

Co-operative News

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UK's largest housing co-operative forms overnight

David J. Thompson | Co-operative News | December 22, 2011 - 8:40am



A housing block of flats, named the Seven Sisters, owned by the Rochdale Boroughwide Housing co-operative overlooks the town's Magistrates Court. Credit: Robert Wade

Britain's largest housing co-operative has formed in Rochdale, on an historic day for the movement.

On December 21st at 8pm, the tenants of Rochdale Boroughwide Housing (RBH) voted to take ownership of all 13,800 housing units owned by the Borough. RBH will immediately become the largest housing co-operative in Britain. The new co-op will operate an enterprise with over £30 million in turnover, 620 employees and home to 40,000 people.

The results were originally to be announced on the 20th of December. However, Gareth Swarbrick, Chief Executive of Rochdale Borough Housing, changed the vote's announcement to coincide with the same time and date as the opening of the Toad Lane co-operative store in Rochdale in 1844. So at 8pm on the 21st December, the Borough announced that the tenant vote was 76% in favor of the newest co-operative in Rochdale.

RBH will transform into a multi-stakeholder co-operative where the representative body will have the power to appoint board members and will consist of 15 elected tenants, eight elected employees, three members from the tenant management organisation, four from the council and three from other organizations.

The announcement was made at Touchstones heritage centre in Rochdale town centre to an audience of over 60 including members of the Rochdale Tenants' Panel, the borough's two MPs, Simon Danczuk and Jim Dobbin, councillors and council officers.

The vote will result in a £169 million improvement programme for homes and estates in the first five years – much more than would have been possible if the houses had stayed with the Council.

Councillor Lambert said: "I am delighted that, on this important date in Rochdale's history, we have been able to announce

that the borough is going to be home to the country's largest housing mutual to be run along co-operative principles. This continues the ambitious, pioneering spirit of the 28 workers who set up the Toad Lane store and it's an exciting development that will quite rightly take its place in our co-operative history.

"The Council has believed from day one that any decision to transfer the homes should rest entirely with residents and now that they have made their choice we'll be working hard to ensure a smooth transfer to RBH."

The ballot was carried out by the independent organisation Electoral Reform Services. Almost 9,000 residents voted — a turn-out of 56% with three to one in favour of the transfer.

Noel Chambers, Chair of the RBH Board, also welcomed the news: "Throughout this process we've worked hard to ensure that tenants were provided with all the information they needed to make an informed decision. I'd like to say a big thank you to tenants for voting and to staff and Council colleagues. The support of our two MPs, Simon Danczuk and Jim Dobbin, has been unstinting and both have worked hard behind the scenes.

"We're delighted and proud that we are able to move towards creating the UK's biggest housing mutual here in the birthplace of co-operation."

Chair of Rochdale Tenants' Panel, Lynne Brosnan, added: "Tenants should be congratulated for making such a momentous decision. Now it is up to RBH to deliver the brighter co-operative future we have voted for.

"The hard work begins now. The next few months will be spent preparing and making sure everything is in place for the transfer next year."

The RBH head office is a majestic old Post Office directly opposite Rochdale Town Hall, across the street from the Co-op Pioneer House and a seven minute walk to Toad Lane. The tallest of the new co-op's housing are the most visible part of Rochdale's skyline and overlook Toad Lane. The tower blocks provide 761 apartments and are known locally as "The Seven Sisters" (four towers 21 floors high and three towers 17 floors high).

The tenant vote took place weeks after the International Co-operative Alliance named Rochdale as the Co-operative Capital of the World and the co-op will begin life in 2012, the Year the United Nation's declared the International Year of Co-operatives.

When thousands arrive in Manchester and Rochdale in October and November of 2012 to participate in the closing ceremonies they will be greeted by a new co-op carrying out the dreams of the Rochdale Pioneers set down in 1844.

The objects and plans of this society are to form arrangements for the pecuniary benefit, and the improvement of the social and domestic condition of its members, by raising a sufficient amount of capital in shares of one pound each, to bring into operation the following plans and arrangements.

- The establishment of a store for the sale of provisions and clothing, etc.
- The building, purchasing or erecting a number of houses, in which those members desiring to assist each other in improving their domestic and social condition may reside.

However, until 1862, the law did not allow friendly societies to develop more than one acre. As a result, co-ops could

hardly start building housing estates for their members. Nonetheless, the Co-operative Land and Building Company was formed in 1860 and began to build housing in 1861. The Pioneers took over the company and by 1868 the co-op had built 37 homes for its members. The first homes still stand on Spotland Street. Later the Pioneers built Pioneer and Equitable Streets just behind the railway station. Most of those 60 or more terraced homes still stand today also (some homes on Pioneer Street were removed to create a park).