

Building Better Homes and Neighbourhoods

Enhancing housing standards in
South Ribble

Foreword by Councillor Michael Green, Chair of the Scrutiny Review Task Group

The Scrutiny Committee selected this review because the houses in South Ribble are increasing in number with each year that passes. As we meet the need for housing, it was felt that the impact of housing developments upon our residents should be looked at. We wanted to consider whether the infrastructure being put in place to support developments is adequate, if new developments can contribute better to reducing carbon emissions and if there is a way to enhance housing standards in South Ribble.

We believe that houses are more than buildings where people live. They are homes, in which we bring up our families, socialise with friends and spend most of our time. The links between housing and health are strong. The homes we live in can influence our physical health and they also impact upon our mental health and wellbeing, in turn potentially affecting the lives of residents in many ways.

We have explored these issues and come up with a series of recommendations which we believe will help to reduce the impact of housing developments upon our residents and lead to better homes being built. We hope that South Ribble Borough Council will accept our recommendations and implement those which are within the powers of the council. For those outside local control, we have suggested that the council may be able to use its influence to bring about improvements.

One of our key recommendations is that the council should introduce a 'charter' accreditation scheme for developers, which would be designed to promote a high standard for the design and style of homes to be built in South Ribble.

I would like to thank my fellow task group members for their hard work during this review and our gratitude must be expressed to the Democratic Services officers who have provided invaluable support to the task group. We would like to thank the elected members who have offered their experiences from developments which have taken place in their communities and all the stakeholders we have met, including officers from the council and our partners.

Finally, we hope that the outcome from this review will be to lead to better homes being built in the future in South Ribble. If successful, this will amount to a great achievement for the residents we serve.



Councillor Michael Green
Vice-Chairman of the Scrutiny Committee
Chairman of the Scrutiny Review Task Group

Members of the Task Group

The following Members were appointed by the Scrutiny Committee to undertake this review:

- Councillor Michael Green (Chair)
- Councillor Lou Jackson
- Councillor Kath Unsworth
- Councillor Karen Walton

The following Officers also supported this review:

- Darren Cranshaw, Head of Democratic Services
- Coral Astbury, Democratic and Member Services Officer

Rationale for the Scrutiny Review

Like many areas South Ribble is under pressure to increase the number of housing developments in the Borough to deal with the increasing needs for houses.

The South Ribble Local Plan is currently being reviewed. There are proposals for a new garden village in Samlesbury as well as other development sites which could impact our communities.

The Council has also started to build its own housing for affordable rent to meet local needs.

Climate change and reducing carbon emissions is a key priority of the Council and Members are interested to find out more about the contribution new housing developments make to this agenda.

Members have expressed concern that some developments are not ready to be adopted or being adopted in a timely or appropriate way.

Members are also concerned about planning enforcement and developers applying to waive planning conditions.

Residents are increasingly commenting that the infrastructure put in place by developers is not adequate for the pressure being put on local facilities.

Objectives for the Review

- To understand the true scale of housing developments and the impacts this has on the Borough and communities.
- To highlight issues around the impact of housing development in South Ribble
- To explore existing initiatives to mitigate the impact of housing developments on communities
- To explore the increased demand on infrastructure as a result of development and to consider how this may be mitigated

- To consider the impact housing development is having on our commitment to tackling climate change and target for net zero
- Engage with developers and relevant stakeholders on how the impact of housing development could be managed more effectively
- To produce a series of recommendations to Council to reduce the impact and more effectively manage housing development in the Borough.

Links with Corporate Plan

This review links in with each of the Council's corporate priorities:

- An exemplary council
- Thriving Communities
- A fair local economy that works for everyone
- Good homes, green spaces and healthy places

Methodology Adopted

Meetings with Stakeholders

The Task Group met with the following stakeholders as part of its review:

- Councillor James Flannery, Cabinet Member for Planning, Business Support and Regeneration
- Councillor Caleb Tomlinson, Chair of Planning Committee
- Jonathan Noad, Director of Planning and Development
- John Harrison, (Interim) Director of Planning and Development
- Steven Brown, Planning Manager
- Chris Sowerby, Development Planning Team Leader
- Neil Martin, Senior Environmental Health Officer
- Jane Clayton, Enforcement Officer
- Ben Terry, School Planning Principal at Lancashire County Council
- Neil Stevens, Development Support Manager for Highways at Lancashire County Council
- Carolyn Williams, Local Plan Co-Ordinator
- Mark Bray, Planning Enforcement Consultant
- Derek Terry, Building Control Manager

Survey

Members of the Task Group designed and circulated a survey to all Borough, Parish and County Councillors for South Ribble.

Workshop

Members held two workshops on the 8 February and the draft recommendations were presented to members.

The feedback received was supportive and positive. Suggested amendments were accepted by the task group and the recommendations have subsequently been updated to reflect the feedback received.

Review of Documents

The Task Group reviewed the following documents and evidence sources as part of their review:

- National Planning Policy Framework (NPPF)
- Central Lancashire Local Plan
- Understanding Planning in South Ribble – LGA Research
- Lancashire Evidence Base – Central Lancashire Local Plan
- Central and West Lancashire Rail Options
- Enforcement complaint response letter

Case Studies

Members of the Task Group also reviewed the following case studies:

- City of York Council
- Cornwall Council
- Climate Emergency – Lancaster City Council
- Sustainable Design Guide SPD – Bradford Council
- Tudor Walters Report

Key Findings

In reviewing all the evidence from the review, the Task Group found the following:

- South Ribble Planning Officers have fostered a good and effective working relationship with Highways Officers at Lancashire County Council and hold weekly meetings wherein applications are discussed. The authority benefits from this relationship as guidance and assistance is shared between officers.
- However, a key frustration for both members and residents stems from national legislation that places restrictions upon several areas within the Planning realm. An example of this is the Highways Authority who are restricted by legislation in how they comment on applications. Current legislation only provides the Highways authority with a route to object if an application is deemed severe, as there is a lack of case law in this area this leads to a strict interpretation of the term which further exacerbates this. It was the Task Group's view that what could be deemed as "severe" in one locality may not be "severe" in another and this one fits all approach does not work.
- Lack of adequate infrastructure is also an issue. With increased traffic on the roads, no extra provision for healthcare services and lack of school places also causing frustration for residents. Where Section 106 and CIL monies are received, it was members view that these should be used within the area of the development where

possible to mitigate the impact of development and to improve the locality.

- Parished areas currently receive 15% of CIL money from developments within their area and areas such as Penwortham, who have a neighbourhood plan receive a 25% share of CIL money. This puts non parished areas such as Leyland at a disadvantage when they are still impacted by development within their area.
- Ward members are often faced with queries and frustration from residents when developments are taking place and it can be a challenge to know who to contact at the development. The task group also wanted to encourage open dialogue between developers and residents, and it was agreed that having a single point of contact would facilitate this.
- Frustration for residents also stems from conditions upon the development not being stringent enough. Developments are taking place within the borough without having mandatory conditions that enforce permitted construction hours and requirements to keep the area clean and free from debris and mud. There also needs to be continued enforcement of conditions post build, such as ensuring that landscaping conditions are adhered to.
- South Ribble is currently seen as an ideal place to build and Members were keen to implement a charter that would seek to encourage developers to build towards a higher standard. The Charter would look to provide accreditation to the developer should they meet certain criteria, such as minimum dwelling sizes, extra features such as solar panels and ensuring the development was fit for purpose with adoptable roads. The Charter would also seek to address the issue of communication between developers and residents by asking the developer to undertake pre-application resident's meetings and to provide a continuous single point of contact.
- As there is similarities and connections between the powers of Building Control and those of Planning it was member's view that Planning could act as an advocate in developing Building Control's work in driving quality and standards. Building Control can reciprocate this by contributing to the Planning process by the increased use of their powers.
- It was noted that the enforcement process was quite lengthy and frustrating, both for officers and residents. Enforcement are another area where strict legislation limits what action can be undertaken. Discussion with officers also highlighted the potential risk officers face when enforcing, particularly in rural areas. It was felt that body cameras should be offered to those public facing officers.

Key Findings – Local Plan

As the current Local Plan is currently under review the document was discussed at length and several key findings were noted:

- The task group referred to the Council's pledge to be Carbon Neutral by 2030. It was felt that the Local Plan should request homes to be carbon neutral from the offset and not leave a five-year gap in which no action was being taken.
- When discussing climate change it was also noted that developments were often in rural areas with limited public transport links. Developers should be contributing to improving green links and transport connections for new residents and residents, which would also lessen the impact on highways infrastructure. This could be done by providing suitable cycle storage and walking routes or by providing additional bus services and investigating potential rail links.
- The current Local Plan contains policies and standards which developers "should" adhere too, and it was felt that this could be strengthened so that the developers "must" adhere. It was realised that developers would often attempt to do the minimum required and they needed to be encouraged to go beyond this.
- The task group also discussed the need to improve the quality of housing within the borough, with homes being fit for purpose. The Tudor Walters report produced in November 1918 set a minimum standard for house design and location for the following 90 years and hailed some success. Five model plans were published, and homes ranged from 820 square feet to 1,230 feet.
- New houses are now built smaller than traditional older builds and are placed quite close together with a lack of public open space, as the developer prioritises the number of dwellings over the quality of the dwelling. Members referred to the successes of the Tudor Walter report and would like to see the Council developing their own extensive portfolio of house styles with minimum requirements for sizes which could be included in the new Local Plan. These houses would be of a higher standard and would improve resident's well-being as they have enough space to live in enjoyment. Increasing the size of dwellings would also ensure that a home is fit for purpose for an ageing population as modifications could be made to ensure the property remains accessible.
- The consultation period for the Local Plan is quite extensive and several key stakeholders are consulted, however given the close proximity between Planning and Building Control and the overlap in service provided, there would be some benefit to Building Control being consulted as part of the Local Plan process.

Recommendations

Based on the research and findings from the review the Task Group make the following recommendations for the Council and Cabinet to consider:

1. The Council develop a “charter” accreditation scheme which would outline the standards and conduct expected of developers when building in South Ribble. The document would also emphasise the need for a single point of contact for Members, Officers and Residents.
2. As part of the review of the Local Plan consideration is given to the Council’s commitment to be Carbon Neutral by 2030 and it is suggested that the Local Plan requests all new dwellings to be Carbon Neutral by the implementation of the plan and not 2030.
3. The Scrutiny Review Task Group will submit a consultation response to the Central Lancashire Local Plan Team referring to the following issues:
 - Improving green links and active travel, with emphasis placed upon improving public transport provision
 - Minimum requirements for public open space
 - Shift in language on policy from passive, for example “you should” to more assertive, for example “you must”
 - Consideration be given to the Council developing their own extensive portfolio of house styles to include minimum standards, dwelling and room size and environmentally friendly features. This would be available for developers to select from when designing their development in South Ribble.
4. Planning Officers should endeavour to ensure that Section 106 and CIL agreements are written in such a way to ensure that funding should be spent within the locality, or surrounding areas of the development. In situations where this is not achievable the funds should be used towards borough wide initiatives.
5. In a non-parished area, the relevant Neighbourhood Community Hub should be given 15% of the CIL funding to be spent as close as possible to the development, where this is not possible it should be spent within the vicinity.
6. The Council uses its influence with the Local Government Association and other bodies to lobby the Government to change legislation in relation to statutory comments on planning applications. In particular, the term “severe” which limits the Highways Authority in how they can respond to Planning Applications.
7. Mandatory conditions need to be placed on all planning consents to reduce the potential impact of development on residents during the construction phase. These would include permitted construction hours, access and a requirement to keep the area around the development clean and free from mud and debris.
8. Building Control should be included on the list of consultees for the Local Plan.

9. Members would like to see increased engagement between Planning and Building Control which would enable both services to work more effectively together.
10. A review of the risk assessments for Enforcement Officers, with body cameras offered to those officers who are public facing and could face threats or harassment.
11. Highways and Enforcement are included as individual Member Learning Sessions on the Member Development Programme for 2023/24.

Further Information

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