

Feedback from the Housing Strategy Conference

23 January 2017

1. Introduction

This was Slough Borough Council's first Housing Strategy for a number of years. The draft Housing Strategy 2016-2021 was developed through the analysis of a large number of data sources before going out to consultation with a range of partners, stakeholders and Council officers. In order to consult as widely as possible, a conference was held on 23 January 2017 at The Curve in Slough.

Conference attendees included representatives from:

- 7 Housing Associations
 - Radian
 - Catalyst
 - Paradigm Housing Group
 - Red Kite Community Housing
 - A2 Dominion
 - Housing Solutions
 - Inqualib Housing Association
- Slough Business Community Partnership
- Slough Urban Renewal
- The Property Bank
- Ron Hothi (local private landlord)
- Asian Carers Group
- Slough CVS
- Life Charity
- Royal Berkshire Fire & Rescue Service
- Thames Valley Community Rehabilitation Company
- Shelter
- Health Watch Slough
- Chiltern District Council
- NHS CCG
- Slough CCG
- Patrick Ruddy Homes (property developer)
- Colleagues from across Slough Borough Council, including Housing the Children's trust, Adult Social Care and Public Health.

Cllr Ajaib, Commissioner for Housing and Urban Renewal and Deputy Leader opened the conference, setting out the vision and ambition for housing in Slough. Mike England, Interim Director for Resources, Housing and Regeneration set out the scope of the strategy and the five key themes:

- Theme 1: New Housing Supply

- Theme 2: Private Sector Housing
- Theme 3: Council Homes
- Theme 4: Homelessness and Housing Need
- Theme 5: Special Housing Needs and Vulnerable Groups

The conference included two sessions for group working where attendees were asked to:

1. Consider the opportunities and challenges for housing in Slough
2. Partnerships and Delivery – how do we make it work and how can we make a difference?

2. Opportunities and Challenges

2.1 Slough's Proximity to London

A common theme across most tables was the pressure on Slough from the London Boroughs, not only in terms of numbers and the impact on the availability of affordable private rented accommodation to the Council, but also in terms of:

- knowing who was being placed in Slough - numbers and location
- any vulnerabilities or support needs of those household members
- the details of any problem families moving into Slough

2.2 Heathrow Expansion and Crossrail

The impact of the expansion of Heathrow Airport together with the Crossrail announcement both on house prices and market rents in Slough was widely recognised together with the increase in demand for homes to house those working on these projects.

It was also recognised that both schemes would present opportunities for Slough to boost its night-time economy and attract young professionals from London who could benefit from Slough's lower house prices and lower market rents.

2.3 Theme 5 and the recognition for the need for specialist housing was welcomed. Particular issues were raised in relation to care leavers and the lack of accommodation (and support) available to them. Concerns relating to housing ex-offenders, vulnerable people and those fleeing domestic violence.

The issue of affordability and the cost of failing tenancies, particularly for housing associations, were raised with the recognition of the need to provide tenancy sustainment support. Housing associations were also keen to test affordability and tenants' ability to afford the rent.

2.4 Developing New, Affordable, Homes

The impact of the 1% reduction in social rents was recognised alongside the significant increase in house prices and private rents. Some developers raised concerns about the lack of construction skills and labour together with the increase in the cost of materials post-

Brexit. This, combined with the lack of land, constituted a considerable challenge to developing new, affordable homes.

The rise in office-residential conversions was noted, together with the ability to do this without requiring planning permission.

However, opportunities to offer training and apprenticeships to Slough people was noted as a positive.

It was widely agreed that an innovative approach would need to be taken to agreeing the right tenure mix to meet demand. Market sale and market rented properties would help to meet the demand, however 'affordability' was key. There was widespread enthusiasm for the idea of a Slough Living Rent.

In terms of plans for the town centre, it was suggested that high rise living can prove problematic to manage and can, unless managed carefully, lead to community breakdown. Sufficient car parking was also noted as a concern and caution urged around relying on people to use public transport. Concerns were raised in general around ensuring that the infrastructure to support extra housing is put in place.

It was felt that more innovation and looking outside of Slough was important with one attendee suggesting Slough should think about what Denmark and Japan are doing to deliver affordable housing. It was suggested that Slough needs to look at the financing opportunities available to build and to work in partnership with housing associations to achieve its aspirations.

3. Partnerships and Delivery: How do we make it work? Where can we make a difference?

3.1 Theme 1: Housing Supply

The group agreed that partnership working with developers and RSLs was key to delivering the 900+ homes needed each year in Slough. A proactive approach to land acquisition and planning was also required to support this.

The message that new development should deliver Slough homes for Slough people was clear, but the group queried who this should be aimed at and who could afford it. Investment in the private rented sector is vibrant in Slough and A2 Dominion noted their intention to invest in the PRS to generate funds to support their development aspirations.

Rents and affordability were discussed, together with the impact of arrears on providers. One RSL noted that of the 28 local authorities where they have stock, 2/3 had target rents and a number of their tenants unable to sustain the higher rent levels. The view was expressed that as Slough was cheaper to live in compared to London, there was a danger that it would continue to attract "sink estates" from the South East. Increasing pressures on homelessness prevention meant that other boroughs are directing people to Slough.

3.2 Theme 2: Private Rented Sector

The group agreed that the main issue with private rented homes was quality and that licensing arrangements and enforcement action were key to driving improvements in the sector. The group felt that homelessness funding could be used to prevent homelessness and also meet the funding gap between private rents and Housing Benefit (LHA) levels.

It was felt that pre-tenancy training would help people to budget and prevent fuel poverty. Partnership working between Health, Housing and Social Care was also needed to support vulnerable people living in private rented accommodation to sustain their tenancy.

The review of the Allocations Policy was welcomed to put Slough people first, combined with closer working with the London boroughs.

Overall the group felt that a Landlord Registration Scheme would be useful in finding hidden landlords and cutting out delays on repairs.

3.3 Theme 3: Council Housing

Overall the group agreed that the Council's housing stock was in a fairly good condition although elderly people could be better supported to maintain their homes. The view was expressed that the Council could offer better quality homes to encourage residents who wanted/needed to downsize to move to.

The following points were raised during the discussion:

- The LHA rate needs to change
- Communication with residents needs to improve
- The Council needs to retain staff and offer career progression to retain knowledge and talent

The review of the Allocations Policy was welcomed, however some members of the group expressed frustration at the slow turnaround of void properties.

3.4 Theme 4: Homelessness

The group felt that the Homelessness Forum should assist in developing the Homelessness Strategy and Action Plan through sharing best practice and communicating with the groups/protocols that are already in place.

The collection and analysis of the available data would help to ensure that services are directed appropriately as well as helping to diagnose local problems would assist in signposting people to appropriate support agencies and private sector partners.

The group agreed that there was a demand for more specific, supported housing in Slough but that it must be properly managed.

3.5 Theme 5: Specialist Housing

The group felt that partnership working was needed to deliver and manage specialist housing, for example joint operations between Housing and the Childrens' Trust to support care leavers. It was noted that the Council has statutory responsibilities towards children leaving care that it would be inspected on.

The group agreed that the conference offered an opportunity to hold an honest conversation to identify gaps in service provision. Stakeholders (outside of Housing) would welcome the opportunity to feed into the review of the Allocations Policy.

Partnership working, at a strategic level, was needed between Housing, Health, the Childrens' Trust and Adult Social Care to look at the bigger issues and address the needs of the increasingly aging population. It was felt that the conversation should begin with residents before they become elderly to discuss and identify their future housing options.