

SUSTAINABLE COMMUNITIES SCRUTINY PANEL
16th September, 2010

Present:- The Mayor (Councillor McNeely) (in the Chair); Councillors Atkin, Blair, Ellis, Havenhand, Hodgkiss, Nightingale, P. A. Russell together with Jenny Andrews (Maltby Town Council) and Andrew Roddison (RotherFed)

Councillor Akhtar was in attendance at the invitation of the Chair.

Apologies for absence were received from Councillors Cutts and Walker, Jack Carr and Derek Corkell.

26. DECLARATIONS OF INTEREST.

There were no Declarations of Interest made at the meeting.

27. QUESTIONS FROM MEMBERS OF THE PUBLIC AND THE PRESS.

There were no members of the public and press present at the meeting.

28. COMMUNICATIONS

The Chair reported that there may need to be an extra meeting convened between October and December to discuss the budget. Members would be given as much notice as possible.

29. PRESENTATION BY THE NEW CHAIR OF 2010 ROTHERHAM LTD.

The Chair introduced Paul Jagger, new Chair of 2010 Rotherham Ltd.

Paul gave an overview of the huge achievements made by the ALMO during the past 5 years. The Decent Homes Programme would finish at the end of the year which would have seen 17,000 homes directly affected positively by the Programme. The ALMO had had 2 good Audit Commission inspections and achieved a 2* rating as well as Investors in People and Customer Services Excellence status. He drew attention to the following:-

- Excellent work, in partnership with the Council, during the floods
- Successful partnership approach towards anti-social behaviour in local communities
- Very good team in the ALMO that was committed to the success of the organisation and to moving it forward in the way the single shareholder (the Council) wants it to go the other side of the present arrangements

- Arrangement with the Chief Executive Officer was successful but not sustainable for the longer term. This was an issue that could not be dealt with until there was an understanding of what the future would be

Challenges/ Future Work

- Transfer of the work to the new contractors and ensuring it was implemented quickly. It was essential that there was no dip in the standard of service
- 2010 Board - The size of the Board was being considered with a view of reducing it from 5-5-5. The size of the Board was directly related to effectiveness and sometimes a large Board could slow that process down. Alongside that, was the need to address Board member commitment as it would increase in direct proportion. Consideration had to be given to Board members' commitment, clarity, skills and profile, training and personal development
- Open Meetings – Board meetings were largely open to members of the public but the response had been poor in terms of attendance. The possibility of having the meetings live on the web was being explored
- Future of 2010 – The decision was the Council's but the ALMO would like to be engaged in the process of decision making. There was to be a Board Away Day to consider the Government's proposals around the future shape of social housing. There were opportunities for Councils, improving services and adding value but there was an assumption that Council housing was the last option which was not the case

Questions were then invited:-

- The likely size of the Board would be 3-3-3. Discussions around the size of the Board had been ongoing before the appointment of the Chair
- There had been no decision as yet whether membership would be taken from the existing or new. A number of the members were new which would wish to retain due to the rigorous recruitment process that had been undertaken and some were due to "retire". It would be the Council's decision as to who it would appoint
- RotherFed had been included on the appointment panel and it was important that tenants were democratically elected onto the new Board

The Chair thanked Paul for his attendance and presentation.

30. PROPOSALS AROUND THE FUTURE SHAPE OF SOCIAL HOUSING

The Director of Housing and Neighbourhood Services submitted a discussion paper to assist understanding and encourage debate on a number of new proposals from Government around Social Housing Policy. The report sought to put the proposals in a Rotherham context and highlighted what the potential impact of such Policy changes could be.

The report included:-

- ALMO Options Appraisal
2010 Rotherham Ltd. had been established in 2005 following extensive consultation with tenants and residents. As at 1st April, 2010, the ALMO had delivered £276M of investment and all homes (except refusals) would meet the Decent Homes Standard by the end of December, 2010. The management agreement expired in June, 2011 and the Council would need to make a decision on the most appropriate model for the future management of housing. PriceWaterhouse Cooper had been commissioned to conduct an appraisal of the options for the future management of Rotherham's Council housing. They would provide an illustration of the financial and service quality implications of the most appropriate model with a clear recommendation on which to base tenant and stakeholder consultation. They would report by the end of September.
- Change in Tenure type
It was possible that a change in tenure type could lead to a greater turn over of tenancies and an increase in costs through rent lost during the amount of time a property remained vacant between the outgoing/ incoming tenants and the repairs and maintenance works required whilst the property was void.
- Decent Homes Programme
Rotherham was on target to complete Decent Homes works across all its properties by the deadline of 31st December, 2010.
- Mobility of Social Housing Tenants
Rotherham had registered with "Home Swapper", a national mobility scheme. Tenants could register free of charge and view possible matches and contact exchange partners to explore potential moves. If a move was mutually agreed, both parties involved would need the permission of their respective landlords.

- Housing Revenue Account Reform
An All Member Seminar was held on 1st July to explore the implications for Rotherham further prior to submission of the completed consultation form. The level of debt 'offered' to Rotherham to move to self-financing was lower than the amount of debt currently being serviced. Current modelling suggested that through HRA self-financing there would be sufficient resources to invest in existing housing and build new Council houses. However, the level of resources available would be directly affected by rent levels (see next bullet point).
- Rent Convergence
Rotherham's rents was amongst the lowest in the country. Should the proposals around HRA reform be realised, achieving convergence would make more money available for Rotherham to invest in affordable housing. 26.2% of Rotherham residents were in receipt of Housing Benefit and was likely to increase when looking solely at Council tenants. Rent convergence could not be looked at without considering the proposals around the review of Housing Benefit.
- Housing Benefit Review
The reforms may result in landlords avoiding letting their properties to those in receipt of Housing Benefit and place the Authority in a difficult position. Rotherham did have a number of under occupied properties and linking Housing Benefit to the size of homes could provide a spur to free up larger under occupied properties.
- Tenant Services Authority
The future of the TSA was still unknown but the Government valued its service standards and local offer. 2010 Rotherham Ltd. had been running a task and finish group with tenants and leaseholders to agree Rotherham's service standards and the local offer. Consultation on the draft standards was imminent with plans to 'go live' in January, 2011.

Discussion ensued on the report with the following issues raised:-

- o Non-traditional properties - in line to complete 108 Airey type as well as all of the non-traditional properties (approximately 700)

- Estimated 8% refusals on the Programme – the national average was approximately 10%. An issue that would emerge very shortly was whether or not to set a cut off point for the Decency Programme e.g. a property becoming vacant that had previously been refused but it would be difficult to schedule the works due to the close of the Programme being so near
- End of the Right to Buy to retain housing stock or the ability given local authorities to end all succession rights
- Leverage on under occupation
- Social housing was an active choice
- Possibility that the Housing Benefit Review might lead to some committing Benefit fraud for fear of losing their homes

Resolved:- (1) That the range of proposals coming from Government be noted.

(2) That the Scrutiny Advisor contact Members with a view to holding a Scrutiny Review on the private rented sector.

31. CHOICE BASED LETTINGS – IMPROVING THE SERVICE FROM A CUSTOMER PERSPECTIVE

Further to Minute No. 55 of 10th December, 2009, the Director of Independent Living reported on progress made against the recommendations of the Sustainable Scrutiny Review into Choice Based Lettings (CBL).

The Review made 25 recommendations all of which had been actioned, a detailed analysis outlined in Appendix A.

A number of the review recommendations had incurred financial implications including the review of the Housing Register and provision of more information. This had required the Key Choices Service to carry out further exploration to identify funding streams.

Sandra Tolley, Housing Choices Manager, gave a presentation, illustrating some of the changes made as a result of the review.

The following points were highlighted:-

- Statistics showed a reduction in the number of people using the

Advertiser to view properties. The adverts came out on a Wednesday and most people went to the Property Shop on that day to view available properties. Due to the expense incurred was it worthwhile continuing with the adverts in the press?

- There were not the number of properties returned to correspond with the number of people wanting properties
- The new computer system should alleviate a lot of the problems experienced when an application fell between the Council and 2010. It was a "live" system
- Consideration was being given to taking the service out to the community. Home visits were made and surgeries at Contact Centres in an attempt to reduce the volume coming into the Property Shop. Larger premises had been considered but the position of the current Shop could not be bettered
- Most authorities used the House Swapper Scheme which was a national mobility scheme

The Chair commended the thorough report and the part that Scrutiny had played in the review.

Resolved:- That it be noted that the Scrutiny Review recommendations had now been addressed by the Directorate and 2010 Rotherham Ltd.

32. CABINET MEMBER FOR HOUSING AND NEIGHBOURHOODS

The Panel noted the decisions made under delegated powers by the Cabinet Member for Housing and Neighbourhoods held on 5th and 19th July and 9th August, 2010.

33. SUSTAINABLE COMMUNITIES SCRUTINY PANEL

Resolved:- The minutes of the meeting held on 11th March, 2010, be agreed with the inclusion of "Garages identified for future scrutiny reviews" under Minute No. 18 (Work Programme 2010/ 11).