

Fenland Options Appraisal

Improving Council Homes – Guidance Notes

The purpose of this core script is to ensure there is a form of words to describe the Options Appraisal process with which all key stakeholders agree. This means everyone will be clear about how we talk and write about the OA. It also means that key messages about how the process will be run are always emphasised. It is designed to last for the first phase of the process, though it can be changed as circumstances change. The core script can be used as a guide for meetings, and as a basis for articles and interviews.

Improving Council Homes – Guidance Notes

Every council home in the country has to meet the Decent Homes Standard – a measure set by the government – by 2010. This means that Council housing has to meet minimum standards for its state of repair, energy efficiency and fixtures and fittings.

Areas across the country are being asked by government to consider how best to achieve this standard. The technical term for this process is Options Appraisal.

There are almost 4,000 council properties in Fenland. Eleven percent of the population live in a council home. With a rapidly increasing population and house prices rising by more than regional averages, the need for good quality low cost rented accommodation has never been greater.

Fenland is embarking on the process to preserve and improve social housing to deliver the Decent Homes Standard that is driven by the tenants themselves. Putting tenants first is very important to the process in Fenland.

Between now and the end of 2004, tenants and leaseholders across Fenland will be asked about the improvements they would like to see to their homes and estates. The results of these views will become the Fenland Standard – which is a vision designed especially for the area that meets and surpasses the Decent Homes Standard. Most importantly, the Fenland Standard looks beyond improvements to the home to include issues around the estates homes are situated in and future availability and access to affordable housing.

Tenants and their representatives will then analyse the options for achieving the Fenland Standard. This will be a rigorous process that weighs up the pros and cons; looks at any new arrangements and their impact upon services, costs and the workforce; and ensures that every option is tested for its ability to achieve the improvements needed.

These options can include keeping things exactly as they are; transferring the stock to a registered social landlord usually known as Housing Associations; bringing new investment through the private finance initiative; giving the council an arms' length management of council homes; or other options that come forward during discussions. The main point is that at this stage there are no preconceptions. Every option will be considered openly and fairly according to how it can achieve what tenants want. Developing a broad understanding of what each of these options can deliver in terms of meeting the Fenland standard will be an important aspect of the process.

Between now and February 2005 the council and the working group (which includes tenants and leaseholders) will consult widely with all tenants and leaseholders and consider all options before deciding their preferred options to achieve the Fenland standard. This will then be sent out for wide consultation to check that the views of this vital group matches that of the vast majority of tenants. After April 2005, the option chosen by tenants will be approved by the council and government office and then implemented.

Improving council homes in Fenland will not just affect tenants. It will have an impact upon the quality of life of everyone living in the area. Investing in housing will create jobs, it will improve environments, and it ensures that there is good quality, low cost social housing for generations to come.

Another essential aspect of delivering the Fenland Standard is about generating greater involvement. Tenants, local people, businesses, council workers, councillors and community groups all have a vital role to play in shaping the future of their area. Whilst it is tenants who will decide what is the best option for delivering the Fenland Standard, this process should help to create a debate where all views are welcome.

To do this the whole process must be honest, open and transparent. At every stage, information, facts and figures will be made available to anyone who wants them. Views expressed in person, in writing and by telephone will be positively encouraged.

Tenants in particular will be given information that is clear and appropriate. They have an Independent Tenants' Adviser (ITA) who will work with them to analyse information and ask questions so that at every stage they can make informed choices.

Above all, the Options Appraisal process should be seen as an opportunity. Whatever tenants decide to do, securing and improving the future of social housing in Fenland should be the main goal of this exercise.

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