

Report to	-	Overview and Scrutiny Committee
Date	-	30 January 2017
Report of the	-	Chairman, Councillor Ian Jenkins
Subject	-	AmicusHorizon

In preparation for the AmicusHorizon (AH) item, Members of the Overview and Scrutiny Committee (OSC) were asked to submit questions they wished answered by AH prior to the meeting. Below are the submitted questions and subsequent answers.

Q1 The Maltings, Peasmarsch – having attended several presentations in Peasmarsch regarding this project, the AH representatives were lacking in knowledge and response. Why has it taken six years to get to this point on that project? Why does AH need Council finance to proceed having decanted residents six years ago leaving an empty building?

Answer: It is true – the new development at The Maltings has taken much longer than we had anticipated. We are looking forward to delivering a modern, energy efficient 36 homes in Peasmarsch and we thank the Council for working with us to provide much needed social housing. With hindsight, we would not have emptied the old scheme as early as we did but it is a challenge to empty any scheme at precisely the right time so it is empty when we need it. If we do not have it empty when the contractor's ready to go on site we may then struggle to complete the building in time and risk losing any Government grant which has to be spent within certain timeframes.

We held our first meeting with residents in March 2014. From start to finish it took just over two years to find homes for all our residents, with the last residents moving out of the bungalows in June 2016.

We approached Rother District Council (RDC) for subsidy because in July 2015, the Government changed the rent housing associations could charge. Eighteen months into a 10 year rent settlement housing associations had built their business plans on we had to factor in a 1% rent reduction per annum on rented homes for a four year period. The cost to AH is c£60m over the four years and wiped this amount of capacity from the development growth we had planned.

So affordable rented homes are less financially viable than they used to be. A reported c£40b loss to the sector to create c£12b of Housing Benefit savings nationally – leading to us, and other housing associations too, not being able to build as many rented homes in the short and medium term.

We had planned to build almost all the homes at The Maltings for rent. However, the rent reduction rendered the original scheme unaffordable. In support of the Government's home ownership agenda, we altered the homes to shared ownership (as they are unaffected by the rent reduction). RDC understandably wanted some rented homes on site so we created a solution where we could provide these with a small subsidy from RDC.

Q2 Decanting process of residents – concerns over people being moved from Orbit into AH, the way and manner that it has been done. Please explain the decanting process.

Answer: The question seems to relate to the Orbit decanting process here and the properties at Hill Top in Rye where we offered to assist Orbit as we have far more properties in Rye and the surrounding areas than they do. In this one case where we could help a family stay in the locality, it was Orbit's decanting procedure being followed. We were not able to influence it but were able to provide suitable accommodation.

Q3 Please provide information on AH's current and shared projects within the district of Rother.

Answer: We will take OSC through these schemes and they are listed below:

The Maltings, Peasmarsh

- 36 homes – a 19 home sheltered block for rent, the remainder are a mix of rent and shared ownership houses.

Roselands, Sedlescombe

- 17 homes – ten for over 55s and seven shared ownership houses.

Pebsham Lane, Bexhill

- We are in contract with Barratts (previously Ward Homes) to buy the Section 106 element of this 108 home site.
- We will buy 32 homes – 16 rented (10 flats and six houses) and 16 shared ownership (four x 2 bed flats and 12 houses).

Station Road, Northiam

- We are in contract on 26 homes.
- It is a Section 106 with Persimmon Homes.

Q4 How does AH calculate housing need and type in any particular village?

Answer: RDC hold the information on the level of housing need and the accommodation type across Rother. We talk to planners throughout the life of a scheme, so before we plan any projects we talk to planners and the housing teams. We will also consider research projects, such as the one commissioned by the Better Together partnership on older people, to get the bigger picture. We look forward to the outcomes of RDC's housing need and stock condition surveys as they too will inform our decisions.

Q5 How do AH access funding for sheltered housing schemes?

Answer: We have successfully built extra care schemes in recent times. One is The Orangery at Bexhill. We have two more in contract in Medway at the moment too. This is a new specialism for us – one we are proud of. However, whether we build any more extra care schemes depends on Government policy.

A Local Housing Allowance (LHA) cap comes into effect soon which caps the amount of total rent and service charge someone on benefits can get at the LHA level (East Sussex £92 per week for a 1 x bed and £120 for a 2 x bed).

Following lobbying, the Government agreed a mechanism for allowing top up money to go to the local councils for them to pass on to providers. However, there is little detail of this at the moment so we will proceed with caution.

Our funding comes from a combination of bank loans, internal and sometimes external subsidy.

Q6 Recently a local AH resident needed fencing to make the garden secure (this was a particularly vulnerable resident). The response was AH do not do fencing. Is there any funding where there are particular specific needs for residents e.g. fencing, carpeting?

Answer: Generally we do not do fencing and are only responsible for boundary fencing. We do have a small pot of money – our ‘helping hand budget’, where applications can be made from residents or staff to assist vulnerable residents who are not able to access any other funds.

There are criteria to decide if we will meet the cost and they include:

- Make a positive lasting difference.
- Help sustain tenancies.
- Provide independence.
- Tailor a service to the individual’s needs.
- Enable social inclusion.

The tenant must:

- Provide evidence they are in receipt of a form of benefit.
- Complete an income and expenditure form if not in receipt of a benefit.

We also refer residents to our Financial Inclusion Team or other support agencies to assist the resident if we are unable to help. The pot of money we have is only £15k for the whole of Sussex, so we need to consider what we do carefully. Also, many of our residents are vulnerable and we need to be consistent with our decisions and services.

Q7 Do AH survey accessibility issues in their older properties?

Answer: We assess an incoming tenant’s needs when they are allocated one of our properties to make sure it is suitable. This may mean us installing minor adaptations to make the property accessible for the resident. As a resident’s circumstances change, they can apply for adaptations to be made to their property – some of which we fund and some are funded by RDC.

Councillor Ian Jenkins
Chairman
Overview and Scrutiny Committee