
Report to

Scrutiny Co-ordination Committee

20th February, 2008

Report of

Councillor S Dixon

Title

Report Back on the Work Of Outside Bodies – Whitefriars Housing Group

1 Purpose of the Report

- 1.1 This reports sets out details of the work of Whitefriars Housing Group over the preceding twelve months and details of attendance by the City Council's representatives.

2 Recommendations

- 2.1 It is recommended that the City Council continue to appoint elected members to serve on the various committees' and main board of this outside body.

3 Information on Work of Outside Body

- 3.1 2007 has been another good year for Whitefriars Housing Group's residents. There have been enhancements in service delivery and service quality and further efficiencies have been delivered.

Some of the achievements are identified below and a few of these are expanded following the bullet points:

- Successful agreement, on behalf of Whitefriars, the City Council and NDC, for the regeneration of the Henley Green, Manor Farm and Wood End neighbourhoods of northeast Coventry negotiated
- Whitefriars' engagement with the Local Strategic Partnership further embedded
- Social Homebuy launched to give people more opportunities to get started on the property ownership ladder
- Resident capacity building
- "Independent Living Team" established bringing together all Whitefriars' Supporting People activities in a one-stop-shop to promote independent living
- Development of 121 new homes in Coventry
- Development of low cost home ownership properties
- Financial exclusion agenda addressed

The above are examples of service achievements. We have also achieved:

- Attendance level rose to 96% (sickness and absence below 4%)
- 97% of HomeWorks responsive repairs are now carried out by appointment
- Chartered Institute of Housing regional award winner for training excellence
- Investors in People reaccreditation

3.2 Regeneration of the Henley Green, Manor Farm, Wood End and Deedmoor neighbourhoods

This summer saw the final agreement of the £360m contract to regenerate the Henley Green, Manor Farm, Wood End and Deedmoor neighbourhoods. This represented the culmination of 2 years tireless work, since selecting the preferred development partner.

Whitefriars undertook the lead role in managing the relationship between the 'public sector' partners (Whitefriars, the City Council and Coventry NDC) and between the partners and the consortium of developers (Persimmons, Bovis and Keepmoat). This at times tested the team's negotiating, financial and political skills almost to the limit.

As well as working with the contracted parties, Whitefriars worked extensively with the communities and community representatives to ensure that the scheme will meet their needs and aspirations.

The scheme will provide approximately 3,500 homes over the next 15 years, including social rented homes, low cost home ownership opportunities and properties for outright sale.

3.3 Financial Inclusion

Whitefriars' already good performance in improving its performance on rent collection has been further improved. The focus of our efforts has been on helping our residents to be able to pay their rent. A change of emphasis from enforcement to prevention. We still have to evict some tenants, as a last resort, and always will do but we are increasingly focusing on helping tenants to be able to pay their rent.

As part of this, a major achievement has been the success of our work with Coventry City Council's Housing Benefit Team. Staff from the Housing Benefit team now work in Whitefriars' Housing Offices. This has many benefits including:

- Helping improve the performance of the Council's Housing benefits team;
- Improving Whitefriars' rent collocation; and most of all,
- Enabling our tenants to maximise their benefits and resolve queries quickly.

In recognition of the excellence of this partnership, Whitefriars and the City Council were joint finalists in the UK Housing Association Awards.

We have also elicited the support of the Department of Work and Pensions to help address financial exclusion amongst our residents. Their staff have trained our frontline staff to be able to advise our tenants and signpost them to other agencies for further assistance.

In addition, we have worked with Coventry Law Centre and the Citizens Advice Bureau to bid for funding for more financial inclusion and debt advisors for the City.

3.4 Repairs Service

Whitefriars in-house repairs service provider, "HomeWorks" has built on the solid foundations of the Council's building maintenance direct labour organisation. It delivers 76% of our responsive repairs. It has been successfully incorporated into the Whitefriars' culture and gained Investors in People accreditation.

New customer service standards were introduced during the year. These were developed with representatives of our residents. With the introduction of new technology, 97% of HomeWorks responsive repairs are now carried out by appointment.

Whitefriars has introduced three craft-worker apprenticeships per year and a programme of skills refreshers and new skill training for existing craft-workers. This is a long-term programme to ensure we have the skills and capability to continue to deliver a quality repairs service in the future, particularly with an aging skilled workforce.

3.5 Potential merger between Whitefriars Housing Group and West Mercia Housing Association: Briefing Paper

Howard Farrand has briefed Gary Ridley, as Housing Portfolio Holder, on the proposed merger and Whitefriars held a seminar for all Members on 15 January, which was attended by Members from both the major parties.

Whitefriars has substantially completed its “transfer promises”, which set out our agenda for the first 5-6 years. The Board now needs to set the path for the next phase of Whitefriars’ development.

The Board recognised the external change going on in the housing sector and the City and the potential opportunities that the next 5 years are likely to present to redress some of the issues we face as Whitefriars. They also understand the constraints that we work under and that these limit our ability to play as much of a key role in the City that they wish us to do.

The Board has decided that potential merger with West Mercia appears to have a lot of merit and that they wish to positively explore the proposal further.

An appealing factor about the proposal is the geographic separation of the proposed partner and the way the group works as a federal organisation with local management being determined by the individual organisations that make up the group, based on the individual local circumstances.

But why can’t we just do it ourselves? There are several reasons but all eventually come down to money and shortening our learning curve in managing new products.

Our Board is keen to make sure that we are “match fit ” for the future and, as far as possible, they want to ‘future proof’ for the next generation of tenants

West Mercia is a federal organisation of three traditional housing associations with:

- 5,000 homes
- A strong financial position
- Secured £132m of Housing Corporation grant to date
- Development Partner with excellent track record (2nd biggest funding allocation in the West Midlands)
- Experience in shared ownership schemes, supported housing and young persons schemes.

If the merger proceeds, Whitefriars’ Board will remain responsible for all the operational decisions about the provision and management of services for the people of Coventry.

It is hoped to agree heads of terms by the end of March 2008 and then, over the next 12 months, fill in the details and formally bring the two organisations together for April 2009.

Any merger will be subject to the agreement of the Housing Corporation.

4 Benefits to the City Council of the Appointment

- 4.1 Coventry City Council gains a clear understanding of social housing via Whitefriars Housing Group. Having representatives from the Council on the board aids communication between both organisations. A large percentage of Coventry citizens are Whitefriars Housing Group tenants. Many of the issues they raise can often be dealt with through board members of Whitefriars Housing Group and Coventry City Council if the first line of enquiry fails.

5 Attendance Record and Remuneration for the Appointment

- 5.1 Coventry City Council's representatives are Councillors Adalat, Mrs Dixon, Maton, Skinner and Smith and Mr P Lacy. During the period December 2006 and November 2007 the following meetings were held:-

6 meetings of the Board Of Directors of Whitefriars Housing Group . Out of six possible meetings, Peter Lacy attended all six; Kevin Maton four; Susanna Dixon and David Skinner each attended three; Altaf Adalat has attended none. David Smith (being a relatively new appointment) has attended one meeting out of the two he was eligible to attend to date.

4 meetings of the Whitefriars' Finance Committee were held. This committee has two council nominees sitting on it, Altaf Adalat and David Smith. Out of four possible meetings, Altaf Adalat attended one. To date, David Smith was only eligible to attend one meeting, but he did not attend.

3 meetings of the Whitefriars' Property & Investment Committee were held. This committee has two nominees sitting on it, Kevin Maton and David Smith. Out of three possible meetings, Kevin Maton has attended all three; David Smith was eligible to attend one of the three meetings, but did not attend.

3 meetings of the Whitefriars' Housing Operations committee were held. This committee has one nominee sitting on it, Councillor David Skinner, who attended all three of its meetings.

3 meetings of the Whitefriars' Human Resources Committee were held. This committee has two council nominees sitting on it, Peter Lacy and Councillor Mrs Dixon. Out of three possible meetings, Peter Lacy has attended all three and Susanna Dixon, two

- 5.2 There is no remuneration associated with the appointment.

List of background papers

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Papers open to Public Inspection

Description of paper

Location CH59

Schedule of City Council Appointments to Outside Bodies