Affordable Housing Task Group Minutes

Minutes of the meeting of the Affordable Housing Task Group held on Thursday 24 May 2012 at the Civic Centre, Poulton le Fylde

Task Group Members present:

Councillor Anderson  Councillor M Gandhi
Councillor E Anderton  Councillor Ormrod
Councillor Balmain  Councillor Perkin
Councillor Brooks (Chairman)  Councillor Rogers

Officers present:

Peter Foulsham, Scrutiny Officer

Others present:

Councillor Lees
Steve Newsham, Regional Director of the Regenda Group
4 members of the public

AH.30 Apologies for absence

Apologies for absence were received from Cllrs Henderson, Robinson and Williams.

AH.31 Declarations of Interest

Councillors Balmain and Rogers declared a personal interest in items 4 and 5 on the agenda, as members of the Regenda Partnership Board.

AH.32 Minutes of previous meetings

The minutes of the task group meetings held on 27 March 2012, 1 May 2012 and 15 May 2012 were agreed by councillors as a true and accurate record.
AH.33 **Chairman’s Introduction**

The Chairman, Cllr Brooks, welcomed Steve Newsham, Regional Director of the Regenda Group to the meeting. He also welcomed four members of the public who attended.

Cllr Brooks informed the task group that a ‘letter before action’ had been received by the council in relation to the granting of planning permission for a development at Hall Lane, Great Eccleston. Cllr Brooks advised that it would be inappropriate to engage in further discussion on this matter in the present forum; he was simply advising members of factual information.

The Chairman reminded members that the work of the task group should focus on attitudes towards affordable housing. He wanted to ensure that affordable housing was acceptable in all areas of the borough.

AH.34

(i) **Reflections on meetings with Parish Councils and Residents’ groups**

(ii) **Comments from Regenda’s Regional Director**

A task group meeting had been held at Claughton on 27 March 2012. Subsequent meetings in Fleetwood and in Great Eccleston had helped inform councillors about the views of Parish Council representatives and local residents.

Councillors reported that they had been very impressed indeed with the development at Beech Close, Claughton, which they had viewed before the meeting on 27 March. It was a discreet development that blended well with the local area, and the allocation process had prioritised local applicants.

The quality of build had been very high, with a number of energy efficiency add-ons. Mr Newsham added that he had attended a meeting with local residents in Claughton some time ago and there had been some concern expressed about a number of issues, including the effect on property prices and the fear that people would be moved in from outside the area. Those fears were dealt with by reassuring local residents that the allocation process would prioritise local people via a formal local lettings policy using an ‘onion skin’ approach in determining priority. Despite those initial concerns the development was now widely welcomed.

Mr Newsham added that a protocol had now been established with Wyre council which set out when registered housing Providers would engage with Parish Councils and it was Regenda’s intention to engage with local people at the earliest opportunity.

Mr Newsham summarised the tenancy arrangements, which included a ‘starter tenancy’ for twelve months enabling Regenda to terminate the tenancy at the end of that period if there had been serious anti-social behaviour or rent arrears, for example. Regenda had a dedicated team of
staff who dealt with issues such as anti-social behaviour, and it had a variety of enforcement tools available, including injunctions, if necessary.

Cllr Brooks reminded members that in Claughton it had been the emphasis on local people that had been the key factor in ensuring that the local community was supportive of the development. Mr Newsham added that Regenda applied a clear prioritisation process in rural areas, and this was proving very successful.

The question of shared ownership was raised and Mr Newsham confirmed that in any affordable housing development those properties that would be for shared ownership would be identified at a very early stage of planning.

Three key points were identified by Mr Newsham regarding the Claughton development:

- The buildings themselves were of excellent quality and fitted in with the local area
- There were lots of local people disappointed when their applications for one of the properties were not successful
- The properties had been allocated to local people

On the subject of application numbers, Mr Newsham advised the task group that a recent development in Stalmine could have been let to local people three times over.

Most affordable housing stock was in the Fleetwood and Thornton areas. Regenda owned approximately 3,000 properties across the borough, 1600-1700 of them being in Fleetwood and Thornton. Cllrs E Anderton and Rogers felt that that number was adequate to meet current need.

Cllr Rogers alluded to the problems that are associated with large estates. Mr Newsham said that Regenda aims to integrate affordable homes in order to achieve a mixed community. He added that a development would ideally be for 8 – 20 properties – anything less that 8 was unlikely to be financially viable.

Mr Newsham informed councillors that the Regenda group generally followed and built new homes to Level 3 of the Code for Sustainable Homes, 2012, covering energy efficiency, sustainability and environmental impact.

Mr Newsham advised councillors that the new welfare reforms were likely to place considerable stress on people in rented accommodation, including affordable homes. Regenda was working very closely with the council to anticipate these difficulties, particularly those related to under occupation. People who lived in houses that were bigger than they required were likely to be squeezed in terms of Housing Benefit as reductions would be introduced for unused bedrooms although tenants over pensionable age would not be impacted by these legislative changes.
In response to a question from Cllr E Anderton, Mr Newsham said that the fact that tenants would no longer be able to have their rent paid direct to landlords would be a “huge issue”. If a tenant failed to pay his/her rent for eight weeks an application could be made for the rent to be paid direct. There would be a significant additional cost incurred for collecting rents (an estimated 300% cost increase) and Regenda was currently working with residents to ensure that they had bank accounts and direct debits set up.

A member of the public, Mr Rowe, said that he had not learnt anything new from the discussion with Mr Newsham. He went on to say that, as a representative of Great Eccleston Parish Council (GEPC), he did not object to the principle of affordable housing but he did object to the way in which need had been identified. He said that the GEPC was not able to trust the results of Wyre’s Rural Housing Needs Survey, for reasons previously stated..

Mr Newsham said that, from his experience over many years, he had not heard Parishes say that they had problems with affordable housing. However, it was very important that Regenda engaged closely with any Parish Council at the earliest opportunity. Mr Newsham asked Mr Rowe how many affordable homes he thought needed to be built in Great Eccleston, to which Mr Rowe responded by saying that the needs survey commissioned by the Parish Council indicated that the answer to that question was “none”.

The Chairman thanked Mr Newsham for his valuable contribution to the work of the task group, and he thanked the members of the public present for their views and interest in affordable housing.

**AH.35 Next Steps**

Member agreed that there should be one further meeting to which members of Parish Councils not yet involved in the review would be invited. Councillors were asked to send details of their availability during June and July to Peter Foulsham, who would make arrangements for the meeting.

**AH.36 Date and time of next meeting**

To be confirmed.