



Rotherham's Housing Strategy;

**A report from a consultation event with
voluntary and community groups in the
borough**

30th March 2010



Introduction

This report summarises the findings from an event organised to give voluntary and community groups across Rotherham a chance to present their views on the refresh of RMBC's draft housing strategy. Held on the 30th March 2010 and led by three local voluntary organisations with assistance from RMBC staff, it provided an opportunity for voluntary and community groups to come together, debate the strengths and weaknesses of the strategy with the aim of assisting the Council in its efforts to have a positive 'fully rounded' housing strategy following wide and meaningful consultation.

Altogether a total of 24 people representing 14 different voluntary and community groups attended the meeting. Their views were collected during a morning of workshops in which they carried out a visioning exercise focusing on what makes a good neighbourhood and good housing, followed by detailed discussion of the strategy. The results of the workshops have been collated to provide a summary of the main points raised by participants, with additional material included from organisations that were unable to attend the meeting.

Context

Within the borough of Rotherham, there are many different voluntary and community groups with interests in issues of housing and community regeneration. Ranging from small local Tenants and Residents Associations to the larger voluntary organisations such as Action for Housing and Safe@Last, they all work directly with local residents and are therefore well placed to represent the views of ordinary people or more vulnerable members of society. Many of the groups who came to this event also took part in consultations around the Local Development Framework in 2009 and were therefore familiar with some of the issues raised during this exercise. A list of participating organisations is contained in Appendix 1.

Collectively VCS organisations welcomed the approach of partnership working advocated by the Homes and Communities Agency in preparation for the Single Conversation. They were also pleased that community engagement was viewed as a vital part of the process.

Findings

Participants welcomed the opportunity presented by the forthcoming Single Conversation negotiations to contribute to Rotherham's Housing Strategy and to give a VCS (Voluntary and Community Sector) perspective on housing and development needs within the borough. They were keen to know what lessons had been learned from the previous housing strategy and expressed concern around what has already been included in the strategy prior to consultation and therefore what differences consultation would provide. In

general, however, they were supportive of the vision and five themes identified in the document. They also recognised the crosscutting nature of these themes and the need for a 'bigger picture' view of what good housing looks like. A recurring point was that VCS organisations were keen to be involved as key partners in the delivery of the strategy and felt that this needed greater recognition in the document

1. Growth

Participants agreed that new housing is greatly needed to offer residents a wider choice of accommodation, both in terms of location and tenure. However they felt strongly that new housing estates must be well designed (so that they create a pleasant environment to live in and don't all look the same) and of a high quality, preferably meeting Homes for Life standards so that people can live in them for their whole lifetime if they choose to. They should not be too big (to encourage a sense of community) and the gardens of individual houses should be of a reasonable size. Many people expressed the view that new housing needed to be built with a view to creating diverse, mixed neighbourhoods. They also felt that a high proportion of these new homes should be affordable, they should all offer good amenities and services and that, once built, they should be managed to provide opportunities for residents to have a say in how they are run.

2. Renewal

The success of the Decent Homes programme was noted by participants but they felt that there was a great need to extend this work to other types of housing, particularly those that are privately owned. Home security was mentioned in this context as important and participants felt that more should be done to encourage home owners to invest in improving security. Participants also wanted an affordable, efficient repairs service that dealt with issues quickly to prevent anti-social behaviour and further damage to properties. They felt that empty Council properties should be dealt with more efficiently and support services provided to tenants to enable them to play an active role as responsible residents.

3. Affordable Housing

Participants agreed that affordable housing was a key element of Rotherham's Housing Strategy; it is vital that the supply of affordable housing meets local demand and is sufficient to offer people choice of tenure and type with rents/prices (for example, for first time buyers) set at levels that match people's incomes. Many other comments made under this heading were already included in the sections on growth and renewal. More specific reference to how the Council intends to use its planning powers to generate affordable housing was suggested as something to be included in the Strategy.

4. Sustainable Communities

Creating sustainable communities was viewed as an essential element of the strategy and one which VCS organisations made an important contribution towards. Participants agreed with the broad definition of a sustainable community adopted in the strategy but felt that the strategy failed to recognise the importance of community facilities such as community buildings and high quality public spaces. These offer spaces in which people can come together, get involved with local activities and develop a sense of pride and belonging in their neighbourhood, strengthening community cohesion. In order to achieve this, buildings and spaces needed to be clean and well maintained. This point also linked with the desire expressed by many participants for engagement in local decision-making and forums for people to air concerns and be consulted as well as the need for an ongoing dialogue with local residents. This is an area of work in which VCS organisations have considerable expertise and experience; the housing strategy needs to acknowledge this and include the VCS as partners in the delivery of the strategy.

5. Climate Change

Participants were supportive of the aim to build new homes which are energy efficient but they also wanted to existing housing stock to be improved to minimise fuel costs. They suggested that grants could be made available to private home owners to improve the energy efficiency of their homes and that sustainable energy sources could be more widely promoted. They felt that new estates should be built to high environmental standards and maximise the location by taking account of the landscape and local environment and by ensuring shared green space was available. High quality public transport and good local infrastructure (shops and other services) were also mentioned in this context.

What was missing from the strategy

Although participants were largely positive about the draft strategy, there were several areas of concern expressed by groups.

First and foremost they felt there was limited emphasis or linkage to actual housing needs in the borough. They were concerned that, whilst the document notes that Rotherham has an ageing population, this was seldom reflected in the actions listed in the strategy. Aligned to this, there was little recognition of the housing needs of specific groups within the local population, particularly those classed as vulnerable and in need of support, such as elderly people, disabled people ,people from BME communities and young people with family problems including teenage parents.

It was not clear how related strategies (an Older Persons Housing Strategy was mentioned) joined up with and supported the Housing Strategy across the range of services and schemes the Council and its partners provide.

A further concern expressed by participants was that the strategy does not recognise the valuable role played by VCS organisations in delivering services that compliment the role played by statutory providers; there is no mention of the VCS in the section dealing with delivery of the plan. VCS organisations provide many different services, often in situations where no alternative exists. Some organisations help people to remain in their own homes (for example Anchor at Home), support particular groups such as young offenders (Robond) and help individuals to deal with crises (Rotherham Women's Refuge) or simply bring people together to improve their local community (many Tenants and Residents groups, RotherFed). Collectively they provide a vital service, enhancing the quality of life for local people and helping some of the most needy and impoverished residents in Rotherham.

Finally participants were concerned that young people and tenants of 2010 (the ALMO in Rotherham) had not been consulted on the draft strategy and felt that it was important to include the views of these groups. They also felt that the Plain Language version of the document should be better structured to ensure that people understood what the Council was planning to do and how they would be informed/involved in future. They wanted to receive a copy of both the investment plan and draft action plan developed from the strategy.

Conclusions

Whilst the draft housing strategy presented at the meeting was considered to be a good starting point and participants were broadly supportive of it, VCS organisations were keen to ensure that a broader vision of the housing strategy is adopted and one that more accurately reflected the needs of people living in Rotherham. This was evident from the many comments made about how the strategy should put greater emphasis on meeting the needs of particular groups, but also from suggestions made about how the strategy needs to emphasise the importance of local infrastructure and facilities to create communities in which people take pride, rather than focusing on housing as just 'bricks and mortar'. They also felt that VCS organisations deserve recognition within the strategy for their role as partners in helping RMBC achieve its housing goals; this should be stated within the strategy. They expressed a wish to be included as partners in the negotiations during the Single Conversation process, requesting a commitment from RMBC to maintain the dialogue started from this meeting. On-going consultation with the Voluntary Sector was therefore felt to be important and the commitment made by the Council to do this was most welcome.

On behalf of the voluntary and community organisations taking part in this event, we hope that the Council will carefully consider our comments as a positive contribution towards the development of an effective Housing Strategy for the people of Rotherham.

Appendix 1: List of organisations attending the Housing Strategy Consultation

RotherFed (Rotherham Federation of Tenants and Residents Associations)
Rotherham Older People's Experiences of Service
SAFE@LAST
Blackburn TARA
Groundwork Dearne Valley
Voluntary Action Rotherham: Financial Inclusion Project,
Voluntary and Community Voices Network

Rotherham Mind
Action Housing and Support
Sheffield YWCA
Richmond Park TARA
Bakersfield TARA
Robond
Rotherham Women's Refuge
Anchor at Home

Organisations not attending that have submitted comments:

SCOPE:

All new homes should be built to Homes for Life Standards so that people can live in them all their lives if they choose. The same applies to the refurbishment of existing houses.

Action for Children:

We need dispersed properties in areas outside the town centre. Most young people that we support dislike gardening but are offered homes with large gardens that they can't maintain; this sets them up to fail.

Apna Haq

Apna Haq provides support to women and children to enable them to remain in their own homes. We also help women to gain tenancies, whether private or council, and establish safe ways of keeping up with mortgage payments.

The strategy states that family sizes are getting smaller in Rotherham but Asian families overall have larger family sizes - how will the strategy account for this?

The work done under the Decent Homes banner should be replicated with private owners: this would assist the Pakistani community as many families are owner occupiers and have the least quality of housing in terms of running hot water and central heating.