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# HOUSING

Report to  
Finance and Procedures  
Overview and Scrutiny  
Committee

22<sup>nd</sup> September 2005

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INVESTORS IN PEOPLE



**Rochford District  
Council**

# **REPORT TO IMPROVEMENT PANEL**

## **Introduction**

The Housing function at Rochford is divided between two Heads of Service to reflect the Landlord/Strategic split, which follows Government guidance. Both services are within the Finance & External Services Directorate.

## **Strategic and Statutory Functions**

A team of ten staff provides a range of housing services including:

- Co-ordination of the Council's overall housing strategy.
- Enabling and liaison with housing associations
- Homelessness, housing advice/homelessness prevention
- Private sector renewal
- Residential caravan site regulation
- Co-ordination of home energy efficiency and fuel poverty work

Three of the team are qualified Environmental Health Officers, one is a qualified Housing Officer and one part qualified.

The Head of Housing Health & Community Care is the client officer for the housing management function.

A structure diagram is at Appendix 1.

## **Housing Management Functions**

The Housing Management team manages 1,780 Council owned units plus an additional 13 properties owned by two small housing trusts. There are three commercial properties in Great Wakering built as part of a low-rise development in the High Street. There are also 111 leaseholders.

The team number 25 under the joint supervision of two Housing Managers. One has responsibility for the Option Appraisal exercise and service development and the other, all operational functions. These two officers are supported by a further manager who has responsibility for policy, training and development.

- Two staff are professionally qualified (Chartered Institute of Housing) and two others have part-qualification. Some of the 14 wardens have certificates in Sheltered Housing Management – equal to NVQ level 2.

A structure diagram is at Appendix 2.

The Head of Revenue and Housing Management is the client officer to the Contracted Services division who carry out all repairs and maintenance. This team number 7 FTE.

The relationship between these functions is shown at appendix 3.

## **Where we were in 2003**

For a number of years, the Council had struggled to achieve a strategic approach to housing and its housing strategy had been judged below average (well below average in 2002, since it did not produce a new one that year).

Like the Revenues & Benefits function (renewed May 2005), the Housing Management service had a mixed level of performance across the range of indicators with top quartile performance for rent collection to bottom quartile in terms of tenant participation and re-let times on void properties.

Following two best value reviews, (Housing Management and Strategic Housing) the Housing Inspectorate undertook a formal inspection with the report being issued in June 2003. The joint report judged the services as 'fair' with 'poor prospects for improvement'.

The key strengths and weaknesses are detailed in the report, but the strengths included:-

- Positive customer assessments of the services.
- Positive signposting to and joint working with a range of other agencies.
- Well maintained Council Housing stock.
- Good rent collection and recovery process.
- Improvements in homelessness services.
- Housing applicants informed and records updated.
- Incentives in place to discourage under-occupation.

However, the report highlighted some major weaknesses:

- Poor reception facilities at Rochford.
- Limited and sometimes unchallenging targets.
- Information to customers on aims, objectives, performance, service standards and the results of satisfaction surveys is inadequate.
- Customer satisfaction not monitored by diversity.
- Poor customer participation, poor tenant choice.
- Delivery of outcomes from partnerships is variable.
- Poor linkages with corporate objectives.

- Key strategic documents missing; lack of focus and clarity about priorities.
- Poor targeting of investment/no decent homes response.
- Planned/responsive repairs ratio reversed.
- No risk assessments for use of temporary accommodation.
- Fee for mutual exchanges.
- Strategy for older persons housing not clear.
- Increasing cost of voids and other value for money issues.

## **Where we are now**

- ***Poor reception facilities at Rochford***

A new reception facility has been provided at the Rochford offices which is fully accessible to the disabled, has a hearing loop system, private interview facilities and a toilet. Customers can self-help via keyboard and screen, and when not in use by the public the equipment can be programmed to run promotional material e.g. about stock option appraisal.

Additionally, at the Rayleigh Civic Suite, customer access is being improved by the installation of a lift, and facilities are being refurbished.

- ***Limited and Sometimes Unchallenging Targets***

All Housing Management targets have been revised and upgraded to be challenging. We aim to be in, or maintain our position in, top quartile performance over a three year period.

Each member of the team participants individually or as a group in target setting. Each team member has their own copy of targets set and this embodies in the PDR appraisal process.

Targets for other service areas have been made SMART and are included in the Housing Strategy and the Council's Performance Plan.

- ***Information to Customers Inadequate***

The Housing Strategy and HRA Business Plan provide information about objectives and priorities and the Performance Plan details past performance and future targets. These are available on the Council's web site.

Housing management aims and objectives are clearly illustrated in the HRA Business Plan and supported in diagrammatic form.

Section Managers use these core values as the basis of team meeting/briefings against which all actions are measured.

Service standards are now included in the Tenants Welcome Pack so that customers know what to expect from the service. These standards are on display in the reception areas at Rochford and Rayleigh.

A new post of Housing Service Improvement Officer has been created in the Housing Health and Community Care division specifically to lead the implementation of initiatives designed to improve customer services. The work will be shaped by customer view. Views are being gathered on a range of services such as the homelessness service, housing advice, from those who have been in any form temporary accommodation and from a wide range of external agencies.

Customers are always encouraged to provide feedback if they have received grant assistance to repair or adapt their home and the users of the handyman and gardening services are surveyed for satisfaction.

We recognise that customers need to be at the heart of service planning and delivery and have requested that this be part of the Voluntary Improvement Work that is to be undertaken with the Housing Inspectorate.

- ***Customer satisfaction not monitored by diversity***

Increasingly, as surveys are updated and new ones introduced, diversity monitoring and evaluation is being embedded. But again, we need to learn from best practice.

The Council participated in the Essex Housing Officers' Group study into improving housing services for BME groups and will be hosting a joint funded Development Officer who will lead the implementation of service improvements. The Policy Manager in Revenues and Housing Management will have responsibility for managing this Essex-wide project to whom the Development Officer will report. Rochford will, therefore, be ideally placed to lead on this important initiative.

- ***Poor customer participation; poor tenant choice***

There has been considerable growth in this area. The original two (East/West) Tenants Groups were dissolved in 2004 and three new Groups formed. These elect up to three members to sit on the Tenants Forum.

In the Stock Option Appraisal exercise the Groups and Forum have played an integral part. Tenants/Leaseholder representatives had full voting rights on the Rochford Housing Option Appraisal Board and have now elected four representatives to sit on the Joint Transfer Steering Group.

Tenants now have an expanded range of choices in relation to improvements to their properties. This is best illustrated on the Decent Homes Delivery

programme (kitchens) where tenants have a choice of four work surfaces, three door types and four floor coverings giving a choice from 48 combinations.

Similar choices are given when bathrooms are refitted.

- ***Delivery of outcomes from Partnerships is variable***

Partnerships are used to provide, or add value to a range of services. Outcomes include:-

- Home Improvement Agency-caseload of 446 cases in 2004/05, mostly older or disabled residents
- Gardening service for the elderly – 376 jobs completed 2004/05
- Handyman Service – 319 jobs completed 2004/05
- Cross border scheme for housing and support for people with mental illness
- Thames Gateway South Essex Housing Strategy Group – Joint Housing Needs Study and Housing Market Analysis completed.
- YMCA – 3 rooms with support available for young homeless people from Rochford.
- Night shelter and day support services for homeless people provided by Homeless Action Resource Project
- Housing Associations – general needs and supported housing schemes developed and further schemes under construction.
- 90 hours per week of Floating Support for vulnerable tenants from Mosaic Housing Association.
- Joint funding of schemes developed through “Essex Strategic Reserve” enables access to specialist projects
- Tenants mediation service with CAB.
- Provided an intermediate care facility at Spa Court (Sheltered Scheme) jointly with PCT.
- Outreach services from Basildon Women’s Refuge for victims of domestic violence

- ***Poor Linkages with Corporate Objectives***

To achieve ‘Fit for Purpose’ status, both the Housing Strategy and Business Plan had to demonstrate the linkages between housing services and corporate objectives.

- ***Key Strategic documents Missing; Lack of focus/priorities***

The two key documents that were missing or out of date – the Housing Strategy and HRA Business Plan – have been completely re-written from scratch. The Heads of Service and other service staff met with Housing Executive staff from GO East who provided advice and information on Authorities who had produced good examples of these strategic documents. We also met with Epping Forest District Council, who had previously achieved a “Well above average” ranking and were one of the first Housing Authorities to attain fit for purpose status. Drafts were submitted and, with further advice from GO East, revised so that in February 2005, both were judged fit for purpose. The action plans are being updated on a 6 monthly basis.

The Homelessness Review and Strategy and the Council’s Private Sector Renewal Policy were both published as required by July 2003.

- ***Poor Targeting of investment/no decent homes response***

Document produced in April 2004 to identify addresses that fail decent homes on a year by year basis. Document covers all council housing and information relating to all decent homes criteria. Dates that potential non-decency is reached are also included on each criteria so properties can be targeted for inspection before that time. King Sturge condition survey estimated current non-decency of 10%. Currently working through programmed properties.

- ***Planned/Responsive repairs ratio reversed***

Work to identify planned works from the current responsive items was completed prior to April 2004. The original budgets ratio of 41:59 was revised to 62:38. Due to highly competitive pricing on some planned works the resulting end of year (2004/05) ration was 54:46 planned:responsive split. The budget split for 2005/06 is currently 64:36. We are working outside of this split, as large planned works tenders are only just starting to become committed. It is anticipated that as we progress throughout the year this will move towards a true 60:40 split.

- ***No risk assessments for use of temporary accommodation***

These are now in place, checking issues such as risk of violence, support needs, vulnerability, special educational needs etc.

The use of the Palace Hotel, which was criticised by the Inspectors, ceased some time ago and it has now closed for redevelopment. Use of bed and breakfast accommodation has been substantially reduced and we are now working to reduce the use of hostel and self-contained temporary accommodation as well.

- ***Fees for mutual exchanges***

A Mutual Exchanges fee was introduced after tenant consultation and imposed a fee of £135 to cover the landlords gas and electricity safety inspections. Tenants agreed that charges ought to be met by those benefiting from the mutual

exchange rather than all tenants meeting the cost through the HRA. Inspectors questioned the legality of the charge.

Research showed that although the charge was not illegal, it was unenforceable and the Council could not prevent the exchange going ahead if the fee was unpaid. A Committee decision was taken to reverse the original decision about nine months after its introduction and those two cases where the fee had been charged received a refund.

- ***Strategy for older person's housing not clear***

The Inspectors were concerned that a bedsit upgrade programme for sheltered housing schemes was still being implemented whilst the Council was undertaking research into the future housing needs of older residents. The conversion programme was put on hold following the report and no further schemes have been undertaken. Further analysis of future housing provision for older people has been undertaken by the Council's lead consultant on Housing Stock Options Appraisal (Graham Moody Associates) and discussions are now being held with Essex County Council, Adult Social Care and Supporting People teams, to ensure that there is agreement on future strategy. The County Council regard these discussions as pilots for future work with other Councils that are pursuing stock transfer.

- ***Increasing cost of voids and other VFM issues***

Void costs have reduced considerably by shortening the time between re-lets. We have achieved this by agreeing with incoming tenants the repairs and improvement we will undertake pre and post occupation. This has had the effect of reducing re-let times from 43 days to 22 days.

## **Where we want to be in 2006/07 and beyond**

We aim to complete all the actions in the Housing Strategy Action Plan, but in particular to:-

- Consult on and publish a new private sector renewal strategy, including a strategic approach to empty houses and ways of enabling private residents to maintain and improve their homes.
- Evaluate options for the future delivery of the homelessness housing advice/homelessness prevention services and reach a decision which fits with the implementation of the decision to transfer the Council's housing stock.
- Put in place robust arrangements for the client-side role post housing stock transfer.
- Improve our customer focus in planning and delivery of services – this will be part of the voluntary improvement work with the Housing Inspectorate.



- Increase the delivery of affordable homes to meet local need, including through cross-border and sub regional working.
- Deliver top quartile performance for most housing indicators within two years using a raft of best practice initiatives.
- Upgrade our Housing Management computer system – this will provide better levels of management information we will use to redirect resources.
- Have a fully implemented National Register of Social Housing (NROSH) system to complement Government research.
- Have selected a partner RSL to set up the Rochford Housing Association and have a positive tenant ballot.
- Have contributed to the research being undertaken on a sub-regional basis to set up a joint Choice Based Letting System.

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Head of Housing, Health &  
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Head of Revenue & Housing  
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## Housing Health and Community Care Division

Graham Woolhouse  
**Head of Housing, Health & Community Care**

Steve Neville  
**Residential Services Unit Manager**

Alex Coulson  
**Housing, Client & Strategy Officer**

- Client for housing management
- Strategy
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Alison Nicholls  
**Housing Service Improvement Officer**

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- Supporting People

Lee Webster  
**Principal EHO**

- Private sector renewal
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- Energy efficiency
- Empty homes

Jeanette Mouldsdale  
**Senior Homelessness & Housing Officer**

- Homelessness
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## Revenue & Housing Management Division



