



**torus**

# **Locality Plan – St Helens**

**Strategy Team**

**22/06/20**

Version 1

# Locality Plan – St Helens

## Torus' current position and future ambition for St Helens

Date 13/07/20

### Executive Summary

To be completed once we've had feedback from tenants

### Introduction

The Torus heartland plans will highlight how the organisation will help shape our heartlands of Liverpool, St Helens and Warrington. Torus are committed to having a significant social impact in the areas that we have a presence, and these plans will ensure that our community work is aligned to local needs. Our entire business model is centred around *Growing Stronger Communities* through an inclusive growth model. The plan will enable Torus to tailor its response to the regeneration work that needs doing and will ensure our impact is as far-reaching as it can be.

### Torus' current standing in St Helens

#### Great Homes

High quality, well-maintained homes and landlord services will always be at the heart of what we do. We go beyond simply letting properties. We deliver a 'landlord plus' scheme that includes a round-the-clock repairs and maintenance service, financial advice, employment and training support, as well as specialist support for older people and for those with complex needs.

Working closely with local partners, we are broadening the mix of home types and tenures we offer. The intention is for this document to ensure that that broadening reflects local need and that it supports and strengthens economic and social sustainability.

Our current housing stock in St Helens is 13,550, this includes 1,305 dwellings for older people.

#### Ambitious Developments

Torus recognise the significant impact we can have on shaping our heartlands. The importance of identifying local need and ensuring that our developments meet changing local demand is pivotal for our long-term ambitions.

Prior to the pandemic, Torus had a commitment to create at least 5,300 new homes by 2024. The long-term effects of the crisis and the economic contraction are yet to truly pan out, however, Torus remain committed to pursuing an ambitious development programme.

Torus currently have 1844 units on site across 33 different development sites, spanning 10 local authorities. Torus Developments has not let the current economic downfall affect its ambitions;

Torus still has an extensive pipeline and there are no intentions to scale back. The Group has 1568 units in our approved pipeline and a further 2000+ in our strategic long-term pipeline.

231 of those 1844 units which are on site are in Liverpool. This represents 12.5% and is a good reflection of how, despite our exploration into other North West areas, St Helens will remain a strategic priority for our developments programme. Almost all of those units in St Helens will be made available for Affordable Rent and a small proportion for Shared Ownership.

### **Strong Communities**

Torus' overarching ambition that defines all of our service delivery is to *Build Stronger Communities*. The community support that we offer has an incredibly significant social impact in the areas that we operate in. By supporting the vulnerable, through vital interventions and through providing opportunities, we help empower the communities that have historically been marginalised.

However, that community ambition is not solely down to social impact, our economic contribution is just as important. Torus has a pre-crisis turnover of £190mil and employs 1500 members of staff, that's not to mention the considerable supply chain. Our contribution to the local economy through our policy of inclusive growth has enabled us to strengthen those communities even further. Our continuous presence as an anchor institution at the heart of our communities has ensured we are one of the biggest and most trusted employers in the region.

Torus' charitable arm, Torus Foundation, was created to ensure commercial profits made by the Group are used to make a positive difference for tenants and the wider community. Torus Foundation has had a wide-reaching impact throughout the region.

Examples of the work the Foundation does in St Helens:

- Digital Champions - Our IT training and digital champions work complements the focus of St Helens Council in delivering skill's training and promoting digital inclusion.
- Women into Construction - working in partnership with St Helens Chamber of Commerce and local employers the programme offers women innovative engagement, advice and guidance, work experience and training to support women into sustainable employment within the construction industry.
- St Helens Community Wellbeing - working in partnership with St Helens Local Authority Sports Development Team, we have delivered regular physical activity sessions at local community centres. Activities have included keep fit, walking groups, healthy eating, first aid and personal development courses. Engagement has been extremely high and we have had real success working within this community.
- Wargrave Big Local - the Big Local Trust was established by Local Trust and the Big Lottery Fund with a National Lottery grant of nearly £200 million, supporting 150 communities in England. Big Locals are resident-led community regeneration programmes. We have acted as the Local Trusted Organisation for Wargrave Big Local Partnership, helping Wargrave Big Local create the Wargrave Hub which launched in November 2019.

### **Commercial Contracting**

A big part of the landlord plus package, that our tenants have become accustomed to, is delivered by our in-house commercial contractor, HMS. HMS delivers all repairs and maintenance services for our 40,000 tenants across the North West.

The ever-expanding capacity of HMS has enabled Torus to pursue ambitious development targets. The combined efforts of Torus Developments and HMS ensured the Group delivered 649 homes in 2019/20, including 306 for affordable rent, 189 for Shared Ownership and (20) Rent to Buy, and 134 specialist homes for people with additional care needs. 204 of those units were in St Helens.

## St Helens as a locality

### Growth Planning

Despite experiencing a 23% economic growth between 2009 and 2016, St Helens remains a somewhat deprived region with St Helens Metropolitan Borough Council being the 26th most deprived local authority out of 317 in England.

The economic upturn has not translated into an upturn in people's prosperity. In fact, St Helens is an area characterised by lower than average income, high levels of workless households and high levels of illness and disability. The likelihood is that these issues will only be exacerbated by the impending recession and an effective regeneration and growth strategy, that sufficiently shields the most vulnerable, will be needed more than ever.

Local plans prior to the crisis recognised the need for economic stimulus and the need for job creation in the area. The focus of the plans is centred around the town centre. In 2017, the authority unveiled plans to transform the town centre and develop new housing alongside the canal. This is a large-scale development which the council believe will help to reform St Helens' sense of place and make the district a more attractive place to live.

However, other areas have also been earmarked for economic development. These include:

- The Bold Forest area
- Newton-Le-willows
- Earlestown
- Haydock

The Growth Plan tends to focus on the North and West part of the district and intends to release sites for manufacturing, warehousing and logistics type industries. The South and East feature less and there is no additional planned growth identified at Billinge, or in the western parts of the urban area, such as Eccleston.

The need for revised figures, and revised priorities, that take into consideration the expected imminent economic contraction, is, of course, now pivotal. It is yet to be seen by how much these ambitions will be affected by Covid-19, however, the appetite to grow and diversify the region, both economically and socially, will remain even if the figures aren't as ambitious. Torus envisage being a big part of the town's recovery and are already contributing significantly to both the Combined Authority's, and the Borough Council's, recovery plans. We do not anticipate our economic contribution decreasing, any drop in turnover will be very short-term with the long-term ambition being to increase capacity and build even stronger communities.

The St Helens Spatial Vision plan has an overarching ambition of: “By 2035, St Helens Borough will provide, through the balanced regeneration and sustainable growth of its built-up areas, a range of attractive, healthy, safe, inclusive and accessible places in which to live, work, visit and invest”. This is very much aligned with Torus’ inclusive growth approach. Torus have a longstanding history of supporting the council reach its strategic ambitions, and we envisage continuing to do so.

Torus have historically been very much at the heart of the region’s target setting, whether that be actively having an input on plans or by providing services that help them reach the targets that have been set. Being a strategic partner to the local authority has ensured Torus has helped shape the economic direction of the region.

### **Demographic**

It has been found that the population in St Helens is aging, and consequently, there has been a longstanding demand for accommodation suitable for older people. An aging population also translates to a less economically active population which reduces the productive capacity of the area and subsequently means there is a lower level of income to be spent within the local economy.

St Helens has a relatively unskilled population, and a large proportion of those who are skilled commute out of the area to other regions as high-level professional jobs are also relatively underrepresented in the area. The Council did however have intentions to grow the local economy, particularly in the area of logistics, and enticing younger/professional people to the area would be a big part of those growth plans.

High levels of deprivation amongst the local population will inevitably be made worse by a recession. Prior to the 2008 financial crisis there is evidence to suggest that people had a bigger safety net to fall back on than they would have available to them in 2020. Years of austerity has created in-work poverty and generally poorer conditions for people on lower or no income who may already be on the brink of debt. A recession this time around could have an even more devastating effect on the local population.

### **Demand**

From a housing perspective the recent SHMA Update and the Local Plan indicates:

- A requirement for 486 houses per annum over a period between 2020 and 2035.
- The 2020-2035 trajectory is weighted towards builds in the first seven years.
- The current estimated need for affordable homes is 117 properties per annum between 2016 and 2033.
- New housing will be delivered via strategic sites at key settlements across the district and to the South of the town centre in the Bold Forest area.
- Calculates total wheelchair user need would be for around 471-528 homes. As 7.1% of social tenants tend to be wheelchair users then this is a priority in the provision of social housing.
- Development priority should be considered for the re-use of currently developed land at key settlements. The council will encourage this by providing lower thresholds for developer contributions.

- Small sites of less than 0.25 hectares will continue to play a part in new developments. Since 2011, housing development at small sites has on average yielded 93 new house builds per year. This will be relevant to the central town and Parr area.
- A requirement for greenbelt land to be made available for development. It is estimated that 2050 of the projected housebuilding target will need to be built on greenbelt land. Getting this balance of sufficient urban density is proving difficult for the Council

Whilst the Local Plan indicates that the Council's overarching aim is for most new housing to be delivered on strategic and/or brownfield sites, meeting the region's development ambitions could be very much dependent on land being released from the Green Belt. The Council has established that sites with an overall capacity of at least 2,034 dwellings must be released from the Green Belt to help meet pre-2035 needs. The latest local plan shows an estimate of 2056 houses being provided through release of Greenbelt land.

The Local Plan states that new developments should optimise the amount of housing developed on a site. New developments should therefore aim to achieve the following minimum densities: a) at least 40 dwellings per hectare (dph) on sites that are within or adjacent to St Helens or Earlestown Town Centres; b) at least 30 dph on sites that are within or adjacent to a district or local centre or in other locations that are well served by frequent bus or train services; and c) at least 30 dph on other sites that are within an existing urban area.

A survey of social housing tenants, done prior to the crisis, suggested a consistent demand for social housing. It found that only one quarter of social housing tenants have aspirations to buy their own home and only one-third of private renters have any savings at all. These indicators would suggest that the current levels of social housing would at the very least have to be maintained.

The chances are, however, that demand will only be increased by the current economic contraction. During the last recession house prices fell leading to an increase in demand but a collapse in mortgage advances meant that house builders reduced the number of new house builds. This, coupled with the economic uncertainty over jobs, meant that during 2009 and 2010 waiting lists for local authority housing were at their highest.

St Helens has historically been susceptible to national trends. Housing delivery in St Helens has always been intricately linked with economic development. An imminent recession could therefore provide a worrying mixture of demand increasing whilst stock declines.

Out of all the affordable housing that has been made available in St Helens, 31% was for Affordable Home Ownership, 35% was for Affordable Rent and 31% was for Social Housing. There is nothing in the current local plans to suggest what the council would like developers to focus on, the only requirement was that 10% of new homes on any major development site should provide some kind of Affordable Home Ownership. This tenure has in the past been seen as an avenue out of working poverty, but again ambitions and priorities may have to be revised now.

## Partnerships

Torus is well connected in the region and is very much regarded as a strategic partner to both the St Helens Brough Council, as well as the Liverpool City Region Combined Authority. This relationship with the local authorities, as well as Torus Leadership being present on various boards, such as the

Liverpool City Region LEP, St Helens Chamber for Commerce and the St Helens Town Deal Board has ensured we have helped determine the economic direction of the town and the surrounding areas.

Our position locally as an anchor institution has ensured that we are a key contributor to the local economy and one of the region's leading employers. This status as a consistent beacon within our communities has allowed us to adopt a policy of inclusive growth where there is an interdependency between us, our tenants and the wider communities.

Torus leaders are also part of regional forums and groups with a specific issue that they focus on. These groups are committed to tackling issues such as, inequality, poverty, elderly ill-health and the lack of youth provision. Torus' affiliation with these groups, the emergency services and other local care providers has ensured our social impact has been substantial and far-reaching.

Equally important are the aspirations of national partners, most notably the Government and its housing accelerator, Homes England. The Prime Minister has stressed the importance of brownfield development and for transport and infrastructure improvements to make otherwise suitable areas available for development.

The Prime Minister also expressed his desire for more efficient and sustainable homes to be built. He is preparing a complete overhaul of the planning system which will allow developers to build better, build greener and also to build faster. Something of course Torus would welcome. Torus continuously monitor Government priorities and shape our business priorities accordingly.

Homes England's ambition to challenge traditional norms to improve neighbourhoods and grow communities by building a better standard of homes at a faster rate is certainly something Torus can, and has been, contributing to. Being the region's only Homes England strategic partner, Torus are best positioned to ensure their ambitions are reflected in the city.

## **Future ambitions in St Helens**

### **Housing**

Torus Developments have already indicated to Homes England that they do not intend to let the crisis slow down progress made in our heartlands and emerging heartlands. Homes England are aware that Torus are in a position to increase capacity and deliver on our ambitious development targets.

As alluded to earlier, Torus still has an extensive development programme in place that it remains committed to delivering. Prior to the crisis, St Helens Borough Council had to abandon its long-term target of 570 houses being built a year due to the availability of appropriate land. Torus have been a key contributor to housing delivery in the region, and we envisage working with the Council to address those issues with land and to reach the amended post-crisis targets. This, coupled with Torus' economic contribution significantly helping the local economy, means we will be an important part of the town's growth plans. It is yet to be seen how the current crisis will affect the figures set out in the Plan, however, given the fact Torus are actively involved in developing the region's recovery plans, we can expect a big role to play in service delivery in the years to come.

Our land-led approach and our focus on placemaking and regenerating existing communities, as well as creating new homes and places for people to live in and thrive, is very much aligned with the



ambitions of Homes England. Torus' development and wider business strategy therefore strikes a chord both locally and nationally.

To appease local demand, Torus should focus on one- or two-bedroom properties. Torus have in the past had a surplus of three-bedroom properties so it would not only make sense to appease local demand, but it would also make commercial sense for the Group. Development of one- or two-bedroom properties would facilitate older people to downsize and it would also provide a broader mix of social housing in the area.

Torus should also look into the possibility of including 'homes for life' into the developments programme. Torus aim to embrace the innovation sphere in the post-Covid-19 environment and adapting our properties in that way would be a good way of doing that. The emphasis on providing housing for the older generation should not be understated. The aging population in St Helens will require appropriate housing and Torus should make that a strategic priority.

Currently developers are focusing on small pockets of land on the outskirts of the Town Centre and Parr, with no scope for larger-scale developments. Policies to achieve greater density have often led to attempts by developers to build ever-smaller-sized apartments, which are unlikely to be suitable for the changing physical needs of older people. Ensuring new builds are built for life so older people can continue to live there in their later years, whilst ensuring we are getting the right levels density in urban areas, will be an incredibly important balance that will need to be struck.

There is currently an emphasis in St Helens on smaller scale housing (on sites smaller than 0.25 hectares). Torus will consider these options, especially as smaller sites seem readily available, but we also recognise the need for larger scale developments. These sorts of developments will be dependent on Green Belt land being made available, something again Torus will need to monitor and consider.

Torus will also actively look for conversion opportunities. The Government have stressed the importance of brownfield development and have made converting non-residential buildings into residential building much easier. This is something Torus will therefore be exploring, particularly as St Helens Council also indicated that their overarching aim is for most new housing to be delivered on strategic and/or brownfield sites. Torus have a longstanding history of doing just that and envisage a continuation of that policy. Pilkingtons Glass Factory, in the north of the region, is a good example of how Torus is regenerating otherwise vacant land.

Torus will be monitoring key economic sites across the St Helens region. These areas, along with areas set out by the Transport Impact Assessment Report will help determine where our development focus will be. The Government have said that housing developments should be intricately linked to transport / infrastructure investment and this guidance will help influence our development strategy. St Helens is strategically well placed between Manchester and Liverpool and sits alongside a number of key motorways. The Council will be looking to capitalise on that and as land is made available for economic development, Torus will be monitoring to see where housing development could follow.

The economic priorities are currently: the Bold Forest area; Newton-Le-willows; Earlestown; and Haydock and these will be a strategic focus for Torus. However, it should be noted that a recession could force the council to reassess priorities from delivering higher end developments in areas of high employment or connectivity, in favour of shielding the vulnerable neighbourhoods that will be hardest hit. The reader should be assured that, whilst we remain committed to delivering high quality



housing for a vast variety of individual need, our place making commitments to the region's most vulnerable and deprived areas will not be overlooked.

Torus will adapt, as ever, to the changing demand as it becomes clearer. Historically, the Council's areas of focus areas have been areas where we have a big presence. The Council recognise the contribution Torus' presence at the heart of communities can have on the targets that they set. This interdependency between Torus and the local authority will be highlighted even further in the post-Covid environment.

The Council had, prior to the crisis, indicated that they were hoping to attract younger professional people to the area by improving the logistics sector. These people will likely need family houses in and around the Town, something that is in relatively short supply. The Torus Developments Programme will therefore bear this factor in mind.

This housing commitment should also focus on 'green' technologies and methods. Local politicians and national politicians alike have stressed the importance of the 'Green Revolution' and Torus should not be left behind. Concentrated efforts on lowering emissions and reducing our carbon footprint should therefore be of paramount concern in our development efforts.

There is a clear demand for Affordable Housing in the region, something Torus' current development commitments will go some way to addressing. Torus should maintain this level of affordable house building and there should be a proportion made wheelchair accessible, especially if trends of social housing residents are taken into account – where there is a high percentage registered as disabled.

### **Other services**

A vast proportion of Torus housing stock is situated in the city's most deprived areas. The Group therefore remain committed to ensuring tenants in these areas will continue to get the support they need, particularly in what are incredibly difficult times. This will include financial support and health and well-being provisions – particularly to Torus' older tenant population.

Although employment levels in St Helens were above the regional average prior to the crisis, the likelihood is that an economic contraction of the magnitude that is going to occur will lead to high levels of unemployment across the entire country. And despite employment levels being okay before the crisis, much of that employment was in unskilled, low-paid jobs. One of Torus' priorities is to up-skill our tenant population and the wider communities. This will be even more important post-crisis as the economic priorities of the entire country will be up for review, with certain sectors looking to expand whilst others will be looking make efficiencies.

There will be a real appetite across the entire country, not just in St Helens, to rebuild broken communities. The most vulnerable societies are the ones most likely to be affected by economic contraction. Torus intend to be at the forefront of these efforts to rebuild communities and to shield the most vulnerable in the region.

Throughout the district there are pockets of severe deprivation. Areas such as Parr, where deprivation is rife, will need the support of Torus Foundation more than ever. Torus has a strong presence in these communities with a high proportion of our housing stock being situated in areas like Parr. Despite being relatively close to the Town Centre, employment levels are very low and areas like this will need increased shielding.

Torus will utilise the close ties it has with local partners. Strategies to tackle deprivation, such as, social inclusion and community wealth building will need a harmonious approach with all community partners to ensure long-term solutions that will provide sustainable growth and improvement.

The current crisis, coupled with the impending withdrawal of EU funding, has presented a number of funding difficulties for Torus Foundation. However, the Foundation remains committed to providing the services that so many people across the region rely upon and a fundraising strategy has been developed.

The Foundation's new fundraising strategy will enable initiatives such as Women in Construction, Digital Champions, Wargrave Big Local and the Community Wellbeing sessions to continue. A lobbying strategy has been created to ensure the entire Group has the resources to maintain and increase our service capacity.

Having our own in-house commercial contractor of course brings with it a number of benefits, notably the ability to provide a reliable, readily available and cost-effective repairs and maintenance service to our tenant population. Torus remain committed to providing all aspects of our landlord plus package and the sustainability of HMS is pivotal to that. HMS has secured business loans to ensure its financial stability and envisage being running back at full capacity in the near future.

Torus has big plans to actively address the skills shortage. The shortage in skills in construction is well-documented and both HMS and the Foundation can offer employment support and can encourage new skills, either for staff or community residents, to build and maintain the homes of the future. This will be extremely beneficial for a region that is actively trying to build a more sustainable economy.

## Potential challenges

The underlying challenge present throughout this document, that the entire world is looking to overcome, not just Torus or the social housing sector, is of course Covid-19 and the effects the disease will have on our service delivery.

From a development's perspective, the crisis has already led to significant reductions in starts on site, handovers, sales, gross expenditure, grant income, sales income and net expenditure. This reforecast position will clearly have a significant impact on the Coronavirus Pandemic on the Development Programme and overall Development Budget. Torus Developments have already indicated that due to the crisis, schemes currently on site will be delayed by three months, whereas schemes not yet on site will be delayed by six months.

The majority of Torus' social impact in the region is coordinated by the Torus Foundation. The current crisis has, however, presented a number of funding difficulties for the Foundation. The amount Gift Aided to the charity from Torus Group's commercial activities has reduced significantly due to reduced workloads at Torus Developments and HMS.

This, coupled with the end of EU funding at the end of the year, will present a number of challenges for the Foundation. The European Structural and Investment Fund will be replaced by the United Kingdom Shared Prosperity Fund, however the full details of this funding stream are yet to be revealed so it is hard to gauge just how much the Foundation would be entitled to. Charities across

the country are however anticipating access to funding to some extent, there just appears to be a certain level of apprehension at the levels of funding that will be made available.

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