

VECTIS HOUSING ASSOCIATION LIMITED

Best Value Review

'Continuous Improvement'- Achievements 2008/2009

Introduction

This report represents an overview of evidence of continuous improvement accumulated over the preceding twelve months. It builds upon the previous report of June 2008, and the substance of predecessors, to demonstrate the ongoing approach to best value.

There is evidence of improvement in various areas, not least of which is the Association's greater engagement in an agenda that goes beyond mere internal efficiencies. This is part of a strategic approach to raising its profile, and thereby securing its future, as a key player in the local housing association movement.

The report is not exhaustive, but it does focus on the most significant aspects of the business.

Achievements

1. Organisational Structure

The retirement of the Project Manager, and the departure of the previous housing assistant afforded the opportunity to establish a structure which best met the Association's strategic plans for the foreseeable future. This included a better distribution of workloads to meet the needs of a steadily expanding business.

Key features of the arrangements:

- 1.1 A new part-time post of **Housing Assistant**, primarily concerned with the allocation process. This has freed up the Housing Officer's time to focus more on rent arrears and resident engagement. There has been a satisfactory outcome so far from both perspectives. Both functions have seen enhanced efficiency and effectiveness in a relatively short time.
- 1.2 The position of **Administrative Assistant** has been re-created, with additional responsibilities for supporting the maintenance team. This has freed the resources of the two lead officers in maintenance in a number of ways, none the least of which has been the taking of telephone enquiries, the processing and following up, of works orders, together with administrative aspects of the function.
- 1.3 The net addition of one officer in the reception area has obviously increased the efficiency of this important centre. At key times of the day there is effectively a fifty per cent increase in the numbers able to take calls and deal with visitor enquiries.
- 1.4 Internal communication between teams has also improved, given the revised structure, and the personalities of those involved.

1.5 It is also important to point out the extent to which remaining staff contributed towards maintaining standards during the two month period in 2008 when there was a shortage of personnel in reception. This additionally saved on the administration budget.

2. Partnering

The Association continues to benefit from a close working relationship with its key maintenance contractors. Prices have remained competitive in exchange for a continued workflow. There are regular meetings to discuss issues and solutions. Quality is always monitored. Residents often comment favourably on the standard of work undertaken, and there have been few, if any, complaints from residents about the work or behaviour of any of the partners in this arrangement. This shows the benefits of employing local craftsmen who “know their stuff” and their customers. They are rewarded by regular and prompt payment, which itself has a positive impact on the local economy.

There continues to be a steady flow of new approved contractors, whose individual capabilities and specialities also benefit the Association’s varied work.

3. Service Reviews

Service Reviews, three of which were undertaken in this financial year, are formal periodic assessments of the policies and procedures adopted by the Association in the carrying out its various operational functions. In practice, reviews are continuous, and processes are varied if scope for improvement is identified between such appraisals. Flexibility and adaptability are two key characteristics of a smaller organisation, where chains of command are relatively short.

3.1 Procurement

This is covered in a separate comprehensive service report, which incorporates, among several other factors, how the Association involves its residents, and how it is dealing with the concepts of energy efficiency.

3.2 IT Management Systems

This is still underway, although close to completion. Funded from previously approved budgetary provision, the former IT Manager at a neighbouring association, now freelance, was commissioned to carry out a full review of existing housing management and maintenance systems, which are currently effected by a single provider, Paloma Systems.

Interviews took place with all users within the Association’s staff to identify their respective criticisms of current, and preferences for improved, techniques, after which the consultant was instructed to research the market for alternatives which best met these preferences.

The outcome narrowed down to two potential suppliers. Visits to customers of both were then arranged. By sheer coincidence, one such customer was a member of the Source Development Partnership, and the other one a member of SHAPE.

Arising from these visits, the preferred option is now being researched in more detail. Should the conclusions to these latest investigations be positive, a more comprehensive report, and recommendation for investment, will be put to the Board, via the Finance Committee’s budget review, in due course.

3.3 Website

Also upon the recommendation of the above consultant, Island Web Services were commissioned to disentangle the mechanics of the existing site, and to make it much more user friendly. This should be completed before the end of the present financial year, after which there is an undertaking to keep the site up to date.

4. Resident involvement/Survey reports

There was no significant improvement in the process of encouraging more direct involvement. Members are advised, if indeed they need to be, that this has a somewhat 'draining' effect on staff who are continuously encouraged by the regulatory authorities to try harder. That notwithstanding, and ever willing to persevere, a programme of "neighbourhood walkabouts" has been introduced. These are undertaken by the Housing Officer, in the company of either an "environment and neighbourhood officer" of the Council's Safer Communities section, or other officer of the Association. This is the subject of a separate report under Housing Management, from which it can be seen that there has been a positive response from residents.

The Administrative Assistant now monitors and records both positive and negative comments about service delivery, as they are relayed to her through general conversation, the satisfaction slips supplied via the maintenance system, or other form of contact. This supports the ethos of one to one communication which has always been considered an important aspect of the Association's relationship with its tenants. The intention is to identify patterns upon which the Association may act as a result.

Given the thrust of the new Tenant Services Authority's initial guidelines, the whole issue of resident involvement is set to become an extremely difficult one for the Association to overcome. Over ninety per cent of residents have steadfastly expressed a preference not to become involved in the general running of the Association's activities. It has hitherto been reasonable, and acceptable, to conclude that best value is obtained by at least offering such opportunities when they arise. The new regime takes this further, however. Best value will not be obtained until the residents *are* actively involved, and that is the difference between the old and the new approaches at the moment.

5. Working with strategic partner organisations

5.1 SHAPE (Smaller Housing Associations Pursuing Excellence)

This exclusive 'club' of thirteen small RSLs operating in the South region continues to serve as an important means of benchmarking, identifying and sharing ideas of best practice, and regular networking via email and quarterly meetings.

The annual PIs were prepared and compared, and its results considered by the Board. The annual staff conference, which this year focused on a theme of "sustainability", attracted over sixty staff from the membership, and was another success.

SHAPE has been recognised by both the National Housing Federation and the Housing Corporation as an example of housing associations coming together to share good practice.

Having served three years in the role, the Chief Executive (of Vectis) stood down as Chairman of SHAPE in April 2008.

5.2 Source Development Partnership (SDP)

The delivery of the successful Nettlestone scheme ('Kerry Fields') was testament to the perseverance with this arrangement. Further potential projects are in the pipeline, and the SDP remains a vital vehicle for the delivery of the Association's development strategy.

A formal Service Level Agreement between Vectis and Spectrum has been drafted and is under review, pending presentation to the board for approval.

5.3 Inter-Agency Working

The Isle of Wight **Strategic Housing Partnership** continues to meet on a quarterly basis, at which the Association is normally represented by the Chief Executive, and tenant board member, Mr. Court.

The Association continues to be represented on key strategic bodies, particularly that working to develop a model for **Choice Based Lettings (CBL)**. Such representation ensures that the Association is able to influence important strategic decisions.

The Housing Services Manager (HSM) serves in that capacity, and on a quarterly rota basis with colleagues from other local associations, to co-ordinate monthly meetings of:

the Partnership Tactical Co-ordination Group (with the Police);
the Special Needs Housing Panel (with the Housing Register Partnership); and
the Domestic Abuse/Sanctuary Joint Working Group (with the IW Council Adult Services)

The HSM also represents the Association at regular meetings of:

Housing Managers and support officers;
Multi-Agency Risk Assessment Conference (MARAC);
High Risk Offender Panel;
Housing Liaison Group;
Anti Social Behaviour (ASB) Scrutiny Panel; and

Court User Group (when constituted)

The Housing Officer represents the Association at meetings of the:

Housing Benefit Forum;
CBL Tasking Group; and
ASB Action Group

The Property Services Manager represents the Association at meetings of the Accessible Homes Group, and at meetings of development schemes with which the Association is involved through the SDP.

The Chief Executive and the Deputy Chief Executive continue to promote the continued and successful operation of that element of the **HAL** scheme which is subsidised by the Council and remains for its Housing Services section (HS) the least expensive means of tackling its very real issue of temporary general needs housing, although HS still has some difficulty in recognising this. It has set up "Find a Home", which carries unknown financial risks. HAL has minimal practical risks, but the financial outlay to the Council is known, which it regards as not as good as it not being known !

In simple terms, the difference between HAL and Find a Home is best value. HAL is managed professionally by a properly regulated housing association. The other scheme is managed randomly by individual landlords in the private sector.

Negotiations nevertheless continue to expand the number of homes within HAL, albeit under subsidy.

6. Aids and Adaptations

The direct funding for adaptations, via Housing Corporation grants, has now ceased. Efforts continue to identify alternative practical solutions to fund projects which meet the important special needs of some residents, but scope is presently limited to Local Authority funding, for which there is regrettably an extended waiting list of some years.

In an effort to achieve as much best value for residents as possible following the demise of previously available immediate subsidy, however, the Association does now expend from its own budgeted reserves any OT recommendations made in favour of residents whose homes are scheduled for modernisation in any given year.

7. Finance and Treasury Management

A second replacement to the original Finance Officer was recruited in January 2008, and has now been with the Association for a year. This appointment has proved highly satisfactory, and the Chief Executive (CE) is able to delegate day to day financial matters, and now the draft management accounts, with some confidence. This has freed up the CE's time to devote to the strategic issues for which he is responsible, so that the Board is properly informed when required to make the decisions for which it is responsible.

Under the supervision and authority of the Finance Committee, the CE continues to monitor the whole of the finance function of the Association, including financial investment, and the mortgage profile. Given the implications and likely pressures put on the development strategy by a downturn in shared ownership opportunities in the present economic climate, it is considered that the Association's consistently prudent approach to treasury management will prove to have been of fundamental benefit in the months to come.

8. Governance

The Board commissioned an independent review of its function and level of achievement in May 2008, and has implemented most of the recommendations it approved following the outcome of that assessment. One such was the formulation of a set of annual objectives for the board to focus upon. This was approved at the meeting held in June 2008, and most have been attained, whilst the remainder will have been by the end of the financial year.

9. Revised Business Plan

The board approved an updated plan in June 2008, and launched it officially at the AGM in September. Subject to enforced variations within the development strategy, and the forthcoming changes in the approach to regulation, the Plan is considered to comprise a robust set of achievable objectives and processes.

Conclusion

The issues referred to in 9 above are likely to represent the two biggest challenges to the Association's activities in the foreseeable future.

Surrounding those particular aspects of the business, however, is a wealth of operational activity to which the board can point when considering the fundamentals of continuous improvement, as this report has endeavoured to highlight. It is suggested that there is strong evidence to support the view that the Association is improvement driven, that there is no complacency, and that the approach to best value remains sound and pro-active.

There is exposure to criticism from the regulator because the outcomes are not *individually* "measured" in the way it would have this done, but that has to be set against the fundamental criteria - a proven high level of resident satisfaction, a financially sound business which is effectively and efficiently managed, and one which is properly governed.

Members are **RECOMMENDED** to note this report, and to endorse its conclusion.

P.V.Hann
Chief Executive
January 2009