

Decent Homes / Decent Neighbourhoods

A Tenant Empowerment Strategy on the Future of Housing in Ashford

Ensuring tenants and leaseholders are able to fully contribute to the decisions about the current and future management and maintenance of council homes

1. Introduction

This document has been prepared to ensure that tenants and stakeholders are both fully informed and have open access to the Council's deliberations on the future of housing in Ashford. The Strategy should be read in conjunction with the Communications Strategy prepared for the appraisal study on the stock options for delivering Decent Homes and future housing services.

2. Tenant Empowerment Strategy

The strategy has been prepared in consultation with tenants. It builds on established tenant participation in the Borough by setting out how tenants are involved and supported in their partnership with the Council and within the housing stock option appraisal process. It also sets out how tenants and leaseholders can gain independent advice through an independent tenant advisor, Urbanfox Consultancy.

3. Background

The Government has told all councils that they must:

- Improve all their stock to a minimum standard by 2010 – this is called the Decent Homes Standard.
- Consider a range of options for the way in which their homes are owned and managed which would enable them to increase the amount of money that is available to help them improve homes and achieve the Decent Homes Standard.
- Examine any gaps between the investment required to maintain, sustain and improve the housing stock and deliver Decent Homes (as well as the priorities and aims of the Council and Tenants) and current identified funding; and to recommend ways of accessing additional funding via an option or mix of options taking account of all available resources.

4. What are the options for council housing in Ashford?

The options for the future ownership and management of the Council's homes are communicated by the Office of the Deputy Prime Minister on behalf of the Government.

The options include:

- continued ownership and management of the housing stock by the Council
- establishing an Arms Length Management Organisation (ALMO) to manage the housing stock which is still owned by the Council
- transferring ownership of the housing stock to an existing or newly created Registered Social Landlord (RSL)
- a Private Finance Initiative (PFI)
- a combination of the above

In Ashford's case, the Council's Housing Stock already meets the Decent Homes Standard (subject to an independent validation survey) and we are therefore taking the opportunity to look beyond the Government's requirements and develop a vision for Decent Homes and Decent Neighbourhoods. We believe that the appraisal process also provides an opportunity to reinforce the Council's commitment to develop its housing services in partnership with its tenants and leaseholders and we have recently (November 2004) updated our Tenant Participation Strategy accordingly.

5. (Previous) Support for Tenant and Leaseholder Involvement

Ashford Borough Council has a solid reputation for working in partnership with its tenants and leaseholders. **Ashford Borough Tenants Forum**, the democratically elected body of tenant representatives, was formed in 1995 to provide an effective conduit for tenants and leaseholders to formally and informally express their views to Council Members and staff. It is the focal point in the broad toolkit of measures established by tenants and leaseholders and the Council to fulfil its statutory responsibilities and good practice ideals.

Included in this toolkit are:

Best Value Review Representation

Tenant and leaseholder input to the Council's commitment to continuous improvement in service delivery

The Borough's initial Tenant Participation Compact

Developed under the National Framework for Tenant Participation Compacts. The first Core Standard in the 'National Framework' is tenant involvement in, 'Developing the council's housing policy and strategy, including identifying and appraising investment options, monitoring and review.'

Tenant Participation Strategy

Updated in November 2004 to reflect changes since the Tenant Participation Compact was introduced.

Service Planning Panels

These are joint working steering groups covering the full range of activities carried out by Ashford Weald Housing Services. They include service planning on rent levels, planned and responsive maintenance, housing strategy, diversity and equality, choice based lettings, homelessness and anti social behaviour.

Stanhope PFI Project

Tenants have been at the forefront of this cutting edge regeneration project on an estate in South Ashford.

Housing Revenue Account Business Plan

Regular updates and presentations are provided to Ashford Borough Tenants Forum by the Housing Resource Manager.

Consumer Surveys

Tenant and leaseholder opinion surveys.

Community Safety Panel

Cross boundary group promoting community safety in the Borough.

Area Plans

An emerging programme of neighbourhood development partnerships and local service agreements.

Training and Community Development

Recent tenant training (2003/4/5) includes:

Anti Social Behaviour

Diversity (including the development of the SE Kent Diversity Pack)

Publications and Media

Choice Based Lettings

Capacity building

Homelessness training

The role of the Independent Tenant Advisor (ITA)

Basic computing skills

Role of the Treasurer

Repairs and monitoring

Tenants Association Handbook

Reviewed every three years.

Newsletters and Annual Reports

Produced quarterly and annually respectively.

Revenue Budget Support

Annual financial support for estate and project based improvements, tenant training and participation activities.

Capacity Building

The Council has a dedicated Tenant Support Officer, Philippa Dale, and her job is to support the development of tenant participation activities and support the growth of individual tenants and leaseholders.

6. Specific Activity Aligned to the Stock Option Appraisal 2004/5

Ashford Borough Council has agreed with Ashford Borough Tenants Forum to make available resources for the Forum to appoint and brief an independent advisor to support tenants and leaseholders throughout the stock option appraisal.

The Forum openly advertised in September 2004 for expressions of interest and six companies responded. A shortlist of three was chosen to make detailed presentations to Forum Members and they appointed Urbanfox Consultancy at the beginning of November.

A schedule of requirements and a programme were agreed by the Forum with the support of the independent advisor based on the following principles that tenants and leaseholders:

- a) Are informed of the stock option appraisal process**
- b) Receive clear, appropriate and timely information about the stock options appraisal process**
- c) Have an understanding of the process**
- d) Are able to, and have the opportunity to, contribute to the process**

This programme, scheduled to be undertaken in November and December 2004 and January 2005 includes:

raising awareness, explaining what the options mean and how tenants and leaseholders may be affected,
seeking opinions and feeding the information back to the Council's Stock Option Appraisal Steering Group.

Forum Members will be provided with additional project management support, further training on housing stock option appraisals and business planning, communications and consultation management.

Their programme comprises:

- 3 newsletters
- 7 advice surgeries (drop-ins)
- 100% opinion survey
- 4 neighbourhood vision workshops
- 4 community audits (to access "difficult to reach" groups)
- Posters
- "Frequently asked questions" flyer
- Free-phone telephone service
- ABTF website pages (on Ashford BC website)
- Regular meetings with the Steering Group
- Presentations on stock condition and asset management programmes
- Presentations on Housing Revenue Account Business Plan
- Preparation of a Report for consideration by the Council's Executive

7. How does this fit into the Council's Stock Option Appraisal Framework?

The Stock Options Appraisal Steering Group has been established by the Council to oversee the Council's options appraisal. It consists of:

- 3 Elected Members of the Council
- 3 Elected Members of Ashford Borough Tenants Forum
- 4 Nominated Members of Staff from Ashford Weald Housing Services
- Independent Tenant Advisor

Their task is to project manage the options appraisal and liaise with relevant bodies such as Government Office for the South-East, Office of the Deputy Prime Minister, the Council's Executive, staff, unions, tenants and leaseholders and other stakeholders.

8. Resources

As well as the Independent Tenant Advisor, support for tenants and leaseholders will be available from the Tenant Participation Officer, the Housing Operations Manager and the Housing Resource Manager. A total expenditure budget of £30,000 has been set for the stock options appraisal.

9. Expected Outcome from this Empowerment Strategy

Essentially the purpose of this Strategy is to ensure that the Borough's consultation arrangements under the Stock Options Appraisal are robust and meaningful. Tenant and leaseholder participation in Ashford is, however, continually growing and evolving. The Council and Ashford Borough Tenants Forum see the Stock Option Appraisal as an opportunity to further develop and strengthen their partnership during a period of enormous change in the region and in Ashford specifically. Beyond the more traditional areas of involvement such as service delivery, service quality and improvement, this Strategy provides another building block in the capacity of the Borough to consult with its communities over futures, the establishment of better practice in open and accountable local government and offers flexible communication channels for reaching yet more sections of Ashford's communities.

10. Testing the effectiveness of communication and consultation

The effectiveness of the communication and consultation undertaken will be assessed through regular monitoring and review. This will include:

- monitoring forms at events
- promotion of comments forms
- sample telephone survey
- feedback questionnaire
- sample survey of tenants
- views expressed at meetings with tenants and leaseholders

There will also be ongoing liaison with and signing off the process with the Government Office for the South East.

11. Comments on this strategy

12.1 If you would like to comment on this strategy, you may do so by completing the feedback form below and return it to:

Philippa Dale,
Tenant Participation Officer,
Ashford Borough Council Housing Services,
Civic Centre,
Tannery Lane,
Ashford,
Kent TN23 1PL

The Strategy can also be provided in other languages or formats

Tenant Empowerment Strategy for Stock Option Appraisal – Feedback Form

Please tick one

Did you find the strategy informative? Yes () No ()

Did you find the strategy easy to follow? Yes () No ()

Did you find the information helpful? Yes () No ()

Did the strategy make it clear to you how the Council is supporting its tenants and leaseholders in communicating + consulting on stock option appraisal? Yes () No ()

Please enter below any comments you would like to make or any reasons why you have answered 'No' to any of the questions above:

Is there any other information you would like to receive from the Council concerning stock option appraisal? If so, please give details below:

Name

Address