

Council

Monday 18 December 2023

Written Questions

Question From: Councillor Ian Middleton

Question To: Leader of the Council, Councillor Barry Wood

Topic: Draft Local Plan 2040 – affordable housing

Question

“At the last full Council meeting I asked the Leader why our proposals on the draft Local Plan 2040 appeared to undermine the motion passed unanimously by this council in February 2023 to investigate an increase in our housing development mix policy to a requirement for 50% affordable housing.

I referenced the report on the plan which said that a range of affordability ratios had been tested on viability grounds but that only 30% affordable housing was being recommended in line with our current policy. I said I believed that could have influenced responses to the Regulation 18 consultation.

The response I received from the Leader was “it’s complicated”.

I acknowledged that response and that I had not given the Leader advanced notice of my question. I asked for the background details of how various levels of affordability had been tested and what information the Executive had considered in terms of changing our affordable housing policy as agreed in my motion. Essentially I hoped to see the information on which this recommendation was based.

The Leader agreed to provide that detail but I have so far received no further information from him or officers.

So I will ask again – Can I be provided with an explanation of why the draft local plan which forms part of the public consultation includes a recommendation that we should continue to support a policy calling for only 30% affordable housing, with no context on how that figure was arrived at and no apparent opportunity to suggest a different figure in the consultation, when we have passed a resolution committing the council to fairly considering an increase to 50%?

Response from the Leader

“The current draft of the Cherwell Local Plan Review is a consultation document. Officers’ recommendation on future affordable housing policy will be made when the ‘Proposed Submission’ Plan (reg. 19) is presented to Members for consideration in Autumn 2024. The NPPF requires an evidence based approach to plan-making.

The consultation draft was presented to the Executive on 5 September 2023.

Paragraph 3.29 of the officer report advises, *“Government policy states that local plans should set out what new development is expected to provide, and that the requirement should not be so high as to undermine the delivery of the Plan. To ensure that the local plan is deliverable its proposals and policies need to be viability tested. In order to understand the level of affordable housing the Plan could require, whilst at the same time ensuring the delivery of the Plan, the Council’s interim Viability Assessment tested a range of requirements for affordable housing from 0 to 50% and for First Homes (discounted market homes) provided at 25%. It recommends an overall 30% affordable housing requirement on all sites. For Banbury and Bicester, this is the same level as the adopted 2015 Local Plan, but lower for Kidlington and the rural areas.”*

The initial viability assessment supporting preparation of the Plan (December 2022) was available to support the consultation at <https://www.cherwell.gov.uk/info/112/evidence-base/844/local-plan-review---economic-evidence>. The study had been published before the Local Plan consultation document was presented to Members.

The study is a detailed one setting out its methodology, modelling approach and scenario testing. Section 12 explains its findings. Para. 12.92 contains the study’s policy specific recommendation for 30%.

However, paragraph 3.30 of the officer report to the Executive states, *“...in light of the Council’s adopted motion, and recognising the importance of housing need as a policy area, officers have inserted a specific consultation question to gauge opinion on whether there is stakeholder support for maximising the delivery of affordable housing, and in particular the delivery of more social rented housing, if sacrifices were made in respect of other requirements.”*

This appeared as Question 24 in the consultation document.

Officers will give full consideration to the responses received to the Local Plan consultation and undertake further work before making their recommendations to Members. This will include further viability evidence. Consideration continues to be given to this matter in accordance with Council’s resolution of 27 February 2023.

Question From: Councillor Ian Middleton

Question To: Leader of the Council, Councillor Barry Wood

Topic: Long term empty homes

Question

“The Department for Levelling Up, Housing and Communities has identified 425 homes in Cherwell as long-term empty as of October this year. This represents a slight decrease from 429 during the same period in 2022 but a significant increase in the order of 13% against the position in 2018 when a similar story hit the headlines.

Rebecca Moore, director of Action on Empty Homes, has said: “It beggars belief that while children are growing up sharing beds in temporary accommodation, our nation has over a quarter of a million homes sitting empty. To say this is a national disgrace is a profound understatement.”

Would the Leader agree with me that, while our housing officers struggle every day to find accommodation for homeless families in the district, the fact that the number of long term empty homes in Cherwell has continued to rise over the past 5 years is a disgrace?”

Response

“Tackling empty homes is an activity carried out currently by the Housing Standards Team as well as through financial measures imposed by the Council Tax team.

As part of the 2023/24 budget proposals, we increased the Council Tax Premiums charged on long term empties, in line with the maximum permitted, to encourage owners to bring them back into use. It’s too soon to know how successful that action has been.

The figures quoted in the question refer to long term vacant properties liable for Council Tax and that have been empty for longer than 6 months and are not subject to the empty homes discount. The Housing Standards team’s work in this area includes attempting to force sales, and using persuasive arguments but this is a slow process and can be easily stymied by the owner taking simple actions.

The numbers of empty homes of all types and categories is consistent. An increase was seen between March 2018 (1187) and September 2019 (1628), but these levels have regressed back to around 1400, which has been a similar level to the last 3 years.

From our contacts with Registered Providers as part of our routine engagement, there appears to be little appetite for acquiring individual properties, even those that were once within their portfolio. Consequently, it is unlikely that bringing homes into use would directly impact the number of social housing properties available to rent.”