

NON CORE ACTIVITY REVIEW – TENANTS RESOURCE CENTRE

Report of the Chief Executive

1. SUMMARY

This report reviews the future of the Tenants Resource Centre, currently based on the ground floor at St Peter's House Derby. This is the base for the Derby Association of Community Partners (DACP), the tenants federation for Council tenants, who are a separate company funded by the Council through Derby Homes' fee.

2. RECOMMENDATION

To agree that:

- the Tenant Resource Centre is retained, but moved to London Road before July 2012, and that notice is served to terminate the lease at St. Peter's House from July 2012
- A new Service Level Agreement (SLA) is agreed between Derby Homes and the DACP that includes a plan for future succession.

3. MATTER FOR CONSIDERATION

3.1 Derby Homes has to cut its Housing Management costs by £1.2m a year and reduce staff by about 40 by 2015. The Executive Team has identified a list of 'add-on services' that could be reviewed to see if they are:

- cost effective
- have opportunities or potential to help us achieve the £1.2m saving
- value for money from the point of view of customer and/or the organisation.

3.2 The scope of this report is to explore these issues with relation to the Tenants Resource Centre in St. Peter's House, Derby.

What is the Tenants Resource Centre?

3.3 The DACP was formed in 1994, and arose out of the 30+ Community Panels set up at that time as a systematic way of gaining feedback from tenants on the Housing Service. Tenants from the different Community Panels attended training sessions and found a common set of issues and decided to come together as an independent body to represent all tenants.

- 3.4 Independence also led the DACP to become a Company, and seek a base that was separate from the Council. The DACP was invited to have a room in the Council House, but they refused and sought funding from the Council to rent an office. The first in Queen's Street, Derby was on the edge of the City centre and had 39 steps to access. This was replaced by a suite of offices in Boden House in the Main Shopping Centre with lift access, and then by offices in St.Peter's House, with the current offices on the ground floor.
- 3.5 The St Peter's House offices include:
- a reception to provide advice and access to internet linked computers
 - an office for five Derby Homes staff, who service the reception area, lead on resident involvement and run the in-house Anti Social Behaviour (ASB) Mediation Service
 - an office for five volunteers who are Officers of the DACP
 - a meeting room big enough to cope with open meetings that could include 20-30 tenants.
- 3.6 The aim of the Tenants Resource Centre is to be a base for tenants to:
- use to gain information on housing issues
 - meet other tenants and exchange views
 - access training on housing issues
 - enhance skills such as IT
 - hold meetings of the DACP Management Committee and open consultation meetings
 - make training room available to others.
- 3.7 The public reception is open each day 10.00 am – 2.00 pm. However attendance is very low from tenants other than the DACP Officers. Staff and volunteers assess this at about six a day, with 3-5 regulars who call in most weeks, some of whom are not tenants and who use the I.T.
- 3.8 The main importance of the Centre is a base for the Tenant Involvement staff of Derby Homes and the Officers of the DACP to work together on tenant involvement initiatives and consultation with other staff to improve the service provided to tenants and leaseholders. This has led to:
- A joint approach to Housing Focus Groups promoted by both and attended by staff and the DACP Officers
 - Support for specialist groups such as SHOUT, WINC and the Leaseholder group
 - A range of specific consultation processes, such as the recent one on rent holiday weeks
 - Joint initiatives to seek external funding for projects that could enhance services to tenants
 - New initiatives such as tenants scrutiny, working on voids inspections, and numerous other improvements to the service
 - Well attended open meetings, for example the January one that considers the rent increase and HRA budgets.

3.9 However difficulties have arisen:

- The location is in the city centre but is slightly off the main streets of Derby, and not prominent enough to be a 'drop in centre'
- I.T. facilities are through the Council network and its firewall restricts the use for members of the public, such as accessing Hotmail. Resident Involvement staff spend a disproportionate amount of time helping non tenants to access I.T. systems
- Despite several initiatives no other housing organisation has agreed to share the use and contribute to the cost of the Tenant Resource Centre
- The building is not the best, with shared toilets and sometimes a mix of users that may put off tenants from returning
- The DACP core of Officers recognise that they need to develop successors and reach out to new tenants to take forward the DACP in the future, and this has not been easy.

What do other ALMOs and RSLs do?

3.10 A number of other models of Tenants Resource Centres exist:

- There are a few that operate similar Resource Centres as the Derby model, for example Kirklees ALMO and Gloucester have separate centres as a base for volunteers and paid staff who support the tenants group
- Others operate Tenants Associations that are based in tenants' community rooms on estates, run by volunteers and supported by staff of the housing organisation , such as at Wolverhampton and Bolton
- Other share a Tenants Resource Centre in their main building , as at Watford Community Trust.

3.11 Whilst the majority of housing organisations have specialist resident involvement staff, most do not provide a bespoke tenants resource centre, and any tenants federation or groups use existing facilities such as local offices or spare times in community rooms for meetings.

The way forward:

3.12 The current lease at St. Peter's House expires in July 2012. There is therefore an opportunity to move out by then and hopefully save the cost of the lease. Three options appear possible:

1. Move into Cardinal Square in July and then into the Council House with Derby Homes in December 2012. The DACP could have access to a counter in the ground floor and to meeting rooms in the Council House, and a space in the third floor shared with Derby Homes staff. This has the advantage of saving costs, and being in a good City centre location. However the split between the third floor, lack of cheap car parking and the possible sense of a loss of independence are negatives.
2. Move into London Road depot where there is a vacant building well suited to their needs, and share meeting rooms with Derby Homes when necessary. This location is not City centre, but the DACP could operate a telephone advice service. London Road is well served for car parking and by buses. Repairs is by

far the most important service to tenants and the proximity with the Repairs (and the Planned Maintenance Team and the Repairs Enquiry Centre from next year) means that the DACP can continue to influence and improve this service. The location means that the DACP could operate their own internet system away from the restrictions of the Council's.

3. Do away with a Resource Centre and operate from under-used community rooms and local offices across the city. This has similar advantages to London Road, however it would disperse the volunteers across the city and lose the identity of the DACP and the strong links with the Resident Involvement team.

- 3.13 The recommendation is to adopt option 2, and to discuss further with them sharing the reception in the Council House in the future.

4. CONSULTATION IMPLICATIONS

The DACP has been consulted and they are fully supportive of option 2. They have also consulted through their open meeting with other tenants and option 2 is favoured by the majority of active tenants who link in with the DACP.

5. FINANCIAL AND BUSINESS PLAN IMPLICATIONS

- 5.1 The DACP receive a grant of £2,000 a year from Derby Homes. The cost of the Tenants Resource Centre is £38,500 per year.
- 5.2 It is not proposed to reduce the DACP grant, but by moving into London Road there will be annual savings from saving on lease costs and sharing meeting rooms and other facilities. I would estimate this saving to be approximately £15,000 a year from 2013-14 onwards.
- 5.3 There will be one off costs of alterations and fitting out the offices in London Road that are estimated at £5,000.

6. LEGAL AND CONFIDENTIALITY IMPLICATIONS

This is an opportunity to revisit the Service Level Agreement with the DACP to reflect the change of location and to require the DACP and the Resident Involvement Team to work together on a succession plan for the officers of the DACP.

7. COUNCIL IMPLICATIONS

This is not a matter which requires the approval of the Council. Negotiations are taking place on the rent cost of London Road, some of which will be borne by the new Tenants Resource Centre

8. PERSONNEL IMPLICATIONS

Consultation with trade unions and the staff will take place, however indications are that staff are in favour of moving to London Road

9. EQUALITIES IMPACT ASSESSMENT

There are implications for increasing travel for some tenants, especially from the North of the City, however the site and the offices are level and accessible.

10. HEALTH & SAFETY IMPLICATIONS

It will be necessary to carry out a health and safety assessment before members of the public are allowed to access the London Road site. Currently there is little or no such access, apart from City Board Members or other volunteers attending occasional meetings. There is a need to improve signage, pathways and lighting for such visitors.

11. RISK IMPLICATIONS

The largest risk arises from the lack of younger DACP activists, and the danger that the DACP is not sustainable beyond the very enthusiastic 3-5 current activists. It is essential that a succession strategy is implemented as a priority for the volunteers, supported by the Resident Involvement Team.

The areas listed below have no implications directly arising from this report:

Environmental
Policy Review

If Board members or others would like to discuss this report ahead of the meeting please contact the author, or Phil Davies, Chief Executive, phil.davies@derbyhomes.org – Phone: 01332 888528

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Background Information: None.

Supporting Information: None.