



**Executive**  
10<sup>th</sup> April 2006

**Report from the Director of  
Policy and Regeneration**

For Action

Wards Affected:  
ALL

**Housing Densities and Urban Impacts – Task Group Report**

FP Ref: PRU-05/06-22

**1.0 Summary**

- 1.1 This report provides officer comments and information on legal, financial, and diversity implications of the scrutiny Task Group's report entitled Housing Densities and Urban Impacts.

**2.0 Recommendations**

- 2.1 To note the recommendations made in this review; to thank the task group for their work, and the service for implementing the recommendations of the task group.

**3.0 Key Points from the Task Group**

- 3.1 Building design is of fundamental importance in developing sustainable and successful new communities but this should not be the preserve of planners and architects. Other agencies and interests including housing managers and Members can also make an important contribution and, as importantly, the needs of the owner/occupier are central to the consideration of the location, design and layout, occupation and management of new housing schemes, particularly those at higher densities.
- 3.2 Higher density housing is not inherently problematical – physically, socially or environmentally. However, there is a legacy of poor quality

schemes from the 1960's (particularly of social housing) and lessons learnt need to be applied.

- 3.3 Developing housing at higher densities is not, of itself, the only 'solution' to addressing the scale of housing need and demand in Brent/London. There needs to be parallel investment in infrastructure and better utilisation of existing (empty) property.
- 3.4 Policy on housing density should be applied flexibly in response to locational characteristics (e.g. access to public transport and services) – one size does not fit all.
- 3.5 Design quality, from site layout and planning to architectural details, is of fundamental importance in developing successful high density housing projects and needs to be sympathetic to the needs of the owner/occupier as well as its urban context, but that management and allocations policy also need to be addressed particularly on affordable housing schemes.
- 3.6 Measures of housing density by themselves can be a crude planning tool. They do not, however, reflect build/environmental quality nor the experience of residents.
- 3.7 When public sector tenants are offered more choice as to where they might live, even if this causes delay, satisfaction with their new home is greater. The European experience demonstrates that choice reduces housing management problems.
- 3.8 To qualify for access to public sector housing necessitates the applicants to have economic constraints and their choices are compromised by only being given one offer due to lack of availability of surplus accommodation.
- 3.9 Choice is crucial for tenant satisfaction. For choice to be possible there has to be a supply of units in excess of demand, preferably by at least five percent. Size, design and location have to cater for people with different needs.
- 3.10 Communal areas only work if the community adopts these spaces as their own and share them collectively. The areas must be kept safe and have secure and restricted access, otherwise, they can become derelict and potential areas for crime.
- 3.11 The majority of high density housing schemes being planned are for families with children. This requires consideration of the specific needs of these families.

## **4.0 Recommendations from the Task Group**

- 4.1 **Housing Policy and Design** – the Council's approach to housing density (from the location, layout, design, maintenance, participation of tenants and other stakeholders to the management of new housing) must be tailored to the needs of the potential owner/occupier, be they single people, families with children, disabled or elderly. It is not a 'one size fits all' solution. People feel well disposed to attractive buildings. Residents will feel privileged, proud, happy and content to live in well designed, managed and maintained developments with obvious results. Living in badly designed and poorly maintained and managed housing is dehumanising. Specifically:
- 4.2. The Council should aspire to meeting the needs of the individual to the greatest possible extent. New homes should be the best possible given available resources. For example, as far as possible families with children should be housed on the lower floors of developments, with access to open space they can call their own. This objective should be championed by Members as well as Officers across the Council.
- 4.3 Brent's housing policy should be suitable for the varying needs of its residents. Current policy is driven by the numbers of families in temporary accommodation.
- 4.4. Housing densities need to take account of the available/planned infrastructure required to support the development – schools, jobs, transport, utilities, etc. On larger schemes appropriate services and facilities should, where possible, be provided on site.
- 4.5 Housing densities need to relate to the scale and density of the surrounding area. Site layout and design details must avoid bland and uninspiring architecture that detracts from the local environment. Poor design can stigmatise large scale housing schemes particularly in the affordable sector.
- 4.6. As part of the emerging Area Action Plan preparation process the Council should review development opportunities (in town centres and around transport interchanges) where higher density housing development would be appropriate.
- 4.7. The Council should undertake a review of SPG17\* and of its Design Guide to encourage innovation and creative solutions in new housing schemes.
- 4.8. The Council should reject poor or mediocre designs.

- 4.9. The Council should consider seeking adoption of the Building Research Establishment's EcoHomes standards for all new and refurbished housing, public or private, as a way of promoting sustainability. These same standards should be applied to the 'decent homes' programme.
- 4.10. The design and planning of high density housing should take into consideration not only immediate housing needs, but also needs in the future 20-50 years.
- 4.11. Rental/mortgage pepper potting, i.e. mixing of different tenures in the same building, is neither sensible nor appropriate and should be avoided. However, each building within a development should have similar tenures and be managed with innovation and imagination. All buildings in a mixed tenure development must be managed and maintained to similar standards to ensure community building and cohesion.
- 4.12. Residents must always be involved in management and maintenance issues. Residents associations, committees, etc. are just a few examples of how community participation can be ensured for the benefit of all.
- 4.13. The 'public sector image' should be avoided at all costs. Quality of internal design, lettings and management is of paramount importance to residents in the new development. The quality of external design is also significant to residents in the surrounding areas.
- 4.14. Housing Management and Funding – housing management including allocations and lettings policy is a key factor in many successful high density developments, particularly affordable housing projects. Allocation policy is a more critical issue in higher density housing than in lower density. Accordingly:
- 4.15. The Council should work together with housing associations and the Housing Corporation to develop policies that reflect best practice on issues of housing allocations, lettings plans and child density levels. There should also be public recognition, perhaps by awards, for successful and innovative management methods.
- 4.16. There appears to be a case to review the working of LOCATA to assess whether everyone that uses it has an opportunity to exercise 'real' choice. Higher density new build will obviously increase the supply side and thereby increase choice. Letting plans should be reviewed with RSLs and the West London Housing Strategy Group to ensure that the widest range of choice is available to all groups of tenants.
- 4.17. This task group report should be considered in conjunction with the report of the Empty Properties task group to ensure the best results for bringing vacant property into use.

- 4.18 Brent, through the West London Housing Strategy Group, should initiate discussion around the case for increased public investment in infrastructure and affordable housing.

## **5.0 Service Department's Response**

### ***Planning Service Response***

- 5.1 The Planning Service welcomes the Task Group report but recognises that much has already changed in terms of policy and practice to ensure that higher density developments are sustainable in the long term. Many of the recommendations are integrated in the review of the council's Unitary Development Plan (UDP). The UDP is being transformed into a Local Development Framework (LDF). The LDF will be presented to Executive (in autumn 2006) to agree core policies and proposals that will be tested at public inquiry in 2007/8. The proposed main strategy of the LDF is to set out areas where higher density housing is suitable and to ensure in these areas there is sufficient social, transport and other infrastructure in order to make higher density development work. The Planning Service will also bring forward new detailed design guidance (recommendation 6) reviewing SPG 17 (this is Supplementary Planning Guidance that sets out design standards for new development) and SPG5 (Guidance on residential conversions and extensions).
- 5.2 There is much the Planning Service is, and will continue to do, particularly with the council's Housing Service when assessing and advising on planning applications. For example the issue of providing family homes in higher density developments and ensuring that there is sufficient amenity and play space is central to our work. This is practical work that happens in the assessment of new development schemes. The LDF will recognise that high density is not a simple prescription to garner more units: it must be accompanied by a sea-change in design quality. The LDF will put in place policies and guidance that will allow us to continue rejecting poor design. At the same time the Planning Service will demand and promote the work of the best architects and urban designers. Also there will be many sites where the council, through land ownership or through planning and other powers will be promoting regeneration and the council must insist that better quality architects are used.
- 5.3 In terms of reducing the energy, water and waste requirements of new buildings, the next few years will provide a sea-change in improvements. The Mayor of London's policy lead has been invaluable in establishing changes in practice and attitudes. Other key players are also making an impact: the Housing Corporation's requirement that in order to get grants Housing Associations must build new homes to Eco-homes 'Very Good' standards is having an impact and meets part of recommendation (8) for example.

- 5.4 The Planning Service is aware of the significant task ahead in ensuring that high density developments are sustainable and do not have the problems and limited lifespan of their 1960 predecessors. It is likely that the Mayor of London's Housing requirements will leave the borough no choice but to manage the production of higher density development the forthcoming LDF will set the policy framework. Our practice in dealing with planning applications and grasping opportunities to promote good design is essential to ensure the sustainability of higher density development.

### ***Housing & Community Care Response***

- 5.5 Housing and Community Care welcome the Task Group report as a timely contribution to the debate on development at higher densities. However, there are one or two areas on which it is hoped that the comments below will be helpful.
- 5.6 The report notes that current policy is driven by the numbers of families in temporary accommodation. Temporary accommodation use is itself a symptom of more complex supply and demand issues and it is unlikely that this situation will change in the near future. Even at current increased rates of investment and development, the social sector supply shortage will remain severe and the government has now set targets for a 50% reduction in temporary accommodation use by 2010. It is also worth noting in this context that housing targets for Brent encompass private as well as social housing provision. Homelessness and other urgent housing need will therefore remain a key driver of housing policy in London.
- 5.7 Bringing empty properties back into use can make a valuable contribution to increasing the overall supply of housing in the borough. This is already a priority within the Housing Strategy and stretch targets, which were agreed in this area under the PSA and have now been met. However, the scope to meet housing need and demand in this way is limited. In particular, only a proportion of empty homes will be available to meet social housing need, while others will return into owner occupation or private letting.
- 5.8 While choice-based lettings systems such as LOCATA have had a very positive impact in enabling households to select properties and areas within and outside the borough, supply and demand constraints will continue to impose limitations on choice. Building at higher densities will not in itself increase supply to the extent that choice will be extended significantly, although it does assist in making better use of existing development capacity.
- 5.9 Housing and Community Care, together with colleagues in Planning, will seek to ensure that all new developments meet the highest standards. For example, sustainability appraisals are already being carried out on development proposals, encompassing many of the factors highlighted in the report in addition to other considerations. In

addition, the Housing Corporation's requirements incorporate the Eco Homes standard among a range of other design factors. The Council is already working with RSLs and our West London partners to develop a sustainable approach to lettings and a report elsewhere on the agenda considers this issue in more detail.

## **6.0 Financial Implications**

- 6.1 There are no financial implications from a planning perspective. From the development point of view, density is only one among many cost factors and it is not possible at this stage to identify either additional costs or savings that might be attributable to density alone. In the longer term, it is acknowledged that density does have an impact on management costs and, potentially, on rents and service charges. The implications will vary from scheme to scheme.
- 6.2 More generally, both Planning and Housing and Community Care are already pursuing policies in line with the overall recommendations of the report as noted above. It is not anticipated that any additional costs will be incurred outside those already budgeted for.

## **7.0 Legal Implications**

- 7.1 The relevant service areas will continue to work within the many legislative, policy and related constraints placed upon them when pursuing the Council's objectives in respect of housing density issues, in the usual way.
- 7.2 In respect of the Local Development Framework ('LDF') mentioned at paragraph 5.2, it is important to note that it will be subject to independent examination by the Secretary of State who will appoint an Inspector to conduct the examination. The Inspector will hold a public inquiry after which the Inspector will produce a report with recommendations which will be binding on the Council. The Council must incorporate the changes required by the Inspector and then adopt the LDF. The LDF will then provide the essential framework for planning in the Borough and against which planning applications will have to be judged.

## **8.0 Diversity Implications**

- 8.1 Recommendations from task groups are incorporated within service department's delivery or development plans and as such will be subject to the equalities impact assessments carried out by services as part of their work program. In addition, the annual review of Overview & Scrutiny activities includes an equalities impact assessment.
- 8.2 This report hopes to address equalities issues to help make services

fairer and more easily accessible to all.

## **9.0 Staffing/Accommodation Implications**

None at this stage in the reporting process.

### **Background Papers**

Housing Density & Urban Impacts Task Group Report

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