

Growth and Prosperity Scrutiny Panel

Date: 9th March 2020

Meeting commenced: 6.00 p.m.

Meeting ended: 8.00 p.m.

Present: Councillor Sharpe – in the Chair

Councillors: Critchley, R. Garrido, Hesling, Lewis, Nkurunziza, Ward, Weir and Wheeler.

Members of the public: Mr Langton, Mr Farrell.

Officers: Lee Sugden – Chief Executive, Salix Homes
Sue Sutton – Director of Operations, Salix Homes
Liz Wright - Democratic Services

1. Apologies for absence

Apologies were submitted from Councillor Jolley and from Councillor Kelly, Lead Member for Housing & Neighbourhoods.

2. Declarations of interest

Councillor R. Garrido declared an interest in respect of Minute 3 (Salix Homes – Progress against the Transfer Offer Document) due to him being a Member of ForViva Board.

3. Salix Homes – Progress against the Transfer Offer Document

Lee Sugden and Sue Sutton gave a presentation (see appendix) to update the members on progress and the following issues were highlighted and questions raised:

- The detail of the schedule of achievements against the offer document were included in the report that accompanied the presentation.
- The target for investment in homes had been exceeded.
- The 100% decency target had been reached.

Having reached the decent homes target was there a rolling programme of updating to ensure to ensure standards did not slip?

There had to be an ongoing rolling programme of updating kitchens, bathrooms etc to maintain 100% decency target and also to comply with the regulations.

Had a stock condition survey and survey of the decency level been carried out?

Over 90% of homes had been surveyed to ensure that works that we needed had been done. The level of decency was based on the actual condition of homes and not estimated based on a sample survey, so the figures were more reliable.

What was the condition of the 8,5000 homes at the time of the transfer?

Before the transfer there was a low level of decency. It was usual to carry out a sample stock survey but considering the condition of homes a 90% survey was carried out to be able to get an accurate picture of the condition of the homes.

What was the criteria used for decency?

The service had to comply with the decent home Government standards ([GOV.uk – Government decency standard](https://www.gov.uk/government/standards/government-decency-standard)) and the standard that Salix Homes adopted was slightly higher than the Government standard.

Was a survey of fencing carried out?

20% of fencing used to be surveyed and then this was extrapolated to estimate how much needed to be repaired/replaced. Following the survey of the actual fencing, there was less than predicted that needed updating. £10 million had been made available to invest in fencing, paths and general environmental improvements.

What was the state of properties before the transfer?

A rump of properties did not have investment. The transfer to Salix Homes was to ensure that the necessary investments could be made.

Was the £10 million in environmental improvements underspent?

This was probably because not all the improvements planned for were needed. The ultimate measure was if the properties were up to the decency standard.

What was the target for upgrading business units?

Some had been converted into social housing if they were surplus to business requirements. Some of these properties had been empty for over 10 years. Shops that had been at the bottom of some high-rise buildings had been converted into flats in some cases. A couple of units were still unlet.

- Members requested more information on business/shop units and specifically asked for information on the level of demand from small businesses for premises, how they were monitored and how many remained unlet.

Had the decent homes standard been reviewed recently? Are they still adequate and what was the view of Salix Homes on the standards?

The view of Salix Homes was that the standards were not very ambitious, and they already used a higher standard than required by the Government guidelines. They would be reviewing the Salix Homes standard considering the requirement of buildings in the 2020s and beyond (to include changes in safety regulations and climate change factors such as not being able to install gas boilers after 2025).

- A member commented that the new development in Langworthy had heat source pumps installed in all the properties and this was a very positive development in terms of climate change.

What was Salix Homes' carbon neutral target?

A Carbon Neutral Strategy was being developed and this would include looking at installing heat sources pumps in properties when they were being upgraded. Members, however, also needed to be aware that Salix Homes and other social landlords with aged properties would not have the funding to make all properties carbon neutral.

What is the quality of the work carried out in the homes?

An independent survey was of the stock and had been carried out and the report stated that the quality of the work and the fitments was high and as a result would be longer lasting.

Was there a vulnerable persons' officer?

All neighbourhood officers had been trained in safeguarding and had had mental health first aid

training. These officers could triage but would then signpost to the vulnerable person to the appropriate services.

What support was made available for people who were experiencing difficulties with Universal Credit (UC)?

An officer from Salix Homes contacts tenants as soon as they were put onto UC to support them with budgeting. All members of the income management team had also been trained on how to deal with UC.

How did people who had English as an Additional Language (EAL) access Salix Homes services?

There were officers who spoke a variety of languages and could provide some translation support and Salix Homes officers visited each housing block to talk to tenants to identify any issues residents were having.

The customer satisfaction rating was at 97%. What is the rating benchmarked against?

The 97% satisfaction rating was with improvement work. The general satisfaction rate was around 86% and this had been found via an independent survey. Other providers used the national Star survey. General satisfaction levels had risen but satisfaction with the environment had reduced.

- The members requested a breakdown of the customer satisfaction data.
- A member congratulated Salix Homes on the emergency repairs response and the three-day response for general repairs.
- It was confirmed that the anti-social behaviour complaints were usually about noise levels and usually low-level noise.
- It was reported that Ward Councillors received quarterly updates and members requested that the updates were made available to all councillors.

What was the link between accommodation and jobs?

Salix Homes had converted one building to accommodate young people (YP) who were struggling to find work and the criteria for living there had focused on those YP who were vulnerable in terms of housing. Some had gone on to do an apprenticeship with Salix Homes and had been able to leave the shared accommodation to move into their own flat. Salix Homes had also converted a property to house key workers for Salford Royal Hospital to provide temporary accommodation whilst they found more permanent homes, so enabling them to fill key posts.

What support was provided for Looked after Children in the city council's role as a corporate parent?

Information about vacancies were circulated via the LAC organisations but LAC were not specifically targeted directly by Salix Homes.

- It was confirmed that Salix Homes housing blocks had their own separate CCTV, but they did work in partnership with Salford City Council and the Greater Manchester Police (GMP). The cameras were filming 24 hours a day and the cameras were monitored. The city council had an up to date list of where all the cameras were and what areas they covered.

What had been the impact of the customers' portal?

The portal was relatively new and included a web chat facility. It was working well but needed more customers to use it. It was being relaunched and marketed to encourage more customers to use it.

- It was confirmed that fly tippers were prosecuted when caught tipping on Salix Homes' land. Crime scene tape had been used to highlight where fly tipping had taken place and when this was implemented the number of incidents in the area were seen to reduce.
- There had been a very high response rate to participate on the Customer Committees.
- Salix Homes were commended for being the only northern housing organisation that had been asked to work with the Government on reviewing safety on high rise blocks.
- A member commented that they had seen some of the improvements themselves and were aware of the improvement in customer satisfaction levels.

A safeguard on rent rises was in place (keeping it at Retail Price Index (RPI) +1% over the next few years). What was the impact of this and what would be happening further in the future?

Rent reductions when the homes were initially transferred had a significant impact on the organisation as staff number had to be reduced and it created many challenges for the procurement team. The current rate of rents could change if the Government make any legislative changes that would directly impact on rents. When looking at new home rents the starting point was whether the rents could be set as social rents or sub-market rents. The Salix Homes Board have a very strategy, as a Salford based organisation, of investing back into the local communities. The board was committed to partnership working with organisations such as Derive. The safety agenda was having and would continue to have a significant impact.

What was the position with the supply of available land?

There was no more land available in the Salix Homes portfolio.

- Concern was raised about the impact on local democracy and accountability because Salix Homes Trust Board had removed all councillors from the board. It was confirmed that there were two Customer Committee members on the board and whilst there were no seats on the board specifically designated for councillors, but councillors were being encouraged to apply for positions on the board and this had been raised with the City Mayor.

What was done about employee engagement and were Salix Homes employees paid the Living Wage?

An employee survey was regularly carried out and the recent one showed an 80% satisfaction rate. Salix Homes was the first organisation in Salford to become an accredited Living Wage Employer.

What mix of housing did Salix homes have and what was the investment strategy?

The housing strategy provided for a mixed approach. Some rent to buy subsidies applied and depending of the costs involved in a scheme, some schemes included affordable rent properties and social housing, where possible. 100 new homes were provided each year, and these replaced those lost via rent to buy. The starting point was always to look at applying a social rent where at all possible, but each scheme had to be looked at on its own merits. There was a 30-35-year payback timeline for a scheme.

Where did the responsibility for roads and highways lie?

There were ongoing discussions about this between Salix Homes and the city council and it was hoped an agreement on funding could be reached and agreed by the organisations bank soon.

- Members agreed to request that the Overview and Scrutiny Committee reviewed and monitored this.
- Members expressed concern regarding there being no councillors on the Salix Homes Board.

- Members asked that a request be made for further information to be provided regarding information on Ward/Groups satisfaction levels and the Salix Homes quarterly updates not being sent to all councillors, and that, subject to the information received, their concerns regarding communications with Councillors in respect of some of the above issues be raised with the Lead Member for Housing & Neighbourhoods.
- The panel thanked Salix Homes for the very detailed presentation and for the work they were doing.

Resolved: That

1. the members be provided with more information on business/shop units and specifically asked for information on the level of demand from small businesses for premises, how they were monitored and how many remained unlet;
2. the members be provided with a breakdown of the customer satisfaction data;
3. the quarterly updates be made available to all councillors
4. subject to the information provided to Members in respect of the above issues, their concerns about communications with Councillors be raised with the Lead Member for Housing & Neighbourhoods.

4. Items for Information

4a. Briefing note on Bus Lane Enforcement

Resolved: That the Growth & Prosperity Scrutiny Panel notes the update on Bus Lane Enforcement (BLE) across Salford

4b. Development across Salford City Centre

Resolved: That the Panel note the contents of this report and the continued progress made to deliver the growth and development strategy for the City.

5. Minutes of the meeting held on 27th January 2020

Resolved: That the minutes of the meeting held on 27th January 2020 be deferred and considered at the next meeting.

6. Work Programme

- The *Mayor's Cycling & Walking Challenge Fund Scheme Prioritisation and Bidding Update* was on the agenda for the next meeting and members requested that the update should cover:
 - How were the schemes chosen?
 - How were the schemes maintained?
 - Who were the officers leads for this?
 - What cycling proficiency levels do children need to reach to use the cycle lanes and how does the council link with schools about this?
 - An update on the cycle lanes to include the junction at Blackfriars as there were concerns that the lanes were not suitable, vehicles blocking them etc.
- The clerk would pass this request to Shoaib Mohammad (Assistant Director of Technical Services) for the next meeting's agenda.

7. Any other business

There were no items of any other business.