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Housing Transfer: Bridgend's Experience

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Introduction

Bridgend County Borough Council's housing stock of 6,800 properties includes some of the poorest condition homes in Wales. This has been evidenced by the Welsh Stock Condition Survey 1998, the in-house Stock Condition Survey of 1997 and a survey completed by independent

specialist surveyors in 2001.

This situation exists because of a historic under-investment in Council housing that has not only prevented homes being bought up to a universally acceptable standard but also hindered the ability to maintain the stock on an ongoing basis. Despite the best efforts of the Council since Local Government Reorganisation in 1996, in targeting resources and pioneering partnership regeneration schemes (which have modernised only 5% of the housing stock), the majority of its homes remain in poor overall condition.

The Council is committed to the Welsh Assembly's vision for everyone in Wales to have the opportunity to live in good quality, affordable housing. It recognised that the provision of modern homes

that are in good repair, safe, secure, adequately heated and energy efficient, as set out in the Welsh Housing Quality Standard, could not be achieved within the prevailing funding arrangements. So the Council embarked on an ambitious project to identify the most effective means to improve the housing stock.

The Housing Options Appraisal Process

In December 2000 the Council took the proactive step of agreeing to commence a Housing Options Appraisal process and a small, dedicated project team of 4 individuals was established, led by the Assistant Director Housing Services. This was an important decision and reaped benefits in as much as the team could focus solely on the project and ensure the objectives within a very challenging, yet achievable timetable could be met. The project team reported to a Project Management Board of Members, which was charged with overseeing the project on behalf of the Council.

The Council resolved to take forward the formal process of examining options for securing additional investment in its housing stock, including large-scale voluntary transfer to a registered social landlord. The complexity of issues allied to a commitment to make it an inclusive and transparent process, allowed key stakeholders to attend the Board's meetings at appropriate times. These included other Members and officers of the Council, tenant representatives, consultants and trade union representatives.

The key consultants – Lead, Stock Condition Survey experts and Independent Tenants Advisors, were identified early in the process. A 10% sample stock condition survey completed in October 2001 identified that £290m of expenditure would be required over the next 30 years to improve and maintain homes. Projections indicated that the Council would be likely to have resources of only £168m over this period, leaving a massive shortfall.

The Independent Tenant Advisor (who were selected by tenants) and the Council worked closely to establish an inclusive consultative process and positive partnership with tenants through the creation of the 'Your Choice for Bridgend Tenants and Residents Steering Group'. The Group considered this outcome and recommended to Council transferring the stock to a new registered social landlord as the preferred option for securing additional resources. At its subsequent meeting on 21st December 2001, Council agreed to pursue stock transfer as the preferred option. Tenants and Residents continued to be engaged and informed the development of the detailed transfer proposals contained within the Formal Consultation ('Offer') document.

Stakeholder Involvement and Consultation

Transfer is the most important decision that tenants will ever make about the future of their homes. The ensuing consultation was the largest exercise the Council has ever embarked on and presented a challenging process which impacted upon a range of stakeholders. Ensuring effective communication is essential to the credibility and success of the process with all stakeholders.

Tenants

The Council recognised that effective communication and partnership with its tenants was fundamental to the consultation process. Involving tenants and encouraging them to engage in deciding the future of their homes was identified as the key priority. In addition to the strong working links developed with the Steering Group, the Council produced consistent information, using straightforward and unambiguous language. Before asking them to vote in a ballot, the Council satisfied itself that tenants fully understood the benefits of a 'Yes' vote and the likely consequences of a 'No' vote. The main means of communication used were:

- **Newsletters**

A total of four newsletters were distributed to tenants, each geared to enhance understanding of the process and the facts of the transfer proposals.

- **Freephone**

A dedicated Freephone, linked directed to the project team was well used by tenants, leaseholders and local residents seeking clarification on a wide range of associated issues. The ITA also maintained a Freephone to provide specialist, independent advice.

- **Community Roadshows**

The roadshow visited 27 communities throughout the County Borough on two occasions – one early in the process which the ITA facilitated and the second shortly before ballot, which presented an opportunity for tenants and residents to meet with the members of the Shadow Board of Valleys to Coast Housing.

- **Home Visits (Door-knocking)**

This proved a very effective way of relaying the key messages to tenants. Every home was visited and overall, contact was made with 67% of the Council's tenants. The team of 20 staff engaged in this exercise was carefully selected and received specialist training, in which tenant representatives were involved. Uniquely, information collected on the doorstep for monitoring purposes, was recorded electronically using handheld computers. The home visits made a significant contribution to ensuring:

- Tenants had received the consultation information and Formal Offer Document
- They understood it
- If they had concerns, they were addressed immediately or by follow-up action

- Tenants understood they had the right to vote and the importance of using it
- Tenants were aware of the availability of free, impartial advice.
- **Information Video**

Prior to the ballot and following the Formal Offer Document, a short video (12 minutes) was delivered to every home. The video featured tenants and gave an opportunity to reinforce the key messages. Throughout the process, the Council was conscious to avoid the potential for tenants to be confused by conflicting messages. The video also proved effective in encouraging tenants to use their vote.

Staff

A key aim of the communications strategy was to engage staff from an early stage to address concerns over the future security of jobs, rights and pensions. A survey of staff early in the process revealed that 82% wished to be informed by briefings and 68% by newsletter. Many are in regular contact with tenants and the provision of a dedicated newsletter, interactive briefings and handy '*pocket guide*' contributed to staff beyond the project team 'owning' the process. Staff, together with tenant representatives valued the opportunity of visiting an RSL that had been formed following an LSVT.

Elected Members

Members were briefed and updated regularly on the consultation process and remained supportive throughout. Members adopted a pragmatic approach to the process, seeking a solution that would be in the best interests of tenants. The status quo was not considered an option and Members took the pragmatic view that it was right and proper for tenants alone to ultimately decide on the future of their homes.

Trade Unions

The Council worked closely with the unions to develop a mutual understanding and nurture a positive working relationship. This will continue post transfer with the new receiving RSL, Valleys to Coast Housing committed to develop a strong relationship, based on mutual trust.

Welsh Assembly Government

The Council developed a close and positive working relationship with Assembly officials through regular dialogue, which continues. The approval process was conducted in a very positive and responsive manner, with both the Council and Assembly working in a spirit of partnership to ensure an outcome that promotes the interests of tenants.

Consultants

The proposed transfer is one of the most significant projects ever undertaken by Bridgend County Borough Council and Members took an early decision to select key consultants to offer specialist advice and guidance. The importance of choosing experienced consultants, with the relevant expertise, knowledge and capacity to work with other stakeholders should not be underestimated. Equally, it is important to manage consultants to ensure that local objectives and priorities are achieved through the process.

Conclusion

Bridgend's approach to housing transfer has been based on establishing clear objectives and of developing meaningful partnerships in a spirit of openness, trust and mutual understanding. The key factors that enabled the main messages to be relayed to tenants stem from having a clear direction and focus, with a strong belief, based on the facts, that transfer would be in the best interests of tenants.

Strong, effective leadership at both political and officer level, a consistent message and the commitment of all stakeholders to put the interests of tenants at the heart of the agenda nurtured the process and ensured that tenants felt sufficiently engaged to make an informed, democratic choice on the future of their homes.

Ballot Result:

Total number of **YES** votes..... 3,808 (**71.5%**)

Total number of **NO** votes..... 1,517 (**28.5%**)

Overall rate of participation (turnout)..... **69.8%**

Bridgend County Borough Council

Housing Transfer Team

December 2002