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3rd August 2012

Dear William,

Re: Kennard Court Petition

Thank you for your letter of 24 July 2012 advising of the petition that your Committee is considering. I am grateful for the opportunity to comment and hope that the information I have sent you is helpful.

I believe it is important to set things in context so I will begin with a general overview before explaining the decision that has been made by our Board about Kennard Court and how we are putting it into practice.

The History and the Issues

Like almost every other provider of housing for older people, we are struggling to address the fact that there is now a significantly low level of demand for our Retirement Housing. We receive an average of 100 bids for every advertisement in general needs housing. In contrast, we have proportions as low as one bid for every eight advertisements in Retirement Housing. In other words, some of our Retirement Housing compares with general needs housing in terms of popularity on a ratio of 1:800.

This is a UK wide problem that is being experienced by all providers.

Retirement Housing (or sheltered housing as it was then known) was built in the 1950s & 60s in Torfaen and was built for a population reaching retirement age who did not have a long life expectancy following retirement or who would expect to move onto residential care accommodation when their needs increased.

As you are aware, there is very little residential care accommodation available now and so it is expected that people will remain in Retirement Housing throughout the rest of their lives, even when they become more vulnerable through reduced mobility, medical problems, poorer eyesight or indeed dementia. Retirement Housing was not built with the needs of these more

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vulnerable older people in mind and very little of our Retirement Housing would meet current standards of design for accommodation for older people.

We have calculated that it would cost £26 million to demolish and build new accommodation of a suitable modern standard for older people living in our Retirement Housing. Even to upgrade it to a high standard and address some of the accessibility problems would cost approaching £20m. We do not have the funds to choose either of these options.

Instead, with a few exceptions where we are planning to change the age range for Retirement Housing (which I will come on to) our Board has set aside over £2m of new money to upgrade communal areas of Retirement Housing which were not previously included in our business plans. In other words, we are making a significant extra commitment to Retirement Housing to bring it up to a higher standard than required. We hope this will address some of the issues in relation to low demand by changing the look and feel of our Retirement schemes and making them more attractive for potential applicants.

The other reason why Retirement Housing demand has dropped significantly is that 55% of those currently occupying our Retirement Housing used to be owner/occupiers and sold their properties in order to move into Retirement Housing. Clearly, in the current housing market, few people are able to sell their properties for a reasonable price so that source of new demand has completely dried up.

The last reason why Retirement Housing is proving to be less popular is that people now have expectations that they can stay in their own homes as their needs increase and they become less mobile. If they are owners, they are entitled to a disabled facilities grant to adapt the property for their use. Bron Afon have spent over £5m on adaptations to our properties since transfer so that people can remain in them despite a disability. Helping to support people to remain in their own homes is in line with Welsh Government Older People's policy and Torfaen's local policy. It is a policy that we endorse but it has implications for demand for Retirement Housing now and in the future.

The consequence of all these factors is that there is very low demand for some of our Retirement schemes.

Our Board have been grappling with the issue of how to address these problems since before the time of transfer to Bron Afon. The status quo was not an option and was unsustainable.

Voids in Retirement Housing

The result of low demand is that we began 2012 with about 50 long term voids (i.e. empty homes) in our Retirement Housing which is broadly half of the number of total voids that we have at any one time. These long term voids are a very significant element of our rent loss through voids and need to be addressed in order to meet our Business Plan requirements particularly with the on-going risk arising from Housing Benefit changes. When we analysed the figures, it showed that over half of the long term Retirement voids were in five of our schemes (and three of these schemes were in Blaenavon). In addition, approximately two thirds of our

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rent loss for long term voids was in these five schemes.

The Board, therefore, considered it appropriate to try and tackle the problem of low demand in these five schemes.

The five low demand schemes

The five low demand schemes were:

Tan y Coed in Pontenewynydd
Baker Street in Blaenavon
Ivor Gardens in Blaenavon
Kennard Court in Blaenavon
Sid Griffiths Court in Garddiffeith.

These are all in the North of the Borough and three of them are in Blaenavon.

We decided that we would consult tenants about changes to their schemes in four of these schemes. Baker Street was the most suitably designed of the three schemes in Blaenavon and had the most thriving community. We hope that by making changes to the other two schemes in Blaenavon this will result in it becoming easier to fill our long term voids in Baker Street.

Consultation with tenants

Rather than inform tenants what we planned to do, we instead began a process of consultation. We went out to the four schemes and talked to tenants collectively in Coffee Mornings and individually regarding their views about how we should tackle the problem in their scheme of lack of demand and also what their own personal wishes were in terms of living in the scheme. We then considered the responses that we'd had and came up with a set of draft proposals for each scheme. We went back out to the schemes and talked to the tenants collectively and individually about the proposals and again sought their views about how they would like to respond in the light of our plans.

Following consultation with tenants we proposed that in three of the schemes we will reduce the minimum age for lettings to 50 years old enabling the schemes to become general need schemes. In two of those schemes we will in due course decommission the washing facilities and the communal room changing these schemes into normal general needs flats albeit with a restricted age range. Tenants were broadly content with reducing the age range but would prefer us to maintain the washing facilities and communal rooms.

Kennard Court

Kennard Court was the fourth of the schemes where we were consulting with tenants and here we came up with a different proposal. In Kennard Court we proposed to decommission the scheme completely and move everyone out and use the building and land for some alternative use. The reason we came up with a different plan for Kennard Court was because not only is its

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design not suitable for continued use as older people's housing it is riddled with asbestos. In order to meet the Welsh Housing Quality Standard, we have to do work to the heating system and in order to do the work to the heating system all the asbestos has to be removed. As it is throughout the building, we cannot do these works with moving all the occupants out for their own health and safety.

As we are going to have to move all the occupants, we decided that this was an appropriate time to decommission the scheme completely and move the occupants on a permanent basis rather than moving them on a temporary basis and then allowing them to return.

Accordingly, after we had consulted with them and sought their views, we went back to the tenants of Kennard Court with the proposal to decommission the scheme. We spoke to tenants individually and a significant number indicated to us privately that they were happy to move. Public meetings were called by a local Council candidate and members of the public were invited to this meeting too at which a significant amount of anxiety was created for tenants and a lot of pressure put on tenants to say they would not move. We declined to attend this meeting as it was clearly a party political meeting and it was inevitable it would increase anxiety and we have received a significant number of complaints about the calling and handling of the meeting since.

Throughout the process, residents of Kennard Court have been telling us privately that they are actually content to move and in some cases keen to move but have felt pressured in saying they did not want to move when asked in public.

Tenants in Kennard Court have been given a package of assistance:

- They get a home loss payment of £4400 per household each when they move;
- They receive a disturbance payment which covers the full cost of removal, transfers of their telephone line and the redirection of post. We arrange all of this work for them if they wish;
- They get first choice of our available properties so that they can choose to stay in Blaenavon if they wish or move further down the valley or live elsewhere

We have already dealt with numerous re-housing arrangements with tenants in Retirement Housing and many older tenants in their own homes who are anxious and concerned about works and moves so we have an experienced team use to hand holding and reassuring older people in these kinds of circumstances. Indeed, over the past four years we have received many compliments from tenants and their families about how sensitively we have supported older people through moves and works. The same staff teams are now working with the tenants of Kennard Court to support them to move.

At the time of writing 5 of the 12 households we are working have moved to new homes of their choice and 4 more have moves planned. Of the remaining 3 households 1 is a temporary resident in an intermediate care flat that the Council's Health and Social Care team manage and we are working with them to secure permanent accommodation and 2 are tenants who are waiting for vacancies to arise on a neighbouring Bron Afon scheme.

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Conclusion

We have been through a lengthy process of consultation. This has created some inevitable anxieties because change is not something that people would prefer to happen. Nevertheless, we have approached the issue sensitively and made sure that our staff have calmly and clearly explained the position to tenants. Unfortunately, the position has been confused by the intervention of local Councillors who have not only confused the facts but also created a lot of anxiety amongst the tenants and forced them in the position of having to state things that they are not happy with. I think we are over this period now and that the residents who we have so far helped to move are very happy with their new homes. This is reflected in comments made to us by tenants about their new homes:

“very happy”, “a lot more suitable”, “yes, in hindsight it is more suitable”

Please let me know if you require any further information and thank you once again for giving me the opportunity to comment.

Yours sincerely,



Ian Simpson
Director of Community Housing and Support

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