

What is East Kent Housing?

East Kent Housing is a company that looks after council housing on behalf of Canterbury City Council, Dover District Council, Folkestone and Hythe District Council and Thanet District Council. It does not make a profit because it was designed to provide a service rather than make money for the councils.

The four councils jointly own East Kent Housing which manages approximately 17,000 homes.

East Kent Housing is overseen by an independent board which is made up of an elected councillor for each council area, a tenant from each council area and four independent members.

East Kent Housing was created on 1 April 2011 and is now in its ninth year of operation.

Why was East Kent Housing set up?

The four councils felt it would provide better quality services for tenants and leaseholders, increase efficiency and save money.

Why are we thinking about the way the system works?

Before the problems with safety checks were discovered, the four councils were worried about how East Kent Housing was performing.

Concerns included how they managed a number of contracts, how they were collecting rent and the progress they were making on getting a new computer system up and running.

The four councils and East Kent Housing all signed up to an improvement plan aimed at fixing these problems.

In May this year, it then became apparent gas safety checks were not being carried out.

This led to the discovery of problems with electrical checks, lift inspections, legionella checks and delays in fire prevention work being carried out. Action has been taken on all of these and they have been fixed or are in the process of being fixed.

By now, the four councils had reported themselves to the government body that oversees council housing, the Regulator of Social Housing. In September, the regulator issued formal notices against all four councils telling them improvements needed to be made.

Why are we saying East Kent Housing should be closed and the four councils should look after council homes themselves?

This is what is known as **Option 2** in our covering letter. We think the advantages of the councils taking back control are:

- The councils would be able to make decisions about their council homes more quickly
- The councils would be able to rebuild the strong relationships they had with tenants before East Kent Housing was created and talk directly to their tenants again
- The decisions around council housing would be made locally
- There could be opportunities to increase investment in council homes
- There could be cost savings from removing duplicated jobs

We think the disadvantages are:

- Performance around repairs and maintenance might dip while the changes are made
- Key staff might not want to work for one of the councils

Why did we rule out the other options?

Option 1 involves East Kent Housing continuing to manage council housing on behalf of the councils with improvements to the way they work

We feel the advantages of this approach are:

- The risks are reduced if smaller changes are being made to the service being provided and this is the least complicated option
- There would be no need to ask tenants for their views
- There is the opportunity for East Kent Housing to improve

We think the disadvantages are:

- The councils, who are paying for East Kent Housing's services, would have less control than if they were running things themselves.
- The extra layer of management provided by East Kent Housing could get in the way of necessary changes
- Lots of people, including councillors, have lost trust in East Kent Housing carrying out safety checks when they need to
- East Kent Housing has struggled to carry out its work and manage the people carrying out work for it. It would cost money to put this right

Option 3 is to close East Kent Housing and for some or all of the councils to work together to manage council housing.

In our view, the advantages are:

- The councils would have more control over the service being delivered

- The councils would be able to save money by not duplicating jobs and taking advantage of their greater buying power to reduce the prices of the goods and services they buy

We feel the disadvantages are:

- The councils would lose a little bit of control over buying decisions
- Disagreements between the councils could hamper efficiency and improvements

Option 4 involves asking an outside provider like a housing association to manage council homes.

We think the advantages of this option are:

- An outside organisation might be more efficient because it operates more like a private company and might have more buying power to reduce the prices of the goods and services they buy
- Any extra money generated can be ploughed back into other council services

The disadvantages are:

- Any savings that are made might be lost if the council cannot persuade the outside provider to alter the way it delivers its services when things go wrong
- It will take the councils a lot of work to ensure the outside provider manages council housing in the way councillors, and ultimately, tenants want
- Tenants and councillors may not trust an outside provider
- An outside provider would be exposed to the same risks as a private company

What happens if one or two of the four councils decide to stay with the current arrangements while the remaining councils take direct control of their housing service?

If the majority of councils decide to close East Kent Housing, it will close. The remaining councils would have to consider their next steps.

If the councils decide to bring the service back under their direct control, would this affect the service I receive?

No, the intention is it would simply be delivered by staff at the council instead of at East Kent Housing. They may be the very same staff you deal with at the moment. You would still be able to access housing services at the council office, by telephone or via the council website.

Would the proposal affect the amount of rent and service charges I pay?

No.

Would the proposal affect the work due to be done to my home?

No, all programmed work will continue as planned. The council will continue to keep your home to a decent standard.

Would staffing levels change?

There is a chance that levels would change overall but staff would still be delivering services and work within the community. The big difference is their employer would change and they are likely to be based in the council's offices.

Would the quality of housing provided change?

The four councils are committed to providing high-quality housing services to all tenants and leaseholders. The aim would be direct management by the four councils would lead to improvements.

Would the transfer affect how I report housing issues?

No, each council has a customer contact centre to provide a single access point for council services including housing.

When will you make a decision on whether to bring the service back under council management?

Consultation closes on Friday 20 December 2019. What you tell us will be reported to councillors early next year. They will use your feedback to decide how your housing service should be delivered in future.

As soon as a decision has been made, we will write to you again to let you know.

If you decide to bring the service back under direct council control, what happens next?

If the council decides to do this, more work would need to be done to manage the process and keep any disruption to a minimum. We would keep you informed on progress.