



# Progress Update to East Northamptonshire Council

March 2014

## 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 particularly focuses on our core objective of providing good quality, affordable homes for local communities which are desperately needed in the midst of the current housing crisis.

The report also reflects on some of the broader activities of Spire as a community focused landlord working to improve the opportunities and quality of life for people locally. 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. We would be delighted to welcome you to Spire Homes to find out more about our work and to meet some of the team.

## Meeting local housing needs

Since our formation in East Northamptonshire over a decade ago, our core mission remains the same: to provide good quality homes and services that make life better for people locally. With the deepening housing crisis our work in providing much needed homes at affordable prices has become increasingly important and remains a key priority.

A year after transfer we built our first new homes in Rushden and our development activity has gone from strength to strength since. To date we have developed around 400 new homes throughout the towns and villages of East Northamptonshire. Homes have been built for rent and for shared ownership, helping people get that first step on the property ladder that would normally be out of reach.

Before changes to the grant regime in 2010, we relied heavily upon Government grant funding to support our development activity, achieving average grant rates of around £25,000 per property. The climate for developing new homes has however become much more challenging with capital investment in housing falling by 63% in 2010 and flat lining since. There is an expectation now that developing housing providers will look for innovative ways to finance new homes without relying on Homes and Community Agency (HCA) grant funding. This means organisations using their own funds and assets to support development activity as well as providing cross subsidy across schemes of different tenures to make them stack up.

The HCA have recently issued their prospectus for the 2015/18 bidding round which closes at the end of April. The HCA have made it clear that their 2015/18 grant funding is very much the last resort and that bidding organisations will have to look at rent conversions, cross subsidy and sale of asset to fund new developments.

Despite this challenging backdrop our focus remains on delivering a range of high quality homes that people want to live in whilst maximising choice and value for money. Whilst we intend to continue to work with the HCA to maximise opportunities for grant we have secured funding through the Bond market to ensure we sustain our ambitious development programme whilst still delivering high quality homes. Most of our new homes are now being delivered without HCA grant, utilising private funding and making better use of our assets where we can use existing land, garage sites or poorly performing and undesirable properties or schemes to provide more and improved housing provision in key areas.

We have also had to be more creative to make schemes work financially which has demanded more mixed tenure schemes, incorporating sale, shared equity and going forward market rent. This is necessary to cross subsidise the affordable homes which will remain our key priority. As a not for profit organisation all proceeds of sales are reinvested in the building of more affordable new homes.

We pride ourselves on doing schemes that other private developers wouldn't deliver such as affordable housing in rural communities, for example Barnwell and the redevelopment of poor quality housing into modern, efficient homes, for example the redevelopment of the Nippendale scheme in Rushden.

Our commitment is to ensure that local people have quality homes that are fit for the future and to achieve this we have conducted a comprehensive review of our homes and assets to ensure they meet the housing needs of our local communities. We appreciate that sometimes this is a sensitive issue and we want to ensure that we work with local councillors and the local community in developing our plans. For example, we have looked at our garage sites and developed plans to deliver 10 new homes initially with up to a further 7 over the coming months. The new homes will be constructed on former garage courts that have been under used and or had become difficult / expensive to maintain. The first site to complete will be Heron Avenue in Thrapston. We appreciate that there are lessons to learn in relation to our communication in putting these plans together and we will be talking to councillors and the local community at a much earlier stage in any future plans.

East Northamptonshire continues to be a very important part of our overall development programme with 289 new homes planned in the district in the next 2 years. These homes will be across various sites in:

- Oundle
- Irthlingborough
- Raunds
- Rushden
- Kingscliffe
- Thrapston

In addition we will be focusing upon redeveloping existing homes at Charles Street and Home Court in Thrapston to provide better quality housing for older people plus some new family homes. Our plans include bungalows which we know are much needed in Thrapston.

In response to high levels of housing need for older people in East Northamptonshire, we are also hoping to develop 29 leasehold apartments in Chancery Lane in Thrapston.

New shared ownership properties continue to be popular and we are experiencing a high level of demand which is proving difficult to meet at this time. We are really pleased to be able to help people take the first step to home ownership which we know remains an aspiration for many people who would otherwise be priced out. With shared ownership, buyers can start with as little as a 25% share of the property.

Our commitment to continue developing new homes is not without its challenges. These challenges include:

- Reducing Section 106 opportunities as developers revisit viability.
- Increased competition.
- Developing with limited or no grant.
- Rising construction costs.

Despite the increasingly difficult climate we are totally committed to meeting the housing needs of local communities and look forward to continuing to bring much needed new homes throughout East Northamptonshire in the future.

## Providing more than just homes

We're proud to be a community focused organisation that delivers much more than a landlord function. We know how important it is to have a decent quality home but our work extends much further than this. We provide a whole range of support services that our tenants can access to help improve daily life as well as their prospects for the future. This includes work throughout local communities in East Northamptonshire that focuses upon: health and well-being, improving skills and job prospects, budgeting and helping people to keep on top of their money and developing a sense of community. Some examples of our work are outlined below:

- With increasing pressures on household incomes our financial inclusion work is more important than ever. Our Money Guidance Service continues to be a fantastic resource for our tenants. Over 500 hundred tenants have been helped to manage around £1.5 million in debts and ensure they are getting the benefits they are entitled to. This service has proved a lifeline for many tenants facing hardship who have had a much needed boost to their household income as a result of this support. Demand for this service continues to grow as the financial climate remains tough.
- We are founder members of an East Midlands wide initiative with Credit Unions to be able to provide tenants with access to banking services that they may not normally be able to obtain.
- Our Tenancy Support Service also continues to make a difference to tenants' lives and hundreds of tenants have benefited from the service which has helped them with things

like budgeting and life skills, accessing health care and supporting people moving into their first home.

- We've continued to raise awareness amongst our customers of energy efficiency initiatives to eradicate fuel poverty, linking in with other organisations and campaigns. This year we will be developing a comprehensive 'Fuel Poverty Strategy' to set out our commitment to helping tenants reduce their fuel costs. Following a successful grant bid we will be offering tenants energy audits this year to provide advice, review tariffs and identify ways to reduce their fuel bills.
- We have been directly helping to cut the costs of bills coming in and making homes more energy efficient through a range of improvement works. In the past year alone in East Northamptonshire we have spent over £3 million on work such as loft and solid wall insulation, better heating systems and solar PV panels which are all making a huge difference to the bills that people pay. Some families have saved over £800 as a result of this work, with average savings on the solid wall insulation programme alone at around £500.
- We have continued to help people improve their job prospects through a variety of initiatives, including providing voluntary work experience for people living locally to boost their skills and employment chances and ensuring that our contractors employ apprentices and trainees to work in our homes. Last year we teamed up with our contractor Keepmoat to offer some of our tenants the chance to kick start their careers. The five week 'Kick Start' programme offered people the opportunity to gain real work experience which is often a barrier when looking for work. At the end of the programme all attendees had the opportunity to interview for a business administration role with Keepmoat with one successful candidate going on to secure a full-time apprenticeship.
- Our Community Grant scheme has been running for a number of years. Within the scheme we now have specific criteria to help our tenants get back into work and training with grants of up to £500. A recent example is where we gave a grant to one of our younger tenants to give them the opportunity to train to become a fully qualified hairdresser. We also give grants for local community projects where our tenants benefit from this. One great example is where the Barnwell Youth Club organiser applied for a grant to help secure the future of the local youth club and help it grow. We've recently built new homes in Barnwell, with more families in the village so it was something we wanted to help with.
- Through our Learn 4 Life initiative we hold courses to help tenants who are looking to develop new skills or simply want to build their confidence up. We've run ICT courses in partnership with Nene Valley Community Action in our new IT facility to help develop skills in using a computer and the internet. Thanks to an 'Award For All' Lottery Grant we are rolling this out so more tenants can benefit. Future work will focus on helping people get back into employment, with training on how to write a CV, search for jobs and using the internet to save money.
- Some of our tenants have been cooking up a storm in a six week cookery course run in partnership with FAIR (Family Action In our Area) in Rushden. With a £5 budget for each two-course meal they prepared, residents were able to hone their skills to make healthy, nutritious and tasty food that they could then take home to their families. By improving their basic skills in the kitchen, each resident has learned how to make their money go even further.

- Following on from a tenant survey that showed only half of our tenants had web access at home, we have launched our 'getting online' initiative focusing on improving accessibility, improving skills, and working with local organisations to help tenants get online. Examples of this work include the launch of our 'Cyber Space', an IT suite where tenants can access the internet during office hours, a 'Making IT easy' course and plans for a laptop hire scheme to help tenants find work, complete training or start their own business. The 'getting online' campaign was recently nominated for a TPAS regional award acknowledging the benefits of this important scheme.
- At the same time we're building our online services, making it easier for people to contact us and access information. Our 'My Account ' online facility will be the first step towards giving customers 24 hour access to key services. It will enhance the customer experience and provide efficiencies for us in terms of staff time and costs. My Account will be launched in July this year and in its first phase will enable 24 hour access to rent balances, the ability to update personal contact details and complete more interactive on-line forms. We have also expanded our online presence by launching our own Facebook page so residents can get in touch at the click of a button and stay up to date with the latest news from Spire Homes.
- A community garden at Higham Ferrers has been able to maintain its place as a hive of activity for the local community thanks to support from Spire Homes. Transforming an area of unused land, the community garden was set up a year ago by Groundwork with some help from staff volunteering. Since then, the garden has quickly become a central part of the community, with locals keen to snap up a place to grow their own vegetables, enjoy a spot of gardening and take part in the family friendly seasonal activities.
- In 2013 we launched a new discount scheme called 'Inspiring Savings' that provides tenants with financial savings on household items and local activities. Savings can be made on a whole host of things from children's shoes, carpets, appliances, furniture to local taxis and cafés.

The above provides just a flavour of just some of the work completed by Spire Homes to improve the lives of people locally. Please get in touch if you would like to know more about specific activities or to see this work in action.

**Lynn Stubbs**  
**Director of Business Services, Spire Homes**

**Presented by John Farrar, Chairman of Spire Homes**