

Minutes of the meeting of the Connected Communities Scrutiny Committee held in Conference Room 1 - Herefordshire Council, Plough Lane Offices, Hereford, HR4 0LE on Wednesday 10 July 2024 at 10.00 am

Committee members present in person and voting: **Councillors: Bruce Baker, Frank Cornthwaite (Vice-Chairperson), Dave Davies, David Hitchiner, Ed O'Driscoll (Chairperson), Rob Owens and Diana Toynbee**

Others in attendance: R Allonby (Service Director Economy and Growth), M Averill (Service Director Environment and Highways), B Baugh (Democratic Services Officer), R Cook (Corporate Director - Economy and Environment), J Higgins (Democratic Services Support Officer), S Holland (Interim Head of Housing Development), D Webb (Statutory Scrutiny Officer) and S Woodhouse (Housing Operations Service Manager)

[Link to the meeting page, including the video for each agenda item](#)

1. APOLOGIES FOR ABSENCE

Apologies for absence had been received from Councillor Roger Phillips.

2. NAMED SUBSTITUTES

Councillors Dave Davies was present as the named substitute for Councillor Roger Phillips.

3. DECLARATIONS OF INTEREST

No declarations of interest were made.

4. MINUTES

The minutes of the previous meeting were received.

Resolved:

That the minutes of the meeting held on 27 February 2024 be confirmed as a correct record and be signed by the Chairperson.

5. QUESTIONS FROM MEMBERS OF THE PUBLIC

A document containing a question received from a member of the public and the response provided was included in supplement to the agenda: [Link to Supplement 2](#).

6. QUESTIONS FROM MEMBERS OF THE COUNCIL

No questions had been received from councillors.

7. AFFORDABLE AND SOCIAL HOUSING IN HEREFORDSHIRE

The committee received the presentation 'Affordable housing and housing need in Herefordshire'. The Housing Operations Service Manager presented the slides: *Introduction; An overview; What is affordable housing?; Affordable housing tenures; Current housing situation in the county; Who delivers housing / services in Herefordshire?; How do we deliver additional housing in the county?; Delivery figures 2019-2024; Variety of completed schemes; Setting the context (1); Setting the context (2); What are we doing about it?; What do we need?; and Questions.*

At the request of the Chairperson, the notes that were read out were published following the meeting: [Link to 'Affordable housing and housing need in Herefordshire' \(with notes\)](#).

The principal points of the discussion included:

1. The potential for government policy reforms following the recent general election.
2. The need to refresh the [Herefordshire Housing Market Needs Assessment 2021](#) which formed part of the evidence base for the development of the Local Plan. Later in the meeting, it was noted that the needs assessment identified local housing market area geographies and housing needs.
3. Capacity and resource issues were outlined, including the need for: dedicated support to help people to move on from temporary accommodation; enhanced incentives for private landlords; and properties that the council could manage itself. The committee was advised that registered providers of social housing were excluding some customers, and the introduction of credit checks was likely to impact others.
4. The Chairperson explained that commissioned research into housing delivery models was due to be considered by the committee in October 2024 and that any cross cutting matters that may arise could be identified to the Scrutiny Management Board or to the relevant scrutiny committee.
5. An overview was provided of the complexities and lengthy processes associated with bringing empty properties back into use through the council.
6. It was reported that the Council Tax and Business Rates Team would hold details of the number of second homes in the county. A committee member questioned whether the council's policy on the levying of empty homes and second homes Council Tax premiums would have implications for the local market, and whether this funding could be used for housing related initiatives.
7. With reference made to the slide *Delivery figures 2019-2024*, it was noted that the number of affordable units delivered had exceeded the yearly target but it was questioned whether this had kept pace with the increasing level of demand. It was also noted that 1,957 households were on the waiting list for general needs affordable housing.
8. A further paper was requested on the issues raised in the meeting to complement the work to be undertaken in October 2024.
9. It was noted that the council had taken the decision to become a registered provider and it was suggested that a 'right to buy-back' scheme could be explored.
10. The Service Director Economy and Growth commented on the importance of housing and infrastructure in supporting the local economy and communities. It

was noted that the council could add to its small amount of stock but a Housing Revenue Account would be required if the number of properties owned reached 200 or more, with consequential financial and operational challenges. The committee was advised that the commissioned research would look at options and best practice from other areas. The committee was also advised that a report was being prepared to seek Council's approval for the addition of capital budget to provide an acquisition fund for housing provision: [Link to Council minutes, 26 July 2024](#).

11. An overview was provided of the position with a stalled affordable housing scheme at the former Holmer Trading Estate, due to the modular homes supplier going into administration, and the efforts of the registered provider to secure another contractor. It was reported that each development site had a designated development officer in the strategic housing team who worked proactively to bring sites forward.
12. It was noted that 120 households were in a form of temporary accommodation arranged by the local authority, a 100% increase on pre-pandemic levels; this increase reflected the picture nationally.
13. It was confirmed that the council did not have any legal authority over any registered provider and any issues around property management had to go through a formal complaints process, and the Housing Ombudsman Service. It was noted that registered providers were regulated by the Regulator of Social Housing.
14. The Housing Operations Service Manager said that a breakdown of the households on the waiting list could be provided, adding that work was likely to be undertaken to identify inactive applicants by November 2024.
15. It was reported that the council had nomination arrangements with most registered providers in Herefordshire.
16. The Housing Operations Service Manager emphasised the need for emergency accommodation, and to help people to move into and to sustain settled housing.

There was a short adjournment to enable committee members to consider potential recommendations. The meeting recommenced and the following resolution was agreed by the committee.

Resolved:

That officers be requested to prepare a report for the committee by the end of September 2024, providing more detail on the issues raised in the meeting, including options to increase the delivery of social and affordable housing.

8. PUBLIC REALM FUTURE OPERATING MODEL WORKING GROUP TERMS OF REFERENCE

The committee considered the formation of a working group to scrutinise development of the Public Realm Future Operating Model; the draft terms of reference were attached to the report: [Link to Appendix 1](#).

The Service Director Environment and Highways explained the background to the development of the new Public Realm Services model and contracting arrangements; the contract would start from June 2026. It was reported that a market testing exercise was being undertaken which would inform the reshaping of the model and a working

group would provide scrutiny committee members with an opportunity to preview ideas prior to consideration by Cabinet.

In response to questions from committee members, the Service Director:

- i) confirmed that the tender would be open to all qualifying suppliers, including the current contractor;
- ii) noted the value of cross-party input given the importance of the contract to residents and people travelling throughout Herefordshire;
- iii) outlined the differences between the broad range of services delivered by the current contractor and the new contract for core services to deliver works; and
- iv) explained that the areas covered by the locality stewards and the demands on their time would be reviewed.

The Chairperson commented that such matters could be explored further and drew attention to the objectives for the working group.

Resolved:

That the committee form a working group according to the terms of reference attached to the report at Appendix 1.

9. WORK PROGRAMME

The Statutory Scrutiny Officer presented the draft work programme for the remainder of the municipal year 2024/25. In particular, it was recommended that the scheduled meeting on 11 September 2024 be moved to 15 October 2024 to enable the committee to consider research into housing delivery models (due to be received on 27 September 2024), and to receive the findings from the Public Realm Future Operating Model Working Group (due to meet on 8 October 2024).

With attention drawn to the 'Enterprise Zones' item, due to be considered on 13 November 2024, a committee member suggested that: the item should explore the benefits arising from businesses moving into enterprise zones and the consequential release of other premises; a recent Internal Audit Update Report could be included as part of the evidence, [Link to Audit and Governance Committee minutes, 11 June 2024](#); and the invitees could include Bill Jackson and Andrew Manning-Cox, as both individuals had chaired the Hereford Enterprise Zone Executive Board. Another committee member suggested that the chair of Ross Town Council could be invited. The Chairperson requested that an informal work programme discussion be arranged for committee members on 11 September 2024.

Resolved:

That the work programme, as amended and subject to periodical reviews, be agreed as the basis of the primary focus for the committee for the remainder of the municipal year 2024/25.

10. DATE OF THE NEXT MEETING

Further to the work programme item above, the next scheduled meeting in public was confirmed as Tuesday 15 October 2024 at 2.00 pm.

The meeting ended at 11.31 am

Chairperson