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Date: 23rd April 2020

Dear Councillor Meredith,

Thank you for your letter dated 27th March 2020 and received by RBH on 20th April 2020.

As we have previously explained, we have been working very closely with senior Council officers since 2016 to develop a positive way forward for College Bank and Lower Falinge. This joint working is based on a shared commitment to ensure that this town centre neighbourhood provides good quality homes that meet the needs of local people, now and in the future. This is about taking the right decisions to support our shared long-term commitment to Rochdale.

Senior Council officers leading on Housing, and Planning and Development have sat on the partner steering group for this work since 2016. Both RBH and the Council secured Government grant funding support for various architectural and technical studies, which helped us to develop a long-term masterplan for the neighbourhood. Senior Council officers have also been involved in workshops and site visits with MHCLG and Homes England colleagues. Senior local politicians have been briefed at key stages, including the current Leader of the Council and his immediate predecessor.

The context for this work is the severe mismatch between the quality, mix and choice of homes in central Rochdale and the needs and demands of local people. Prior to our recent new developments at Lower Falinge, our entire offer in central Rochdale consisted of flats and maisonettes built in the mid to late 1960s. Over many years, we have experienced high turnover for our flats in central Rochdale and much lower demand for them than for other types of home. The current crisis has starkly illustrated the importance of families having access to their own outside space - and our new homes in Lower Falinge are the only RBH family homes that offer this in the town centre.

We set out our long-term vision in June 2017 after extensive consultation with the community, involving hundreds of face-to-face and online interactions. Underpinning this vision is our commitment to providing local people with the security of a good quality, genuinely affordable home for the long-term. We need to make the right decisions to support this. Within the specific masterplan boundary, we will provide more homes at the end of the redevelopment process than the current number of homes in College Bank and Lower Falinge. Like all the long-term plans for the town centre, including this week's very positive announcement regarding the area around Rochdale railway station, the delivery and exact detail of this will be worked through in phases.

Our additional investment in College Bank and Lower Falinge will help the Council to unlock sites across the wider town centre, where we know there is capacity for many more new homes. Our aim is to help create the conditions that will provide the viability required to deliver new homes, new jobs, and new investment in the wider town centre area. This is part of supporting the Council's wider long-term regeneration plans for the town centre.

From the beginning, we have been clear that our commitment has been about people as much as place; a good quality home and a good quality of life go hand in hand. As part of this, we have guaranteed that all those who wish to stay in the town centre will be able to do so. We are also aiming to ensure that those people affected will only have to move once. We have set out these promises as part of our Residents' Deal - again developed together with the community. A further part of our commitment to supporting people living in College Bank and Lower Falinge and encouraging them to want to stay in the area is our New Pioneers Programme, with investment and delivery in partnership between RBH and the Council and some fantastic feedback from our first Pioneers who are receiving support through this.

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A key challenge in all of this is generating the funding required to ensure that all homes are of the quality that local people deserve. Since 2016, we have regularly reviewed the investment required for the seven high-rise blocks at College Bank, which as stated earlier are now five decades old. The latest technical cost report shows that over £90m is needed to provide the quality of homes that local people deserve.

To provide you with some detail on this, I will send you separately the latest feasibility costs estimate for the essential refurbishment of the Tentercroft block as produced by our independent cost consultants. This gives a breakdown of the headline costs for the block of over £15m. I must stress that these costs are for work required to refurbish the blocks as is, and do not include any works to remodel the floor layouts, for example, to turn some of the small bedsits into larger flats. RBH would be happy to talk you through this document individually or with Council officers.

There is simply no prospect of RBH being able to raise or secure the £90m-plus required to refurbish all seven blocks. To put this in context, even if we stopped our entire investment programme in our other 12,000 homes over a prolonged period, this still would not provide the money required to carry out refurbishment required at College Bank. If, however, the Council has a realistic alternative plan to generate the £90m-plus needed to fund the works, then it would be helpful if the detail of this could be shared with us. Officers have not been able to offer this to date.

As part of the local response to the coronavirus pandemic, we have worked closely with the Council and with other local partners to provide support to those who are homeless and at risk of homelessness. Currently, of the 40 families currently in temporary accommodation, 32 are housed in either RBH's specialist family accommodation unit or dispersed RBH-owned furnished temporary accommodation. We will continue to work together to ensure that those now in temporary accommodation are able to move into a good quality permanent home, with the right services in place to support them, as soon practicably possible.

Of course, we also put in place measures to protect our employees and tenants during the coronavirus outbreak – including stopping face-to-face conversations and making it clear that nobody will be expected to move at the current time. We put these measures in place well before the Government announced a freeze on home moves.

The fundamental challenges faced in providing the right quality and mix of homes in central Rochdale remain – especially the need to provide new family housing. Both the Council and RBH have long agreed that high-rise flats are not appropriate for housing families with children.

Despite all of the current challenges, this month we are progressing the next phase of new homes in Lower Falinge – with 55 high quality new houses and apartments on the way, all to be let at a genuinely affordable rent and on the same tenancy conditions as for other RBH homes. The new homes we have built so far in Lower Falinge have received exceptionally positive feedback from our tenants and the wider community. We will continue to strive with Council colleagues to deliver the number, type and quality of homes that local people need, in central Rochdale and across the borough.

I would like to offer a further briefing for yourself and all interested Councillors to talk through any points you would like to discuss in more detail. There are some misunderstandings and inaccuracies in your letter that it would be helpful to talk through. I also look forward to receiving details of any viable alternative plan that the Council has for investing the £90m-plus required at College Bank. Once these details are shared with us we will happily sit down with the Council to discuss further.

Kind regards and best wishes



Gareth Swarbrick
Chief Executive - RBH