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OPENhouse



Issue No.12

July 2003

HOUSING CHOICE SHIFTS UP A GEAR



MP opens tenants' resource

Tony McNulty MP visited Tower Hamlets to officially open the Wyn Garrett Tenants' Resource Centre in Stepney. He was shown round the centre by the Leader of the Council, Helal Abbas and Bernard Cameron, Chair of the Boroughwide Compact Group. In the picture Tony McNulty (right) presents a certificate to resource centre student Dan Kelly, watched by Cllr Abbas. For more information on the Wyn Garrett Tenants' Resource Centre and future courses contact 020 7364 7540/7531

Housing Choice – the Council's proposals for bringing new investment into estates and giving residents a greater say over their homes – continues to gain momentum.

Four more steering groups covering eight estates have chosen their landlord partner for Stage 3 of Housing Choice, bringing the total of estates to have completed Stage 2 to thirteen.

The most recent estate steering groups to make their choice are:

- Boundary, which has chosen Peabody Trust
 - Coventry Cross, which has chosen Poplar HARCA
 - Wapping, Riverside and Royal Mint have chosen Guinness Trust
 - East India, comprising Brownfield, Teviot and Aberfeldy estates has chosen Poplar HARCA.
- The estate steering

groups' decisions mean that they have now completed Stage 2 of Housing Choice, selecting a partner from the list of social landlords drawn up by residents on the borough-wide Compact Group.

Each group, made up of tenants and leaseholders can select from this list according to who they think will best meet their priorities for their estate.

They now move on to Stage 3, which involves working up detailed proposals for their estate – the nuts and bolts of what the chosen social landlord would be able to do for the estate if it took over management and maintenance. These proposals will then be put to residents

to vote on. Already in Stage 3 are Bede, British Street, Eric and Leopold Estates in Mile End and Crossways Estate in Bromley-by-Bow. Detailed discussions are taking place with the government about the amount of money needed by these estates.

Maureen McEleney, Tower Hamlets' Interim Director of Housing, said: "It's exciting to see so many estates getting involved in Housing Choice and seeing just what the opportunities are."

Find out more about what's going on on your estate by calling the Council's consultation and participation team on 020 7531 0220, e-mail: cpt@towerhamlets.gov.uk

Editorial

Making a real difference

AS HOUSING Choice continues, estate steering groups across the borough are busy looking at other social landlords, considering whether they would provide a better service, and more investment, than the Council with its limited resources can offer.

If estates choose to move on to Stage 3 of Housing Choice, then tenants can vote on whether to transfer to a new landlord.

But if this happens, it is not only ownership of the homes that will transfer. Many Council officers will have protected employment rights so all the social landlords taking part in Housing Choice know they may be required to take on some of the Council's staff. This has led some people to wonder whether things will really be different. Won't it be the 'same old, same old'?

As Paul Bloss, head of the newly-formed EastEndHomes explains in 'Change for the better' on page 4, there will be a real difference. Council staff will bring their commitment, energy, experience and local knowledge to their new organisation. But the organisations they join, unlike the Council, will have the resources to spend on improving your homes and estates and will bring new ideas and ways of working that can be tailored to the needs of each estate.

VOLUNTEERS NEEDED

THE AREA RESIDENTS' PANELS

NEED YOU!

The Area Residents' Panels provide the main forum for the council to consult with tenants and leaseholders on housing issues and find out their views on the service that they receive.

There are four Area Residents' Panels:
Bethnal Green, Stepney/Wapping,
Isle of Dogs/South Poplar and
Bow/North Poplar.

They meet every six to eight weeks to discuss housing matters important to their area. They feed into the Borough Wide Compact Group, which is made up of representatives from the area panels.

The Borough Wide Compact Group currently meets once a month and is playing a key role in decision making ensuring residents voices are heard.

If you are interested in getting involved in decisions about your home and the area where you live, contact Louis Rotsos at the Housing Department's Consultation and Participation Team on 020 7531 0220 or e-mail cpt@towerhamlets.gov.uk

Find out more about

At the start of Housing Choice, residents on the borough-wide compact group selected a long-list of 16 housing associations which estates could choose as a partner. Here, Openhouse looks at four more organisations on that list.

Spitalfields Housing Association

Spitalfields is a community-based housing association working almost exclusively in Tower Hamlets.

It was set up some 25 years ago by members of the local Bengali community in response to poor housing and overcrowding in the Spitalfields area. It is still growing, with more than 150 new homes currently in development.

It manages around 500 properties, and is keen to take on more through Housing Choice. As Ian Weightman, Chief Executive, says: "We believe our local knowledge and experience of working in Tower Hamlets means we can provide the services that tenants and residents want."

"We provide high standards of housing management and tenant participation and would welcome the opportunity to offer this to new tenants," says Ian.

Ian believes that Spitalfields can offer a responsive repair service that gets repairs done on

time, backed up by 'firm-but-fair' housing management policies to deal with problems such as anti-social behaviour.

In particular, Spitalfields is proud of its strong community links – from involving tenants on the board of management (five tenants, six local community leaders and four experts to provide additional support) to the way it provides services.

"Spitalfields is very much at the heart of the local community," explains Ian. "Our strengths lie in working with communities to provide real solutions to problems. We are currently involved in providing employment training, support to tenants' associations and various projects to promote the welfare of our residents."

"We have a long track record of delivering quality services and have frequently been a best performing housing association in the annual assessment of all social landlords in the borough carried out by the Council."

"Working with Tower Hamlets' existing staff, we believe we can show progress and make a difference – high standards of customer care, com-



Swan's housing officer visits a tenant

binated with regeneration initiatives and a local base, make us ideally-placed to meet the expectations of local residents. Our track record is one of success."

Swan Housing Association

Swan was created to take on homes that were transferred from Commission for New Towns ownership in Basildon in 1994.

"We are an organisation created for our tenants and tenants have a clear say in how we are run," says Geoff Pearce, Head of Development Services.

"Residents at Crossways have chosen us as their preferred partner because we demonstrated that we listen to residents and respond openly; have a positive enthusiastic and innovative approach; have a skilled and experienced team with local focus; and we are committed to con-

sultation and involvement."

Asked what difference Swan would make to estates in Tower Hamlets, Geoff points out that each neighbourhood is unique and will therefore require its own plan for investment and management. But, he says, there are principles that always apply.

These include: listening to residents' views; having a physical presence on an estate; consulting residents on the level of service they require; cracking down on anti-social behaviour and investing in improvements.

"We can get funding that is not available to the Council because they are not allowed to borrow in the way we can," he explains.

Swan believes that communities are more than just housing: "We must address wider social issues such as the need to include and involve everybody, to provide training



New Spitalfields homes take shape

Housing Choice landlords

New Director for Housing



BGVPHA's tenants' working group

and employment opportunities, services for vulnerable people and community facilities," he says.

Ideas for achieving this include free digital set-top boxes for all residents so that they can access the internet and a range of Swan services in the home; IT training for residents; employment and training opportunities in construction; and a commitment to employing Swan tenants, with a target of 10% of all staff being recruited from residents".

All Council staff transferring to Swan through Housing Choice are assured that terms and conditions of contract will be preserved, and that additional benefits will be provided where Swan's terms are better. And this will benefit residents, too. As Geoff explains: "We believe that a happy, supported and well-trained workforce leads directly to high standards of service to our customers.

"We are committed to continuous improvement by developing creative and resident-led solutions for each estate that selects us."

BGVPHA

Bethnal Green and Victoria Park Housing Association (BGVPHA) has a track record in Tower Hamlets going back to 1926.

In that time, they have

built up considerable experience of refurbishing existing properties – both empty and with residents in situ – and of developing new homes.

"We are clear that our core business is long-term housing management and maintenance," says Adrian Greenwood, Chief Executive. "We seek to put service delivery at the heart of our organisation and we achieve high standards of performance and resident satisfaction.

"We are happy to show Council tenants and leaseholders what we have done across the borough, and invite them to meet with our residents."

BGVPHA sees a clear link between the quality of housing and thriving, mixed communities. "As well as our excellent maintenance track record, with 98% of repairs carried out on time last year, we also have initiatives to reduce anti-social behaviour, such as neighbourhood wardens and youth groups," Adrian explains.

"We are tough on any kind of anti-social behaviour and have harassment and nuisance policies which are strongly enforced," Adrian says.

The views of residents are valued in improving and monitoring our services, with residents involved at all levels of BGVPHA. But the organisation also puts a high value on staff. "We take great care in the way that

staff are recruited, inducted, trained and managed," explains Adrian. "We have high levels of staff retention. Staff transferring from Tower Hamlets will join a committed and dynamic group of staff who are focussed on getting the job done."

Adrian points out that BGVPHA is the only locally-based independent housing association in Tower Hamlets to have been awarded the government's Charter Mark for excellence in public services. The assessors for the award described BGVPHA as 'an innovative and progressive organisation, characterised by a successful blend of experience, enthusiasm, openness and professionalism', with a high priority

attached 'to involving users in all aspect of its work and service delivery'.

The assessors wrote to BGVPHA: "Your commitment to regeneration in Tower Hamlets and to the provision of high-quality affordable housing is reflected in the improvements you have made to your services and to the innovative and beneficial partnership arrangements you have established. Tenants are taking an increasingly important role in the work and strategic development of the organisation."

Poplar HARCA

Poplar HARCA manages some 5000 former Council homes in Poplar. The first tenants transferred in 1998, and since then £150 million has been spent on refurbishing existing homes, with new kitchens or bathrooms, new roofs, windows and heating and improved security and landscaping.

With the refurbishment to properties almost complete, HARCA is now carrying out more external improvement works, such as landscaping and upgrading the communal areas.

Equally important is the work that HARCA does on bringing new life to the community. "HARCA

stands for Housing and Regeneration Community Association," explains Rob Hannabuss, Housing Choice Co-ordinator. "We think that it is very important that other things that effect local people are dealt with. Long-term change and improvements in the area will only come about by linking housing issues to jobs, education, health, sport, art and so on."

To this end, the HARCA has set up a network of neighbourhood centres, one for each estate, where local people can meet for community events, playgroups, training, advice and a range of other services.

The organisation works with local people on initiatives to tackle crime, such as the estate ranger patrols, money for extra policing and physical improvements such as better lighting and CCTV cameras.

Most HARCA staff transferred from the Council and have helped the new organisation to build a track record for excellent service delivery. Around 50 per cent of staff live in the borough and Poplar HARCA encourages contractors to employ local people.

Residents have a big say in the organisation, with residents' boards on each estate, and seven of the organisation's main board directors – including the chair – are residents. "The structure of Poplar HARCA will be modified to ensure that every estate, old and new, has an equal voice in how the organisation is run," says Rob. "We are also aiming to have a resident majority on the board."

"Our work is already bringing benefits to the whole of Poplar, for example through our neighbourhood centres. If more homes join us we will be a stronger organisation, able to do more for the area. We will have the strength, the money and the backing of local people to make Poplar an area to be proud of."



Refurbished HARCA homes

Meet Maureen McEleney, Tower Hamlets' new Interim Director, Housing Management. Here, Maureen explains her priorities for the service and her hopes for the future.

Maureen McEleney is Tower Hamlet's Interim Director, Housing Management. Former Director Sue Benjamins has left the Council, and Maureen will hold the post while a new structure is developed to deliver Housing and other services in the future.

Maureen has worked in the housing department for over 15 years, so she knows the area and issues well.

Her main priority is on improving service delivery. She told staff that it was a real achievement for the department to receive a 'good' rating in the Government's recent grading of council services, but that there was still much to be done in improving residents' experience of the service.

"It's important to meet performance targets on things like repairs," she says. "But just as important is how the targets are met, our residents experience of the service. It's about quality."

Other key priorities are the future structure of the housing department and, of course, delivering Housing Choice.

She says: "This is a challenging time for everybody working in housing, with the government clear that it wants to change the way social housing is financed and managed. What is exciting about working at Tower Hamlets is that we are one of the leading local authorities taking these changes seriously with our Housing Choice programme and putting residents in charge of the process."

Protecting your housing rights

Many tenants will be concerned whether the rights that they currently have as Council tenants will be protected if they vote to transfer to a social landlord.

As you can see from the chart below, almost all existing rights will be protected – and in some cases you would gain rights that you don't have now.

You would keep your security of tenure so it would

not be easier for a social landlord to evict you. Just like the Council, a social landlord would have to prove its case to a county court in order to get a possession order. These protections will apply to *all* of the social landlords taking part in Housing Choice.

The statutory Right to Manage, which collectively allows a group of tenants to set up a Tenant Management Organisation does not apply to social landlords.

However, estate steering groups can make it clear to prospective landlords during the Housing Choice process if they wish to consider the option of self-management as part of their choice of new landlord.

The social landlords can then show how they could accommodate it within their organisation so that where appropriate desire for tenant management exists, it becomes part of the selection process.

Your Rights	Your rights now as a secure tenant with the Council	Your Rights now as a probationary tenant with the Council (first 12 months as a Council tenant)	Your rights with a social landlord
The Right to Buy (This would be known as the "Preserved" Right to Buy, if the transfer took place)	✓	✗	✓
The Right to live in your home without the threat of being evicted without good cause	✓	✓	✓
The Right to pass on your home when you die	✓	✓	✓
A second right of succession	✓	✗	✓
The Right to make certain improvements and receive compensation for them when the tenancy comes to an end	✓	✗	✓
The Right to have repairs carried out within set timescales	✓	✓	✓
The Right to be given information about the management of your home	✓	✓	✓
The Right to transfer or exchange your home	✓	✗	✓
The Right to "Rent to Mortgage"	✓	✗	✗
The Right to Manage	✓	✓	✗
The Right to take in lodgers and (with permission) to sublet part of your home	✓	✗	✓
The new Right to Acquire in certain circumstances	✗	✗	✓
The Right not to have your tenancy agreement changed (except for rent and service charge) without your consent	✗	✗	✓
The right to be consulted	✓	✓	✓

Frequently asked questions

Housing Choice is the biggest consultation with residents ever introduced by the Council's housing department.

The proposals would bring in a big change in the way housing in the borough is owned and managed, so it's not surprising that residents have a lot of questions. Here we answer some of the most frequently asked questions.

WHY HAS THE COUNCIL DEVELOPED HOUSING CHOICE?

The Council decided to develop the Housing Choice programme when its housing business plan showed a £290 million shortfall in the money needed to maintain and repair the housing stock. It was clear that things could not go on as they are.

The Council 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.

WILL RENTS GO UP MUCH FASTER IF HOMES ARE TRANSFERRED THAN IF THEY STAY WITH THE COUNCIL?

No. Rents of homes transferred by the Council to Poplar HARCA and Tower Hamlets Community Housing (THCH) have not risen faster than Council rents.

The Government has introduced a new policy for rents which applies to all councils and housing associations. Under this policy properties of a similar size in a similar area will carry a similar rent regardless of whether the landlord is a local authority or a housing association. This means that the rents will be worked out in a similar way whether or not there is a change of

landlord.

Each organisation has to set a target rent according to a Government formula and over a 10 year period it must change its rents to meet this (maximum) rent target. Some councils and registered 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, regardless of who the landlord is.

WILL IT BE EASIER FOR NEW LANDLORDS TO EVICT TENANTS?

No. Just as with the Council, a social landlord cannot evict anybody without a court order. (See story above for more information)

WHAT ABOUT LOCAL DEMOCRACY? YOU GET A VOTE WITH THE COUNCIL, AND IF YOU DON'T LIKE WHAT THEY ARE DOING, YOU CAN VOTE ACCORD-

INGLY. HOW DO RESIDENTS GET A SAY OVER A SOCIAL LANDLORD?

Residents have the ultimate control over Housing Choice, in that the proposals can only go ahead if tenants vote in favour. If they vote 'no', properties cannot transfer. In the secret ballots on transfer proposals that have taken place so far in the borough there has been a higher percentage turnout than for most local Council elections.

And residents do have the opportunity to have a real say over how their estates are managed. Many social landlords have come up with innovative ways of involving residents, including seats on the board that govern the organisation.

If residents want to ensure that they are involved in decision making, they can make sure that this is part of the proposals that govern how a new landlord would manage their estate.

Change for the better

All of the social landlords participating in Housing Choice will be required to accept Council staff along with any homes that may transfer.

One of the questions many residents are asking is: How will a new landlord be able to deliver improvements with the same staff?

This question is particularly relevant to EastEndHomes, the new social landlord that is being set up by the Council. Paul Bloss, who has recently been appointed to lead the new organisation, and his staff come from within the Council.

Paul is confident that his team really can make a difference.

"Council staff have the skills, the local knowledge, the experience and enthusiasm to deliver a first-rate housing service," he explains.

"What they haven't had – because the Council hasn't had it – is enough money to spend on maintenance and management of peo-

ple's homes. It has been incredibly frustrating.

"Council staff working for EastEndHomes want to prove that given both the resources and independence that working for a social landlord will bring, they can work closely with residents to deliver real improvements."

Paul adds: "We have staff who have worked in local housing offices, others with a lot of experience of community regeneration or tackling anti-social behaviour, as well as technical staff with a wealth of experience in major works programmes.

All have local experience, local knowledge and, above all, local commitment but they will also have the flexibility of a new organisation, training in new skills and the resources to get the job done."

"We are all excited about the prospect of creating a new organisation with residents, which will be run by residents for residents."