

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 Housing Services in conjunction with other relevant services especially the Public Relations and Marketing Section, Performance Management Unit, Environmental Services 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 XXXXX.

2. Background to the Service

- 2.1 The availability of clear and easy comprehended information is an essential part of good customer care. There is also a duty to inform Council tenants 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
 - 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 and leaseholders. 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

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Government by set deadlines for the annual Housing Investment Programme, and other statistical returns. Statistics and information must be collected, provided and shared for the Best Value Performance Plan. In particular a number of housing performance indicators are required by the Audit Commission. Those who receive information, or share information of this kind with the Council, include;

- a) the Government;
 - b) the Audit Commission;
 - c) other Council services;
 - d) other local authorities; and
 - i) other agencies such as housing associations and research bodies.
- 2.3 Local performance indicators are set for Housing Services as part of the Best Value Performance Plan. 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 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.
- 2.5 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 Housing Services, reporting to the Housing Resources Manager. Housing information is sourced from the Head and Assistant Heads of Housing Services, Housing Managers, staff with specialist knowledge, other Council services, the Government, other housing organisations and outside agencies.
- 2.6 The Information and Strategy Team is responsible for the Housing Investment Programme which is submitted annually to the Government. This involves the provision of statistical data which are appendices to the Housing Strategy Statement and the HRA Business Plan. The Housing Strategy Statement 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 Statement is also available to the public for information purposes. The HRA Business Plan follows the key aims of the Best Value Performance Plan and analyses the Council's current service. It lists the Council's strategies and includes a 30 year financial plan. Assessments of the District's future housing needs are required by the Government in the form of Housing Needs Surveys and/or Housing Market Assessments. The Information and Strategy Team provides statistics and assistance in the production of these documents.
- 2.7 Housing Services 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 31.03.07). Applicants on the Housing Register are

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- prospective tenants and copies Housing News are distributed to all applicants where they contain relevant information (approximately 3,500 at 31.03.07).
- 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 Housing Services;
 - d) "Grapevine" - a regular newsletter for all Council staff;
 - e) the Council's *Best Value Performance Plan*.
- 2.8 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 the Tenants Charter, the conditions of tenancy; rents and housing management; maintenance and repairs; advice on transfers and exchanges; services for the elderly; successions; the right to buy, garage rentals; other general information.
- 2.9 A range of leaflets produced by the Housing Information and Strategy team provide information on specific issues, such as advice on homelessness and the housing appeals system.
- 2.10 Every housing applicant is given an *Application Pack* which includes a leaflet on applying for housing, an application form with guidance, a 'Where to Live' brochure and any other relevant matter such as covering letters and forms.
- 2.11 The Council has an area dedicated to Housing Services on its website. The Strategy and Information Team is responsible for publishing and updating any housing information relevant to tenants, leaseholders, applicants 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 Team.
- 2.12 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 Services staff and for all Council employees. This includes: information specific to each section (Needs, Assets and Repairs, Management, Resources and Older Peoples Services); general information; Housing policies and strategies; risk assessments; work instructions and other quality management system documents; publications and an index.
- 2.13 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.
- 2.14 Housing applicants and tenants are given information directly through interviews and day-to-day telephone contact with housing officers.
- 2.15 Council tenants and leaseholders are given information, and consulted on Council policy, through the District-wide Tenants' Federation, estate-based tenants' associations, the Leaseholders Association, the Sheltered Housing Forum, consultation days and other formal and informal residents groups.
- 2.16 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.

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- 2.17 Estate-based residents' associations are encouraged to have Local Tenant Participation Agreements setting out their approach to involving residents and providing information.
- 2.18 Consultation on special issues is carried out through surveys, special editions of the tenants' newspaper, public meetings, individual consultations or other means as appropriate.
- 2.19 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.
- 2.20 Detailed information on the Council's housing stock is maintained to produce an annual analysis of stock changes. This is required for Finance subsidy claims and Government statistics.

3. Coverage

- 3.1 This Housing Service Strategy covers the Council's:
- a) general approach to providing information to tenants, leaseholders, housing applicants 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 produce an annual *Housing Investment Programme* submission for the Government;
 - e) commitment to provide the information required under the Best Value regime;
 - f) 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 Statement 2004-2007*.
- 4.2 The Council produces an *HRA Best Value Performance Plan* annually which sets out its aims and objectives for the housing services, and explains its priorities.
- 4.3 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.
- 4.4 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*.
- 4.5 The Council has published a *Best Value Performance Plan* annually which reports on the Council's current performance and how the Council intends to continually improve its service.

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- 4.6 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.
- 4.7 Audit Commission guidance on the provision of *Best Value Performance Indicators* is provided annually.
- 4.8 The Government provides guidance annually on the *Housing Investment Programme* submission and other housing strategy requirements.
- 4.9 Procedures for obtaining and providing information are set out in the *Housing Services 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 Housing Services”.

- 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 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 an annual HRA Business Plan 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 Best Value Performance Plan;
- g) developing systems to monitor and report housing performance;
- h) 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 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).
- 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).
- General duty to meet the Government's directives on Best Value (Section 3).
- Duty of local authorities to produce a Best Value Performance Plan including a Consultation Statement which comments on the forms and types of consultation carried out over the previous year (Section 6).

6.2 There is no longer a statutory requirement on local authorities to produce an Annual Report to Tenants. 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 Statement, 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 and the Housing Corporation.

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;
 - customer satisfaction surveys, in particular the triennial Tenant Satisfaction Survey which provides two statutory Best Value Performance Indicators;
 - 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 Housing Services 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 and homeless people will be published and updated as necessary to ensure they 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.

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- 8.7 The Housing Services 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 Statement*, and annual updates of this document, according to the Government's guidelines and timetable.
- 8.12 Information will be collected for the production of the Council's annual *Housing Investment Programme*, including the HRA Business Plan and Housing Strategy appendices 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)*, 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) *Best Value*

- 8.15 The Council will meet its obligations to provide statistics required under the Best Value regime including the provision of figures for any *Best Value Performance Indicators*, 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 Management Unit.
- 8.16 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 required under Best Value and in particular for Best Value Performance Reviews.

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 ❖ Charter Mark for customer service excellence ❖ 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 ❖ 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 9000:2001 ❖ 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 functionality for customers wishing to make applications for housing services online ❖ Lack of a diversity profile of the client group
<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

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10. Action Plan

ACTION	RESOURCES REQUIRED	DATE	ACTIONED BY
<p>General provision of information Establish a Customer Focus Group to review the housing information service and other customer services.</p>	Within existing resources	Oct 2007	Head of Housing Services
<p>Website Promote the Council's website more widely through a variety of media.</p>	Within existing resources	Oct 2007	Principal Housing Officer (Information)
<p>Provide more on-line functionality to the website include online housing applications and mutual exchange facility</p>	Within existing resources	Oct 2007	Principal Housing Officer (Information)
<p>Tenant participation Conduct a survey of tenants and leaseholders to: establish satisfaction with the Council's TP initiatives including the provision of information, and; seek views on preferred methods of involvement</p>	Within existing resources	Oct 2007	Tenant Participation Officer (TPO)
<p>Establish 'tenant sounding boards' on specific issues eg repairs for tenants and leaseholders</p>	Within existing resources	March 2008	TPO
<p>Equality and diversity Use the results of the 2007 'census' to produce a diversity profile of tenants and leaseholders</p>	Within existing resources	March 2008	Principal Housing Officer (Information)
<p>Procedures are in place to provide large print publications, and Braille or audio if requested. 2007 'census' results to be used to establish any additional information services are required to meet the needs of people with disabilities.</p>	Within existing resources	March 2008	Principal Housing Officer (Information)
<p>Procedures are in place to provide translation and interpreting services. Use 2007 'census' results to establish any additional requirements for people who speak other languages.</p>	Within existing resources	March 2008	Principal Housing Officer (Information)
<p>Tenant satisfaction A triennial postal Tenant Satisfaction Survey is informs two Best Value Performance Indicators. The survey assesses tenant satisfaction with opportunities for participation. Additional questions were added in 2003 and 2006 to assess satisfaction with the provision of information. This practice will continue.</p>	Within existing resources	Sept 2009	Principal Housing Officer (Information)
<p>Reviewed and report annually responses to the online satisfaction monitoring form provided on the Council's website.</p>	Within existing resources	Sept 2007	Principal Housing Officer (Information)
<p>Seek comments on satisfaction with the Council's newsletter.</p>	Within existing resources	Sept 2007	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			
	2007/08	2008/09	2009/10	2010/11
Av no. staff to provide service (FTE p/a)	1.8	1.8	1.8	1.8

Staff Resource Breakdown – 2005/06	
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 Housing Investment Programme submission by the Government;
- e) feedback from officers;
- f) the results of the triennial Tenant Satisfaction Survey;
- 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 2010 for renewal September 2010. Individual elements may be reviewed earlier if this should prove necessary.