

Review Committee – 9 December 2008

Minutes of the meeting of the **Review Committee** held on **9 December 2008** when there were present:-

Chairman: Cllr Mrs J R Lumley
Vice-Chairman: Cllr Mrs C A Weston

Cllr K A Gibbs
Cllr T Livings
Cllr Mrs G A Lucas-Gill

Cllr M Maddocks
Cllr M J Steptoe

VISITING MEMBER

Cllr K J Gordon

OFFICERS PRESENT

| | | |
|-------------|---|--|
| P Warren | - | Chief Executive |
| G Woolhouse | - | Corporate Director (External Services) |
| J Bourne | - | Head of Community Services |
| P Gowers | - | Overview & Scrutiny Officer |
| M Power | - | Committee Administrator |

349 MINUTES

The Minutes of the meeting held on 19 November 2008 were approved as a correct record and signed by the Chairman with the exception of the following amendment to Minute 329 on page 1, which should read 'The 85% increase in bank charges shown in the report was in respect of credit card charges'.

350 DECLARATIONS OF INTEREST

Cllrs K J Gordon, Mrs G A Lucas-Gill and Mrs J R Lumley declared personal interests in item 5 of the agenda relating to Rochford Housing Association by virtue of previous membership of the Rochford Housing Association Board. Cllr Mrs C A Weston declared a personal interest in the same item as a current member of the Rochford Housing Association Board.

351 ROCHFORD HOUSING ASSOCIATION

The Committee received a presentation from Simon Clark, Managing Director of Rochford Housing Association (RHA), Maureen Vince, Chairman of RHA Board, Virginia Wade-Bain, Tenant Member and Anthony Sheppard, Independent Member on how the new organisation is developing and on the progress being made towards delivery of the promises made in the transfer offer document.

The Committee discussed the report, which outlined the main promises contained within the offer document and an update on RHA progress. In response to questions, the following answers from RHA were received:-

Major repairs and improvement programme

- Although works in respect of the major repairs and improvement programme had commenced later than anticipated, the programme for bringing properties up to the 'Rochford Standard' was on schedule. Those properties that should have been completed would be absorbed into the rest of the schedule.
- In respect of the delivery of repairs to the Rochford Standard, although consideration had been given to dealing with the worst properties first, for logistical reasons it had been decided to commence the refurbishment programme in Rochford and then work systematically around the District. However, the programme was flexible enough to respond to specific issues where necessary.
- In respect of help given to tenants concerned with 'green' issues, RHA was upgrading insulation works as part of its refurbishment programme; tenants would be asked to evaluate what difference these works had made to the warmth of their property. An energy performance certificate is issued as each new heating system is installed. RHA was looking into using more eco-friendly paint in the refurbishments and endeavoured to use renewable sources wherever possible. The installation of new front doors helped with the insulation of properties.
- It was confirmed that the performance indicators that showed a tenant satisfaction rate in excess of 95% related to all works carried out by the contractor to the end of October 2008. Concerns expressed by tenants generally related to mess, poor finish or late/non arrival of workmen; these issues had been reported to the contractor.
- A Clerk of Works was employed full-time to check the standard of workmanship and there was also a part-time Project Manager was employed by RHA. There were also financial penalties built into the contract.
- The RHA Board Forum had representatives from the three residents' associations and attendance levels at the meetings were generally high due to the good communication links that existed between RHA and residents. As well as liaison with the residents' associations, RHA was starting to establish more effective links with 'hard to reach' groups of residents, including the elderly, the disabled and the long-term sick. Liaison between RHA and Council tenants prior to the transfer had been excellent. Residents were involved in 'mystery shopping' the services of RHA via email, phone and in person. A shortcoming that had been noted in the first point of contact between RHA and its clients had resulted in training and development of staff to remedy the situation.

- The contractor, Connaught, used preferred suppliers. There were a number of checks and balances, including periodic audits, to ensure the quality of the work.

Improvement to services for sheltered housing tenants

- The remodelling programme in respect of the Britton Court and Spa Court schemes had been tendered for separately in one contract, which had been awarded to Apollo Group; work is due to commence mid-January 2009. It was anticipated that the conversion of 38 bedsits into one-bedroomed flats in the schemes would result in a net loss in the region of 15 units. It was noted that one-bedroomed flats were easier to let than bedsits and that architects had configured the schemes to ensure that as few units as possible were lost.

Bathroom improvements

- Improvements would generally encompass all the necessary works to bathrooms, rather than just the required installation of over-bath showers and heated towel rails.

Heating

- RHA was conscious of ensuring that properties were not left without heating or hot water during the winter period and would therefore desist from undertaking major works during winter. An energy performance certificate was issued to residents in respect of every empty home that had been refurbished as well as those that had new heating systems. A gas heating maintenance service would be offered, at prices similar to those paid through the contract, to leasehold owners in the developments owned by RHA.

Entrance Doors

- Advice relating to security issues was given at the Residents' Association and Forum meetings and smoke detectors and fire alarms were in place in the schemes. All residents have access to the handyman service, free of charge, and a system whereby a handyman is assigned to a particular sheltered housing scheme for one day per month was being considered.

Disabled adaptations

- It was anticipated that a service level agreement with the occupational health team would be created by the end of the year.
- If a property cannot be adapted to meet the specific needs of the individual within the home itself, there was an option of either relocating a resident to more suitable accommodation or putting an extension on the home.

Day to Day Repairs/Cyclical Maintenance

- A fencing replacement programme of works had been developed as it was not cost efficient to deal with replacements on an ad hoc basis.

All homes up to at least decent homes standard by 2010

- Some areas, particularly in the east of the District, would need extensive works and a survey would be undertaken to determine the scope of these works. It was anticipated that 92% of homes would achieve the decent homes standard by the beginning of 2009.
- There are at any one time in the region of 12 homes empty that are not part of the remodelling works. These are termed management voids and represent less than 1% of the total RHA housing stock, which accorded with the business plan. The turnaround time for re-letting was longer than previously because of the requirement to refurbish to the Rochford standard. As 75% of the homes that become available are for nomination from the Council's register, focus would be given to working in partnership with the Council to improve communication and learn as much as possible about prospective tenants prior to their being allocated accommodation. This would help to facilitate housing people in the most appropriate properties, with particular attention to residents with disabilities.
- RHA had an asbestos policy and strategy in place.
- Although RHA expected to achieve its target by 2010, there was now provision nationally for Housing Associations to apply to the Housing Corporation for dispensation if they failed to complete the works by the deadline; it appeared that dispensation would be given as long as an agreed programme was in place.
- Mrs Wade-Bain, Tenant Member, added that residents were generally happy with the works being undertaken.

Aim to provide at least 50 new affordable homes each year

- The aim of RHA was to provide new affordable housing. From a strategic housing perspective, any new developments would have to take account of the affordable housing needs of the District and presented a collective challenge for the partnership of RHA and Rochford District Council. A 'needs study' would be carried out mid 2009 to ascertain the type of accommodation that is most appropriate according to the assets available over the 5-year period and subject to planning considerations.
- The RHA policy is to actively seek out areas for development and all possible sites in the District that would be suitable for development would be examined.

- Play spaces were safe from development as it is a Contract requirement that these have to be maintained to the Council's standard and must be replaced if the land is used for housing.
- Shared ownership or 'mortgage rescue' schemes had not to date been considered as they carried an element of risk.

Long term rent stability

- The Retail Price Index (RPI) rate that would be used as the basis for this year's rent increase would be 5%, as this was the rate of the RPI in September 2008.

Two local housing offices in place

- Options for the best location for an Association office in the west of the District had been discussed at the Residents' Forum.

Pets in sheltered housing schemes

- RHA did not as a rule allow pets in sheltered housing schemes due to the potential impact on other residents and common areas. Nevertheless, the benefits of owning an animal were recognised, although this had to be reconciled with other considerations. The matter would be raised with residents next year and a policy would be formulated.
- An invitation to visit some of the properties that had been refurbished was extended to Review Committee Members; officers would organise an appropriate time for the visit.

The meeting closed at 9.40 pm.

Chairman

Date

If you would like these minutes in large print, braille or another language please contact 01702 546366.