PURPOSE OF REPORT

To consider how arrangements for engaging private sector members in Greater Manchester’s planning and housing work could be strengthened, whilst ensuring elected members continue to be engaged through the Commission.

RECOMMENDATIONS

1. That Commission members discuss the issues set out below and the benefits of increasing engagement with private sector stakeholders.

2. That a more detailed proposal to establish an advisory network of private sector stakeholders is developed for the AGMA/GMCA AGM in June.

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1. BACKGROUND

The role of private sector members on the Planning and Housing Commission (PHC) was previously considered in early 2014, as part of a wider refresh of the group’s terms of reference and membership. At that time, it was agreed that the number of non-elected members should comprise three private sector members along with representatives from United Utilities and from the GM Housing providers Group (who is also vice chair).

Since then, the number of elected members on the Commission has grown in light of changing workloads and priorities. Elected representatives from all ten GM districts are now invited to commission meetings in order to ensure that they can contribute to, and share views on, key pieces of work like the GM Spatial Framework, etc.

It was also agreed that two deputy planning and housing portfolio holders for GM should be invited to take part in commission meetings, to help support the GM Planning and Housing Portfolio Holder.

In contrast, private sector membership on the commission has remained constant and it seems timely to review this situation and consider the benefits or opportunities for increasing private sector engagement in GMs planning and housing work.

2. ROLE OF PRIVATE SECTOR ON THE COMMISSION

The role of private sector members has been to inform discussions at PHC meetings by bringing up to date market information and expert advice in their field as well as private sector insights or perspectives. At the same time, private sector members also bring an element of challenge to discussions, testing assumptions and presenting alternative views.

These roles will continue to be essential. Indeed, given the scale of challenge facing GM on issues like planning, housing provision and investment, there could be benefits in increasing opportunities for private sector engagement beyond Commission meetings - for example, conducting ‘deep dives’ into a particular issue, gathering intelligence or testing the market’s appetite for new initiatives. Some of these approaches have been used in other forums like the Local Enterprise Partnership and have proved to be an effective way of utilising the time and expertise of the private sector most effectively at critical stages or decision points.

This is an issue that has also been raised in the recent consultation on the GMSF, with a desire by some developers and other stakeholders for greater opportunities to discuss policy and proposals in the round.

3. OPPORTUNITY FOR CHANGE

Given the growing number of elected members at Commission meetings, and its role as a forum in which elected members can discuss key pieces of work like the GMSF, there is a risk that the impact of a limited number of private sector members can become diluted in the wider debate.
As such, it is suggested that a separate (but linked) network of private sector stakeholders is established to advise GM on specific pieces of planning and housing work, by acting as a ‘sounding board’ for proposals or undertaking ‘deep dives’ into single issues, etc. at specific stages of work and policy development.

The details of this new group would need to be developed and agreed in order to be formally endorsed at the AGMA/GMCA in June. As a basic approach, though, the network could be established under the auspices of the Local Enterprise Partnership, in order to link into the wider private sector networks at the GM level. It would be formed around the core of existing private sector members on the Commission, but broadened to reflect a wider range of expertise and knowledge in terms of:

- Critical infrastructure;
- Social housing provision/development;
- Spatial planning;
- Private housing provision/development;
- Development finance/investment.

Rather than see this as a standing group, the aim would be to create a more flexible ‘network’ of appropriate individuals who would be contacted directly to discuss work under development or attend events as and when required, with meetings held at a time and place that was convenient for participants (e.g. working lunches or early breakfast meetings, etc.).

Establishing a broader network of private sector stakeholders would also enable Commission meetings to continue for elected members, but provide these meetings with more in-depth and informed views from private sector stakeholders.

4. NEXT STEPS

If the approach outlined above is broadly agreeable, it is suggested that a more detailed proposal is developed for ratification by the Chair before submitting to the Annual General Meeting of AGMA/GMCA for approval. And to ensure that these changes are also in line with changes to wider GM governance arrangements.

A detailed programme of work and membership for the network would also be developed and brought to a future PHC meeting for approval.