

Councillor Eleanor Jackson

Chair of the Housing and Major Projects PDS Panel

Members of the Cabinet

You have before you the relevant extract from the Minutes of the PDS Committee for Housing and Major Projects concerning recent developments in the relationship between B&NES Council and the organisation formerly known as Somer Housing and now calling itself 'Curo'.

To understand our grave disquiet at the report presented to us by Graham Sabourn, the Director for Housing about 'Curo' and the re-structuring process going on there, you have to go back to 1999/2000 when an independent, not for profit housing association was set up to manage the Council's housing stock. It was designed on a tripartite system: tenants/councillors/housing executives of the new organisation. The ratio put 5 councillors on the board, but over the last decade that was reduced to 3 and then to one. The Council still possesses a 'block vote' or veto at the AGM.

Despite the close relationship which has functioned fairly well as far as the benefit to residents is considered, we now have a unilateral divorce because now even that single voice is to be removed.

Some elements of the re-organisation can be commended: to bring together five associations into one with streamlined management is clearly a good thing, indeed highly necessary in today's world. However, we feel that there is going to be a loss of transparency and accountability precisely at the point when the organisation is needed more than ever to drive forward the delivery of housing for the homeless, when affordable rented property is need and so on. The changes need to be for the public benefit. The process whereby the Core Strategy is ratified is stalled because the Planning Inspector says that there insufficient provision for housing in B&NES so it is crucially important that Somer/Curo improves its delivery to 2015.

Some changes we, as a council, are powerless to prevent. The rise in rents to 80% of the market rate will hit tenants hard in an area of high rents. We cannot do anything about new tenancies being limited to six years, which will hit chronically vulnerable families in this area and elsewhere. But other matters I would call on the cabinet to use their powers to arrest.

As a PDS Panel we urgently want an effective way to communicate public concerns to the heart of Curo, which at the moment looks very much as though it is set to sail away into the sunset and become a purely commercial operation.

Cllr Eleanor Jackson Chair of the PDS Panel for Housing and Major Projects.

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