the budget.

JD: I asked why Barrow hadn't built more council houses and they said that when they built new houses they got snapped up with the Right to Buy, so they gave up.