

Better together

One, stronger organisation

Issue 2, April 2011



Owen Ingram, Chair of the Governance Implementation Group

Welcome to issue two of the **Better Together** newsletter which is written to keep residents informed and involved in the plans to bring together all the organisations across Somer Housing Group – that is Redland Housing Association, Shape Housing Association and Somer Community Housing Trust – into one, stronger organisation.

In this issue, we bring you up to speed with what is happening and why, and also answer some of the questions that have been raised by residents over recent months.

A brief reminder of what Better Together is about

Last summer Somer Housing Group asked whether we could be organised in a way that could give you – our residents – a better service and better value for money. We, with our consultants Campbell Tickell, talked to Board members, tenants and residents from each organisation and, following a detailed review, all of the Boards agreed in December 2010 to work towards becoming one single body and reduce the number of Boards down from four to one.

What's happening now?

The new Group Chair has now been recruited and is Roger Thomas (pictured), an experienced entrepreneur who has extensive experience in developing and managing businesses, both in the UK and overseas. He has specialised in business development, turnaround and restructuring, and brings Board-level experience in both the private and charity sectors. As the Chair of Valleys to Coast Housing Association, he led the Board of the first 'large-scale stock transfer' housing association in Wales. He also brings considerable financial and investment experience. Steps to set up and recruit the new, single Board for the whole Group are continuing and we expect to have this new Board in place by the autumn.



Work to become one single body is being led by a group of Board members with representatives from Somer Community Housing Trust, Redland Housing Association and Shape – known as the Governance Implementation Group or GIG. GIG is currently looking at the best legal route to go about consolidating all four organisations into one.

Because of our major house-building programme, we have large loans with banks and we need their consent before making changes to our legal structure. Getting that consent may take time.

In the meantime the aim is for the Boards to operate together and to look at how the management structure across Somer Housing Group could be made more efficient to help deliver better services to our residents.

What happens next?

In response to requests received from your residents' committees, we have set up a Residents' Governance Involvement Group (RGIG). This group of residents from all three organisations within the Group will, among other things, advise on the best way of seeking residents' views and taking forward the proposals. RGIG held its first meeting on 7th April. It selected John Richardson as its Chair and Kathleen Hovland as Vice Chair (pictured). At its next



meeting RGIG will be focussing on looking at the best ways of communicating with residents and of making sure that ideas and issues raised are taken into account by GIG.

We have created a detailed project plan so that we can make these changes happen and can be clear about the costs and the longer-term savings and benefits they must bring for residents.

We are continuing to talk to the many residents' groups, panels and committees across the organisation about this work. If you are involved in a residents' association or other group and would like someone to come and talk about "Better Together" at one of your meetings, please get in touch using the contact details in the section 'find out more' at the end of this newsletter.

We are also keeping our many other partners informed about these changes – such as local councils and house-building partners and our regulators.

How long will the process take?

We are aiming to have the Boards operating as one from the end of this summer. In terms of making changes to our legal structure, we are waiting for feedback from our lenders but would like to bring the organisations together next year.

How will bringing together all of the organisations in the Group benefit existing and future residents?

This is a question that the first issue of this newsletter looked at in some detail and is clearly a very important one for all residents. The new, single organisation structure will be more efficient to give residents a service that is more effective and delivers better value for money. Once in place, this will allow us to reduce duplication and invest more in the services residents tell us are their priorities.

Some of the benefits of working together are already starting to be seen. For example, we are making good progress on setting up a scrutiny panel – a new Resident Panel that provides independent and direct feedback about our services to our Board. The "Better Together" approach means too that we have been able to produce the first-ever single business plan for Somer Housing Group. We have also produced for residents a new Group-wide Home Standard which means that all residents can benefit from the same set of high standards for your home.

Will there still be residents on the Board?

There will be a new single Board which will have

four resident representatives of Somer Housing Group on it.

Will the tenancy agreement change?

Ownership of all homes would remain within the Somer Housing Group. On the coming together of Somer Housing Community Trust, Redland Housing Association and Shape into one organisation, the name of your landlord would change to become the name chosen for the new combined organisation. However we will not be changing the conditions of tenancy agreements or leases or rights of any of our tenants or leaseholders because of these changes.

What will happen to our offices?

There are no plans to close any of our offices and it remains as important as ever that we have offices and Local Service Centres in places that are convenient for you. We are already looking at ways to improve customer access and an early priority will be to improve the facility in Keynsham.

Will it make getting transfers easier?

There would eventually be one lettings and allocation policy and procedure across the whole organisation. This will make the process easier to run by staff and easier to understand for residents. The reality is that we still do not have enough homes to meet the need and it is unlikely that getting a transfer will be as easy as we, or you, would like it to be.

Will staff be made redundant?

The purpose of these changes is ultimately to improve the services we deliver to you and become more efficient during what are very tough financial times for all of us. Our front-line staff are critical in providing you with the services you need, so we are not anticipating any reductions although there may be at more senior management level. By sharing good practice across the organisation and working better together we expect to be able to improve the way we can deliver services to residents.

Find out more

We will continue to provide more information about these plans through future "Better Together" newsletters which will be sent to all residents. We are also publishing all this information on our Group website at www.somerhousinggroup.co.uk/bettertogether.

In the mean-time, if you have any questions, concerns or suggestions, please do get in touch with us by calling 01225 366370 or by sending an email to bettertogether@somer.org.uk.