



RYKNELD HOMES LTD
Report to Board
Date: 15th September 2020

Report of Head of Business Development

Area Housing Office Consultation

RECOMMENDATION

- 1.1 That Board notes the feedback from the Area Housing Office consultation.
- 1.2 That Board ratifies its 22nd June recommendation to NEDDC for the permanent closure of the Area Housing Offices.

REASONS FOR PROPOSAL/REPORT

- 2.1 To provide Board with the feedback at the end of the Area Housing Office consultation period - 13th August 2020.
- 2.2 The 1,658 customers who used one of the Area Housing offices in the 6 months prior to lockdown were written to directly and invited to comment on the proposed closure and potential future arrangements. The survey was also forwarded to 274 Customers who form the Digital Involvement Group for a response.
- 2.3 The Consultation questions and a feedback form were also made available on RHL's website.
- 2.4 Posters with details of the proposal, feedback forms with pre-paid envelopes were made available at 51 locations (shops, leisure centres, community centres) across the district. The consultation has also been advertised on Facebook and Twitter. See Appendix One.
- 2.5 In both the north and the south of the district 20 Drop-in sessions to support customers and provide opportunity to consult.
- 2.6 Consultation meetings were held with the Parish Councillors of Clay Cross, North Wingfield, Dronfield and Killamarsh.
- 2.7 **Summary of Responses**
- 2.8 Only 312 people responded to the 1,658 letters that were mailed out. 81% of customers did not respond. For consultation outcomes see Appendix Two.
- 2.9 Of the 312 responses only 72 people said they could not pay rent/access services whilst the offices were closed – this is less than 1% of total tenants. Of the 72 customers who said they were unable to access services 41 have actually made

rent payments. The survey included a free text box so customers could make comments. Of the 148 comments received, 62 preferred the offices to reopen.

2.10 89 people responded to the online survey. 66% said they used the offices pre lockdown. During lockdown 89% said they were able to access services.

2.11 Following the consultation meetings, the majority of the Parish and Town Councillors understood the reasons for the proposal. However, there was concern for more elderly/vulnerable residents whom they felt were reliant on the offices. The Clay Cross members promoted the consultation through a Derbyshire Times article. The parish council members were keen to work with RHL/NEDDC to explore continued use of the office for housing enquiries (excluding payments) – especially given the term of the lease arrangement.

2.12 The key points to support the recommendation are as follows:

- The transactional cost (pre Covid) of a rent payment through the AHO was £8.89 compared to £1.77 at the Call Centre. This will become more expensive and represent less value for money post Covid.
- The social value for a small number of customers who would prefer to continue to use an area office is minimal compared to the ongoing annual savings that could be re-invested to provide people with better homes.
- A meeting with NEDDC Revenues and Benefits Team, highlighted a similar experience in terms of Council Tax payments. Where there has been a drop in income collection this has been due to customer's furlough/financial difficulties rather than the lack of an area office. The small number of customers that do require additional help to access services can be adequately supported through bespoke home visits by RHL staff.
- The welfare calls made by RHL staff during the Covid period has been enormously well received by customers. This service can be continued with added home visits to support the small number of customers that need additional support to access services.
- Should the Council decide to close the offices, Rykneld Homes Community Involvement Team and Financial Inclusion Team would deliver a programme of projects to support any customers who need help to access services. This will include:

- **Online how-to videos to pay online + use website**

To be sent via link to customers email/smart phones or accessed through website.

- **Implement regular drop in sessions**

Sessions would be once a week with future frequency determined by demand. When NEDDC closed the Eckington Area Office, RHL provided drop-in sessions at the Eckington Community Centre until the attendance levels dropped to one or no visitors for each advertised session. Our Community Involvement Team deliver and attend a number of multi-agency events each year across the district. Support

would continue to be provided at these events, with new events introduced to provide support where a demand is identified.

The sessions would be delivered so people can come and make enquires and collect relevant literature. Specific officers could be invited if we see a pattern of questions, such as homeless or financial inclusion enquiries. IT equipment would be made available for people who might want to use online services who don't have their own equipment.

- **Support for Housing Applicants**

Applications can be posted to Pioneer House.

Applicants can visit Pioneer House.

Our Choice Move Team and Neighbourhood Support team will make home visits.

Our Community Involvement Team and Choice Move Team will be part of drop-in sessions to support any customers to access services.

- **Support for Homeless Applicants**

Our Community Involvement Team and Choice Move Team will arrange drop-in sessions to support any customers to access services. NEDDC staff could attend the advertised drop-in sessions to support homeless applicants. RHL staff would always support applicants at any such event.

The AHO's are not the main hub for providing the support for homeless applicants – this is the Councils Homeless Team at Mill Lane.

Homeless applicants could get a Homeless Application from NEDDC offices such as Dronfield and Eckington Leisure Centre in the north, and Sharley Park, Clay Cross and NEDDC, Mill Lane, Wingerworth in the south. Forms could also be made available at other community facilities.

- **IT support sessions to help people use Rykneld Website**

Either in group or 1 to 1 support sessions.

- **Increased promotion of locations to pay in local area**

In the specific locations of the 4 Area Housing Offices these are:

Clay Cross 6 current alternate payment locations:

Post Office, 42 High Street, Clay Cross

Post Office, 101 Pilsley Road, Danesmoor

Post Office, 55 Harewood Crescent, Holmgate

Payzone, Paul News For You, Market Street, Clay Cross

Payzone, Smiths Creamland Ices, High Street, Clay Cross

Payzone, Danesmoor Mini Market, Pilsley Road

North Wingfield 3 current alternate payment locations

Post Office, 14 The Green, North Wingfield
PayZone, Alma Convenience Store, 2 Alma Rd, North Wingfield
PayZone, Wingfield Store, 77 Station Road, North Wingfield

Killamarsh 4 current alternate payment locations

Post Office, 28 Bridge Street, Killamarsh
PayZone, Killamarsh News, 205 Sheffield Rd
PayZone, Rai Convenience Store, Delves Rd
PayZone, Stop n Shop, Cherry Tree Drive

Dronfield 3 current alternate payment locations

Post Office, 73 Chesterfield Rd, Dronfield
Post Office, 3 Barnes Lane, Dronfield Woodhouse
Payzone, Holmsdale Convenience, 69 Holmsdale Rd

- **Increased promotion of alternate payment methods**

Contact Centres, Direct Debit, Payzone, Post Office, Customer Portal (Website), Automated Phone line

- **Signpost to voluntary sector where issue identified**

Links CVS, Befriending services, Royal voluntary service

- **Re-introduce my money and me workshops**

Targeted at people who currently use AHO's. CIT would facilitate the workshops with a member of the financial inclusion team.

We can identify who currently uses the service and target them specifically through a mail out or telephone contact. Using this information, we can identify the barriers that will prevent them using alternative payment methods and develop a solution.

- The more detailed discussion with the Involved Customer Group members adds more context to the responses. It's clear that those who have moved to another payment method would not switch back to the AHO's if they were to reopen.
- Only 54 Customers attended the 20 drop-in sessions and only 1 provided feedback the rest attended for a range of reasons including reporting repairs, housing application support and bus pass renewal etc.

2.13 See Appendix 1 for further detail.

OPTIONS CONSIDERED

- 3.1 Do nothing – option not chosen, RHL will either provide additional support to help customers access services where required or the offices will re-open.
- 3.2 Re-open the offices at an annual cost of £684,000 per annum.
- 3.3 For the Council to agree a value for money cost threshold for each transaction (payment and enquiries) at the Area Offices. This is currently £8.89 each time a customer visits an office. Each year there is a declining number of customers visiting the office – as new customers opt to pay by DD. Given the number of customers that have moved to alternate payment methods during Covid, the £8.89 will increase if the offices are re-opened. A VfM threshold could be set to trigger a future review – for example, if each transaction cost the Council £15, then the consultation and review could be re-run for the Council to reconsider.

FINANCE, VALUE FOR MONEY & SOCIAL VALUE

(PLEASE INCLUDE ANY PROCUREMENT ACTIVITY REQUIRED)

4. The expensive transactional cost (pre Covid) of a payment through the AHO at £8.89 Vs Contact Centre at £1.77 will even more expensive post Covid. (Appendix Four).
- 4.1 The cost of keeping the offices open is £684k per annum and does not provide value for money to customers.
- 4.2 Staff redeployment – possible job losses and exit costs of c£80k.
- 4.3 The lease costs of the offices are Clay Cross £12,000 (paid to the Parish Council), Dronfield £5,000 (paid to NEDDC, North Wingfield £7,825 (Paid to the Parish Council).
- 4.4 Homelessness and Council Tax enquires/payments are Statutory General Fund services, these should not be subsidised by the HRA. Over half of the AHO enquiries relate to GF services which are currently provided by RHL staff. The proposal to close the offices will resolve this financial anomaly for NEDDC.
- 4.5 NEDDC staff could attend the advertised drop-in sessions to support homeless applicants. RHL staff would always support applicants at any such event.

LINKS TO THE BUSINESS PLAN, PERFORMANCE AND COMPLIANCE

- 5.1 Make People our Priority – the consultation included all the stakeholders impacted by the proposal regarding the Area housing Offices.
- 5.2 Deliver Efficiencies through Innovation – the AHO proposal would deliver efficiencies because customers have already moved to alternate payment methods/enquiry access channels during the Covid19 lockdown.

DECISION/DISCUSSION*

*DELETE AS APPLICABLE

Item ...

5.3 Invest in Homes and Communities – the proposal could deliver substantial annual savings which could be reinvested in NEDDC housing stock improvements.

RISKS AND IMPACT

6.1 There are no risks associated with the consultation feedback.

EQUALITY [How does the proposal(s) in this Report have regard to:]

7.1 An equality impact assessment is completed as part of the proposal and appended as Appendix Three.

HEALTH & SAFETY (H&S)/ HUMAN RESOURCES (HR) / ICT

8.1 H&S : There are no health and safety issues arising from this proposal.

8.2 HR : A re-deployment and redundancy process would follow any closure decision.

8.2 ICT : There are no ICT issues arising from this proposal.

COMMUNICATION AND CONSULTATION ISSUES

9.1 The outcome of the consultation included in the final report to NEDDC for decision re the AHO proposal.

SMT Report Approved

(to be signed by the Managing Director or Director of Property Services & Development during SMT)

Submission to Board for Discussion/Decision

(to be signed by the Managing Director or Director of Property Services & Development)

Name

Signature:

Date:

Yes

No

Date of Board Meeting:

For more information contact:

Background Papers:

List of Appendices:

Appendix One – Posters and Feedback form.

Appendix Two - Area Housing Office Consultation

Appendix Three - EIA

Appendix Four - Transactional Analysis