

Epping Forest District Council
HOUSING SERVICE STRATEGY ON
INFORMATION

1. Introduction

- 1.1 This Housing Service Strategy relates to the Council's approach to the provision of information on housing issues.
- 1.2 The information service is provided by the Housing Directorate in conjunction with other relevant Directorates especially the Deputy Chief Executive's Office and Finance.
- 1.3 This Housing Service Strategy sets out how the information service will be delivered. The strategy was formulated in consultation with representatives of the Tenants and Leaseholders Federation. It was approved by the Housing Portfolio Holder on ??????.

2. Background to the Service

- 2.1 The availability of clear and easily understood information is an essential part of good customer care. There is also a duty to inform Council tenants, leaseholders and social housing applicants of their rights and responsibilities. The main recipients of such information are:
 - a) Council tenants and leaseholders;
 - b) Applicants for social housing;
 - c) Homeless people and people at risk of becoming homeless;
 - d) People seeking advice on general housing issues;
 - e) People with special housing needs;
 - f) Other residents of the district;
 - g) Council staff and members; and
 - h) Housing associations, other partners and agencies.

The provision of information is a two-way process. In addition to disseminating information on housing services, the Council seeks information in the form of feedback from its client groups.

- 2.2 There is a statutory duty to inform in certain cases. The Council is required to inform tenants regularly of their rights with respect to repairs, the Right to Buy and other key issues. In addition any changes to legislation or Council policy must be reported to tenants, leaseholders and applicants. In some cases the Council may be required by law to consult with the client group on prospective changes, such as new Tenancy Conditions. Accurate information and statistics must be provided to

the Government by set deadlines for the annual Business Plan Statistical Appendix (BPSA), Housing Strategy Statistical Appendix (HSSA), and other statistical returns. Statistics and information must be collected and provided to the Council's Performance Improvement Unit. In particular a number of housing performance indicators are required. Those who receive information, or share information of this kind with the Council, include;

- a) the Government;
 - b) other Council Directorates;
 - c) other local authorities; and
 - i) other agencies such as housing associations and research bodies.
- 2.3 Local performance indicators are set for the Housing Directorate in consultation with members. Performance and cost data is also required for the Housemark online benchmarking system which provides comparative data for local authorities and housing associations on a national and regional basis. Other information and statistics are required by senior housing management to monitor performance and assist in the development of housing policy and strategies.
- 2.4 The Housing Directorate has established a number of service standards in compliance with the regulatory framework of the Tenant Services Authority. The Service Standards and Housing Charter set out the Council's promises to customers, and give details of the services they can expect to receive.
- 2.5 It is also considered good practice to ensure that the Council's staff and Council members are well informed on housing performance, strategy and policy issues.
- 2.6 The Housing Information and Strategy team consists of the Principal Housing Officer (Information) and a part-time Housing Assistant. The Team also includes the Tenant Participation Officer and a Senior Housing Officer (Quality and Performance). It is based within the Housing Resources Section of the Housing Directorate, reporting to the Housing Resources Manager. Housing information is sourced from the Director and Assistant Directors of Housing, Housing Managers, staff with specialist knowledge, other Council services, the Government, other housing organisations and outside agencies.
- 2.7 The Information and Strategy Team is responsible for the annual Business Plan Statistical Appendix (BPSA), Housing Strategy Statistical Appendix (HSSA). These Government returns involve the provision of statistical data which support the Council's Housing Strategy, the HRA Business Plan and the Private Sector Housing Business Plan. The Housing Strategy assesses the District's current and future housing needs, and sets out the Council's general approach towards meeting those needs for the following three years. The Strategy is also available to the public for information purposes. Housing's Business Plans follow the Council's key Corporate aims and analyse the Council's current service. The HRA Business Plan lists the Council's strategies and includes a 30 year financial plan. Assessments of the District's future housing needs may be required by the Government in the form of Housing Needs Surveys and/or Strategic Housing Market Assessments. The Information and Strategy Team provides statistics and assistance in the production of these documents and the housing element of other corporate plans.

- 2.8 The Housing Directorate provides written information to tenants and other residents mainly through the publication of its own literature and contributions to corporate publications. These currently include;
- a) "Housing News" - a newsletter for all tenants and leaseholders (approximately 7,500 at 31.03.10). Applicants on the Housing Register are prospective tenants and copies of Housing News are distributed to all applicants where they contain relevant information (approximately 5,500 at 31.03.10).
 - b) "The Forester" - a newspaper normally delivered four times a year to all residents of the district;
 - c) "In House" - a regular newsletter for staff within the Housing Directorate;
- 2.9 Every new tenant is given a copy of the *Tenants Handbook* produced by the Housing Information and Strategy team. This publication is in the form of a binder containing a set of leaflets. These cover Housing's service standards and Tenants Charter, the conditions of tenancy; rents and housing management; maintenance and repairs; advice on moving home and exchanges; services for the elderly; successions; the right to buy; garage rentals; appeals, complaints and reviews; other general information.
- 2.10 A range of leaflets produced by the Housing Information and Strategy team provide information on specific issues, such as advice on homelessness and introductory tenancies.
- 2.11 Every housing applicant is given an *Application Pack* which includes a leaflet on applying for housing, an application form with guidance, information on choice based lettings and any other relevant matters such as covering letters and forms.
- 2.12 Under the regulatory framework of the Tenant Services Authority (TSA), housing providers (including local authorities) are required to produce an Annual Report by no later than 1 October each year. This will assess how the Housing Directorate is currently meeting its own standards and measuring compliance. The Council is required to share the Report with tenants and the TSA.
- 2.13 The Council has an area dedicated to Housing on its website. The Strategy and Information Team is responsible for publishing and updating any housing information relevant to tenants, leaseholders, applicants, private owner-occupiers and the general public. This includes facilities to report repairs and to download leaflets and forms. Visitors to the Council's website can request information on housing and these requests are dealt with by the Team.
- 2.14 An intranet computerised information system is available to all council staff with access to a computer. The Housing Information and Strategy team publishes and updates information on housing for Housing staff and for all Council employees. This includes: information specific to each section (Needs, Assets and Repairs, Management, Resources, Private Sector Housing and Older Peoples Services); general information; Housing policies and strategies; risk assessments; work instructions and other quality management system documents; and publications.
- 2.15 News items, events and issues relating to new Council policy are reported to the media in conjunction with the Council's Public Relations and Marketing Section.

- 2.16 Housing applicants, tenants and leaseholders are given information directly through interviews at the office, home visits and day-to-day telephone contact with housing officers. Occupants of sheltered housing are given information through their contacts with Scheme Managers.
- 2.17 Council tenants and leaseholders are given information, and consulted on Council policy, through the District-wide Tenants' and Leaseholders Federation, estate-based tenants' associations, the Leaseholders Association, the Sheltered Housing Forum, the Rural Tenants' Forum, consultation days and other formal and informal residents groups.
- 2.18 The Council has formalised its approach to tenant participation, and the provision of information to tenants, in a Tenant Participation Agreement signed by the Council and the Tenants and Leaseholders Federation.
- 2.19 Estate-based residents' associations are encouraged to have Local Tenant Participation Agreements setting out their approach to involving residents and providing information.
- 2.20 Consultation on special issues is carried out through surveys, special editions of 'Housing News', public meetings, individual consultations or other means as appropriate.
- 2.21 Equalities monitoring is conducted for strategic profiling purposes, and to help tailor the provision of services to clients, through the use of profiling questions which are included in application forms and surveys.
- 2.22 The Tenant Participation Officer provides information through direct contact with individual tenants and tenants' associations, and through involvement with the District-wide Tenants and Leaseholders Federation.
- 2.23 Detailed information on the Council's housing stock is maintained by the Team to produce an annual analysis of stock changes. This is required for Finance subsidy claims and Government statistics.
- 2.24 Statistical data on housing stock and social housing lettings is provided to the Government in conjunction with the Housing IT Team and is submitted using NROSH and CORE electronic systems.

3. Coverage

- 3.1 This Housing Service Strategy covers the Council's:
 - a) general approach to providing information to tenants, leaseholders, housing applicants, private owner-occupiers and other residents;
 - b) approach to providing information for people with special needs, including people with disabilities, older people and those with special language needs;
 - c) approach to providing information and statistical returns requested by the Government;
 - d) commitment to provide the information required for corporate performance monitoring;

- e) commitment to respond to requests for information from other Council services, individuals and agencies.

4. Relationships with other documents

- 4.1 This Housing Service Strategy forms part of the Council's overall Housing Strategy, which is set out in the *Housing Strategy 2009-2012*.
- 4.2 The Council has adopted its *Housing Charter* which sets out, in simple, clear and precise terms the Council's general approach to all its housing services.
- 4.3 The Council's general approach to providing information to tenants is set out in the District-wide *Tenant Participation Agreement* and in the *Local Tenant Participation Agreements*.
- 4.4 The Council has adopted a published *Equal Opportunities Policy in the Provision of Housing Services* which sets out its commitment to equal opportunities in the provision and quality of its housing services.
- 4.5 Guidance on the provision of *National Indicators* is provided annually.
- 4.6 The Government provides guidance annually on the *BPSA* and *HSSA* submission, and other housing information requirements.
- 4.7 Procedures for obtaining and providing information are set out in the Housing Directorate's *Quality Process Manual* and *Work Instructions*.

5. Aim and Objectives

- 5.1 The aim of this strategy is:

"To provide relevant, timely, clear and accurate information for the Council's tenants, leaseholders, housing applicants, other residents of the district, Council staff, the Government and other individuals or bodies with an interest in the Housing Directorate".

- 5.2 This aim will be met by;

- a) producing publications for the Council's client groups on its housing services, policies and performance;
- b) ensuring that all such published information is well presented and easy to understand;
- c) making provision for people who may have difficulty accessing information, and those who need information provided in another format or language;
- d) ensuring that housing applicants, tenants and leaseholders are given up to date information on Council policies and conditions, and on their rights;
- e) producing annual Business Plans with statistical appendices as required, strategy documents, housing needs surveys and/or housing market assessments and statistical returns for the Government;

- f) providing information for the Council's corporate plans as required;
- g) developing systems to monitor and report housing performance;
- h) measuring performance against Housing's Service Standards where possible;
- i) developing the Council's approach to the way information is provided by;
 - ensuring its publications are consistent in quality of presentation and readability;
 - continually increasing the flow of information to the target groups;
 - providing information in a form suitable for any people with special needs;
 - make the best use of all types of media available for the dissemination of information.

6. Statutory requirements

6.1 The provision of information is good practice and in some areas there are statutory requirements. In other areas the Council is asked to respond to requests for information from the Government. These responses can play an important part in attracting funding which can result in an improved level of service.

a) Housing Act 1985:

- Provision of information about tenancies (Section 104);
- Consultation on matters of housing management (Section 105); and
- Information about housing allocation (Section 106).

b) Housing Act 1996:

- Duty of local housing authority to provide advisory services in relation to homelessness (Section 179).

c) Housing Act 2004:

- Duty of local housing authority to provide information to help tenants decide whether to exercise the Right to Buy (Section 189).

d) Local Government Act 1999:

- Under the directives on Best Value the Secretary of State may order the Council to provide performance indicators (Section 4a);
- Duty of local authorities to report on performance standards (Section 4b); and
- General duty to meet the Government's directives on Best Value (Section 3).

e) Section 204, Housing and Regeneration Act 2008:

- Requirement of registered housing providers to publish an annual report for tenants to be shared with tenants and the Tenant Services Authority (TSA).

- 6.2 Housing statistics, information on performance and complaints monitoring reports are published regularly in the tenants newsletter.
- 6.3 The Council is not required as a statutory duty to submit a Housing Strategy, Housing Revenue Account (HRA) Business Plan, Housing Needs Survey or Housing Market Assessment. However, under Section 8 of the Housing Act 1985, the Council has a duty to consider the housing conditions and needs of the District with respect to the provision of further housing accommodation. In any event these submissions play an important part in attracting additional financial resources which are largely used for maintaining and improving the Council's own stock or for building new social housing in partnership with RSLs, the TSA and the Homes and Communities Agency (HCA).

7. Client Consultation, Information and Involvement

- 7.1 Tenants will be involved and consulted on the Council's arrangements for the provision of information through:
- consultation with the Tenants and Leaseholders Federation, and tenants' associations, on service delivery and any proposed changes to the service and strategy;
 - tenant satisfaction surveys providing opinions on the overall landlord service and surveys on satisfaction with specific services, such as repairs;
 - feedback forms included in Council publications and on the website; and
 - exit surveys following interviews with housing officers.
- 7.2 The District-wide Tenant Participation Agreement sets out the Council's commitment to tenant participation and states that the Council will enable its tenants to participate in the delivery of their housing service through:
- the receipt of good quality information;
 - adequate and appropriate consultation on relevant housing issues; and,
 - opportunities to provide feedback.

8. General principles

a) Information for client groups

- 8.1 All the information published by the Housing Directorate should be well presented, accurate and written in plain English.
- 8.2 The needs of older people and those with disabilities will be taken into account in the preparation of information.
- 8.3 *Housing News*, the Council's newsletter for all tenants and leaseholders, will be published at least three times a year to include items on: Council policy, Council services, application criteria, opportunities for participation, housing performance and; general items of information. Information for applicants will be included in *Housing News* as required and distributed to that client group.

- 8.4 *Leaflets* for Council tenants, applicants, homeless people and owner-occupiers will be published and updated as necessary to ensure all residents are fully informed of their rights and responsibilities, and the housing services available to them from the Council and other organisations.
- 8.5 The Council's *Housing Application Pack* will be kept up to date so that all applicants for social housing are fully informed of the Council's policies and the law relating to them.
- 8.6 The *Tenants Handbook* will be updated as necessary.
- 8.7 The Housing area of the Council's Website will be kept up to date to provide news and information that may be sought by tenants, leaseholders, applicants and members of the general public.
- 8.8 Information for staff on housing matters will be published on the Council's intranet and kept up to date.
- 8.9 Information on housing news items, major projects or significant policy changes will be reported to the public through the media on an ad hoc basis.
- 8.10 Where issues will affect a defined group of tenants, the necessary information may be provided through public meetings, through tenants' groups or by individual consultation.

b) *Information required by the Government*

- 8.11 The Council will prepare, consult with others, produce and distribute a three year *Housing Strategy*, according to the Government's guidelines.
- 8.12 Information will be collected for the production of the Council's annual *Business Plan Statistical Appendix (BPSA)* and *Housing Strategy Statistical Appendix (HSSA)* according to the Government's guidelines and timetable.
- 8.13 The Council will obtain accurate information and complete any statistical returns requested by the Government or its agencies, including the quarterly and annual *Housing Activity Returns (P Forms)*, *National Register of Social Housing (NROSH)* and *Continuous Recording of Lettings and Sales in Social Housing in England (CORE)* by the dates given.
- 8.14 The Council will carry out an annual housing stock reconciliation as required by the Finance service for its subsidy claim to the Government.

c) *Performance Management System*

- 8.15 The Housing Directorate will meet its obligations to provide statistics required by the Council including the provision of figures for any *National Indicator*, details of consultation exercises and the establishment and co-ordination of local performance indicators. Requests for information will be met within the timetables set by the Council's Performance Improvement Unit.
- 8.16 The Housing Directorate is required to report on performance against standards and monitor improvement under the TSA Regulatory Framework. The Housing Strategy and Information Team will work with housing managers, other Council

services and other local authorities to assist in the benchmarking of individual services for this purpose.

9. Future Developments

9.1 The following “SWOT” analysis identifies the strengths, weaknesses, opportunities and threats for the areas covered by this Service Strategy.

<p>Strengths</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ❖ Knowledgeable and committed staff ❖ Customer Service Excellence Award ❖ All tenants, leaseholders and applicants receive up to date news and housing information via tenants newsletter ❖ All tenants receive a Tenants Handbook ❖ All housing applicants receive an Application Pack ❖ Welcome pack for sheltered housing residents and Careline users ❖ Information on all housing services available online ❖ Staff are regularly updated on housing matters through in-house magazine ❖ Information procedures reviewed as part of Quality Management System ISO 9001:2008 ❖ Feedback on housing information services through Tenants Satisfaction Survey and other mechanisms ❖ Tenants’ groups including the District-wide federation are consulted on information issues 	<p>Weaknesses</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ❖ Council website does not have full interactive functionality, for example customers are unable to make housing applications online ❖ Customers wishing to seek housing information online are unable to access a PC at the Civic Offices or at the Limes Farm Housing Office ❖ Some diversity profiling has been conducted but a comprehensive profile of the client group is lacking
<p>Opportunities</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ❖ Action plan to improve the housing information service ❖ More involvement of customers in reviewing the provision of housing information ❖ Provide information in different formats for customers with special needs where required ❖ Take advantage of new technology as appropriate 	<p>Threats</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ❖ Major changes in legislation ❖ Major changes in government requirements for statistics and/or information ❖ Failure of IT or communications systems

10. Action Plan

ACTION	RESOURCES REQUIRED	DATE	ACTIONED BY
General provision of information			
Complete any outstanding actions relating to meetings of the Customer Perspective Group.	Within existing resources	March 2011	Principal Housing Officer (Information)
Annual Report			
Produce an annual report in accordance with the TSA guidance on annual reports to tenants	Within existing resources	Oct 2010	Principal Housing Officer (Information)
Website			
Update the website to ensure accuracy of information and working links.	Within existing resources	Oct 2010	Principal Housing Officer (Information)
Provide more on-line functionality to the website include online housing applications though links to OHMS system	Within existing resources	Oct 2011	Principal Housing Officer (IT)
Provide PC at Civic Offices and Limes Farm Housing Office principally for accessing HomeOption and HomeSwapper	Within existing resources	Oct 2010	Asst. Director of Housing (Operations)
Tenant participation			
Review and update the District-wide Tenant Participation Agreement setting out the ways in which information will be provided	Within existing resources	June 2011	Tenant Participation Officer (TPO)
Use Tenants Talkback Panel "Reading Group" to discuss the format of Housing's 2010 Annual Report	Within existing resources	Sept 2010	Tenant Participation Officer (TPO)
Equality and diversity			
Work with Assistant Housing Manager (Options) and Principal Housing Officer (IT) to collect additional profiling data on all homeseekers as part of the signing up process.	Within existing resources	Oct 2010	Principal Housing Officer (Information)
Work with other Essex authorities to update the Essex-wide report "Facing the facts" to include faith and ethnicity profiling	Within existing resources	Oct 2011	Principal Housing Officer (Information)

Tenant satisfaction			
Consider Housing's approach to tenant satisfaction surveys in light of the Government's decision to discontinue the requirement to conduct 'STATUS' tenant satisfaction surveys	Within existing resources	Oct 2010	Director of Housing
Review and report annually responses to the online satisfaction monitoring form provided on the Council's website.	Within existing resources	March 2011	Principal Housing Officer (Information)
Seek comments on satisfaction with the Council's newsletter.	Within existing resources	March 2011	Principal Housing Officer (Information)

11. Funding the Strategy

11.1. This is a relatively small-scale service funded primarily by the Housing Revenue Account. 1.5 FTE staff are employed exclusively for strategy and information functions. A part-time Senior Quality and Performance Officer and a full-time Tenant Participation Officer (TPO) are also attached to this Section, with responsibility for a number of information related functions. The Housing Assistant, TPO and Senior Quality and Performance Officer are supervised by the Principal Housing Officer (Information). This supervisory role forms part of the duties of the PHO, in addition to the information functions set out in this strategy and other housing strategy related responsibilities. Demand for the information service peaks at certain times of year and is gradually increasing overall due to statutory requirements. However, an increase in the number of staff is not anticipated.

	Staff Resource Projections			
	2009/10	2010/11	2011/12	2012/13
Av no. staff to provide service (FTE p/a)	1.8	1.8	1.8	1.8

Staff Resource Breakdown – 2010/11	
Post(s)	FTE
Principal Housing Officer (Information)	1.0
Housing Assistant (Info/Strategy)	0.5
Tenant Participation Officer	0.2
Senior Quality and Performance Officer	0.1
Total	1.8

12. Key Targets & Performance Monitoring

12.1 The information service responds to the needs of its client groups, requests for information, and any statutory requirements. There are no key targets for this service.

12.2 The Council will monitor the performance of its Information Strategy through;

- a) requests for feedback and comments from the client group;
- b) feedback from the Tenants and Leaseholders Federation;
- c) timely submission of returns to the Government;
- d) perception of the HSSA and BPSA submissions by the Government;
- e) feedback from officers;
- f) the results of tenant satisfaction surveys;
- g) feedback from the website.

13. Reviewing the Strategy

- 13.1 Officers will review this Strategy annually. They will consider the feedback received from the groups listed at 12.2.
- 13.2 The whole strategy will be reviewed by the Housing Portfolio Holder in consultation with the Tenants and Leaseholders Federation in April 2013 for renewal September 2013. Individual elements may be reviewed earlier if this should prove necessary.