

MINUTES
of the
CHELMSFORD POLICY BOARD
held on 3 March 2022 at 7:00pm

Present:

Councillor I Fuller (Chair)

Councillors H Ayres, D Clark, G B R Knight, G H J Pooley, R J Poulter,

J Raven, A Sosin, N Walsh and T N Willis

Also present: Councillors C Davidson and M J Mackrory

1. Apologies for Absence

Apologies for absence had been received from Councillors W Daden, J Galley and N Gulliver. Councillor Raven had been appointed to substitute for Councillor Galley.

2. Declarations of Interest

Members were reminded that they must disclose any interests they knew they had in items of business on the meeting's agenda and that they must do so at this point on the agenda or as soon as they became aware of the interest. If the interest was a Disclosable Pecuniary Interest they were also obliged to notify the Monitoring Officer within 28 days of the meeting. Any declarations are recorded in the relevant minute below.

3. Minutes

The minutes of the meeting on 17 February 2022 were confirmed as a correct record.

4. Public Questions

There were no questions or statements from members of the public.

5. Chelmsford Housing Strategy 2022-27

The Housing Working Group had carried out an assessment of the main housing challenges facing Chelmsford as the local housing authority. A consultation document that set out their initial findings, and included feedback from Registered Providers, was approved for wider consultation at a meeting of the Policy Board on 5 July 2021. Feedback from that consultation had been used to inform the final version of the Chelmsford Housing Strategy 2022 – 2027, attached at Appendix 1 to the report to the meeting. The Strategy was supported by a Statistical Appendix, attached at Appendix 2 to the report, which provided more detailed information on the supply of, and demand for, a range of affordable homes.

The Strategy's vision was "To address the housing needs of all Chelmsford residents so everyone can reasonably aspire to having a home that meets their needs." It was supported by the following strategic priorities that aimed to achieve a better, more balanced supply of homes that met the Council's statutory duties and the City's strategic housing needs:

- 1) Increasing the supply of affordable homes with a focus on larger units.
- 2) Increasingly the supply of affordable homes from the existing housing stock.
- 3) Supporting landlords and tenants of privately rented homes.
- 4) Enabling the right supply of specialist housing to meet local need.
- 5) Developing effective partnerships.
- 6) Monitoring trends and performance to inform future actions.

The strategic priorities were supported by a range of initiatives and interventions, which the Council was seeking to implement with its partners and were summarised in Appendix 3 'Action Plan and Outputs' in the Strategy document.

The Strategy would be delivered between 2022 and 2027 and progress would be reported to the Policy Board through updates to the Action Plan and Outputs section of the Strategy and updating of the Statistical Appendix. The Chelmsford Housing Strategy 2022 - 2027, along with the Council's Homelessness and Rough Sleeper Strategy, would form the future focus of the Council's Strategic Housing Service.

A Green Sheet setting out amendments to clarify aspects of the Strategy and correct minor errors had been distributed before the meeting.

In welcoming the Strategy as a positive response to the housing challenges facing the city, members raised a number of questions and made several observations on it.

- The Green Sheet included a proposed change to the wording of Action 1c to read "Seek to ensure that the affordable housing element of First Homes sites best meets local housing needs". It was asked whether the First Homes share of the allocation for affordable homes could be redistributed to the homes available for social rent and shared ownership elements, if the First Homes share could not be provided affordably. Officers said that Action 1c related only to First Homes exception sites and sought to achieve additionality in the provision of affordable housing for rent. The wording of that action would be further amended to make that clear.

- On Action 2g, it was requested that the wording of the last sentence of the first paragraph be amended to clarify the timescales for the provision of modular units.
- Table 4 in Appendix 4 showed that the number of long term empty affordable rented properties in Chelmsford was higher than in neighbouring authorities. Action 2c, to reduce the number of empty private properties, was no different to what was already be done, without apparent success, and it was questioned what further steps could be taken. Officers said that the reference in Table 4 was to long term empty properties owned or operated by housing associations and related to Action 2b rather than 2c, which was aimed at properties in private ownership. One of the strategic priorities was to improve communications with partners, including Registered Providers, and seeking to understand the reasons for the high number of empty properties owned by them, and how to reduce that number, would be a feature of discussions with those providers. The Council had a programme to tackle privately-owned long term empty properties and whilst this took a long time and was resource intensive it was gradually bringing such properties back into use.
- In response to a question on the provision of housing for those with special needs, officers said that all options were explored to ensure that they were provided with suitable accommodation, including relocation and the provision of adaptations funded by Disabled Facilities Grants. On a related question, the Board was informed that accommodation for overnight carers would still be considered on a case by case basis.
- Asked whether it was possible to ensure that pre-paid energy meters were not provided in affordable accommodation, the Board was told that this was primarily decided by the providers of such housing. However, providers were conscious of the costs to tenants of pre-paid meters and CHP, for example, was trying to move all of its tenants to a contract with one energy provider which did not involve the use of pre-paid meters. On a related question about thermal insulation of older properties, the Board was informed that housing associations could now bid directly to the government for home insulation grants.
- Responding to a question on what was being done to ensure the provision of larger affordable homes in the short term, officers said that Action 1a was a response to the evident need for such dwellings which was being addressed through Planning Advice Notes on additionality, the planning application process and street purchases. The current review of the Local Plan would also review the affordable housing contributions sought through the planning system. However, these were not short term solutions and would take time to increase the number and proportion of larger affordable homes.
- It was asked whether the trend in the proportion of housing being provided through the private rented sector was likely to continue. Officers said that this trend was reflected across the south-east of England and was a response to housing demand. The Council would continue to work constructively with the private sector to provide affordable and temporary accommodation.

The Policy Board thanked the Housing Working Group, members and officers for their work on the Housing Strategy, which it was happy to recommend to the Cabinet with the amendments on the Green Sheet and those agreed during the above discussion.

RESOLVED that

1. the Chelmsford Housing Strategy 2022-27 be supported and that, subject to the amendments on the Green Sheet and those made at the meeting, the documents set out at Appendix 1 and 2 of the report to the meeting be referred to the Cabinet for approval ; and
2. any subsequent textual or presentation changes be delegated to the Director of Sustainable Communities in consultation with the Cabinet Member for Fairer Chelmsford and Cabinet Member for Sustainable Development.

(7.02pm to 8.27pm)

6. Chelmsford Policy Board Work Programme

The Board received the latest version of its Work Programme for 2021-22. It was advised that an additional meeting was being provisionally earmarked for 28 April 2022 but that date was subject to confirmation.

RESOLVED that the latest Work Programme of the Board, as amended at the meeting, be noted.

(8.27pm to 8.28pm)

. Urgent Business

There were no items of urgent business.

The meeting closed at 8.28pm

Chair