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Housing report shows need for major repairs



Celebrating on the Crossways Estate

■ Councillor David Edgar, Tower Hamlet's lead Councillor for housing, cuts the cake at the Crossways estate fun day. The event was held to promote the regeneration of the estate and inform residents about Housing Choice.

80% of council homes need investment to meet decent homes standard

According to the Council's latest business plan, four out of every five council houses do not meet the government's decent homes standard.

That means that 80% of council houses in the borough either need repairs, do not have sufficiently modern facilities, or are too cold.

URGENCY

Inside this issue you can read more about the decent homes standard and how the council will struggle, given its current resources, to improve the situation by 2010 to meet the govern-

ment's target.

"It shows how urgent Housing Choice is," says Lead Councillor for Housing, Cllr David Edgar. "It shows why we must work with residents to find new ways to bring investment onto the estates."

NEW PROPOSALS

Some estates are already well on the way to talking to potential new social landlords about the future of their estates.

On page 2 you can read about what some estates have already done in Housing Choice Stage 2.

You can also read about how proposals

for EastEndHomes are developing.

EastEndHomes is a planned new council-sponsored landlord which would give local people a great deal of influence over the way their homes are managed.

HAVE YOUR SAY

Don't forget – Housing Choice is your choice.

It's up to you to make sure you have your say on the future of your home and your estate.

Find out more about Housing Choice Stage 2 in this issue of OpenHouse – and find out how to make sure that your views are heard.

Housing Choice Stage 2 – estates start on the path to new investment

Resident groups on some estates are already looking at proposals to improve their homes. How can you get involved?

Bernie Cameron, who many residents will know as chair of the Borough-wide Tenant Compact Group, is also the chair of the estate steering group for Bede, Eric, Treby and British Street estates.

The group has been running for a couple of months and has 18 members.

Bernie worked hard to get people involved at the beginning: "I leafleted the three areas and visited people," he explains. "We held open meetings and asked for volunteers."

The first task for the group was to decide which of the registered social landlords they were interested in, from a list of 16 drawn up by the Compact Group, along with the potential new landlord being set up by the council. Their chosen three did a presentation to the group.

The next stage is wider



... a chance to discuss some of the issues

consultation with residents on the estates. "We've put the photos and plans from the presentations on display in the British Street Community Hall," says Bernie.

"There was a Fun Day on Saturday 5th October, and every Monday and Tuesday evening in early October somebody from the organisations being considered was on hand to answer questions."

The steering group has also drawn up a feedback form so that residents can comment on the proposals and say who they think is best.

"The steering group will look at all the answers we get and decide which social landlord we are likely to pick," said Bernie.

Bernie is in no doubt that residents and leaseholders should get involved in Stage 2.

"If they don't, they've no right to make any complaints," he says.

"Unless they say something, nobody will know what they think. It's important to have a say in what's going on."

Betty Baunton is chair of the steering group covering a number of estates in Bow.

The group has asked four of the social landlords to make a presentation on proposals for the estates, and Betty is keen that people should find out what they have to say. As she says: "There's going to be a vote next year. People need to attend these meetings, hear what the social landlords are saying and make their choice."

Residents who came to the September meeting were able to ask the social landlords some of the questions that they thought were important for the future of their estates, such as how they would deal with repairs, and what they would do to improve security.

Betty is keen that all groups on the estate are able to put across their views. She would like to see very young people have their say: "I would like to see a youth committee under the auspices of the steering group to come forward with propo-

sals. It's their estate too," she says.

She acknowledges that it is a responsibility to be on the steering group, but as she points out: "It is their homes they are talking about and the control of those homes, and people must please get involved."

The council is keen that steering groups should be made up of both tenants and leaseholders to reflect the balance of their estate.

Richard Roberts, one of the founding members of the Tower Hamlets leaseholders' association, is on the steering group for Barley Mow Estate in Limehouse.

"We've had three meetings of the steering group so far and we're arranging a meeting so that all the members of the group understand what Housing Choice is about."

"It is a very complex issue and it is also a very serious issue, with implications especially for leaseholders."

"Twelve years ago, the Barley Mow estate was the best in the borough, very pretty, very desirable," he says. "But since the refurbishment, nothing has been spent on the estate."

"I think in an ideal world you'd like the council to stay as your landlord, delivering good services – but it isn't going to happen."

"I think in a number of years the council will cease to be a landlord – I think that's government policy – so we need to pick out someone to deliver services to both tenants and leaseholders."

"The landlord we pick out is important."

Estate steering groups are where tenants and leaseholders make the key decisions on the future of their homes.

Stage 2 of Housing Choice is now well under way, and many estates have formed steering groups to look at potential new social landlords. However, there are still some estates where steering groups have yet to be formed.

The estate steering groups are crucial to Stage 2. Each steering group will work with the Council to decide on the best option for their estate – whether that is working with an existing not-for-profit landlord or setting up an entirely new registered social landlord to manage their homes.

"The steering groups are residents' opportunity to make key decisions about the future of their homes," said Consultation and Participation Manager Vicki Potticary.

The role of the estate steering group is to:

- Agree the priorities for their estate – such as how day-to-day services should be provided and what are the main issues that a new landlord would be expected to resolve.
- Identify the potential social landlords, meet with them and draw up a shortlist of those the group wishes formally to interview.
- Appoint a partner to work with for Stage 3.
- Encourage all residents to give their views and ensure they are updated on progress

The council is working closely with the steering groups, and independent advice is available from PPCR.

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

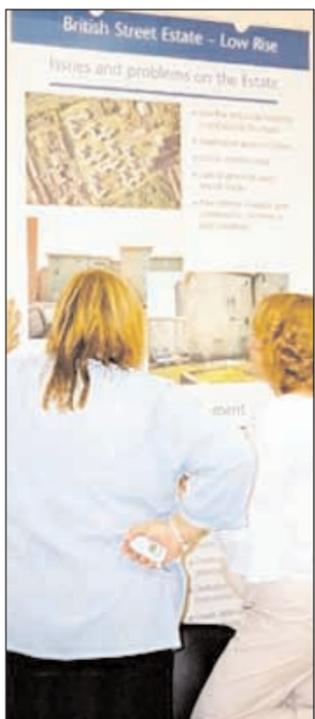
Find out more – call the Consultation & Participation Team on 020 7531 0220 or email cpt.towerhamlets@dial.pipex.com

Richard thinks that some leaseholders do not get involved because government legislation means that their votes do not count if it comes to transfer.

"I spoke to a big social landlord formed by tenants and the chair was a leaseholder," he says. "She said that although

leaseholders had no vote, they got actively involved in setting up the organisation and how it was run and that was how they safeguarded their future.

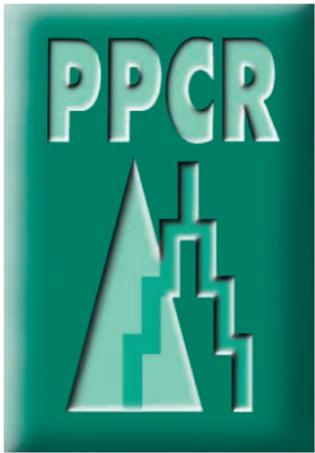
"We can have a say – and we can talk to our neighbours who do have a vote. We have to get in there and make it work."



The proposals go on display...



Having fun – and checking out the future



Familiar face in a new role

Facing up to repairs challenge

Peter Griffiths is a familiar face to many Tower Hamlets residents. He worked for the council for many years before moving to the HARCA in 1999.

Peter now has a new role in the borough. He has just joined PPCR, the organisation chosen by the Borough-wide Tenants Compact Group to act as independent advisor to residents during Housing Choice.

He joins PPCR as a senior consultant, responsible for carrying out or advising on a wide range of projects, from government-related research to housing stock investment options. He is particularly attracted to the idea of helping people have a say in their future:

"PPCR really is about getting the public involved in making decisions that will be impor-



Peter Griffiths, helping to make sure that residents get independent advice on Housing Choice

tant to them," he says.

Peter certainly brings a wealth of experience to his new role. He joined the council from industry in 1977 and became head of housing services for the former Poplar neighbourhood. And he gained extensive experience of working with the public as head of the housing service's community consultation team.

At Poplar HARCA he also gained a wide range of experience. "I was respon-

sible for the creation of 6 residents estate boards and a joint estate panel – including leaseholder representation," he says. "I fought to get a leaseholder rep, because I thought it important that leaseholders have a voice."

"Once that was completed, I joined the technical division, as a project manager. This gave me the opportunity to ensure that works that residents were promised in their offer document by the

HARCA were delivered."

So Peter is well placed to see Housing Choice from all sides of the issue. What would he say to people who might think that, with his council and HARCA background, he cannot be truly independent?

"I would like to think that over the years I have always offered residents and staff fair and honest advice and they have on occasion thanked me for being honest – for not telling them what they

wanted to hear," he says. "The reputation of PPCR has also been built on fair, honest, impartial advice to residents.

"However, residents will be the real judges, because at the end of the Housing Choice programme I would welcome a further opportunity to ask residents their views on the impartiality that we have provided. I do not intend to jeopardise residents' trust at this stage of my career."

Some 80% of council housing in Tower Hamlets does not meet the government's 'decent homes' standard, according to the council's updated business plan.

A decent home is one which is wind and weather tight, warm, has modern facilities and meets the following four criteria:

- 1 It meets the current statutory minimum standard for housing
- 2 It is in a reasonable state of repair
- 3 It has reasonably modern facilities and services
- 4 It provides a reasonable degree of thermal comfort – ie it has both effective insulation and efficient heating.

Nearly all homes in the borough meet the first criteria and only a few more lack modern facilities or services such as a reasonably modern kitchen and bathroom.

Almost 70% (17877 homes) fail the second category. This means that some of the building components are old and, because of their condition, need replacing or repair.

Director of Housing Sue Benjamins says: "The estimated cost of work to carry out the necessary repair and improvement to achieve the decent homes standard for all the council homes in the borough is around £209 million. This is in addition to £390 million required for the other major works that are needed to address the backlog of repairs on the council's housing estates"

However, the money available to the council means that this backlog of repairs will remain largely untouched unless additional resources can be identified.

"The council is doing the best it can, but without more money to spend, we are running to keep still," says Sue Benjamins.

"This confirms that our only option is to work with tenants to look at new ways of bringing in investment."



Plans for community-led landlord

Some estate steering groups have already included EastEndHomes on their shortlist of potential landlords.

Further proposals for the structure of the new organisation were due to go to the Council's Cabinet meeting as we went to press.

The proposed structure for the council-sponsored landlord is as follows:

- EastEndHomes will be an umbrella organisation. Estates will be encouraged to set up their own local community housing trust or a tenant management organisation if they wish, or opt to be directly managed by EastEndHomes.
- In line with Housing Corporation guidelines,

it is suggested that the management board of EastEndHomes would consist of 18 members – eight residents, six independent people and four Tower Hamlets councillors.

- Local estate boards can have a resident majority if they wish.

There will be a range of options for developing local decision making within the EastEndHomes group structure.

Discussions are taking place with estates who have shown an interest in this model to develop various ideas on community led local service delivery organisations.

Broadly these involve either a tenant management organisation (TMO) or a local community hous-



ing trust, with a resident majority board at local level.

The umbrella organisation would provide a range of core support and technical services. Funding for the group would also be secured by

EastEndHomes.

Councillor David Edgar said: "The planned structure has been influenced by ideas on local community control through stock transfer developed by the Federation of Co-opera-

tive Housing.

"It is exciting because it really does allow for local decision making and a higher level of resident control than we see with the council and traditional social landlords."

Options for the future – your Housing Choice concerns and questions answered

One of the tasks for the Estate Steering Groups is to decide what they think are the key issues on their estate that they would want any potential new landlord to tackle. Here, Openhouse answers some of the most frequently asked questions.



Will rents and service charges rise much faster if homes are transferred?

No. Rents of homes transferred by the Council to Poplar HARCA and Tower Hamlets Community Housing (THCH) have not risen faster than council rents. In fact the average rent for Poplar HARCA is lower than the Council's average rent.

Because the Government is concerned about significant differences in some parts of the country between the rents charged by social landlords and councils for similar sized properties, it is introducing a new policy of controlling rents.

It means that a target rent will be set by the Government and over a 10-year period each social landlord and council must change its rents to meet this. Some councils and social landlords will have to reduce their rents

to do so, some will have to increase them, but in the end rents in social housing in any one area – whether council or other social landlord – will be the same.

As for service charges, the new landlord will not be able to charge more for existing services – in fact they should come down if the new landlord can provide them more cheaply. If a new service – a concierge for example – is introduced, then obviously a charge can be made for that, but that will only happen if residents agree.

How can the steering groups be sure that they are making the right decisions for their estate? Are they accountable?

The steering groups have been made up from people who volunteered to be involved after public meetings on the estate. The aim has been to

reflect the balance of tenants and leaseholders on their estate, so they are representative of residents as a whole. But of course, they need to find out what their neighbours think.

Each steering group will be holding exhibitions and/or public meetings to give people a chance to learn about and comment on the proposals. It is vital that people do go along and have their say.

Once a social landlord partner has been chosen, does that mean the estate will definitely transfer?

No, the next stage involves developing proposals for service provision and investment, at the end of which it will be made clear to all residents exactly what the social landlord is offering. At that point tenants will make a decision whether to transfer or stay with the Council.

Resources galore for borough tenants

The Wynn Garrett tenant resource centre has now opened its doors and is providing a useful resource for residents in the borough.

The centre, in Massingham Street, off Globe Road, offers a meeting space for tenants groups such as the estate steering groups and tenant and resident associations.

Plus it has a range of useful facilities, such as a reference library, photocopiers, PCs and internet access.

And there is a lively programme of courses running through the autumn.

Residents can sign up for a wide range of IT classes, from Microsoft and Office to desktop publishing and web design.

There are also personal development courses, including career planning, assertiveness training and other skills designed to help people search for work, and take an active role in their community.

"We want people to know that we are here and open for business," says project co-ordinator Justina Tulloch.

**The Centre is open:
10am-1pm and
2pm-4pm
Monday to Friday.**

**To find out about
courses, either visit
the centre or call
Justina on
020 7364 7534.**



Members of the borough-wide compact group put the new computer facilities to the test