

Swindon Council's housing policy – making the crisis worse

Swindon Council's Cabinet nodded through the document on the government's "Affordable Homes Programme" at its meeting last Wednesday. They will be bidding for grant under this programme, which comes attached with central government conditions. As we have explained elsewhere ("[Why Swindon Council should keep Council rents for Council homes](http://keepourcouncilhomes.files.wordpress.com/2014/04/ahp2015-18cab.pdf)"¹) if Swindon wins the bid and proceeds with the work it appears to mean **the loss of as many as 203 Council homes with Council rent**, which will be converted to the government's risible "affordable rent" (80% of market rents).

The document presented to the Cabinet was shoddy even by their standards. It said that the programme would provide new homes for "150 additional households". However, it neglected to mention that it includes the demolition of up to 83 existing properties², meaning that a 3 or 4 year programme would only produce 67 additional properties, all at "affordable rent". I say appears to include because of some confusion over exactly what is in the programme.

In an article in the Swindon Advertiser, the same day, we brought to public attention the fact that the Cabinet document said that rents in these properties would be 'slightly higher'. This meant anything up to £61 a week more than Council rents. By anybody's reckoning this is not a 'slight' increase. In the public forum session before the Cabinet meeting the Lead member responded to me by saying there were no 4 bed properties (the £61 figure was rent for these) being proposed. Sadly I had to bring it to his attention that there *were* such properties in the document he was supposed to have signed off.

In the Cabinet meeting he announced that the inclusion of 4 bedroom properties had been a mistake. This was definitely not true. I had a meeting with Council officers for an update on the Sussex Square regeneration where we discussed the four bedroom properties they were planning to build there.

Maybe the Council thinks that the rent levels would be less problematic if the highest rent is 'only' an extra £39 a week for a 3 bed house. Only somebody who had no idea of the lives of millions of working people would still think that £39 was 'slightly higher'.

Meanwhile a BBC journalist told me that the Council's Deputy Leader told him that the 150 property programme was made up of 120 refurbishments and 30 new builds. This can't be true because the programme includes 38 new homes in Sussex Square alone. I have asked Brian Mattack to confirm if that was an accurate representation of what he said, but so far he has not replied to my email. You have to wonder whether Cabinet members read the documents that they vote through with a nod.

The irony of this ludicrous behaviour is that the Cabinet, as a one party body, is nothing other than **a rubber stamp**. In the public forum the Council Leader spoke as if their deliberations would involve genuine debate. The vote was hardly likely to be a cliff-hanger was it? In reality what happens is this. The Lead member agrees proposals with the relevant Council officer and they are put to the Cabinet. Since it's a one-party Cabinet it gets nodded through. For those who have

1 <http://keepourcouncilhomes.files.wordpress.com/2014/04/ahp2015-18cab.pdf>

2 We know that 33 flats at Sussex Square will be demolished. We are not sure yet whether the replacements for 'Woolaway' homes involves one for one replacement or whether they might be intending building more than one new home on each plot.

attended these meetings there's little evidence that they read the documents they vote on. The Cabinet is a profoundly undemocratic body, and it still would be if another political party was in power. It's like a one party state in miniature.

In what passed for discussion at the Cabinet on this item we were told that £3.45 million grant was available. In fact the government has said that there is no specific grant per home as there was in the first round of its programme. It wants Councils to bid for as little grant as possible and 'maximise' their own contribution. As we said previously it is a blind bid. Consequently we don't know whether Swindon would receive £3.45 million even if it wins any grant. Even if it did, the Council's own figures estimate a 'funding gap' of almost £1.4 million, so in effect the grant would be worth £2 million. What also has to be taken into account is the risk associated with the bidding process, a risk which the Cabinet document conveniently failed to mention. If there are any miscalculations, or change of circumstances then, the Council will have to make up the difference itself; or rather the tenants will make up the difference either from their rent, or in reduced spending by the Housing Revenue Account.

Bearing in mind the 'funding gap' the effective (average) grant per home works out at £16,333, or 12.9% of the cost. The cost of the 'prize' is the driving up of Council rents in the 'converted' homes towards market rents. It is a price which doesn't merit paying.

It remains to be seen whether Swindon Borough Council wins some grant from its bid. We hope they don't. But in accepting the conditions which the coalition government has imposed they have betrayed the people on the waiting list, the future tenants. They have adopted a policy which not only accepts that it's OK to have a decline in the number of 'social rent' homes in the town, but one which **promotes** such a decline. The administration also supports 'right to buy' which erodes the stock available. Instead of adopting a policy to tackle the housing crisis they have adopted one which will make it worse. We will have less genuinely affordable homes than we do now.

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