



Progress Update to East Northamptonshire Council

February 2012

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

Despite the challenging economic climate, Spire Homes has continued to flourish and deliver high quality homes and housing services that have helped to improve the quality of life for our customers and their families. Outlined below are just some of the many achievements over the past year:

With robust financial planning, major investment in our existing homes continues, despite the tough financial climate. To date we have spent around £80 million on maintaining and improving our homes.

Through this major investment and strong asset management, all our homes throughout Northamptonshire meet the Government's Decent Homes Standard, and go beyond this through our 'Home Standard' which was developed with our customers to ensure our homes meet their aspirations.

To ensure we make the best use of our assets we have carried out a comprehensive review of our asset management strategy and approach. The findings demonstrate sound investment decisions and a housing portfolio that is performing exceptionally well in financial terms.

We have invested in our neighbourhoods through a range of environmental improvements to improve security, provide parking and make areas look and feel better.

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 continued to focus on boosting local people's employment prospects through a range of initiatives.

We have provided permanent roles for some of the young people that joined us through the Governments Future Jobs Fund Programme. We have sponsored local 'work clubs' for our tenants, provided work experience and work placements through the 'Welfare to Work' scheme and recruited apprentices.

Our Community Grant Fund continues to help people to improve their employment chances, to support individuals and to encourage neighbourhood development in the communities where we work. Residents oversee the scheme via a Grants Panel and make the decisions about where the grants are awarded. To date, over £24,000 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 hundreds of tenants have benefited from the service which has helped them 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, as the financial climate remains tough.

We have set up a partnership with the Community Law Service, which provides our tenants with direct access to debt advice and money management.

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 also participate in 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 in need one-off winter heating payments.

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. Solar generated electricity has also reduced energy costs and consumption for many residents and all eligible schemes were completed in time to benefit from the higher feed in tariff rates. We've also installed solar power to our own offices to reduce our running costs.

Our new homes also have a range of energy efficient features to keep running costs as low as possible.

In the last year we developed 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, over 520 families have benefitted from our new homes. We are exceptionally proud of this contribution to bringing affordable homes to our areas.

We achieved fantastic results in our recent Status Plus Survey, placing us as one of the top performers nationally for customer satisfaction.

Great progress has been made in developing our knowledge about our customers which is playing a vital role in tailoring services and ensuring we fully understand the impact of the proposed welfare and housing reforms.

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

We have completed a comprehensive review of our approach to anti social behaviour and made changes to improve what we do.

Following a resident inspector review of our customer services we have introduced a low cost telephone number making it easier and cheaper for customers to contact us.

Our new handyperson service is up and running with Age Concern. This gives our tenants the opportunity to use our low cost service for work around their home.

We have made better use of our ICT systems so processes are more streamlined, provide better working practices and increase efficiency.

Following a comprehensive governance review during 2011 and subsequent recruitment we now have a high calibre Board in place, ready and able to meet the challenges ahead.

Our plans and priorities for the year ahead

Like many other service providers throughout the UK, we continue to face a period of momentous change arising from significant shifts in policy direction and the major reforms that will be introduced through the Localism Bill, continuing measures to reduce the budget deficit and the wider economic climate. Taken as a whole these factors probably represent the biggest change process the housing sector has faced since the early seventies.

Times are tough and likely to get tougher for our customer too. Incomes are being squeezed, whilst the cost of living and unemployment is rising. So our plans for the year ahead take account of and will be delivered in the context of the changing operating environment and the need to support our customers through these difficult times. 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 much needed new ones.

Alongside that our Business Plan accommodates healthy, efficient and effective local 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.

We also have very strong relationships with our Local Authority partners which we want to build upon in the year ahead as we respond to the Localism agenda within our areas.

The Business Plan for the year ahead is still being finalised, however outlined below are the key business aims that we intend to take forward in the coming year. These will be subject to final approval by the Board over the coming months.

Each of these aims will be supported by specific delivery objectives for the next twelve months, which form part of comprehensive Service Improvement Plans for each service area.

Our focus in the year ahead will be upon:

1. Understanding and mitigating the impact of the welfare reforms on our customers and the business.

This will include:

- Continuing to assess the impact of the welfare reforms on our customers and the business as the reforms go through the parliamentary process and focusing our attention on the areas of biggest impact.
- Increasing the support services we provide to tenants through a new Money Guidance Project, access to money and debt advice and enhanced tenancy support. This will be vital to prepare people for the welfare reforms as well as protecting our rental income as arrears are projected to increase significantly in the coming years.
- Ensuring we recover all income due to us, and encouraging a message of 'rent first' as we compete with other organisations for limited household budgets.
- Helping to boost local job prospects by providing opportunities for improving skills, employment, volunteering and work experience in partnership with other organisations.
- Raising awareness amongst our customers of energy efficiency initiatives to eradicate fuel poverty, linking in with other organisations and campaigns.

2. Managing our assets wisely including continuing to invest in our existing homes

This will include:

- Ensuring 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. We have completed a thorough review of our asset management strategy and approach to ensure it is robust and effectively informs strategic decisions.
- Ensuring all properties meet the Decent Homes Standard as an absolute minimum.
- Having robust plans in place to improve our properties to protect our assets and to make them desirable homes.
- Completing a full asset management review of our garages to determine the best options for their future use.
- Mobilising the new repairs and maintenance contract, due for renewal during 2012.

3. Delivering service excellence and nurture our 'can do' culture

This will include:

- Continuing to value our staff as our greatest asset; fostering a team spirit and a culture of continuous improvement, innovation and creativity, and building on our high levels of staff satisfaction.
- Continuing to invest in staff training and development, to ensure staff have the right skills, knowledge and experience to deliver our business objectives within the agreed culture and values. Ensuring staff are up to date in the complex and changing operating environment will be critical in the year ahead.
- Undertaking service reviews to ensure that services are delivered in the most efficient and cost effective way and are what our customers require.
- Improving 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. In the year ahead, customer insight will remain critical to understanding and responding effectively to the implications of the major reforms to welfare and housing systems.
- Actively seeking opportunities to share resources and expertise to enhance the services we provide and reduce costs through partnerships and collaborative working.
- Building upon our resident led self regulation framework, the development of local offers and resident inspector work in line with emerging regulatory requirements.

4. Providing efficient services and being cost conscious

This will include:

- Developing a culture throughout the organisation of achieving value for money by ensuring that staff understand costs, are financially smart and committed to budgetary management.
- Developing a robust process of self assessment to evidence value for money and efficiency, in line with new regulatory requirements.
- Identifying grants and funding streams that could be utilised to maximise income and enhance the services or initiatives delivered.
- Focusing our ICT systems to provide better, more efficient services to our customers and more efficient working practices.

5. Growing the business by providing new homes and services

This will include:

- Seeking out new business and growth opportunities, which compliment our mission and strategic direction and consolidating our position in our key areas of Northamptonshire and Rutland. Our aim is to achieve a total of 6,000 homes in ownership or management by 2014, within our current infrastructure.
- Continuing 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. A key aspect of this will be to consider new models and approaches, such as market or intermediate rent to provide cross subsidy for affordable homes and ensure schemes are financially viable.
- Providing services for others where they generate income or break even but deliver qualitative benefits.

6. Reducing our environmental impact

This will include:

- Developing asset management programmes that prioritise increasing the energy efficiency of our existing homes and reducing the carbon footprint.
- Taking account of eco standards and the use of recycling and renewable components in the development of our new homes.
- Reducing 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
- Exploring initiatives and funding to retrofit our properties with solar panels, air sourced heat pumps, improved insulation, etc. This will include a further programme of solar panels as part of our 2012/13 investment plans to reduce fuel costs for residents.

Lynn Stubbs
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Presented by John Farrar, Chairman of Spire Homes