



CITY OF WESTMINSTER

CityWest Homes Task Group

NOTES

Notes of a meeting of the **CityWest Homes Task Group** held on **5th September 2018**

Members Present: Councillor Melvyn Caplan (Chairman), Councillor Paul Dimoldenberg, Councillor Richard Elcho, Councillor Adam Hug, Councillor Pancho Lewis, Councillor James Spencer and Councillor Paul Swaddle

Also Present: Tom McGregor (Director of Housing and Regeneration), Fergus Coleman (Head of Affordable Housing and Strategy), Sandra Skeete (Interim Managing Director, CityWest Homes), Andrea Luker (Executive Director of Strategy and Planning, CityWest Homes) and Eamon McGoldrick (Managing Director, National Federation of ALMOs)

1 Introduction and Apologies

- 1.1 The Chairman welcomed those present. Apologies were received from Councillor Mark Shearer.

2 ALMOs – Expert Witness

- 2.1 Eamon McGoldrick attended to provide an expert view of best practice with regards to Arm's Length Management Organisations (ALMOs). Topics covered included:

- ALMOs had recently started to want a closer relationship with local authorities.
- A number of ALMOs saw themselves as the council's first and preferred partner.
- ALMOs had expanded in to a number of fields such as development, homelessness prevention and services that could be delivered through the council's general fund. The type of work an ALMO undertook depended on local circumstances, for example in Nottingham the ALMO had entered the private rented sector to try to drive up standards.
- Some diversification by ALMOs had failed. Diversification was now usually done because of the local authority's wishes. Lessons are being learnt about not overstressing an ALMO's capacity and focusing on the core service of housing management.
- Benefits of an ALMO over an in-house housing management service included resident involvement at board level. This gives residents a

greater involvement in decision-making and makes use of their experience. Decision-making in an ALMO is generally quicker than in a local authority.

- ALMOs have generally addressed the reduction in social rents in the same ways as housing associations and local authorities. A key difference was that most ALMOs were used to being asked to deliver savings every year.
- The key issue with boards is making sure that board members are appropriately trained, mentored and supported. Ensuring the board has a diverse and appropriate skill mix is important, especially where ALMOs are undertaking additional activities. ALMOs should undertake annual governance reviews.
- Most areas had closed estate offices up to 10 years ago. Most councils/ALMOs had decided to do this to invest the funds elsewhere.
- The vast majority of ALMO boards have equal representation of councillors, residents and independent members. Some authorities had departed from this arrangement if for example the ALMO was part of larger group of organisations (Barnet) or if residents had been given more places on the board and councillors got involved via Overview and Scrutiny (Stockport).
- ALMOs had no advantage over local authorities concerning borrowing. Eight ALMOs were also registered providers, which do have additional borrowing powers.
- CityWest Homes (CWH) had always had a good reputation. It was seen as expensive but delivering good services.
- The characteristics of a good ALMO were:
 - Clearly defined relationship with local authority
 - Clear delivery plan built with the local authority
 - Clear framework of communication between ALMO and local authority
 - Good governance
 - Balanced clienting by the local authority
 - Positive relationship with residents
 - Housing management services at the core of the business
- Face to face interactions with residents were important, but there are a number of ways of delivering them. Estate offices can be one way of engaging with residents but they need to have a clear purpose and be efficient. Home visits are being increasingly used; mobile working can make this easier. Colchester Borough Homes had undertaken a door knocking exercise on all of their properties over 2 years; this helped provide useful feedback on services, updated contact details and identified a number of enforcement issues. Some ALMOs did similar exercises with all members of staff being involved as a way of helping back office staff understand frontline issues. Lewisham Homes is piloting a scheme where residents can contact a repairs operative directly.
- Contractors should be seen as part of the ALMO family and act as the eyes and ears on the ground for the organisation and be another point of contact.

- The National Federation of ALMOs was generally positive about the Government's Green Paper on Social Housing in particular the requirement to sell high value assets being dropped, the acknowledgement of the need to tackle the stigma surrounding social housing and the prospect of increased regulation, which the sector generally welcomed.
- Some Councils that have brought housing management services back in house have struggled to replicate the levels of resident engagement of an ALMO. There have also been issues for authorities that have spread the functions of an ALMO across several departments (e.g. putting rent collection in finance and resident engagement in corporate communications department).
- Mr McGoldrick firmly believed an ALMO needed to be led by someone with a housing management background.