



Sounding Board – September 2009

AGM SPECIAL

Welcome to a Sounding Board Special Edition

WPH held its 5th AGM on 29 September which was attended by 33 company members and 15 other invited guests.

AGMs are not known for being exciting events, unless it happens to be a big publicly owned financial institution perhaps but the team at WPH has tried to make each annual meeting just a little different.

This year the afternoon began with a hot lunch served at Tranmere Rovers' ground (inside, not on the pitch) followed by a brief tour for company members to see some of the work done during the year and to hear more about some of the challenges that lie ahead.

Returning to Prenton Park, the AGM itself was preceded by tea and cakes.

The Tour

The Tour, on a full-sized coach started in Bebington to hear about the development in Juliet Avenue where 6 new houses are being built of the site of some derelict flats before moving on to Clifton Avenue on the Mill Park estate. The area around the shops in Clifton Avenue is a recognised "hotspot" on an otherwise desirable estate. During the summer, young people from the area worked with community artists to transform the grey shutters on the several disused shops into a bright mural depicting traditional shop fronts.

At Woodchurch the tour stopped to look at the development of 10 houses and 4 bungalows on the site of some shops which were demolished soon after transfer. The energy saving and "environment friendly" features were noted as was the cost and the support from the Council which enabled WPH to secure grant funding from the Homes and Communities Agency.

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In contrast, the next stop was at Town Meadow Lane in Moreton where the tour was shown the empty shops and advised about the challenges to tackling the problems of the locality. There was a lively debate on the coach about what could be done on the site and how engagement with young people was important. It was suggested that two or three of the empty units could be used as a drop-in centre in the evenings to reduce the problems created by young people hanging about the chip shop. Matters of NIMBYism were raised of course along with serious concerns about the effect on local residents.

Next stop – Bidston Rise. Here Dominique Blundell joined the tour to give an explanation of the work she and her team have been doing on the estate and how the work of the investment team and housing management has come together to make a transformation to the estate. The size of the coach prevented us from going into the estate but Dominique answered questions about the changes made on the estate.

Moving to Seacombe and Egremont the tour heard about the problems WPH has faced in deciding the best course of action for its 15 high rise blocks and learnt how residents had been moving out of both Charter House and Mersey Court with a number of people moving into new flats at the Apollo in Egremont.

Other aspects of WPH's work were mentioned as we went along including the improved performance on income collection, the extension of services through SupportLink and an explanation of how WPH gets funding from the Homes and Communities Agency with the support of the Council.

AGM – The Business...

Back at the home of Rovers, and after a bit of cake or scone and a cup of tea, the real business of the day began.

Chair of the Board of WPH, Jed Pearson, opened proceedings by presenting the minutes of the last AGM before highlighting another year of achievement and explaining how changes to governance arrangements through the year had put WPH in a good position to face the challenges of the future and reach its goal of becoming a provider of excellent services.

Brian Simpson, WPH Chief Executive added more detail setting out the achievements such as improving the value for money service by saving over £2m through staff suggestions and £3m on the investment programme works – all of which goes to provide better services for tenants. Satisfaction with WPH was high with almost 93% of customers saying they were satisfied or very satisfied with the services and almost 96% saying they were treated with respect by WPH.

Brian also pointed out that from having only 30% of its houses, flats and bungalows reaching the Government's Decent Homes Standard in 2005, the figure had shot up to 84% by the end of March this year and was now approaching 88%. Just one in ten homes was currently failing the standard and this would fall even further in the next 12 months.

Repairs and maintenance services were highlighted recognising that almost 93% of appointments that were made were kept and all homes with a gas supply had been inspected and issued with a gas safety certificate during the year.

Having said how well WPH had performed in the year, Brian went on to explain the challenges and the objectives for the next year. WPH has set out its corporate objectives to provide affordable homes that people want, to provide excellent services and to be an employer of choice.

To achieve this there needs to be further improvement in some performance areas and there is a need to tackle some of the environmental hotspots on estates. Four key areas were highlighted for more action:

- Faster re-letting of properties
- Better resident involvement in the work of WPH
- Further improvements to the repairs service
- Learning from customers.

Brian concluded by noting that following the hard work in 2008/09, an independent inspection had assessed WPH as providing 2 star (good) services and it continued to have promising prospects for further improvement – something to build on.

...and the money

Patrick McCarthy , Deputy Chief Executive of WPH presented the year's accounts to the meeting and talked about how WPH had been affected by global markets and the "credit crunch".

The year's accounts had been given a clear bill of health by the independent, external auditors. Patrick explained how the accounts work and how, whilst the rents that WPH charges are the same as they would have been under the Council, the expenditure on improving homes and other services is so much greater. WPH spends more each year than it raises in rent and the difference is met by loans from the funders, in our case Royal Bank of Scotland (RBS). Once the major works to improve the properties as set out in the transfer promise are completed, WPH will start to pay back the loans.

The loans we have with RBS have been secured at good rates and this has protected WPH from the worst effects of the financial changes of the last few months but there could be difficult times ahead for the company. There is the possibility of a rent freeze or even a rent reduction which would mean a

review of the spending plans for the next year but overall WPH is well prepared for another successful year using its beneficial loan rates, its in-house repairs team and partnering arrangements to combat inevitable rises in inflation.

The new Board

New tenant Board Directors Joan Ormond and Lynne Bunting were formally appointed as were independent Board Directors Angela Green and Murdo McDonald.

Retiring tenant board director Mal Brewer who had served on the Development Panel, the Operations and Trading Services Committees and the Building Services Board as well as the main board received a gift in recognition of his work.

Ask the Board

A new feature for this year was “Ask the Board” where company members or other guests were invited to quiz the Board about its work.

Questions ranged from the standard of cleanliness of properties offered for rent to the new grounds maintenance contract taking in heating equipment and service charges along the way.

Standard of voids

A question was asked about the condition in which properties were offered for rent and whether the standard of cleaning was high enough and if it would be better to paint each property throughout rather than offer decorating grants.

In response, it was explained that all properties are given a final clean before being offered for rent. This is in addition to any cleaning up after any building work has been undertaken. It is normal to offer a decorating grant to the incoming tenant rather than repaint the whole property, this is not only more cost effective but has proved popular with new tenants who are able to choose their own decoration schemes. In some cases, such as where property is intended for people who may not be able to decorate themselves, repainting will be completed.

It was recognised that where WPH is working with residents in high rise flats who are having to move as a result of decisions to close some blocks, such as from Flambards to Brackendale, it was important to make sure that everything was done to make the move as easy as possible.

Grounds Maintenance

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In responding to concerns about the new grounds maintenance contract, the Board and officers explained that a new contract was now in place and that a panel of residents had been involved in the decisions about the content of the contract and the selection of Sodexo as the new contractor. In response to a specific request to view the contract, David Rooke said that the Customer group had been involved in agreeing the main terms and they could see the contract if they wished although the detailed costs were commercially sensitive.

Ray Jinkinson who had overseen the selection and award of contract process with the tenants' group explained that the cost of the work was now less than in previous years despite a better specification although the closer attention to the contract had highlighted a number of areas where additional work was necessary to reach an acceptable standard.

A concern was raised that the interim contractor had started with old equipment and then acquired new machinery before the end of the temporary arrangement. This was a decision by the contractor and WPH did not pay towards the cost of new machines. Ray concluded by inviting more people to get involved with the on-going review of the new services to ensure that the standards are set for next season.

Heaters

In Brackendale, it was explained, some of the heaters seem to leave marks on the wallpaper and the question was asked if heat deflectors could be fitted to reduce this problem.

David Rooke explained that the heating system in all the high rise blocks that would be retained were due to be overhauled and refurbished as part of the improvement works and that this problem would be tackled by the technical design team. He also pointed out that WPH's mechanical and electrical engineering consultant working on the project was in the audience and would be making a note of the comment.

Service Charges

Linked to concerns about grounds maintenance, the issue of service charges was raised and this was noted as a subject for more debate during the coming year.

Why be a board director?

As a concluding comment from the "Ask the Board" session, Angela Green explained why she chose to stand as an independent board director and what

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she felt she could offer to WPH as a local resident who cared about local services and, especially, the importance of good quality housing. She said she would encourage others to get involved if they felt the same passion for excellent services.

Involving the Council

As well as tenant and independent Board Directors, the Council also nominates five people to WPH's Board and in order to explain more about what WPH does and how council nominees can play their part in governance, Jed Pearson and Brian Simpson invited Councillors to a separate morning briefing and also gave them the same tour as the company members.

And next year?

It is another 12 months until the next AGM but there did seem to be enthusiasm for another tour, perhaps with fewer sites and more detail so we will start planning next summer to reflect on what we hope to be successful 2009/10.

WPH Executive Management Team
2 October 2009