



Making the best use of stock and support services at RCT Homes

This case study explores the way in which RCT Homes has modernised its sheltered housing and support services for older people. RCT Homes aims to provide excellent quality housing and services to help people remain independent in their own homes and live as part of their community. Since 2010, RCT Homes has carried out extensive reviews of its accommodation and services to ensure improvement works and



changes to the way in which it delivers support follow good practice guidelines, meet funding requirements and government regulations.

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Introduction

RCT Homes' sheltered housing stock was designed and built in the 1960's and 70's and was of its era with a mixture of poor quality bedsits, small one-bedroom flats and bungalows. Many of the schemes had shared bathrooms, poor accessibility, as well as outdated and unwelcoming communal areas. Demand was very low in some areas with long-term voids being prevalent in a number of schemes.

The introduction of the Supporting People programme, enabling residents to remain in their home with tenure neutral support packages, along with changing organisational aspirations, led RCT Homes to review its housing and support services to older people to ensure effective management of its assets whilst meeting the needs and aspirations of current and future residents.

A two stage approach was developed. Firstly, a review of its stock was undertaken through an options appraisal, looking at the design and condition of individual properties, communal facilities, housing demand, the locality and accessibility, and other providers in the area. Secondly, a review of its support service for older people was completed.



Stock review - Options appraisal

An independent assessment by Berkshire-based experts Ridge Consultants outlined works needed to bring the accommodation up to a high standard in order to match the support service, which was CHS accredited in 2010. RCT Homes had clear proposals for the future investment in complexes across Rhondda Cynon Taff.

When undertaking the options appraisal there were four basic questions considered:

- Is the scheme financially viable?
- Is there demand for the scheme?
- Is the scheme what's needed strategically for the Local Authority and RCT Homes?
- Are the needs and aspirations of residents being met?

If the answers were "no" to one or more of these questions alternative options were considered for the scheme.

Schemes were categorised in accordance with their long term viability and the action RCT Homes needed to undertake. The four categories were:

Green	Viable, popular sheltered scheme. Retain and improve.
Amber	Viable scheme but design issues leading to increasing letting difficulties in the current configuration. Retain and improve. Scheme requires priority investment.
Blue	Location and demand good but current scheme does not lend itself to redesign. Re-provide sheltered accommodation with redevelopment of the site. Consultation with residents and stakeholders.
Red	Location/demand/accommodation poor. Not viable for sheltered housing in the long term. No further long term investment, limited investment and essential maintenance only. Consultation with residents and stakeholders regarding options.

Implications for staff

The outcomes of the consultation exercise had implications for staff employed in the schemes categorised as blue and red. One-to-one consultations with staff affected were held and meetings with all staff were arranged to discuss the report.

Proposed investment

The investment proposal was all about making sure residents' aspirations and needs could be met in the future. Requirements were significantly higher than when schemes were first conceived.

Bedsits with shared bathrooms were to be remodelled with the aim of creating one and some two-bedroomed properties, providing a home for life so as people's needs and demands changed the property would adapt with them. In addition, RCT Homes wanted to ensure that complexes continued to be the hub of the community. The proposals ensured that schemes would be fitted with lifts, have improved access for people with disabilities and a major internal refurbishment programme resulting in modern homes, fit for purpose, remodelled and refurbished to meet Welsh Housing Quality Standards¹.

Partnership working

RCT Homes took a holistic approach to improving the quality of its accommodation and incorporated achieving the RNIB's Visibly Better accreditation² into its design. This ensured people with sight impairment were able to get out and about and enjoy their home. Much work has been done to make day-to-day living as easy as possible, such as improving colour contrast and signage encouraging tenants to participate.

RCT Homes involved partners from the outset and talked to the local Supporting People team, Older People's Services team and other providers such as RNIB Cymru to identify the wider support older people required to live independently.

¹ Welsh Assembly Government, *Revised Guidance for Social Landlords on Interpretation and Achievement of the Welsh Housing Quality Standard*, July 2008

² RNIB Cymru Visibly Better, *Designing accessible housing and buildings*

Consultation

Meetings were held at every complex to discuss the report and the proposed changes, renovations to their complex and their individual properties to ensure tenants were comfortable and understood the processes before works were started. Individual one-to-one took place with tenants affected to ensure that we are aware of their needs, concerns and fears to make the experience the best it could be.

RCT Homes witnessed a range of emotions after consultations and felt that the one-to-ones with tenants in their own homes, in addition to the group consultation events, were a fundamental part of the process to understand tenants' needs. In one instance, after being approached by a concerned relative whose mother had dementia and found change very unsettling, staff sat down with the family and worked out a plan to make the move as easy as possible. Photographs were taken of the existing flat, a flat with an identical layout was identified within the complex and the furniture was moved mirroring the old flat, using the photos for guidance.

Refurbishment

The first complex to have the refurbishment works completed was Bryn Ivor, Llwynypia. Prior to the work, voids were running at 50 per cent. A state-of-the-art complex providing 15 one and two-bedroom properties providing the opportunity of a home for life was achieved. The open and airy accommodation provides a great range of communal facilities and associated activities not just for residents but the wider community of older people.

RCT Homes has proudly achieved RNIB accreditation in four complexes with three awaiting assessment and twelve planned to be completed in 2014/15.

External Improvements



Modernised kitchens and walk-in showers





Two schemes have been decommissioned, redeveloped and redesignated as supported housing accommodation. Two further schemes are being demolished and rebuilt as new modern sheltered housing.

Modern communal lounges



Outside space

In addition to the main buildings, RCT Homes has also worked with residents on gardening projects. Tenants have linked with local volunteers and disabled gardening teams and what were once blank canvases of overgrowth are now vegetable plots, sensory gardens and relaxation areas where people can meet to socialise and enjoy a barbeque.



The key to the success of the Schemes has been the commitment and enthusiasm from all staff, tenants and volunteers involved.

Remodelling the support service

The sheltered service model included a full-time scheme manager based at each scheme with an out-of-hours service and mobile cover at weekends. The service was largely funded through Supporting People Grant and an intensive housing management charge.

A review of Supporting People by the Welsh Government in 2010³, led to a recommendation that older people's services be need and not tenure led. In partnership with the Supporting People Commissioner, RCT Homes revised the service model to incorporate service provision to older people in need of support, residing in the wider community irrespective of tenure.

The revised support service is fully funded by the grant allocation. Housing management services are funded from rents with intensive housing management elements funded through service charge.

Person-Centred Support

RCT Homes has delivered support to its sheltered tenants through personalised support plans since 2011. The plans can be monitored in line with the Supporting People outcomes framework. This element of the service operates within new grant requirements.

Service Approach

A team of support workers deliver housing-related support through tailored support plans agreed with clients that have identified goals and service outcomes. This service is tenure neutral.

Health and wellbeing teams are developing new initiatives; seeking opportunities to collaborate with Health and Social Care to improve physical and mental wellbeing of older people and identifying seasonal initiatives that improve general health and maintain independence.

Scheme coordinators deliver housing management and intensive housing management services across the sheltered housing stock ensuring that social activities and tenant engagement continues to thrive.

Out-of-hours service is covered by staff on stand-by that are contacted through a warden call system linked to a call centre.



Consultation

The transition for existing tenants was a concern for both RCT Homes as the landlord and the Local Authority as the Supporting People Commissioner. At the point of stock transfer there was a commitment from the Local Authority to maintain a scheme manager in all sheltered housing schemes.

³ Aylward, M, *The Supporting People Programme in Wales: Final Report*, 2010

The approach to consultation was to hold a scheme-based consultation event in each scheme and to leave a written consultation brief that encapsulated the discussion. This was supported with the offer of a face-to-face personal consultation discussion made available on request. Tenants were asked to provide a written response to the service proposal. The feedback from the initial consultation identified four key questions for tenants:-

- Why were we proposing to discontinue the scheme manager role?
- Who will help in an emergency?
- Why were we proposing to change a system that residents were happy with?
- Who will make sure the complex is secure?



These views were summed up by one resident in the Rhondda who wrote:

“I understand the need for change. In theory, streamlining the provisions into separate areas of responsibility could be more efficient and improve services. However, people have got used to having a scheme manager on site who can cater for all their needs. It gives peace of mind and enhances our quality of life.”

In response to these questions, RCT Homes explained that tenants will have access to a scheme coordinator who will work across a number of schemes and can be contacted by mobile telephone during the working day to give advice and guidance and to resolve any building related matters that are a cause of concern.

Piloting the service

The new service was broken down into geographical areas with six areas in total, with the pilot being rolled out over a series of months, allowing time between each phase to consider feedback from tenants and staff on the new service and implementing any changes needed. This ensured management and staff resources were available to enable a smooth transition, with capacity and flexibility to respond to unexpected issues. This approach was essential to maintain tenants' confidence in the new approach. Staff roles were made permanent and surplus staff released from this date.

Key learning

The changes to the accommodation and the piloting of the new service model has involved much research, discussion, planning and reviewing. The following were essential to ensure the new service was implemented successfully:

- Thorough planning to implement changes to existing services.
- Allowing sufficient time to consult, feedback and implement changes.
- Providing written information to tenants before meetings wherever possible so that they have time to consider and are able to discuss in meetings and to share with family/friends.
- Holding consultation meetings in groups that allow all tenants/residents to voice their questions or concerns. Meetings held in groups of ten or less allow tenants to talk, listen and understand.
- Offering tenants the opportunity of one-to-one meetings as many do not like to ask questions in groups, even small groups.
- Ensuring staff, colleagues and local councillors were aware of the changes planned and had the opportunity to contribute to the proposals.
- Being flexible with staff numbers in geographical areas so that staff can provide support where it is needed most.
- Meeting with tenants and staff throughout the pilot period to give support and pick up on “lessons learnt”.
- Continuing to meet with stakeholders and partners to tell them about the new service and explain the benefits of the service.
- Challenging processes for effectiveness and cost efficiency.
- Case studies – highlighting good practice
- When undertaking the options appraisal RCT Homes concentrated on consulting with existing tenants and missed the opportunity to look outward and consult with older people in other tenures to gain a more rounded view on what older people want.
- Tenants did not want to lose the daily call and thought and creativity was needed to develop scheme-based activities that bring tenants together in the morning to encourage tenants to contact staff if they had concerns about each other.
- Building the relationship with tenants and the new team – staff were introduced to tenants whilst the scheme manager was still on site, to handover personal details and share knowledge about the tenants.
- Publishing rotas and providing team photographs helped build confidence and ensured tenants could identify the new team members.
- Contractor access requires planning and engagement with repairs and asset management teams is critical.

Conclusions

RCT Homes has now modernised many of its sheltered housing complexes and has plans to complete all by 2016, providing self contained accessible one and two- bedroomed properties, with a range of modern communal facilities. The schemes are well managed with a team of scheme co-ordinators looking after them and activities and health and well-being initiatives are promoted with the schemes being hubs within the community. In addition, support is provided to older people who need it regardless of tenure.

Note

The views expressed are those of the author and not necessarily those of the Housing Learning and Improvement Network.

About RCT Homes



RCT Homes is a not for profit community mutual housing association that manages 10,200 properties in the borough of Rhondda Cynon Taf. It was formed following transfer of the housing stock from Rhondda Cynon Taf council in December 2007 and included 27 sheltered housing schemes. In addition to being a social housing landlord, it is also committed to supporting the economic regeneration and development of its communities.

Rhondda Cynon Taf, a large geographical area, with a population of 234,400, is second only to Cardiff of all Wales' local authority districts in terms of population size. It's a diverse area comprising a mixture of urban, semi-urban and rural communities. Settlements tend to follow the lines of the valleys with principal towns, such as Pontypridd in the South and Aberdare in the North. Around a fifth of the Rhondda Cynon Taf area is among the 10% most deprived areas in Wales and the majority of these areas are more deprived than the Wales average.



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Part funded by the Welsh Government, we are involved in knowledge transfer and innovation exchange on planning, commissioning, designing, funding, building and managing housing, care and support services for older people and vulnerable adults with long term conditions.

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