



BRIEFING NOTE FROM FAY SHANAHAN, CORPORATE DIRECTOR OF OPERATIONS, whg

WALSALL COUNCIL'S CORPORATE & PUBLIC SERVICES SCRUTINY COMMITTEE

22 FEBRUARY 2018

Engagement between the Council and your organisation

- Established as a stock transfer from Walsall Council in 2003
- Group Chief Executive attends Borough Management Team
- Corporate Director of Operations attends Strategic Partnership Group & Homeless Steering Group
- Key partner with Walsall Council and Accord Housing in the design of a new homeless support and accommodation service.
- Have a single point of contact for all Councillor enquiries ensuring our prompt attention and clear escalation route if difficulties are not dealt with.
- Close and regular partnership working with Walsall Council on many issues including:
 - meeting local housing needs
 - safeguarding vulnerable customers
 - reducing homelessness and rough sleeping
 - rolling out Universal Credit and other welfare benefit changes
 - tackling crime and anti-social behaviour
 - providing employment & skills training
 - promoting community and cultural cohesion and integration
 - reducing waste and fly tipping
 - Health & wellbeing initiatives
 - Young person's support & accommodation service

Impact on benefit cuts, current government policy and any barriers facing your organisation

Impact of current government policy:

Government policy has in last few years created a number of challenges, but most recently, national policy has been more positive for us as an organisation. This includes;

- Increased investment in new affordable homes, especially for rent or shared ownership (a decreased focus on just home ownership)
- Clarity on the rent settlement from 2020 onwards – this was really positive and very welcome news. This will undoubtedly help us and our neighbouring housing organisations to invest in new housing provision in our local communities.
- Removal of the threat of Local Housing Allowance from social housing including supported housing; this was a key risk and would have put our

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accommodation out of reach for some low income households (e.g. young people under 35).

- Following the tragic Grenfell fire there is an increased focus on customer safety and redress. We took part in one of Alok Sharma MP 'listening' meetings. These were specific meetings held across the country with social housing tenants in order to understand the key issues affecting tenants in social housing.
- In response to Grenfell;
 - None of our high rise blocks have cladding on them.
 - We have been working closely with West Midlands Fire Service (WMFS) and attend the Social Housing and Local Authority partnership group meetings hosted by the WMFS.
 - We are currently fitting HIPs (High Rise Information Plates) to each high rise block. This is an information plate that will be used by the WMFS in the event of attending a fire incident at any of whg's high rise blocks. The plate contains symbols highlighting staircase locations, hydrants, number of floors, number of flats etc. Designs have been agreed and a programme of works has now commenced.
 - We have been auditing the fire safety of buildings and implementing a number of changes to improve detection and alarm, undertaking additional visual checks and testing to smoke and fire alarms.
- The 4 year rent cut continues, so the focus continues to be on delivering further efficiencies. We have however received recent benchmarking data from both our regulator, the Social Housing Regulator (formally the HCA), and the benchmarking organisation HouseMark, that compared us to other housing organisations. We are pleased to report that we have achieved upper quartile performance in terms of efficiency.

Impact of benefit cuts:

- Universal Credit and welfare benefit cuts are hitting our customers hard as around 60% receive support with their housing costs.
- Many customers are financially excluded or are on low / inconsistent wages so struggle to pay their rent and other charges.
- We are grateful for the support and close working relationship that we have with Walsall Council's Housing Benefit Team, whose support through the use of Discretionary Housing Benefit has helped sustain tenancies and keep people in their homes.
- We have responded to the challenge of welfare reform and universal credit through the provision of a successful and dedicated in-house money advice team. This team have helped 1819 people and have raised £5,281,586 in extra income for our customers since April 2017.

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- We also have our own in-house tenancy support team. The team support vulnerable customers who are struggling to maintain their tenancy.
- A core part of our welfare reform strategy was to reduce the level of rent arrears. We have successfully reduced our rent arrears from 2.03% in Jan 2017 to 1.55% Jan 2018.
- Our rent arrears performance has not been achieved as a result of evicting households; we have reduced the number evictions for rent arrears (in 2014/15 we evicted 66 households due to rent arrears, by 2016/17 this had reduced to 43, a 35% reduction). This is a genuine example of where we have been able to sustain tenancies.
- Our income collection service was recently awarded the Rental Income Excellence Network (RIEN) Accreditation. In their report RIEN highlighted a number of areas of best practice that they had found and they complimented us on our approach to dealing with welfare reform.
- Recognising that Universal Credit is an online benefit, we are committed to helping support our customers make the move to become more digital. We are leading a National Lottery and EU funded project Click Start. This is a £3.8m project across the Black Country that aims to ensure 3000 residents will have the basic skills and ability to manage and save money utilising digital tools and information.

Barriers facing our organisation:

- Uncertainty over the funding for supported accommodation. The government launched a new consultation exercise concerning the future funding of supported housing, both long-term funding for older person's accommodation (sheltered and extra care), as well as short-term supported accommodation (e.g. domestic violence refuges / homeless temporary accommodation). We are committed to providing good quality older person's wellbeing schemes to meet the growing demand and have contributed to the consultation. We have received positive feedback regarding the government's current thinking and are hopeful for a positive outcome to this consultation.
- Austerity continues to impact heavily on our partners, such as Walsall Council, Police and other key services. We are however working closely with partners to explore new ways of working that may help all of us manage our resources more effectively.
- The impact of Brexit is unknown, but we are anticipating a possible negative effect on the economy, jobs and inflation, all of which will impact on our customers and communities.
- Land and planning delays – new developments are being delayed, to the detriment of everyone; our local communities who need housing, ourselves as

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a result of the loss in income and Walsall Council due to a delay in new council tax income being received.

How your organisation is serving Walsall residents

- Providing over 20,000 homes (all tenure types, social /affordable rent, market rent, wellbeing schemes, shared ownership and rent to buy).
- Building new homes; in the last 2 years we have built 329 new homes across Walsall, this represents an investment of £37.5 million locally.
 - Shelter shows that £3.51 of value is generated for the local economy for every £1 we spend on development. Our investment therefore would have generated £132 million for the local economy.
- We had the privilege of showing Alok Sharma MP our newest development at Gosgate and discussed with him the importance of regeneration projects like this for local communities and the economy.
- Ensuring the safety of our customers and communities, including deploying CCTV overtly to provide assurance and covertly to support crime reduction.
 - HouseMark benchmarking data shows that we have achieved Upper Quartile customer satisfaction for our anti-social behaviour services provided by our Community Safety Team.
- Providing a range of services to support our customers in Walsall to sustain their tenancies – including money and welfare benefits advice and helping people get training or into employment (in 2016/17 we helped 179 customers get a job).
- Supporting communities – grounds maintenance, removing waste, funding events and initiatives through our VIEW Board and providing community rooms.
- Generating social value – estimated at £26.2m in 2016/17.
- Improving the health and wellbeing of our communities;
 - including a weight management programme, family nutrition and exercise programmes, pop up health sessions, walking sports for over 50's, falls prevention and community gardens
 - providing an Independent Living Team/Wellbeing Service that works with customers to remain / regain independent and sustain their tenancy.

Homelessness

We are working closely with Walsall Council and Accord Housing on a new initiative aimed at helping rough sleepers in Walsall to find more settled accommodation.

Walsall Council set up a new night shelter in December that will remain open until the end of February 2018, providing rough sleepers with somewhere safe and warm to sleep during the coldest months of the year.

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Our new homeless support service aims to start when the night shelter closes. The service will provide intensive housing support, coupled with move-on accommodation, to former homeless households. Walsall Council is funding the support service, with ourselves, for a period of 12 months.

We recognise that rough sleepers often have complex and difficult needs with each individual requiring a tailored response; moving straight into independent accommodation might not be the right approach. We are therefore designing the new support service so that it is aimed at those most ready for independent accommodation with support.

Future plans for your organisation

Our future plans are set out within the whg Corporate Plan 2017-2024 and include:

- Deliver high quality homes and services to our customers
- Grow and expand our services, our reach and our range
- Promote health and prosperity where we can make a difference

To deliver the above there is going to be a new drive towards providing our customers with more digital self-service opportunities.

Deliver these strategic aims will involving us:

- Being well run and financially viable
- Being a regional housing provider
- Building around 600 new homes each year to cater for a range of housing needs within and beyond Walsall, including wellbeing schemes in Goscote and Brownhills
- High performance, low costs and efficiently run, including generating income from commercial activity to help fund our social purpose
- Focus on sustaining tenancies and building customer resilience

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