



Progress Update to East Northamptonshire Council

September 2011

Introduction

This report provides Councillors with a brief summary of key areas of progress and information to keep them up to date with the work of Spire Homes. It provides information about our notable achievements over the past year and our business plans and priorities for the year ahead. It is hoped that it proves useful and informative. If you would like any further information on the content of this briefing paper or the work of Spire Homes generally please contact Lynn Stubbs, Director of Business Services on 01933 415323.

Notable achievements over the past year

Over the past year, we reached an important milestone in the life of Spire Homes as we reached our tenth anniversary. This landmark provided time to reflect on and celebrate the many achievements over the past decade in providing high quality homes and housing services and most importantly making a difference to the lives of people and communities.

From 1st April 2011, we became a charity, which as a community focused organisation was a natural step and complementary to the ethos that underpins our work.



Despite the challenging economic climate, with robust financial planning, major investment in our existing homes continues. We spent £8.2 million on repairs and improvements to our homes in Northamptonshire in the last year alone and to date we have spent in excess of £72 million.

Through this major investment and strong asset management, in March 2010, we met the Government's Decent Homes Standard, well ahead of the Government deadline of the end of December 2010.

Our aids and adaptations programme has responded to the needs of hundreds of tenants, to provide the equipment and remodelling work they need to enable them to remain in their homes, or to move to a more suitable one.

Over the past year we have focused on helping young people back to work as youth unemployment reaches some of the highest levels seen for over a decade. Through the Governments Future Jobs Fund Programme, we recruited young people in a variety of roles across Spire Homes and with our contractors to help improve their future job prospects and have successfully moved some of the recruits into permanent roles. We have also promoted 'work clubs' to our tenants as part of a Government initiative with a local employment agency.

We were one of 37 Housing Associations chosen by the Tenant Services Authority (TSA) to pilot local standards. We established a new Resident Inspector Project to lead the local standards pilot which focussed on the standard of our properties when we let them to new tenants. As a result, in the first quarter alone, there was an impressive improvement of 18% in satisfaction levels with the condition of properties when new tenants move in. We were also commended by the TSA for the thorough approach to the project which was led by tenants themselves. Our Resident Inspectors continue to scrutinise services and work with us to continuously shape and improve services in line with customer needs.

Our Supported Housing Services have again been externally accredited: Care and Repair have achieved 6 A's and 6B's in the Quality Assessment Framework assessment and the Supported Housing Service has achieved A's and B's.

A handyman service has been introduced by Care and Repair for homeowners and private tenants in East Northamptonshire and Wellingborough.

We have implemented a new Tenant Assistance Scheme which provides support to vulnerable tenants who need help with decorating or maintaining their gardens.

We are very proud of our newly created Community Fund from which residents can apply for grants to transform local neighbourhoods or people's lives. The Fund has a small grants pot, awarding individuals up to £500. While in the large grants fund up to £5,000 can be awarded to Community Groups. The Funds objectives were determined by the Board and funding aims to help people to improve their employment chances, to support individuals or to encourage neighbourhood development in the communities where we work.

The scheme is unique in that residents oversee it via a Grants Panel and make the decisions about where the grants are awarded. To date, over £22,000 has been awarded to a range of individuals and groups including to a project aimed at reducing anti-social behaviour, and a disabled man to buy equipment for his home to improve his independence.

Our Tenancy Support Service continues to make a difference to tenants' lives and so far around 130 tenants have been referred to the service for help with things like applying for grants and benefits, reducing arrears, budgeting skills and moving into their first home. We expect demand to grow for this service, which now operates across Rutland and Northamptonshire, as the financial climate remains tough.

We have joined forces with North Northamptonshire Financial Inclusion Partnership to help people get money in a safe way through an affordable loan scheme, which is aimed at people on low incomes. We have also joined a mortgage rescue scheme to help home owners stay in their homes too.

We have been helping to cut the costs of bills coming in and making homes more energy efficient.

Work such as installing cavity walls and loft insulation as well as new roofs, new windows and better heating systems are all making a difference to the bills that people pay, saving some residents over £120 a year. Following a successful grant bid we were also able to give tenants extra financial support to pay their heating bills.

We have continued our programme to install solar powered heating in our sheltered schemes to reduce energy bills by around 30%, lower maintenance costs and reduce carbon emissions. Three schemes now have these environmentally friendly heating systems and we are planning to install solar power to other schemes in the coming year, as well as to our own offices to reduce our running costs. We are also looking at the potential to extend solar power further across our homes.

Our new homes have a range of energy efficient features to keep running costs as low as possible and our eco-friendly development in Seaton Road, Uppingham won the prestigious National Green Apple Award in recognition of its social, environmental and economic impact.

In the last year we developed 87 new homes for rent and shared ownership in East Northamptonshire, Corby, Rutland and Wellingborough, and saw the completion of our first new homes in Kettering. To date, almost 500 families have benefitted from our new homes. We are exceptionally proud of this contribution to bringing affordable homes to our areas.

We launched Spire Homes' new 'People, Pride and Community' Awards for the first time in 2010 to give local residents a chance to nominate people within our communities who always go the extra mile and deserve recognition for their efforts.

During 2010 we completed a major review of the Governance framework and made significant changes to the size and structure of the Board to enhance our Governance arrangements.

We have developed a robust tenant scrutiny framework over the past year to develop our co-regulatory approach.

In 2010 we took part in the National Best Companies Programme and we are extremely proud to announce we were successfully accredited as a **One Star 'Best Company To Work For'**. This achievement, alongside an impressive result of 75% overall satisfaction in our staff survey conducted in 2010, which placed us in the top 12% of all companies surveyed, highlights our continuing focus on our staff and on making Spire Homes a great place to work.

Our plans and priorities for the year ahead

Like many other service providers throughout the UK, we are faced with some momentous changes arising from the change in Government Policy and the major reforms that will be introduced through the Localism Bill, the spending announcements and wider economic climate. Taken as a whole these factors probably represent the biggest change process the housing sector has faced since the early seventies.

So our plans for the year ahead take account of and will be delivered in the context of the changing operating environment. Spire Homes is geared up for this challenge; we have financial plans in place to allow us to continue to invest in our existing homes, as well as to build new ones.

Alongside that our Business Plan accommodates healthy, efficient and effective housing services, as well as the added value services such as tenancy support and meaningful involvement that sets Spire Homes apart as a landlord and makes a difference to the daily lives of tenants and communities in these challenging times.

Outlined below are the five main business aims that have been agreed to take the business forward in the coming year. Each of these aims is supported by specific delivery objectives for the next 12 months, which form part of comprehensive Service Improvement Plans for each service area. Examples of some of these specific objectives are provided under each heading. The key business goals are to:

1. Manage our assets wisely including continuing to invest in our existing homes

To achieve this aim we will:

- Ensure we make the best use of the properties, land and sites we own or manage, exploring all options for development use, re-designation or potential disposal. This will require a comprehensive review of the asset management strategy and approach to ensure it is robust and effectively informs strategic decisions.
- Ensure all properties meet the Decent Homes Standard as an absolute minimum.
- Have robust plans in place to improve our properties to protect our assets and to make them desirable homes.
- Identify the most efficient and effective options for delivering repairs and maintenance services as contracts are due for renewal during 2012.

2. Deliver service excellence and nurture our 'can do' culture

To achieve this aim we will:

- Value our staff as our greatest asset; foster a team spirit and a culture of continuous improvement, innovation and creativity, and build on our high levels of staff satisfaction.
- Undertake service reviews to ensure that services are delivered in the most efficient and cost effective way and are what our customers require.
- Improve customer intelligence, through developing customer profiles to provide tailored services to existing customers, and market research to understand the demography and issues within the areas we operate, to provide the right service offerings to potential new customers.
- Actively seek opportunities to share resources and expertise to enhance the services we provide and reduce costs through partnerships and collaborative working.
- Provide opportunities for employment, volunteering and work experience to local people in partnership with other agencies to improve employment prospects and life skills and contribute to the worklessness agenda.

- Build upon our resident led self regulation framework, the development of local offers and resident inspector work in line with emerging regulatory requirements.

3. Provide efficient services and be cost conscious

To achieve this aim we will:

- Develop a culture throughout the organisation of achieving value for money by ensuring that staff understand costs, are financially smart and committed to budgetary management.
- Focus resources on income maximisation, supporting tenants through benefit reforms and embedding a 'rent first' payment culture.
- Identify grants and funding streams that could be utilised to maximise income and enhance the services or initiatives delivered.
- Use our IT systems to provide better, more efficient services to our customers and more efficient working practices.

4. Grow the business by providing new homes and services

To achieve this aim we will:

- Seek out new business and growth opportunities, which compliment our mission and strategic direction. Our aim is to achieve a total of 6,000 units in ownership or management by 2012, within our current infrastructure.
- Continue to meet affordable housing needs as a major provider of new homes in the areas we operate, working with local authority partners to complement their housing strategies.
- Provide services for others where they generate income or break even but deliver qualitative benefits.
- Work with the Group to identify and realise opportunities to develop affordable homes, considering alternative funding sources, models and partnerships.

5. Reduce our environmental impact

To achieve this aim we will:

- Develop asset management programmes that prioritise increasing the energy efficiency of our existing homes and reducing the carbon footprint.
- Raise awareness amongst our customers of energy efficiency initiatives to eradicate fuel poverty, linking in with other organisations and campaigns.
- Take account of eco standards and the use of recycling and renewable components in the development of our new homes.

- Reduce the environmental impact of our business by recycling as much as we can, by understanding our carbon footprint and aiming to reduce it through unnecessary travel and waste, etc
- Explore initiatives and funding to retrofit our properties with solar panels, air sourced heat pumps, improved insulation, etc.

Lynn Stubbs
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Presented by John Farrar, Chairman of Spire Homes