

Scrutiny Board (Housing and Regeneration)

28th August 2014

Leeds Housing Standard

Comments to Executive Board

1. At the first Scrutiny Board meeting of the new municipal year the Executive Member for Neighbourhoods, Planning and Personnel, Councillor Peter Gruen, proposed that the Housing and Regeneration Scrutiny Board should carry out pre-decision scrutiny in relation to the development of a new Leeds Housing Standard.
2. In agreeing to take this forward, a working group meeting was arranged during August to enable members of the Housing and Regeneration Scrutiny Board to comment on the developing proposals in anticipation of a report on the Leeds Housing Standard being presented to the Executive Board on 17 September 2014. This working group meeting was held on 28th August 2014, to which all Board Members were invited to attend. With the agreement of the Chair of the Scrutiny Board, the Sustainable Economy and Culture Scrutiny Board and the Safer and Stronger Communities Scrutiny Board were also invited to nominate a representative to take part in this working group, given their remits in relation to planning and sustainability matters.
3. The Scrutiny Board (Housing and Regeneration) requests that the observations and recommendations arising from this piece of Scrutiny work, as set out below, are appended to the report of the Director of City Development and the Director of Environment and Housing to Executive Board on 17th September 2014 on the Leeds Housing Standard.

Scrutiny observations and recommendations

4. The working group received a report from the Director of City Development and the Director of Environment and Housing setting out the latest developments with the Standard. Attached to this report was a matrix setting out the existing local planning policy and guidance that has been developed to underpin the themes of the Leeds Standard as it applies to the Council Housing Growth Programme and in the Council's role as Local Planning Authority, to housing growth as a whole. Representatives from City Development and Environment and Housing attended the working group meeting to explain the proposals and respond to Members' questions.
5. Our observations and recommendations are therefore based on the evidence provided during the working group meeting on 28th August 2014 and are as follows:

Applying robust application of existing policy

6. In order to influence the development of market led housing growth, we understand that the Leeds Standard will take the form of a reinforcement and update of existing policy. As such, the application of the Leeds Standard will take two routes -

measures to influence market delivery through the clarification and application of the principles held within the Neighbourhoods for Living document and a clear set of standards and specification for the Council's new build programme under three themes – Design Quality, Space Standards and Energy Efficiency Standards.

7. We recognise that the development of new policy can be very time consuming and therefore we are supportive of the Leeds Housing Standard being used as a mechanism to take a more robust approach in the application of existing policy.
8. In particular, we note that aspects of the Standard concerned with design quality can be addressed through better application of the existing standards set out in the Council's Neighbourhoods for Living (NfL) guidance. However, reference was also made to the use and enforcement of other Council policies and guidance, particularly the Council's 'Street Design Guide' and 'Building for Tomorrow Today' Supplementary Planning Documents, which are sister documents to the NfL.
9. We understand that the provisions of NfL in particular will be used to prompt, steer and assess design proposals as they develop and to aid further clarity for developers in this regard, we learned that a separate explanatory memorandum linked to the Standard will be produced too.
10. However, we note that the Council's Street Design Guide in particular covers the design of the 'highway' in its broadest sense, namely the public space between private dwellings or plots which facilitates all public activity, including, but not exclusively, the circulation and storage of motorised traffic. Recognising that parking facilities and vehicle accessibility, particularly in relation to refuse vehicles, are common issues raised, we would urge that either the explanatory memorandum linked to the Standard provides greater clarity to developers of such highways standard or work is undertaken to develop a similar document in this regard.
11. Once available, we would welcome the opportunity to consider the draft explanatory memorandum prior to approval.

Recommendation 1

That either the explanatory memorandum linked to the Leeds Housing Standard provides greater clarity to developers of the highways standards set out in the Council's Street Design Guide or a separate explanatory document is developed in this regard.

Recommendation 2

That a draft of the explanatory memorandum linked to the Leeds Housing Standard is considered by Scrutiny prior to approval.

12. We appreciate the Leeds Housing Standard will continue to evolve as we understand that the wider application of other aspects of the standard is contingent on further government guidance, which currently envisages a formal development plan process and implementation through the building regulations.

Enabling proactive engagement with developers at initial proposal stage

13. The introduction of the pre-application process enabled an opportunity for Plans Panel Members to engage with, and offer advice to, developers prior to the submission of a final application at Plans Panel. However, we believe that further initiatives are still needed to achieve greater efficiency and to speed up the decision making process, especially for housing development proposals.
14. With the introduction of the Leeds Housing Standard, we recognise the benefit of planning officers using the Standard as a benchmark document during early negotiations with developers. Planning Officers should therefore be empowered to advise developers whether an initial proposal falls short of the Standard and to give them direction on where improvements could be made prior to it being submitted to a Plans Panel. There are clear mutual benefits in adopting this proactive approach as Plans Panel Members will have greater confidence that developers have been advised accordingly during initial proposal stage prior to progressing applications through the formal decision making process. Developers will also welcome the consistency of this approach in terms of achieving a level playing field and obtaining early advice that will assist them to reach a speedier approval decision.