Affordable Housing Task Group

Minutes of the meeting of the Affordable Housing Task Group held on Thursday 12 July 2012 at the Civic Centre, Poulton-le-Fylde.

Members present:

Councillor Anderson  
Councillor E Anderton  
Councillor Balmain  
Councillor Brooks (Chairman)  
Councillor M Gandhi  
Councillor Henderson

Others present:

Roy Saunders  Democratic Services & Scrutiny Manager  
Councillor Lady Atkins  Wyre Council  
Councillor Chris Ryan  Garstang Town Council  
Councillor Joan Williams  Garstang Town Council  
Councillor Paul Desborough  Inskip with Sowerby Parish Council  
Councillor Phil Orme  Preesall Town Council  
Councillor John Savage  Pilling Parish Town Council

AH.37  Apologies for absence

Apologies for absence were received from Councillors Ormrod, Pimbley, Robinson, Rogers and Shewan.

AH.38  Declarations of Interest

Councillor Balmain declared a personal interest in item 4 (Affordable Housing – Demand, Supply and Public Awareness) as a member of the Regenda Partnership Board.

AH.39  Minutes of the previous meeting
The minutes of the meeting of the Task Group held on 24 May 2012 were agreed as a correct record.

AH.40 Affordable Housing – Demand, Supply and Public Awareness

The Chairman (Councillor Brooks) welcomed the representatives of the Parish and Town Councils to the meeting. He explained the purpose of the task group and what had been done so far. He said that the intention at this meeting was to gain some knowledge of the views of local people in the rural areas of the borough on the need for and the impact of affordable housing.

Councillor Brooks referred to an article in the 18 June 2012 edition of the Local Government Association Newsletter for councillors, the headline for which stated that “public opposition is the single biggest barrier to the building of desperately needed new homes, according to a survey of frontline councillors”. The article stated that, according to government figures, only 106,050 new homes had been built in 2010/11, compared to 160,030 in 1990/91. Approximately 250,000 were required each year to meet demand. In the LGA survey 4 in 5 councillors had said that their area needed new housing but, 42% felt that residents were opposed to housing developments.

Councillor Brooks explained the definition “affordable housing” being used by the task group. He said that the Council was currently formulating its planning policy framework which included a proposed core strategy on affordable housing. That core strategy document would soon be the subject of a further consultation process. He said that the evidence for the policy relied heavily on the Wyre Rural Housing Needs Assessment carried out in 2010, which aimed to find out the number of new houses needed in the next 5 years. The outcomes of that survey had been reported to the Cabinet in October 2010.

Councillor Brooks referred to some of the key conclusions of the survey. He said that all houses in rural areas had received the survey questionnaire, whilst a sample of properties in Garstang and Preesall had received it. He said that there had been a 25% response rate. Of the respondents, 27% had said there was no need for any further housing, whilst 73% had said that more housing was required. In Preesall the figures had been 33% for no development and 66% for further development. From the information so far obtained by the task group, it was apparent that there was a far greater level of support for new housing developments when it could be demonstrated that such properties were intended for young people with a strong connection to the local area.

Councillor Brooks pointed out however, that Great Eccleston Parish Council disagreed with the findings of the Housing Needs Assessment and was in the process of making a legal challenge against a planning approval for affordable housing granted by the Council in April 2012.
Councillor Brooks then invited the Parish Council representatives to express their views on the need for affordable housing within their areas and the likely perception within their local communities of applications for affordable housing schemes which might be submitted by developers.

Councillor Orme said that he was concerned that the Housing Need Survey might not be fully represented the views of the people of Preesall because only a sample of households had received a questionnaire. There was therefore a possibility that the need for affordable housing for local people might have been under recorded. However, with regard to the issue of public perception he said that there would only be local support for further housing development if there was an acceptance that the housing would be provided for people with a real local connection and that the “onion skin” arrangement for allocation of properties was effectively enforced. He said that in recent times a number of young people had moved out of the local area because there was no housing available. However a development had recently been built which had been occupied by single people rather than families who were not local.

Councillor Brooks said in response that the choice-based letting scheme now being operated by Regenda would prioritise allocations to people with an established local connection. He accepted that there was concern amongst local people that subsequent allocations as well as the initial allocation should be to people with a local connection.

Councillor Orme said in response to the question from Councillor Perkin that the Parish Council did not keep details of the number of people actively seeking housing or details of allocations made to people from outside the area, but it was apparent his own local knowledge and from anecdotal evidence that such allocations had been made.

Councillor Orme said in response to a question from Councillor M Gandhi that the properties in Preesall allocated to outsiders had all been one and two bedroomed houses.

Councillor Balmain and other Wyre Councillors referred to the Regenda Housing Association development at Beech Close in Claughton, which had been successful because it had been made clear at the planning stage that the accommodation would be allocated to local people in perpetuity.

Councillor Orme said that although the development in Preesall had been provided by a registered social landlord it was not a Regenda development and the conditions had not been rigorously applied.

Councillor Brooks said that in the housing needs survey 83% of respondents from Garstang had said that additional homes were needed and 17% had said that no houses were needed. He asked the local representatives whether they thought that response reflected the current views of local communities. Both Councillors Ryan and Lady Atkins said
that there was definitely a need for additional housing for local people in both Garstang and in Nateby. However, there was a degree of wariness and mistrust about such developments, because of the previous allocation of rented properties to people from urban areas well away from Garstang. Councillor Lady Atkins referred to a development at Green Lane East, in particular, where people with no affinity for a small market town environment had been allocated properties. Councillor Ryan also referred to difficulties caused by a few "problem families" where Regenda, as the landlord, had not been very effective.

Councillor Brooks said that the housing needs survey had revealed a very low level of need for affordable housing in Inskip. Councillor Desborough said that 8 affordable houses had been built in the village in 2008. Two of those were currently occupied by children of local farmers. He was not aware of the background of the other tenants. He confirmed that there had been no social problems arising from that development.

Councillor Savage said that, as mentioned by the representatives of the other rural communities, the view of Pilling residents was that local people should be given priority for the allocation of social rented housing. He said that had not been the case with the previous points system where, as in Garstang, some tenants with remote family connections had been transferred to Pilling from urban areas, including Manchester. Some problems had been experienced as a result.

All of the parish and town council representatives agreed that there was some level of identifiable need for affordable housing over the next 3 to 5 years. There was also a consensus that there would be very little objection to the provision of affordable housing if there was confidence that places would be allocated as a priority to local people.

Councillor Perkin pointed out that whilst the Council could exert some influence over social housing provision, the Council could not control the market in the private rented sector.

Councillor E Anderton also pointed out that, whilst she accepted that there might have been some problems caused in the past by tenants moving in with a spurious local connection, there might be people who had a relatively remote local connection but who genuinely had a high level of need.

Councillor Brooks said that the new choice based letting scheme which had only just been implemented had been designed to assuage some of the concerns previously voiced by local people. Clearly, the Council would do as much as it could to make sure that the new system was implemented effectively by registered social landlords.

Councillor Lady Atkins said that the Claughton scheme showed that success could be achieved where there was a close link between the developer and the Parish Council. Councillor Henderson pointed out that
there had initially been quite a high level of public objection to the Beech Road site at Claughton and, that the Parish Council had not been 100% in favour at the beginning of the process. However, there had been no planning grounds for refusing the application and, once the application had been approved and the local population had been involved in the development, widespread support for the scheme had been achieved.

Councillor Joan Williams pointed out that there was currently a problem with the lack of sufficient rented accommodation for elderly people seeking to downsize to smaller properties. This was a very sensitive issue but the lack of sufficient property of the appropriate size for elderly single people or couples, meant that very little family sized accommodation was released for families.

The conclusion of this meeting, which was consistent with views previously expressed by the majority of representatives of other areas, was that there would be local support for affordable housing provision where:

- there was an identifiable need;
- there was an appropriate site;
- the quality, size and style of the building was appropriate;
- there was early communication between the developer and the local parish or town council;
- that the parish or town council was actively involved thereafter in discussions on the mix of properties to be provided and the allocation of tenancies;
- there was a clear letting policy giving initial priority to local applicants and enabling the properties to continue to be let to people with a strong local connection over a long period of time;
- there was effective policing of the letting policy.

Councillor Brooks said that he believed that the work undertaken by the task group had raised awareness of what affordable social housing was, clarified views on the level of future need for such housing and had identified the concerns of local residents which currently led to the resistance to such developments.

**AH.41 Next Steps**

The group agreed to request the Scrutiny Officer to prepare an initial draft report setting out the evidence gathered by the task group and the conclusions reached for circulation to members of the group prior to submission of a report to the Overview and Scrutiny Committee and
subsequently to the Cabinet. The group also agreed that the final report should include a recommendation that a review of the provision of social housing be undertaken in two years time.

The meeting started at 6.00 pm and finished at 7.20 pm