



PARTNERSHIP PROPOSAL

*Update for residents
September 2007*

In the last issue of HOME, we gave information about a proposal for Westlea to form a new partnership with Oxford Citizens Housing Association (OCHA). We explained the different ways in which residents could tell us what you thought of the proposal and make your voice heard.

Since then, a lot of you have done just that! We held a series of question and answer sessions at various events during the summer including at the 'Communities and Partnerships' event, District Forum Community Get-togethers and Disability and Older Persons' forums. We also included a freepost comments card with the last HOME and have since followed that up with a telephone survey of residents. Our residents District Forum have been considering all the feedback that's come from this consultation and have produced a report, with independent support from the Tenant Participation Advisory Service.

We believe that this partnership will mean that we can provide better services, build more homes and save money. Over the next few pages, you will find more details of what residents have told us they think – as well as a reminder of the main questions and answers about this proposal. ►

Q&A

Here are the answers to some of the questions you may have about the proposal.

Why are we doing this?

Forming a partnership means that we can provide better services, build more homes and save money. We can use this money to build even more homes that are affordable for local people. We need to grow to get funding and to be able to compete with other, larger housing associations and private developers. We can achieve a lot more together than we could by ourselves.

How will this affect residents?

Not very much at all. You will still talk to the same people that you do at the moment. We will still rent out homes and repair homes in the way that we do at the moment.

What will the new organisation be like?

Westlea and OCHA will still operate under their own names and with

their own identities within the new group. We don't know what the group will be called yet, but altogether it will have about 350 employees and 9000 homes.

Who are OCHA?

They are a housing association who provide over 2,800 homes in Oxfordshire. They are very similar to us – they rent and build homes. Like us, they are also very focused on excellent customer service and community development. You can find out more from their website: www.ocha.org.uk

Where will the offices be?

Our main office will still be at Methuen Park in Chippenham, and you can still visit us here. We are looking at opening another smaller office in Swindon because of the increasing amount of work we are doing there.

When will it happen?

We are doing a lot of preparation work now. The Housing Corporation (our government regulators) have to approve our plans, and then our shareholders vote to say whether it should go ahead or not. This should happen before Christmas. The formal partnership would then start in April 2008.



OCHA had a stall at the Communities & Partnerships event in June (left top) and consultation included 'video box' comments for a DVD; Westlea's resident District Forum has considered all the feedback from residents (left bottom and inset) and produced a report for the Board.



Westlea's resident District Forum officers discussed the partnership proposal with staff as soon as it was announced in May which has meant active resident input from day one. The process has been mirrored at OCHA with similar resident consultation.

In May, Westlea's Chief Executive spoke to the District Forum about the proposed partnership and took part in a question and answer session. Following this, a consultation plan was discussed and agreed with input from District Forum members.

Residents and senior staff from OCHA were welcomed to Westlea's Communities and Partnership event in Corsham in June. OCHA had a stall displaying information about their housing association and residents from both organisations were asked for their views and filmed for a DVD.

Also that day, Westlea District Forum member Paul Jones asked residents for their thoughts in a face to face survey. He found that majority either thought it was a good idea or had no strong opinion – but some residents were sceptical and most wanted to know more details. A strong theme was that "It's a good idea – if service does not diminish" and that it would be "Alright as long as Westlea keeps promises to tenants and are honest with us".

Residents continued to ask lots of interesting questions as we shared the news of the proposal. Many of these early questions were included – with answers – in the last HOME magazine. A feedback card was also sent out with the last HOME, with 20 of these being returned. And residents were also able to get many more questions answered in the weeks that followed. One of the main ways this

happened was through Westlea's Chief Executive attending most of the resident meetings and events organised this summer. He was at the Disability Forum on 23rd June when 55 residents attended; on the 10th July he also attended an Older Persons Forum meeting which 43 people attended; and went to another Older Persons Forum on the 17th July which 39 people attended. An open discussion about the proposed partnership followed by a question and answer session took place at all of these meetings. The same thing happened at the District Forum-organised 'Community Get-togethers' on 25th June and 2nd July, with comments and suggestions fed back to the Management Board.

Some of the questions asked at these meetings included: "What will this mean to all the tenants - will anything change?"; "Will it [the partnership] make it easier or more difficult to get repairs done?"; and "Will it be possible to move to Oxford and vice versa?". There were also concerns about services becoming too remote and losing the individual touch. In response, tenants were told they should not notice any great change as both Westlea and OCHA would continue to exist as part of the new group, with the same frontline staff you know now. Details about housing transfers will be agreed as the proposal is developed further, but things like how quickly repairs are completed will not change as they are delivered to standards set out by the government.

Residents have asked how savings will be made in the new group. These are expected to happen by having fewer senior staff – one chief executive for the Group, not two – and by combining some of the shared support services like Finance, IT and Human Resources. At the four open sessions for the Residents' Business Plan in July, a question was asked on how people wanted any savings to be spent; the clear response was for more new homes, supported by improved homes and services.

Another key part of our resident consultation has been a telephone

survey, carried out in August, which contacted 595 residents. The majority of residents (57%) said they had heard about the partnership proposal and 84% said they did not have any further questions or comments. On a scale of 1 to 5 (with 1 being the most negative and 5 the most positive), 94% rated the proposal as 3 or above; 59% rated it 4 or above. In terms of how they would like to see any savings spent, those giving the views in our telephone survey agreed with the view of those at the resident business planning sessions: if it happens, residents want to see the new partnership result in more new homes and even better housing and maintenance services than they get now.

There has been a majority in support of the proposal in principle from those who have been contacted and are aware of the proposed partnership. The residents District Forum has worked with TPAS (the independent Tenant Participation Advisory Service) on a report on the consultation process and they will now present their findings to the 'Shadow Board' which has been set up to plan and prepare for the new group if it is given the go-ahead.

Keeping you informed

There is not room on these pages to publish all the results of our consultation with residents. But all of the reports and findings mentioned in the article above are available on at www.westlea.co.uk/ocha and can be requested by contacting Neighbourhood Involvement on 01249 466163.

Although the formal resident consultation period has now ended, and the feedback we have received has been reported to our Board, we still welcome any further comments from residents; contact us on 01249 465465 or email enquiries@westlea.co.uk We will publish another update in the next issue of HOME – and will get in touch before then if there are important developments that we need to tell you about.

Senior staff appointed to run proposed Group

Part of the work to prepare for the proposed group has been to appoint a 'Project Board' and 'Shadow Board' to oversee the different stages. These groups are made up of senior staff and Board representatives from Westlea and OCHA.



During the last few weeks, interviews have been held for the post of Group Chief Executive Designate and other senior posts including Westlea Managing Director and OCHA Managing Director. After a rigorous and transparent recruitment process, David Ashmore (pictured) has been appointed as Group Chief Executive Designate; Ann Cornelius as Westlea Managing Director Designate; and Andrew Smith as OCHA Managing Director Designate. These posts will have 'Designate' included in their titles up until the new Group actually comes into being (which of course is still subject to approval by our regulator and our Boards and shareholders). Dave and Ann will also continue in their current posts at Westlea until then.