



The council's only housing newspaper for all your Housing Choice news

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OPENhouse



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GOVERNMENT: NO MORE MONEY WITHOUT CHANGE

Dizzee (and friends) getting busy



A young Dizzee Rascal puts his painting skills to the test. Now a rising star of the hip-hop scene, Dizzee grew up in Tower Hamlets, where he was a regular user of the youth club at the Linc Centre, one of the community facilities set up by Poplar HARCA on the Lincoln Estate. Turn to pages 2-3 to find out more about what RSLs are doing to improve the quality of life for their residents.

Housing Minister confirms that there will be no extra housing money unless councils accept government options

The government's Housing Minister has confirmed that there will be no extra resources for councils to improve their housing unless they adopt one of its three options for council housing:

- transferring homes to an alternative social landlord.
- setting up an arms-length management organisation
- private finance initiative (PFI)

Readers of Openhouse will know that the council has already looked at all these options and developed Housing Choice as the best way for Tower Hamlets to deliver the government's decent homes standard and bring housing in the borough up to scratch.

Housing Choice enables residents on each estate to decide for themselves whether transferring to a social landlord is right for their estate.

There has been some speculation that if council tenants reject all three available options then the government could be forced to stump up the cash anyway. But Housing Minister Keith Hill has made it clear that this is not going to happen.

He told the Decent Homes Committee in January that the governments' options: "provide a clear focus for the delivery of the landlord's service and secure guaranteed tenant involvement in decision-making."

"There will be no so-

called fourth way. The cavalry will not come over the hills with alternatives."

Mr Hill went on to say that the government believed that the three options provide all social housing tenants with the opportunity of having their homes brought into decent condition by 2010:

"This policy is making a real difference up and down the country. Hundreds of thousands of tenants are now living in better homes, ie warm, dry modern homes.

"Where there has been a change in management arrangements, either through transfer or an ALMO, tenants are experiencing improvements in service."

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

RSLs – working to improve the quality of

The social landlords involved in Housing Choice don't just provide housing. They have the resources to offer a range of opportunities for their local communities – from support for parents to activities for young people. Openhouse asked four RSLs to describe their work in this area.

Old Ford

Construction training, community education for adults and youth drama lessons are just a few of the initiatives that have taken place on Old Ford estates during the last 12 months.

Fifteen young adults took the chance of learning a trade in the construction industry last year, in a programme funded by the European Social Fund.

Some of them are already working on site and others are attending college in order to qualify for their NVQs in electrici-

ty, plumbing and carpentry.

A new group of trainees joined the programme this February. They will take part in a 12-month training scheme that will see them improving their basic skills as well as learning their chosen trade.

The community education programme offers many adults the opportunity to learn new skills in a leisure environment, absolutely free of charge. So far, we have run courses including Caribbean cookery, jive, Spanish and singing.

The residents – who determine which variety

of courses they want – have decided that in 2004 they will do reflexology, line dancing and application of make-up.

A group of 20 children and teenagers are learning drama skills with tutors from Theatre Royal Stratford East. They have been working together since November and will be joining an annual show at Stratford Circus this month.

Old Ford also works closely with local schools. We have already carried out two arts and crafts projects with Old Ford and Bow Boys School and another one is on the go for this spring.



Old Ford sponsored pupils from Bow Boys School to build a boat which was later floated in the Herford Union Canal.

Poplar HARCA

Each year Poplar HARCA contributes £1.5 million core funding towards regeneration projects.

This core budget is matched by over £1.7 million of funds raised by the Poplar HARCA Community and Economic Regeneration Team.

Through its network of

neighbourhood centres (one on each estate) an extensive programme of community regeneration has been taking place. Here local people meet for community events, playgroups, youth nights, training advice and a range of other services

Steve Stride, Chief Executive of Poplar HARCA said: "Our community regeneration work has brought in £11 million to benefit local people in recent years. The programme creates jobs and training opportunities and ensures both the young and old are involved and supported."

Some of Poplar HARCA's most recent projects include:

- supporting a local group of mothers to set up 'Stay and Play' Toy library for children, parents and carers on the Lansbury Estate
- working with a housing company to fund a new community centre and nursery underneath a new block of flats on the Bow Bridge estate
- taking over the management of Trussler Hall near Chrisp St market and refurbishing it so now it's a diverse multi-use community facility
- working with a resident's group to convert a disused piece of land into a multi-purpose games pitch and community garden
- youth activities – Poplar HARCA's Linc Centre

was used by Mercury Winner and three-time Brit nominee Dizzee Rascal.

Sanctuary

Sanctuary Housing Association has been chosen as the preferred partner registered social landlord by the Ocean Estate.

Rob Hughes from Sanctuary set out his organisation's vision for community development on the estate if transfer goes ahead.

"In addition to providing good quality, affordable homes, Sanctuary will also be the delivery vehicle to take forward the New Deal for Communities vision to regenerate and develop the community in a variety of ways, including;

- generating employment
- education and training opportunities
- youth activity projects
- recycling initiatives
- health projects
- community facilities

"Sanctuary will work closely with the NDC and the community to deliver appropriate solutions for the current and future residents of the Ocean estate. This will involve consulting with residents, existing community groups, organisations such as Sure Start and Working Links, shop keepers and other stakeholders to provide a wide



The launch of the "stay and play" toy library on Lansbury West estate – a partnership between Poplar HARCA, Sure Start and Lansbury West TMO.

life for tenants

Housing Choice:

your questions answered

range of community initiatives that will improve the social and economic well-being of the estate.

“Initiatives to combat crime and drug abuse, redress the lack of youth activities and improve the health of the community will be undertaken that will ensure a holistic, sustainable approach and give access to all residents. This will include the building of new community leisure buildings that will be a focus point and provide opportunities for bringing the community closer together.

“We will also work closely with statutory bodies such as NHS, social services, education, DSS and police to ensure all essential partners are involved in this transformation.”

BGVPHA

Bethnal Green and Victoria Park Housing Association has an excellent track record in community development and regeneration.

“We believe in creating communities and sustainable neighbourhoods, not just providing homes,” says BGVPHA’s community development officer, Phil Hissey.

“We want our estates to be places where people want to live, bring up children and retire.”

One of its most successful community programmes is on the Ocean estate in central Stepney. When three blocks were demolished, BGVPHA

built street properties with gardens and put in place initiatives to encourage people to get to know each other.

Resident volunteers were taught to instruct their neighbours how to use the unfamiliar equipment – such as smoke alarms and individually adjusted central heating – in their new homes.

The also introduced ‘Mutual Aid’, where neighbours are encouraged to look out for each other. A tool hire project means that residents can tend their new gardens without purchasing expensive tools.

Other BGVPHA community and regeneration projects include youth groups and inter-generational work between school children and residents in sheltered accommodation. There are a number of training programmes in partnership with the Limehouse Project and London Youth.

At BGVPHA sheltered schemes, wardens arrange activities for residents, including bingo, exercise classes, race nights, parties and trips, such as outings to the seaside. Last summer, residents enjoyed day trips to Royden Mills leisure centre, Lakeside, Southend on Sea and Herne Bay.

Phil explains: ‘Helping to create strong communities where residents feel they belong, which they can contribute to and are proud to be a part of is an essential aspect of BGVPHA’s work.’



A coffee morning at a BGVPHA sheltered scheme.

The council has set up Housing Choice to give residents a real say in the way their homes and estates are looked after. If tenants wish, they can vote to transfer to a new social landlord, which will be better placed to invest in repairs and improvements and provide a service tailored to the needs of the estate.

Tenants may still decide that they would prefer to stay with the council – even if the council does not have the money needed to bring homes up to a decent standard. The choice is yours.

The council wants to make sure that your choice is an informed choice, based on the facts. We know from previous transfer ballots that a lot of so-called information that circulates around estates is misleading.

Openhouse got the answers to some of the most frequently asked questions. And they’ve been checked through by a lawyer, so you can be sure that the information here is legal and correct.



Checking out information on Housing Choice.

Does Housing Choice mean the privatisation of council housing in Tower Hamlets?

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

By contrast, the proposed transfer of the council’s housing is to a housing association or charitable housing trust. They are not-for-profit organisations and there are no shareholders to pay dividends to. The income received goes into managing, maintaining and improving homes and repaying their loans.

Won’t it mean less democratic control?

Housing Choice is democratic, in that changes can only be made if tenants vote in favour of transfer. May RSLs have much more direct tenant involvement in the way they are run. For example THCH and Poplar HARCA, which were involved in previous transfers in the borough – are run by a governing body made up of at least one third residents, who have a direct say on the day-to-day running of the organisation that runs their homes.

Will rents go up much faster if the stock is transferred than if it is retained by the council?

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

Secondly, the Government has introduced a policy of rent control which means that each home whether owned by the council or an RSL is set a target rent according to a Government formula and over a 10-year period all social landlords must set their rents to meet this (maximum) rent target. Some councils and RSLs will have to reduce their rents to meet this target, some will have to increase them, but in the end rents for properties of a similar size in a similar area will have the same rent.

What will happen to people’s legal rights as tenants if they move to a new landlord? Will we lose our security?

No – you will not lose your security of tenure if your tenancy transfers to an RSL.

The confusion has arisen because of the different names that council tenancies and RSL tenancies have. Your tenancy with the council is called a secure tenancy. Tenants of RSLs have an ‘assured tenancy’. The names are different because they are governed by different Acts of Parliament. The tenancy agreement that you would have with an RSL if you transfer would be similar to the one you have with the council. It will certainly be no easier for you to be evicted if you transfer to a new landlord under Housing Choice.

There are claims that if houses don’t transfer, then the government can be forced to put more money into council housing.

There is absolutely no evidence to support this. As our front page story reports, the government’s Housing Minister has recently stated again that there will be no extra money for councils that do not follow one of its options for raising additional resources to invest in their housing and meet the decent homes standard.

These options are:

- transfer of the housing to a new social landlord
- private finance initiative
- arms-length management organisation

Tower Hamlets has looked in detail at these three options and established that Housing Choice is the best way of bringing the necessary investment into your estates.

Will the banks own the houses after transfer?

No – the RSL will own the houses. RSLs, unlike Tower Hamlets council, can borrow money to do up the homes, but they own the properties. (The government has recently relaxed the rules on borrowing for councils, but unfortunately Tower Hamlets is not a position to benefit from them).

What if things go wrong?

Registered Social Landlords are closely monitored by the Housing Corporation and their accounts checked to ensure that things are not going wrong. Any difficulties can be sorted out quickly, with the Housing Corporation intervening and if necessary bringing in additional managers or another social landlord to assist.

Leaseholders – council revises policy on contributions towards repairs

The Director of Housing, Maureen McEleney, is writing to all leaseholders to explain the council's revised policy framework for protecting less well off leaseholders from large bills when major repairs and improvements are carried out to their home.

The council's policy since 1996 has been to limit the amount that some leaseholders have to pay to no more than £10,000 – even if the works carried out cost more than this.

In effect the council has subsidised the cost of those works.

The revised policy still gives protection to those in most financial need, while ensuring that as much money as possible is available for essential repairs and improvements that need to be carried out on their homes.

Leaseholders will still pay no more than £10,000

towards major improvements works if they are in receipt of a means tested state benefit or are able to demonstrate exceptional financial hardship and meet certain criteria (see box on right).

For leaseholders who do have to pay the full costs, there will be a wide range of loan and repayment options, from paying in instalments to having a charge placed on the property so that you do not need to pay the money until you sell your home.

Leaseholders will be advised about the payment options before any work starts, and will always be invited to give

their views on many major improvement schemes.

Maureen McEleney said: "Our housing needs major investment if we are to bring it up to the government's Decent Homes standard, and we have to ensure that as much of our resources as possible are directed to that end.

"Carrying out repairs and improvements are important for us all. The investment is reflected in the value of the homes owned by leaseholders and contributes to a much needed improvement in the quality of life for all residents."

Who will be eligible for a £10,000 cap?

Leaseholders will be eligible for the £10,000 'cap' on their charges if they meet all the following criteria:

- they are the original right to buy purchaser
- the property is their only or principal home and they live there full-time
- they do not have any service charge arrears
- the works were not specified on their Section 125 Offer Notice (the document leaseholders receive from the council before they buy their home, setting out the work it intends to carry out over the next five years)
- they are in receipt of a means tested state benefit or are able to demonstrate exceptional financial hardship

If a leaseholder sells their home within seven years of having their charges limited to £10,000, then the council will recover the difference between the £10,000 and the full cost of the recharge.

Any leaseholders who want more information or have any questions should contact: Claire Thorogood, major works manager on 020 7364 6256.

I can see that leaseholders should pay for repairs to their own home, but will we have to pay the costs of major estate improvements of the sort being discussed in Housing Choice?

The policy framework recognises that there are some works of an exceptional or very extensive nature which cannot be fully recharged to leaseholders.

An example would be where entrances or staircases are being demolished to separate blocks to tackle anti-social behaviour.

The landlords taking part in Housing Choice are working with the council to ensure that a common approach is adopted.

What will happen to the policy if different estates transfer to different landlords?

The council is working closely with the social landlords who are involved in Housing Choice to ensure that there are common policies on recharging in line with the policy framework.

Guinness information base in Wapping



Residents from Wapping, Royal Mint and Riverside Estates can find out more about what Housing Choice could mean for their estate at an information office opened by Guinness Trust in St Peter's Mission House, Wapping Lane, E1. Guinness is the housing association chosen by residents in April 2003 as their preferred partner landlord for Stage 3 of Housing Choice. Call the Mission on 020 8519 2599 and leave a message, or look in the Guinness newsletter being delivered to your door for details of surgery times.

In the picture: the band plays on at an information day organised by Guinness in Wapping.

Service charges for tenants – see where your money goes

The rent notices sent out to tenants advising of rent levels from April 2004 will have a new look.

The rent you pay as a tenant includes a sum to pay for services such as caretaking, grounds maintenance and cleaning.

From April 2004, the Council will list these charges separately from your rent, so that you can see exactly what you are paying for. This change is in line with government guidance.

This means that your rent statement will show the figure for your rent and the figure for services, with the services you are being charged for clearly set out.

However, these are not additional charges. You

have always been paying for these services; the amount you pay is simply being presented differently. And it won't affect anybody's housing benefit.

If after consultation with tenants, new services are introduced – such as CCTV cameras on their estate or a concierge to look after their block – these would be charged for.

The council can only charge tenants what it actually costs to provide a service.

It is not allowed to make a profit. These rules apply to other social landlords too.

If you have any questions or need any further information, contact Beverley Greenidge on 020 7364 2874.

