

Report of the Overview and Scrutiny Task Group - Chorley Community Housing

November 2008



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1. EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Chorley Community Housing is a not for profit organisation. In March 2007 it contracted with Chorley Council to take on the housing stock of the Borough. Included in the contract is a Chorley Community Housing commitment to invest £26 million pounds over the first five years. At the start of the inquiry the contract had been running for fourteen months.

The Chorley Community Housing report presented to Executive Cabinet monitoring progress indicated that all six promises made to tenants on the transfer of houses were on target. This coincided with major changes to staffing at Chorley Community Housing. Initial inquiries showed that the performance statistics presumed to be year one were in fact treated by Chorley Community Housing as an initial year for fact finding.

The Overview and Scrutiny Committee asked a task and finish group to examine the report in more detail.

The members of the task and finish group concluded that:

- there are question marks that the improvement of the delivery rate would be seen,
- That generally residents are happy with the service provided by Chorley Community Housing, although further work needs to be done on the provision of affordable housing and monitoring contractors.
- The performance monitoring of Chorley Community Housing would benefit from a review. This is the responsibility of the Corporate Director (Business).
- The delivery of affordable housing needs to be addressed.

Objectives

To investigate and evidence that the promises made by Chorley Council and provided under contract by Chorley Community Housing are being delivered to tenants. Of the six initially considered the group decided to investigate the following four in detail:

1. Delivery of home improvements,
2. Service improvement,
3. Tenant involvement in decision making,
4. Regeneration.

The promise relating to affordable rents was not considered as rents are set in accordance with a national formula set by the government. However, Members did investigate aspects of the delivering sustainable communities promise.

Desired Outcomes

- To have documentary evidence that the services delivered to our customers meet those promised in themes by Chorley Council.
- To make recommendations in areas where improvements are required.
- To identify any barriers Chorley Community Housing face in delivering their services and any solutions Chorley Council can provide.

Group Membership

Councillor Mike Devaney (Chair)
Councillor Alistair Bradley Councillor Julia Berry
Councillor Pat Haughton Councillor Harold Heaton
Councillor Kevin Joyce Councillor Roy Lees
Councillor Marion Lowe Councillor June Molyneaux
Councillor Rosemary Russell Councillor Stella Walsh

Officer Support

Lead Officer
Lesley-Ann Fenton Assistant Chief Executive (Policy and
Performance
Democratic Services
Ruth Hawes Assistant Democratic Services Officer

Meetings

The meeting papers of the Group can be found on the Council's website: <http://www.chorley.gov.uk/scrutiny>. This includes the inquiry project outline and other relevant information on policy and procedures.

Contribution of Evidence

The Group would like to thank all those who have provided evidence and contributed to the Inquiry.

Recommendations

The Executive Cabinet is asked to consider the following recommendations:

1. The format of the report monitoring progress on all six promises made to tenants should be amended to include the targets, achievement against the target, sufficiently detailed evidence to support this and actions to be taken where the target has not been met. Perhaps short, medium and long term targets could be identified. Any tenant perception and satisfaction surveys and tenant complaints should be included with this report.
2. The Council don't accept that the amendments to the business plan, due to the recent restructuring, has no impact as it is linked to the promises made to tenants and financially to the eventual size of the VAT shelter. For these reasons the Council feel it is appropriate that Chorley Community Housing provide, not the detail, but updated information with regard to the business plan.
3. It is noted that the provision of affordable homes is a key issue and progress on this should be monitored closely. Adactus are requested to produce a plan (by a date to be determined by the Executive Cabinet) on how the targets will be delivered and funded. An updated plan is to be received by the Council every six months.
4. The report monitoring progress on all six promises made to tenants should be presented to the Executive Cabinet every six months by the Council's contract management officer in addition to the performance of key partnerships report.

5. That an updated list of contact details for Chorley Community Housing staff be sent to Customer Services at the Council every six months. Other information relevant to Councillors be sent to Democratic Services at the Council, e.g. refurbishment projects being delayed or new initiatives.
6. The reporting and monitoring systems between Chorley Community Housing and Lancashire County Council should be strengthened, in particular requests for work on the highways.
7. Contractors undertaking work on behalf of Chorley Community Housing should carry an ID badge at all times in line with the approach taken by Chorley Community Housing staff and have an increased level of supervision.
8. To support the Council's Neighbourhood Working arrangements by strengthening the reporting and monitoring systems between the Council and Chorley Community Housing
9. Contractors should provide tenants with information to enable tenants to contact them throughout the course of work being undertaken on their property.
10. To collect and monitor tenant satisfaction before, during and after work is undertaken on their property.
11. To secure an updated service level agreement with Chorley Community Housing for the provision of streetscene services.
12. It is recognised that strong residents associations supports a cohesive society and the Council and Chorley Community Housing need to work together towards this. Councillors with social housing in their ward are encouraged to participate in and support residents associations and be in contact with the social housing provider.
13. The Development Control Committee focus Section 106 agreements on rented houses rather than shared ownership.

Financial Implications: There are no financial implications for Chorley Council to implement any of the recommendations made.

2. METHOD OF INVESTIGATION

Evidence

The Group received and considered several reports and documents, these included:

- An extract of the report submitted to Executive Cabinet on 29 May 2008 on the performance of key partnerships, monitoring progress on all six promises made to tenants,
- A briefing note on the Council's contract with Chorley Community Housing,
- Various leaflets, newsletters and surveys from Chorley Community Housing, including a residents perception survey (completed by just over 10% of tenants),
- The updated report monitoring progress on all six promises made to tenants.

Witnesses

Adactus:

Paul Lees (Managing Director), Annabelle Robinson (Group Housing Management Director) and Morna Maines (Project Manager).

Residents Associations:

Representatives from Devonport United Group, Eaves Green Residents' Group and The Ryes Residents' Group. Chorley Moor Residents' Group were invited to attend.

Chorley Council officers:

Gary Hall (Assistant Chief Executive (Business Transformation)), Ishbel Murray (Corporate Director (Neighbourhoods)), Zoe Whiteside (Strategic Housing Services Manager) and Councillor Peter Malpas (Executive Member (Business)).

Members contribution

An important feature of the inquiry has been the degree of feedback from Members about their constituents at each meeting.

3. FINDINGS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

Objective 1: Delivery of home improvements.

One of the key aims of the inquiry has been to ensure that Chorley Community Housing are delivering a good service to customers. The main way tenants will have contact with Chorley Community Housing is through the delivery of home improvements. The “Chorley Standard” has been agreed by tenant representatives setting out the improvements and modernisation to be completed on each house. There are concerns that 18 months into the contract there is a lack of progress specifically on home improvements.

Communication has previously been an issue for customers both with Chorley Community Housing and contractors used. A project manager now monitors the performance of contractors and quarterly key performance indicator reports are now presented to the Chorley Community Housing Board for monitoring purposes. It has been evident that, although issues within Chorley Community Housing have been addressed, concerns remain regarding contractors. This includes supervision of contractors generally and tenants being able to contact contractors during work being carried out on their house.

It was clarified that if tenants do not take up the offer of a new kitchen or bathroom (for example as they have just decorated) the money not spent on a particular property will be ring fenced to keep the money in the renovations account. Accurate records are kept about work done to each property for the decent homes standard. A particular issue has been the state of the central heating systems, including boilers over 10 years old and the compatibility between the actual heating installation and the central heating unit. A clerk of works inspects all works on completion and the resident has to say that they are satisfied prior to accepting formal handover of a property.

Where urgent work is identified in houses to bring them up to the Chorley standard not in the programme of work for this year these will be reviewed on a case by case basis.

Following discussions the three houses requiring total refurbishment in Charnock Richard have now been surveyed, although the project is not in the budget for this year. This is important as there is a need for rented homes in rural areas.

Members were assured that Chorley Community Housing will consider alternative accommodation needs when properties are being renovated and have acknowledged past shortcomings in this area.

One of the areas highlighted by the residents’ perception survey, carried out by Chorley Community Housing showed the need for additional residents’ car parking spaces. The group felt that the resolution of this would encourage tenants to take ownership of the parking area, leading to a reduction in litter. 168 additional car parking spaces have been identified to provide hard standing areas for residents and these are in the Chorley Community Housing programme.

Other highway issues like speeding and requests for traffic calming measures indicate that improvements could be made in communications between Chorley Community Housing and Lancashire County Council.

Throughout the inquiry Members stressed the importance of partnership working on issues such as anti social behaviour, car parking, speeding motorists and litter. This will be taken forward by the Council through the locality plan and neighbourhood working.

Recommendations:

1. The format of the report monitoring progress on all six promises made to tenants should be amended to include the targets, achievement against the target, sufficiently detailed evidence to support this and actions to be taken where the target has not been met. Perhaps short, medium and long term targets could be identified. Any tenant perception and satisfaction surveys and tenant complaints should be included with this report.
2. The Council don't accept that the amendments to the business plan, due to the recent restructuring, has no impact as it is linked to the promises made to tenants and financially to the eventual size of the VAT shelter. For these reasons the Council feel it is appropriate that Chorley Community Housing provide, not the detail, but updated information with regard to the business plan.
3. It is noted that the provision of affordable homes is a key issue and progress on this should be monitored closely. Adactus are requested to produce a plan (by a date to be determined by the Executive Cabinet) on how the targets will be delivered and funded. An updated plan is to be received by the Council every six months.
4. The report monitoring progress on all six promises made to tenants should be presented to the Executive Cabinet every six months by the Council's contract management officer in addition to the performance of key partnerships report.
5. That an updated list of contact details for Chorley Community Housing staff be sent to Customer Services at the Council every six months. Other information relevant to Councillors be sent to Democratic Services at the Council, e.g. refurbishment projects being delayed or new initiatives.
6. The reporting and monitoring systems between Chorley Community Housing and Lancashire County Council should be strengthened, in particular requests for work on the highways.
7. Contractors undertaking work on behalf of Chorley Community Housing should carry an ID badge at all times in line with the approach taken by Chorley Community Housing staff and have an increased level of supervision.
8. To support the Council's Neighbourhood Working arrangements by strengthening the reporting and monitoring systems between the Council and Chorley Community Housing
9. Contractors should provide tenants with information to enable tenants to contact them throughout the course of work being undertaken on their property.
10. To collect and monitor tenant satisfaction before, during and after work is undertaken on their property.

Objective 2: Service improvement.

It was notable that when maintenance problems are reported to Chorley Community Housing residents are happy with the service received. When reporting a defect tenants are informed when a repairperson will come. If the problem is urgent this will be the same day. In most instances the service received is, in fact, better than that received from the Council.

Residents associations raised street scene issues. An area of concern for the Council is the inconsistency between the properties on the work schedule and the Chorley Community Housing property schedule. Houses are sold or alternative arrangements have been made with residents and the Council are not always advised of this. It has been made more difficult as Chorley Community Housing don't appear to have the up to date information either.

There is a service level agreement between the Council and Chorley Community Housing for grounds maintenance, including mowing and bedding provisions. The service level agreement is currently running on an annual contract basis, this position requires to be reviewed and an extended contract arrangement secured.

A review of records and work schedules has been instigated by the Council to clarify the service level agreement and to map Chorley Community Housing areas on the geographical information system (GIS). The Council want to provide a consistent service to residents and the need for this has been highlighted through the neighbourhood working agenda. Chorley Community Housing has a role to play in monitoring the work of the Council, as do the Council supervisors.

If the Council do not continue to provide this service for Chorley Community Housing it is important to ensure that good standards of service are provided to all residents of the borough. The Council have suggested to Chorley Community Housing that they tender the process in 2010 to enable the records issues to be resolved and to establish a satisfactory specification for services. This is still on-going and is with Chorley Community Housing.

Recently there has been a problem with mowing work not being undertaken due to the wet weather, in particular with the cut and collect scheme. Generally with the cut and collect scheme areas are mown at least every three weeks with a maximum of fifteen cuts per year. Hedges are cut and bedding schemes are renewed twice a year.

Litter has been highlighted as an issue in the residents' perception survey. Areas are litter picked as and when required, but always prior to mowing. Chorley Community Housing has the responsibility to provide the litterbins. Although additional litterbins could be considered this will lead to additional costs, both in provision and servicing. It is thought that larger litter bins will solve some of the problems. This will be considered as part of the ongoing street scene inquiry.

Equality recording and monitoring is evident from the literature produced by Chorley Community Housing,

Recommendation:

11. To secure an updated service level agreement with Chorley Community Housing for the provision of streetscene services.

Objective 3: Tenant involvement in decision-making.

The established residents association, The Ryes, in a free ranging discussion with the group gave evidence that they have widened their role to try and improve things further. Rather than being issue based there is a concentration on community cohesion and social events and the association has received grants for various projects. This is something that other associations could consider doing.

Chorley Community Housing do give assistance when requested, including attending meetings, finding venues for meetings, setting up constitutions etc. There is also a Tenants' and Residents' Panel, buddy scheme, monthly meetings with residents associations, tenants newsletters, a resource room and an annual grant to each residents association. The residents associations advised the most important aspect they needed help with was getting people involved, in particular having someone to lead the residents association. It also helps having Borough Councillors involved.

Residents advise that Chorley Community Housing do ask for their opinions on how things could be improved, but feel they could be kept better informed of when improvements in their area will be made.

From the residents association, in the main, a positive response was reported in the way that Chorley Community Housing deals with antisocial behaviour. Chorley Community Housing will not tolerate anti-social behaviour and a dedicated team is in place to combat this. This reassured Members as this problem has been raised through feedback from residents. It was recognised that the control of anti-social behaviour is a major factor in "delivering sustainable communities" and although this promise was not considered in detail by the inquiry this part of the report is considered the best place to report the findings.

Recommendation

12. It is recognised that strong residents associations supports a cohesive society and the Council and Chorley Community Housing need to work together towards this. Councillors with social housing in their ward are encouraged to participate in and support residents associations and be in contact with the social housing provider.

Objective 4: Regeneration.

The definition of affordable housing is the Borough median income (£29600) times 2.5, which equals £74,000.

Chorley Community Housing is committed to providing affordable housing and it is acknowledged that Adactus are an experienced deliverer. They are contractually committed to deliver the target to provide and fund forty affordable housing units per year, although this can roll over for a maximum of four years. These are above those which Adactus provides that are funded via the Housing Corporation's mainstream funding programme. It should be noted that the Council is not under contract to help achieve the target.

Concern had been expressed at the difference of opinion between Chorley Community Housing and the Council on the delivery of affordable housing, in particular, the units on the Gillibrand estate.

The Council has identified privately owned land that Chorley Community Housing could buy. On the plus side, working with a Registered Social Landlord means more chance of achieving rented units than low cost or shared ownership units. The current financial position has increased the need for rented housing, compounded by lack of mortgage finance. Rented houses need to be viewed financially over a longer term and this was not as attractive to Registered Social Landlords.

Where there are Section 106 agreements the Council do promote Chorley Community Housing and also focus on rented houses rather than shared ownership, which is better financially for the developer. The Council need to push for this and Development Control Committee Members can play an important role here.

It was understood that the restructure at Chorley Community Housing has generated a significant financial saving. All rent and other money Chorley Community Housing receive from the property transferred (including right to buy receipts) has to be spent on expenses relating to the Chorley houses and for other social housing etc. purposes primarily in Chorley.

Recommendation:

13. The Development Control Committee focus Section 106 agreements on rented houses rather than shared ownership.