

# Interim Report on the Panel's Scrutiny of the Housing Transfer and Social Housing in Tameside

(A further report will follow on other aspects of housing in Tameside)

## 1. Introduction and Terms of Reference

- (a) Following the large scale transfer of the Council's housing stock to the New Charter Housing Company, the Members of the Panel decided to give consideration to the transfer, the performance New Charter Housing and social housing in general in Tameside.
- (b) The Terms of Reference for the Scrutiny Exercise are as follows:
  - 1. "To compare the provision of housing services by new the New Charter Housing Company to its tenants with the terms of the agreed transfer of properties from the Council to the company and identify any areas of the agreement limiting New Charter.
  - 2. To review the services provided by the Council to the Company and to ensure that these services maximise the Council's support to the Company's operation.
  - 3. As part of this investigation, the Panel will want to consider the length of time taken to process housing applications, undertake repairs and implement planned maintenance programmes.
  - 4. The Panel will want to consider whether both the company and the Council are meeting their responsibilities in accordance with the transfer agreements.
  - 5. In addition to consider the housing provision made by all social housing providers in Tameside to ascertain their effectiveness and whether Tameside MBC can improve its support.
  - 6. In order to carry out this scrutiny exercise the Panel will want to meet with the Chief Executive and Directors of the New Charter Housing Company and other social housing providers, representatives of Tenants Associations and tenants themselves. Officers of the Council responsible for the New Charter and Ashton Pioneer Homes transfer agreements.
  - 7. Councillors tenants and staff will be invited to submit observations which will be considered by the Panel."

## 2. Method of Review

- (a) During this part of the scrutiny investigation, the Panel met with Mrs L Kenyon (Conveyancing Manager) and Mr H Davis, Head of Housing and Regeneration.
- (b) Members also interviewed the following representatives of social housing providers In Tameside:-

Mr T Pinder, Chief Executive, Ashton Pioneer Homes Housing Association, M S Jennings, Managing Director and Mr L Woods, Regional Manager, Manchester and District Housing Association; Ms J Appleton, Regional Manager, West Pennine Housing Association; Mr S Parker, Regional Manager, Bradford and Northern Housing Association; Mr M Creamer, Chief Executive Portico Housing Association and Mr I Munro, Chief Executive New Charter Housing Group.

### 3. Information received from Council officers

- (a) The Head of Housing and Regeneration undertook the strategic monitoring of housing provision. He also encouraged housing providers to make good quality provision, ensuring that people were properly housed. To help achieve this, he or his staff met every two weeks with officers from New Charter Housing.
- (b) The Panel was informed of the regeneration initiatives in Tameside together with the regeneration of East Manchester and some of the implications that this would have on this Borough.
- (c) Under the New Charter transfer agreement, some services were specifically contracted to the company, such as the housing register and homelessness. There were three particular areas in the transfer agreement namely nomination rights, agency agreements and the delivery of pledges.
- (d) In November 2000, the time taken to determine homelessness applications was 14.35 days compared with the pre transfer time of 25 days and the national best value target of 33 days. There were 7,700 people on the housing waiting list and 577 people were housed by New Charter Housing during the period April to November 2000.
- (e) Where ever possible applicants were matched to properties and their geographical preference was taken into consideration. Of the people housed by New Charter, 369 had accepted the first offer, 112 had accepted the second offer and 57 had accepted the third offer. The company had also undertaken 35,000 catch up repairs since the transfer had taken place.
- (f) The Housing Corporation monitored the performance of housing associations and social housing companies, publishing annual performance on both a regional and national basis.
- (g) There had been an increase in the number of private landlords and the authority tried hard to maintain good relations with this sector of the housing market. His service was also working to achieve a joint housing register which would enable applications to be processed more quickly, together with proper monitoring of this sector of housing provision.
- (h) The Conveyancing Manager outlined some of the terms of the transfer agreement with New Charter Housing and members noted the nature of the transfer of land and the claw back arrangements relating to the sale of property.
- (i) New Charter Housing Group was now completely separate and independent form the Council and was separately managed by its own directors and management team. The Council's role was no longer as a provider of housing services but as a facilitator for all housing providers.
- (j) It was noted that although all Members of the Council had been invited by the Chair to make any comments, in writing to the Panel, on any matter relating to New Charter Housing Group, or any other registered social landlord, no such comments had been received.

## 4. Information received from social housing providers

- (a) The Council has statutory functions regarding homelessness and the maintenance of the housing register. These were contracted to New Charter when the company was formed. Other social housing providers understood why this had been done and appreciated the expertise that had been accumulated by New Charter. It was felt that it would be difficult to prove that the Council was obtaining best value without seeking open competition for this service.
- (b) New Charter had also been invited to become a partner in the Crime and Disorder Reduction Programme and were the first RSLs to sign up to an information exchange protocol to enable them to participate fully in crime and reduction activity. All RSLs that were members of the RSLs Forum were included in the partnership by virtue of their membership. The attitude of all social housing providers had altered and had adopted a culture of sharing information and co-operating closely with the police.
- (c) Housing Benefits made up a large part of most landlords' income and were paid weekly in arrears to New Charter but four weekly in arrears to the other landlords. The cash flow differential was felt to be unfair and that all social housing providers should be treated equally. The payment of benefits was better administered in Tameside than in most areas. The four week payment delay, however, led to problems identifying potential tenant arrears and increased the problems for both the tenant and the landlord in resolving payment issues. The faster payment of benefits would lead to less evictions and consequent homelessness.
- (d) The registered social landlords interviewed all felt that greater emphasis should be placed upon the regulation of private landlords. It was felt that the majority of private landlords acted responsibly, but this could be spoilt by those that did not. Unified standards and controls were seen as a pre requisite to the operation of a one stop shop approach to property.
- (e) Housing Associations were subject to increased financial constraints and therefore were becoming more competitive at the expense of co-operation. This was emphasised by the number of vacant properties in the North West and the need to let them. This placed pressure on landlords to be both more customer orientated and ensure that they had good market intelligence.
- (f) Social landlords' experiences of the volatility of the rented housing sector varied considerably. Although most landlords found no real problem in letting properties, one association did experience problems in some parts of the Borough. A number of reasons were given for this:-
  1. Old terraced properties were seen as stepping stone to more modern properties.
  2. In the 1950s and 60s tenanted properties were seen as a home for life and turnover was almost negligible. This situation had gradually changed until now the turnover is well over 10% per annum.
  3. There was a negative culture towards social housing, which whilst not justified, did pervade the market.
  4. Tenants now generally expected much higher standards in their properties.
  5. In a number of areas supply matched or exceeded demand and tenants could now exercise greater choice.

6. Tenants were more conscious about their surroundings which could create small areas of less desirable properties, in effect post code blight.
- (g) No single agency had all the answers to social housing and it was therefore important to work in partnership. This would require a number of changes to the way the Council, landlords and other agencies operated to include the following:
1. The sharing of information - an easy way to empty rented properties was to house a problem family between them.
  2. To work to a common register of all rented properties. This was the best service for a potential tenant to identify most suitable property from a central access point such as a one stop shop. This should be accompanied by a single application form for all landlords.
  3. The need to give greater positive information and publicity to social housing.
  4. To pool data in order that pre-emptive action can be taken if an area declines or becomes static.
  5. Regular tenant surveys would enable landlords to determine a pattern of customer based issues.
- (h) Competition would not necessarily lead to the best service. The Council through tenants forums should take a leading role in ensuring that there was an over arching plan to meet tenants' needs. The bidding process had not always been conducive to tenants' needs and lead to fragmented stock holding and increased costs. In the past there had been too much emphasis on lowest cost tendering where as now this should relate to best value.
- (i) There was a 14% increase in the number of people presenting themselves as homeless and requiring rehousing. The main causes were family breakdown and mortgage arrears. It was felt that more should be done to support people in their own homes and that better property should be made available to provide temporary accommodation and reduce the reliance on bed and breakfast. In Tameside temporary and bed and breakfast accommodation was seen as an unsatisfactory option and alternatives should be considered.
- (j) Some managers felt that there were long standing tenants who had been undertaking some landlords' responsibilities who should be recognised and offered what was termed as a Gold Standard. This could include cheaper rents, preferential treatment and group insurance. It was felt that the Council might facilitate this.
- (k) It was suggested that the Human Rights Act could have an effect on the way that introductory tenancies and the ability of landlords to use references in determining tenancies. Most social landlords required two references, but Shelter was apparently challenging this. Courts had not always been supportive of such schemes and landlords still had problems in evicting bad tenants. It was suggested that the Council could sponsor a presentation to local magistrates on the consequences of court decisions.
- (l) Nomination could soon be a thing of the past as landlords were seeking tenants in some parts of the Borough. The local authority would, however, still have responsibilities for some groups of people.
- (m) With the change in career patterns, with people being more mobile and perhaps having two or three careers, it was felt that alternative and perhaps furnished accommodation could be

provided.

- (n) Increasingly sheltered housing was less being used by the people for whom it was intended. This was mainly due to elderly people remaining in their own properties and receiving support. This did have an affect on the supply of three to four bedroom properties in more desirable areas.
- (o) Tenants still preferred to deal with local contact points and some associations employed caretakers on site who had responsibility to undertake minor repairs. Central call centres were often seen by tenants as too remote and often cumbersome and slow. Whilst initially increasing costs, local provision was seen in the long term as more efficient and effective.
- (p) There was a need to market available property rather than produce waiting lists and to match properties to demand.
- (q) The role of the Housing Corporation was seen to be critical to the provision of social housing. Although the Housing Corporation was considered to be bureaucratic, it was felt increasingly to be led by performance measurement ideals, which was a positive improvement. The best of the social housing providers already matched the concept of Best Value and it was felt that as performance indicators became more systematic, those associations that performed less well would be identified, which would lead to improved standards.
- (r) Some providers expressed their concern that bidding for property in the past had left them with small clusters of housing units that were proving expensive and more difficult to manage.
- (s) The registered social landlords interviewed by the Panel considered the Tameside Planning Service to be one of the most proactive and helpful in the area. The Service understood the preferences of tenants, not necessarily requiring large gardens or several parking places. There was also more sympathy for hard landscaping and the provision of secure areas. One landlord felt that the Engineering Service could be more sympathetic towards the needs of pedestrians rather than vehicular traffic.

## 5. Recommendations

- (a) That the Council in conjunction with all landlords implement as soon as possible, a single register of available housing in the Borough for all registered social landlords, as part of its one point of contact, Customer First approach service to the people of Tameside.
- (b) That a single, straight forward means of application be implemented for all rented residential property in the Borough irrespective of the provider and that such means of application be widely available at customer service points throughout Tameside.
- (c) That the Council explore with landlords innovative ways to use new technology to link and enhance information to prospective tenants and existing tenants.
- (d) That all registered social landlords should co-operate fully with each other, the Council and the police regard to the provision of information about prospective and existing tenants.
- (e) That all registered social landlords operating in the Borough be encouraged to sign the crime reduction protocol to enable them to have the same access to information and resources received by the New Charter Housing Group.
- (f) That registered social landlords take a proactive position when dealing with disruptive and

anti-social tenants in order to prevent the social blighting of areas; and to ease as quickly as possible, the trauma and distressed experienced by neighbouring residents.

- (g) That the Council sponsor a presentation to the local magistrates association, to bring their attention to the problems caused by anti social tenants.
- (h) That the Borough Treasurer review the payment of housing benefit to all registered social landlords to move towards a common standard of payment.
- (i) That in accordance with the principles of Best Value, greater competition be applied when the contract for the statutory functions relating to homelessness, etc., when it is due to be renewed.
- (j) That the Council undertake market surveys to identify housing needs and trend, which will help identify areas of changing demand and to support strategies which will regenerate areas.
- (k) That the Planning Service endeavour to be even more responsive to the requirements of social housing by recognising that requirements with regard to the provision of parking places and gardens may be different to private housing developments.