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ECONOMY REGENERATION & HOUSING COMMITTEE

Monday, 20 January 2025

Present: Councillor T Jones (Chair)

Councillors GJ Davies A Gardner
A Davies J Bird
M Skillicorn E Lamb
G Wood E Tomeny
A Hodson H Raymond

130 **WELCOME AND INTRODUCTION**

The Chair opened the meeting and reminded everyone that the meeting was being webcast and a copy was retained on the Council's website for two years.

131 **APOLOGIES**

The Chair informed the committee that no apologies had been received.

132 **MEMBERS' CODE OF CONDUCT - DECLARATIONS OF INTEREST**

Members were asked to consider whether they had any disclosable pecuniary interests and/or any other relevant interests in connection with any items on this agenda and, if so, to declare them and state the nature of the interest.

No declarations of interest were received.

133 **MINUTES**

Resolved – That the minutes of the meeting held on 4th December 2024 be approved as a correct record.

134 **PUBLIC AND MEMBER QUESTIONS**

134.1 **Public Questions**

John Heath asked a question on behalf of the Wirral Green Space Alliance and Irby, Thurstaston & Pensby Amenity Society, relating to the Government's housing targets and the methodology used to make them. He wished to know if the committee was aware of where the additional residents would come from to occupy the large number of homes that the Government would require

Wirral to build, claiming that the increased numbers would alter Wirral's character and require release of greenbelt land.

The Chair responded that while the committee was aware of the new method for calculating housing targets, the Council did not accept that this method accurately reflected the housing need in Wirral. He noted that the views of the Council had been made clear in its response to the draft National Planning Policy Framework consultation.

Mr Heath asked a supplementary question regarding the number of people that the housing targets would require to move to Wirral. If up to 60,000 new residents were to move to Wirral to occupy the property built under the Government's targets, he asked where would they be coming from?

The Chair thanked Mr Heath for his question and confirmed that he would receive a written response to his supplemental question.

Rod Tann asked a question on behalf of the Wirral Green Space Alliance. He stated that at the Extraordinary Council Meeting held on 19 August 2024, the Council had agreed to meet with the Government and "New Towns Task Force" to promote the concept of a "New Town within a Historic Town", which he felt would add to the robustness, attraction and speed of delivery of the Birkenhead 2040 Framework and the Local Plan. He asked why doubt had been cast on this proposal without involvement of Committee or Senior Management and Stakeholders.

The Chair responded that the Council was in dialogue with the Ministry of Housing, Communities and Local Government (MHCLG) about its commitment to delivery of new homes as set out in the Local Plan. The Council had prepared a draft Expression of Interest (EoI) with MHCLG and the New Towns Task Force which set out its plans for housing delivery.

During the process, clarity was sought from MHCLG regarding the criteria and specifically the threshold of 10,000 new homes and whether these could be homes already identified in the Council's local plan trajectory or whether they would need to be in addition to those already in the Local Plan. At the time MHCLG was unable to provide that clarity and on that basis the EoI submission had been drafted based on the new homes proposed having been identified within the Local Plan.

However, further clarity from MHCLG, provided at a later date, confirmed that the call for evidence related to proposal of in excess of 10,000 new homes over and above the Local Plan requirement. As a result of this advice, the Interim Director of Regeneration & Place decided that an EoI submission would not be made, on the basis that the draft EoI did not meet the relevant criteria and its submission might prejudice the Council's commitment to delivery as set out in the Local Plan.

Mr Tann asked a supplementary question. He asked whether it would be possible for the Council to explore the possibility of linking Liverpool City Council's application to the New Town Task Force with that of the Council's Birkenhead 2040 vision.

The Chair thanked Mr Tann for his question and confirmed that he would receive a written response to his supplemental question.

134.2 **Statements and Petitions**

No statements or petitions had been received.

134.3 **Questions by Members**

The Chair informed the committee that no questions had been submitted by Members.

135 **HOUSING UPDATE REPORT**

The Assistant Director of Housing presented the report on behalf of the Director of Regeneration and Place. The report noted that the Committee had previously agreed to receive several updates relating to housing agendas and priorities. The report along with any future reports, formed part of the housing work programme with updates scheduled and informed by a range of data and performance briefings relating to both the Wirral Plan and the previously agreed and approved Economy, Regeneration and Housing Insight Report.

The report was therefore not intended to replicate the information within those reports, instead it was intended to enhance and provide further insight into a wider range of housing work which fell under the remit of the Committee.

Members thanked officers for the report, which they felt was comprehensive with a lot of useful information.

Members discussed the Renters' Rights Bill and queried who would be responsible for keeping and maintaining the Private Renters' database mentioned in the report.

Officers responded that it had not yet been stated by the Government, but that it was likely to be maintained by Central Government with Councils feeding information to them.

Members raised their concerns for families that were struggling financially and potentially falling behind on their rent payments. They noted that they had been contacted by residents in this situation that were being faced with eviction and asked about the support offered to families that were struggling to pay their rent.

Officers responded that each case had to be dealt with in a different manner as the reasons for rent arrears can be so varied. The service was able to negotiate with landlords and look into the reasons for the situation a family found themselves in. They noted that this issue was not the greatest cause of Section 21 eviction notices.

Members discussed the work being done around damp and mould problems in rented properties and asked whether the climate team could be involved when work was being undertaken on properties to improve their heating and ventilation systems. They felt that this would be the ideal opportunity to move away from fossil fuel based heating systems if landlords and homeowners could be encouraged to take up a boiler upgrade scheme that had a low barrier for entry.

Officers noted that a lot of work had been done regarding damp and mould withing rented properties and offered to share further information and literature with Members outside of the meeting. They were also working closely with the Liverpool City Region Combined Authority on energy efficiency within these properties as well as working to the council's own environmental policies and working with the Council's Climate Change Team.

Members asked about the funding received from the Ministry for Housing, Communities and Local Government (MHCLG) for tackling damp and mould in rented properties and whether that funding would continue.

Officers responded that MHCLG had been impressed with the work that the Council had done in this area, but direct funding to tackle damp and mould was unlikely to continue, however alternate funding streams were potentially going to be on offer and would be sought when available.

Members asked whether officers had explored the possibility of using empty, Council owned properties such as office buildings for temporary accommodation to reduce the pressure on the borough's housing stock.

Officers responded that it had been considered previously, but the majority of such building would need significant work done to them, at a high cost, to make them suitable.

Members noted that they had been contacted recently by some of their constituents regarding landlords rapidly increasing rent prices and posited that this could be in response to the incoming Renters' Rights Bill as a way to lose tenants before they were forced to comply with aspects of the Bill.

Officers responded that they were seeing rents increased due to rises in mortgage and insurance costs to landlords, which was being passed on to their tenants. They requested that if Members were to receive such

correspondence about rent increases, they should pass it on to the Housing team.

Members discussed the impact to respiratory health that damp and mould could have and asked whether housing officers were working collaboratively with air quality officers to look into these impacts.

Officers responded that they sat on an Air Quality Group which included air quality officers and other professionals to improve the situation for rented properties.

Members requested further information on high rise buildings and what work was being done with the fire authorities on fire safety in such buildings.

Officers offered to provide information to Members on this subject by way of a briefing paper.

Members discussed dispersal accommodation for asylum seekers and noted that there were many more people in hotels and B&Bs than dispersal accommodation. They asked what was being done to increase dispersal accommodation to reduce the pressure on these hotels and B&Bs.

Officers responded that they were always looking for grant money opportunities that might allow them to build or buy additional accommodation for this purpose. They noted that it has been difficult to find accommodation at the right price for the authority to purchase.

Resolved – That the report be noted and endorsed.

136 **2025-26 BUDGET REPORT UPDATE**

The Finance Manager (Place) presented the report on behalf of the Director of Finance which provided an update on the budgets within the remit of the Committee in respect of forthcoming pressures and proposed savings that were being considered within the Medium-Term Financial Plan.

It was stated that it was also for the Committee to consider feedback and outcomes from the Budget Oversight Panels which had been held in recent months. The Panels enabled officer and member liaison on proposed budget options, to facilitate discussion and allow direction to be obtained on further analysis required. The Panels also provided an opportunity for alternative proposals to be considered.

The Policy and Service Committees were responsible for those services being delivered under their operational headings within their actual budget envelope. The Policy and Resources Committee, in consultation with the

respective Policy and Service Committees, had been charged by Council to formulate a draft Medium Term Financial Plan and budget to recommend to the Council.

The Council was required to set a balanced budget each year and set a Medium-Term Financial Plan which considered the future pressures and savings options that would be taken forward to result in a balanced budget position.

It was reported that the Council faced a severe budget challenge to identify savings required to set a balanced budget for next financial year, largely due to increased demand and costs for social care services. This was compounded by the previous significant reductions in Government funding and uncertainty around the future financial settlements.

Unless significant, deliverable cost reductions were identified and approved, the Council would not meet its statutory obligation to set a legal and balanced budget without a significant increase in funding.

The report contributed to the Wirral Plan 2023-2027 in supporting the organisation in meeting all Council priorities.

The Chair noted that Members wished to discuss the content of the exempt appendices relating to the report. Therefore, on a motion by the Chair, seconded by Councillor George Davies, it was –

Resolved: That, under section 100 (A) (4) of the Local Government Act 1972, the public be excluded from the meeting during consideration of the following items of business on the grounds that they involve the likely disclosure of exempt information as defined by paragraphs 3 and 4 of Part I of Schedule 12A (as amended) to that Act. The Public Interest test had been applied and favoured exclusion.

During the discussion of the exempt appendix three, Members raised their concerns about the effects that savings proposal 7 of the January Budget Oversight Panel would have on service delivery and questioned whether the savings would be offset by the loss on income that taking this option might cause.

Resolved – That

- 1. The indicative pressures and proposed savings detailed in Appendices 1 and 2 be noted; and**
- 2. The Budget Oversight Panel feedback and outcomes, as detailed in the exempt Appendix 3 be agreed.**

137 **EXEMPT INFORMATION - EXCLUSION OF THE PRESS AND PUBLIC**

Resolved - That, under section 100 (A) (4) of the Local Government Act 1972, the public be excluded from the meeting during consideration of the following items of business on the grounds that they involve the likely disclosure of exempt information as defined by paragraphs 3 and 4 of Part I of Schedule 12A (as amended) to that Act. The Public Interest test had been applied and favoured exclusion:

- **2025-26 Budget Report Update - Appendix 1: Budget Pressures**
- **2025-26 Budget Report Update - Appendix 2: Potential Savings**
- **2025-26 Budget Report Update - Appendix 3: Service & Policy Committee Budget Oversight Panel Feedback**

138 **WORK PROGRAMME**

The Lead Principal Lawyer presented the report on behalf of the Chair of the Committee. Members were informed that the work programme should align with the corporate priorities of the Council, in particular the delivery of the key decisions which are within the remit of the Committee.

Resolved - That the Economy Regeneration and Housing Committee work programme for the remainder of the 2024/25 municipal year be agreed.

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