



COUNCIL, 23 APRIL 2009 APPENDIX 2

## **Tenant Issues and Responses in the SCDC Stock Ballot Project**

### **PS Consultants – Independent Tenant Adviser**

#### **1. Introduction**

The main ITA tasks during the course of the project have been;

- **Attendance at both ITA and Council Drop-in meetings**
- **Support and advice for tenant representatives on the original Housing Futures Group and other bodies**
- **The operation of a Freephone Service**
- **The provision of advice and information to all tenants and leaseholders via the drop-ins and Freephone, newsletters, letters to the press, radio interviews, responses to e-mails, and staff briefings**
- **Attendance both at project liaison meetings, and at the SCVH Shadow Board Meetings**

Summarised below are the main points for each of these tasks. Given that we have previously reported to Council on many of them over the course of the stock transfer proposal (i.e. since September 2007) this report covers mainly work in this calendar year (January 2009 to the present date).

#### **2. Drop-ins and Exhibitions**

There have been two strands this year;

- **The Council mobile exhibition and road show**

We were present at around 40% of these across the district during February. They generally went well and the trailer showing model kitchen and bathrooms was popular. Attendances (as with our own drop-ins described below) could be as high as 30 per session for morning sessions linked to an event (e.g. a coffee morning) but very low numbers (two to three people) at evening events.

### **Issues**

Given that the mobile exhibition showed examples of kitchen and bathroom improvements, and of new doors, most questions were about the nature of an improvement programme should transfer go ahead e.g. scope; programming; whether improvements would be forced on tenants where they did not want them; etc. But in most cases the discussions also expanded to cover questions about future rents, tenant rights, allocations and lettings, and the possibilities for building new social housing for rent.

- **ITA drop-ins**

The latest series of 10 drop-ins were held earlier in March 2009. With attendance at sheltered housing scheme coffee mornings, and the Council's road shows described above, this last series of ITA drop-ins means that we have done 105 such sessions across the district since we began in September 2007.

The purpose of this latest series of drop-ins was mainly to give people the opportunity to ask questions about the content of the Offer Document.

As with previous drop-ins, and the Council's own events, attendance was good for the morning sessions (15-20 per session on average and one with over 30 people) much quieter in the afternoon session (6 or 7 people on average) and very poor in the evenings (one person only turned up in Balsham).

So although individual events don't have high attendances we estimate that the 105 events we have been present at since September 2007 has enabled to meet face-to-face around 1200 tenants and leaseholders (even allowing for seeing some people more than once)

The three main issues that tenants asked us about in the March sessions were;

### **Rents (and benefits)**

## **The future of sheltered housing services**

### **What is South Cambridgeshire Village Homes and can its independence be maintained long term?**

In line with similar responses in stock transfers elsewhere shared equity leaseholders tend to be significantly over-represented in such drop-ins compared to their numbers in the stock as a whole, whereas tenants in general needs are under-represented.

We have planned a final series of drop-ins for April 2009 to pick up any last issues people want to discuss with us and to stress the importance of using their vote if and when a ballot is initiated

### **3. Support and Advice for Tenant Representatives**

The formal training for active tenants was done in the earlier phases of work . These included sessions on;

- **Tenancies and Tenancy Rights**
- **Valuation and Business Planning**
- **The basics of stock transfer**
- **Housing Association Governance and Regulation**
- **Leaseholder Issues**
- **Stock Condition and Investment**

We also did a session in late 2008 for TPG on the Community Gateway model

### **4. The Freephone Service**

Our phone logs show that we have had an average of 5 calls per week from South Cambridgeshire since September 2007. A proportion of these are not about the transfer issues at all (e.g. people think we are the Council and want to order a repair). And some messages left on the answerphone leave either an incomplete address or phone number or a wrong phone number – in which case we can't follow up the call. But even allowing for those calls we have dealt with approximately 310 calls since we began – with around 75 calls since January 1<sup>st</sup> 2009.

Freephone calls tend to cover more than one topic - callers will often raise three or four things they have questions about. The most asked questions are about;

#### **Rents and Benefits**

## **Right to Buy**

**The nature of housing associations (and their ability to borrow in a financials crisis – much asked since autumn 2008)**

**Leaseholder / equity share issues (since the Offer Document went out around one third of calls have been from equity sharers)**

Approximately 20% of all calls have been prompted by the caller receiving a leaflet arguing against transfer or reading a letter in one of the local Newspapers. We estimate that 10-15% of people who call us have also called the Council Freephone line – so there is an element of some tenants and leaseholders comparing one source of information with another.

There has not been a clear geographical pattern to the calls. That is; that they broadly reflect the distribution of council housing across South Cambridgeshire.

## **5. General Advice and Information**

We deliver this in a number of other ways too;

### **Newsletters**

We have published 7 of these since the Housing Futures process started, the latest one being in February 2009. We have a final one to publish in April 2009 – assuming a ballot at some time early thereafter.

### **Letters to newspapers and Radio-Spots**

We have had 6 letters published in the CEN responding to issues being raised about the transfer in the letters page, and one in 'Royston Crow'

I have also been asked, on two occasions, to answer question about transfer related issues on Radio Cambridge – which I have done.

## **6. Attendance at Project Liaison Meetings and SCVH Shadow Board Meetings**

As ITA we are part of the project liaison structure, with other consultants. I also attend the Shadow Board meetings as an adviser from time to time.

## **7. General Conclusions**

- **How many people have we reached?**

This is always very difficult to answer unless research has been directly commissioned on the impact of communication material. A crude measure would be to add together the number of people we have met at our, and the

Council's, drop-ins to those contacting us by Freephone – a total of around 1,500 people. But in addition many others will have at least seen a copy of one or more of the newsletters, read our letters to the press, or heard something of the discussion on the local radio.

We haven't done specific research here to assess how many people actually read any or all of our newsletters (and common sense suggests a proportion do indeed go straight into the dustbin along with much other material people get through their letter box). But in other projects elsewhere (mainly in master-planning projects) we have done follow-up research which indicates that between 20%-30% of recipients have some knowledge of our newsletters and the key messages they contain.

And, clearly, many people do rely heavily on local newspapers for their information on local matters.

We don't think it is unreasonable, therefore, to assume that between at least 3,000 and 3,500 people will have come across some material from the ITA (or 50% - 60% of tenanted / leaseholder households). Given that that average turnout in such ballots is in the 65-70% region, our view is that we have reached a high proportion of those who will take the trouble to vote in a ballot.

- **Issues and Responses**

The specific issues and questions that have come up have been summarised above. What we have also seen in the last 18 months is how perceptions of the stock transfer proposal itself have changed over that period.

In the initial phase (Sep – December 2007) the reaction of most tenants was either puzzlement or irritation that the Council was, in their eyes, once again asking tenants to consider transfer (the fact that there has never actually been a stock transfer ballot here notwithstanding).

That has gradually changed. Certainly there are grumbles about the cost of the process and the length of time it has taken. But, in our view, there is now an acceptance that the issue needs to be resolved and that a ballot is the best way to do it. This change of attitude is, we believe, largely due to growing recognition by tenants of the impact on council housing finances in South Cambridgeshire of the government's subsidy system, and its very negative impact here.

So throughout 2008, and into 2009, there has been a growing debate (both for and against) around the details of the transfer proposal itself as they have emerged), and away from the view that the question should not be put at all.

Since autumn 2008 the debate has taken a further twist, in that much of what we are being asked about now reflects public understanding of the impact of the credit crunch and the current recession. So people are asking us about,

for example, the likely impact of the credit crunch on the ability of SCVH to borrow to deliver its Offer Document commitments.

This suggests a much more mature debate than was true 18 months ago.

Our general conclusion is that SCDC tenants are now at the point where they are able to make an informed choice, both for and against, the transfer proposal

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**April 2009**