

ROTHERHAM BOROUGH COUNCIL – REPORT TO MEMBERS

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| 1. | Meeting: | Cabinet Member for Safe and Attractive Neighbourhoods |
| 2. | Date: | 20th September 2010 |
| 3. | Title: | Dawson Croft, Greasbrough |
| 4. | Directorate: | Neighbourhoods and Adult Services |

5. Summary

Following the completion of the Borough-wide Sheltered Housing Review, a report and recommendations were submitted and approved by Cabinet on 25th October 2006, Minute No: 130 refers.

Dawson Croft was recommended and approved for decommissioning as a sheltered housing scheme, as it did not meet the Rotherham Sheltered Housing Standard for such provision. The report recommended that the process of decommissioning be achieved through normal tenancy termination processes, with empty homes not being relet. In the interim, remaining residents would continue to enjoy the level of service and investment in their homes that they would expect. A further review of the scheme would then be undertaken when the scheme was fully vacated.

Since 2006, there has been a gradual process of decommissioning, but this has become very protracted. This is likely to remain so adopting the current approach. In seeking to effectively manage issues relating to empty homes and ensure that the Council delivers the affordable homes that the Borough requires, a review of Dawson Croft has been completed by the Neighbourhood Investment Service.

The review concludes that Dawson Croft should be retained for the purposes of affordable housing provision, targeted initially at the over 60 age group and subject to the provisions of a Local Lettings Policy, which is detailed within the report. The report also recommends that to enhance the sustainability of the scheme, the existing bedsits are converted to self contained flats, to better meet the current and future needs and aspirations of housing applicants.

6. Recommendations: That Cabinet Member:

- Approves the redesignation of Dawson Croft as a general needs housing scheme for the 50 plus age group.
- Approves the reletting of empty homes at Dawson Croft, subject to the Local Lettings Policy attached at Appendix 1.
- Supports the conversion of 8 existing bedsits, to self contained flats.
- Approves the relocation of an existing resident to an alternative 1 bed flat at Dawson Croft, as a matter of priority, to facilitate bedsit conversions.

7. Proposals and Details

7.1 Background

The Sheltered Housing Review was concluded and reported to Cabinet on 25th October 2006, Minute No:130 refers.

With regard to Dawson Croft, the report concluded that:-

- Existing residents could remain and continue to receive all services up to their departure.
- Decent Homes investment would be undertaken to all properties.
- That properties when vacated should not be relet pending a further review.
- That a further review should be undertaken once vacated to determine the most sustainable future use for this scheme.

Since 2006, of the 30 homes within the scheme, 17 empty homes have been vacated. Due to the client group involved and the process of decommissioning agreed, the process has become very protracted.

In view of this and mindful of the need to effectively manage vacant homes and meet the increasing affordable housing needs of the Borough, the Neighbourhood Investment Service was commissioned to undertake a review.

7.2 Review Process

The review process has focussed upon the potential demand and future lettings approach to be adopted and resultant investment needs to support that future use. It has included the following:-

- A re-assessment of suitability for specialist housing need provision.
- An open event to assess housing demand and from what age group.
- Ongoing consultation with existing residents and Ward Members.
- Surveys to understand current and long term investment needs.
- A review of general running costs and rental income.
- Maintenance checks, including health and safety measures.
- Inspections to assess and identify works to ensure DDA compliance.
- Surveys to establish conversion costs related to proposed bedsit conversions to self contained homes.

7.2.1 Future client group.

Due to the physical nature of Dawson Croft, it had initially been highlighted as a potential specialist supported housing scheme. Discussions held with Independent Living Department identified that there was still a desire to develop a supported housing project for young people / care leavers. However, funding and essential resources had not yet been secured and the uncertainty around the timing of full vacation of the existing scheme made forward planning problematic.

Ward Members were consulted about this option and indicated their lack of support for such a scheme to be implemented in Dawson Croft. Ward Members indicated that they were confident through local knowledge that a housing need existed for older people within the locality and such need could be met at Dawson Croft. This could be achieved with existing residents remaining in-situ.

To test this opinion, it was agreed that consultation should commence with Ward Members, Key Choices, Independent Living Service, 2010 Rotherham Ltd and existing residents. Through these discussions it became clear that residents and ward members were supportive of the retention of Dawson Croft as affordable housing for older client groups, but unsupportive of an integrated supported housing solution. Consultation concluded that there was general support for the retention and letting of properties at Dawson Croft to an older person's age group, initially 50 years and over.

It was agreed that an open day/ market testing event should be held to assess current demand from applicants over 50yrs. An event was organised by the Neighbourhood Investment Service and supported by Key Choices and 2010 Rotherham Ltd, held on the 25th March. A show flat was prepared and furnished with the help of Key Choices Furnished Homes Team and used for viewing purposes. Adverts were placed in the local press, Key Choices Property Shop and local establishments. The event proved very successful in attracting interest from a diverse range of applicants who positively expressed an interest in living in Dawson Croft.

Although this scheme no longer meets the agreed sheltered standard, Dawson Croft has a lot to offer and its quiet semi rural location which is easily accessible and near to many local amenities is very sustainable and attractive to an older age group, as identified during the open day, and via the advert.

22 prospective applicants of mixed age and good character showed a keen interest in living at Dawson Croft during the open day event. Many have local connections to the area, most are wishing to downsize from their current family home, which further supports the supply of affordable homes to meet local housing need.

It was concluded that consideration should be given to the redesignation of Dawson Croft as a general needs housing scheme for the over 50 client group.

7.2.2 Local lettings Approach.

Due to the nature of its construction, the presence of and access to communal corridors and facilities and in order to sustain new and existing tenancies created within Dawson Croft, a LLP is considered an essential ingredient in the lettings process.

It is proposed that the Local Lettings Policy for Dawson Croft include the following provisions:-

- Allocations would not be made to applicants who had a history of drug and alcohol related issues; anti social behaviour issues or a criminal record within a twelve month period (CRB checks would determine reason)
- Preference to be given to applicants over 60yrs of age in the first instance followed by a decreasing age range to include the 50 plus age group.
- Residents and members would be kept informed and consulted on any proposed changes to the LLP.

A draft Local lettings Policy for Dawson Croft is attached at Appendix 1.

7.2.2 Investment needs

Empty Homes – self contained flats

Having identified a potential client group whose needs could be demonstrably met by Dawson Croft and be sensitive to the existing residents, the investment needs to support this proposal were investigated.

A survey was carried out of all empty homes by 2010 Rotherham Ltd. This identified that only one recent empty property was not Decent Homes compliant due to refusal, the remaining empty properties were Decent Homes compliant, but would require £21,000 of investment to bring them back into use. This did not include the bedsit properties which were considered separately. The cost of bringing the homes back into use would be met from the 2010 Empty Homes budget.

The jobs fund training scheme implemented recently by 2010 Ltd Empty Homes Team is offering work experience and further training for people who are unemployed. The scheme provides participants with the opportunity to enhance their skills, learn a new trade and to help them find future employment.

The current scheme is offering training in painting and decorating, and the team of five are being utilised around the borough to support new tenants, elderly residents, and for suitable project work for a 6 month period. Discussion with Empty Homes Team, 2010 has confirmed that the team would be made available to decorate all empty properties in Dawson Croft and spruce up communal areas and corridors, at no added cost to the Council. This would support the letting of the properties and the quality of homes presented to housing applicants. The associated costs would be absorbed within the training fund.

Empty Homes – Bedsits

Currently there is no demand for bedsit accommodation. There are 7 bedsits empty within Dawson Croft which are long term empty homes. It is proposed that, subject to approval, the 8 bedsits within Dawson Croft are converted into 2 bedroomed self contained flats. This proposal would require:-

- The relocation an existing resident occupying a bedsit to one of the 1 bedroom flats when ready to let.

- The conversion of all 8 bedsits into 4 x 2 bedroomed self contained flats at a total cost of £128,000.

The cost of conversion to create four sustainable two bedroomed dwellings is approximately £32k per dwelling. This compares well with the cost to the Council of providing affordable homes through the Local Authority New Build Programme and the national affordable Housing Programme with Registered Provider partners.

It is proposed that the costs of conversion are met from the One-Off Properties Budget within the approved 2010/11 Housing Investment Programme.

7.2.2 Management Implications.

The proposal would reclassify Dawson Croft as a non-sheltered housing scheme; in effect a general needs housing scheme for the 50+ age group. This has communal facilities management implications. As the scheme would no longer be a sheltered housing scheme, the management of communal facilities would (from a date to be agreed) no longer fall within the management of Warden Service, Independent Living Department. The management of the communal areas, laundry facilities etc would need to be undertaken as part of the general housing management functions undertaken on behalf of the Council by 2010 Ltd. For example, arrangements could be agreed with 2010 Ltd as follows:-

- Management of the tenancies, repair and maintenance of the housing stock and communal areas would be delivered by 2010 in common with other general needs apartment blocks.
- Cleaning of communal areas and communal windows would remain within the existing cleaning contract schedule undertaken by Facilities Management, EDS. Costs would however be chargeable to 2010 Ltd rather than Warden Services. This is in common with the cleaning and charging arrangements on other apartment blocks managed by 2010 Ltd.
- The collection of ad-hoc laundry monies from the communal laundry and the periodic collection of monies from the communal payphone would need to be managed and accounted for by a nominated officer within 2010 Ltd and paid into a designated income code.
- Budgetary responsibility for the maintenance and replacement of communal fixtures and fittings, including furnishings in the communal lounge and kitchen, communal television licence etc would be chargeable to 2010 Ltd.
- Domiciliary Services, where requested, would continue to be provided under existing arrangements.

It should be noted that such service delivery would need to be finalised and agreed prior to the letting of empty homes, in order that existing and ingoing tenants could be fully informed of management arrangements and reporting mechanisms.

It should also be noted that any proposed arrangements should be considered in the context of a Corporate Asset Management Review, the current internal reorganisation of 2010 Ltd and the pending review of the options for the future of 2010 Ltd.

8. Finance

The £21,000 cost of works to recommission void properties will be met from the 2010 Ltd Empty Homes budget.

The £128,000 cost of the proposed bedsit conversion works will be met from the One-off properties Budget within the approved 2010/11 Housing Investment Programme. To date, of the £400k budget allocated, 197,605.66 is already committed. As such, the costs of conversion can be met within the remaining budget.

Existing tenants pay a weekly sheltered charge for warden services and use of the communal facilities. If approval is given and all void properties are let, the rent and service charge income for the Council would increase, as currently empty homes generate rental income and the mandatory communal charge would continue to be applied to new tenancies. This would support the ongoing provision of communal facilities and services. The communal facilities income would be collected by 2010 Ltd and be used to manage the costs of provision.

Further analysis is required of income and expenditure with regard to communal facilities at Dawson Croft, in order to determine whether the centre will operate at a surplus or deficit under the proposed future use.

9. Risks and Uncertainties

Delays in investment decision making will negatively impact upon void performance indicators measuring empty homes relet times and income recovery performance. In addition, timely decisions are required to ensure that all works are completed to enable swift letting of properties and the completion of conversions works within the current financial year.

At a time of fiscal constraint and growing pressures upon capital investment budgets, the effective management of empty homes is paramount, in both financial and service delivery terms.

The presence of empty homes produce a negative perception of neighbourhoods and a negative reaction from customers, particularly at a time of increasing demand for affordable homes.

10. Policy and Performance Agenda Implications

Timely decision making with regard to investment in empty homes will contribute towards empty homes performance indicators, void rent loss performance and support increasing demand.

This proposal is making effective use of assets and managing them to best effect. It contributes to the sustainable neighbourhood's agenda by addressing identified housing issues and will help deliver better choice and quality of housing to the community.

The proposal contributes towards our key corporate strategic themes of:-

- Rotherham Proud
- Rotherham Safe
- Rotherham Alive
- Fairness
- Sustainable Development

These key themes are reflected within the Individual Well-being and Healthy Communities outcome framework, as follows:

- Improved Quality of Life – by creating opportunities for an improved quality of life, by dealing with empty homes and stimulating investment in the built environment (Objective 6)
- Economic well-being – providing affordable high quality housing options, to meet identified needs and create sustainable neighbourhoods
- Safe – by creating neighbourhoods that are safe, clean, green and well maintained with well-designed, good quality homes and access to local facilities.

The key investment themes within the LIP are:-

- New homes – supporting delivery of housing opportunities in the Borough to meet current and future needs and aspirations.
- Economic recovery – delivering investment activity which supports the recovery and stimulates local economic growth, sustaining businesses and jobs and training opportunities.
- Renewal – continuing the transformation of the Borough.
- Affordable housing – to meet the current and future needs of the Boroughs citizens.
- Sustainable communities – ensuring that our communities are safe and healthy and benefit from the range of essential services and provision that they need.

These key investment themes align with the Councils Corporate Priorities of:-

- Making sure that no community is left behind.
- Helping to create safe and healthy communities.
- Ensuring care and protection are available for those people who need it most.
- Providing quality education, ensuring people have the opportunity to improve their skills, learn and get a job.
- Improving the environment.

The proposal contributes to NAS strategic Objectives and Outcomes

Neighbourhood centres like Dawson Croft still have the potential to provide secure safe accommodation with specific integrated opportunities and resources to supply older people with the independence they require within a manageable space with minimum or nil support whilst integrating with existing residents who may need specific services.

The NAS strategic Objectives

- Objective 4 – To modernise services so that they are designed to maximise people's independence
- Objective 5 – to develop Innovative services./ ways which contributes to helping people to live at home independently
- Outcomes framework 1 – Improved health and well being
- Outcomes framework 2 - Improved quality of life (promoting independence and preventing isolation)
- Outcomes framework 3 – Making a positive contribution
- Outcomes framework 4 – increased choice and control

11. Background Papers and Consultation

- Open Day event material
- Draft Local Lettings Policy for Dawson Croft attached at Appendix 1.
- A cost breakdown for conversion works is held by the Neighbourhood Investment Service.

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