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OPENhouse



TOWER HAMLETS

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First residents make their choice

Five estates now have a social landlord to work with on plans for their homes

Residents on five Tower Hamlets estates have chosen their preferred social landlord partner to work with in the Council's Housing Choice programme.

The Council launched Housing Choice when its business plan showed it did not have the money needed to bring its housing up to the Government's decent homes standard.

The Housing Choice programme means that residents get to look at the options available for bringing in investment and improving services – and it is residents who get to make the choice.

All across the borough, estates have been setting up steer-

ing groups to look at ways to bring much-needed investment into their estates.

As part of Housing Choice they have been able to choose from a list of registered social landlords drawn up by the Boroughwide Compact Group, a group of residents' representatives from across Tower Hamlets who are the main forum for consultation with Council on housing issues.

Also on the list is EastEndHomes, a new independent community-led registered social landlord currently being set up.

Once they have chosen their partners, the steering groups will work with them on developing proposals for their estates. Once the proposals are

agreed, tenants on each estate will then be able to vote on whether they would like to transfer to that new landlord with the potential benefits from those plans or stay with the Council.

The five estates that have chosen are:

- Leopold and Burdett has selected Poplar HARCA
- British St, Bede, and Eric estates have selected EastEnd Homes
- Crossways Estate has selected Swan Housing Association.

Inside: hear from residents on the steering groups about what their decision means. And find out more about what happens once estates have chosen a partner.



EastEndHomes – work gets underway

- Pictured are some of the staff who will be busy developing the proposals for EastEndHomes over the coming months. From left to right are Colin Gray, Julia Farr, Foruk Rabbani, Raj Kerai, John Wooster, Matthew Foster, Sarah Finn and Steve Inkpen. The legal and constitutional structure of EastEndHomes was agreed by Tower Hamlets Cabinet on 8th January and work can now go ahead to finalise arrangements for setting up the new community-led social landlord.

Andrew Mahoney, Bernie Cameron and John Collis are on the steering groups that have now selected their preferred social landlord. They told Openhouse how they came to their decision and what it means for their estates.

John Collis is on the steering group for Crossways, which has just chosen Swan HA as its preferred partner.

He says that there is a strong tenants' association on the estate, so finding members for a steering group to look at the Housing Choice proposals was not a problem.

"The group is a good mix of residents," he says. "Some have been there a long time, some a short time and we have a good mix of ages and ethnic groups."

"We had training from the Council on such things as how to ask questions, and we drew up a list of questions for each of the candidates."

The list covered things that the steering group felt were a priority for their estate – such as: What could they offer tenants and leaseholders in terms of maintenance? Did they have caretakers living in? Did they have plans for a site office? What was their strategy for ensuring that the site is maintained after regeneration?

"We wanted to get an idea of the way in which the successful candidate would operate," he explains.

"After we'd drawn up the questions, we had informal meetings with the candidates to get a view of what they did, then a presentation for all residents to attend. We also did a tour of estates that the candidates had in Tower Hamlets and Hackney."

Finally the group had formal presentations from the candidates before making their decision.

"In the end it was quite an easy choice," he said. "Swan won because they gave the impression that our estate was special to them – not just another brick in the wall – and that they would be committed

to it once the estate was refurbished. We are hoping that residents will see that we have made the right choice when they come in and start doing their stuff."

So what's next? "We've got to start looking at the plans and have tenants' meetings to keep up the momentum."

The steering group is busy organising a meeting for all residents soon.

Andrew Mahoney is Chair of the steering group for Leopold and Burdett estate – the first to choose a preferred partner.

The group chose Poplar HARCA, which already has estates in the borough nearby.

"This is potentially very good news for the residents of the Leopold Estate," he said. "We are looking forward to working alongside Poplar HARCA towards building the new Leopold Estate".

Andrew points out that of the 540 homes on the estate, 170 are sixties-built 'bison blocks'. "To say that they are showing signs of wear and tear is an understatement."

As he says, a new landlord could bring £20 million for refurbishment, and, he hopes, knock down some of the oldest blocks.

There is a high proportion of leaseholders. "They have their own particular needs that have got to be addressed. We are setting up a leaseholders' sub group."

The next stage is to give residents the chance to see the plans so far.

"We are having a launch event. Every single person on the estate will be invited to see the initial plans. And we will start an initial consultation to see what people want so that we can put the proposals together. We want to knock on every

Steering groups look to the future



Steering groups are holding open days so residents can contribute to the selection process.

door on the estate between now and June."

Bernard Cameron, is Chair of the Mile End East Steering Group, covering British St, Bede, Eric and Treby estates. The group chose EastEndHomes, the new independent social landlord.

"Of the three interested social landlords, the steering group felt that the proposals and ideas coming forward from EastEndHomes were more realistic and honest than some of the other proposals," he explains.

"Scrutiny of the proposals from interested landlords indicated to the steering group that the ideas coming forward from each were pretty similar. However, with EastEndHomes we were being given a blank canvass with which to work."

EastEndHomes will be a new social landlord totally independent from the Council. Being a new social landlord, we as tenants can have a greater input into

how the organisation is developed and run."

The plans are for the area to be run independently and have a separate board with a resident majority. The proposal is for this local organisation to be called Mile End Community Housing Trust.

The steering group is organising drop-in sessions with each of the estates to find out residents' priorities for property, the housing service and community regeneration. It will also set up estate-based groups for residents who would like to get involved in selecting architects and building contractors and developing ideas for improving their estate.

"We now have a real opportunity to decide what we want done to our estates, our homes and how we want them run," says Bernie. "Each estate will be asked to form a working party to shape proposals for their estate and service delivery. This is an opportunity to achieve our ideal home and estate."

Editorial

Make a difference

WELCOME to the latest issue of Openhouse, bringing you the latest information on the Council's Housing Choice programme. In it you can hear what estates around the borough are doing to look at ways to bring in investment and improved services.

As our front page story shows, some estates have already chosen the social landlord they want to work with during Stage 3 of Housing Choice, when estates look in detail at what a new landlord could offer.

Other estates are still in the early stages of Stage 2, setting up steering groups, setting priorities and looking at the list of registered landlords to see who might best meet those priorities.

Whatever stage your estate is at, it is important that you have your say. The decisions being taken will affect your home and your estate. They will make a big difference to the kind of housing service that you and your family have in the coming years.

Don't leave it to others to decide – have your say. To find out who to speak to on your estate, and how to get involved further, contact the Council's: Consultation and Participation Team, 20 Three Colt St, Limehouse E14 8HU Tel. 020 7531 0220 or email cpt.towerhamlets@dial.pipex.com



Officers from PPCR are responsible for collecting residents' views at steering group open days.

Borough residents take the opportunity to get involved in their estate steering groups

Stage 2 of Housing Choice is giving residents the opportunity to take a close look at all the options for their estate, and to look at whether a different landlord would provide a better service and better investment in their homes.

Steering groups are invited to choose from a list of social landlords drawn up by the Boroughwide Compact Group, which is made up of residents from estates across the borough.

As you can read on page 1 of this issue of Open House, five estates have already chosen their preferred partners. But others are well on the way to making a decision.

As Openhouse went to press:

- 6 steering groups, covering 14 estates, had agreed their shortlist of landlords they would like to consider working with

- 1 steering group covering seven estates had received informal presentations from 4 social landlords

- 3 steering groups, covering 9 estates, were organising open days to allow residents the chance to see the plans so far

- 8 steering groups were established covering 10 estates and working on setting their local priorities and receiving training from PPCR, the independent residents' adviser.

- 6 estates are looking at the option of a Tenant Management Organisation running the estate.

The Council has set up a framework for steering groups, but is stressing that it is up to residents to decide the approach that best suits them.

It is therefore inevitable that different estates are at different stages in Housing Choice. Some estates are in the early

stages of setting up steering groups and deciding on the priorities for their estate which they would want their preferred partner to address.

Sue Benjamins, Corporate Director Housing, explains: "There are a number of different fac-

tors which will influence residents' choice of a preferred social landlord. These include service delivery, service charges, proposals for major repairs and estate improvements and opportunities for resident involvement."

*To find out the situation on your estate – and to get involved – contact the Consultation and Participation Team
20 Three Colt St,
Limehouse, E14 8HU
Tel. 020 7531 0220 or
email: cpt.towerhamlets@dial.pipex.com.*

What happens at Stage 3?

Housing Choice has been divided into three stages, to ensure that there is plenty of time for a thorough consultation with residents. The Council wants to make sure that everybody has a chance to make an informed choice on a thorough understanding of the proposals.

Stage 1: the initial consultation, finished in February 2002 when residents took part in a referendum to decide whether their estate should continue to take part in Housing Choice.

Stage 2: began in May 2002. Steering groups on each estate have been looking at various potential social landlords to work on proposals for their estate. As estates select their preferred partner they will move straight away into Stage 3.

Stage 3: involves detailed consultation

about the kind of service that the partner landlord would be able to offer. Once these details are finalised, they will be drawn up into a formal offer for tenants to vote on. Tenants will be able to vote on whether their estate should transfer to this new landlord or stay with the Council.

David Edgar, Lead Councillor for Housing said: "An estate will only transfer if tenants vote for that to happen. If they vote no, the estate will stay with the council. The choice is entirely up to tenants."

During Stage 3, your estate steering group will be making sure that you have plenty of opportunities to see the plans. They are planning meetings, exhibitions and estate newsletters and, of course, Openhouse will be bringing you the latest news from across the borough.

Praise for Housing Choice

Parts of Tower Hamlet's housing service have achieved top ratings in a government assessment of local authorities across the country.

The department was placed in the excellent category both for its overall housing strategy and for its housing business plan. Housing Choice is key to both and contributed to the high rating.

The survey, known as the Comprehensive Performance Assessment, was carried out by the Audit Commission, which is responsible for overseeing council performance in England and Wales.

According to the commission, this is the first time that such an extensive picture of local authority performance has been compiled. Its aim is to give people a clear indication of how their council compares to others.

As well as giving the housing strategy and the business plan the 'excellent' rating, the Audit Commission also praised the Council's housing benefits service as 'amongst the top performers in London' and noted the Council's efficiency at re-letting empty properties as the second best in the capital in 2001/2.

Developments, including some regeneration schemes, are described in the Commission's report as imaginative and leading edge, and engagement with the community is described as excellent.

Maureen McEleney, Acting Assistant Director – Strategy & Development, believes that Tower Hamlets did so well because it has both staff and councillors who are committed to delivering the best possible service.

"In general terms it can be seen as a vindication of Housing Choice and of the Business Plan. The high assessment can be seen as supporting the approach we are taking."

Your important questions answered

As estates move ahead on choosing their preferred social landlord for Stage 3 of Housing choice, Openhouse answers some frequently asked residents' questions.

WHAT WILL HAPPEN TO PEOPLE'S LEGAL RIGHTS AS TENANTS IF THEY MOVE TO A NEW LANDLORD?

Council tenants are known in law as "Secure Tenants". The legal term for tenants of social landlords is "Assured Tenants". A "secure tenancy" sounds more secure than an "assured tenancy" but in practice there will be very little difference between your situation with the Council and your situation if you transfer to a social landlord.

Both types of tenancy are protected by the courts and social landlords cannot evict a tenant without first getting a court order.

The main difference between secure tenants and assured tenants is that the conditions that govern them are set down in different acts of Parliament. The act of Parliament that covers council tenants gives fewer grounds to the landlord for taking back possession of a tenancy than the act of Parliament that covers assured tenants.

However, the Council will not allow the transfer of any of its homes to social landlords that are not prepared to guarantee that council tenants will keep all the security they enjoy with the council.

Therefore if you transfer, your new social landlord will enter into a contract with you as a tenant, guaranteeing your rights. This contract would be legally binding and the landlord will not be allowed to change it without your consent. The social landlord will also enter into a contract with the Council. This gives the Council the power to ensure that the new landlord keeps all the promises made to tenants, including those about tenants rights and security.

Tenants who transfer to a social landlord will keep the rights that they enjoy with the Council, including:

- the right to buy your home
- the right to take in lodgers
- the right to make certain improvements and receive compensation for them at the end of the tenancy
- the right to pass on your tenancy to another member of your household when you die.
- the right to have repairs carried out within set time scales
- the right to exchange properties with another tenant

The Government is considering changing the law to simplify the current system, which is confusing for both landlords and tenants. If the law is changed it is likely that in the future there will be no difference in rights and security between tenants of the council and tenants of other social landlords.

WILL OUR RENTS GO UP MUCH FASTER IF WE TRANSFER TO A NEW LANDLORD?

No. For one thing, rents of homes already transferred by the Council to social landlords have not risen faster than Council rents. In fact their average rents are lower than the Council's.

Secondly, the Government is introducing a new policy to tackle difference in the rents charged for similar properties by councils and housing associations.

It means that each organisation will be set a target rent by the Government and over a 10 year period each social landlord and council must adjust its rents to meet this rent target.

Some councils and social landlords will have to reduce their rents to meet this target, some will

have to increase them, but in the end rents in social housing in any one area will be the same.

WHAT WILL HAPPEN IF SOME ESTATES DECIDE THAT THEY ARE NOT INTERESTED IN CHOOSING A SOCIAL LANDLORD PARTNER TO WORK WITH?

Their homes will remain with the Council. However, there will be less money available for services, major repairs and improvements than if the homes transferred to another social landlord.

WHAT ABOUT LEASEHOLDERS? WILL THEY HAVE TO PAY FOR IMPROVEMENTS?

Leaseholders are liable under the terms of their lease to contribute toward the cost incurred by the Council in maintaining the block/estate where they live – just as any homeowner has to pay for the upkeep of his or her home. At present the Council has chosen to adopt an upper limit so that most leaseholders pay no more than £10,000 towards repairs in any 5-year period.

The Council is currently reviewing this policy and, subject to further consultation, may keep the £10,000 limit only for state pensioners and those in receipt of income support or job seekers allowance.

On previous occasions where homes have transferred to social landlords, resident home owners had their contributions for the major repairs and improvements limited to a maximum of £10,000. The difference between the actual cost of the work and the leaseholders' contributions was made up by Government grant. The Council will be bidding for similar grants to assist any future transfers that take place through Housing Choice.



Residents have lots of questions about how Housing Choice could affect them

What are the options for tenant management?

Residents on a number of estates are investigating whether a tenant management organisation (TMO) could work on their estates. TMOs can run their local housing services such as:

- collecting rents and service charges
- organising repairs and maintenance and
- making sure that buildings are kept clean and tidy.

The council could still own the homes and be the landlord if a TMO is set up under the Right to Manage Regulations but it is also possible for TMOs to manage homes on behalf of other social landlords.

Setting up a TMO does not guarantee any more money becoming available to invest on major repairs and improvements if the homes stay with the Council.

TMOs receive an allowance per property from the Council equivalent to the amount of money that the Council spends on the same responsibilities for the properties that it manages. If a TMO is able to provide services more cheaply, then it can keep the savings made and use the money towards improving the properties that it manages.

Housing Choice will not prevent those residents who are looking at TMO options from setting up their own management organisation where this is supported by the majority of residents on an estate. All landlords taking part in Housing Choice will be expected to enable tenants to complete any TMO

proposals initiated with the Council and to fully support active tenant participation in the future. Housing Choice also offers residents alternative ways of getting involved in the management of their homes such as the proposal to set up a local community housing trust in Mile End (see page 2).

HOW DOES THE RIGHT TO MANAGE WORK?

There are a number of phases to go through before management responsibilities can be transferred to a tenant management organisation. First, with the help of an independent adviser, there will be a short pre-feasibility study to ensure that the requirements of the right to manage regulations are met and to help tenants serve a Right to Manage notice on their council.

If tenants support the proposal this will be followed by a feasibility study. This will look at the possibilities for setting up a tenant management organisation, including looking at any disadvantages as well as the potential benefits.

The independent adviser will give a view on the likely success of a tenant management organisation and, if tenants vote in favour, an approved agency will carry out a development study to prepare the group for its chosen role in housing management.

The right to manage process can take three to four years. Success depends upon tenants' groups being prepared to devote the time, effort and commitment needed.