

Item 12 - Quercus Housing - Increasing the Delivery of Affordable Housing in the Sevenoaks District

The attached report was considered by the Housing & Health Advisory Committee on 20 October 2021, and will be considered by Finance & Investment Advisory Committee on 4 November 2021. The relevant Minute extract from Housing & Health Advisory Committee is below, and the Finance & Investment Advisory Committee Minute extract will follow.

Housing & Health Advisory Committee (20 October 2021, Minute 24)

The Deputy Chief Executive and Chief Officer - People & Places presented the report which set out the proposal to amend the Quercus Housing Business Plan to enable prudential borrowing to take forward the purchase of Abbey Court in West Kingsdown.

The Deputy Chief Executive and Chief Officer - Finance & Trading set out that the report also sought the approval for the revised 2021/22 Capital Programme, which excluded the Property Investment Strategy Scheme and would give the Council access to Public Works Loan Board (PWLB) borrowing to enable the scheme to progress. A draw-down of a loan from prudential borrowing for up to £1,050,000 would be loaned to Quercus Housing (as the Trading company) in order to progress the capital purchase and refurbishment of Abbey Court, subject to due diligence. In turn this would increase the supply of new affordable homes delivered by Quercus Housing, the Council's affordable housing trading company.

Negotiations were taking place to purchase the former nursing home which could be converted into self-contained units at affordable rent, and be split between Local Housing Allowance and 80% of market rent. The Council's Housing team would use Abbey Court to provide suitable move on accommodation at affordable rent for households currently placed in temporary accommodation, whilst developing its Local Lettings Plan.

An offer of £700,000 to purchase the property had been submitted to the agent, with the estimated cost of refurbishment being £875,000 plus contingency fees. Currently there was insufficient s106 funding to support the refurbishment of the property, and so the draw-down of a loan from the PWLB was vital.

Members were advised that there remained a shortfall between the demand and supply of new affordable homes in the District. The lack of affordable housing had contributed to the rise of homelessness and, as the Council had a statutory responsibility to assist homeless residents that had created a greater financial burden upon the budget. The high cost of land in the District made it difficult for the Council's Registered Provider (RP) partner's to acquire land for building new affordable housing themselves.

Members raised concerns regarding the suitability of the site for tenants including the proximity to suitable transport links, safe entry/exit route from/to the site entrance and robust internal sound proofing between units.

The Deputy Chief Executive and Chief Officer - People & Places assured the committee those suitable residents would be identified after considering the issues identified by members. In addition, the quality of sound proofing would be one issue to be assured within the context of the quality of the whole building to ensure a suitable living environment for future residents.

Public Sector Equality Duty

Members gave consideration to impacts under the Public Sector Equality Duty

Resolved: That it be recommended to Cabinet to recommend to Council that

- a) The revised 2021/22 Capital Programme (Appendix C of the report) that excluded the Property Investment Strategy scheme, that would give SDC access to Public Works Loan Board (PWLB) borrowing to enable the scheme to progress, be approved;
- b) The draw-down of a loan from prudential borrowing (for example, through PWLB) for up to £1,050,000 which would then be loaned to Quercus Housing (as the Trading company) to progress the capital purchase and refurbishment of Abbey Court (West Kingsdown), subject to due diligence, to support the delivery of affordable housing in the district, be approved; and
- c) The terms of the loan be determined at the point of draw down by the Deputy Chief Executive and Chief Officer - Finance and Trading, be agreed.