

**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 housing information service is provided by the Housing Directorate in conjunction with other relevant Directorates.
- 1.3 This Housing Service Strategy sets out how the housing 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 on housing is an essential part of good customer care. 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) Homeowners, private tenants and landlords seeking advice on housing issues;
  - e) Older people and others with special housing needs;
  - f) Council staff and members; and
  - g) Housing associations, other partners and agencies.
- 2.2 In addition to disseminating information on housing services, the Council seeks information to assist in the strategic planning process.
- 2.3 There is also a duty to inform Council tenants, leaseholders and social housing applicants on Council policy, and their rights and responsibilities.
- 2.4 Feedback on services is sought through tenant involvement, surveys and other consultation methods.
- 2.5 There is a statutory duty to inform in certain cases. The Council is required to inform tenants of their rights with respect to housing allocations, repairs, the Right to Buy and other key issues. In addition, any changes to legislation or Council policy must be reported to tenants, leaseholders, homeseekers and residents in privately-owned accommodation. 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 Local Authority Housing Statistics (LAHS) return and other statistical returns. The Directorate is expected to provide statistics and information to the Council's Performance Improvement Unit. A number of housing performance indicators are collected for continuous improvement monitoring and for tenant scrutiny. Those who receive information, or share information of this kind with the Council, include;

- a) the Director of Housing, Assistant Directors and managers;
- b) tenants and specifically the Tenants and Leaseholders Federation;
- c) the Government;
- d) other Council Directorates;
- e) other local authorities; and
- h) other agencies such as housing associations and research bodies.

- 2.6 Key performance indicators are set for the Housing Directorate in consultation with Council 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 managers to monitor performance through the Continuous Improvement Plan, and to assist in the development of housing policy and strategies.
- 2.7 The Housing Directorate has established a number of service standards in compliance with the regulatory framework of the Homes and Communities Agency (HCA). The Housing Service Standards and Housing Charter set out the Council's promises to customers, and give details of the services they can expect to receive.
- 2.8 The Council's staff and Council members are provided with information on housing services, events, performance, strategy and policy issues to assist in service provision and client communication.
- 2.9 The Housing Information and Strategy Team consists of the Principal Housing Officer (Information and Strategy) and a part-time Housing Assistant. The Team also includes the Tenant Participation Officer and a part-time 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.
- 2.10 The Team is responsible for the annual Local Authority Housing Statistics (LAHS) return and other Government returns. These involve the provision of statistical data which also supports the Council's housing strategies, the HRA Business Plan and the Private Sector Housing Business Plan. 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 from time to time 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.

- 2.11 Information on complaints and compliments received, and any appeals and reviews carried out by Housing officers, are reported corporately and as part of Housing's Continuous Improvement Plan. The objective is to monitor types of complaint and identify any learning points.
- 2.12 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" and "Tenants Voice" - newsletters for all tenants (approximately 6,500 at April 2013).
  - b) "The Forester" - a newspaper delivered periodically to all residents of the District;
  - c) "District Lines" – a regular newsletter for Council staff;
  - d) "In House" - a regular newsletter for staff within the Housing Directorate;
  - e) The Tenant Participation Officer works with residents' groups and assists in the production of newsletters directed towards the target area.
- 2.13 Every new tenant is given a copy of a *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; rents and housing management; joint tenancies; maintenance and repairs; advice on moving home; services for older tenants; succession to a tenancy; the right to buy; appeals, complaints and reviews; and other general information.
- 2.14 A range of leaflets produced by the Housing Information and Strategy team provide information on specific issues, such as advice on homelessness, anti-social behaviour and services provided by the Private Sector Housing teams.
- 2.15 Housing applicants are given relevant information including a leaflet on moving home, information on the HomeOption online application service, and information on choice based lettings.
- 2.16 Under the regulatory framework of the HCA, housing providers (including local authorities) are required to produce an Annual Report to Tenants. This assesses how the Housing Directorate is currently meeting its own standards and measuring compliance, particularly in relation to housing repairs. The Council is required to share the Report with tenants.
- 2.17 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, owner-occupiers, private tenants and other members of the general public. Such information could include events, news and facilities to apply for services and report faults. Leaflets are available in downloadable form and there are links to other sources of information.
- 2.18 An intranet information system can be accessed by all council staff. The Housing Information and Strategy Team publishes and updates information on housing for Housing staff and for all Council employees. This can include general housing information, policies and strategies, risk assessments, quality management system documents, equality data and publications.

- 2.19 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.
- 2.20 Housing applicants, tenants, leaseholders and other residents are given information verbally 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.
- 2.21 Council tenants and leaseholders are given information, and consulted on Council policy, through the District-wide Tenants' and Leaseholders Federation, Tenant Scrutiny Panel, estate-based tenants' associations, the Leaseholders Association, the Sheltered Housing Forum, and other formal and informal residents groups.
- 2.22 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.
- 2.23 Estate-based residents' associations are encouraged to have Local Tenant Participation Agreements setting out their approach to involving residents and providing information.
- 2.24 Older people and otherwise vulnerable residents (disabled people and families on low incomes) in privately-owned homes can access help through Caring and Repairing in Epping Forest (C.A.R.E.), the Council's in-house Home Improvement Agency. C.A.R.E. has a Service Users Forum through which potential C.A.R.E. customers can access information on services appropriate to them.
- 2.25 Consultation on special issues is carried out through surveys, special editions of 'Housing News', public meetings, individual consultations or other means as appropriate.
- 2.26 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.
- 2.27 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 the HRA Business Plan, financial controls and Government statistics.
- 2.28 Statistical data on housing stock, social housing lettings, housebuilding and homelessness is provided to the Government in conjunction with the Housing IT Team and is submitted using Interform 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 requirements including people with disabilities, older people and those with special communication needs;
  - c) approach to providing information and statistical returns requested by the Government;
  - d) commitment to provide the information required for service and 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 The Council has adopted its *Housing Charter* and a set of *Housing Service Standards* which set out, in simple, clear and precise terms the Council's general approach to all its housing services.
- 4.2 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*.
- 4.3 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.
- 4.4 The Government provides guidance annually on the *LAHS* submission, and other housing information requirements.
- 4.5 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) developing and maintaining the Housing areas of the Council's website and intranet;
- d) making provision for people who may have difficulty accessing information, and those who need information provided in another format or language;
- e) ensuring that housing applicants, tenants and leaseholders are given up-to-date information on Council policies and conditions, and on their rights;
- f) publishing Business Plans, Housing Allocations Schemes, tenancy strategies and other key documents;
- g) providing statistical returns to the Government;
- h) providing information for the Council's corporate plans as required;
- i) maintaining systems to monitor and report housing performance;

- j) measuring performance against Housing's Service Standards where possible;
- k) 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 that is suitable for all our customers;
  - making 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 is covered by statutory requirements.

- 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), [the provision of performance indicators to the Government is not currently a requirement].
- e) The Regulatory Framework for Social Housing in England from April 2012
  - Under the Regulatory Framework, registered housing providers should issue timely and relevant performance information to support effective scrutiny by tenants of their landlord's performance, in a form agreed with tenants.
  - Registered housing providers are required to publish an annual report for tenants, to be shared with tenants.
  - The 'Tenant Involvement and Empowerment standard' is one of the four consumer standards for housing providers within the Framework. Under this standard, housing providers are required to provide choices, information and communication that is appropriate to the diverse needs of their tenants in the delivery of all standards.
- f) Equality Act 2010

- Requirement of public bodies to publish relevant, proportionate information showing compliance with the Equality Duty, and to set equality objectives.

g) Freedom of Information Act 2000

- Any person making a request for information to a public authority is entitled:
  - (a) to be informed in writing by the public authority whether it holds information of the description specified in the request, and
  - (b) if that is the case, to have that information communicated to him/her.

h) Data Protection Act

- The Data Protection Act requires fair and lawful processing of personal data.

The Council must:

- (a) have legitimate grounds for collecting and using the personal data;
- (b) not use the data in ways that have unjustified adverse effects on the individuals concerned;
- (c) be transparent about how it intends to use the data, and give individuals appropriate privacy notices when collecting their personal data;
- (d) handle people's personal data only in ways they would reasonably expect; and
- (e) make sure it does not do anything unlawful with the data.

## 7. Client Consultation, Information and Involvement

7.1 Residents are involved and consulted on the Council's arrangements for the provision of information through:

- consultation with the Tenants and Leaseholders Federation and other tenants' groups on service delivery and any proposed policy changes;
- tenant satisfaction surveys providing opinions on the overall landlord service and on satisfaction with specific areas such as contact with the Council;
- feedback forms included in Council publications and on the website; and
- occasional 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 all the Directorate's customers 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* or special publications as required and distributed to that client group.
  - 8.4 An *Annual Report to Tenants* will be published and a copy sent to every tenant, including relevant performance information, details of repair and maintenance budgets, and performance in relation to the standards set out in the Regulatory Framework for Social Housing.
  - 8.5 *Information 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.
  - 8.6 A *Housing Revenue Account (HRA) Business Plan* will be made available to tenants annually, incorporating a *Repairs and Maintenance Business Plan*. A *Private Sector Housing Business Plan* will be published annually.
  - 8.7 The Council's *Housing Allocation Scheme* will provide information for homeseekers on housing eligibility criteria and the 'banding scheme'. Once registered, homeseekers will be kept informed on available properties through the HomeOption online system, maintained for the Council by Locata.
    - 8.7.1 Information in the *Tenants Handbook* will be updated as necessary and the Council's *Tenancy Policy* will be made available to tenants.
  - 8.8 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, private rental tenants and residents in privately owned homes.
  - 8.9 The Housing area of Council's intranet will be kept up to date for staff, and information on housing matters will be published periodically in *In House*.
  - 8.10 Housing news items, information on major projects or significant policy changes will be reported to the public through the media and on the Council website.
  - 8.11 Where issues will affect a defined group of residents, the necessary information may be provided through public meetings, through residents' groups or by individual consultation.
- b) *Information required by the Government*
- 8.12 Housing Information will be collected for the production of the annual *Local Authority Housing Statistics (LAHS)* return according to the Government's guidelines and timetable. This generally includes statistics on housing stock, council house sales and transfers, allocations, lettings, vacant properties, stock condition, capital expenditure, rent arrears, housing management and affordable housing supply.



8.13 The Council will obtain accurate information and complete any statistical returns requested by the Government or its agencies, including quarterly and annual *Housing Activity Returns (P Forms)* 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 for financial audit and for the *LAHS* stock breakdown.

c) *Performance Management*

8.15 The Housing Directorate will meet its obligations to provide statistics required by the Council. Such statistics include the provision of key performance indicator figures and data on compliments and complaints. Details of consultation exercises will be continuously recorded and held on an annual return. Requests for information will be met within the timetables set by the Council (normally on a quarterly basis).

8.16 Under the Regulatory Framework, social housing providers are required to provide information to council tenants on performance against standards, and monitor improvement. The Housing Strategy and Information Team will work with housing managers and other Council services to assist in the benchmarking of individual services for this purpose. Performance against a set of tenant selected indicators is monitored quarterly by the Tenants and Leaseholders Federation and reported in the Annual Report to Tenants.

## 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><b>Strengths</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>❖ Knowledgeable and committed staff</li> <li>❖ Customer Service Excellence Award</li> <li>❖ All tenants, leaseholders and applicants receive up to date news and housing information via tenants newsletter</li> <li>❖ All tenants receive a Tenants Handbook</li> <li>❖ All housing applicants receive HomeOption user information</li> <li>❖ Welcome packs for sheltered housing residents and Careline users</li> <li>❖ Information on all housing services available online</li> <li>❖ Staff are regularly updated on housing matters through in-house magazine</li> <li>❖ Information procedures reviewed as part of Quality Management System ISO 9001:2008</li> <li>❖ Feedback on housing information services through Tenants Satisfaction Survey and other mechanisms</li> <li>❖ Tenants’ groups including the District-wide federation are consulted on information issues</li> </ul> | <p><b>Weaknesses</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>❖ Council website does not have full interactive functionality, for example customers can report faults to the Housing Repairs Section by email, but there is no facility to identify and report defects online</li> <li>❖ Some diversity profiling has been conducted but a comprehensive profile of the client group is lacking</li> </ul> |
| <p><b>Opportunities</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>❖ Action plan to improve the housing information service</li> <li>❖ More involvement of customers in reviewing the provision of housing information</li> <li>❖ Provide information in different formats for customers with special needs where required</li> <li>❖ Take advantage of new technology as appropriate</li> </ul>   | <p><b>Threats</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>❖ Major changes in legislation</li> <li>❖ Major changes in government requirements for statistics and/or information</li> <li>❖ Failure of IT or communications systems</li> </ul>  |

## 10. Action Plan

| <b>ACTION</b>   | <b>RESOURCES REQUIRED</b> | <b>DATE</b>       | <b>ACTIONED BY</b>   |
|---|---------------------------|-------------------|--|
| <b>General provision of information</b>   |                           |                   |  |
| Maintain and update the Tenants Handbook, and other publications providing information required by the client group.                                  | Within existing resources | Ongoing           | Principal Housing Officer (Information) and all Housing Managers |
| <b>Annual Report</b>  |                           |                   |  |
| Produce an annual report including relevant performance information and details of maintenance budgets  | Within existing resources | Annual<br>October | PHO (Info)   |
| <b>Website</b>  |                           |                   |  |
| Maintain the website to ensure accuracy of information and working links  | Within existing resources | Monthly           | PHO (Info)   |
| Provide more online functionality to the website, including fraud reporting and repairs reporting   | Within existing resources | March 2014        | PHO (Info) and Housing Repairs Manager                           |
| <b>Tenant participation</b>   |                           |                   |  |
| Review and update the District-wide Tenant Participation Agreement setting out the ways in which information will be provided                         | Within existing resources | November 2014     | Tenant Participation Officer (TPO)                               |
| Use tenant 'Website and publicity focus group' to discuss improvements to the website   | Within existing resources | March 2014        | PHO (Info) and TPO   |
| Provide timely information and statistics to the Tenant Scrutiny Panel and Tenants and Leaseholders Federation  | Within existing resources | As required       | PHO (Info)   |
| <b>Equality and diversity</b>   |                           |                   |  |
| Conduct a tenant 'census' and publish a report on the profile of council tenants to inform service provision  | Within existing resources | March 2014        | PHO (Inf)  |
| Produce an annual equality information report detailing work carried out by Housing that assists in meeting the requirements of the Equality Act 2010 | Within existing resources | June 2014         | PHO (Inf)  |

|   |                           |           |   |
|---|---------------------------|-----------|---|
| <b>Tenant satisfaction</b>  |                           |           |   |
| Conduct a bi-ennial tenant satisfaction survey using Housemark STAR methodology | Within existing resources | July 2014 | Director of Housing                     |
| Seek comments on satisfaction with the Council's newsletter and website.        | Within existing resources | June 2014 | 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 (PHO) (Strategy and 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. However, an increase in the number of staff is not anticipated.

|  |                |                |                |
|--|----------------|----------------|----------------|
|  | <b>2013/14</b> | <b>2014/15</b> | <b>2015/16</b> |
| <b>Av no. staff to provide service (FTE p/a)</b> | 1.9            | 1.9            | 1.9            |

| Staff Resource Breakdown – 2013/14      |            |
|---|------------|
| 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  | 0.2        |
| <b>Total</b>                            | <b>1.9</b> |

## 12. Key Targets and 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, Tenant Scrutiny Panel and C.A.R.E. Service Users Forum;
- c) timely submission of returns to the Government;
- d) perception of LAHS 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 2016 for renewal September 2016. Individual elements may be reviewed earlier if this should prove necessary.