

1. Introduction

Over 50 people attended the Rother Fed Delegates meeting on Wednesday 10th September 2008 at the Unity Centre entitled ‘the future of council housing’ which included a presentation by Cllr Jahangir Akhtar, RMBC Cabinet Member for Housing and Neighbourhoods. The Landlord Relations Manager Jane Davies Read also spoke about the work of the Council House Futures Group which was presently looking at the options on the future management of council housing following the completion of Decent Homes. This group had four subgroups – the first was looking at finance, the second at landlord options, the third at the development of new council housing and the final one, future business expansion opportunities for the Arms Length Management Organisation 2010 Rotherham Ltd .

These presentations were followed by short workshops asking people how they wish to be involved in the Council House Futures Project and how they want to be involved in the management of council house services as a whole. One group commented that “key issues for both these questions were about trust and communication and tenants contributing whilst professionals took responsibility. Some people thought officers should rely less on volunteers to communicate the information and should be able to talk directly to customers face to face.”



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The notes below are a collation of the varied and different comments made at the workshops. There is a wealth of ideas and thoughts here all contributed in a short period of time. They are a reflection of both individual and group contributions but none are specifically endorsed by Rother Fed or their partners. Thanks to Trevor Wilson, Lynne Rowan, Caroline Boyle and Sneh Soni from 2010 Rotherham, Chris Brown, Angela Smith and Jane Davies-Read from RMBC and to Andrew Roddison, Company Secretary of Rother Fed who facilitated the workshops and for collating the comments and observations in this paper.

2. How do you want to be involved in the Council House Futures Project?

“We Don’t Want Our Voice Ignored”

Those who attended the Delegates meeting were keen to be involved, in a variety of ways and in a real and meaningful manner from start to finish. Involvement was not just about the people at the meeting but everyone. There were some differences of views expressed about whether this involvement should be for council tenants only or for tenants and residents as a whole. Suggestions for the type of involvement included the need for regular feedback including an “Interim Tenants Conference when groups have ideas to discuss” , another suggested active road shows to raise awareness of the issues, a further group proposed a simple tick box questionnaire to tenants and another a tenants forum. Involvement meant real influence of decisions made and as one delegate commented, opportunities to ‘change the direction’ when required. As one participant said “we do not want our voice ignored”.

A number of barriers to involvement exist, some around ‘apathy’ and having enough time. Using plain English would make a difference and presenting the information in a way that was more inclusive would be key. As one attendee said they “want to see RMBC encouraging involvement from under represented groups, for instance young people and those in their 20’s, 30’s and 40’s.”

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Communication

At the heart of involvement will be communication. This includes the production and distribution of newsletters and articles in established newsletters like 'Round Your Place'. Attendees wanted officers to talk to tenants, area housing panels, TARAs and community groups directly. Good quality, timely and correct information needs to be circulated which includes details of how the council house futures group operates, who the key contacts are and when and where they meet. This could possibly be one person whom everything goes through. One attendee commented on the need for early information out to tenants highlighting what options are being considered. Another suggested "we attract attention by being controversial and then explaining issues afterwards".

Correct information can provide facts and dispel incorrect rumours. Attendees said they would appreciate information from officers on the ground through caretakers, champions and other face to face opportunities. TARAs can be given information from officers that they can pass onto members. Professionals can play an important role supporting voluntary representatives to ensure clear and correct messages. One comment "information must be shared with staff too" made it clear that RMBC and 2010 officers themselves need correct and up to date information themselves to effectively perform this communication role.

Council House Futures

There were different views on whether a Tenant Reference Group would be a good idea. Concerns were expressed that the Council House Futures Group was already set up. One person commented that they "don't want to be just a group to feed into the existing group, they want to be in the main body of Futures Group". Another said "the four sub groups should be open to all Rotherham residents to have an input" and suggested using local mechanisms, like Area Housing Panels, Area Assemblies and TARAs.

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Concerns were shared that the name of the main group was the Council House Futures Group which reminded tenants of a previous RMBC created group that informed the creation of 2010 Rotherham and was tenant led. It was suggested that a group with a brand new name that hasn't been used before may help dispel this confusion. Another group commented they wished to see "more tenants on Groups and Committees that are being set up"

Some others though felt a tenant's reference group was a good idea and would be a good mechanism to feed into the Council House Futures Group. One person suggested "a focus group to ensure two-way communication with TARA reps and other members". A few people thought it was important that we know how we contact these steering and reference groups where they exist.

Not Just Rother Fed

Regular reports on progress were requested from Rother Fed which could provide feedback and also act as a sounding board. It was suggested that an identified tenant contact would be good mechanism to feed in ideas. One attendee said they would be interested in knowing how they contact Rother Fed board members and also how they can put their views into the board and get them across. It was felt that the Rother Fed website had little influence and limited use but that it would be useful to have individual meetings with groups like TARAs before public meetings take place. It was suggested



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that information should be included in the Rother Fed newsletter and regular updates are provided to ensure council house futures remains on the agenda

Some concerns though were expressed about Rother Fed acting as a gatekeeper. One person commented that they “don’t want just Rother Feds TARAs and tenants to be in the new group – new tenants that aren’t necessarily involved in Rother Fed should be encouraged to be more involved”. Another “wanted to see Real Tenant Empowerment, not just the Rother Fed voice”.

3. How Do You Want to be Involved in Housing Management Services?

Leading on Regeneration

One group commented that different estates and area priorities vary and blanket policies were not an appropriate way to always move forward. This group felt communities should be involved in decisions about new build, street names, sense of place and local identity. In building new homes and regenerating areas, it was suggested we should ensure we don’t lose the sense of place, local identity and history. This group suggested that local communities should be involved in naming new roads

It was felt that communities ought to be involved in decisions about housing management services and there should be comprehensive information on all options available for management of estates and services. In deciding how people can get more involved in housing management we need to ensure people have clear definitions of what these services entail.

In some of the workshops there were comments about influencing both council and government policy, for instance creating limitations to the right to buy. One tenant pointed out that there is still confusion about the respective roles of 2010 Rotherham and RMBC in management of housing. One group noted they wished to see the end of

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the sale of council houses, another on the need to address the stigma perceived of council housing.

Empowering Tenants

One group suggested that tenants should be more involved in management of their own homes. This should not just be lip service but there should be effective assistance and training to help tenants understand how to manage and support for tenants who want to look at forming Tenant Management Organisations. Some would like to see tenants managing budgets for estates. More detailed information on housing budgets including what the budget is, where it is spent, how much things cost and the balance (what is left and why) can be both empowering and give tenants some real understanding of costs and processes. This is giving tenants a real say in how things are done and money is spent. Tenants should be involved right at the heart of housing management starting with lettings.

Quite a few groups showed interest in have some involvement in housing lettings policy including the choice of incoming tenants and vetting new tenants. One focus group said they would prefer the community to have a greater say in who moves where and that members of the community be included in decisions about allocations and choice-based lettings. Tenants also could be involved in the enforcement of tenancy agreements, monitoring these and reporting back on their effectiveness. Also deciding on what is built and where.

Communication, Communication, Communication

People stressed that a mechanism is required where the 'man in the street' can feed their views and thoughts to the community representatives. They suggested the best way to be kept informed is face to face, phone is OK but newsletters quite often are not read by people. The group wanted staff to listen to tenants and provide honest and direct information in their communications. Drop in surgeries for tenants with decent

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homes contractors and 2010 made available weekly on their estate during work would help this.

TARAs Play a Key Role

TARAs can play a key role in tenant liaison and as focal points for addressing issues and supporting their resolution for all partners. One group wished to see their neighbourhood champion's presence at TARA meetings, another suggested that "a focus group should be set up to ensure two-way communication between TARAs and Rother Fed". One delegate expressed concerns there appeared to be huge phone bills being run up, perhaps something needs to be considered to make sure cheap and easy access to the phone for TARA representatives. Building up tenants and residents capacity to enable them to be Street Champions and representative of their areas is something Rother Fed could take up and provide support with.

One group stressed the importance of the need to encourage youth involvement and also provide opportunities for older and younger people to work together. They also felt that all members of the community should have a say – not just those that are already involved and not just tenants and residents. In particular, vulnerable people should have a voice and more user friendly meetings would enable this to happen. Different areas also have different needs and one group pointed out that housing management had to adapt and change to these. One person suggested setting up estate and



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neighbourhood team in all 7 areas to include all local partners like residents, tenants, RMBC, police and 2010. It was felt that tenant representatives need to have more of a say not just be there as a box ticker. Tenants need to see that their thoughts and ideas are acted upon and they get recognition for their contributions. One person suggested they wished to have more face to face contact with councillors and another wanted “four public meetings a year for the person in the street to meet up with councillors and senior management”. Comments were also made about the lack of feedback from tenants on the 2010 Board and wishing to see more tenants on that Board.

What Next?

The above report is for consideration at the next Rother Fed Executive meeting on Monday October 13th 2008. This meeting (like all our meetings) is open for all tenants and residents to attend. Are there any actions that can be taken forward from the workshop suggestions and if so, who do we expect to initiate these?

In particular, does Rother Fed want to set up a tenants reference group to explore the various options for the future of council housing and put forward tenants views or is such an action premature?

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Steve Ruffle

September 29th 2008