



Lewes District Council

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Scrutiny Panel – Provision of Affordable Housing in Urban Areas

Minutes of a meeting of the **Scrutiny Panel – Provision of Affordable Housing in Urban Areas** held in **Malling Community Centre, Spences Lane, Lewes** on **Monday 19 November 2012 at 3:00pm**

Present:

Councillors S J Osborne (Chair), P F Gardiner, J V Harris, E C Merry, I A Nicholson and J Stockdale

Officers Attending:

R Allan, Scrutiny and Committee Officer
L Frost, Director of Planning and Environmental Services
I Kedge, Head of Environmental Health
L Rowe, Housing Policy and Development Manager

In attendance:

Councillor S Catlin, Lewes Town Council
R Cheesman, South Downs Society
Councillor N Harrison, South Downs National Park Authority
J Gardner, HomeLink
J Hill, Ringmer Parish Council
J Kay, Campaign to Protect Rural England
Councillor S Murray, Lewes Town Council
Councillor R Murray, Lewes Town Council
A Simpson, Lewes Community Land Trust
R Turner, Ringmer Parish Council

Minutes

4 Provision of Affordable Housing in Urban Areas

The Chair of the Panel welcomed the stakeholders to the meeting and explained the background to the Review. The Panel and all the stakeholders agreed that there was a need for more affordable housing in the urban areas of the District.

The Housing Policy and Development Manager took the Panel through the definition of affordable housing that was used for the Review. Affordable housing included homes rented at rent levels at approximately 50% of the local market level (social rented), homes rented at affordable rent levels at approximately 80% of the market rent (affordable rent), homes that were sold as a part buy/part rent (shared ownership) or homes that were sold as

a part equity purchase (shared equity). A discussion followed, and stakeholders questioned whether the description of affordable housing within planning policy needed to be more specific, or whether a degree of flexibility was required.

In response to a Councillor's question, the Housing Policy and Development Manager explained that the majority of affordable housing in the District was social rented, and that there had been very little shared equity housing provided within the District. Stakeholders informed the Panel that feedback from local residents found that many families could not afford to live in the urban areas of the District, particularly Lewes where house prices and rents were highest. They were concerned that the lack of families who both lived and worked within the District could have an effect on the economic footfall in the town centres. This was because high house prices tended to attract commuters who could earn higher wages outside the District, but were only around locally for part of the week.

The Head of Environmental Health advised that the lack of affordable housing in the District had led to an additional pressure on the private rented sector, and that the provision of more affordable housing could ease that pressure.

The Panel discussed the proportion of affordable housing that was required by Lewes District Council within new housing schemes and whether the level should be raised. The Housing Policy and Development Manager confirmed that the current policy stated that the level of affordable housing required within a housing scheme was 25%, but that the level could increase to 40% in new proposals contained in the Local Plan Core Strategy. He added that it was important to ensure that schemes were economically viable.

Stakeholders questioned whether Lewes District Council offered land that was owned by the Council at a rate below market value to incentivise housing developers to build affordable housing. The Housing Policy and Development Manager explained that the Housing Department was currently examining whether land owned by the Housing Department, such as disused garage sites, could be turned into new affordable housing.

The stakeholders made various suggestions to the Panel about how to improve the amount of affordable housing in the District, namely:

- Providing land that the District Council owned at a cheaper than market rate value to housing developers to incentivise the building of affordable housing.
- Offering to reduce the size of larger private gardens in the District to provide extra affordable housing on said land.
- Using empty shops as potential sites for affordable housing.

- Helping shopkeepers in developing empty floorspace they own above shops to use as affordable housing.
- The use of empty buildings across the District, such as the Magistrates Court and Springland House in Lewes for affordable housing.
- The use of empty buildings owned by statutory bodies, such as the County Council and the NHS, to provide affordable housing and to negotiate lower than market rate land prices.
- The use of redundant railway buildings and BT telephone exchanges for affordable housing.
- Building multi-storeys and using airspace over current land, such as car parks.
- Establishing if there was any church owned land that could be used for affordable housing.
- Going into partnership with a lettings agency, or setting up an agency at the District Council to help provide appropriate housing.
- Use of the Localism Act's new provisions, such as Community Right to Bid and the general power of competence to help provide new affordable housing.
- Establishing if any of the redundant or underused central Government buildings in the District could be used for affordable housing.
- The building of smaller studio and one-bedroom flats to provide extra affordable housing (increasing the units on a scheme).
- The creation of new Council housing.
- Flat pack housing.

Councillor Harrison from the South Downs National Park Authority (SDNP) reminded the Panel that the town of Lewes was part of the South Downs National Park, and that any new building must take the Park's considerations into account. He clarified that the SDNP supported the additional provision of affordable housing in the District.

Members of the Panel suggested that a survey could be undertaken with local shopkeepers to ascertain if there was a desire to develop any empty properties above shops. They added that it was important to implement the ideas that took less time to execute as the need for affordable housing in urban areas was pressing.

The Chair thanked stakeholders for attending and closed the meeting in order to discuss affordable housing in urban areas with members of the public who had attended the meeting.

Resolved:

- 4.1 That a vote of thanks be accorded to the stakeholders who attended the Scrutiny Panel meeting on 19 November 2012 for their contributions to the Scrutiny Review on the Provision of Affordable Housing in Urban Areas;
- 4.2 That the Housing Policy and Development Manager be requested to undertake a survey with local shopkeepers in the District to ascertain if the Council could assist in the development of empty properties above shops into affordable housing; and
- 4.3 That the Scrutiny and Committee Officer be requested to ensure that the feedback from the Scrutiny Panel meeting on 19 November 2012 be considered as part of the Scrutiny Review on the Provision of Affordable Housing in Urban Areas.

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5 Date of Next Meeting

Resolved:

- 5.1 That the next meeting of the Scrutiny Panel - Provision of Affordable Housing in Urban Areas be held on Wednesday 28 November 2012 at 10.00am in the Hillcrest Centre, Hillcrest Road, Newhaven.

All to note

The meeting ended at 6.00pm

S J Osborne
Chair