

St Helens Council housing delivery support – information note

Introduction

Housing land supply was discussed in the Matter 5 sessions on 15 and 16 June 2021. Resulting from the discussion, an action was recorded as follows:

“Prepare a note to explain what the Council are doing to assist housing delivery in terms of interventions, partnership working and the various initiatives in place.”

This note will set out how the Council has succeeded in delivering housing on urban sites, how it works proactively and who it works with to ensure urban sites will continue to support housing growth over the Plan period to the scale the Council expects in the housing trajectory.

Track record of urban site delivery

It is important to note that St Helens has a strong track record of delivering urban sites, and particularly in facilitating the delivery of homes on previously developed land (PDL). The following table provides an illustration of this, with the percentage of housing growth delivered on PDL sites over the last five years set out:

Monitoring year	Total gross housing completions	Total PDL housing completions	Percentage of gross completions delivered on PDL
2016/17	489	414	84.7%
2017/18	457	388	84.9%
2018/19	806	601	74.6%
2019/20	765	602	78.7%
2020/21	654	528	80.7%

This is part of a long term pattern for St Helens Borough Council of bringing forward housing on previously developed land in the urban area. Therefore, the Council has a significant amount of experience of delivering such sites, and the types of challenges they can pose. As discussed in the hearing session, Council Planning Officers are experienced in dealing with sites facing issues including viability, contamination etc.

Council's pro-active approach

The Council's planning department takes a very pro-active approach in relation to development proposals on previously developed land, working to overcome identified issues, and using the tools available to support the delivery of sites. These include the provision of pre-application advice, careful consideration of s106 requirements and reduction of requested contributions where necessary to address site viability issues. As an example, the Council reduced the Affordable Housing requirement for the Moss Nook site (10HA) due to viability issues.

The Council also seeks to reduce the use of pre-commencement conditions with a view to ensuring development on site can come forward in a timely manner.

In summary, the Council takes a pragmatic approach to considering development proposals on brownfield sites to facilitate their delivery, and has a strong record and a significant amount of experience in doing so. This knowledge and experience will enable the Council to continue to deliver housing on previously developed land over the Plan period, as discussed in the Matter 5 hearing session, and proposed in the housing trajectory.

Partnership working

Another key element of the Council's proactive approach to delivering housing on brownfield sites is working with key partners, both internal and external.

With respect to internal partnership working, the Planning Department works closely with colleagues in other departments. Amongst many others (including transport, environmental health), Council planners work with colleagues in housing to consider opportunities for delivering growth. Housing colleagues meet with Homes England on a regular basis on both a Local Authority level and at the Combined Authority level. They also have regular meetings with Torus, a very active Registered Provider in the Borough, which include representatives from Planning. In addition, the Council's housing team have established a Registered Provider Forum, which is intended to be an ongoing arrangement.

The planning and housing teams have also worked together on housing pipeline project work to feed into wider work being undertaken at the Liverpool City Region level.

Such strong linkages between the housing and planning teams, as well as further key external stakeholders, support the Council's ambitions to facilitate the delivery of sites, including those that may be considered challenging under normal circumstances.

St Helens Borough Council is part of the Liverpool City Region (LCR). This is beneficial due to the availability of funding from the LCR Combined Authority to support the delivery of sites, with certain funds targeted specifically at the delivery of brownfield sites.

This is highlighted by a very recent example. The LCR Combined Authority is currently running a 'Call for Projects' exercise to invite Expressions of Interest for the Brownfield Land Fund. This will close on 14 July. The fund aims to ease viability issues affecting brownfield sites. More information on this 'call for projects' can be found here -

<https://www.liverpoolcityregion-ca.gov.uk/what-we-do/brownfield-land-fund/call-for-projects/>

Reflecting the pro-active approach of the Council, the housing and planning teams worked together to approach the site promoters / landowners of a number of SHLAA sites and Registered Providers active in the Borough to make them aware of the fund, should they wish to submit an Expression of Interest.

Indeed, as referenced by the Council in the hearing session, brownfield sites in St Helens have successfully secured funding through the Combined Authority previously. Most notably, a £2million grant was secured from the LCR Strategic Investment Fund to accelerate development of the Moss Nook site (allocation 10HA). The funding was to unlock the first phase of the site (approximately 240 units) through a financial contribution to the construction of a spine road and associated infrastructure.

The Council will continue to build relationships with key partners and seek opportunities to facilitate the delivery of suitable sites, clearly communicating these to the relevant stakeholders at the appropriate times.

A further opportunity to deliver on brownfield land in the urban area has arisen through the Council's partnership with the English Cities Fund (ECF). At a meeting on 6 March 2020, Cabinet approved the appointment of ECF as the Council's preferred strategic partner to ensure the delivery of a borough wide regeneration strategy. The Cabinet Report for this decision is available for further information -

<http://moderngov.sthelens.gov.uk/documents/s98348/Cabinet%20Report.pdf>.

This partnership will look at opportunities within the Town Centres of St Helens and Earlestown, bringing about, as part of a wider regeneration vision, the potential to drive the development of sites that have not been delivered to date. The partnership will provide a mechanism to deliver a comprehensive regeneration of the wider borough including the provision of quality housing, new commercial activity, upgraded infrastructure and the overall improvement of the social and economic viability of the borough on a phased basis.

Conclusions

It is clear that St Helens Borough Council has knowledge and experience of how the planning system should support the development of housing on brownfield sites, including sites that have their own challenges, including contamination, which can have a clear impact on viability. It has been dealing with planning applications for such sites for many years, using the various tools at its disposal, and with a lot of success given the sheer number of homes that have been delivered on PDL sites.

Sites within the Borough have been successful in securing funding to unlock development in the past. To continue with this success, the Council will work with partners, and as has happened with the recent ECF partnership, will continue to look for further opportunities to facilitate development in the Borough, and particularly with respect to the urban areas.