



CABINET

Tuesday, 07 December 2021

Subject	Review of Housing Development: Recommendations from Scrutiny Committee
Report by	Councillor Richard Kerry Cabinet Member with responsibility for Housing
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Is the report Open or Exempt?	OPEN
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Category of Exempt Information and reason why it is NOT in the public interest to disclose the exempt information.	Not Applicable
Wards Affected:	All Wards

Purpose and high-level overview

Purpose of Report:

This report provides a response to the Scrutiny Committee's recommendation following an in-depth review which took place at its meeting on 16 September 2021.

The review conducted by the Scrutiny Committee was an update of the overall progress of the Housing Development Strategy with particular focus on the ambition to build 50 Council houses per annum and the implications of the staff resources available to achieve that target.

The Scrutiny Committee having considered the contents of the report, the responses to its questions and the matters raised in debate, discussed the merits of recommending to Cabinet that the target be increased from 50 to 100 new builds per annum.

Given, however, that it was not possible at this stage to determine what the implications this recommendation would have on staffing and budgets, it was felt more appropriate to recommend to Cabinet that a Business Case be drawn up to identify and quantify the implications first.

Options:

The Cabinet can either choose to accept or reject the recommendation by Scrutiny Committee for the development of a Business Case to identify the opportunities available to increase the build target from 50 to 100 homes per annum.

Recommendation/s:

That Cabinet rejects the recommendation by the Scrutiny Committee.

Corporate Impact Assessment

Governance:

This report has been prepared in response to a recommendation made by the Scrutiny Committee. The Council is required by statute to discharge certain overview and scrutiny functions. These functions are an essential component of local democracy. Scrutiny Committees can contribute to the development of Council policies and can also hold the Cabinet to account for its decisions.

ESC policies and strategies that directly apply to the proposal:

[We are East Suffolk Strategic Plan 2020-24](#)
[ESC HRA Business Plan 2018-2048](#)
[ESC Housing Strategy 2017-23](#)
[ESC Housing Development Strategy 2020-24](#)

Environmental:

East Suffolk Council Housing Development Strategy 2020-24: The Strategy identifies "Environmental Sustainability" as an essential element in the creation of homes and

communities in which people want to live and work. It notes that lowering the whole-life carbon footprint of properties will help tenants save money and deliver lasting environmental, social and economic benefits. A number of innovative design solutions across several projects recognise the benefit of fabric first principles and the value of carbon neutral design.

In drawing up a Business Case, the potential environmental impact of increasing the number of Council houses built per annum would be identified.

Equalities and Diversity:

The supply of new build properties from the development programme must deliver the housing needs of residents in the district with the right homes, regarding mix and tenure, in the right locations.

Financial:

As of 31 March 2022, the HRA's Council Housing debt will be just over £60m and this needs to be repaid in full by 2041-42. As of 31 March 2021, the HRA had 4459 properties with a market value of £585.7m demonstrating that a £60m debt position was relatively low and could be increased if required.

The HRA has approximately £21m in income per annum, with fixed expenditure of £16m. Leaving £5m per annum to contribute to debt repayments and invest in the HRA Capital Programme. The HRA Capital Programme approved at Full Council on 27 January 2021 included £7.725m for redevelopment projects and £42.121m for new build development from 2021-22 to 2024-25.

To achieve a target to build more Council houses would require more funding, however, it was clear from the evidence provided to the Scrutiny Committee that the HRA could borrow additional funding if it wished.

Human Resources:

Over the last 18 months, the Housing Development Team has been expanded to help assess development opportunities, creating a development pipeline and enabling the year-on-year projected completions to increase. In addition, further specialisms in areas such as development contracting, construction law and commercial procurement were required, as well as external legal and procurement advice on particularly complex projects requiring construction sector expertise.

A Business Case would be able to identify additional staff/roles that would be required if the target to build Council houses was increased.

ICT:

The recent purchase of ARGUS developer software will help the Team to manage complex, multi-staged development projects with confidence.

The use of this software is helping the Council to assess development opportunities with a more commercial focused view ensuring the most appropriate use of HRA finance and bringing transparency to risks, helping to progress the building of additional new homes.

Legal:

Discussions are currently being held with the Head of Legal and Democratic Services concerning future specialised construction and development legal support for the HRA.

Increasing the target for new builds further was likely to increase the need for this support.. The Business Case would help identify the support needed and the associated costs.

Risk:

All projects within the Housing Development Programme have a project specific risk assessment carried out at the commencement of the project to identify potential risks to the delivery of the project and provide mitigation recommendations. The most common risks were not being able to successfully deliver the project brief within budget and on time, however, other risks included changes in the housing market, skills shortages or economic and political changes impacting the construction sector directly such as the availability of raw materials and imported goods. Risks have a potential to impact on multiple projects within the Programme.

Increasing the target for new builds within the existing HRA Development programme would likely increase the risk of delivery due to the availability of land, resource and funding. Increasing the Councils development programme across multiple sectors and tenures would spread risk of successfully delivering a programme. However, a successful delivery model would need to be defined and tested prior to consideration. Individual project risks would remain however the ability to take a more commercial approach may mean measured risks could be taken to reduce cost / programme and ultimately improve efficiently.

External Consultees:	Not applicable.
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Strategic Plan Priorities

Select the priorities of the Strategic Plan which are supported by this proposal: <i>(Select only one primary and as many secondary as appropriate)</i>		Primary priority	Secondary priorities
T01	Growing our Economy		
P01	Build the right environment for East Suffolk	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
P02	Attract and stimulate inward investment	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
P03	Maximise and grow the unique selling points of East Suffolk	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
P04	Business partnerships	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>
P05	Support and deliver infrastructure	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
T02	Enabling our Communities		
P06	Community Partnerships	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
P07	Taking positive action on what matters most	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>
P08	Maximising health, well-being and safety in our District	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>

P09	Community Pride	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>
T03	Maintaining Financial Sustainability		
P10	Organisational design and streamlining services	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
P11	Making best use of and investing in our assets	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>
P12	Being commercially astute	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
P13	Optimising our financial investments and grant opportunities	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>
P14	Review service delivery with partners	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
T04	Delivering Digital Transformation		
P15	Digital by default	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
P16	Lean and efficient streamlined services	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
P17	Effective use of data	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
P18	Skills and training	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
P19	District-wide digital infrastructure	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
T05	Caring for our Environment		
P20	Lead by example	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>
P21	Minimise waste, reuse materials, increase recycling	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
P22	Renewable energy	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>
P23	Protection, education and influence	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
XXX	Governance		
XXX	How ESC governs itself as an authority	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
How does this proposal support the priorities selected?			
<p>The Council's Housing Development Programme's primary objective is to meet housing need by providing high quality sustainable housing at affordable rents or sale values and to develop appropriate housing solutions in all areas of East Suffolk which are effective and cost efficient.</p> <p>Increasing the target of new builds will provide even more high-quality sustainable housing solutions for East Suffolk residents.</p>			

Background and Justification for Recommendation

1	Background facts
1.1	<p>The Committee considered the Cabinet Member's report on the Housing Development Programme at its meeting on 24 September 2020 and recommended to Cabinet "That the Scrutiny Committee welcomed and encouraged the Housing portfolio's ambition to build 50 Council houses per annum. The Committee, mindful of the limited resources available, recommended to Cabinet that it explore the potential for modular construction, carbon neutral where possible, on appropriate sites at the earliest and most realistic opportunity".</p> <p>An update was requested in one year to review the overall programme and, if necessary, the implications of staffing resources on the attainment of the ambition.</p> <p>That update was considered by the Committee at its meeting on 16 September 2021.</p>

1.2	<p>The Cabinet Member's update report provided details of the latest position with regards to new stock being added to the HRA portfolio.</p> <p>The written questions submitted in advance of the meeting, together with the written responses, form an appendix to the formal report which went to the Committee.</p>
1.3	<p>The following aspects of this topic were raised and discussed with the Cabinet Member and Officers at the meeting:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • the targets for East Suffolk under the Government's Affordable Homes Programme • Right to Buy and the impact on stock numbers • housing waiting lists and the need to review the Gateway to Home Choice Scheme • the current staffing levels in the Housing Development Team • the budget available to build and the implications of borrowing more money • the cost of purchasing land and the need to ensure value for money whilst providing new affordable housing in the places that residents need it • the lack of and price of building materials • the challenges of building environmentally sustainable housing.
1.4	<p>There is appreciation of the aspiration and desire for East Suffolk to commit to building additional Affordable Housing units, but there are a number of other factors we need to consider, before we can produce a Business Case such as the one requested by the Scrutiny Committee.</p>

2 Current position

2.1	<p>The current position with regards to the Council's progress on its Housing Development Programme are detailed in the Cabinet Member's report with additional information provided at the Scrutiny Committee meeting. It is not, therefore, proposed to restate that position here, in this report, and for the sake of efficiency readers are referred to the Cabinet Member's report and minutes of the meeting for this information.</p>
2.2	<p>In July 2019, East Suffolk Council voted unanimously to step up its positive work on environmental issues to tackle the issue of climate change. As part of this work, East Suffolk Council needs to consider the energy efficiency of its 4,500 Housing Revenue Account owned properties.</p>
2.3	<p>The level of work and investment required in the stock is not yet fully understood. Work is underway to try and understand the true cost and scale of the issue. However, it is without doubt going to be at considerable expense.</p>
2.4	<p>The Housing Revenue Account (HRA) has its own Business Plan, which was written in 2018 and since it was produced, we have seen a number of key changes, which will impact on what we choose to do in the future. These include the Building Safety Bill, the Retrofit agenda, the changes in the way we can use Right to Buy receipts and the removal of the debt cap.</p>
2.5	<p>Therefore, we will need to conduct a fundamental review of the Business Plan, which incorporates more than just development, so we can set a clear direction on future spend required within the HRA.</p>

3 How to address current situation	
3.1	The Scrutiny Committee noted that the current target had not always been met due to various factors, however, it was also clear from the evidence that there is a demand for more affordable housing for East Suffolk residents.
3.2	Although the Committee were of a mind to recommend that the target for new build Council houses be increased to provide more affordable housing, they recognised that building Council houses had budgetary and resource implications. Members also noted the challenges of building new Council houses, some of which were ongoing such as the impact of Right to Buy and the size of the Housing Development Team, whilst others were potentially short term issues such as the cost of materials and shortage in skilled labour.
3.3	A suggestion was made by the Strategic Director that rather than recommending the target be increased, it would be more beneficial to recommend to Cabinet that a Business Case be drawn up to identify and quantify the impact and cost of increasing the target from 50 to 100 new build Council houses per annum. This would enable Cabinet to assess the cost benefit ratio for providing the additional Council housing balanced against the costs required for other competing demands on the HRA budget such as making the existing stock more sustainable.
3.4	The Committee, in forming its recommendation, wished to offer a constructive friend's view of the current situation. In conducting the review, it was, as always, the Committee's intention to challenge in a positive way that might also add value and assistance rather than criticism.

4 Reason/s for recommendation	
4.1	It is proposed that Cabinet reject the recommendation from Scrutiny Committee to develop a business case to increase the target of affordable homes being delivered annually.
4.2	As stated above, there are a number of demands on the Housing Revenue Account at present, particularly in relation to the ambitious target to make the stock more energy efficient by 2030.
4.3	Therefore, at this time, it is not recommended we carry out one piece of work in isolation and instead allow officers to review all the demands on the HRA, in conjunction with the HRA Business Plan.

Appendices

Appendices:	
Appendix A	Review of Housing Development by the Scrutiny Committee

Background reference papers:

None.