

OVERVIEW AND SCRUTINY



REPORT OF THE GREEN VALE HOMES TASK AND FINISH GROUP

BACKGROUND

In late June 2003 the Government launched guidance for local authorities on the appraisal of options available to meet the Decent Homes Standard.

The Government required all local authorities that own housing stock to submit their option appraisal for sign off by the Regional Government Office by July 2005.

In 2004, a report was taken to Cabinet asking them to recommend the outcome of a Home Choice Housing Stock Options appraisal becoming the policy of the Council. It was agreed to recommend to Full Council the approval of the housing stock transfer as a preferred option and a formal application was made in November 2004.

In July 2005 Green Vale Homes provided a set of commitments they would make if the transfer went ahead and in March 2006 the Council transferred its housing stock to Green Vale Homes.

Following an internal review across all Registered Providers within the group Together Housing Group Board was formed to act as a Parent Board. While this review looks at the proposed amendments to Green Vale Homes the role of the Together Housing Board will have a significant impact in the future.

INTRODUCTION

Rossendale Borough Council has two Council representatives on Green Vale Homes' Board of Directors. These representatives are nominated on an annual basis, confirmed at the Annual Council Meeting in May.

There are planned changes to the governance arrangements at Green Vale Homes and therefore one of the primary objectives of this Task and Finish Group was to gain an understanding of what this would mean to Rossendale Borough Council and more importantly Green Vale tenants.

It was suggested that the most appropriate way to ensure the good relationships that currently exist between Green Vale Homes and its tenants would continue, should the proposed governance arrangements change, was to establish a Task and Finish group to look more in-depth at the changes within Green Vale Homes (GVH).

The group had its first meeting in September 2014 and agreed that there was a need to consider lots of information from the initial transfer of stock and GVH's commitments to tenants and the borough, to their most recent Action Plan and both Green Vale Homes and Together Housing Group's proposals for the future.

SCOPE OF THE REVIEW

The following terms of reference were agreed:

The review will focus on three areas:-

a) Governance:

There are to be huge changes to the governance at GVH and therefore the group want to look at the following:

- To explore the possible new governance arrangements.
- To look at what this could mean to the Council and Rossendale residents.
- The relationship between the Council and GVH going forward under the new proposed governance arrangements.

b) Operations:

Operational structures have also changed and the group need to look more in-depth to find out what has changed and how GVH can influence and work with the Council and vice-versa.

c) New Build Developments:

To look at issues around new developments in terms of consultation and communication.

Witnesses to support the task and finish group were as follows:

Councillors Jackson and Procter – Board Members of Green Vale Homes
Jenny Duthie - Citizens Advice Bureau (CAB)
Council Officers – Rebecca Lawlor, Cathy Lord
Mandy Whittaker - Neighbourhood Manager, Green Vale Homes
Frances Clark, Head of Green Vale Homes
Amanda Garrard, Group Director of Neighbourhoods, Together Housing Group
Steve Close, Chief Executive, Together Housing Group
Ian Clark –Group Director of Strategy and Communications, Together Housing Group

What we want out of the review

To get the best for our residents in Rossendale, especially those elderly and vulnerable residents by:

- a) Consolidating our existing relationship with GVH.
- b) Highlighting areas where the evidence suggests that service delivery may fall short of that desired.
- c) Making positive recommendations for change, where appropriate.

The task and finish group would present their findings to representatives of the Together Housing Group and GVH Officers at the final meeting prior to the report being sent to Cabinet and Together Housing for a formal response.

1. WHAT WE FOUND OUT

1.1 Citizen's Advice Bureau

A representative from the Citizen's Advice Bureau (CAB) attended the meeting to provide information on clients attending their service in relation to GVH. The CAB is an independent and impartial organisation and their view is that they had seen deterioration in the service offered from GVH since they joined the Together Housing Group (THG). The CAB has five main areas of concern and they had found it difficult for tenants to make formal complaints for fear of losing their home. The CAB representative stated that they found the THG website was not user friendly in relation to its tenants and how to make a complaint.

Members heard in detail the five main concerns which the CAB receive in relation to GVH, which are detailed below.

1. Policy and Procedures regarding rent arrears. The Bureau Manger has requested details of these but to date nothing has been provided from Green Vale Homes. The CAB stated that they had clients who say they feel intimidated by members of the Income Generation Team calling at their homes without prior arrangement regarding rent arrears. Also GVH tenants who have rent arrears and have been served 'Notice Seeking Possession' are being referred to CAB for debt advice when an application for a Discretionary Housing Payment may have resolved the problem and could have been done by GVH staff. This ties in with point 2 below.
2. Income Maximisation – CAB see a lot of GVH tenants who are not in receipt of their full benefit entitlement. Do they have a policy of income maximisation for their tenants? Are all new tenants offered a full benefit check when they sign up for a tenancy? If there are rent arrears again is benefit entitlement looked into.
3. Anti-Social Behaviour – poor response to complaints about anti-social behaviour to the extent where the victims of the behaviour have been forced to move. One couple have told the CAB that they felt they were given no support by GVH when they found themselves being harassed and intimidated by a neighbour.
4. B-With-Us Applications – the length of time it is currently taking to process an application is not acceptable. Some clients are in desperate need of re-housing and having to wait up to 10 weeks for their application to be processed so that they can start to bid on properties. This causes a lot of distress to some of the CAB clients.
5. 'Rent Up Front' Policy – The CAB would like a response from GVH regarding their policy on Rent Up Front. The CAB cited a case of a client who was an existing GVH tenant on Housing Benefit being told she would have to pay a week's rent in advance, in order to downsize into a smaller property because of under occupancy. When the CAB raised the matter on behalf of their client they were told that as a one off this ruling would be waived in that case. Their concern is of this is still being applied to other people in those circumstances.

At the meeting on 12th March the Officers from Together Housing Group gave detailed responses to the 5 points above and it was agreed there was a need for improved dialogue with the CAB. It was agreed that there

need to be regular meetings between the CAB and GVH to ensure these types of concerns would be picked up earlier.

1.2 Neighbourhood Management – GVH

The Neighbourhood Manager from Green Vale Homes explained her role which included Estate Management and Customer Relations, having responsibility for a team of seven Housing Officers, each having responsibility for approximately 500 properties, with the Bacup Officer having responsibility for 350 properties.

Neighbourhood Projects

There were a number of neighbourhood projects which the GVH team were involved in, as follows:

- a) Estate events, such as clean-up campaign and support to other agencies such as Seniors Together in Rossendale (STIR) and the Haslingden Street Fair.
- b) Anti-social behaviour, working with Anti-Social Behaviour Risk Assessment Conference (ASBRAC) to provide a multi-agency approach to Anti -Social Behaviour (ASB).
- c) Delivery of Citizenship programmes in primary schools throughout the Borough.
- d) Working with other statutory agencies, such as children centres and social services.
- e) GROW project – working with young people to achieve employment.
- f) Young Warden Scheme operating in Bacup.

They also work on a number of health projects throughout the Borough.

Through the Newground Charity GVH offer two types of grants for supporting neighbourhood activity, these are:

- a. A small grant - of up to £1,000 which groups can apply for by completing a short form. The grants are for GVH tenants and must provide benefits to tenants on the estate.
- b. A larger grant - which comprises a more extensive form that has to be completed to include detailed information about the project and it must be something that is self-sustainable.

Over half a million pounds has been invested into Rossendale by the Together Housing Group's Newground charity since 2013. Neighbourhood Officers also work with the Independent Living Team and support tenants when various issues arise. They also signpost and refer tenants to the CAB, Welfare Rights, Credit Union and Help Direct.

All applicants for properties complete an 'Affordability Check' to ensure they can afford to take up the tenancy and the check includes some welfare benefit and debt advice, if appropriate.

They carry out a visit between 4-6 weeks of a new tenancy starting. In addition all 'starter' tenants are visited 9 months after their tenancy has commenced. These are undertaken by Neighbourhood Officers, Support Officers and Income Recovery Officers by both appointment and cold-calling basis. They also have a 'cause for concern' system in place whereby repair and gas technicians can raise concerns they may have regarding a property / people / animals. This would see a follow-up visit undertaken by a Neighbourhood Officer.

Welfare Reforms

There are approximately 350 properties across the borough classed as being 'under occupied' and therefore subject to 'under occupancy charges'. Many of these tenants have opted to be re-housed in smaller accommodation, some still remain and pay the under-occupancy charges, with others are falling into arrears due to the 'under-occupancy charges. For those who have fallen into arrears, they are offered welfare benefit advice to ensure that the tenant is maximising their income benefit and also assist them to obtain discretionary housing payment, if appropriate.

If a tenant was eight weeks in arrears then as a housing association they can apply for deductions direct from a person's income support, although the tenant has to agree to this.

In relation to Universal Credit, if the tenant falls into arrears and they owe eight or more weeks rent arrears, GVH can apply for the rent to be paid direct. If the tenant was already in several weeks arrears before commencing Universal Credit or there was a suggestion that the tenant may be vulnerable, then an Alternative Payment Plan could be granted by the Department of Works and Pensions to pay the rent element of the Universal Credit directly to the landlord. Each case would be considered by the DWP on an individual basis.

'Rent Up Front'

All new tenants or transferring tenants are required to pay one week rent up-front irrespective of their income source. Prospective tenants are informed of this as soon as an offer of accommodation is made. The purpose of this is to promote a 'rent first' culture. This can cause concern where tenants applying for housing benefit will not receive a housing payment for the first week if they have not moved in, so there is a potential for those claiming housing benefit to

be in arrears for the first week. However, paying one week's rent up-front will ensure that this is not the case. If the tenant receives housing benefit for that first week then they will be reimbursed for the week that they paid 'up front'. This up-front payment is not a bond, but covers their first week's rent.

The task and finish group heard from the CAB that a client who was an existing GVH tenant on Housing Benefit had been told she would have to pay a week's rent in advance in order to downsize into a smaller property even though she was within a GVH property and would be responsible for two homes but only entitled to Housing Benefit on one for one week. In this case GVH agreed as a one off to waive the ruling in terms of provide a week's rent up front, but CAB raised concern that this was still being applied to other people in similar circumstances.

GVH's Response

GVH confirmed that if a tenant is transferring between GV properties they are not required to pay what would in effect be a second weeks rent in front as part of the transfer conditions.

Complaints

GVH aim to deal with complaints at the first point of contact. This can be through a Customer Service Officer, Housing Officer or any other member of staff.

If it isn't dealt with at the first point of contact or the customer is not satisfied with the outcome, then their complaint would be escalated to Stage 1 and be looked at by the Service Manager. If the complainant is still unhappy, then the complaint would progress and be looked at by the Head of the Service area.

The Green Vale Homes Board receives regular reports on complaints and at the time of writing this report they were reviewing their complaints policy and procedure.

- 1.3** The task and finish group received a presentation in December 2014 from the Head of Green Vale Homes and also the Group Director of Neighbourhoods which detailed the following:

The Green Vale structure was divided into two areas

Local Services

Neighbourhood Management
Rent Income
Supported Housing

Group Services

Community Regeneration
Repairs
Asset Management
Development

In relation to rent income, the turnover was quite high for GVH and therefore they want to focus on this going forward as they want tenants to be more sustainable.

1.3.1 Performance

- In 2012, re-let times on properties were down to 17 days, whereas in 2013/14 this had increased to 33 days, although this has reduced recently to 25 days.
- Rent collected was £99 out of every £100, although there could be future challenges with the Welfare Reforms and Universal Credit roll out.
- 17,000 repairs reported over the 2013/14 financial year.
- 50,000 calls to customer services over the 2013/14 financial year.
- In Rossendale 420 property re-lets over the 2013/14 financial year.
- £4.2m improvement scheme.

1.3.2 Allocations and Lettings

- On average there was a turnover of around 420 (12.4%) properties per year, with the target being 10%, so there was work that needed to be undertaken to reduce this rate – it costs on average around £2,500 to re-let a property once a tenant has left.
- There are 1567 applications for Rossendale on the Housing Register across Pennine Lancashire.
- There are 923 applicants out of 1500 who are not making bids for properties – one reason being is that the Choice Based Lettings service is hard to access. GVH confirmed that this is being upgraded.
- There are 626 (40%) applicants on the register for Rossendale that need to be re-housed. Concern has been raised around the time taken to be on the register before applicants can bid but improvements have been made to ensure that customers are registered within a week of the application coming in.
- The average private rent for Rossendale is £469 per month (Helmshore and Haslingden) whilst Bacup rents are approximately £370-£380 per month.
- The B-with-Us website could be more user friendly and there will be an upgrade in April 2015.
- The new build schemes currently taking place in the valley are for Rossendale people only and are not opened up to applicants from Pennine Lancashire, at the request of RBC.

Concern was raised by the task and finish group about the number of people on the B-with-Us register who were not bidding on properties (923 of 1500 applications), and whilst members were told that this was because of the

complexity of accessing the service, there is a need to establish how many were on the register that no longer want to move. A periodic review of the register is undertaken by writing to people who have been on the register a long time. Both the Council and GVH provide support for people wanting to bid for properties. It was also noted that work is due to commence with GVH and RBC's Strategic Housing Team to look at the system and how properties can be better marketed.

The CAB raised concern about the length of time taken to process an application, with some clients in desperate need of re-housing having to wait up to 10 weeks for their application to be processed delaying their bidding for properties. The follow up response from GVH was that this had been an issue but measures had been put in place to address this and turn around was within one week.

1.3.3 Anti-Social Behaviour (ASB)

GVH dealt with 225 cases in the last year, with 92.6% of the cases resolved. Most cases were about noise nuisance and 12 cases were referred to the Courts for such things as drug-related issues and harassment.

The group were informed of the new ASB, Crime and Policing Act 2014 which contained a variety of measures to protect the public, including ASB, giving more powers to tackle ASB, which provides better protection for victims and communities which acts as a real deterrent to perpetrators and gives victims a say in the way their complaints are dealt with.

The CAB felt that GVH provided a poor response to complaints about ASB, to the extent where the victims of the behaviour have been forced to move home. One couple told the CAB that they felt that they were given no support from GVH when they found themselves being harassed and intimidated by the neighbour.

GVH's Response

GVH considers this to be somewhat of a generalisation based on a case that they were not aware of, though they do acknowledge that these are the views of CAB with regard to complaints about ASB. GVH has set up a dedicated ASB team and a contract with Smile Mediation Service to assist with ASB issues.

Members also raised concerns about the 'state' of some estates where tenants were failing to maintain a standard to the exterior of the property such as untidy gardens, tired fencing, litter / clutter etc. which can form a nuisance to other residents on the estate.

1.3.4 Supporting People Cuts

GVH were notified by Lancashire County Council that they had cut the Supporting People budget to GVH by 62% from April 2015. There is a

possibility that there will be zero supporting people budget from 2017, which will impact on the services GVH can provide. This has provided an opportunity to carry out a fundamental review of the service that GVH offers for those tenants receiving extra housing support. GVH is currently considering a number of service options for the future which could include charging for some services offered as part of this extra housing support.

All tenants identified as needing support are provided with a Careline Alarm (450 out of 700 supported people having an alarm). This service will remain and will be funded from the reduced Supporting People funding.

At the present time some tenants also receive visits from Supported Housing Officers between 1 - 5 times per week. Following consultation with tenants it was apparent that some tenants do not require a weekly visit and this is something that is being looked at further in order to meet the cuts imposed through loss of grant.

1.3.5 B-With-Us Allocation Letting Scheme

Following Government's publication in 2005 of the 'Sustainable Communities: Home for All – 5 year plan' all housing authorities were tasked to have in place a choice based letting allocation scheme by 2010. For Pennine Lancashire the B-with-us Scheme was the agreed method of letting social and affordable housing offered by Housing Associations as a transparent way of allowing applicants to bid for preferred properties, whilst ensuring those with greatest need get quicker access through a system of priority banding.

The choice based lettings scheme operates through a shared web based IT system, centrally administered and co-ordinated through Twin Valley Homes, as agreed by the B-With-Us partner organisations of which Green Vale Homes is one.

The system allows customers to have an understanding of their housing situation, enabling them to make the best choice from a full range of housing options available to them by offering a 'bidding' system.

The system is an integrated one which provides applicants, applying for housing, to be supplied with details of available or vacant properties within Pennine Lancashire, so that they can make an informed choice as to the most suitable location, tenure and type of housing which they wish to pursue.

The information on the B-with-Us website, on available homes, is updated on a weekly basis and applicants may choose up to five homes in each advert cycle.

Homes appear on the website at 12am on Thursday morning and are available for bidding until just before midnight the following Tuesday. The allocation process starts on Wednesday and they aim to contact the successful customer within five working days.

The advert tells you the landlord, location, size, rent and other features of the property to help you decide which homes are right for you. The advert also tells you if there are any special requirements that the customer must meet, such as a local connection etc.

Feedback from CAB, Council Officers and users felt that B-with-Us was a very complex website. This has been reflected by GVH own review of customer experience using the website (summary is provided in Appendix A) and they are acting on this feedback; and looking to upgrade the system in early 2015.

Proposed Governance Changes

Amanda Garrard of Together Housing Group informed the task and finish group that the Together Housing Group Board were reviewing their group structure because it was apparent that it was overly complex and not proving an efficient and effective way of governing the Group. This has been commented on by other stakeholders including the lenders to the Group and the Homes and Communities Agency. A review had been undertaken during 2014 on the existing governance and scrutiny arrangements across all the boards, including the skills of Board Directors.

It was felt that over recent years the local board agenda for GVH has become dominated with corporate issues duplicated at the Parent Board of Together Housing Group Board rather than a focus on local issues affecting GVH tenants.

In October 2013, there was a Board Away Day, asking the partner boards to look at the involvement of members and governance arrangements and how they would like to see the structure of the organisation going forward. The results of the away day were to have a structure that:-

- Provides excellent services.
- Maximises delivery of new homes.
- Enables effective governance.
- Provides value for money.
- Ensures effective local influence in decision making.
- Provides an excellent tenant voice.

Tenant's input was seen as a key factor and through the proposed governance structure this would be enhanced by the further development of a Local Scrutiny Panel to look at the services of the group, working alongside officers.

The task and finish group asked the Chief Executive and Group Director to attend a meeting to provide the task group with more detailed information on the proposed governance structure within the Together Housing Group.

2. Proposed Governance Structure

The new proposal is that the governance structure would change to one parent board with strategic control. This would be made up of twelve members, six existing independent members plus six new members elected from the existing Boards on a skills basis against a skills matrix. Their responsibility would be corporate governance, including strategy, financial management including resource allocation, planning and high level performance management.

An Operating Committee would oversee the social housing business. This would have up to 12 members appointed from across the Group's operating areas. This committee would work with a coordinating scrutiny committee which will represent the local scrutiny panels to ensure services are delivered effectively and efficiently at local level. The scrutiny panels will be made up of tenants from the localities. The Operations Committee would also manage the social housing budget, develop an annual investment plan and oversee its delivery.

At a local level there would be 'area panels' made up of local people and agencies within that locality who would oversee performance and other local issues and needs.

The aim of these local panels is to have a flexible approach and recognise that one size does not fit all so they would be constituted in a way the local area panel would want it to be. They would operate outside of the governance structure, to look at local issues such as the investment programme and development opportunities. It would be serviced by Together Housing and include where appropriate membership from councillors, tenants, local businesses and statutory services etc.

Running parallel to this governance review would be a review of the group's legal structure. The proposal being considered is for the partners to transfer their homes and associated loans etc into the charitable parent hence creating a stronger organisation with greater flexibility which can do more than the individual partners can. There is a lot more work to be undertaken in the next 12-15 months to prove a business case. The formal changes in legal structures would need to prove value for money, be consistent with the objectives detailed above and would go out to consultation and would take a while to implement.

The GVH Board has suggested that two representatives from the existing board would sit on the Operations Committee. The proposal also suggests that one representative from the Parent Board would sit on the Operating Committee.

THG have drafted an initial 'Commitments to Rossendale' which will look to provide reassurance to the Council around its commitment to investment and maintenance of resources within Rossendale for its tenants.

NEW DEVELOPMENTS- Together Housing Group's Commitment to Rossendale Borough Council

- 3.1 During 2011-2015, there was a programme to build 51 homes at a cost of £5.3 which includes:
- 16 homes at Ashley Court, Whitworth.
 - 12 homes at Mytholme House, Waterfoot.
 - 20 homes at Bacup Hub,
 - 3 homes at Broadway Haslingden.
- 3.2 There was also a further commitment to build 16 homes at Burnley Road, Rawtenstall and second phase of four homes at Broadway Haslingden at a cost of £2m, for delivery during 2015/16. The total units for 2011-2016 will be 7. This compares to the 58 units built from 2007-2011 pre the Together Housing Group.
- 3.3 Additional development funding has been secured to develop more homes throughout the Home and Communities Agency (HCA) 2015-18 programme. However, sites have yet to be identified within Rossendale.

4. CONCLUSIONS

- 4.1 Whilst the task group members were impressed about most elements of the way that both GVH / THG manage their housing stock, they felt there were areas which could be improved upon. Members felt that more could be done in the way that GVH communicated with applicants and the support they provided for those on the B-with-Us scheme. The waiting list itself caused concern as it was felt that although there were 1500 on the register, it was unsure realistically as to how many were genuinely still waiting on the list, which could reflect on the actual housing need or were not actively bidding due to mis-held beliefs around allocations.
- 4.2 The task and finish group were not clear as to whether the Choice Based Letting scheme supports all people fairly, according to priority, demographic and ability to use the system (is the system simple, and is adequate support available?). This is a key area of work for GVH and the Council in order to ensure an equitable service,
- 4.3 As there is no policy around 'Rent up Front' it came across as confusing in terms of existing GVH tenants wanting to upsize or down size and therefore providing a consistent and equitable process.
- 4.4 Together Housing Group provided specialised staff members at all events to be on hand to give advice on energy use, energy suppliers, financial inclusion issues and welfare benefits.

- 4.5 The task and finish group welcomed the continuation of the estate walkabouts, but asked that all Ward Councillors are made aware of when they take place and are invited to attend if they so wish.
- 4.6 The task and finish group were impressed at the work of the Neighbourhood Officers and the projects they deliver for their tenants.
- 4.7 The CAB raised concern about the length of time taken to process an application, with some clients in desperate need of re-housing having to wait up to 10 weeks for their application to be processed delaying their bidding for properties. We heard from the Head of GVH that improvements have been made to ensure that customers are registered within a week of the application coming in.
- 4.8 Information was requested in relation to those older people who have never been entitled to housing benefit, but as rents rise could be entitled to it. Is there a system in place to ensure that these people receive financial checks to make sure they can still pay their increased rents.

GVH's Response

At the meeting on 12th March it was confirmed that the rent income team have welfare benefit skills as well as financial inclusion staff members and a credit union worker

- 4.9 Whilst the task and finish group welcomed the commitment to keep developing within Rossendale, concern was raised that sometimes GVH do not attend planning meetings and input in this area was not as good as it could be.

GVH's Response

At the meeting on 12th March it was confirmed that any development is now done through the RTB Partnership. This means it is unlikely that someone from GVH will attend planning meetings and is more likely to be someone from the RTB Partnership. There was a one-off instance in the early days of the partnership of no one attending a planning meeting from RTB due to mix up in diaries.

The recommendations below were discussed with the Chief Executive and Group Director of Strategy and Communications within the Together Housing Group at a meeting on 12th March.

Whilst almost all the recommendations were accepted, they provided comments to some, which are highlighted below as appropriate.

5. RECOMMENDATIONS

- 5.1. That the task and finish group receive an undertaking that the Council will continue to have representation on the Operations Committee or Together Housing Group Board, once proposed changes to its governance arrangements are in place. Also, that GVH / TGH provide a Member Briefing to the Council on the proposed changes before the Council makes its decision.

Comment from Together Housing Group Officers

Councillors are eligible to sit on both, but both are to be recruited for skills rather than representation. This fits with the HCA's requirement to see skills based boards. The Operations Committee does allow for 2 nominations from the current GVH Board which could include councillors. We can give an undertaking that councillors can sit on the Local Panel.

- 5.2. That THG ensures that they work with the regional B-with-Us partners, including other housing associations and district councils to provide a more simplistic and effective B-with-Us system to ensure appropriate allocation of social housing to applicants, especially those with the highest need and this is undertaken in partnership with the Council who are a partner to the choice based lettings system.

Comment from Together Housing Group Officers

It's not within THG's gift to make unilateral changes to B-with-Us. We agree changes will need to be made, but this needs to be done in agreement with B-with-Us partners.

- 5.3 Due to the fact that the B-with-Us register could be inaccurate, the task and finish group queried how policies could be set or demand for social housing calculated with appropriate data to rely on, and asked GVH/THG to ensure the register is kept up to date more often
- 5.4 The Council would welcome the opportunity of undertaking a marketing exercise with GVH on how we can assist in improving the allocations system.

- 5.5 That there should be increased publicity to those tenants who need extra support, to ensure they are aware of the various agencies who can support them.
- 5.6 That the Council consider a targeted neighbourhood campaign, possibly on STAN, to encourage people to search out the best deals and help them switch energy supplier.
- 5.7 That contact details of all Councillors should be provided to GVH to ensure they are offered the opportunity to attend their ward estate walkabouts.
- 5.8 That the Community Regeneration Team of GVH extend the Young Warden Scheme beyond Bacup.

Comment from Together Housing Group Officers

The Young Warden's Scheme was running at Bacup Family Centre one evening a week and had been well attended by 8-11 year olds from Thorn estate. They do things around how to be a good neighbour, keeping the environment tidy. This finished in February as the intention was to try and get new people coming through the doors but that never quite happened, but there is scope for us to learn from this programme and develop one which could be rolled out elsewhere such as Edgeside and Stacksteads. We will be picking this up with the Communities Team but our preference would be to develop a scheme for older children and one that could prepare them for having a tenancy linked to the pre tenancy work.

- 5.9 The task and finish group would suggest that 'Rent Up First' policy is produced and is circulated to support agencies. The task and finish group would also suggest that existing tenants who wish to move to another GVH property are exempt from a further rent up-front payment.

Comments from Together Housing Officers

This is not a policy in its own right. It is part of our approach to rent and welfare reforms changes. We can make our rent income policy available to key partners such as the CAB. We also agreed that it was inequitable to charge existing GVH tenants who move to another GVH property, and would look to ensure that this does not occur in the future.

- 5.10 That GVH ensure they provide improved co-operation and look to a better working relationship with the CAB, who are there in an advisory / support capacity for the people of Rossendale.

- 5.11 Whilst virtually all of the GVH properties are at a Decent Homes standard, there are a few properties which are subject to review as to whether or not to re-invest in the stock, such as Greenfield Gardens. Whilst recognising the financial implications of such decisions, we would recommend an urgent review of such properties to ensure that tenants are re-housed or that properties are brought up to Decent Homes standard as soon as possible.
- 5.12 In relation to individual schemes we are aware that investment decisions do take time and therefore the task and finish group suggest that a working group be established, consisting of GVH and Council Officers, Local Councillors and tenants to consult on schemes for reconfiguration / redevelopment such as Greenfield Gardens and to be in place as a rolling programme to consider problematic schemes.

Comments from Together Housing Officers

GVH has a detailed Asset Management Plan and schemes will be appraised as part of this plan. We would of course consult tenants and councillors on any major changes and recommendations, but the final decision would be for the GVH Board to make (in future the Local Panel and Operations Committee).

- 5.13 That further discussion around finalising a Commitment for Rossendale is undertaken between TGH and Council Officers.
- 5.14 That joint working protocols are established with Rossendale Borough Council and the Police around new ASB Legislation to make a positive impact on neighbourhoods.
- 5.15 That Together Housing provides a Briefing to Members in June 2015 on the proposed governance changes.
- 5.16 That GVH continues to have regular dialogue at Overview & Scrutiny level with Rossendale Borough Council.

The Overview and Scrutiny Committee will monitor progress with implementation of these recommendations, subject to acceptance by the Cabinet and GVH/THG to determine the beneficial impact on local people.

6 Appreciation

Thanks to the members of the task and finish group and everyone who participated and supported the task and finish group in this piece of work.

Councillor Roy Knowles, Chair of the Task and Finish Group.