

HOUSING DENSITY TARGETS TASK REVIEW – FINAL REPORT

Relevant Portfolio Holder	Councillor Greg Chance, Planning, Regeneration, Economic Development and Transport.
Portfolio Holder Consulted	Yes
Relevant Head of Service	Ruth Bamford, Head of Planning and Regeneration.
Ward(s) Affected	No specific ward relevance.
Non-Key Decision	

1. SUMMARY OF PROPOSALS

This report contains the final proposals of the Housing Density Targets Task Group. The group is proposing one overall recommendation, split into three distinct parts, which is designed to help encourage wider housing provision in the Borough and form part of the Council's emerging policy on housing as part of the Local Plan.

2. RECOMMENDATION

Policy 5 of the emerging Draft Borough of Redditch Local Plan No. 4 be revised as per Appendix 1 to incorporate the following headline points:

- i. All new housing developments within the Borough on sites less than 0.16 hectares should be exempt from the Council's housing density requirements;**
- ii. All new self-build housing developments on sites larger than 0.16 hectares within the Borough should meet a minimum housing density requirement of 15 dwellings per hectare; and that**
- iii. All new bungalow developments within the Borough on sites larger than 0.16 hectares should meet a minimum density requirement of 15 dwellings per hectare.**

3. KEY ISSUES

Background

- 3.1 The Housing Density Targets Task Group was established in February 2013 to review the impact of the Council's existing housing density requirements on the range of housing provision in the Borough, especially around whether the Council should retain its current minimum density requirements. It was intended that the findings of the review would then be included as part of the Council's consultation into Local Plan No 4 which would be running concurrently.

- 3.2 Three members were initially appointed to the review: Councillors David Bush, Brandon Clayton, and Roger Bennett. Councillor Bush was appointed to chair the review. However, Councillor Clayton was required to resign from the group during the review following his appointment onto the Council's Executive Committee. Councillor Carole Gandy was subsequently nominated as his replacement.
- 3.3 Following Government changes to the planning system through the Localism Act and the National Planning Policy Framework (NPPF), the Borough Council set about preparing a Local Plan rather than a Core Strategy. The new plan became known as 'Draft Borough of Redditch Local Plan 4'. The NPPF states that it is at the discretion of individual local authorities to determine their own density levels, and therefore does not prescribe minimum density targets.
- 3.4 The Local Plan 4 outlines the vision and policies regarding how Redditch will aim to be like in 2030. It states that while any housing development should take density limits into account and that each potential new housing site should be assessed on its own individual merits. Local Plan No. 4 was to be published for public consultation during April / May 2013. Members felt it was therefore timely to analyse whether the Council's emerging Policy 5, incorporating housing density policy, would be suitable for the town's housing requirements in future.
- 3.5 As part of the wider Local Plan No. 4, the individual Policy 5 states that 'effective and efficient use of land must be sought in all new development schemes.' In particular, it states that: 'densities of between 30 and 50 dwellings per hectare will be sought in Redditch Borough, and 70 dwellings per hectare will be sought on sites for residential development that are within or adjacent to Redditch Town Centre and the District Centres'.
- 3.6 Policy 5 also states that 'lower densities will only be considered acceptable where it has been demonstrated that there are site specific limitations which negate standard densities being met, or where there would be a detrimental impact on the current and future amenity, character, and environmental quality of the neighbourhood. Development may be supported if there are substantial overriding environmental, social and economic benefits to justify the development'.
- 3.7 The group initially consulted relevant lead Officers to gain a greater understanding of the justification for Policy 5 as it stood. Members then referred to existing data regarding what Redditch's housing requirements were expected to be in future based on projected demographic changes, with particular reference made to the most up to date Strategic Housing Market Assessment (SHMA) for Redditch (2012). Members also consulted a local housing developer to gain their perspective on how density level requirements affected the housing trade in the Borough. Finally, questionnaires were submitted to the majority of estate agents in the town to seek their views about the existing level of demand and around what provision was needed to meet future demand.

4. RECOMMENDATION

We RECOMMEND that Policy 5 of the emerging Draft Borough of Redditch Local Plan No. 4 be revised as per Appendix 1 to incorporate the following headline points:

- i. all new housing developments within the Borough on sites less than 0.16 hectares should be exempt from the Council's housing density requirements**

- 4.1 It was explained to the group during their investigations that current housing density requirements made it extremely difficult for small locally based developers to compete with nationally based firms due to the latter's greater capacity to deliver larger housing developments that met density requirements. It was suggested to the group that more opportunities should be facilitated for smaller scale select builds on certain sites which could enable a wider variety of housing to be developed.
- 4.2 Members were also told that local developers were far more likely to source their employment locally compared to the large nationally based developers, and heard that the difficult conditions for smaller developers had a negative impact on local employment. In the case of the housing developer that was consulted, they also worked with local colleges to give apprentices the opportunity to gain experience working in the building trade.
- 4.3 The group was told that smaller developers should become far more competitive if they could build to lower density requirements. Members therefore feel that smaller, locally based developers need more help and flexibility in this respect, especially as it was argued they could help provide a wider range of housing in the Borough. It was felt that this could help make Redditch a more attractive proposition to people currently living outside the town and enable it to better compete with nearby locations such as Bromsgrove and Barnt Green as a desirable place to live. Indeed, a local estate agent commented that they had seen many potential buyers for executive level detached homes in Redditch look elsewhere due to lack of supply. Furthermore, all of the estate agents that responded to the group's consultation felt that Redditch needed a larger supply of larger executive type housing.
- 4.4 Evidence from the Worcestershire SHMA suggests that 'there is also a continued requirement to deliver medium and larger family-size dwellings consisting of 3 and 4+ bedrooms in all authorities'. Evidence specific to Redditch suggests that 'there is likely to be a significant increase in the number of higher value jobs, linked to the expansion of the service sector.' The group therefore feels that local housing developers must be supported to help deliver more detached executive homes that will be sufficient to meet rising demand. In particular, it is felt that Redditch needs to attract more professionals to live and work in the Borough. Policy 5 explains that 'applicants should refer to the most up to date SHMA to determine the most appropriate types of dwellings required throughout the Borough'. The Redditch SHMA Overview Report mentions that "the lower levels of lettings turnover in the

larger 3 bedroom and, in particular, 4+ bedroom family housing result in there being limited availability of such stock and highlight the continued need to deliver new additional dwellings to boost supply for families.”

- 4.5 During their investigations, Members were informed by a representative from the Asian community in Redditch that finding suitable larger houses within the Borough for extended families from the Pakistani community was a real issue. The group heard that many of these families were housed in the town centre area where properties are older and in many cases in need of considerable repair. The group therefore suggests that the supply of larger properties within the Borough should be increased to help meet the housing needs of this community.
- 4.6 Members also became concerned that, in some instances, the Council’s existing minimum density requirement of 30 dwellings per hectare had led to developments having a ‘detrimental impact on the amenity, character and environmental quality of an area’ as stated in Policy 5. Members feel that density requirements have not been suitable for particular developments within the Borough, and have indeed reduced the visual attraction of these locations. Members of the review suggest that applying density level requirements to these smaller sites is not appropriate as there is very little flexibility for developers to meet these requirements without compromising the look and amenities of the general area itself.
- 4.7 The group appreciates that there must be a fair balance between giving local developers more freedom to deliver new housing on smaller sites while ensuring that there is sufficient land for the Council to meet its own housing targets. With this in mind, the Council’s Strategic Housing Land Availability Assessment (SHLAA) (2011) explains that sites needed to be at least 0.16 hectares in size before they were considered. Essentially this means that they are able to accommodate a minimum of five dwellings at a minimum of thirty dwellings per hectare. Members therefore propose that a threshold is established at 0.16 hectares for exempting new developments from density requirements. This would ensure that all these developments would meet the minimum density requirements to be assessed under the SHLAA. This five dwelling threshold would also give the Council a strong argument for including a windfall allowance in the five year housing supply.
- 4.8 The group feels that exempting all new housing developments within the Borough on sites less than 0.16 hectares from the Council’s housing density requirements could lead to a number of significant benefits being realised in terms of providing greater support to local developers, producing more local employment opportunities, and facilitating a wider variety of housing in the Borough to help meet future demand. The group therefore believes that setting a threshold at 0.16 hectares would help achieve a fair balance for the needs of local developers, the Borough Council, and local residents.

- ii. **all new self-build housing developments on sites larger than 0.16 hectares within the Borough should meet a minimum housing density requirement of 15 dwellings per hectare**

- 4.9 It was suggested to the group by a local housing developer that there was significant local demand for self-build developments in Redditch. They were referred to previous self build sites that had been successfully developed within the Borough, including on Icknield Street and Wolverton Close in Ipsley. It was therefore suggested that more land should be put allocated for these types of developments.
- 4.10 Central Government introduced new initiatives as part of the Localism Act to help encourage more self-build developments. For example, the *Community Right to Build* initiative allows local communities to undertake small-scale, site-specific, community-led developments, including new homes. The intention is to enable the individual communities to retain the benefits of the development. Proposals must meet some minimum requirements, including the strategic elements of the local plan, before they can be approved.
- 4.11 The group are aware that self-build developments can possess a number of strong ecological advantages over traditional house building, especially around energy saving through its strong emphasis on green building design leading to zero carbon housing standards. The group feels that more self-build developments in Redditch, whether through private groups or cooperative means, can also help make local people more employable through improving their range of skills, especially in the construction and business fields.
- 4.12 The group suggests that more should be done to encourage more of these developments to produce a wider variety of housing in the Borough through innovative designs to suit the distinct needs of local residents. Community cohesion could also be improved through local people coming together on these developments. Members are aware that there have been a number of successful cases across the country to the benefit of the local community and environment, including the Hedgehog Housing Co-Operative development of ten timber frame detached bungalows which were constructed in Bevendean, Brighton. The project, which started in 1996, was initiated by four local residents who were in urgent need of being rehoused. They saw self build project as a means to take real ownership and to literally build for a secure future for their family. Drawing on the support of self build groups, they were successful in gaining approval from the city council by highlighting the potential benefits to the local community through the provision of more eco-friendly housing that would be tailored to the needs to the current inhabitants. The scheme has since been praised as a clear example of how self built housing can be truly innovative.
- 4.13 Members feel that more of these of the developments should be actively encouraged in Redditch. It is proposed that self-build projects on sites larger than 0.16 hectares within the Borough should meet a reduced minimum housing density requirement of 15 dwellings per hectare. It is argued that reducing the density

requirement would allow individual communities to benefit from these developments within the Borough, and to help facilitate a wider variety of local housing provision which Members feel can help attract more people to live in Redditch now and in future. Eliminating density requirements altogether on sites less than 0.16 hectares would give added incentive for more of these developments on very small pockets of land. The group believes that in giving local people the opportunity work together on these schemes could help develop a greater sense of community in Redditch and would improve the skills of local residents in doing so.

iii. all new bungalow developments within the Borough on sites larger than 0.16 hectares should meet a minimum density requirement of 15 dwellings per hectare

- 4.14 According to the Office for National Statistics, Worcestershire is projected to have a population of almost 607,000 by 2031, representing an increase of around 49,500 on the 2010 figure, or just less than 9 per cent. This projected increase in population is concentrated almost exclusively in the 65-plus age range, with the number of people aged 65 and over projected to increase by more than 64,000. In total, this represents a growth of nearly 60 per cent among the 65+ age group between 2010 and 2031. This accounts for 130 per cent of the total projected population increase for Worcestershire during this period.
- 4.15 However, during the review, Members grew concerned that Redditch did not appear to possess a sufficient supply of suitable accommodation to meet the demand of an ageing population.
- 4.16 The majority of estate agents that responded to the group's questionnaire suggested that there was a real need for more bungalows to be built within the Borough, with one estate agent claiming that more two and three bedroom bungalows were 'desperately needed'.
- 4.17 The group suggests that there is an inadequate supply of accommodation for elderly people who want to live independently within the Borough. They are concerned that a significant proportion of existing elderly accommodation within the Borough is not suitable for independent living. In particular, the group argues that there needs to be more ground floor based accommodation that is easily accessible for elderly people in Redditch.
- 4.18 At the time of publication, there were 494 households on the Council's housing register where the main applicant was aged 55 or over. This equated to 23 per cent of the total number of households on the register. 277 of these were aged 65 or over.
- 4.19 It is felt that there needs to be more flexibility for new bungalow developments within the Borough to help meet a rising demand for ground floor accommodation. Once again, the group suggests that a threshold site size should be established at 0.16 hectares before a reduced minimum density requirement would apply. This would

ensure that all developments that reach this threshold could be assessed for inclusion in the SHLAA and would give the Council a strong argument for including a windfall allowance in the five year land supply.

Financial Implications

4.20 There are no financial implications.

Legal Implications

4.21 The proposed re-wording of Policy 5 is a variation to the current Draft Borough of Redditch Local Plan No. 4 policy that has been out for consultation. If accepted, the revised Policy 5 would be incorporated into the Publication Version of the plan, which is due to be published for consultation, in September 2013.

Service / Operational Implications

4.22 There are no service or operational implications.

Customer / Equalities and Diversity Implications

4.23 There are no customer equalities or diversity implications.

5. **RISK MANAGEMENT**

There are no risk management identified.

6. **APPENDICES**

Appendix 1 - Policy 5 Effective and Efficient Use of Land, extracted from the Draft Borough of Redditch Local Plan 4.

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