



Coventry City Council

8.12

Public report

Report to
Scrutiny Co-ordination Committee

6 January 2010

Report of
Councillor David Skinner

Title
Report Back on the Work of Outside Bodies – Whitefriars Housing Group

1 Purpose of the Report

Members nominated by the Council to sit on the boards and committees of outside bodies are required to report back on annually on their work. This report does that with respect to the nominations to the Whitefriars Housing Group. It also gives details of attendance at the organisation's meetings by the Council's nominees.

2 Recommendations

2.1 It is recommended that the City Council continue to appoint people to serve on the boards and committees of Whitefriars Housing Group.

3 Background

- 3.1 Whitefriars Housing Group Limited is the not-for-profit housing and regeneration organisation established in 2000 at the time of the housing stock transfer, that owns and manages approximately 17,000 homes across Coventry.
- 3.2 Coventry City Council's nominations for 2009/10 are Councillors Adalat, Andrews, Maton, Skinner and Smith and Mr P Lacy. In November 2009, the Council nominated Councillor Bailey as a replacement for Councillor Adalat.
- 3.3 In December 2008, Whitefriars merged with the West Mercia Group. Whitefriars is now part of a diverse group that operates across the West Midlands, including Coventry, Worcestershire, Herefordshire and Birmingham.
- 3.4 Whitefriars' vision is – Creating places where people are PROUD to live and work.
- 3.5 Whitefriars' has four core values to underpin its vision:

Providing Excellent Service

- We aspire to 'excellence in customer services' and at the same time seek ways to enhance communities
- We will work to make each contact easy and trouble free and turn the ordinary into the extra-ordinary by going that 'extra mile' for you
- We do what we say we will do, when we say we will do it. If we don't we will apologise and take whatever practical steps we can to put it right.

Acting with Integrity

- We are honest in our dealings with you. We will always strive to keep our promises

- We will run our business in a way which is ethical and decent by doing 'the right thing'
- We will use our resources and influence to help you and make sure our policies and practices reflect our commitment to an ethical business.

Delivering Creative Solutions

- We will work with you and our partners in culture of mutual respect.
- Not all issues are as simple as 'you ask, we do'. Some require more complex solutions and we will work with you and others, as far as is practical, to develop them.
- We will work with you and our partners to help find solutions which reflect your needs as individuals.

Valuing People

- We value you and will treat you with respect and understanding. We expect you to do the same when dealing with us and your neighbours
- We see everyone as important. Even when we can't meet every request you make we will try to help. If we can't help we will explain why.
- We want to get things right first time and we will involve you whenever we can on the things that affect you.
- We listen to what you tell us and use this to help improve the service you receive.

3.6 Since Whitefriars was formed in 2000 it has invested £232 million of private sector money into Coventry's social housing and its neighbourhoods.

3.7 Whitefriars is working with the City Council to promote regeneration of many communities across the city.

4 Whitefriars' Achievements

4.1 2008 has been another good year for Whitefriars Housing Group's residents. There have been enhancements in service delivery and new services have been provided. Service quality has been improved and further efficiencies have been achieved.

4.2 Working in neighbourhoods, Whitefriars is committed to the national 'iN business for neighbourhoods' agenda and is a major player in the regeneration of Coventry and the provision of affordable housing.

4.3 In addition to providing homes, the Group works in partnership with communities and other agencies to provide training and employment opportunities and support services for local residents, with the aim of building sustainable communities.

4.3 Whitefriars continues to define its culture through its Vision and Core Values. We continue to work to ensure that we put our residents at the heart of all we aspire to and all we do.

4.4 Below is a summary of some of the key achievements of Whitefriars during 2009:

a. Children's safety and Education Foundation

Building on the success of Whitefriars' working with Barrs Hill, Ernsford Grange and Caludon Castle Schools the previous year we are now working with local primary schools. A measure of our success from last year's program was that a group of students from Caludon Castle school went out with cameras to highlight their concerns in their neighbourhood and present these to the Wyken Ward Forum.

The project is designed to help young people stay safe and avoid danger in their neighbourhoods. This project is sponsored and delivered by Whitefriars. It involves class discussion around: safety at home, road safety, drug awareness and disability awareness. This is another example of Whitefriars investing in our communities, not just in homes.

b. Hillfields

The beginning of 2009 marked the completion of Whitefriars', together with partners at the Council and the City College, regeneration works in Hillfields. The neighbourhood has been transformed into a vibrant, cohesive, multi-cultural community – a place where people are now proud to live.

c. Financial inclusion

Examples of financial exclusion are plentiful but include, for example:

- Lack of access to a bank or building society account.
- Lack of access to necessary financial services and credit.
- Limited access to services that could improve an individual's financial situation such as money advice.
- Lack of access to the best deals on utility costs.
- Reliance on credit from sources other than high street financial service suppliers, for example, use of doorstep lenders

Residents who are on low incomes are often unable to obtain the most economic financial products or access affordable lending and some struggle to budget effectively.

As the national and local financial situation has tightened, Whitefriars has increasingly put resources into helping its residents who are financially excluded. Examples of the activities that Whitefriars undertakes, either directly or in partnership, include:

- Provision of a Money Advice Worker who will work exclusively with Whitefriars customers. The worker will be part of Coventry Law Centre's specialist money advice team. Being part of the Law Centre team will allow our worker to benefit from the expertise of the team and allow access to continual learning. It will also allow other members of the team to cover the role during leave period. The role involves seeing people, not only in our housing offices but also in their own homes where people often feel more comfortable, to discuss their finances. This role will also provide training for housing office staff on debt advice and money management
- Establishing a Money Aid fund has been established to assist residents in times of financial crisis. Applications to fund are decided by a panel of residents from the Building Better Behaviour Customer Service Involvement Group. Payments from the fund either match fund customers rent payments for an agreed length of time or are one-off awards. In order to be considered for a payment from the fund customers must agree to work with our Money Advice Worker.
- Establishing city wide and local referral systems to members of Advice Services Coventry, for example, Coventry Law Centre, Citizens Advice Bureau (CAB), Credit Unions.
- Whitefriars is working in partnership with the CAB to assist them in developing their evening service. The plan which is now being implemented is that the CAB will train 10 members of Whitefriars' staff to be able to deliver advice to CAB's customers on money and welfare benefits. These staff will then volunteer at the

CAB during evening sessions enabling those people who cannot attend the daytime session to do and making more advice slots available. The CAB training will build on the existing skills already held by many of our housing office and finance staff. We have already asked staff for expression of interest and it is evident that the initial 10 places are going to be very over subscribed, however, CAB are happy to repeat the training for another 10 people when the first training phase has been completed

d. Reducing worklessness, improving skills

Whitefriars runs the Training Agency to provide training and development opportunities for people of Coventry and to help reduce worklessness in the City. They have provided hundreds of local young people, employed and unemployed adults, local businesses and communities with practical training and sustainable employment opportunities.

These opportunities include:

- Community Engagement – providing accessible learning programmes that promote skills, opportunities and employment values.
- Work Based Training – vocational learning programmes that provide personal and practical skills, self-confidence and employability.
- Employer Support – programmes to support business growth and ease Employers' employment and training burdens.
- Employee Support – Programmes to help make new and existing employees' jobs sustainable and worthwhile

In addition, Whitefriars runs a successful apprentice scheme. This year, Whitefriars has taken on 15 apprentices, 10 modern apprentices and 5 craft apprentices.

e. Improvements in Anti-social Behaviour Management

Last year Whitefriars implemented a pilot of a new way of working to take proactive steps to prevent anti-social behaviour and managing any that does arise. During this year, as the pilot proved to be successful and increased resident satisfaction with the ASB service, we have rolled out this new way of working across the City.

ASB management continues to be a significant focus for Whitefriars. This is partly their work with young people, detailed above, is an example of the innovative approaches that Whitefriars is taking to reduce antisocial behaviour.

f. Community pride awards

Whitefriars introduced community budgeting for resident generated ideas for enhancing their neighbourhoods. Bids had to be under £5,000 and were judged by local panels of residents against the themes of: stronger, safer, cleaner, greener. The awards were made in October and the neighbourhood enhancements are in the process of being delivered.

g. New properties, new choices

In spite of the collapse of the housing market, Whitefriars has continued to be able to deliver new homes for the people of Coventry. Whitefriars has provided 24 new homes so far this year. Six of these were new built homes and eighteen were homes

purchased by Whitefriars. In addition, Whitefriars is in the process of buying back some properties where the residents are unable to keep up their mortgage payments. This will enable those families to remain in their home and convert to social renting. The Board has agreed for Whitefriars to join in the government's "mortgage rescue" scheme.

In addition to providing more homes, Whitefriars now offers a larger range of tenure options. The vast majority of our homes are social rented but we also have other tenures, including: leasehold; shared ownership homes at 'Bannerbrook' which gives people the opportunity to get an affordable first step on the housing ladder; intermediate market rent that allows people to rent at below market rents and then to purchase the property when the mortgage improves; and full ownership. This provides residents with a choice of tenure to meet their needs.

h. Repairs and Maintenance

Repairs and maintenance continues to be a service that is important to Whitefriars' residents and one that is highly valued. Whitefriars will undertake approximately 70,000 reactive repairs during the year.

Over the last 12 months, Whitefriars has continued to deliver significant improvements to its repairs and maintenance service, building on the solid foundations of the previous years' achievements. The repairs performance and resident satisfaction continues to improve. Embedding the benefits that the new hand-held technology for HomeWorks' craft-workers provides has led to more repairs being completed right first time, better use of our resources and, where any concerns do arise, quick resolution of any problems.

The repairs appointments system gives residents a choice of appointment times, with a special appointment choice for those residents that need to be out to do the school run and text reminders 24 hours before their repairs appointment.

Whitefriars, as one of the benefits of being part of the West Mercia Group, have opened a new contact centre for dealing with residents' repairs requests. This new contact centre is providing a higher level of customer service and better diagnosing of repairs so that the right person can be sent with the right materials to enable more repairs to be completed in a single visit..

i. Whitefriars' Garden competition

Whitefriars held its traditional annual garden competition which recognised and rewarded residents for their fantastic efforts in gardening, whether they had a large garden or just a window box. The entries were, as usual, magnificent. Their efforts helps further Whitefriars' vision of creating places where people are proud to live. This year, there was also a competition especially for primary schools. Whitefriars supported 20 primary schools by giving them gardening tools, seeds and bulbs. There was a theme of growing their own fruit and vegetables. This supported the LSP Environment Theme Group's local food production initiative.

j. Independent Living

It has been another good year for the Independent Living Team (ILT) who have worked hard, especially in delivering key changes in service delivery models. The

relationship between the ILT and the Council continues to thrive and new partnership opportunities endorse the trust that has been developed between us.

However, grant funding continues to reduce with many services in the city either being decommissioned or operating on much lower grant thresholds. Whitefriars have always managed to retain good levels of grant income, but from April 2010, the grant will be substantially cut.

The ILT services include: the Chace Centre, accommodation for 200 single, homeless people; sheltered accommodation; supported housing, with Whitefriars as the landlord and the support service being provided by the Council; and floating support to people to enable them to remain in their own homes.

At the Chace Centre, the focus has changed from just providing temporary accommodation for the homeless to helping homeless people move on into independent accommodation, through the provision of training and support. Over the last twelve months, 335 new residents were received in, and 332 moved on.

The new Group structure has enabled us to utilise the expertise of our colleagues across the Group to enhance our service offer.

k. Regeneration of the Wood End, Henley Green, Manor Farm and Deedmore neighbourhoods

In spite of the extraordinary housing market conditions over the past year, the 12-15 year redevelopment scheme for Wood End, Henley Green, Manor Farm and Deedmore will be starting on site by the end of May 2010, working to make these neighbourhoods places where people are proud to live. The outline planning application for up to 3,328 homes has been approved by the Planning Authority as well as a Design Code. The first tranche of development will deliver 154 new homes, including 39 for rent by Whitefriars. This first planning application is due to be determined in December 2009 and the second application for a further 468 homes (168 for Whitefriars rent) was submitted on 10th December.

Delivery of the first 154 homes is supported by a funding package of more than £10m from the Homes and Communities Agency (HCA); for planning, infrastructure, affordable housing and a guaranteed purchase scheme. HCA is also making contributions to a new Broad Spectrum school in Wood End and £1.6m to provide combined heat and power to the homes. The Regional Development Agency, Coventry City Council and Coventry NDC are also paying for reserved matters work. The scheme is also providing for new informal play areas, enhancements to open space and homes that comply with high quality space and design standards for both affordable and private homes. Finally, it will deliver an employment and training strategy to provide opportunities for local people and a long-term stewardship strategy focused upon community ownership and effective local service delivery.

5 Whitefriars' Future

- 5.1 The merger has helped Whitefriars further reduce its costs and improve its services. As the new Group “beds down” further efficiencies and service developments will result, delivering benefits, including increased choice for residents.

6 Benefits to the City Council of the Appointments

6.1 Coventry City Council gains a clear understanding of the social housing environment and social housing provision in Coventry. Nominations of the Council on the Board and Committees of Whitefriars aid communication and the essential synergy between both organisations. Whitefriars houses almost 1 in 5 of Coventry's population and their residents are often amongst the most deprived in the community. The Council appointees on Whitefriars Board help ensure that tenants receive high quality, value for money homes and services.

6.2 I have the following comments to add:

- a) I am constantly struck by the ongoing need for high-quality affordable housing in Coventry.
- b) I recognise the great need for close and efficient working relationships between Whitefriars and relevant Council staff.
- c) **I hope that the Homefinder list can be regularised soonest.** I realise that much detailed work is involved, but am concerned that at present published figures of people waiting are much greater than reality. This is, I believe, a technical quirk, but one which could give residents a misleading picture.
- d) I am greatly impressed with the work of Mr Peter Lacy, Mr Richard Monk and other Members of the Board. They care, and I am proud to be associated with them.

7 Attendance Record and Remuneration

7.1 Attendance Record

During the period December 2008 and November 2009, there were seven meetings of the Board of Directors of Whitefriars Housing Group. Out of the seven possible meetings, the attendance was: Mr Peter Lacy, seven; Councillor David Skinner, six; Councillor Kevin Maton, six; and Councillor David Smith three. Councillor Allan Andrews, being appointed after the January meeting, attended three out of a possible six. Councillor Altaf Adalat attended no meetings.

Councillor Roger Bailey's first meeting is scheduled to be on 17 December 2009.

7.2 Remuneration

Only the Chairs of Whitefriars and the Chairs of their Committees are remunerated. This only applies to Mr P Lacy. His re-numeration is £10,000 per annum.

List of background papers

Author:

Cllr David Skinner

(Any enquiries should be directed to the above)

Telephone 024 7683 3156

Other contributors:

Richard Monk, Whitefriars Housing Group

Stephen Rudge, Housing Policy and Services, Community Services Directorate

Papers open to Public Inspection

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Schedule of City Council Appointments to Outside Bodies