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OPENhouse



TOWER HAMLETS

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Government plans mean change ahead

Councils who do not change their traditional landlord role will not get any extra money

The government has confirmed that it expects big changes in council housing in return for increased investment

The Government has published its action plan for bringing all social housing up to a decent standard by 2010.

Called *Sustainable Communities: Building for the Future*, it was presented to the House of Commons by John Prescott, the Deputy Prime Minister in February.

The Plan states: "Local authorities will be able to choose the right approach for additional investment in housing stock which they own from

the three existing options: stock transfer; the Private Finance Initiative; and, for high performing authorities, Arms Length Management Organisations.

"Authorities that do not use these options cannot expect increased investment in their stock above that from the Housing Investment Programme."

Councils like Tower Hamlets have already discovered that this standard allowance simply will not be enough to bring homes up to a decent standard.

All three options outlined by John Prescott involve councils stepping back from their traditional role as hands-on landlords.

Councils would take more of a planning and policy role, with the actual management and maintenance, or even ownership, of housing carried out by a different body, such as a housing association.

Tower Hamlet's Lead Councillor for Housing, David Edgar, said:

"It is clear that the government expects big changes in council housing in return for investment.

"Those councils who don't change the way they operate will miss out.

"It shows that Tower Hamlet's Housing Choice programme really is the right way forward for improving homes and estates."



Improvements are smashing

■ Toynbee Housing Association, one of the organisations on the long list for Housing Choice, demolishes Tarling House, Shadwell, to make way for new homes as part of the council's SRB5 regeneration scheme.

In each issue of *Openhouse* we will give social landlords a chance to say why they would like to manage estates in Tower Hamlets and what difference they think their organisation could make.

Look at what's on offer

THCH

Tower Hamlets Community Housing (THCH) is keen to take on some more estates in the borough, following the success of a previous stock transfer in 2000, when 1500 homes transferred.

"We know we can make a difference because of the work we've done since then," says THCH chief executive Mike Tyrrell.

"We've done a lot of work around security because of people's concerns about anti-social behaviour.

"We've done a lot to tackle overcrowding and all tenants have got new kitchens and bathrooms. People can see the difference inside and outside their homes."

Mike feels that his organisation can make the same difference to estates which are neighbouring the THCH ones.

"This year sees the end of the refurbishment pro-

gramme, three years ahead of schedule, which means that we have the resources in our technical section to look at how we improve any estates which transfer under Housing Choice – and we have the experience."

But he stresses that he does not want the organisation to grow too big. "We don't want to lose the effectiveness that a local organisation has to deliver local services. We don't want to lose all the local contact which we've managed to build up."

EXPERIENCE

He feels too that the experience of the last three years would stand THCH in good stead in managing any new estates which transfer.

"We've got the experience of refurbishing homes with tenants in situ, learning from any mistakes, learning about security measures and also the experience of dealing with overcrowded households and tackling anti-social behaviour," he says.

He points out that when estates transferred in 2000, THCH was inundated with requests for repairs.

"We know what to expect, and how to stagger the work," he explains.

Mike and many of his staff had previously worked for the Council, and he believes that experience, combined with the willingness to embrace a new culture as a housing association, has made them a success.

"But the success is also down to our active residents. Consultation doesn't end with the ballot. They have cajoled, criticised and supported us to get the best deal that we possibly could for residents out of the refurbishment programme.

"That means that we have been able to give them not only what we promised at transfer but a whole range of extras. For example, residents at Ada House got new windows and where we promised to put on flat roofs we

have been able to put on pitched ones.

He also stresses that local management would ensure that any money spent on refurbishment was made to last through proper maintenance.

Asked what difference THCH would make to any estates which transferred, Mike says "We would bring a sense of pride and community spirit back to those estates. And our local management is there to ensure that where before money was spent on refurbishment and then neglected, we intend to maintain those estates so that the refurbishments are long lasting."

Guinness

The Guinness Trust has been a housing association in London since the 1890s. In the 1960s it grew to become a national organisation, but its roots are very firmly in the capital.

Martin Lippitt, regional development manager for the South Region of the Trust, explains: "We were set up to provide good quality housing to people in need and to build, develop and sustain communities. And that ethos has carried through our work over the past 100 years and is still very important.

LOCAL FOCUS

"We are a national organisation but with a local focus – so very keen on local management, local organisation and a presence on the estates. But because we are national, we have the resources to back it up."

When asked what experience the Guinness Trust would bring to managing estates in Tower Hamlets, Martin points to a number of issues: "We've got very long and wide experience

of managing different sorts of estates and different sorts of communities.

"We've also been successful specifically with stock transfer – in Islington, Hackney, Manchester and Oldham."

Guinness also has longstanding experience in developing communities and community support alongside physical refurbishment.

"We're recognised by local authorities in London and elsewhere as being a good RSL partner, who they're happy and confident to work alongside in achieving their objectives," he says. "We won't accept poor quality and we won't take up opportunities where we can't meet our standards for people's homes."

Martin points out that the Guinness core design brief – its basic criteria for its buildings – is recognised as one of the highest in the country. And he guarantees that money for refurbishing estates in Tower Hamlets would be 'ring-fenced' – that is kept only for those estates – so that it cannot be diverted to any other properties. "As a charity, we can't make a profit, we don't have shareholders to satisfy, so any surplus goes back into the estate," he says.

Guinness believes that the key difference it could make to any estates which transfer is in housing management and estate services.

"We would have a very strong local presence and make sure that we deliver proper services – eg care-takers, locally-based staff, and locally-focussed services," he says.

The Trust prides itself on fair but firm management policies, including policies to deal with tenants guilty of anti-social behaviour.

"We have evicted people who have ignored all our

attempts to deal with it," he says. "It's serious but we've got the rest of the community to think about." The Trust has linked up with a professional witness organisation who can find evidence and even go to court for people if they feel intimidated.

On refurbishment, Martin says: "We have a good track record on delivering high-quality major works – new kitchens, new bathrooms, environmental improvements – supported by only picking contractors who meet our standards."

INVOLVING RESIDENTS

Guinness is committed to listening to and involving residents in the management of their estates, giving them the opportunity to get involved and make decisions through tenant organisations, local management boards, or whatever tenants want. "And we ensure that the whole community has the opportunity to get involved," he stresses. "We get in specialist advice on communicating with non-English speakers.

"It's about creating sustainable communities, with community facilities, employment training, working with schools, police etc."

To people who might be nervous of transferring from the Council to a new landlord, Martin points out that an RSL is regulated, just as a local authority is. "We're not operating like a private landlord, there are some clear boundaries that we all have to work under," he says. "At the end of the day there will be a contract between us and the borough, saying what we must do. And we've been doing it over 100 years – longer than any authority – so it's quite a stable thing people are going into."



THCH put up these brand new homes in just a few weeks.



Satisfied residents – youngsters outside a Labo home.

Labo

Labo was set up in Tower Hamlets almost 15 years ago. It grew out of a community group, the Limehouse Project, which was set up to assist the Bengali community at a time when many people were coming to Tower Hamlets as refugees.

It became a registered housing association in 1989.

“Our focus is on the Bengali and Somali communities,” explains Labo director John Brewster. “As these are the two biggest black and ethnic minority groups in the borough we feel we are best placed to support them and break down the social exclusion which they have experienced.

“We are a community-based housing association and our roots are in Tower Hamlets. We have demonstrated our commitment to the area – we originated in the borough and we haven’t tried to go outside it. Of the 400 units Labo owns only 15 properties are outside Tower Hamlets.

“We understand the issues. We feel that we can make a difference to what the council is trying to do.”

John is keen to see Labo grow – but to grow locally. “In the housing world, the larger you are, the more you are heard. If we grow in size we would have

more opportunities to advocate for people and offer more non-housing initiatives.”

Advocacy has been a key part of Labo since the organisation began.

“When Bengali refugees first came to the borough, they were not always welcomed. Some people did not speak any English or were lone parents, women with three or four children whose husbands had been left behind in Bangladesh or had died in the civil war in Somalia.

“We tried to get services for them. Then we got a few housing units and started advocating for them.”

Labo still puts a high priority on community development, running classes in English as a second language, computer training, job seeking and debt advice. “We give a community service, not just a housing service,” John says.

However, he stresses that the organisation also has extensive housing management experience. “Our housing performance can stand with any in the borough,” he says. “Our rent collection rate is 100%, completion of repairs is 98%. I think very few other RSLs can touch those figures.”

Labo is particularly well-placed to work with people from black and ethnic minority groups in the community. Its front desk staff are all Bengali or Somali speakers. “And in

terms of getting tenants’ participation in services, because of who we are we are able to get more participation from these communities.”

It is in resident involvement and improvement of services that John thinks that Labo can really make a difference to any estates that transfer. “Our approach is very much one of partnership,” he explains. “We will attempt to address the issues on a grass roots basis, and can approach residents as partners.

“And that will be seen in the initiatives we carry out – not just bricks and mortar but also developing regeneration initiatives. We’ll address community safety, and seek to work with other RSLs on these, looking at pan-RSL CCTV initiatives and anti social behaviour initiatives. We’re not insular – it’s about taking a large scale strategic approach.”

Labo will also consider providing Saturday and after-school homework clubs for residents’ children and culturally sensitive services for elders from black and ethnic minority communities.

“We recognise that the strength of the community revolves around the family,” explains John. “And that is very important to us – supporting families and setting up supportive networks and also supporting elders from black and ethnic minority communities.”

Peabody Trust

Peabody Trust is a leading regeneration agency and one of London’s largest and longest-established housing associations.

As Nic Parker, the Trust’s principal economic and community development manager says: “We work to provide good quality housing at affordable rents. We tackle social exclusion and we create thriving sustainable communities.

“What we can bring to Housing Choice is physical improvements to residents’ homes, local estate-based management through estate offices, resident caretakers and a community regeneration team who will create better opportunities for local people.”

Peabody has over 140 years’ experience as a housing association, managing over 19,000 properties across 27 London boroughs.

It has 1,100 homes in Tower Hamlets, in Bethnal Green and the Stepney-Wapping area. “We’ve got five local estate offices in the borough, which give residents quick and easy access to the Trust,” says Nic.

“We’ve invested over £100 million in the last 10 years in our own estate improvement programme, and over the next few years we’ll be investing a further £20 million.

“We also have an unrivalled record in providing employment, training and community initiatives and since 1997 we’ve attracted over £21 million in grants to deliver community programmes cross the capital.”

Three of these projects are in Tower Hamlets, for example St Peter’s North, where 50 new homes and a community centre have been built alongside an extensive range of community, training and employment activities.

The Trust has carried out three successful stock transfers since 1997. The most recent, in Hackney and in King’s Cross, have seen 2000 properties transfer. In King’s Cross homes are undergoing a five-year £44 million renewal programme, including extensive environmental improvements.

The Pembury Estates in Hackney have just started on a £40 million programme of improvements, based on residents’ views and ideas.

“Residents’ views shape any proposals that we make,” says Nic. “On every project we aim to speak directly to over 70% of residents and involve them in the development of ideas.”

Asked what difference the Trust would make to estates, Nic points out that the organisation would work with the Council and residents to tackle some of the underlying issues which the Council simply doesn’t have the resources to improve.

“We believe as a landlord we have the responsibility both to invest in people’s homes and to provide a quality external environment on the estate,” he says.

“We have a very long tradition of local service development and we believe that locally placed staff are best placed to deliver a highly responsive service to local residents.

“Our vision for Tower Hamlets includes providing local estate offices, which can offer help on a range of

matters from tenancy and rent advice to ordering large-scale repairs.

“The site staff will be backed up by a team of welfare benefit advisors, housing support workers and tenant liaison officers, who are able to offer more specialist help and advice.

“We would reintroduce resident caretakers, which has been a long-established tradition on Peabody estates and we find that they play an important role in keeping estates clean, clear of rubbish and graffiti in addition to offering a minor repairs service and 24-hour emergency cover as well.

“We also plan to introduce an active community regeneration programme, which will build on our existing services in the area, and we would like to develop new services as well.

“We want to invest in the homes and estates and carry out an extensive programme of major works which includes modernising kitchens and bathrooms, replacing windows, security improvements and landscaping.”

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Editorial

Check out the opportunities

AS HOUSING Choice continues, more estates are making the decision about what potential social landlord can offer the best opportunities for improving their homes.

Openhouse will be highlighting the registered social landlords (RSLs) on the long list selected by the tenants on the Boroughwide Compact Group – the list from which estates can make their choice. You can read about the first five – Peabody Trust, the Guinness Trust, Tower Hamlets Community Housing, Toynbee and Labo – in this issue.

All the organisations on the list have something in common. They are all non-profit making, which means that any money they make goes back into their homes. But there are also big differences. Some are large organisations, managing many homes around the country and with experience going back over 100 years. Others pride themselves on their local roots and local knowledge. Some take a specialist approach. It is up to each estate to decide which organisation best meets their needs. And with real choices to be made, it’s important that everybody has their say. Make sure you have your say on the future of your estate.

**To find out more contact the Council’s Consultation and Participation Team at:
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Look at what's on offer (continued from page 3)

Toynbee Housing Association

Toynbee Housing Association grew out of Toynbee Hall, a Spitalfields-based charity set up to work with a range of disadvantaged people. It has been working in Tower Hamlets for 40 years.

The association has around 3000 properties in total, and manages homes across the borough.

"We know the area, we know the local community, and our staff are very much reflective of the communities we work in," says Toynbee's new initiatives manager Liz Pearce.

She believes that taking on more properties will enable the organisation to make economies of scale and give them more of a voice.

"We've grown at a reasonably rapid pace over the past few years, but it has been managed growth and we feel able to manage more," she says. "And we have the staff and the expertise to work with local people to manage and improve services."

LOCAL KNOWLEDGE

Asked what experience Toynbee can bring to estates in Tower Hamlets, Liz points to the organisation's housing management and caretaking skills – and its knowledge of estates in the borough. Its development staff are experienced in refurbishment and repairs, and the organisation has a strong financial basis.

"We're now in a position where we have just over £100 million in private finance facilities," Liz explains.

Added to that, she points out: "We have got a very strong understanding of the different elements of the community in Tower Hamlets – a lot of our staff actually live in the borough as well as working with local people.

"In terms of experience of stock transfer issues, in 1996 Toynbee took over Rodinglea Housing association and acquired 400



Peabody refurbished this estate to the highest standards after transfer.

properties from them. So we took them on, improved the homes, improved the services that tenants were getting.

"In West Ham we took over eight blocks belonging to Newham Council and completely refurbished them, so we now have 100 new properties working extremely well, which had been described by the council as their most difficult to let estate.

"We manage estates in East London and in Bedfordshire and we think that we do it well."

Liz believes that one of Toynbee's strengths is its accessibility. "We are very much 'hands on', so you don't get the same levels of bureaucracy as with a council or a large organisation," she says.

IMPROVING CONDITIONS

What would they bring to estates transferring under Housing Choice? "In terms of the physical environment, it's about knowing people's expectations, being able to come up with the money and having innovative ways of using the space better and improving living conditions generally," Liz says.

As an example, she points out that many of the schemes Toynbee has now are high density, but they make sure that people have their own private space. "Most schemes we're doing now have

either a garden or a balcony. It's about making the best use of design and we've been working with very good architects who have been looking at very good ways of doing that. We've just finished 78 units in Stratford, and all

have some sort of external living area.

THE RIGHT TEAM

"It's all about finding the right team to work with to ensure that anything proposed matches people's aspirations."



Guinness' friendly and local service.

Residents set the pace

More estates are getting ready to choose a housing association to work with on ways to bring investment into their homes.

But how do steering groups go about making their choice? How do they ensure that they consider the views of everybody on their estate?

"It's very much steering group led, we're marching to their tune." So says Peter Griffiths of PPCR, the organisation chosen by the tenants to give free, independent help and advice to residents during Stage 2 of Housing Choice.

"And there are lots of opportunities for all residents to get involved and give their views."

PPCR are on hand to offer lots of training and advice to ensure that steering groups have the skills and confidence to make their choice of the right housing association for their estate.

"At the start, we give steering group members a training needs form, and advise people on how to interview, what to look for, the kinds of questions to ask and how to judge the answers," Peter explains.

PPCR have outlined a timetable for the whole Housing Choice process, from setting up an estate steering group to selecting a registered social landlord (RSL).

First of all, the steering group has to decide from among the registered social landlords who have expressed an interest in their estate. PPCR will do a profile of the organisation, point out what to look for and how to compare them.

Once the RSLs have responded, PPCR can offer help in assessing the replies.

The steering group then marks the answers. "People sometimes wonder what would happen if different steering group members gave very differ-

ent assessments," says Peter. "But it hasn't happened. It's amazing how close the responses are."

The next stage is for the steering group to visit one of the RSL's estates to see for themselves what their properties are like and how they run things. Again, they will have some kind of marking system and again, if they wish, PPCR is on hand to offer help.

But steering groups also need to check that their views are in line with other residents on the estate. This is where the open days come in. They give all residents the chance to have a look at what the different RSLs are offering and to give their views.

"We get everybody who comes to fill in a questionnaire, giving their comments on the information provided by the various social landlords," says Peter. "We can then give a report to the steering group on what residents want."

At last, the RSLs give their final presentation. PPCR will offer training in interview skills if the panel wants it. If the steering group is particularly large, then the questions are put by a small panel, with other members attending as observers.

"That way, the whole estate can know that the process is fair," says Peter.

Within the basic timetable, there is plenty of opportunity for residents on the steering group to do things their way and ensure that they get the information they want and can choose the right partner for them.

The process has to suit the steering group – not the other way round. The important thing, both PPCR and the Council agree, is that residents are in charge, are happy with the process and have all the information they need to make an informed decision as to who would be the best landlord for their estate.