

TENANT EMPOWERMENT STRATEGY

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INTRODUCTION

As Portfolio Holder for Housing I am delighted to introduce the first Tenant Empowerment Strategy in Fenland. This Strategy and action plan will build a broad base of participation on top of the valued formal structure, which has developed since its roots in the mid 1990's.

The document clearly details the roller coaster ride for Tenant Participation over the years from the high at the late 1990's where we were seen by Government Office as the benchmark of good practice for a small rural authority to the lows which became evident for all to see in the Best Value Inspection of Repairs and Maintenance in March 2003. That was the watershed and along with a new Corporate Management Team and our Customer First priority for Fenland we are united, tenants, officers and members in learning positively from our mistakes of the past to enable a step change in tenant empowerment in the future.

Councillor Kit Owen
Portfolio Holder

As Chairman of the Tenant's Forum I welcome the focus and real commitment this Strategy gives to empowering the tenants of Fenland to become involved in fundamental issues which will have a direct impact on their lives in the future.

As a founder member of Tenant Participation I have witnessed the highs and lows of stakeholder participation in Fenland. What is refreshing to see within this document is a real openness and transparency highlighting the problems of the past, which in effect clears the way forward to positive development of tenant empowerment in the future.

The measurable action plan attached to this strategy along with the Tenant Participation Agreement and the existing formal Tenant Participation structure gives the strategy the ideal platform to deliver.

Lets get started!!

George Hawkins
Chairman of Fenland Tenants Forum

KEY AIMS AND OBJECTIVES

The main aims and objectives of the tenant empowerment strategy are:

- To engage tenants and leaseholders in the Housing Options Appraisal Process
- To ensure that all tenants and leaseholders are fully aware of the extent of opportunities to give their views
- To provide training and support to tenants and leaseholders to allow full engagement and make meaningful contributions to the process
- To provide access to Independent Advice
- To identify communication methods to ensure that tenants and leaseholders maintain full awareness of the developments of the process and know that their views have been considered.
- To ensure that tenants and leaseholders gain and retain ownership of the process.

CHAPTER 1 – OPTIONS APPRAISAL

What is Options Appraisal?

A Stock Options Appraisal is about asking tenants what they want for the future of their homes and their environment and working with them to identify the best option to deliver those aspirations. Within that it needs to demonstrate how the Authority will achieve the Decent Homes Standard by 2010 and, if that cannot be done within current finances, where extra resources will come from.

Why do we have to do it?

All Authorities who retain their own stock are being required to carry out a Stock Options Appraisal by the government. This is because the government have made a commitment to bring all Council stock up to the decent homes standard by 2010. All Authorities have to finish the process and have it signed off by the Government Office in their area, to say that the process has been carried out in the way that the Government has laid out. The deadline for this sign off is July 2005. Fenland are working with the Government Office for the East of England (GO-East) and the Community Housing Task Force (CHTF) on ensuring the process is effective and fully involves tenants throughout the process as well as meeting all the required technical criteria.

Decent Homes Standard

Based on current projections Fenland can achieve the Decent Homes standard for its entire stock before the deadline of 2010, as well as a degree of additional work. Option appraisal will therefore be looking at the aspirations of our tenants for their homes to create a “Fenland Standard” which will be used to inform the Options Appraisal process.

As important as the physical fabric of our properties is the range and quality of services that tenants require and how far the existing and the projected decrease in future revenue resources available to the Council can meet these aspirations. The options appraisal will rigorously examine all these issues.

The potential added value that can be gained from working with other organisations will have to be weighed with the benefits of being part of the new corporate structure within Fenland District Council as part of our priorities of improving the “Streetscape” and “Customer First”. We need to examine which option can give the most to achieve both priorities and how these could be delivered. This will inform the criteria for determining which option is the long-term answer to create “liveability” on all our estates.

Tenant Participation requirements for Options Appraisal.

We are delighted that the key requirement for ensuring that GO-East sign off our Options Appraisal process is that tenants must be rigorously involved in the process from the beginning, middle and end.

“ For an options appraisal to be signed off it is not enough that tenants and leaseholders are merely consulted, they must be able to make meaningful contributions to the process and thus have some ownership of the conclusions”

*Delivering decent homes – Options Appraisal – Guidance for Local Authorities
– June 2003 page 10*

The above quote highlights the significance of proper involvement and the importance on getting this Strategy correct.

What options are available for the future of our stock?

Retention

Continuing to have all the stock managed as now under the control of Fenland District Council in accordance with Local Authority finance rules and regulations stated in the Housing Revenue Account business plan.

Arms Length Management Organisation (ALMO)

This option is available to all Councils but opportunities to access additional finance to improve the stock is only available to those who deliver a 2 star or above housing service accredited by the audit commission inspection team. Fenland District Council continue to own the stock but management is carried out by an arms length organisation. A board of Council, tenant nominees and independents governs the ALMO. The ALMO would manage some of the services to tenants.

Stock Transfer

Transfer of ownership of all or part of the stock to another landlord (either existing or new housing association or other non profit making form of social landlord) who based on the stock valuation has the ability to borrow to improve the stock and the wider environment.

Private Finance Initiative (PFI)

The Government makes available PFI credits to support the process based on stock condition survey and other investment needs to improve the stock and wider environment of a particular area or type of stock in the district. Obtaining of these credits is subject to a bid process. Through a tendering process a “PFI Contractor” is identified. The PFI contractor will manage some of the services but the ownership remains under the Council.

Community Gateway Model

Through the development of this Tenant Empowerment Strategy the Council wishes to explore the potential interest or not from our tenants to be involved in a community gateway model. The model aims to give tenants and leaseholders more control over their homes and living environment. For ALMO and Transfer options the Community Gateway model provides a new type of body, where rights to influence the running of the organisation are built into the structure in a range of ways.

Mixed Options

In larger authorities it also encourages mixed options. For Fenland the issue of the future of our Sheltered Housing Service is particularly significant as it forms a significant proportion of the stock. The county-wide Best Value review of Sheltered Housing (see below) currently underway will help to inform our decisions on this service. However, at present despite the excellent work on a day-to-day basis it is a very traditional service, which needs to achieve a step change around the service being individually tailored to the customer, rather than the customer having to fit in with a rigid inflexible standard of service not specific to his or her needs. The best method of achieving this change will be considered as part of our option appraisal process. This increases the complexity of the process and brings in additional options of partnering and management whether solely for that element of the service or across the stock as a whole.

The probable existence of the Neighbourhood Management pathfinder (see chapter 2) within Fenland also has to be considered. Fenland is open to alternative options for this area whether within or separate to the options for the District as a whole. We will support tenants to explore the options probably through an option study.

The role of consultants in Options Appraisal

The guidance from Government Office indicates that there is a need to appoint consultants to bring in the relevant expertise to ensure that the process is driven to meet all outcomes expected of it. Fenland are appointing 3 consultants:-

1. Main Consultants: - DTZ Pidea

- The role of the main consultants in OA will be to work closely with the OA executive steering group the officer group, the working group, wider tenant groups, other consultants and all other stakeholders to ensure the OA meets it's objectives within the timescales of the project plan.
- DTZ will critically analyse the Councils base position (The Housing Revenue Account Business Plan) for retaining the stock in accordance with the Options Appraisal Guidance.

- Train the Options Appraisal working group to enable the group to look at the advantages and disadvantages of each option and inform opinion at which is the best long-term management and ownership option for the Stock.
- Write the option appraisal final report detailing the reasons behind the recommendation.

2. Independent Tenants Advisor:-

- To help build on the strong foundations of the existing tenant participation structure, to ensure broad and representative tenant involvement is achieved throughout the Options Appraisal Process.
- Checking the local authority's consultation, information, activities and events to make sure they are balanced, effective and inclusive and feeding back to tenant representative groups, the local authority as well as advising the wider tenant body of their findings;
- Providing direct support, capacity building and training to those tenants closely involved in the decision-making structure (e.g. members of a project group, commission or a tenants' jury);
- Acting as a source of independent advice to all tenants on the proposals, for example through a telephone advice line, local surgeries, ad-hoc meetings and visits;
- Briefing staff and elected members on the role of the ITA and how the Tenant Empowerment strategy impacts on other stakeholders.
- To help develop the draft Tenant Empowerment strategy and the developing communication and consultation strategy to ensure it has the outputs that meets the requirements of the option appraisal process.

3. Communication Consultants – DHA Communications

- To ensure that the communication and consultation process of Option appraisal is rigorous enough for sign off from GO-East
- To scope the communication and consultation exercise on behalf of the Council including the design of the work programme
- Identifying improvements to the developing Communication and Consultation strategy of the Council and working in partnership with ourselves, the main consultants and the ITA to implement it.
- Advising and help scope media relations regarding OA
- Preparation of suitable material to be used for consultation with tenants, staff, members and other stakeholders
- Assistance with consultations with the Community Housing Task Force, GO-East and any other relevant government departments and agencies
- Identifying information to be obtained and establishing arrangements for obtaining feedback from the consultation exercise
- Establishing a mechanism for reviewing the consultation methods used and making changes to the approach as appropriate.
- Supporting the Council in reviewing the results of consultation exercise

The feedback process

The Council will ensure tenants and leaseholders receive continuous feedback throughout the options appraisal process by providing a variety of communication material.

Options Appraisal information will be placed on Fenland District Council Web site (www.fenland.gov.uk) that will be updated on a regular basis and articles will be published in the Council's regular publications such as the Fenland Eye.

There will be opportunities for feedback through various informal and formal mechanisms such as newsletters, freephone line, and special events held throughout the district. The details will be contained in the emerging communications strategy for Options Appraisal.

When the final decision is made on which option is best for Fenland District Council, the Council will continue to ensure that its tenants and leaseholders are made aware of the implications and effect the chosen option will have.

The Council recognises the importance of keeping its tenants and leaseholders at the heart of the Housing Options Appraisal process and will ensure to feedback throughout the process.

CHAPTER 2

DEVELOPMENT OF THE TENANT EMPOWERMENT STRATEGY

The Strategy's development is seen as the launch pad for a step change in tenant involvement. The focus of this Strategy is to meet the rigorous stakeholder requirements for Options Appraisal but the outcomes will create a strong base of tenant involvement, which whatever option is chosen we will continue to build on as part of our Customer First medium term priority long after Options appraisal has finished (see chapter 3).

Our Tenant Participation Structure

Existing structure

We currently have 5 Tenants Associations and a Tenants Forum active in Fenland.

Fenland Tenants Forum

Up to two members from each Tenants' Association sit on the Tenants' Forum who are a consultative group representing tenants across Fenland. The Forum also have the power to co-opt tenants or leaseholders from FDC housing stock to become members of the Forum or voices to the Forum or voices to the Forum/ Associations on an informal basis.

There is a solid core of Tenants Forum members many of whom have been committed to working with the Council from the start of Tenant Participation in Fenland. The group has thrived on the rapid growth of the movement in the late 1990's and have become disillusioned from the lack of growth and development in more recent years despite their best efforts. They feel that the reason for this has been a lack of human resource allocated by Council officers to developing Tenant Participation. As important has been a perceived reluctance from non-tenant participation staff to give appropriate support to tenants groups. They feel that the reason why tenants are reluctant to get involved is issues raised are not dealt with or when things don't happen there is inappropriate feedback as to why. These frustrations were highlighted in March 2003 to the repairs and maintenance inspectors for example the mismanagement of the Council's voice-mail system.

The Tenants Forum has seen the inspection findings as a watershed for participation. Since March 2003 they have been encouraged by the efforts made by the Council to develop tenant participation. The initiatives include :-

- Chair of Tenants Forum involved in the interview of new Tenant Participation Officer. A commitment to involve Tenants in the selection of key housing posts in the future.
- Maintaining a good financial budget to develop Tenant Participation

- The creation of a resource centre for tenants at the Council Offices in March
- Improved involvement in the decision making structure of the Council (See member support below)

However they are quick to emphasise that the Council have only laid building blocks to real improvements and that they hope that through the Options Appraisal process and the development of this strategy this will cement Officer and Member commitment to Tenant Participation into the Culture of the Council as an entire Organisation, rather than parts of it. An example of where the tenants feel that an initiative has been rushed rather than thought out properly is the pilot tenant external improvement initiative (see below). Another example is the interruption in estate inspections that tenants felt worked well and while that is being remedied the failure to carry through such issues has undermined trust in officers.

Chatteris Tenants Association

Meets monthly at the Town Council in Church Walk Chatteris. This group is supported by Chatteris town Council and is one of longest established groups. Contact Keith Haylett telephone 01354 693048

Ivy Leaf Tenants Association

Meets monthly alternating between the communal lounges of Fleming Court, Bradshaw Court and Morton Avenue March. This again is a long established group encompassing the whole of March. Contact – Brenda Reynolds telephone 01354 657351

Manea Tenants Association

One of our most rural groups this group meets at the Village Hall on a monthly basis. Again this group has been together from the origins of Tenant Participation in Fenland. Contact George Hawkins 01354 680626

Whittlesey and District Tenants Association.

This group has a wide coverage in representing not only the town of Whittlesey but also the outer villages of Coates, Eastrea, Turves and Pondersbridge. This group meets monthly at the refurbished St Mary's House, Gracious Street, Whittlesey. Contact Irene Henson 01733 208368.

Wisbech Tenants Association.

Formerly known as South West Wisbech with the changing of the ward boundaries this group now embraces the whole of Wisbech and Walsoken. This established group meets on a monthly basis at Onyx Court, Norfolk Street, Wisbech. Contact John Smith 01945 589661.

Any Tenant can join any group of their choice.

Independent Tenant Advisor (ITA) Selection Panel

7 tenants and 1 leaseholder have been co-opted onto ITA selection panel to appoint the ITA. No officers or members will be involved in the decision to appoint. The group have signed up to a code of conduct for the process and the group will disband on appointment.

Tenant Participation Agreement

The Tenant Participation Agreement (Compact) has been reviewed in early 2004, and is attached at Appendix 1. The key elements to the agreement are

- Broadening informal involvement
- Encourage diversification and involvement to meet the changing needs of Tenants and ensure representation of our tenants as a whole.
- Development of a tenant resource centre
- Detailing the working relationship with the Political Structure at Fenland District Council
- Details the financial resources available for tenant participation

Neighbourhood Pathfinder II project

The Neighbourhood Pathfinder 2 project covers the area of North Wisbech and the surrounding rural villages. Parish plans are being created and will identify the aspirations of the community and needs. There is a clear link with housing regarding affordability of homes, housing management and investment, travellers and other ethnic minority groups and equality issues.

We aim to establish a participative group of tenants from this area to look at the potential of a separate option relating to their area.

Sheltered Housing

The Council has 14 sheltered housing schemes including one extra care scheme, in all 4 market towns and surrounding villages, there are 493 units. Following the results of the Best Value Review of Sheltered Housing, the Council anticipates confirmation that substantial investment will be required to bring properties in line with new Government ideal property guidelines, or Decent Homes Plus.

We have set up an Older Persons Panel that will meet ?? a year to focus on housing issues specific to this groups needs.

Leaseholder Involvement

As yet there has not been any form of specific marketing to encourage involvement of the Councils' 79 leaseholders. We do have a leaseholder who

is active within the Tenants' Forum but although delighted with a leaseholder presence we acknowledge that this is through accident rather than any campaign to encourage such involvement. We acknowledge that encouraging leaseholder involvement requires a targeted action plan to fulfill our duties under the Option Appraisal process.

As part of the Options Appraisal process specific liaison / participation with leaseholders will form part of the Tenant Empowerment and Communication Strategies.

Newsletters

Again Fenland in the mid 1990's took the lead for a rural district in terms of producing far more literature to it's tenants other than the statutory yearly information that by law the Council was duty bound to give e.g. rent performance. In 1996 the 1st colour broad sheet was produced and the editions became twice yearly and then 4 times a year in 1998. Since 1998 the style has again changed to a tabloid size (broadsheet quality!) look. The feedback has always been positive with regard to our newsletter, and we see this as an important tool in getting the option appraisal issue high on the agenda of our customer.

Along with the Fenland Follower we are committed to sending a new newsletter specific to Options Appraisal throughout the process. This will include a new logo and title more relevant than the word "Options Appraisal".

Stock Options Appraisal Working Group

This group of 12 stakeholders (including 5 tenants and 1 leaseholder) will examine which option provides the most sustainable long term future for the housing stock. They will agree the base position on which the options will be tested. Then the group will look at how well the Fenland Standard can be met from each of the options available.

Village Voice

There are currently two village voice representatives in Coates and Ponders Bridge, they are linked to Whittlesey and District Tenants' Association, attend monthly meetings and feed back to the villages they represent. This initiative is new and requires development and expansion to ensure there is a good cross representative, geographical, and demographic participation structure for Options appraisal involvement.

Extending this type of participation will be evaluated in terms of it's effectiveness as part of the Options Appraisal process

Tenant Participation Menu

The Tenant Participation Menu was advertised through the Fenland Follower, (the housing newsletter to it's tenants) as a vehicle for the following range of options for participation.

- **Starters** = Telephone survey, Postal Questionnaire, electronic surveys
- **Main Course** = Attending local, Tenants' Association meetings, forming a local Tenants' Association, becoming a village voice, attend public meetings in local area, creating a focus group
- **Dessert** = Fenland promises to feedback the results.

34 responses were received from tenants who expressed an interest in taking part in focus groups, telephone questionnaires to involvement in an Association.

This database will be used and built on as an administrative tool to help focus the communications and participation events for the Options Appraisal process.

Hard to reach groups

A key focus to this strategy will be to develop consultation and participation structures that encourage involvement from hard to reach groups such as Young People , Disabled, tenants with learning difficulties and tenants from Black and Minority Ethnic groups.

DHA Communications are assisting in developing a communication strategy that will assist in this objective. The techniques will build on the development of the Black and Minority Ethnic Accommodation Strategy, and the Customer Focus Form which was sent out with the rent increase letters in March 2004 to data capture key data from our tenants. The details are being fed into the housing IT system to enable targeted communications relating to Options Appraisal

Tenant External Improvement Initiative

In October 2003, £20,000 was made available for small external improvements identified by tenants following open meetings across Fenland. This initiative also highlighted tenants priorities for capital expenditure, their comments of the aims of the Housing Revenue Account Business Plan and the encouraging tenant participation. This pilot exercise attracted over 100 tenants, and the following improvements have been agreed:

- Street lighting in a garage area and bungalow cul-de-sac
- Individual external lighting to a flat complex and communal hallway lighting

As an initiative we feel giving tenants the responsibility in determining environmental improvements to our neighbourhoods is a significant statement of our commitment to tenant involvement in decision-making. Not only that the meetings held across the district were used as a basis to try and encourage our customers to become involved at what ever level of the menu highlighted above.

However as always with a pilot exercise there have been concerns raised about the process from both tenants in our formal tenant participation structure and officers who held the meetings. For example it was felt that tenants' who could not attend a formal meeting should have the facility to input their ideas for spending the environmental improvement budget.

Although the principle of Tenants having real say in how money is spent is welcomed the Tenants Forum and Associations felt the methodology in the pilot did not encourage an efficient use of scarce resources.

The Forum and the Council are currently reviewing the first year and the Forum hope that this review will enable them to support an increased allocation of £50,000 for the initiative, in the financial year 2004 - 2005

CHAPTER 3 - TRAINING AND SUPPORT NEEDS OF TENANTS

As can be seen from the section on budgets below, the Council has invested considerable resources into the development of all constituted tenant groups over the years. Much of the training has been Officer led but from July 2002 when the Forum were delegated their own training budget, the group themselves have arranged external providers to come in and meet their training requirements. See appendix 2 for the detail of their training undertaken since October 2000.

Forthcoming training

- **Recruitment and Selection through the tendering process :-** The Forum are to receive specialist training in February 2004 to ensure that they have the skills necessary to appoint the Independent Tenant Advisor for Options Appraisal and participate in the selection of other consultants and in future enable a broader range of tenants to participate in the selection of contractors.
- **Recruitment and Selection Training for the appointment of Staff.** The Chairman of the Tenants Forum recently observed and commented on the interview process to appoint on a secondment a Tenant Participation Officer (see "Fenland District Council support" below). It has now been agreed to train the Tenants' Forum on recruitment and selection to enable them to play an active role in the appointment of future key staff appointments, for example the new Housing Operations Manager and Policy and Performance Manager.

It is envisaged that the ITA will undertake a skills audit (see action plan) of the existing tenant structure to enable rigorous and effective involvement in Options Appraisal. This will be extended to wider stakeholders as the action plan from this strategy develops.

It is a key issue for Options Appraisal to ensure that key stakeholders who receive training and information relating to the process are taught the relevant skills to feedback their knowledge to the group they are representing. This will form a key element to the skills audit.

Local Authority Support

Officer Support

As mentioned in the introduction our development of a formal tenant participation structure in the mid to late 1990's was commended from government office as good practice for a small rural district authority. The Council agreed to the appointment of a dedicated full time tenant participation officer post in 1996. From that the formal tenant participation structure developed quickly and was cemented through the Large Scale Voluntary Transfer process in 1999. However since 2001 the Tenant Participation Officer has been seconded to spend half a week on managing the Supported Housing Service. It was envisaged that this would be for a limited period of 9 months but at the end of that period a major restructure of the Council was announced.

This unacceptable situation therefore continued and both our tenants groups, the forum and officers acknowledge that the progression of tenant participation particularly the development of informal consultation processes has suffered as a result. The new Head of Housing Services who commenced employment at Fenland in September 2003 has quickly addressed this situation and through the secondment of a member of staff into tenant participation has increased the dedicated support to tenant participation to 1.5 full time equivalent posts which will be the permanent establishment. The tenant participation officer will assist in driving through the actions from the tenant empowerment strategy and be part of the officer team facilitating the Options Appraisal process.

Another concern raised consistently through our formal tenant participation structure has been the amount of time offered from non dedicated tenant participation housing staff. Part of the reason for this has been due to capacity to play a full role in tenant participation but it is acknowledged that this has to change. It is felt that the new structure will enable Area Housing Officers to be more active with Tenant Participation and from April 2004 all Housing staff job descriptions have a requirement to foster a positive approach to Tenant Participation.

Member Support

The fact that Fenland became the trailblazers for tenant participation in the Eastern Region in the mid to late 1990's is as a result of member support for it's development. They approved the creation of a Tenant Participation Officer and were pro-active in supporting the creation of 6 tenant participation groups throughout the district, along with the creation of the Tenants' Forum.

However, along with the problems highlighted in Officer Support to tenant participation (above) the creation of the Cabinet system (Pilot from December 2001, adopted May 2002) has also led to some unease about the roles that tenant participation play which can be similar to that of the none cabinet member.

This unease has been highlighted through the Tenants Forum request to have a “non voting” role within the new political structure. The Tenants Forum felt this took longer than necessary to agree, and saw the delay as reluctance to embrace the development of the tenant movement in Fenland and that barriers to participation were being put in their way.

However, Members have agreed to allow a representative of the Tenants’ Forum to sit on Overview and Scrutiny Committee (which scrutinises the decisions made in Cabinet) on matters relating to housing and it’s wider environment. The Tenants’ Forum has welcomed this development and it is hoped this will be increased to two seats in 2004. There remains uncertainty of what the Forum representative can or cannot do at these meetings but there is a new spirit of partnership emerging through the “customer first” key corporate priority and these issues are currently being worked through to satisfaction of both the members and the Tenants’ Forum. There is a renewed conviction to put Fenland back on top of the table in terms of its tenant participation movement, and this is welcomed from tenants, officers and members

Budget

Further evidence of member support to tenant participation in Fenland has been the financial support given to Tenants’ Groups and the Tenants’ Forum. Each group following it’s yearly Annual General Meeting receives £200 to assist in their development. The Tenants Forum also receives a yearly budget of £8000. As can be seen from the table below in 2000 - 2001 a huge increase in the budget was achieved through a one off grant from government office to assist in the development of the tenants compact (tenant participation agreement). However as a commitment from Fenland District Council the budget has been kept at this higher level in subsequent years.

Year	Tenant Participation Budget Allocated (£)	Tenant Participation Budget Spent (£)
1996 – 1997	4,000	3,456.02
1997 – 1998	N/a	15,664.83
1998 – 1999	7,000	7,233.21
1999 – 2000	7,600	9,229.71
2000 – 2001	24,700	19,178.97
2001 – 2002	24,700	13,594.00
2002 – 2003	24,700	17,518.00
2003 – 2004	24,700	
2004 – 2005	24,700	

CHAPTER 4

OUR STRATEGIC DIRECTION FOR TENANT INVOLVEMENT

Although proud that Fenland has an established Tenant movement dating back to 1995, which was in the late 1990's acknowledged by GO-East as an example of good practice for a small rural district authority, it is now acknowledged that a further step-change from these solid foundations are required to meet the requirements of Options Appraisal (see chapter 1) and the Housing Strategy 2004 – 2007, the Housing Revenue Account Business Plan 2004-2005, and the Black and Minority Ethnic (BME) Accommodation Strategy 2004 – 2007.

Links to Corporate Wide Objectives

Fenland District Council is a very active partner in the Fenland Strategic Partnership (FSP). The FSP has developed 7 key aims through extensive public and stakeholder participation.

These 7 key aims are:

1. Improving Access to Services and Information
2. Improving the Community's Safety, Health and Environment
3. Building vibrant town and village communities that are good to live in
4. Encouraging strong and learning communities with higher aspirations
5. Developing a diverse and sustainable economy
6. Raising Fenland's profile
7. Developing pride in the countryside

Fenland District Council is using these key themes as the driver for its Corporate Planning. In order to prioritise within these themes an exercise was conducted with members. From this 3 key medium term priorities based on the themes were identified:

1. That we are "Open for Business"
2. That we are "Streets Ahead"
3. That we put "Customers First"

Internally, as part of the Corporate Plan we have a 4th medium term priority to create a quality organisation, which will ensure each of the priorities and themes are delivered.

Every action within the Tenant Empowerment Strategy links to these wider corporate objectives. This, coupled with a new performance management framework will ensure the actions from the plan are delivered, but crucially at a pace and level the tenants themselves are happy with. Another essential link for this Strategy will be with the emerging Communication and Consultation Strategy, which is being developed for Options Appraisal to ensure a clear, consistent and concise information service is delivered to not only tenants but wider stakeholders affected by the future of our stock

discussion. We are also developing a Council wide consultation strategy and this strategy reflects the principles within it.

Housing Strategy Participation

There has been a step change in the last 12 months with regard to Stakeholder Involvement in the development of the Housing Strategy 2004 – 2007. It came in response to the Tenants' Forum who were keen to have more input in the development of the document prior to submission. In response to this Fenland District Council held a Strategy Consultation Seminar in May 2003 that had over 80 delegates attending including Tenants, Members, Registered Social Landlords (RSLs), wider partners such as the Primary Care Trust (PCT), our sub-regional partners, the voluntary sector and private sector developers.

In October the Tenants' Forum endorsed the revised layout style to the Housing Strategy and in November the draft document was disseminated to all our partners for comments, with revisions made as a result. Consultation with tenants across Fenland was carried out during November as part of the tenant external improvement initiative (see below) on the aims and priorities for investment, and this is reflected in the Strategy and Housing Revenue Account (HRA) Business Plan.

The development of the Housing Strategy has shown that as a council we can be reactive to concerns raised by our customers on the level of involvement. We acknowledge that this ethos needs cementing across the whole service to ensure that a broad participation base can be developed. We also recognise that we need to develop informal participation structures for the development of the housing strategy and other key service documents.

Links to Housing Revenue Account (HRA) Business Plan 2004/05 and Housing Strategy 2004 – 2007.

The development of this strategy is essential in fulfilling the 2 priorities for action contained in the HRA Business Plan :-

- 1. To manage a sustainable, high quality, affordable housing service which is set in a safe environment and is in demand from it's futurecustomers.**
- 2. To deliver a housing service at a price and quality acceptable to our customer.**

Priority number 1 is a priority about how our stock fits into the wider agenda of the community and the housing market. Priority number 2 concentrates on the service given to our customers in our stock.

Effective empowerment of our customer is also an important driver to meeting many of the key components of our Housing Strategy, as without effective engagement it is impossible to make progress towards balancing the housing

market nor can we be sure that initiatives to ensure “liveability” on all our estates will work.

Formal and informal Tenant involvement

The focus of this strategy will be to strengthen the formal participation structure highlighted above, as well as encouraging and providing appropriate resource (human and financial) to the development of robust informal consultation techniques. The aim overall is to ensure a statistically relevant cross representative sample of our tenants become involved at an informal or formal level. Coupled with this aim is to ensure that no tenant is excluded from an opportunity of involvement should they so wish. It is crucial therefore that this strategy links closely with the outputs from the draft BME accommodation strategy which focussed on building our knowledge base on the BME breakdown of our tenants. We acknowledge that improving involvement of difficult to reach groups extends much wider than a BME focus for example literacy issues and tenants who are physically isolated.

CHAPTER 5

SUMMARY OF ACTION PLAN FOR TENANT EMPOWERMENT DEVELOPMENT

Appendix 3 details the project plan for Options Appraisal in Fenland. Below is a summary of the development of tenant empowerment action plan linked to the development of the 3 key phases of the Options Appraisal process.

Phase 1 ending October 2004

- Appoint Independent Tenant Advisor for Options Appraisal
- Identify the Black and Minority Ethnic (BME) and demographic profile of our tenants
- Encouraging hard-to-reach groups and developing their involvement
- Build a participation profile which is inclusive and covers all diversity groups
- Undertake a skills audit of active tenants in Fenland and identify barriers to effective involvement
- Create and develop a statistically representative tele-contact group of tenants to monitor their opinions of Option Appraisal throughout the process.
- Develop groups (formal or informal) in Neighbourhood Management Pathfinder Area, Leaseholder Sector and Sheltered Housing
- The setting up of a free-phone advice line for any tenant to call with their queries.
- Creation of Tenants Newsletters relating to Options Appraisal
- Create and Train the Options Appraisal Working Group

Phase 2 from October 2004 to February 2005

- Empower the Option Appraisal Working group in examining all options for the long-term management of the housing stock. Each option needs to be measured against the following:-
 - targets for decent homes; decent homes plus
 - tenants and leaseholders aspirations and priorities;
 - National and Regional priorities and agreed priorities of partners;
 - the Council's statutory housing duties and enhanced strategic role;
 - an improved service and increased tenant involvement;
 - all types of housing need;
 - To ensure “liveability “ on all our estates i.e anyone would be happy to live on our estates
 - Experience of other areas who have undertaken a relevant option (visit area if required)

- Empower the tenants and other stakeholders to communicate to and receive feedback from their respective groups.
- Continue communication strategy relating to Options Appraisal using initiatives started prior to September 2004. Encourage specific input and support to tenants of sheltered housing (results of county-wide Best Value review of sheltered housing are expected April 2004) and tenants within the Neighbourhood Management Pathfinder project, to consider options directly related to them.
- Continue with development tenant empowerment initiatives started in phase 1

Phase 3 from February 2005 – April 2005

- Communicate agreed option/s from the findings of the Option Appraisal working group and consult with all tenants through a variety of formal and informal mechanisms