

TAUNTON DEANE BOROUGH COUNCIL

SPECIAL EXECUTIVE AND COUNCIL MEETING – 13 NOVEMBER 2006

ADDENDUM REPORT OF THE HEAD OF HOUSING (HOUSING TRANSFER CONSULTATION CO-ORDINATOR)

PROCEEDING TO HOUSING TRANSFER BALLOT

(This matter is the responsibility of Executive Councillor G Garner)

Executive Summary

This report should be read alongside the main report to Special Executive and Council. In that report, a further update was promised as to the results of a telephone survey carried out on our behalf.

This report includes the results of that survey, together with some assessment of what its implications are for the Council.

1. Purpose of Report

- 1.1 To update Members on the results of a telephone survey carried out by SMSR (an independent market research organisation) on the Council's behalf, so that these can be taken into account in deciding whether the Council wishes to proceed to Stage Two (ballot of all tenants).

2. Background

- 2.1 As Members will be aware, one of the major objectives for the Stock Transfer Project has been to raise awareness of what stock transfer is, and what it would mean to tenants. The process is one where a detailed model has been developed by central government, with clear and detailed guidance for each Council to follow. Because of the need to be able to demonstrate strict objectivity, Councils invariably have appointed external specialist advisers to support the complex process. Input from both government and the advisers has therefore assured transparency and accuracy in all material which this Council has published during the stock transfer process.
- 2.2 We have emphasised since the Council embarked on the project that the decision of whether or not to transfer the housing stock to a Housing Association would not be the Council's, but would be firmly a matter for the tenants themselves to decide. Thus, the reason for such emphasis being placed upon the need for a full understanding of what is inevitably a complex process. Whilst the Council has reached its own conclusion as to what is in the long-term best interests of tenants, it has committed itself to a "You Decide" approach to the taking of the final decision. So – when opinion testing has been carried out over the months, it has been primarily to help us assess how well we have achieved that "awareness raising".

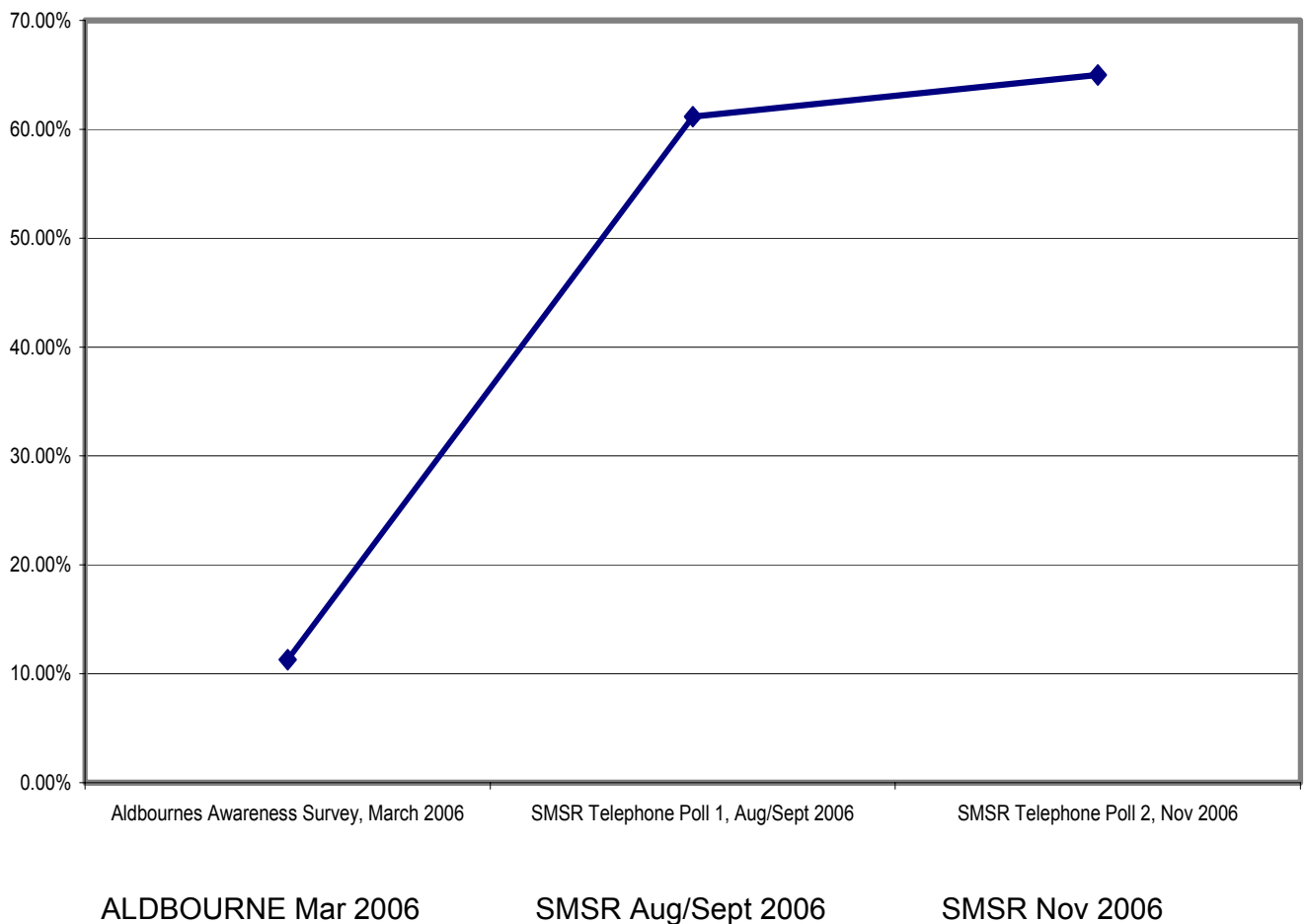
2.3 Amongst the threads being tested have been:

- Awareness of the project and its implications for tenants
- Areas where further information is desired
- Particular concerns that tenants have
- Voting intentions

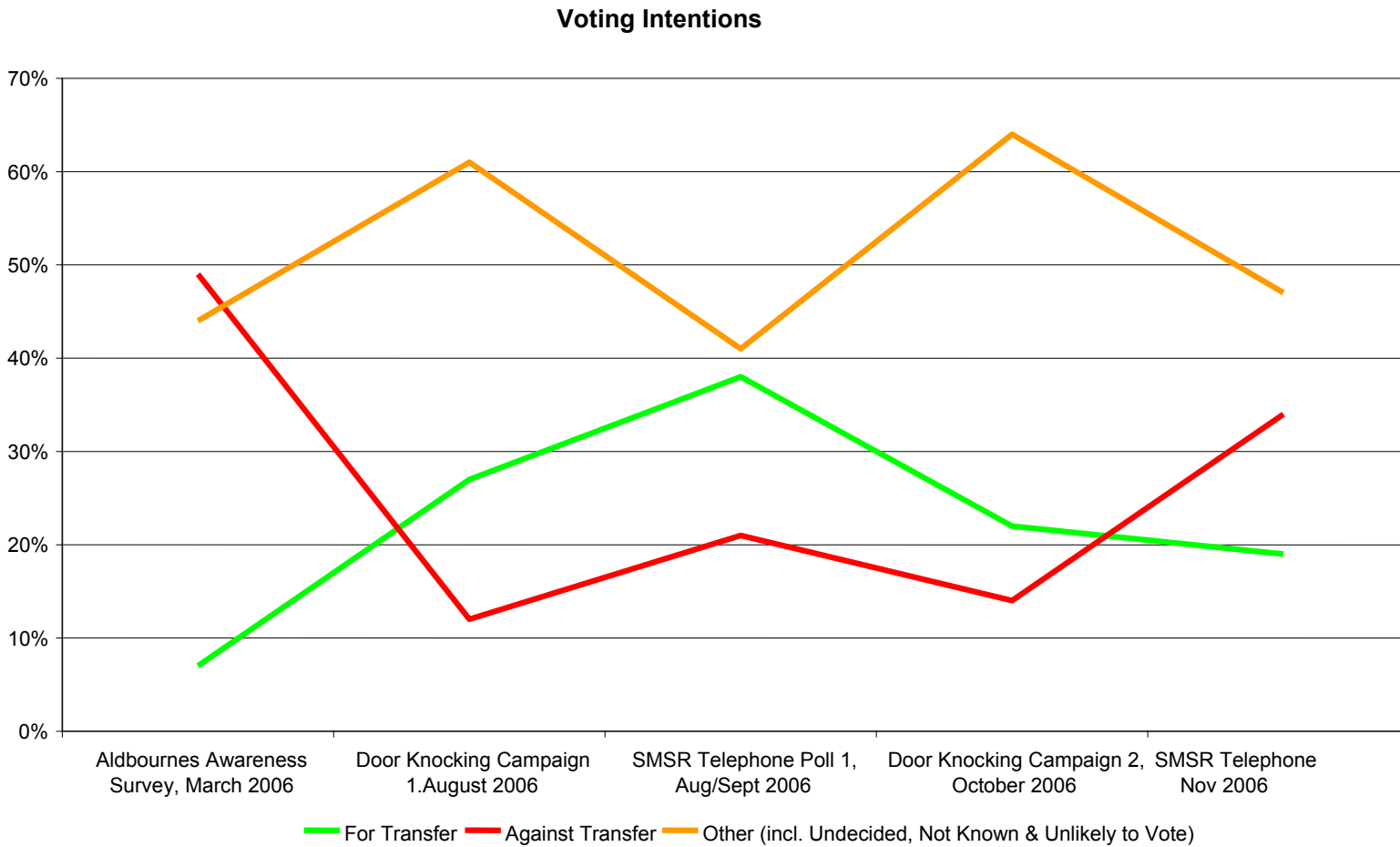
2.4 Set out below are the results of that opinion testing carried out over the last year – either by professional surveys or by our own staff “door knocking”.

The first is as to levels of awareness of the project and its implications:

Tenants Fully Aware of Transfer Process



The following shows the results of opinion testing as to voting intentions:



The awareness aspect shows a steady and satisfactory pattern, which does demonstrate that our aims of ensuring that tenants are fully aware of the issue before them has been properly met.

Until now, voting intentions have also shown a steady trend, with a reducing level of “don’t knows/won’t reveals” and a consistent majority of those who were in favour of transfer, over those who were not. But, that trend has now sharply reversed with the recent SMSR opinion testing. The 10% telephone sample which they conducted now shows a sizeable majority opposed to the transfer, and with an increased number of respondents unprepared to give their voting intentions. Whereas in September, SMSR found 38% in favour of the transfer and 21% against, now there has been a reversal of the trend with 19% now in favour and 36% shown to be against.

3. Assessment

3.1 This unexpected reversal in a firm trend presents the Council with a real dilemma as to whether it should, indeed, now proceed to the formal tenant ballot under Stage Two.

3.2 The Advisers' Views:

We have sought the advice from the Council's external advisers – Price Waterhouse Cooper (Lead advisers); Pinsents (legal); and The Bridge Group (communications). We have also sought guidance from Government Regional Office. Their unanimous view is that:

- The survey results point to the near certainty that the tenants as a body will reject the stock transfer.
- They believe, however, that the work done in raising the level of awareness amongst tenants, as to the process and its implications for tenants, have been successful and have reached an acceptable level.
- Their advice, consequently, is that the Council does not proceed to a Stage Two ballot.

4. What then are the factors which the Council should take into account?

4.1 Validity of survey results

The change of direction in voting trends is quite contrary to previous surveys – including the door knocking carried out by our staff. Inevitably, such a telephone poll of 10% of the tenants is only a partial snapshot, and cannot guarantee that that will be the outcome of the formal vote of all tenants. However, having discussed the outcome with SMSR and with our advisers – all of whom have had experience in such stock transfer projects – the consistent view coming back is that the results are valid, and do point firmly towards the presumption that a full ballot would also produce a “no” vote.

4.2 The cost of a Stage Two ballot

The cost of employing the Electoral Reform Society to carry out a ballot on the Council's behalf is £14K; if the Council does not proceed to Stage Two, then that £14K would be saved.

What also needs to be taken into account in assessing the financial consequences is that, if the Council were to withdraw from the expected ballot at this stage, then a good deal of work would still be needed in order to explain to tenants why this had happened – through the further use of our Consultants, and of PR, newsletters/letters, drop-in sessions and free-phone.

4.3 Commitments

We have told our tenants that it will be they who will make the final decision as to the future management of their homes. This has been emphasised by the use of the “You Decide” logo, and by the commitments made by the Council throughout the project.

In assessing the likely reactions, it is also clear that there would be disappointment amongst staff that a full vote amongst tenants was not to be pursued. Staff have approached the project with considerable energy and enthusiasm, with an exceptional level of commitment to the many hours which have been devoted to raising awareness amongst tenants as to the nature of the choice before them. Having seen what the consequences of what a “no vote” would have on the quality of the service which can be provided for tenants – there would be a clear disappointment were that important decision to be taken at this stage based upon this opinion sample. They are also very conscious of the often stated desire amongst tenants to let them now vote on the issue.

4.4 How then would a withdrawal be viewed at this stage?

Many tenants would clearly see this as a sensible way of saving £14K of public money. Those who opposed the transfer would, no doubt, also be glad that the process had been stopped.

On the other hand, however, there is clearly a sizeable body of tenants who believe that the future levels of investment in their homes do depend upon a transfer to Deane Housing. If we were to pull back at this stage, there will also be those who would feel that the Council has reneged on a firm promise that this plan would be finally disposed of – one way or the other – by a vote of all tenants. As our inability to meet the Decent Homes Standard starts to bite, then there will inevitably also be questions raised by tenants as to the credibility of a 10% telephone sample forming the foundation for such a crucial decision by the Council.

5.. Summary

- The result of the SMSR survey as to voting intentions has come as somewhat of a surprise, and runs counter to the trend that has been shown over the course of previous opinion testing.
- The awareness of the process itself has now reached a level which is nevertheless acceptable to our advisers and to GOSW.
- We must accept the advice of our advisers that it is very unlikely that a full vote of all tenants will produce a different result.
- The financial costs of holding the ballot are approximately £14K.
- There are, however, a range of other factors which the Council must also weigh in the balance in deciding whether it wishes to proceed to a full tenant ballot at Stage Two.

6. Conclusions

The options now open to the Council are:

- (1) Proceed to Stage Two of the formal ballot of our tenants (as previously recommended), or,
- (2) Postpone a Stage Two ballot (not recommended), or,
- (3) End the Stock Transfer Project at this point without going to formal ballot.

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Executive Summary

The report comes to the Exec and to full Council at the end of the formal consultation period with our tenants as to Stock Transfer. It is for the Council to now decide on whether to proceed to “Stage 2” - ie to a ballot of tenants as to a transfer to Deane Housing Ltd.

1. Purpose of Report

- 1.1 To seek agreement from the Executive and Council to proceed to balloting tenants as to the transfer of the housing stock to Deane Housing Ltd. Formally the ballot is known as Stage Two of the Housing Stock Transfer Consultation.

2. Background

- 2.1 Members will not need reminding that for the last 20 months or so, the Council has been consulting its tenants, partners and others over the possibility of transferring its housing stock to a new, independent housing association – Deane Housing Ltd.
- 2.2 On 13 September 2006, the Executive and Council decided to proceed with Stage One of the formal process. This involved sending out the Offer Document, a DVD, a summary and an introductory letter to every tenant. We also sent a letter of notification to all our leaseholders.
- 2.3 As members will appreciate – all documents such as these which the Council has circulated during the process - have been formally approved as to their accuracy and fairness by our advisors. In the case of the Offer Document, this together with the “Promises” it contains, has also been contributed to and agreed by the tenants’ bodies and by the Shadow Board of Deane Housing. All publications relating to the consultation are verified by the Housing Corporation, Department of Communities and Local Government, Government Officer of the South West and all our advisors including the tenants’ independent advisors.

- 2.4 Throughout the process it has been essential for us to test out how successful we have been in getting the issues across to our tenants in a clear way on what is such an important issue for them all.
- 2.5 Before the Offer Document was sent out on 9th October we employed an independent market research organisation (SMSR) to carry out a telephone survey of a 10% sample of our tenants. The results of this were that around 38% were in favour of transfer, 22% were against with the remainder (40%) as yet undecided or, in a few instances, not going to vote.
- 2.6 This was a considerable advance on previous testing carried out at the beginning of the year when awareness of the issues involved were found to be at a much lower level.
- 2.7 To further raise awareness of the Offer Document, and to emphasise the key role for tenants in deciding the future of their homes, staff have again been “door knocking” over the last month. This has also given each tenant the opportunity to raise any concerns or questions as to the Offer and as to the process. It has also provided the chance to outline the consequences that we see in a “no” vote. We have also held drop-in sessions and attended meetings, coffee mornings and various events to help with this understanding.
- 2.8 However clearly this is done Stock Transfer will never be a simple concept to describe. So it is unfortunate that various letters and articles have appeared in the press which seem designed to counteract the good work and clarity that has been achieved during the Council’s consultation campaign.
- 2.9 Our role has been to respond objectively and accurately to such misinformation. This we have done by re-emphasising the crucial and unarguable facts ie – that a “no” vote would indeed mean an inevitable cut in services and in the posts which provide those services - due to the shortfall of £1.85m per annum needed by the Council to meet the “Decent Homes Standard” by 2010/11. We have also reinforced the unchallenged fact that a “yes” vote would ensure no cuts but would instead produce an extra £6m pa to spend on tenants’ homes, estates and services.

3. Current Situation

- 3.1 Door knocking has been completed. SMSR are carrying out another 10% telephone survey, the results of which will be available to help inform discussion on 13 November.
- 3.2 The responses from tenants to the Offer Document have been examined to see whether issues have been raised which would require any changes to be made. During this “Stage One” consultation some 209 reply cards were received covering a range of issues. What is clear is that tenants felt the offer document properly covered all the issues. Tenants asked that as well as the postal ballot, could a telephone voting system be incorporated. This has been arranged subject to the stage two decision to go ahead to ballot. Tenants also wanted reassurances on rent, rights, protection of future generations,

price of homes and improvements to services. These will be included in our next newsletter. Consequently there are no additions or changes to the Offer which need to be notified to tenants - if the Council decides to progress to "Stage Two".

- 3.3 We have made provisional arrangements for a ballot to be conducted by Electoral Reform Services who would handle the entire procedure independently from the Council. If the Council agree then the ballot will proceed immediately with the results being delivered before Christmas - as projected.

4. Financial Situation

- 4.1 The ballot, "door knocking" and all the costs of the Housing Transfer Consultation work are within the approved budget.
- 4.2 Should there be a "yes" vote then the procedure for formalising the transfer and its associated costs will need to be reported to a meeting of the Council for the necessary decisions to be made. A further special meeting has therefore been provisionally arranged for the evening of 19th or 20th December. Details of this will be confirmed to members in the next few weeks

5. Conclusion

- 5.1 We are now entering the final stage of this lengthy Stock Transfer consultation. This has been aimed at ensuring that the Council and our tenants are at one over what they would wish to see from their future housing service. It has also sought to ensure that what is being offered on the one hand by Deane Housing and on the other by this Council, are fully understood by tenants. It is now for the Council to decide whether or not to proceed to "Stage Two" of the Housing Stock Transfer - the ballot of the tenants.

6. Recommendation

- 6.1 The Executive and Council are recommended to proceed to "Stage Two" of the formal Housing Stock Transfer by carrying out a ballot of our tenants on whether Taunton Deane Borough Council transfers its homes to Deane Housing Ltd.

Members will be updated at the meeting should any further information be received since the drafting of this report which would affect this recommendation.

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