

SLOUGH BOROUGH COUNCIL

REPORT TO: Neighbourhood and Community Services Scrutiny Panel **DATE:** 5th December 2011

CONTACT OFFICER: Neil Aves, Assistant Director, Housing
(For all enquiries) (01753) 875527

WARD(S): All

PART I

HOUSING FUTURES - PROVISION OF HOUSING SERVICES UPDATE REPORT

1. Purpose of Report

After almost nine months of service delivery in the new structure and 18 months after the service was brought back in house this report updates Members of the progress in developing the housing service and advises on plans for further integration with strategic housing.

2. Recommendation(s)/Proposed Action

The Panel is requested to note this update report and the progress made in designing and delivering a quality service to residents.

3. Community Strategy Priorities

The provision of good quality, inclusive and efficient housing services are fundamental to delivering the Council's community strategy priorities and as such, ongoing, meaningful consultation with staff, tenants and stakeholders is essential in the design of structures and services that will deliver services to meet identified need. Although the Housing Futures project has been formally closed down, the service remains under constant review to ensure that it delivers against the aspirations of service users and the council as service providers.

4. Other Implications

(a) Financial

There are no financial consequences inherent within this report and in accordance with the Council's medium term financial strategy all budgets and expenditure are kept under review to ensure services are efficiently delivered and that resources, both financial and operational are deployed where they are needed.

(b) Risk Management

The Housing Futures project board which oversaw the return to in-house provision of housing services was disbanded in March 2011 and since that date all outstanding or newly arising issues have been managed as part of the normal day to day management arrangements with the normal considerations given to risk management.

(c) Human Rights Act and Other Legal Implications

There are no human rights or other legal implications arising from this update report.

5. Supporting Information

Background

- 5.1 April 4th this year marked the formal launch of the new Housing Services structure, the culmination of 14 month's work prompted by the Council's decision to end the management agreement with People 1st (Slough) Ltd. and return to in-house service provision. Nine months on the service is thriving and tenants are beginning to recognise the changes which have brought them greater responsiveness and greater accountability. This report highlights just a few of the initiatives which have now been deployed to continue the drive to quality service delivery.

Update

- 5.2 **Accommodation** – The corporate review of office accommodation, recommended that the new Housing Service be located at The Centre, Farnham Road. Relocation began for the majority of staff in January when the services delivered from Airways Housing and St Martin's Place were transferred and co-located. In June they were joined by the Private Sector Housing Team and then the Housing Allocations team formally occupying Landmark Place. The co-location of all housing related services will be complete on the 25th November when the remaining Housing Needs staff leave Landmark place to join colleagues at The Centre.
- 5.3 Co-location is vitally important for the efficient and effective delivery of services during a time of reducing budgets and funding but it also provides a demonstrably better service for residents who can now expect multi-faceted problems to be resolved simply through colleagues interactions across the open plan office. Repairs, transfers, rent arrears, anti-social behaviour can now all be dealt with through one point of contact, something which was never achievable despite everyone's best efforts throughout the life of the ALMO.
- 5.4 **Customer Access** – The first point of contact for face to face dealings remains at My Council and following the corporate review of that service, six Customer Service Officers were selected to create the Housing 'hub' the first point of contact for all customer enquiries. The 'hub' is seen as an integral part of the

- services own customer service team based at The Centre and plans are at an advanced stage to arrange regular job swaps, joint training and shadowing so that colleagues are all aware of all aspects of the service. In September a joint Housing/My Council team building event was staged to welcome the CSO's from the hub to the service and to engender a team spirit and ethos to problem solving.
- 5.5 Telecoms protocols have been developed such that any overflow of housing calls received at My Council are automatically re-routed through to the Centre to maximize the chances of customers receiving immediate specialist advice rather than leaving a voicemail message or even abandoning the call. While the Housing Needs service was based at Landmark Place they provided a separate face to face and call handling service however once they are at the Centre the initial contacts will be increasingly integrated within the customer service hub, leaving professional officers to deal with the more detailed or complex cases.
- 5.6 While first time face to face contact with the Council will continue to be concentrated on My Council at Landmark Place, there is of course an ongoing need to meet customers and other professionals in pre arranged appointments. By expanding the accommodation holding within the Centre the service is now able to provide a well furnished, professional looking reception facility which is located with that of the Registrars Service. This was provided in direct response to the concerns expressed by customers and the management of the Centre which highlighted the difficulty of discussion personal issues in the open foyer environment.
- 5.7 **Consultation** - When tenants and leaseholders were originally consulted about the future delivery of housing services over 2,000 responded to the questionnaires and many took the opportunity to highlight service areas which they perceived as needing to be improved. These views were broadly supported by a number of workshops and drop in sessions held last Autumn which highlighted the key concerns to be,
- Anti Social Behaviour
 - Cleanliness and upkeep of estates
 - Access to staff – don't know who to contact/ they don't return our calls
 - Communication with leaseholders – they feel under valued and don't get good information about what they are paying for
 - Mix of tenants in supported housing – de-designation is causing problems.
- 5.8 In response to each of these points, additional front line staff resources were introduced taking the number of Neighbourhood Housing Officers from six to twelve as well as a dedicated ASB officer being recruited and seconded to the Council's Community Safety Team to ensure a joined up approach to tackling ASB issues. Two new posts were created within Leasehold Services to

address the specific issues associated with that sector and this will allow greater transparency in how services are costed and deal with concerns that some services are not actually being delivered either in the way that leaseholders want them or in certain cases, at all. The creation of smaller patches (650 homes) for the Neighbourhood Housing Officers together with their generic responsibility for anything that occurs on that patch means that tenants immediately see an improved response rate with officers being 'solution oriented' rather than in the past what appeared to be a culture of passing the buck to someone else. Tenants and leaseholders only need to remember one name and one face to receive a service from Housing rather than the confusing mire that existed previously when different officers dealt with rent accounts, lettings, repairs, ASB, supported housing and arrears.

5.9 **Recruitment** – Once the internal recruitment process was completed a number of posts remained unfilled and covered by agency staff. Since April each of the following posts has been recruited to with the full complement of staff being in post by the beginning of September. Interest in the posts was extremely high with, for example, 32 applications for the five housing officer posts. The Assessment Centre and shortlisting process was challenging for all applicants however this investment insured that only the very best candidates were invited for final interview and that any subsequent appointments would strengthen the service and take it beyond its current position. It is also worth mentioning that the selection process resulted in two of the five housing officers being appointed with no previous experience of front line housing management, such was the quality of their customer focus and drive to improve service delivery.

5.10 The full list of posts recruited to is,

3 x Area Housing Managers
Housing intervention Manager
Leasehold Services Manager
5 x Neighbourhood Housing Officers
Tenancy Sustainment Officer
Local Estate Standards Officer

5.11 **Newsletter** – Over the Summer all tenants and leaseholders were contacted as the service reviewed its primary consultation medium, Housing News, the monthly magazine. Almost 1,000 responses (13%) were received with a broad agreement that the magazine should in future be published bi-monthly to increase its content and variety of topics featured. More importantly, the responses showed that there was a high degree of interest in the journal and that is clearly represents a useful and viable means of communicating and consulting with our tenants.

5.12 The full results are shown below;

How often should the magazine be published?

| Bi-monthly | Monthly | Don't mind | No response |
|--------------|--------------|--------------|-------------|
| 532 (55.65%) | 140 (14.64%) | 253 (26.46%) | 31 (3.24%) |

What do you think of the magazine?

| Very satisfied | Fairly satisfied | Neither satisfied or dissatisfied | Fairly dissatisfied | Very dissatisfied | No response |
|----------------|------------------|-----------------------------------|---------------------|-------------------|-------------|
| 382 (39.9%) | 355 (37.1%) | 162 (16.93%) | 26 (2.72%) | 8 (0.84%) | 24 (2.51%) |

5.13 **Tenancy sustainment** - The Tenancy Sustainment Officer role is designed to help vulnerable tenants maintain and sustain their tenancy and is crucial in assisting these tenants to live independently. The service, offered to any tenant with an identified support need currently works on a combination of early intervention, with the TSO involved in all introductory tenancy sign-ups and a referral mechanism. This enables the TSO to make early assessments on support needs leading to a tailored support plan that can include a wide range of assistance including; setting up utilities, welfare benefits advice, debt management, sourcing furniture and accessing social funds and charities for financial assistance.

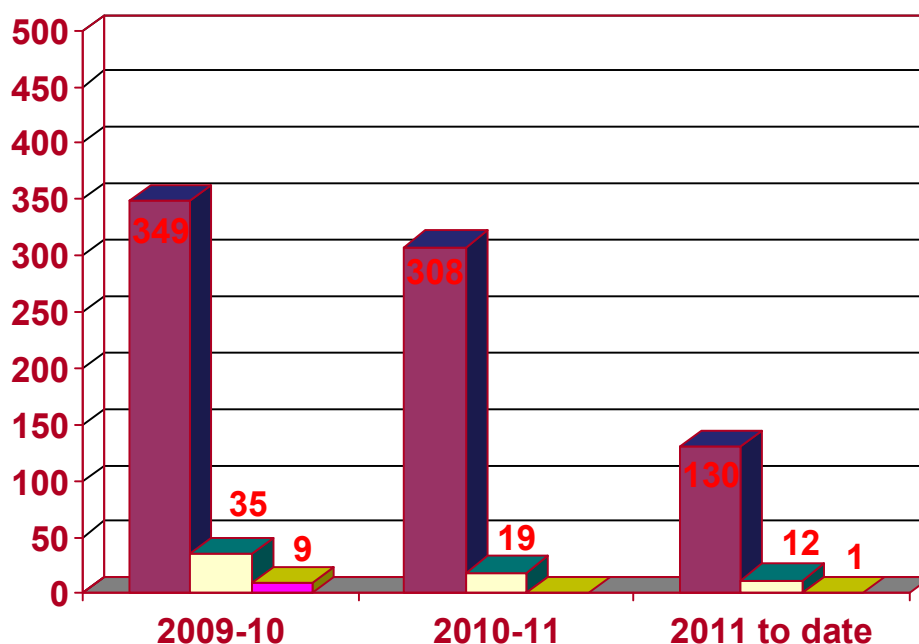
5.14 Piloted in mid-June, the TSO is currently supporting 38 cases with varying degrees of support needs. With the ability to also sign-post and to work closely with and engage the services of other agencies e.g. Social Services, Community Mental Health, Age Concern and Citizens Advice Bureau, the service is instrumental in helping people manage their own tenancy and in some cases can be the difference in a tenant facing legal action for rent arrears or anti-social behaviour.

5.15 **Anti-social behaviour** – The generic operation of housing management supported by the specialist advice from the escalated ASB officer has undoubtedly improved the partnership working with the Community Safety Team and the Police. The number of reported ASB cases has dropped dramatically since April partly because the term ASB is now only reserved for serious incidents rather than the more basic ‘barking dogs and neighbour disputes but also because the visible presence of NHO’s on the estates means that issues are addressed and dealt with before relations break down and tempers rise. At a recent meeting the Safer Slough Partnership executive recognized that in terms of dealing with ASB Housing provided a much improved service.

5.16 To boost this, 11th November saw the new ASB module on the integrated housing management computer package go live. This will enable officers to effectively monitor and profile ASB complaints, hotspots and manage performance to a degree not previously possible.

5.17 **Leaseholder Services-** Leaseholder Forums have been established across the borough as an open communication platform and feedback to date reflects the improved service with dedicated resources ensuring that any service charge queries/disputes are dealt with on a formal basis and that leaseholders emails are responded to from the generic email address, providing all information where requested. The service to leaseholders has also been enhanced by now offering gas servicing and home contents insurance similar to that offered to tenants.

5.18 **Formal Complaints** – One measure of how the service is performing is the level of formal complaints raised by tenants and leaseholders during the year. The following table shows the level of stage 1, 2 and 3 complaints over the last two full years and to date since April 2011.



5.19 Based upon the figures to date, the full year equivalent figure for stage 1 complaints is projected to be around 220, something like a 25% reduction on the previous year. A note of caution is that this is only raw data and further investigation will need to be undertaken to analyse whether this is a true trend or whether there is some other explanation, however at face value this is a positive indication that the service is improving.

5.20 **Tenant Services Authority (TSA)** – Prior to the new structure going 'live' the TSA had initially expressed concern regarding the development of local offers

to tenants in accordance with the legislative timetable. However once the local standards were adopted and the Customer Senate launched, they have relaxed their scrutiny of the service and are satisfied that due progress has been made.

- 5.21 **Customer Senate** The shadow Senate continues to be trained and mentored by peers from Thames Valley Housing Association and has continued to meet regularly throughout the Summer. The first formal meeting of the Senate has been arranged for November 2011 from which time the Senate will be operating under its own jurisdiction.
- 5.22 The Senate is already developing a work plan of service reviews and scrutiny for the forthcoming year and its first project was to review the current operation of the Estate Services (Caretaking team). Representatives of the Senate have shadowed staff in their duties and discussed their operation and liaison with Neighbourhood Housing Officers. Most importantly they have undertaken mystery shopping and customer consultation exercises to understand the current satisfaction levels and perceptions of the service. Their final report into Estate Services is due to be presented to the Senate at their launch meeting in November. The report will then be considered by the senior management team and an response delivered to both the Senate and this Scrutiny Panel.
- 5.23 **Estate Services (Caretaking)** – In advance of the Senate review, the operation of the estate services team has been adjusted such that the single team has been split and now reports to each of the three area housing managers. ESO's are paired with specific Neighbourhood Housing Officers so that work, service requests and customer responses can be handled in a coordinated way. This has had the effect of bringing the ESO's into the team rather than being a standalone, satellite service with a corresponding upturn in performance and accountability and improved customer perception. Their attendance at the relaunched estate inspections insures that defects are remedied without delay.
- 5.24 **Resident Engagement** - To understand how the service transformation is being received and working in practice, the tenant's annual consultation event was held on Wednesday 16th November at The Centre. Over 100 tenant's and leaseholders were present to participate in a series of structured debates on how the service is performing and what improvements are sought to make things even better. Analysis of the feedback and contributions is still ongoing and a verbal update will be provided for the meeting.
- 5.25 **Environmental improvements** – Finally the process through which environmental and estate improvements are selected and prioritised has been formalised between housing management and property services. An annual budget of £400,000 has been built into the business plan for future years and this figure will be reviewed as the need arises. This year's schemes have been consulted upon and tendered and will be implemented between now and March 2012. Having now programmed three years of improvements the back log of schemes has mostly been cleared and while there is currently a schemes on the reserve list which will be prioritised for funding next year, it is anticipated

that all outstanding proposals will be accommodated within the next year's programme.

Looking to the future

- 5.26 **Planning for the Future** – the council is once again offering all staff the opportunity to review their future employment options and the service is currently preparing to consider a number of requests for voluntary redundancy and early retirement from existing staff members. Given the level of recent recruitment and the drive to improve the new housing service, it is not anticipated that many, if any requests will be received from staff within housing management.
- 5.27 There is a greater likelihood of applications being received from staff within strategic housing and in preparation a staff consultation document has been released proposing a new structure with reduced management tiers and enhances front line staffing to reflect the growing demands from households with housing need. The proposal continues to integrate the two aspects of the housing service into one and creates new team leads which mirror the three area teams within housing management. This is intended to provide consistent links across the teams and enhance the principles of neighbourhood management where diverse issues can be rapidly resolved through the coordinated actions of fellow professionals. Once these proposals are finalised and implemented in April 2012, the service will have achieved the 25% general fund savings required to contribute to the council's medium term financial strategy together with a comparable amount of saving to the HRA.
- 5.28 **Performance management** – This year has been one of transition for the housing service and as such much of the effort has gone into rebasing the service and ensuring that the services we provide, the fundamentals are right. As we move forward into the next year we will begin the formal service planning exercises to drive further improvements and efficiencies. The council has now employed a dedicated business information analyst on behalf of the housing service and jointly, performance management of the service will be strengthened by agreeing key indicators, following the trends over time and benchmarking the services against other similar authorities.

6 Conclusion

- 6.1 This report demonstrates that much has been done to improve the housing service since its launch in April this year. By year end additional customer feedback and performance indicators will be available and these will reinforce the perception that Slough is moving towards the goal of delivering a housing management service that it and the tenants can be proud of.