Coventry Partnership Housing Theme Group Minutes
23rd June 2009

Attendees (members)

Richard Monk (RM) - Chair	Whitefriars Housing Group
Stephen Rudge (SR)	Head of Housing Policy & Services, CCC
Ayaz Maqsood (AM) – Advisor	Housing Strategy Manager, CCC
Sarah Perry (SP)	Coventry Partnership
Niall McChesney (NM)	City Development, CCC
Clive Benfield (CB)	Benfield Homes
Stewart Fergusson (SF)	Orbit Heart of England
Tim Brown (TB)	De Montford University
Kim Fawcett (KF)	Housing Strategy, CCC

1. Apologies and Introductions.

Apologies were received from Joan Allen, John Payne and Councillor Nigel Lee.

2. Minutes of Previous Meeting and Matters Arising

The minutes from the meeting held on 24th March 2009 were agreed as accurate.

Community Cohesion Strategy:
SP – The Housing Theme Group has agreed a statement of commitment to the Community Cohesion Strategy. The strategy will be available for consultation in July/August with a target to launch the document on 3rd September 2009.

3. Coventry Homefinder 2008/09

Ayaz Maqsood gave a presentation on the analysis of the first full financial year of Coventry Homefinder. Main points from the presentation included:

- AM gave an introduction to Coventry Homefinder, which is the choice based letting (CBL) system for social housing in Coventry.
- A recent law case has clarified some issues with CBL, including the option but not the requirement for multiple needs to be given more priority, and that each authority can include an element of priority based on length of time on the register.
- Over 2400 properties were advertised on Homefinder during 2008/09 and successfully let.
- The policy states that 75% or properties should have a shortlist prioritised by band, and 25% prioritised by registration date. This is very close to being achieved (actual split 76%/24%).
- Only 26% of the properties advertised and let were houses. 7% were bungalows, and the remainder were flats or maisonettes.
- 13% of properties were bedsits, 34% had 1 bedroom, 38% had 2 bedrooms, 13% had 3 bedrooms, and 1% had 4 or more bedrooms. There were 25 properties available with 4 or more bedrooms.
- The city is divided into 40 areas for Homefinder – the top ten areas with the highest number of lettings had 58% of the total lettings, the lowest 10 areas had less than 4%.
- A total of 222,018 bids were made during 2008/09. Over 50% of houses advertised received more than 100 bids each. The highest number of bids for a single property was a 3-bedroom house in Holbrooks, which received 579 bids.
- On 1st April 2009 there were 22,935 applicants on the Homefinder register. 106 were in Band 1 (very urgent need); 1,799 were in Band 2 (urgent need), and 21,030 were in Band 3 (all other homefinders).
- A higher proportion of households in bands 1 and 2 required properties with three or four bedrooms than band 3. A number of households have very high bedspace requirements (up to 13 bedspaces). 157 households have a requirement for purpose built wheelchair accommodation or adapted properties.
- 53% of households on the Homefinder register have never made a bid. A survey of people in a priority band (band 2) who had never made a bid revealed that 42% had no use for it any more, 32% had not seen any suitable properties, and 12% had no recollection of joining.

- A comparison of the register and the properties available throughout 2008/09 highlights a shortage of large family homes and adapted properties.
- There were 25 properties with four or more bedrooms available in 2008/09, yet there were 184 households in priority bands 1 and 2 on 1st April who required four or more bedrooms.

(Please see the presentation slides distributed for further detail)

Main points of discussion were:

AM – there is a need for this information to be fed back to people on the register and to manage people's expectations. We are working with the Homefinder team on this.

RM – Are all RSLs in Coventry participating in Coventry Homefinder?
AM – No, but there are 11 RSL partners participating in Homefinder that cover over 97% of the total social housing stock in the city. The ones that do not participate are mostly specialist RSLs that have very small numbers in Coventry.

RM – How does the breakdown of properties available on Homefinder compare with the overall breakdown of the RSL stock in the city?
AM – We do not currently have that level of detail for all RSL stock in the city, however we are hoping that the National Register of Social Housing (NROSH) will be able to provide that detail in the near future. The total number of RSL dwellings in Coventry is just under 24,000 and so just over 10% of properties became available in 2008/09. This is in line with the national average.
SF – There is generally a higher turnover of flats than houses.

TB – The issues raised here (not enough properties, shortage of family sized properties, low bidding activity in non-priority bands) are general issues that have been experienced in other areas of the country. One trend elsewhere has been for people in the highest bands to become choosier about the property or area that they bid for, as they are aware that they have high priority and a good chance of being successful for properties that they want when the bids are shortlisted.

TB – There are new guidelines on Choice Based Lettings due to be published by the Government, and also a good practice guide to ensure that vulnerable groups are able to access CBL.

4. The New Regulatory Framework for Housing

Richard Monk gave a presentation on 'Affordable Housing – Changes to regulation and investment'. Main points from the presentation included:

- Pre-December 2008, the main organisations were English Partnerships (regeneration, investment, brownfield sites) and the Housing Corporation (regulation of housing associations, funding for new affordable housing).
- At the start of December 2008, the Homes and Communities Agency (HCA) and Tenant Services Authority (TSA) were set up to replace English Partnerships and the Housing Corporation.
- The HCA is responsible for housing and regeneration and controls an investment budget for affordable housing.
- The HCA has set up 'Single Conversations' with local authorities as a new way of working.
- The TSA is responsible for the regulation of registered providers (RSLs) and has graduated enforcement powers. It aims to represent the interests and wishes of tenants.
- The TSA has set up a 'National Conversation' to consult with tenants.
- The future of regulation and investment will be shaped by issues such as the slow recovery of the housing market, a likely reduction in funding post-2011, the upcoming general election, and greater use of enforcement powers by the TSA.

Main points of discussion included:

The Single Conversation –
RM - The HCA are planning to work with Local Authorities as the single point of contact for an area, as the democratically elected body in each area. Local investment plans are developed which lead to local investment agreements.
SR - The HCA are currently leading the Single Conversations with Coventry, Birmingham, Solihull and Telford (within the West Mids). An investment document has been drafted by CCC and is with the HCA now, and includes the major regeneration schemes, the city centre redevelopment and Friargate.

Sub-regional working –
AM – Paul Spooner (Regional Director – West Midlands, HCA) recently met with the Chief Executives of the councils in the Coventry, Solihull and Warwickshire Sub-Region, and we are now working on a CSW Sub-Regional Housing Growth Strategy to deliver the housing growth required in the Regional Spatial Strategy (RSS). This will take an investment plan approach to fit in with the Single Conversation.

RM – The TSA currently regulate Registered Social Landlords, but plans include expanding this to include all providers of 'social housing' – this will include ALMOs (arms length management organisations) and stock holding Local Authorities, and may include the opportunity for private landlords to register in the future.

AM – The HCA currently has a large amount of funds available for affordable housing in the period up to 2011. After 2011, the amount of funding available will probably reduce significantly.

RM – RSL rent increases are linked to the RPI which may be negative in September this year. The formula is RPI plus ½% plus £2. This could see RSLs having to reduce their rents.

5. Eco-Housing Update
Stewart Fergusson informed the group of the Reduct Partnership project:
- Reduct is a partnership between Orbit Group, Whitefriars Housing Group and Midland Heart Housing Association to improve the energy efficiency of housing stock in Coventry.
- There are three retro-fitting projects aiming to improve the energy efficiency of existing stock, and one new-build project to develop Passive Housing at Samson Close. The three retrofit schemes will focus on different house types – a Victorian terrace at Russell Street, 1970s stock at Tanyard Farm, and No-fines housing.
- The aim is to upgrade the housing to Passive House standards, where the insulation and structure of the building means very low energy requirements for heating. A Passive House will have a heating footprint of approx 15 kwh/m^2. This is compared to a Victorian terrace heating footprint of approx 200 kwh/m^2, or a house built to Code Level 3 with a heating footprint of 65-80 kwh/m^2.
- The project aims to test methods of upgrading existing housing to see whether it is possible to upgrade existing housing to this standard, and to find what is replicable in other areas, as over 70% of the housing that will be available in 2050 is already built.
- Upgrading existing properties will need long term investment plans over 10-15 years.
- Coventry University is involved in the project to research the technical aspects of the energy efficiency measures, and also the behavioural aspects of the tenants who will be using the technologies and living in the homes.
- Funding for the project comes partly from the associations' asset management programmes, but external funding is also being actively pursued. The Concerto III bid was unsuccessful but three other sources of funding are being pursued.
- The pilot projects will start on-site this financial year.
- The results will provide solid data to influence future policy agendas, rent/service charge levels or supplements, and grant levels for new-build properties.
- A seminar will be held on 3rd September for stakeholders.

Discussion points included:

SR – Some of the properties, particularly flats, are very hard and very expensive to retrofit and improve energy efficiency. Is it better to demolish and replace these with new build properties?
SF – It is generally more expensive to demolish and rebuild. Demolition and rebuild has a higher carbon impact so it is better to improve the existing flats. However some current funding streams specify that they are for family houses only.

6. Sub-Regional Housing Growth Strategy
Niall McChesney gave a presentation on Coventry, Solihull and Warwickshire – Growth in the Sub-Region. Main points from the presentation were:
- The Coventry, Solihull and Warwickshire (CSW) Forum Development Strategy was published in June 2007. It provides for estimated demand generated within the CSW sub-region to be met in the sub-region, but with growth concentrated on Coventry and Solihull (50%) and focussed on a north-south corridor and Rugby.
- Growth will be phased in sustainable locations and brownfield sites first. Green belt adjustments may be made but only if and when necessary.
- The Regional Spatial Strategy (RSS) Phase 2 Preferred Option of Dec 2007 proposed that 365,000 new homes (net) were required in the West Midlands from 2006-2026, of which 82,000 should be provided in the CSW sub-region. 33,500 new homes should be provided in Coventry.
- This is based on 2004 national projections of household growth. 2006 projections were published in March 2009 and show even greater growth of 99,800 household in CSW.
- GOWM commissioned a study to investigate whether the West Midlands could accommodate more growth. CSW argued that it is unrealistic to increase housing numbers in line with 2006 projections due to the economic situation and slow-down in house building.
- The local authorities in the CSW sub-region are at different stages in the process of developing their Core Strategies.
- There is a collective agreement within the CSW to work across boundaries to deliver growth and supporting infrastructure.

AM – The Coventry, Solihull and Warwickshire Local Authorities are producing a sub-regional Housing Growth Strategy (see discussion under agenda item 4)

SR – The 33,500 homes allocated to Coventry cannot be accommodated within the Coventry boundary. Both Warwick and Nuneaton & Bedworth Councils are consulting on plans to accommodate some of this growth within their boundaries.

NM – The target numbers require a much higher rate of construction than is currently the case.
CB – Government figures show that there are an additional 252,000 households forming each year, and their national target was 240,000 new homes per year. The current build rate is estimated at 70,000 additional homes for this year due to market conditions and the recession.

7. Coventry Housing Fair 2009
AM – The year's Housing Fair will be held 10.00am – 4.00pm on Friday 14th August 2009, in the Lower Precinct shopping centre. Members of the public will be able to access information and advice from a wide range of housing organisations, including Coventry City Council's housing services, housing associations, developers, low cost home ownership, police and fire services and many more.

After feedback, and considering the issues that have arisen due to the economic recession, there will be more emphasis this year on advice and help for people who are struggling with their housing situation, and so the CAB and Coventry Law Centre have been invited to participate.

8. Impact of the market downturn on Theme Group Members.

Tim Brown has been involved in a project with the National Housing and Planning Advice Unit (NHPAU) regarding alternative models and delivery vehicles for affordable housing, to reduce reliance on the planning system for affordable housing. The report will be launched in July.

CB – the market for private developers is still very slow, the issues are the same as has been reported in the last few meetings (lack of mortgages, high levels of deposit needed etc). There are higher numbers of buyers returning to the market but these are often cash buyers or first-time buyers making unrealistic offers. Developers are still having difficulty securing finance from lenders to fund development. Volume house builders are starting to build more properties again, but smaller developers will not be able to start for another year or two.

SF – The market downturn has had less of an impact on housing associations. Orbit have been appointed as the HomeBuy Agents for the West Midlands region, taking over from Mercian. Orbit have approx 4-5000 properties in the pipeline nationally and have little shared ownership standing stock – some are now available for intermediate rent. The HCA currently has a significant amount of funding available and the crisis has brought some opportunities for developing HAs.

NM – The planning team has seen an increase in the number of developers who have planning permission but want to renegotiate the section 106 agreements.

SR – There has not been a significant change in the numbers of people accepted as homeless by the LA, which is the general situation across the country. It is thought that the private rented sector is providing a solution.

9. Major Housing Projects in the City – update on progress.
AM – all the major housing and regeneration projects are being progressed through the HCA in the single conversation.

SR – The developers of the Peugeot/Stoke Aldermoor scheme have requested that the section106 agreement be revised – originally the affordable housing element was going to consist of a financial contribution, but they would now prefer to provide affordable housing as part of the scheme.
RM – The long term view should be taken, as a mixed tenure community in this area would be preferable and more sustainable. The area is currently predominantly social housing. The local authority's priority should be the long-term community rather than assisting the developer.

10. Any Other Business
AM suggested that the September meeting be organised differently, with members of the group visiting some developments in the city rather than the usual meeting format in the Conference Room. RM and members present agreed that this would be beneficial.

11. Date of Next Meeting:

Tuesday 22nd September 2009