



**Exeter City Council**

**EXETER CITY COUNCIL**

**OPTIONS APPRAISAL**

**TENANT EMPOWERMENT STRATEGY**

**JUNE 2004**

June 2004

## EXETER CITY COUNCIL

### HOUSING OPTIONS APPRAISAL: TENANT EMPOWERMENT STRATEGY

#### BACKGROUND

The Government's target is for all social tenants to have a decent home by 2010. It has set a 'Decent Homes Standard' so that homes should:

- ❖ be wind and watertight
- ❖ be in a reasonable state of repair
- ❖ provide reasonably modern facilities and services
- ❖ provide a reasonable degree of thermal comfort

The Sustainable Communities Plan, published by the Office for the Deputy Prime Minister in February 2003, requires local authorities that still own housing stock to carry out "*an objective and rigorous appraisal of investment options*" to ensure all their homes can be made decent by 2010.

#### PURPOSE OF THIS EMPOWERMENT STRATEGY

It is essential that all tenants be at the heart of the housing options appraisal. It is not enough that they are merely consulted; they must be able to make meaningful contributions to the process and have ownership of the conclusions. This empowerment strategy describes how Exeter City Council will enable tenants to:

- ❖ understand all the information about the housing options appraisal
- ❖ critically assess the different options and their implications
- ❖ provide relevant and meaningful feedback on the different options
- ❖ play a key part in the decision-making process.

#### EXISTING TENANT PARTICIPATION ARRANGEMENTS

Exeter City Council has worked with tenants for many years to maximise opportunities for participation by:

- ❖ providing ways for tenants to be involved in the delivery of housing services
- ❖ supporting the tenants who are involved
- ❖ widening the breadth of the involvement

- ❖ developing partnership working between Councillors, officers and tenants.

### **Tenant Participation Compact/EXACT**

The Council and Tenants and Leaseholder Consultation Group (see below) have recently reviewed the Tenant Participation Compact and produced a summary document called 'EXACT', which offers tenants a flexible framework for participation. It sets out the possible range of opportunities for them to become involved in the provision, management and maintenance of their homes and surrounding environment.

### **The Tenant and Leaseholder Consultation Group**

The Tenant and Leaseholder Consultation Group was developed in 1999 to address the issues of 'Best Value'. It seeks to represent the interests of all tenants and leaseholders on housing service issues. At 1<sup>st</sup> April 2004 there were 70 members of the Consultation Group mailing list with up to 20 members attending any one meeting. The Consultation Group meets every three months and. Any tenant is welcome to attend meetings that are advertised in 'Tenants News'.

### **Tenants' and Residents' Associations**

The Council supports Tenants' and Residents' Associations (T&RAs) and encourages them to involve all members of their community. Financial and other means of support are given to T&RAs, which must have agreed constitutions and terms of reference including equal opportunities policies. One of the key standards for T&RAs is that they should actively seek the views and priorities of their community.

### **Sheltered Housing Forum**

The tenants of the Council's 21 sheltered schemes are represented at the Sheltered Housing Forum, which meets bi-monthly. This is an active and well-supported group that works with Council officers to tackle issues of particular interest and importance to the residents of sheltered schemes.

### **Support given to those wanting to get involved**

Experience has shown that tenants are fairly willing to become involved in informal participation activities particularly one-off events such as focus groups and surveys. But it is much more difficult to persuade tenants to get involved in formal tenant participation arrangements. One of the reasons for this may be a lack of confidence in speaking at formal meetings and worries about not having enough knowledge of Council operations. The review of the TP Compact that led to the drafting of 'EXACT' recognised the need for further training and capacity-building, as well as financial support to be provided to tenants interested in getting involved to overcome these potential barriers.

### **Involvement in decision-making**

The T&LCG is actively involved in affecting decision making on two levels: firstly by electing representatives onto policy development working groups, for example Choice Based Lettings and Introductory Tenancies, and secondly by debating draft policies and making suggestions for change. The group has considered issues such as the Anti – Social Behaviour policy; Habitable and Lettable standards for empty properties; Selecting a Home Contents Insurer and the quarterly monitoring of contractor performance.

### **Other means of getting involved**

There is a range of informal participation arrangements including occasional tenants' conferences on a Devon wide and south west regional basis, sponsoring educational opportunities such as the Certificate in Tenant Participation and surveys on city – wide and specific estate issues.

### **Broadening involvement**

In common with other social landlords, Exeter City Council faces the challenge of ensuring that its tenant participation arrangements are fully representative and involve those tenants from easy to reach but hard to engage groups e.g. Black and Minority Ethnic tenants, frail elderly, young people and those with disabilities. This challenge will be addressed as part of the Stock Options Appraisal process (see below).

Experience has shown that tenants will come together as a group and get involved in decisions about the housing service when there is a particular issue that needs to be addressed – either a local issue or a single issue like Stock Options Appraisal. It is hoped that the emphasis on meaningful consultation and involvement on Stock Options will strengthen tenant participation across Exeter. The Tenant Participation team will work to encourage local groups of tenants to keep the momentum of involvement going on a range of issues. In addition to 'EXACT' the council aims to set up local agreements with T&RAs and a Sheltered Housing Compact.

## **EXISTING LEASEHOLDERS PARTICIPATION ARRANGEMENTS**

Exeter City Council is working to improve formal and informal leaseholder participation arrangements. Leaseholders are consulted about planned maintenance works in accordance with legal requirements. They are also involved in joint estate-based consultation exercises with tenants. A Leaseholders Consultation Forum has been established and meets quarterly. Clearly, the Options Appraisal process will have a serious impact on leaseholders as tenants/leaseholders aspirations may lead to higher service charges

## **THE ROLE OF EXISTING PARTICIPATION ARRANGEMENTS IN THE HOUSING OPTIONS APPRAISAL**

The existing tenant and leaseholder participation arrangements described above will be developed and enhanced during the housing options appraisal. The Council sees this as an important opportunity for empowering tenants and increasing their involvement in the housing service in the long term regardless of the outcome of the options appraisal.

## **HOUSING OPTIONS APPRAISAL BOARD**

Exeter City Council tenants, councillors and staff will be working together on the Stock Options Appraisal throughout 2004. Through membership of the Appraisal Board, tenants are directly involved in the decision making process. The Board comprises four councillors, three tenants, one leaseholder and three housing staff to oversee the Stock Options Appraisal. Other council staff will attend on an ad hoc basis, as their expertise is required. The three tenants and one leaseholder will contribute to the Appraisal Board on an

equal basis with councillors and officers, including having the opportunity to contribute to agenda items. This will include assessing the likely impact of the options and the results of consultations with tenants, leaseholders and other stakeholders. The Appraisal Board will meet at least monthly throughout the options appraisal process and will receive reports from the Council's consultants and others. It will approve the project plan and monitor progress against that plan. The Appraisal Board will also make reports to Exeter City Council's Executive on a regular basis and a recommendation to full Council at the conclusion of the process.

### **ROLE OF INDEPENDENT TENANTS' ADVISER**

An essential element of this empowerment strategy is securing independent advice to and feedback from tenants. This will be achieved through the work of the appointed Independent Tenants Advisor (ITA), TACT@DOME, who has been selected by representatives of the Tenants and Leaseholders Consultation Group. The ITA will:

- ❖ check that Exeter City Council's consultation, information, activities and events are balanced, effective and inclusive, identifying and advising on how to overcome any barriers to meaningful tenant involvement
- ❖ provide feedback to the Housing Options Appraisal Board and to the Council on their findings
- ❖ work closely with the Options Appraisal Sub Group. This group is made up of tenants representing the Tenant and Leaseholder Consultation Group and other tenants drawn from the wider tenant body with an interest in the process and supported by the Tenant Participation team. This group will agree key activities with the ITA and monitor progress
- ❖ provide tenants with direct support, capacity building and training as necessary to enable them to participate with confidence and understanding in the housing options appraisal
- ❖ check facts for tenants and leaseholders, advising on some of the key assumptions e.g. those underlying stock condition information, HRA Business Plan and Housing Strategy
- ❖ act as a source of independent advice to all tenants and leaseholders on the detail and deliverability of the options through a range of media and events
- ❖ help tenants understand the implications of the various options and how they are likely to deliver the Decent Homes target and tenants' wider aspirations – the 'Exeter Standard'
- ❖ work with tenants to identify their aspirations for their future housing service using feedback from recent Tenant Satisfaction Surveys and carrying out further consultation as necessary

- ❖ feed back the views of tenants and leaseholders on the options to the Housing Options Appraisal Board including their key concerns, their general level of understanding and recommendations on the next steps to be taken
- ❖ seek to involve tenants and leaseholders from all backgrounds including those who are easy to reach but hard to engage e.g. Black and Minority Ethnic (BME) groups, young people, frail older people and the disabled
- ❖ seek to develop confidence and partnerships between tenants and their landlord which will last beyond the Stock Options Appraisal process
- ❖ brief councillors and staff on the ITA role

### **DIVERSITY ISSUES**

The options appraisal process will take account of the diverse needs of existing and potential Exeter City Council tenants and will actively seek to include people who are vulnerable to social exclusion, as a result of:

- ❖ Ethnicity  
The 2001 census recorded 2.4% of Black and Minority Ethnic (BME) residents within Exeter as a whole but with no clear largest minority ethnic group. In view of this mix there is no one most common language of Exeter's BME tenants. Based on the Tenants Satisfaction survey it is estimated that approximately 0.2% of 5260 tenants are from BME groups. The introduction of a new computerised waiting list will enable the council to identify the proportion of BME applicants for housing.
- ❖ Reading difficulties  
Although by its very nature this tends to be hidden and therefore difficult to quantify, it is important to take account of the possibility that some people may have difficulty with written communication.
- ❖ Frailty due to age  
A high proportion of Exeter's tenants are older people. Its housing stock includes 552 homes within fully sheltered schemes. According to the satisfaction survey, 48% of households amongst Exeter CC tenants contain people aged over 60.
- ❖ Disability  
51% of the respondents to the Tenants Satisfaction survey considered themselves to have a long-standing illness, disability or infirmity. Of those, 47% indicated that it limited their activities and of these, 9% used a wheelchair.

Steps will be taken to involve people from the above groups and others who are traditionally easy to reach but hard to engage. These will include:

- ❖ offering to translate publications into other languages

- ❖ offering to provide large-print, audio tape and Braille versions of publications
- ❖ communicating through local media
- ❖ offering face to face meetings and home visits
- ❖ running drop-ins and surgeries at local venues throughout the City
- ❖ offering to arrange transport to events
- ❖ offering to pay for child care facilities while carers attend an event relating to the housing options appraisal
- ❖ communicating with and through partner statutory and voluntary agencies, faith communities, religious centres and community organisations throughout the City
- ❖ talking to advocates of people unable to speak for themselves e.g. relatives of frail elderly people

The selection of the ITA was tested against their ability to work effectively with the diversity issues in Exeter. In consultation with the ITA, targets will be set and monitored for participation of tenants who are traditionally hard to reach.

#### **FINANCIAL SUPPORT**

The Council has allocated a budget for the options appraisal including the implementation of this empowerment strategy. The cost of the ITA is included within this. Although the contract is between the Council and the ITA, the Options Appraisal Sub Group will be responsible for monitoring the contract and authorising the payment of the ITA's fees.

#### **AVAILABILITY OF COUNCILLORS AND SENIOR STAFF**

Councillors and senior Exeter CC staff will continue to make themselves available to tenants as required using a variety of different media. If invited to do so, they may attend events organised by the ITA and will seek to involve the ITA in any events organised by the Council. Councillors and senior Exeter CC staff who do communicate with tenants or attend events concerning the housing options appraisal have a responsibility to ensure they are properly briefed so that they are able to provide accurate and consistent information.

#### **FEEDBACK OF TENANTS INVOLVEMENT IN THE OPTIONS APPRAISAL**

The Council will describe the involvement of tenants in the housing options appraisal including decision-making and publicity about the process. It will also publish feedback received from tenants about their aspirations, concerns and views on the housing options. A variety of media, aimed at ensuring all tenants and leaseholders receive this information will be used.

## **LINKS WITH COMMUNICATION AND CONSULTATION STRATEGY**

This Empowerment Strategy is closely linked with the Communication and Consultation strategy for the housing options appraisal and should be read with it.

## **TIMETABLE**

A project plan showing the overall timetable for the options appraisal has been developed and is available from the Council. A detailed work programme to implement the empowerment strategy will be agreed with the ITA and Options Appraisal Sub Group, for approval by the Options Appraisal Board. Initially, activities are scheduled as follows:

Activity	Timetable
Agree work plan and consultation methods	April-May
Agree empowerment strategy with ITA	June
ITA to draft newsletter	May
ITA newsletter distributed with 'Your Priorities' survey distributed to tenants	June
Article in (Council's tenants newsletter) explaining need for housing options appraisal	June
Initial consultation exercises by ITA including roadshows, local/sheltered scheme meetings, surgeries, drop-ins etc	16 June through to end of July
Recruit <i>Insight Group</i> (reference group of 30-50 tenants)	June – July
<i>Insight</i> sessions run by ITA – to understand options and reach agreement on tenants' aspirations for the service/homes and criteria for 'testing' the options	July through to September
<i>Insight</i> newsletters to all tenants	First delivered in early June
Newsletters/fact-sheets from Council to tenants, leaseholders, licensees and applicants	First delivered in June and throughout process
Interim report by ITA	August
Conference(s) run by the ITA	September
Visits by tenants to other organisations	September/October
<i>Insight</i> sessions run by ITA – to reach recommendation to the council, based on financial implications of options; decision making sessions	September – end of October
Final report from ITA to inform Housing Options Appraisal Board of tenants etc views	Beginning November

## **FURTHER INFORMATION**

For further information about this empowerment strategy and copies of any document referred to within it please contact: Tony Bodgin Special Projects & Tenant Liaison Manager on (01392) 265738, email to [tony.bodgin@exeter.gov.uk](mailto:tony.bodgin@exeter.gov.uk), the council's web site at [www.exeter.gov.uk](http://www.exeter.gov.uk) or at the Civic Centre, Paris Street, Exeter, EX1 1RQ