

Shadow Board Members Experience

Learning and Issues

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Shadow Board Members Experience

Shadow Board Members and soon-to-be Shadow Board Members from 5 Local Authorities (Torfaen, Swansea, RCT, Monmouthshire, Newport) have met twice to share their experiences and discuss issues. These notes are an abstract of points of experience and learning discussed at these meetings; we hope they will be of value to others whether would-be Shadow Board Members, tenants, staff or Councillors.

Shadow Board Operation

- It's difficult to gel as a group, having to learn and to make decisions at the same time.
- Visits to other transfer landlords helped the Shadow Board to knit well.
- Being a Shadow Board is harder than being a board – responsibility without power! How much influence does the Shadow Board have when decisions are still with Council? Post ballot the influence will shift.
- Consultants largely driving the agenda initially but Shadow Board has now taken the lead. Don't be over reliant on consultants but lead yourselves.
- It's an immense challenge to get a large scale business off the ground.
- English based consultants are not necessarily up to speed about the Welsh context, it's important to question Business Plan assumptions and content.
- Business plans elsewhere have had to be rewritten in the first year after transfer. Stock Condition Surveys based on samples are often not thorough enough – need to challenge the 'experts' with local knowledge.
- Have to take a very, very long term view.

Staff Issues:

- It's hard to prove that the new organisation will be a good employer because the organisation and its policies don't yet exist – staff need as much reassurance as tenants.
- Staff need access to good quality accurate information regarding their future within new organisation. Using independent staff advisors (RCT) is very useful.
- Shadow Board needs to meet with staff Unions. One Shadow Board held successful joint workshops with Shadow Board and Staff. There is always room to generate more certainty for Staff.
- Many staff have found it valuable to meet the broad range of tenants, through door knocking, instead of just those with a problem.
- Staff used for information and contact work need thorough briefing, and more so if they are from outside the Housing Dept. and know less about the issues. Some Authorities used staff from outside Housing Dept. successfully, but had to explain to Unions about this.
- Important to brief all Local Authority and Health Authority staff who are in day to day contact with tenants about the basics of stock options/transfer to be able to answer simple questions or signpost to other information.
- Jobs in Community Housing Mutual organisations will be different and challenging because of the linking of housing with wider regeneration, and the need to be more accountable and transparent. Staff will need to be involved in the organisation as well as tenants. A huge culture change with demands for new skills training.

Working with Tenants:

- Ensure the process is run at the right speed for tenants – allow time for consultation; some members timetabling may have been too ambitious,
- It's important that tenants are involved together with Councillors and staff from the start - Tenants were invited to the first seminar with Councillors and been involved at all stages since then; had visits to other transfer Authorities.
- Face to face contact of Shadow Board Members with tenants is critical - individual contact has been an important part alongside paper information.
– though home visits raised many issues and repairs spend went up by £400k!
- Essential that Shadow Board members are known and accessible to tenants – Shadow Board Members have been involved in roadshows and contacted direct by many tenants.
- Some people feel staff were trying to persuade them for stock transfer, not just informing them.
- It's important to talk to and bring on board prominent individuals in the community.
- Sheltered housing tenants are not keen on door knocking, and contact work may be better left to supported housing officers in regular contact in sheltered housing. Better to fall in with existing activities such as coffee mornings rather than holding special meetings in sheltered housing.
- Sheltered housing tenants usually vote and so are a key target group.
- Tenants are more persuaded and trust more the experience and views of other tenants, so bring tenants from other Authorities to brief local tenants.

The Anti-Transfer Campaign

- Misinformation is difficult to counter and just a few people can create big problems.
- Anti campaign can just give headline grabbing messages but Shadow Board and Council has to be more detailed. This reinforces the need to keep the message simple.
- Press has been fair and balanced locally, but not the national Wales media. A lot of the anti campaign is misleading but the worst points are often ignored by tenants, though some areas of concern are seized on eg. what happens after the 5 year rent guarantee.

Information:

- It's a big challenge to explain the Community Housing Mutuals model and to make it work.
- It's difficult to set out the Offer Document to meet contentious issues – it's more a case of how to communicate points rather than changing Offer Document itself. Offer Document has to go into detail and it's harder to generate trust and confidence at a detailed level.
- DVD or video information was well received. Some Authorities used a celebrity as presenter, others felt this could put tenants off as too slick and used a local media person as presenter.
- When producing a video/DVD it may prove worthwhile to carry out some form of attitude survey both before and after releasing the material in order to assess the impact it has.

Community Housing Mutuals (CHMs):

Interpretation and structures vary:

- Membership in Torfaen includes residents of the area, but tenants must remain in the majority.
Membership in RCT is tenants and leaseholders only.
- Local management of housing services will be considered in RCT after WHQS is achieved in accord with tenant views expressed in options appraisal, but could be earlier in Torfaen if tenants choose.
- Accountability in Torfaen includes the option for the chief executive of the new landlord to attend the Local Authority Scrutiny Committee; Board meetings are open to the public and minutes freely available, except for certain confidential items.
Accountability in RCT is via Welsh Assembly Government regulation and inspection.
- Much more funding is needed for capacity building and participation to enable CHMs to function – 4 times the existing Council budget in Torfaen.

Regeneration:

- Community regeneration means different things to different people – get clarity of understanding.
- Procurement procedures need to be examined to be able to foster local procurement. Tensions for best value between the cheapest option and the most effective for regeneration.
- Funders of the landlord have been asked by RCT what added value they will offer in terms local business support and advice, not just a standard loan.
- There is a need to get the key messages about regeneration and new ways of working to other actors such as funders.
- Need to work on growing local capacity to enable local procurement – RCT have mapped what capacity and training there is locally.

Transfer and Assets and Services:

- Separation of assets, paths, lights, roads etc from the Council has many problematic issues.
- Service level agreements for IT, finance services, grass cutting etc have to be sorted out. VAT advice is a complex area needing specialist advice.

The Shadow Board Members Network is facilitated by TPAS Cymru, in collaboration with Inform 2 Involve and Community Housing Cymru.

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