



Season's greetings to all our readers

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OPENhouse



TOWER HAMLETS

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HOUSING CHOICE IS ON THE RIGHT TRACK

A new report has confirmed that the council is on the right path to improve its housing with Housing Choice

The council launched Housing Choice because it does not have the money to bring homes in the borough up to a decent standard.

Millions of pounds need to be spent on housing repairs and maintenance – money that the council simply does not have.

And it has no way of getting that money from the usual sources – rent and government finance – over the coming years.

Housing Choice will give tenants the opportunity to choose another not-for-profit landlord to manage and maintain their homes.

The report, from

PricewaterhouseCoopers (PwC), says that Housing Choice is the best option open to the council in its bid to ensure that people in the borough get the chance for a decent home.

There are other possibilities, such as an arms length management organisation (ALMO), where homes are managed by an organisation at one remove from the council, or the Private Finance Initiative (PFI) where the management and maintenance of homes is contracted out.

But PwC points out that neither of these will work for Tower Hamlets. The amount of money the borough

needs to spend adds up to 60% of the national ALMO budget.

As the report says the way that PFIs have been set up makes them more suitable for smaller, estate-based projects.

On the other hand, transfer to a social landlord, of the kind tenants are being asked to consider under Housing Choice, does meet key criteria, such as essential repairs and increasing tenants' participation in the way their homes are run.

"The council believes it is the best option available to residents, and this report bears that out," says Maureen McEleney, Tower Hamlets' Housing Director.

In the market for information



Carol Street, of Parkside Steering Group, joined Old Ford Housing Association staff in Roman Road market earlier this month to give local people the opportunity to ask questions and get more information about Housing Choice. All around the borough the council and registered social landlords are organising similar events to ensure residents can find out about proposals for bringing in investment and improving their estates.

This paper is distributed free to all council residents of the London Borough of Tower Hamlets

Tackling trouble – what the

Anti-social behaviour is a real concern for Tower Hamlets residents. Over and over again, during the open days, questionnaires and consultations being carried out for Housing Choice, people have raised this issue as a priority. Whether its noisy neighbours or menacing gangs, you want something to be done about it. Openhouse asked some of the RSLs involved in Housing Choice what they do to deal with the problem of anti-social behaviour.

Swan

Swan believes that tackling anti-social behaviour begins before a tenancy starts.

“Tenants have rights but they also have responsibilities, which we make clear during the first interview with prospective tenants,” says Jo Ellis, Housing Services Director at Swan.

“We explain to all tenants what we require of them and what will happen if they breach the terms of their tenancy. We show them examples of action we have taken against tenants who do not comply. Tenants are left in no doubt what we

require of them, their families and their visitors.

We visit all new tenants within six weeks of their new tenancy. Tenants can raise any concerns and we can reinforce the message that we do not tolerate anti-social behaviour.

Housing officers and community wardens regularly visit the estates and get to know the tenants; they identify problems at an early stage.

Often problems come from simple misunderstandings and clashes of lifestyle. Some straight talking can often solve a problem. Some tenants and their families are not willing to comply with the requirements of the ten-

ancy and have no regard for the impact that their behaviour has on those around them.

“This needs a different approach and Swan will use all the tools available to deal with the problems effectively,” says Jo.

EastEndHomes

With years of experience managing estates in Tower Hamlets, the team at EastEndHomes is only too aware of the anxiety and stress that neighbour nuisance and anti-social behaviour cause.

That is why their approach to dealing with the problem is based on

taking positive action in partnership with residents.

As Paul Bloss of EastEndHomes explains: “Anti-social behaviour makes people’s lives a real misery and spoils the whole feel of an estate.

“Having listened to what residents have said about the problem, we have come up with a three-step plan to tackle three key areas: poor estate design, lack of evidence and the history of little action being taken.

“We will work with residents to really make a difference.”

EastEndHomes’ plans start with the need to re-design the estates, which

often encourage problems by creating dark areas, open stairwells and rat-run through-roads.

The second step is to work with residents and to support them in helping to tackle the problem by providing locally-based specialist neighbour nuisance officers, professional witness services and, importantly, having wardens to patrol the estates.

Finally, EastEndHomes will use the full force of the law to protect the right of its law-abiding residents to live in peace.

This means using legal tools such as Acceptable Behaviour Contracts, Anti-Social Behaviour Orders and, where necessary, repossession.

Guinness Trust

Guinness Trust was quick to act when squatters moved into empty flats in Islington awaiting the bulldozer.

“They were involved in a number of criminal anti-social activities, including drug dealing and prostitution,” says Suzanne Wolfe, Guinness’ project manager.

The Trust put in high-security doors, but the squatters still managed to break in. Guinness then switched to the highest security brand.

“But,” says Suzanne, “the problem was solved by the Trust developing very close working relationships with the local police.

“The police obliged by repeatedly raiding the properties in question until the matter was under control, and by providing ongoing support until the blocks were demolished.”

Guinness is not afraid to use eviction against tenants responsible for persistent anti-social behaviour.

“We evicted a tenant last year from our Columbia Road estate who had been a constant nuisance to neighbours.

“She was involved in drugs and prostitution and was responsible for much disturbance late into the night.”

The Trust adopted an approach whereby the residents felt able to formally complain and provide the Trust with infor-

Editorial

Make sure you get your Housing Choice information

IN THIS issue of *Openhouse* you can read about how estates are progressing on Housing Choice. Some have already picked a partner landlord to work with in drawing up plans to improve their estates.

You can read on page 4 what two estate steering groups are doing to make sure that everybody on their estate is up-to-date on what is happening.

Openhouse is your newsletter for finding out about Housing Choice. Also in this issue we answer some frequently asked questions about Housing Choice and why the council has launched this consultation.

It is crucial that you get the information you need. Housing Choice affects your home and your estate – and it is your opportunity to have a say on how they are managed and maintained.

Find out more about Housing Choice. Call the council’s Consultation and Participation Team on 020 7531 0220, check out the council’s website on www.towerhamlets.gov.uk or contact the independent tenants’ advisor PPCR on 020 7407 7452.



One of Swan’s community wardens talks to residents on a Swan estate in Basildon.

RSLs do Housing Choice: your questions answered



Police Community Support Officers set up by Poplar HARCA and the police to improve safety

mation to support court action.

Again the Trust worked closely with police as part of an information sharing protocol, and the police supported the Trust at the court hearing.

BGVPHA

BGVPHA's Youth Groups are instrumental in helping to wipe out the anti-social behaviour that makes many people's lives a misery.

By working with young people locally, BGVPHA has drastically reduced the amount of anti-social behaviour occurring on its estates.

BGVPHA's largest and longest running group is situated at Huddleston Close in Globe Town.

The group has 55 regular members and trips are arranged to the cinema, bowling, the seaside and even short camping holidays.

It is run by Elaine Farrell, who says, "These trips provide new oppor-

tunities for young people and involving them from an early age also helps to create a greater sense of community and reduces vandalism, graffiti, and cultural tension."

BGVPHA also works with residents to identify locations where there are problems.

Solutions include the use of high-specification locks, steel-lined doors and the redesigning of secluded areas.

This has successfully eradicated drug taking in the communal areas in schemes in Bethnal Green and Poplar.

"We also work with the police and tenants in the Stepney area to identify whether drugs are being dealt in our blocks and to redesign the communal areas to eradicate drug use," says Phil Hissey, community development and tenant participation officer for BGVPHA.

"Through listening to and working with local residents, BGVPHA is striving to create a better place to live."

Why has the Council set up Housing Choice?

The council set up Housing Choice when it looked at the resources it needed to spend on housing. Its business plan – double-checked by the government and by accountants PricewaterhouseCoopers – showed a huge shortfall in the money needed to maintain and repair the housing stock.

There are a number of reasons for this shortfall. There are two main sources of income for the council's housing department – government subsidy and rents. But the large number of right-to-buy sales means that the council loses out on rent. And government subsidy is paid on rented stock only, so it also loses out on this source of money.

The council therefore decided to consult with tenants and leaseholders to see whether they would be interested in working with other not-for-profit social landlords on ways to bring much-needed investment to their homes.

Who are the other landlords who are involved in Housing Choice?

The official name is registered social landlord, although they are often called housing associations or RSLs. They are not-for-profit organisations – that means they are not allowed to make a profit. There are no shareholders to pay and the board members who run the organisation usually give their time for free. All the money that comes in – from your rents for example – must be spent on managing, maintaining and improving your estates.

Does Housing Choice mean council housing is being privatised in Tower Hamlets?

No. Privatisation means selling public assets (e.g. gas, electricity or the railways) to a company, which trades for profit and pays dividends from these profits to its shareholders.

By contrast the transfer of council housing is always to a housing association or charitable housing trust. These are not private companies.

They are not allowed to make a profit and there are no shareholders to pay dividends to. All the money made goes into managing, maintaining and improving homes.

Organisations of this type are registered (hence the term Registered Social Landlord or RSL) with the Housing Corporation, which monitors and regulates the organisation on behalf of the government to ensure that it meets certain standards. RSLs are also subject to performance inspections by the Audit Commission's housing inspectors just like the council.

What if an estate decides that it doesn't want to choose an RSL partner to work with, or if tenants vote against transfer?

Their homes will remain with the council. Before you have to vote, the council will make sure that you have the information you need to make your decision – including what level of service and repairs you can expect if you stay with the council.

Who makes the decisions about what happens in Housing Choice?

Residents decide. Nothing can change unless tenants agree in the final ballot at the end of Stage 3.

What about tenants rights if their homes transfer to a new landlord?

An RSL tenancy has a different name to a council tenancy. With the council you have a secure tenancy, with an RSL it is called an assured tenancy. However, although the name is different, in practice your rights are almost the same. (Look out for a detailed look at your tenancy rights in the next issue of Housing Choice.)

But is it democratic? We vote for councillors – we don't get to vote on the RSL.

The process is democratic, in that changes can only be made if tenants vote in favour. Many Registered Social Landlords allow a high level of direct tenant involvement in the way they are run. Many RSLs – such as Tower Hamlets Community Housing (THCH) and Poplar HARCA, which were involved in previous transfers – are run by a governing body made up of one third tenants, who have a direct say on the day-to-day running of the organisation that runs their homes.

When will Housing Choice finish?

Because residents make the decisions, different estates are at different stages. Some are still at the early stages of setting up a steering group. Others have already selected a partner RSL and moved on to Stage 3 (see page 4). Housing Choice is expected to continue until 2006.

How can I find out more?

Contact the council's Consultation and Participation Team on 020 7531 0220.



Mile End residents find out what EastEndHomes could offer their estate.

More estates make their choice

Some 16000 Tower Hamlets' homes – more than 45% of the council's housing – are now in Stage 3 of Housing Choice. That means they have chosen their partner registered social landlord (RSL) and will now start work on drawing up proposals for their estates.

These proposals will be drawn up into a formal, legally binding 'Offer Document', setting out exactly what residents can expect if the RSL becomes their new landlord. However, in the meantime, people remain with the council. Nothing can change unless residents vote in favour of a transfer.

But how does the choice get made? Openhouse takes a look at the hard work of the estate steering groups, and (below) asks the chairs of two groups what is being done to ensure that as many people as possible get the chance to hear about the proposals and give their views.

Who chooses the partner Registered Social Landlord for an estate?

The estate steering group selects from a list drawn up by tenants of suitable landlords. However, although the estate steering group makes the selection, they do so only after extensive consultation with residents to make sure the choice reflects the majority view.

How does the estate steering group make its choice?

The role of the estate steering group is to:

- Agree the priorities for their estate, including how day-to-day services such as cleaning are provided and what the main issues are that a prospective new landlord would be expected to resolve, e.g. anti-social behaviour, overcrowding, resident involvement etc
- Select the social landlords the group wishes to talk to

and meet with officers (and tenants) from the social landlords

- Draw up a shortlist of those social landlords the group wishes to formally interview
- Agree how the group wishes to carry out the formal selection process.
- Appoint a prospective new landlord to work with at Stage 3 of Housing Choice.

Why should residents get involved in their estate steering group?

It is your chance to have a say about what happens to your estate. If you are concerned about the future of your estate, don't leave it to others to make the decision for you.

To find out more call the council's Consultation and Participation Team on 020 7531 0220.

Estates in Stage 3

Estates in Stage 3	Chosen RSL
Mile End East (British St, Eric, Bede)	EastEndHomes
Leopold/Burdett	Poplar HARCA
Crossways	Swan
Ocean NDC	Sanctuary
Barleymow	EastEndHomes
Boundary	Peabody
Birchfield	Swan
Bow Bridge	Poplar HARCA
Columbia (Dorset, Newling, Gascoignes & Virginia)	Guinness Trust
Coventry Cross	Poplar HARCA
East India (Aberfeldy, Brownfield, Teviot)	Poplar HARCA
Glamis	EastEndHomes
Lansbury	Poplar HARCA
Parkside (Lakeview, Lanfranc, Locton & Ranwell east and west)	Old Ford
Roche	BGVPHA
St George's	EastEndHomes
Samuda, Barkantine, Kingsbridge, St Johns	Toynbee
Sheltered blocks	BGVPHA
Tarling	THCH
Wapping (Riverside and Royal Mint)	Guinness
Westferry, Cubitt Town, Island Gardens	EastEndHomes



Fun events, like this Guinness Trust open day in Wapping, inform residents about Housing Choice.

Giving residents the opportunity to have their say

Tarling estate, in Shadwell, recently selected THCH as its partner for Stage 3 of Housing Choice.

According to estate steering group chair Sundor Miah, so many people were interested in getting involved in Housing Choice that the estate decided to set up an extra large steering group.

Some 36 people have attended the meetings, poring over the presenta-

tions and proposals from the five RSLs interested in Tarling.

It means that the steering group has been selected from as wide and representative a group of leaseholders and tenants as possible.

But still, there are many other people on the estate, and the Tarling steering group was keen to get as many of their views as possible: "We had open days, visits to estates that the RSLs already man-

aged and informal and formal presentations," explains Mr Miah.

They are now looking with the council and independent tenants' advisor PPCR at ways to make sure that residents are kept informed.

The steering group over on Bow Bridge estate is also busy thinking up ways of getting people involved. Bow Bridge recently selected Poplar HARCA as its preferred partner for Stage 3.

Bow Bridge estate steering group chair Peter McCarthy hopes that HARCA will bring things the estate wants – CCTV, cleaner and safer streets, better maintenance.

"HARCA has said there will be refurbishment of all properties," he says. "If you walk around on estates that have gone over to Poplar HARCA you can't deny that they have done a lot."

However, he is also keen to make sure that

residents give their views. He is especially concerned that people think that once things have moved on to Stage 3, the process is over:

"A lot of people don't know the difference between elected and selected."

Poplar HARCA has been selected as the preferred partner, but in many ways the process has only just begun. As Jen Pepper, Programme Co-ordinator explains: "There's a lot of

work that needs to be done, drawing up proposals for the estates – and it's crucial that residents have their say on what those proposals include.

"Tenants will get to vote on the proposals, and nothing can change unless they vote in favour."

"The council will be working with estates in Stage 3, and their chosen RSLs, to ensure that people do have the information they need to make an informed choice."

