

Options Fenland

Final Report of the Independent Tenants' Advisor

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22nd June 2005

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1. Introduction

1.1 The role of the Independent Tenants' Adviser

1.1.1 'AWICS was appointed as Independent Tenants' Adviser for the 'Options Fenland' process by a panel of tenant representatives in May 2004.

1.1.2 At the outset, the objectives of the independent tenants' advisor were identified as:

- 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, inclusive of out of hours work.
- 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
- To work in conjunction with the Option Appraisal Main Consultants and Communication consultants of the Council;
 - A broad consensus on the scale of investment needed to reach the decent homes target;
 - A clear idea of priorities for investment beyond decency;
 - agreed priorities for improvement in housing services;
 - A clear idea of the pros and cons of various investment strategies and how deliverable they are locally and essentially based on the above;
 - A tenant agreed way forward that meets the criteria for sign off by the Government Office in time for July 2005.

1.1.3 This was to be achieved in three phases:

Phase 1 (May to September 2004)

- To assist tenants on building a broad base of participation that is sustainable. This will include identifying and consulting appropriately with a statistically relevant cross representative sample of tenants and then with formal Tenants groups, and individual tenants, and in consultation with the Council, produce a method statement on how to involve groups, individuals, and leaseholders right across Fenland.
- The ITA will need to develop initiatives that will encourage hard to reach groups and BME groups.
- Undertake a skills audit of active tenants in Fenland.
- To create a participation profile that is inclusive and covers all diversity groups.
- Help create and develop a statistically representative tele-contact group of tenants to monitor their opinions of option appraisal throughout the process.
- The setting up and running by the ITA of a free-phone advice line for any tenant to call with their queries. This should be available, during day-time with some out of hours.
- The training of tenants and leaseholders on Option Appraisal Process, to ensure we can be rigorous in our involvement and examination of all long-term options.
- The creation of Tenants Newsletters relating to Options Appraisal
- Identify any barriers to Tenant Involvement in Fen land.
- In consultation with tenants, to offer advice on the membership and formation of the Option Appraisal Working Group

Phase 2 (September 2004 to February 2005)

Support the Option Appraisal Working group in examining all options for the long-term management of the housing stock. As part of this process you will need to ensure the information is fair and consistent and in a clear and understandable way to all stakeholders. 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
- Experiences of other areas who have undertaken a relevant exercise (visit area if required)

- 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 of the tenant empowerment strategy, communication and consultation strategy and the initiatives started in phase 1

Phase Three (February to April 2005)

It is understood that phase three is to 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.

1.2 Our Approach

- 1.2.1 Throughout the process our objective has been to empower tenants by providing them with access to good quality professional and independent advice. This has applied equally to tenants who have sat on the 'Options Fenland' Working Group who have needed to gain an in-depth knowledge of all the relevant issues; and to individual tenants who have contacted the helpline with particular queries.
- 1.2.2 We have neither sought to 'sell' an alternative model for the future management of Fenland District Council's housing, nor to defend the existing management of council housing. We have sought to inform tenants of the issues and to encourage them to become involved in 'Options Fenland' so that as many tenants as possible have been able to take part in the decisions about the future of their homes.
- 1.2.3 We hope that we have helped the tenants and leaseholders of Fenland to arrive at what should be the 'right' decision for them. We also hope that our involvement in 'Options Fenland' has strengthened the tenants' movement in the district generally so that in future Fenland's tenants and leaseholders can play an increasing role in taking decisions about the future ownership and management of their homes.

1.3 This Report

1.3.1 This Report outlines the work that we have undertaken. It is designed to describe what we have done, the outcomes, and any conclusions that we feel should be drawn. It includes:

- Meetings
- Skills Audit & Selection of Working Group
- Free phone Helpline
- Website
- Pool of Opinion Consultation

1.3.2 We have also supported the 'Options Fenland' process through working with the media, including giving interviews and preparing press releases; and preparing material for newsletters and other written material that has been sent to tenants.

1.4 Acknowledgements

1.4.1 The 'Options Fenland' process was characterised throughout by good teamwork between tenants' representatives, other members of the Working Group, Councillors, Council officers and all the consultants. We could not have carried out our role as Independent Tenants' Advisor without the strong support that was received from everyone in the team. We would like to thank everyone for this.

2. Meetings

2.1 Introduction

2.1.1 During the 'Options Fenland' process we have attended many meetings and have met with many of the tenants and leaseholders of Fenland as well as councillors, council officers and others with an interest in council housing in Fenland. This has included advising tenants who have sat on the Tenants' Forum and Working Group, representing tenants at other meetings, and meeting a large number of individual tenants through attending meetings of Tenants' Associations and other means.

2.2 Tenants Forum

2.2.1 Throughout the Options Fenland process I have attended meetings of the Tenants' Forum regularly, have ensured that the Forum is well informed about Options Fenland and have given members of the Forum opportunities to ask questions about every aspect of the process.

2.2.2 For example, during February 2005 I facilitated a workshop for the Tenants' Forum.

2.2.3 The Workshop for the Tenants' Forum considered the Options Appraisal process as a whole and also the stock retention model that had been prepared by DTZ Pieda.

2.2.4 The Tenants' Forum considered that the Working Group should adopt a retention option that was able to fund the works that have been identified through the stock condition survey. They identified an option that would achieve this through:

- (a) Use of 100% of Right to buy receipts on the Housing Revenue Account.
- (b) Modelling the continued availability of Supported Capital Expenditure until 2010/2011 in accordance with Government Office – East guidance.
- (c) Making savings in management costs in years four and nine.
- (d) Making efficiency savings in repairs and maintenance so that unit costs would not increase in real terms.
- (e) Carrying out £2.1million of prudential borrowing.

2.2.5 The Tenants' Forum would not wish to see any reduction in planned investment in new affordable housing, and would suggest that the Council consider making any necessary reductions in its planned general fund capital expenditure by considering alternative means of financing investment in information technology, vehicles and refuse collection.

2.2.6 An electronic copy of the model that was developed by the Tenants' Forum has been made available to Council officers and to DTZ Pieda.

2.3 Working Group

2.3.1 Throughout the 'Options Fenland' process I have attended meetings of the Working Group and have provided advice to the Working Group in general and to tenant members of the Working Group in particular.

2.3.2 This has included drafting and commenting on reports for the Working Group, newsletters and press releases. I have also given a number of interviews for the local media.

2.4 Executive Steering Group

2.4.1 I have attended most of the meetings of the Executive Steering Group and have reported back to the Working Group and the Tenants' Forum as appropriate. I have supported tenant representatives in making representations to the executive Steering Group as appropriate.

2.5 Community Housing Task Force – September 2004

2.5.1 I attended this meeting on 10th September 2004. The following matters were discussed:

- Confirmation of Options Appraisal Process & Methodology
- Project Timetable – Community Housing Task Force consider that the timetable at fenland is quite 'tight'. There is a need to update the stock condition information.
- Executive Group and Working Group Membership – six applications have been received for the vacant position on the working group from the pathfinder area. The consultants will advise the working group on an appointment at their next meeting.
- Base Case Analysis
- Tenant Empowerment Strategy
- Communications Strategy - a telephone survey is being carried out and focus groups are being established
- Independent Tenants' Advisor Feedback – I reported on the meetings that have been held, the other communications that have been made with tenants, and the feedback received through meetings and the hotline. The main concerns of tenants appear to be:
 - Repairs, Maintenance and Improvements
 - Grounds Maintenance
 - Affordable Housing
 - A small amount of nuisance caused by neighbours
- Emerging issues, risks and mitigating factors

2.5.2 I reported on this meeting to the Working Group and to the Tenants' Forum.

2.6 Tenants Associations – first round

2.6.1 At the outset of 'Options Fenland' I attended meetings of each of the Tenants' Associations in Fenland to explain the process to tenants, meet tenants and gain an understanding of their concerns. The issues that were raised in these meetings helped to form the 'Fenland Standard'. Some issues were referred to Council officers for more immediate attention.

2.6.2 Manea Tenants' Association – 5th July 2004

I attended a meeting of the Manea Tenants' Association on 5th July 2004, and made a presentation to them on the stock options appraisal process. The meeting was attended by eight tenants and one housing officer. The following matters were discussed and points raised:

Communications and Participation

Tenants do not always go to meetings as they don't understand what is going on. Letters are not always written in 'laymen's language'.

Some tenants are not comfortable dealing with written communications.

Tenant participation arrangements have improved since 1999.

Fenland Standard

The Fenland Standard needs to be detailed.

Fenland District Council is in the process of upgrading homes, including in Manea. It is not certain, though, how soon all homes will be upgraded.

Tenants in upgraded homes are generally satisfied with them. All now have central heating and double glazing. Many have loft and cavity insulation.

Tenants would like showers installed.

Tenants' felt that having door handles on both sides of front doors was not appropriate.

Tenants' felt that there is insufficient security. Door chains can be removed from outside. Window locks are not always operable.

Bungalows for elderly people have small windows at the top of the window frame that they cannot reach to open.

Disabled people have difficulty in unlocking front doors.

In some villages with no mains gas there are economy seven heaters that are not considered appropriate.

Supply of Social Housing

400 council homes have been sold since 1999 while house prices have risen. More people want to rent social housing and the waiting list is 'out of control'. The 'right to buy' is reducing the social housing stock.

There are insufficient purpose built homes for the elderly. In particular there is a shortage of bungalows, while many bungalows have only one bedroom. Most elderly people would like a guest room for family visitors.

Problems are encountered in installing adaptations for elderly and disabled tenants. The budget does not appear to be adequate. The main problem appears to be the waiting list for assessments by occupational therapists.

2.6.3 Wisbech Tenants' Association Meeting – 12th July 2004

I attended a meeting of the Wisbech Tenants' Association on 12th July 2004, and made a presentation to them on the stock options appraisal process. The meeting was attended by 23 tenants, the Chairman of the Tenants' Forum, four councillors and one housing officer. The following matters were discussed and points raised:

Tenancies

Tenants are finding difficulty in moving:

- One tenant would like to move to a house that faces the main road.
- One elderly tenant would like to move from a flat to a bungalow. There is a waiting list for bungalows, but this is not seen as a big problem.

One elderly tenant had applied for a transfer from a flat to a bungalow, and had been offered one in March that she viewed and refused to accept on the grounds that it was damp. She needs to move to a bungalow before having an operation. Three months had gone by since she wrote to the council to decline the new tenancy but she had not heard again from the council.

Anti-Social Behaviour

A tenant complained about a 'drugs problem' and said that one of her neighbours' flats had been raided for drugs during the night.

Repairs & Maintenance

A tenant complained that a replacement fire had not filled the fireplace and that a board that had been used to fill the gap looked terrible.

New kitchens that are being installed at Onyx Court are unsuitable, especially because the cooker is too small and has a hob top.

New piping at Onyx Court will go through the cupboards and around the wall rather than under the floor. Tenants think that it should be boxed in.

Grounds Maintenance

Tenants think that the standard of grounds maintenance has got worse during the last six years, especially on Holmes Drive. Hedges are not maintained, rose bushes have died off, and operatives are not there long and do not appear to be motivated.

There is concern about maintenance of the gardens around Onyx Court. Hedges are 'disgusting and sky high'.

There are very high weeds in Norwich Road where the former toilets have been pulled down.

There is rubbish in the yards where the washing is hung that attracts rats.

Some tenants do not maintain their gardens properly on Main Road.

Tenants in flats used to share the cleaning of the stairs, but some new tenants do not do this.

Car Parking

Car Park spaces that are reserved for tenants are used by others.

Tenant Participation

It is difficult to get younger people interested in tenants' associations.

2.6.3 Whittlesey Tenants' Association Meeting – 14th July 2004

I attended a meeting of the Whittlesey Tenants' Association on 14th July 2004, and made a presentation to them on the stock options appraisal process. The meeting was attended by eleven tenants, one village voice representative and three housing officers. The following matters were discussed and points raised:

Grounds Maintenance

Tenants consider that the hedges, trees and shrubs need trimming. There is also a problem with the dyke in front of the houses in Romsey Road.

Trees at North Green need pruning. There are potholes around the bus shelters at South Green. The lights are out on Eastea Road.

There is an accumulation of leaves under the fire escape at St. Mary's.

The Grounds Maintenance Officer had been invited to attend the meeting but had not done so.

Repairs & Maintenance

The council will now take responsibility for replacing strip lights and smoke alarms for elderly and disabled tenants.

The system for telling tenants when repairs are to be done does not appear to work always. One elderly tenant left for hospital at 7.45am and the operative called at 8.15am.

Improvements

A tenant would like a ramp building at his front door.

St. Mary's Issues

Residents at St. Mary's would like SKY television installed. It is understood that funding is the main problem with this.

There is a nuisance with noise from cars at 4.00am.

2.6.4 Chatteris Tenants' Association Meeting – 20th July 2004

I attended a meeting of the Chatteris Tenants' Association on 20th July 2004, and made a presentation to them on the stock options appraisal process. The meeting was attended by 7 tenants and two housing officers. The following matters were discussed and points raised:

Grounds Maintenance

The standard of grounds maintenance in the Chatteris area is not considered good.

There is a flooding problem in some areas that causes damage to gardens which the council is not seen to be addressing.

Supply of Affordable Homes

Tenants consider that there is a shortage of affordable homes in the Chatteris area.

A bungalow that has been adapted for the use of a disabled tenant has recently been sold under 'right to buy'. The council has wished to find an exemption but had been unable to prevent the sale. Tenants felt that this had reduced the ability of the council to offer social housing to disabled tenants.

2.6.5 Ivy Leaf Tenants' Association, March – 20th July 2004

I was represented at a meeting of the Ivy Leaf Tenants' Association by my Associate Consultant, Jay Redgrove, on 20th July 2004.

No significant issues were raised. Residents who attended spent their time taking it all in and questions will no doubt arise later on.

Communal areas were mentioned (by the Parks and Open Spaces Officer) in respect of their maintenance and would they transfer to the Registered Social Landlord or Arms Length Management Organisation. Also the five year garden maintenance contract they are locked into which has not solved the issues residents had about open.

2.6.6 Ivy Leaf Tenants' Association Meeting – 6th September 2004

I attended a meeting of the Ivy Leaf Tenants' Association at the Bradshaw Court Sheltered Housing scheme on 6th September 2004, and made a presentation to them on the stock options appraisal process. The meeting was attended by 26 tenants, three housing officers and a representative of the Cambridgeshire Police. The following matters were discussed and points raised:

Improvements, Repairs and Maintenance

Improvement schemes to homes in March that have been approved by the council are delayed in practice.

Electric cookers are apparently faulty in sheltered housing schemes.

Tenants would like security chains to be fixed to back doors as well as front doors.

A kitchen in Springfield is of old design and has a strange smell.

Grounds Maintenance

The hedges on Gas Road footpath are considered to be overgrown and dangerous.

A tree on Springfield is considered to be growing too near to a house and its roots are giving rise to concern. Leaves are blocking drains.

The drains on Smiths Drive are blocked so that there is flooding even with moderate rain.

The link passages on Morton Avenue are considered to need 'doing again'. There are issues with street cleansing and dog fouling.

Supply of Affordable Homes

Tenants are concerned at the lack of affordable housing caused by rising house prices and rents in the private sector combined with the reduced social housing stock caused by 'right to buy'. There is a perceived need for more 'new-build'.

Tenant Issues

One of the bungalows in Springfield Road is considered to be badly kept.

2.7 Thorney Toll Meeting

2.7.1 I attended a Neighbourhood Management Options Fenland meeting on 20th July 2004.

2.7.2 The following matters were discussed and points raised:

Neighbourhood Management Project

Anna McNab reported that the project will eventually employ six people who will work with agencies and communities. It is a government funded scheme, but this does not include extra money to fund activities that should take place anyway. The matters that will be addressed are:

- a. Children, parents and families
- b. Health
- c. Young people
- d. Skills, employment and learning
- e. Anti-social behaviour
- f. Access to services including transport and community facilities
- g. Housing

It is a seven-year programme. A delivery plan will be submitted to government in October 2004 to cover the following two years. The project has started to incur expenditure already.

The scheme is supported by the Neighbourhood Renewal Fund that is for disadvantaged areas. It is a pilot scheme for rural areas as the first round was for inner city areas.

The project builds on investment that has already been made in the north ward of Wisbech.

Stock Options Appraisal

Dan Horn outlined the need for an Options Appraisal and the process that the Council would follow.

There would be a Working Group that would direct the process that would include six tenants, four councillors, a staff representative and a representative of the Local Strategic Partnership. Of the tenants, three would be appointed by and from the Tenants' Forum, one from sheltered housing, one would be a leaseholder and one would represent the pathfinder area.

Dan Horn reported that the Best Value Review of Sheltered Housing has just been completed, and that the 'Older People's Panel' would appoint a representative to the Options Appraisal Working Group.

Adrian Waite explained that as the Independent Tenants' Adviser, he was there to provide independent and impartial advice to all tenants during the stock options appraisal process.

Dan Horn also reported that the Council wished to establish a Focus Group of tenants in the pathfinder area who would be asked to contribute their views to the Options Fenland process.

Thorney Toll Issues

Tenants from Thorney Toll felt that the Council does not have sufficient awareness of Thorney Toll and its problems and gives them too low a priority, and that the evening was a more appropriate time than the afternoon to hold meetings.

It was suggested that repairs took seven days to complete in Thorney Toll compared to two days in Wisbech. Complaints were also made about jobs being cancelled or not completed, and that the Council expects tenants to carry out their own repairs to things such as dripping taps.

Focus Group

The draft constitution prepared by the Council was discussed. However, the meeting did not feel able to make nominations to the proposed committee. Instead it was decided that those who wished to be associated with the Focus Group should give their names and addresses to Sally Taylor, the Council's Tenant Participation Officer; and that another meeting should be called to discuss issues in Thorney Toll including the possible establishment of a Tenants' Association for the village.

Options Appraisal Working Group

The meeting did not feel able to make nominations for the pathfinder area's representative on the working group. It was agreed that council officers should consider alternative ways of making an appointment and that the Tenants' Forum would be advised of the outcome of this meeting at their meeting on 21st July 2004.

- 2.7.3 Following this meeting, tenants of Thorney Toll decided to establish a Tenants' Association for the village.

2.8 Community Van in Pathfinder area – 15th September 2004

- 2.8.1 I visited the pathfinder area with the Community van on 15th September 2004. Unfortunately we had a van rather than the planned community bus. The following matters were discussed and points raised by tenants:

2.8.2 Leverington

Nuisance caused by neighbours appears to be a problem in Leverington.

There is an open space on Woodgate Road that local children use as a play area as there is no proper play area available. Football is played resulting in balls hitting windows, damage to fences and plants and noise and nuisance to mainly elderly neighbours. Children from all parts of the village appear to gather in St. Leonard's.

People (including young children) ride round St. Leonard's' and Woodgate in a circle on motorcycles causing noise and a traffic hazard.

The council has put up fences and the police have patrolled but to no effect. Tenants suggested turning the open space into a car park as car parking spaces are limited.

Tenants suggested that there is a need for a proper play area, and that the £1million that has been made available for rural areas could be used to fund this.

There was apparently an incident where a 'lad' with an air rifle shot at a man in a greenhouse.

One tenant has requested that their garden be fenced following an incident with an intruder, but this has not been done.

There have been thefts from gardens and damage to fences apparently caused by residents of the housing association estate. The Housing Association does not appear to address anti-social behaviour.

I was told that an owner-occupier who recently bought a house for £169,000 is now trying to sell it for £139,000 due to problems with neighbours.

The council can be slow. One tenant has waited six years since their first application for a replacement window. An application for a two-bedroom bungalow has been turned down as has a 'right to buy' application.

Shed roofs apparently contain asbestos and tenants believe that these should be replaced on health & safety grounds.

One tenant needs a walk-in shower as they can no longer use a bath. They have been told that they will have to wait eighteen months for an appraisal and that it will take five years for the shower to be installed. In the meantime the tenant is going to the local swimming baths to wash.

2.8.3 Wisbech St. Mary

The housing is considered to be fine, and the area is good. There is a lack of car parking space and the verges are not maintained properly. One tenant would like a drop kerb and double gates so they can park off the road.

2.8.4 Guyhirn

Tenants were disappointed that there was a van rather than a community bus.

Dis-satisfaction was expressed with the repairs service. It is perceived that tenants who don't look after their properties get priority for repairs. One tenant claimed that they had waited in three times for a repairs appointment but no one had come. One tenant said that it had taken days to clean up after workmen had been in. One tenant complained that no one answered the telephone at the repairs centre.

A tenant was expecting a new boiler to be installed and would like to know its size. The fascia boards are rotten and they would like to know whether they should expect wooden or plastic replacements. They would also like to know what the council would charge to install a sink unit that they purchased themselves.

2.9 Tenants' Associations - Pool of Opinion Consultation

- 2.9.1 During the Pool of Opinion Consultation in May 2005, each of the Tenants' Associations received a presentation from the Independent Tenants' Advisor on the conclusions of the Options Fenland Working Group. Tenants were given an opportunity to ask questions and to discuss any issues that were raised and were encouraged to complete the consultation returns. I attended all the meetings with the exception of that at Whittlesey that was attended by my Associate Peter Sutcliffe.
- 2.9.2 The presentation explained that the 'Options Fenland' process was as a result of the Government telling all Councils to do a stock options appraisal by July 2005 as part of the Communities Plan. The Focus is on improving homes and neighbourhoods, and the Options are:
- Retention (staying with the Council)
 - Arms Length Management Organisation
 - Private Finance Initiative
 - Stock Transfer to Housing Association
- 2.9.3 It was explained that 'Options Fenland' was being carried out as follows:
- A Tenant-led Working Group was established
 - Tenants were consulted on the Fenland Standard
 - Financial analysis was carried out by the Council's lead advisors – DTZ Piedad
 - Tenants were advised by the Independent Tenants' Advisor
- 2.9.4 The Fenland Standard was described and it was shown that:
- The Fenland Standard meets and surpasses the government's decent homes standard (Council's existing standard exceeds decent homes standard)
 - It was developed and created by a significant number of representative tenants
 - Hard to reach groups have been represented in the consultation process
- 2.9.5 The Main Elements of Fenland Standard were identified as:
- Security Lighting
 - Showers over baths
 - Off-street parking
 - Wardens in Sheltered Schemes
- 2.9.6 Workshops have been held with tenants, councillors and staff that have identified and weighted the issues that are important to tenants, leaseholders and other stakeholders:
- Housing Performance 33%
 - Housing Investment 22%
 - Tenant involvement & participation 15%
 - Council's strategic & enabling housing role 15%

- Staff issues 10%
- Corporate impact on Council 3%
- Financial appraisal 2%

2.9.7 It was explained that the Working Group had considered that stock retention was a viable option as long as some changes were made. Local Issues that had been identified included:

- High demand for council housing
- Decent Homes Standard: 52% achieved in 2002, 100% by 2010
- All stock has double glazing and will have central heating by 2005
- Rent restructuring has a negative effect
- With existing policies and resources the Council would not be able to achieve much more than the Decent Homes Standard

2.9.8 The Working Group's findings regarding stock retention were that:

"This is a workable option for Fenland because it would deliver the Decent Homes Standard which is the basic standard plus a very small number of extra improvements. However, retention would not be able to fund improvements at the existing level undertaken or the Fenland Standard level of improvements to your homes without cuts in other housing priorities such as new affordable housing. So if implemented the Working Group have agreed with the Council that under current resources...changes need to be made."

2.9.9 Tenants were advised that housing associations:

- Have existed for over 100 years
- Do not have government limits on borrowing and do not have to give the government some of the rent that they collect
- Are regulated by the Housing Corporation and Audit Commission
- Usually have tenant representatives on the Board
- Are specialist providers of housing

2.9.10 Tenants were advised that there are the following implications of a stock transfer to a housing association:

- The Council 'sells' the homes to a housing association that would be an existing association
- Tenants become tenants of the Housing Association rather than the Council
- Tenancy agreements and rents would be similar but not the same
- The Council may be able to spend the money from the transfer on investing in other services

2.9.11 The Working Group's findings regarding stock transfer were:

"Transfer could deliver all improvements, including the Fenland Standard. This is because housing associations buy council housing at tenanted market value and not market value and therefore can borrow at attractive rates to furnish improvements greater than what the council can afford. Don't forget the Council last year had to hand almost £2 million of your rent to Central government."

2.9.12 It was explained that the Working Group had arrived at its first preference through the following process:

- Working Group scored each option against its priorities
- Stock retention scored 51 – able to meet about half of what was wanted
- Stock transfer scored 68 – able to meet most of what was wanted – because a housing association would have more funds
- But the Working Group's recommendation will not be made until after the pool of opinion

2.9.13 Tenants were advised that the next steps would be as follows:

- Pool of Opinion concludes at end of May 2005
- Independent Tenants' Adviser will collate and analyse all the returns and report back to the Working Group
- Working Group will look at the results and make a recommendation to the Council in early June 2005
- The Council will take its decision in June 2005
- Government Office and Community Housing Task Force will sign off the appraisal in July 2005
- IF it is decided to do a stock transfer, a ballot WILL take place, probably sometime in late 2006
- IF it is decided to stay with Fenland District Council there will be no need for a ballot

2.9.14 Tenants were informed that the following sources of information were available during the consultation period:

- Newsletters
- More detailed information available on request
- Various events around Fenland – May 2005
- Meetings with Tenants' Associations – May 2005
- Independent Tenants' Advisor:
 - Free phone advice line: 0800-085-8616
 - E-mail: adrian.waite@awics.co.uk
- George Hawkins, Chair of Tenants' Forum. Tel: 01354-680626
- Sally Taylor: Tenant Participation Team, Fenland Council
 - Tel: 01354-602150
 - E-mail: staylor@fenland.gov.uk

2.10 Conclusions

- 2.10.1 Meetings at Tenants' Associations have given us an opportunity to brief tenants on 'Options Fenland', answer tenants' questions and facilitate discussion among tenants. However, the communication has not been a one-way process. We have also listened to tenants and have found that many tenants have serious concerns and firmly held opinions about their homes and neighbourhoods. 'Options Fenland' has provided a mechanism for tenants to make their views known and we would suggest that the Council and the Tenants' Forum continue to develop ways in which tenants can communicate their concerns and ideas and have them acted upon.
- 2.10.2 We were pleased to see the creation of a new Tenants' Association at Thorney Toll during the 'Options Fenland' process. The Tenants' Forum also demonstrated a pro-active approach in proposing its own stock retention model to the Council in place of those that had been prepared by the lead consultant.
- 2.10.3 We found that Council officers are strongly committed to supporting the Tenants' Associations and many are prepared to attend Tenants' Association meetings regularly. However, we attended some meetings where officers were in danger of out-numbering the tenants! We would suggest that the Council and the Tenants' Associations consider what should be an appropriate level of officer support for a meeting of a Tenants' Association.

3. Skills Audit & Selection of Working Group

3.1 Introduction

3.1.1 One part of our work has been to identify the skills and training requirements of tenants' representatives, provide appropriate training and ensure that those who represent tenants' and leaseholders' interests were properly equipped and empowered to do so.

3.2 Skills Audit and Training

3.2.1 At the meeting of 16th June 2004 the Tenants' Forum agreed to use self-assessment as a way of carrying out the skills audit. I was asked to draft a suitable form that members of the Tenants' Forum would complete and return to me in confidence so that I could carry out an assessment of training needs.

3.2.2 Copies of the skills audit self-assessment form were sent to all ten members of the Tenants' Forum. Nine copies were returned.

3.2.3 Tenants considered that the most important personal skills are making meetings work and communications skills; while the most important areas of technical knowledge are the options appraisal process and tenancy issues.

3.2.4 The areas where most tenants wished to develop their skills further were policy and legal issues, followed by the options appraisal process, finance issues, housing associations and tenancy issues.

3.2.5 I prepared a matrix to identify what the priorities for training should be, combining the degree of importance of an issue with the degree to which tenants felt they are already equipped to deal with the matter. This analysis identified the following as the most important areas for future skills development:

1. Options Appraisal Process
2. Tenancy Issues
3. Policy & Legal issues
4. Finance issues
5. Housing Associations
6. Making meetings work more effectively

3.2.6 The Tenants' Forum discussed this audit and agreed that these six areas were the main areas for work on skills development to concentrate. It was decided to address these skills needs as follows:

- The Independent Tenants' Adviser provided members of the Tenants' Forum with ongoing briefings on the options appraisal process. However, where the Tenants' Forum identified any specific issues then arrangements were made to address them specifically.

- The council has an arrangement with a training provider which includes providing one free training session a year to tenants. They were invited to provide a training session to cover policy, legal and tenancy issues.
- Two training sessions were provided on finance by the Independent Tenants' Adviser.
- 'Fact finding' visits were organised to Hereward Housing Association, other housing associations, and authorities that had opted for an Arms Length Management Organisation, the Private Finance Initiative and Stock Retention.

3.2.7 I understand that a need for training in equal opportunities and black & ethnic minority issues had already been identified.

3.2.8 I suggested that any training that is arranged should also be made available to all members of the options appraisal working group, and to active tenants, subject to the availability of places. This suggestion was taken up by the Tenants' Forum.

3.3 Selection of Tenant Forum Representatives on Working Group

3.3.1 At a meeting of the Tenants' Forum on 16th June 2004, it was noted that the Lead Consultants had identified a need for tenants' representatives on the Stock Options Appraisal Working Group to be able to carry out the responsibilities effectively, and had identified five attributes that tenants' representatives in this role would have to possess. These are:

- Ability to grasp technical information
- Capacity to invest the necessary time
- Track record of good communications with tenants as a whole
- Capacity to research around the subject
- Independence

3.3.2 It was agreed that there was a need to choose a selection process that was transparent and democratic, but that would result in representatives being appointed who met these criteria. It was therefore decided that members of the tenants' forum would be invited to volunteer for membership of the working group and would be asked to complete a simple form in which they would show their ability to meet the identified criteria. Volunteers would then discuss their application with the Independent Tenants' Adviser and a Tenant Participation Officer who would consider which volunteers met the criteria most closely and make recommendations to the tenants' forum on who the representatives should be. It was agreed that Adrian Waite would prepare the application form and make arrangements for the selection process.

- 3.3.3 The Tenants' forum considers that all members of the working group, including council nominees, should go through the same process to assess their suitability for the task. Adrian Waite agreed to communicate this view to council officers. This view was accepted and all members of the Working Group were appointed through a comparable process.
- 3.3.4 Three tenant representatives were selected to represent the Tenants' Forum in this way. Following the completion of the process outlined, the following were appointed:
- Ron Butcher (Wisbech Tenants' Association)
 - George Hawkins (Manea Tenants' Association)
 - Irene Henson (Whittlesey Tenants' Association)
- 3.3.5 The representative of the sheltered housing tenants was Les Palfrey who was appointed by the elderly tenants' panel. The representative of leaseholders was Tony Roughton who was appointed by the leaseholders' panel. The method of appointment of a representative for the 'pathfinder area' is described below.
- 3.4 Interviews with volunteers to represent pathfinder area on options appraisal working group – 13th October 2004**
- 3.4.1 As there was no organised tenant movement in the 'pathfinder area' in June 2004 it was decided to appoint a representative of that area by making a direct approach to the tenants who lived there. I therefore wrote to all tenants inviting them to volunteer for this role.
- 3.4.2 Six tenants responded to the invitation to volunteer to represent the pathfinder area on the options appraisal working party.
- 3.4.3 The six applications were 'scored' by myself and David Ogilvie and Duncan Melville of DTZ Piedad – the council's lead consultants – against the criteria that had been identified as desirable characteristics of members of the working group.
- 3.4.4 The volunteers were all invited to an interview, but two withdrew before the interviews took place. The four remaining volunteers were interviewed on 13th October 2004 by David Ogilvie of DTZ Piedad and me.
- 3.4.5 Following interview, David Ogilvie and I both concluded that Shirley Wilson of Wisbech would be the most suitable person to represent tenants of the pathfinder area on the options appraisal working group. At its meeting of 7th October 2004, the working group had delegated authority for making this appointment to George Hawkins, as Chairman. I therefore made this recommendation to George Hawkins, and he has accepted this recommendation.
- 3.4.6 Shirley Wilson has therefore been appointed to represent the pathfinder area on the options appraisal working group.

3.4.7 The other three volunteers were all very able and enthusiastic people and they have been asked to become members of the pathfinder area focus group. One of the tenants who withdrew from consideration as a member of the options appraisal working group has also agreed to become a member of the focus group.

3.5 Conclusions

3.5.1 Some of the training needs that were identified have not been addressed during the 'Options Fenland' process (for example, making meetings effective), while other needs are ongoing. It has also been established that the training needs of tenant representatives are often the same as those of Councillors, Council officers or the Council's partners. Joint training exercises have proved successful during 'Options Fenland' and we would suggest that the Council consider further joint exercises in future.

4. Freephone Helpline

4.1 Introduction

4.1.1 We provided a freephone helpline to tenants and leaseholders throughout the 'Options Fenland' process.

4.1.2 This report provides information on the calls that have been received on the freephone line. The information is provided in chronological order.

4.2 July 2004

4.2.1 Calls received during July 2004 were as follows:

Date & Time	Question(s) raised	Answer(s) Given
7th July 2004 @ 1pm	Can I just turn up at the meetings?	Yes.
7th July 2004 @ 3.50pm	1. What is the point of this as there was a ballot in 1999? 2. Why are meetings held at 'stupid' times? 3. When do people who aren't included get there say? There should be a meeting in Elm.	Government requirement. The times are chosen by the tenants' associations Everyone is entitled to attend the meetings and will be consulted in various ways. The request for a meeting in Elm is noted.
7th July 2004 @ 5.50pm	1. When will the ITA go to meet the tenants at Guyhirn? There are forty households and a meeting is requested before October.	Guyhirn tenants can attend the other meetings and further consultation in rural areas is being considered. Letter to be sent to confirm.
8th July 2004 AM	Trees are too bushy at Holmes Drive, Wisbech	Comment noted.
8th July 2004 AM	Has been waiting a long time for double glazing to be done	Comment noted.
11th July @ 9.40am	Concerns raised by letter of 9th July. Has sent fax. Guyhirn is not represented by Wisbech TA.	ITA had understood that Guyhirn tenants could attend the Wisbech meeting. Will check facts and contact tenant again.

12th July @ 9am	Rails for bath fitted six months ago. Still not finished. Can't get a bath and rails were only supposed to take two months.	Attempted to call back but number not recognised (see below)
14th July @ 3.40pm	Seven year old children make too much noise at Fleming Court at March at weekends. Claims that she is getting divorced because of it.	Comment noted.
15th July @ 2.10pm	Met at Wisbech and raised concerns about requested transfer to bungalow. Tenant now pursuing this directly with housing officers and does not wish ITA to take further action.	Comment noted.
16th July	Same point as on 12th July	Comment noted.
20th July @ 4.40pm	Called last week about abuse, vandalism and damage to her property. Tried talking to warden and filed police report (ID449 at March). Would like a call from council	Sally Taylor at council contacted and informed
29 th July @ 1.20pm	Has had central heating taken out. When it was put back in some new plastering was done. He has requested redecoration thorough the council office, but no one has got back.	Message passed on to Sally Taylor. Tenant advised that this has been done
29 th July @ 3.10pm	She would like help as she cannot read the Fenland Standard form to fill it in.	Message passed on to Sally Taylor. Tenant advised that this has been done

30th July @ 9.40am	Pantries are forty years old and have concrete shelves. There is a lack of money & manpower. One bedroom bungalows have been modernised. Council unresponsive and administrative costs increase. Management budgets increase while maintenance budgets are reduced. Last year had to pay for own path to be repaired - £37 for half a square metre of concrete that the council could not afford. Will not complete 'Options Fenland' forms as has 'heard it all before'. Is it compulsory to complete the form?	Comments noted. Not compulsory to complete form, but encouraged tenant to do so.
30th July @ 10.00am	Does Q4 refer back to Q2? Buzzer at door is too loud. She thinks it is for her when it isn't. Would like to have a one-bed bungalow with a garden. Wants a little place that is nice. Is waiting for operation and has difficulty climbing fourteen stairs. Has asked for transfer to a bungalow but has been offered an unsuitable one. Has raised this with ITA before. Council is unresponsive and 'lives in cloud cuckoo land'. There should be a housing officer to deal with tenants' problems and complaints.	Yes Comment noted. Comments noted. Suggested that she raise the question of her request for relocation with Sally Taylor or a Councillor as she has not been satisfied with the response of the housing officer.
30th July @ 11.00am	Has been asking for someone to sort out the bushes at the bottom of the garden that are overgrown and prevent hanging out of washing. Is 93 years old.	Comment noted and will be referred to council.
30th July @ 11.10am	House Manager. 7 letters have been received for people who are not residents	Advised to contact Sally Taylor
30th July @ 12.30pm	Why does the form ask for the gender of the tenant? Form does not highlight problem of nuisance neighbours Bradshaw Court tenants appear to have been confused by recent visit from Hereward Housing	To monitor representativeness of replies Tenants can raise this in the other comments box. Would speak to council about possible meeting at Bradshaw Court.

30th July @ 2.00pm Wanted to know how PFI worked. Explained.

Considers PFI to be complicated. Does not approve of 'right to buy'. Is inclined to think that the service should stay as it is. Aged 78.

- 4.2.2 Most of the calls have been from tenants who wish to raise concerns about the service that they receive especially building maintenance and grounds maintenance.
- 4.2.3 A number of calls have been about the 'Options Fenland' process, including some requests for help in completing the questionnaire.
- 4.2.4 There have been requests for meetings in rural areas. It is planned to address this through visiting these areas by bus. It is intended that the Independent Tenants' Advisor will be on the bus for some of these visits.
- 4.2.5 The 'Options Fenland' newsletter and the 'Fenland Standard' questionnaire appear to have prompted tenants to call.

4.3 August to 10th September 2004

4.3.1 Calls received during this period were as follows:

Date & Time	Question(s) raised	Answer(s) Given
19th August @ 7.30pm	Does the options appraisal address private planning issues?	Returned call to say that it does not.
20th August	The letter inviting volunteers for the working party is on Fenland paper and does not make it clear that Fenland Council and Options Fenland are different outfits. Tenants are in awe of the landlord and officers intimidate tenants. What is meant by 'independence'?	Explained that this means independently minded approach.

The process discriminates unfairly against people who are less able and the equal opportunities legislation. The council appears to wish to discriminate against people. The process is open to judicial review. He would not sit on the working party if the appointment was made in this way.

ITA will seek advice on equal opportunities points.

When will a meeting be held in Guyhirn and can it not be held on a Tuesday?

Will be held during September and not on a Tuesday.

25th August

The letter from Sarah Clements could be construed as being from the ITA. The ITA could therefore be sued for a multi-million sum. Also the tenant could circulate the letter to the ITA's actual and potential customers in an attempt to discourage them from placing business.

The letter was from the council.

26th August
@ 10.30am

He demanded that the ITA agree with his point about the request for volunteers on the steering group excluding people with learning difficulties and the approach to data protection not being legal. He has had advice from someone about this.

He was called back and advised that the working group would consider his points. He was not pleased and ranted on about the ITA not doing his job properly. He alleged that the ITA was giving in to bullying by council officers. The ITA should be in his office personally at all times to answer his telephone calls. The ITA is supposed to represent all tenants and is not doing so. The ITA should drop everything else before he is taken to a court of law.

27th August @ 10.00am	The letter excludes people with a learning disability. The disabled should be mentioned specifically. The Data Protection Act is breached. People feel excluded. Disabled volunteers should be given an interview.	Comments noted. ITA is seeking advice.
	Are working group meetings open to the public? He would like to address the next meeting. Does not want to apply to be a member of the working group. What are the rights of appeal?	Working group has not considered whether the meetings should be open. Request to address working group to be put to chairman. Working Group would be asked to consider their policy on these matters.
27th August @ 10.45am	Previous points repeated. Has requested a meeting with Tim Pilsbury. Has consulted a barrister who has advised that a judicial review would be granted if requested. He could ask for a penal notice. His son will withhold his rent so as to raise the matter in court when the council pursues arrears.	
27th August @ 1.30pm	Fenland DC has a draft equalities & diversity strategy that is available from Jo Hart. The letter breaches this policy.	Could not comment as had not seen draft policy, but would ask for a copy.
31st August @ 9.00am	Believes that the letter asking for volunteers for the Working Group is flawed on equal opportunities and data protection grounds	ITA has received advice from Government Office East and Council solicitor that it is not.

31st August @ 10.30am	Previous point. Will criticise ITA in the press for not stopping recruitment of working group member for pathfinder area. Also enquired what appeals process was in place for unsuccessful applicants.	Explained that the working group had yet to address the matter of an appeals process. Tenant contacted later and told that his request to address the next meeting had been refused.
31st August @ 1.00pm	Previous points repeated. Will protest outside the working group meeting if not allowed to address it.	
1st September @ 9.30am	Is prepared to withdraw his objections as long as the ITA advises the working group to consider allowing tenants to attend meetings as observers and addressing the working group.	Noted
	Is prepared to withdraw his objections to the letter as long as the council admit they could have worded it better and agree to make specific reference to equal opportunities in future correspondence	Advised to agree this with council officers.
6th September @ 11.40am	Why are we letting the Tenants' Forum exclude other tenants? The ITA should make them be more inclusive.	Spent fifteen minutes advising the tenant of the processes that had been followed.
6th September @ 12.15pm	The council is in breach of legal requirements. In the Fenland Follower on page 10 question 2 it asks whether we need this service. Where is the meeting tonight?	The tenant already has the ITA's views on procedures. The meeting will be at Bradshaw Court, March. The tenant said that he would complain to Tim Pilsbury about the lack of independence of the ITA.
6th September @ 12.30pm	Her mail is incorrectly addressed.	Request passed on to Sally Taylor

6th
September
@ 3.30pm

Someone in her home is selling a piano that she and a friend bought years ago. How can she stop this or make the others share the proceeds?

Matter referred to Sally Taylor and the tenant advised that this had been done.

7th
September
@ 2.15pm

Who should he get in touch with for his son to move into a two bedroom flat rather than a one bedroom flat?

Advised to contact Sally Taylor

4.3.2 During this period five tenants contacted the helpline. One particular tenant made all the calls excluding those on 19th August at 7.30pm, 6th September at 12.30pm and 3.30pm and 7th September at 2.15pm.

4.4 11th to 24th September 2004

4.4.1 The following calls were received between 11th and 24th September 2004:

14th
September
@ 10.10am

The tenant ordered some light bulbs from the Fenland energy magazine and things to go behind the radiators 3/4 months ago but has heard nothing

Energy department called but on leave so left message to which there was no response. Called council who said that it was taking longer than they thought to install these things but are going as fast as they can. Tenant was advised of this and given contact numbers at the council and energy department.

15th
September
@ 10.25am

Tenant has had a note about improvements but cannot park her car.

16th
September
@ 9.55am

The tenant lives in a one bedroom bungalow and has special permission to park where she is not supposed to. Children are going up and down the back lane and damaging her car. She knows who is involved and cannot afford the repairs to the car.

Problem reported to Dan Horn. Tenant advised that this is reported to council and that they should contact the ITA again if the problem recurs.

20th September @ 3.40pm	There is bad lighting in the corner of Linden Close. There used to be a light in the middle but this was taken down and not replaced. A man fell last week in the dark.	Matter reported to Yvonne Ferney who undertook to address it. Tenant advised of the action taken.
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4.4.2 Most of the calls have been from tenants who wish to raise concerns about the service that they receive especially building maintenance and grounds maintenance.

4.4.3 A number of calls have been about the 'Options Fenland' process, including some requests for help in completing the questionnaire.

4.4.4 The 'Options Fenland' and 'Fenland Follower' newsletters and the 'Fenland Standard' questionnaire appear to have prompted tenants to call.

4.5 21st September to 10th November 2004

4.5.1 The calls received between 21st September 2004 and 10th November 2004 are summarised below:

21st September @ 4.05pm	Tenant has been awaiting new back doors and windows since April. Now the boards are coming off and damp is getting in.	Matter reported to Repairs Team, Stacey Smith and J Kelly. Tenant advised of action taken.
2nd October @ 2.50pm	Message left	Unable to contact
3rd October	Tenant has a son who is homeless.	Matter reported to Sue Bradshaw who will advise tenant on how to make a homeless application.
3rd October	Tenant had to leave her former council house in Walsoken because of drug dealers. The council did not address the problem and the responsible people are still tenants. This tenant is now living in a hostel.	Problem noted and will be reported to Options Appraisal Working Group and Tenants' Forum
4th October	Has been promised a move to no. 25 while her flat is re-furnished, but has now been told that she will be moved to no. 18. This is further to walk. She would like a visit or telephone call to explain the situation.	Matter reported to Steve Miles with a request that he contact the tenant.
4th October	Tenant lives in a two-bedroom bungalow with	Problem of lack of suitable affordable housing

	five people and would like to move to a larger house. There are 1,400 people on the waiting list and none available in the Wimblington area. Tenant is on waiting list.	noted and will be reported to Options Appraisal Working Group and Tenants' Forum.
4th October	Understands that the council will modernise the kitchen, bathroom and toilet and would like to know when this will be done.	Matter reported to Steve Miles with a request that he contact the tenant.
4th October	Their home has electric night storage heating. The quarterly bill in winter is £500. They work shifts so sometimes are without heating or water. A new central heating system has been promised but installation has been put back from October to April. Why is this the case?	Problem reported to Steve Miles. Response awaited.
5th October	She is the only house in a row of ten that does not have central heating. Will she get oil fired central heating rather than coal?	Problem reported to Andy Gilson.
6th October	Boiler needs replacing	Caller is an owner-occupier and was advised to contact a commercial supplier.
6th October	Message left regarding problem with garden service	Unable to contact
6th October	Tenant is desperate for a transfer to a disabled bungalow. She has problems with mobility in her present accommodation - her husband has to take the sides of her wheelchair when she goes down the hall and she is afraid of falling off. She has raised these problems with council officers and considers their attitude insulting. She considers that a specially designed bungalow should be built.	Problem reported to Andy Gilson. He is aware of the problem, but there is no suitable accommodation for her because of her size. The council is looking for a house that could be adapted but none are available. There are no plans to construct a new bungalow.
8th October	Central heating controls are not working and it cannot be switched off. His brother was taken to hospital because of over-heating.	Graham Wilson has been asked for an update on this.
11th October	There are 60ft high trees near the house which cause problems with falling branches and leaves. The tenant would like them to be lobbed.	Problem reported to Dave Suttle.
11th October	Bushes and apple trees near the house are falling over. The conifers are full of rubbish.	Reported to David Suttle. Bob Ollier asked to investigate and contact the tenant.

11th October	Is disabled and uses a wheel chair. The bushes at the back of their bungalow are so overgrown that they cannot access the back garden or get out of the back door.	Reported to Steve Miles. Bob Ollier asked to investigate and contact the tenant.
11th October @ 5.10pm	Unable to attend meeting on 13th October	Noted
12th October at 12.00pm	Unable to attend meeting on 13th October	Advised that alternative times were being considered and that he would be contacted
18th October @ 1pm	Mother in law lives at Summers Court, Wisbech. What is role of Les Palfrey in representing tenants? There are rumours that the council is discussing transfer of sheltered housing to a housing association. People in suits are going round Summers Court looking at things. Who is the person at the council who can be contacted about this?	Role of Les Palfrey explained. The Council has not and cannot consider stock transfer of sheltered housing unless this is through the options appraisal process and even then a ballot would be required. Enquirer given names and addresses of senior staff and councillors.
18th October @ 1.10pm	Refurbishments at Coronation Avenue have stopped at no. 74. Maintenance work at her house has been suspended pending the refurbishment. When will the refurbishments take place?	Dave Suttle has been asked for an update on this. It appears that the house is outside the modernisation programme and the routine repairs should be done.
1st November	No.12 is being used as the base for a building business which results in nuisance. There is loading & unloading of building materials and waste. Waste is deposited in the street. Waste is burnt in the back garden. Occupier of No.12 is understood to be a RTB owner-occupier.	Matter referred to area housing manager, planning department and environmental health department. Environmental Health plan to investigate.
8th November @ 12 noon	Same matter as 1st November	Action taken explained. Tenant has already spoken to housing, and intends to raise it with planning and environmental health.

4.5.2 Most of the calls have been from tenants who wish to raise concerns about the service that they receive especially building maintenance and grounds maintenance, although there are also some concerns about housing allocations.

4.5.3 Some calls have been about the 'Options Fenland' process.

4.6 10th November 2004 to 5th December 2004

4.6.1 The calls that were received between 10th November and 5th December 2004 are summarised below:

Date	Message left	Action taken
18 th November	Tenant wanted advice on fire alarm as it is too high up to reach and goes off frequently, so could she have a new one?	Repairs said that she probably could not have a new one from the council, but they will ring and say if the tenant buys a new alarm then repairs will send someone to fit it.
3 rd December	Complaint about a two year wait for tiles to be replaced, and that the tenants back drive was supposed to have been done by the 19 th October but that it has not been.	E-mail to Yvonne Ferney was sent. Her reply was that she had forwarded it to the repairs manager who would get back to us directly, but that she knew that the tenant had been told that the path could only be done in drier weather.

4.7 6th to 31st December 2004

4.7.1 The following calls were received during the remainder of December 2004:

- Tenant who had previously asked when the kitchen and bathroom would be improved. The ITA had referred the matter to the repairs section, but they had not responded. Matter referred to housing officer.
- Tenant who complained that the washing machine in a sheltered scheme was not operational, and would not be repaired until mid-January. ITA reported this to the housing officer and it was repaired that day.

4.8 January 2005

4.8.1 The following call was received during January 2005:

- Tenant who wished to report a leaking door. ITA passed message on to repairs section.

4.9 February 2005

4.9.1 The Independent Tenants Advice freephone helpline has received the following calls:

- A tenant called to tell us that her back fence had blown down in a storm and she had reported it to the council, an officer had been out to see her, but no one had been to repair the fence. We rang the officer and left a message and rang the tenant later who said she now had a date for the repair. The tenant rang on the day of the planned repair to say no one had come. We reported this to the officer.

- An elderly lady rang to find out who could help her about the playing field at the back of her house as it is being used as a scramble and quad bike track. This has made the field impossible to be used. The people on the bikes also use the path at the side of her house as access to the field and one of the bikers ran her off the path as she was going home. We left a message for the officer in her area and rang the lady back to give her the phone number of the officer and advise her to ring the local police if they were still causing a nuisance.
- We had an enquiry about the base case report Appendix G. We provided the enquirer with the telephone number of DTZ Pbeda.
- A lady rang to talk about the playing fields next to her house, on Sunday afternoon there were 4 quad bikes and a scramble motor bike tearing around the field, therefore children who normally play or people who like to walk in the field could not safely do so. The entrance to the field is by a path at the side of the lady's house, this path got covered in mud. On the Monday the quad bikes came back and churned up more grass and she was nearly run over by the motor bike. We told the lady we would get in touch with Andy Gibson her housing officer, We could not get hold of him so we left a message for him. On Friday we rang the lady back to ask if any one had been in touch, they had not so we gave her Andy Gilson's number.

4.10 March 2005

4.10.1 A man rang to say that he lives in a cul de sac and outside his bungalow there are only 6 parking spaces, he is a disabled driver and has a parking disc, but the people from the next turning are parking in the 6 spaces, can he have a space reserved and can white lines be painted to show the parking spaces, also over the road there are more spaces that no one uses, cant these other people be made to park there? We said we would find out about his query. We rang Steve Mills who said he could get a bay but he could not have it reserved and it would not stop any other disabled people parking in it. We rang the man back and told him what Steve had said and that we were sorry that it did not seem to help him.

4.11 April 2005

4.11.1 we received no calls during April 2005.

4.12 Pool of Opinion Consultation

4.12.1 9th May 2005

Two from same number in 30 minutes, the second with a message. We phoned back and left a message asking him to ring back if he would like to say any thing to us.

From a lady wanting a house in Whittlesey to rent. We rang back and gave her the phone number for the councils housing department.

A lady about where will I pay my rent? I phoned back telling her that there will be an office set up in all the areas, she asked more questions

- How will it work? We explained the options to her.
- If she goes for transfer will things improve? They probably will.
- In some areas they get the outside tidied up, will she get that? We said we couldn't say about that.
- Would she be able to transfer to another property if she liked? We said most likely yes.
- Can she have transport to meetings as she can't get about? We told her we would get in touch with Sally Taylor who would get in touch with her.
- She complained that the council had said they would bring green bins, she waited 5 weeks but no bin arrived, she rang the council 16 times to no avail then she said she would go to the press and one arrived the next day.

A lady rang to ask questions

- What will they up grade and where do they get the money from? The properties will be up graded and the money comes from the rents.
- Will they make a profit? No, they put the money back in to new housing.
- Will the rent go up? No it shouldn't.
- What redress will we have if the Housing Association. turns out to be bad? The Housing Association is inspected by a housing inspector and regulated by the Housing Corporation

A man had spoilt his form

We left a message for Sally Taylor and asked her to send him one, Sally rang back to say we had to do that so we did.

A man has been in contact with the council a lot as he and his family live in a 1 bedroom house and have a boy of 14 and a girl of 6, and they need a bigger house. We told him to ring the allocation section and gave him the number.

A lady to ask if it changed to a Housing Association would she be able to pay her rent at Fenland Hall. Not necessarily, but offices will be set up locally. She was pleased with this answer.

A man rang to ask if going in to a Housing Association. would alter his right to buy? No, it will be the same.

4.12.2 Tuesday 10th May

Another person wanted to know where will we pay our rent? Same answer as before.

Will the phone numbers change? Yes but you will be given lots of notice before they do.

Will the repairs get done? Yes.

Will the people doing the repairs be the same as I like them? Yes they will initially.

Will our rent go up? No, and they can only go up in line with what the council would have put them up.

Will the in front of house parking be compulsory as I have a lovely garden and don't want to lose it? No it will not be compulsory, they will ask you.

A man rang to say that he and his wife have lived in this house for two years NOT BY CHOICE, his wife is disabled and can not climb the stairs, she is too young for knee replacements and they cant afford a chair lift, they do not want a flat. They are very disappointed with the way the council officers have dealt with the problems they have, They were told that nothing could be done, why don't you sleep down stairs? They have put a shower in themselves, this is now broken and they can't afford to repair it, his wife can't get in the bath. Their neighbours have broken down the fence round their house and this has not been replaced. Their situation was reported to Council officers.

If they change to a Housing Association will they be able to change to a bungalow? Yes if one is available.

Will we have to find someone to change with? That is what the council has told us. That will depend on the H.A. policies.

4.12.3 Wednesday 11th May

Two calls on answering machine with messages so called back.

One man with 4 questions.

- Why are we changing again? It was changed 4 years ago. The government requirement to do an options appraisal this time it was not compulsory last time.
- Will it change my housing benefit? No.
- Will garages be transferred too? Yes.
- Why are housing officers to be approached via the email I have no computer. Officers used to come locally once a week to be approached face to face now appointments have to be made. Will the officers be more approachable? You can still contact them on 01354 654321 Fenland District Council and ask for the department you need.

This was lady on behalf of her mother who is 86 and is happy with things as they are so far.

- Rent. She gets benefit given. Will she have to pay if a stock transfer and will it go up? She will still get help and the rent will only go up in accordance with what the council would have charged.
- Will repairs still get done? Yes.
- Council tax will she have to pay it? Not if she does not now.

4.12.4 Thursday 12th May

A lady asking where Napier Court is? We rang Dan Horn to find out. We rang the lady back and told her.

A man rang for information about selling his house to a Housing Association. We told him it would depend on the Housing Association so we could not say.

A person who has bought their flat rang to ask if they should be involved in the appraisal. Yes as you are a leaseholder.

4.12.5 Friday 13th May

A lady rang to see if we have any bungalows to let? We gave the lady the council's number and said ask for the housing department.

A man rang to tell us that there is a printing mistake on the options Fenland on tour. It says that stock transfer involves no change and that stock retention involves sale of the council housing to a housing association. We thanked him for telling us but the council did know about this.

Will the envelope get through with no address? Yes.

4.12.6 Monday 16th May

A lady asked if she could get bungalow in another area. We gave her the council number to ring.

4.12.7 Tuesday 17th May

A person left a message to say he has no problem understanding any thing.

4.12.8 Wednesday 18th May

A man rang telling us that it has all been decided and that we will just throw the forms in the bin. We told him that this was not true and we needed every one to fill in the forms and we certainly would be making sure that all the yes and no returns are counted. He just laughed and said nothing will change. He said one of his neighbours had complained about antisocial behaviour around their houses and was told that she was the only person to complain but he knew that 6 other tenants had complained so how can you trust any one.

4.12.9 Thursday 19th May

No calls

4.12.10 Friday 20th May

A man called and said he owns his house so why am I writing to him about options Fenland? I said sorry and that I would get his name off the list, but when I spoke to Dan Horn he said that this man was a leaseholder and he could fill in the form, unfortunately we did not get the number to ring the man back.

A lady asked us to stop sending her sister letters as she has passed away. We passed on this to Dan Horn.

4.12.11 Monday 23rd May

A lady from Quinion Court wanted advice on completion of the form.

A scheme manager asked whether tenants who had completed the initial form had to do anything in response to the reminder letter. No.

A lady who has been to a meeting and has realised that transfer would not affect her housing benefit and so is in favour of transfer.

A man who has already returned the initial form and would like to know if he has to return the second.

A lady who did not receive the initial newsletter and would like to know if she can use the second form.

A lady who wished us to complete her form over the telephone.

A lady in Wisbech who is disabled due to a spinal injury. Her carer has had her car vandalised four times. Four flats face the road while the others are in a courtyard. Local elderly people are victims of distraction burglaries. An 83 year old woman recently lost £245 when her handbag was snatched. There is broken glass in the street. Half the security lights do not work as they need new bulbs. The only solution is CCTV. The police have said that they would pay half the cost of CCTV if the Council paid the other. There is limited scope to make improvements to the physical fabric of the homes. Comments passed on to Council.

A man who believes that transfer offers no benefits and that Housing Associations do not have more resources. He has already submitted his form.

A disabled lady who has had a new fitted kitchen and has the Council service her stair lift and electronic doors. Would a Housing Association still do this? Yes.

A lady from Wisbech who agrees with stock transfer.

A man who wanted to know if a housing association could fund more improvements. Yes.

A lady who is opposed to transfer and will complete her form accordingly.

A lady from Chatteris who wished us to complete her form over the telephone.

A man whose home was last refurbished 78 years ago.

A man complaining about the printing error in options at a glance, and he will not vote for a Housing Association. We just thanked him for his call.

A lady wanted to know if her repairs will get done. Yes.

This man told me that he has had 4 heart attacks and has arthritis, he cant get in the bath so would like an over bath shower and also he can no longer do his gardening. We passed this on to the council who have passed it to an occupational therapist.

A man asking if he can have a bigger house? and he has filled in 2 forms. We said he would have to ask the council and gave him the number.

A man saying he did not like getting the letter, it said he had not filled in the form and had not sent it back and he has done, he has sent two, he did not want a transfer. We explained that everyone had received the reminder.

A lady asked us not to send any more mail to her sister as she had died. We told her we would take her off the mailing list, and I passed it on to Dan Horn.

A lady asking us to fill in her form. We did.

Another lady for form filling.

Form to fill in.

A lady saying she will fill in the form but has no comments is that ok? We said yes, not every one is putting comments.

A lady said her house is not suitable for her she is disabled and has to sleep in a down stairs pantry, so she wants to change. She will send her form in.

A lady who lives in a bedsit with a shower said her bathroom is big enough to have a bath or made in to a bedroom. She will fill in the form and add more comments.

A man said he did not know about this but if it went to a Housing Association would he have to move in to a smaller house because he has lived in this one for 40 years. We said no.

Another form to fill in.

A man asking when will he get his kitchen and bathroom done? We said we could not say he would have to ask the council and I gave him the number, we had a long chat. He said he needed a new form, I sent him one first class.

A man asked where will the Housing Association get their money and will they put up the rent, and can he go to a coffee meeting in a sheltered housing scheme? We said that they borrow it, they won't put up the rent and yes he can go to the coffee meeting.

4.12.12 Tuesday 24th May

Seven calls from people who wanted us to fill in the form so we did.

A man said his wife has died please take her off the mailing list. We said we would pass it on to the council I passed it to Dan Horn.

An angry man saying 75% of people won't vote, you say the council are not doing their job. Where did the council get the money to do this? And does it mater which form he fills in. We said we want as many people to take part in the consultation as possible, we have never said any thing about the council. And no you can fill in ether form.

A man asked will the rents go up with a Housing Association. No they should not.

A lady wanted an explanation about the form. She has not had any news letters. We gave her an explanation and said we were sorry she had not got the news letters.

4.12.13 Wednesday 25th May

Four Calls for forms to be filled in.

A lady for her mother, would her lease change if a Housing Association? No.

A man asking if there would be any tenants on the board of the Housing Association? Yes 1/3 of the board will be tenants.

A lady asked if the criteria would be different if we change to a Housing Association would it be stricter. No it should stay the same.

A lady rang on behalf of her mother; she has just moved in and knows nothing about options. That's ok look at what you have and fill in the form if you can.

4.12.14 Thursday 26th May

A lady rang to ask if a stock transfer what will happen to her application?, she has been told she will not be able to take her dog if it goes to a Housing Association. She has had to keep going to the one stop shop because they are not doing her repairs. We said that we could not see why she would not be able to take her dog, and her application would go through just the same, and that I was sorry that her repairs were not getting done as quickly as they should.

A lady called to ask about the form, what was it all about? We explained it to her and she said she thought that it was that.

A man rang to ask if the Housing Association will put in more plugs and do the repairs and could he have a new form. We said yes to all his questions and sent him a form.

A lady rang with a complaint; she has had no luck getting hold of the housing officer in her area. She wants to move to be near her daughter, she has been told by the other council that the change will go through smoothly but it must be done from Fenland District Council. We told this lady that we would contact the housing officer and get him to contact her. We e-mailed the officer.

4.12.15 Friday 27th May

A man whose wife has just died didn't know what to do with the form does he have to fill it in? No.

4.12.16 Tuesday 31st May

Four People asked for the form to be filled in.

4.12.17 Wednesday 1st June

A lady for form filling in.

A lady asking if her right to buy would change if it was a Housing Association?
We said no.

4.11 Conclusions

- 4.11.1 We received many calls about 'Options Fenland' and were able to provide tenants with information that helped them to come to their own conclusions about stock options.
- 4.11.2 We also received many calls about problems that tenants experience with their homes or neighbourhoods. When we received such calls we made the appropriate Council officer aware of the problem or concern that had been raised.
- 4.11.3 Clearly many tenants found the availability of a freephone helpline useful for this purpose. We would therefore suggest that the Council consider whether they should offer a similar freephone helpline service that would enable tenants to raise their problems or concerns or to provide feedback on the services that they receive. The service could either be provided by the Tenant Participation Officer or by an independent person funded by the Council but responsible to the Tenants' Forum.

5. Website

5.1 Introduction

5.1.1 The Independent Tenants' Adviser's website was launched on 31 July 2004. The website contains:

- a home page that explains the role of the Independent Tenants Adviser
- a page on the 'Fenland Standard' from which tenants can download a copy of the questionnaire
- a page about the tenants' freephone hotline (0800-085-8616) and from where feedback can be given online
- a page of information about 'Options Fenland' and related subjects

5.1.2 The website address is www.awics.co.uk/fenlandita

5.1.3 The website gave tenants yet another way of getting information about 'Options Fenland' and of raising concerns and having their say. We kept the site up to date with new information as 'Options Fenland' progressed.

5.1.4 Tenants did not have to have their own computer to look at the site. The Libraries Service has a 'Peoples' Network, which means that there are computers in the libraries at Chatteris, March, Whittlesey and Wisbech that tenants can use free of charge to look at the website. If anyone needs help with the computers, library staff will be pleased to help.

5.1.5 All the information on the site was also available to tenants in other ways.

5.2 Website Usage

5.2.1 The Fenland Independent Tenants' Advisor Website was launched on 31st July 2004. Website usage between then and September 2004 was as follows:

	July Hits	August Hits	September Hits	Total Hits
Home Page	17	81	70	168
Fenland Standard	8	20	22	50
Information	9	20	20	49
Hotline & feedback	8	20	16	44
Fenland Standard Questionnaire		11	26	37
Options Fenland Newsletter			13	13
Total	42	152	167	361

5.2.2 Website usage from October to December 2004 was as follows:

	October Hits	November Hits	December Hits	Total Hits
Home Page	11	26	31	34
Options Fenland questionnaire			13	13
Hotline & feedback			10	10
Information	4			4
Total	15	26	54	95

5.2.3 The Independent Tenants Advice website has received the following number of 'hits' from January to March 2005:

	January Hits	February Hits	March Hits	Total Hits
ITA homepage	21	69	55	145
Hotline & feedback	8	27	16	51
Fenland Standard	8	27	15	50
Information	9	31		40
Options Fenland Questionnaire	9	9		18
Tenants' PowerPoint Presentation		5		5
Total	55	168	86	309

5.2.3 The Independent Tenants Advice website has received the following number of 'hits' from January to March 2005:

	April Hits	May Hits	June Hits	Total Hits
ITA homepage	25	37	25	87
Information		12	13	25
Hotline & feedback		10		10
Fenland Standard		9		9
Total	25	68	38	131

5.3 Contacts through Internet

5.3.1 Three tenants contacted the Independent Tenants' Adviser by e-mail during this period. Their messages and my replies are reproduced below:

E-mail 1:

My name is C and I've been a council tenant for just over a year now. When I moved into my 2 bed roomed bungalow there was just me and my two daughters now aged 8 and 7. But I'm now living with my new partner and we now have a ten week old daughter. So there is now five of us in a small 2 bed roomed bungalow, which me and my partner are now sleeping in the front room on an air-bed, as we kept disturbing are daughter when we went to bed. I am on the transfer list but have been told basically the only way we will get a larger property is if someone passes away. I've just received your newsletter today and couldn't believe it when I saw on the feedback part, that apparently elderly tenants are finding it difficult to move to stair-free accommodation?? I'm very keen to stay in Doddington, Wimblington or Benwick as my children are very settled in Lionel Walden school. I was also told by the council to get a bigger property we should look at living elsewhere. It infuriates me that I know there are two 3-bedroomed houses in Benwick with only one person in each of them. Surely something could be done to help our situation. I look forward to hearing from you.

C.

Dear C,

Thank you for your e-mail and for letting me know about the problems that you are having and your wish to move to a larger house or bungalow.

While it is true that the last newsletter said that some elderly tenants were having difficulty moving to bungalows, these are elderly tenants who currently live in flats rather than in larger houses and who do not live in the Doddington, Wimblington & Benwick area.

I assume that you are on the waiting list for a larger home and that the problem is that none have become available.

There is a problem in many areas with single people or couples living in houses that would be more suitable for families, but the local authority cannot force them to move to a smaller home against their wishes. The government intends to change the way that rents and housing benefit are calculated to encourage people to move to smaller homes where this is appropriate, but this is not likely to take effect for some years. I am not aware of any policy at Fenland District Council to encourage people to move in this way, but I have made enquiries and will let you know if I hear anything.

The other problem is 'right to buy' as it results in the stock of social housing getting smaller at the same time as more families need social housing because house prices and rents in the private sector are increasing. You probably know that there are arguments about this at national level, but the government does not propose to make any changes at the moment. The Options Fenland Working Group that is carrying out 'Options Fenland' knows that this is a problem in Fenland, though, and it will look to see if changing the way in which council housing is managed in Fenland could result in more homes being built.

I know that none of this helps you with your present problem. However I have noted your comments and will report them to the Tenants Forum and Options Appraisal Working Group - without, of course, identifying you by name.

Yours sincerely,

Adrian (Waite)
Independent Tenants Advisor

E-mail Two:

No consultation was requested from residents at St. Mary's House. Whittlesey, about cutting our Wardens work related establishment.

We are paying for her services to be on hand, and legally, the Council can not charge us for her services, and then withdraw her.

This Pull Cord for Emergency's can not attend a patient within the legal requirement of 5 - 7 minutes.

Even OPTIONS FENLAND has failed in consultations.

Kind Regards

T

Dear T,

Thank you for your e-mail regarding the cuts in the warden service. I know that this is an issue that concerns many tenants.

I have noted your views and will report them to the Tenants' Forum and the Options Fenland Working Party.

I reported at the November meeting of the working party that a tenant had contacted me by e-mail to express dissatisfaction with the 'Options Fenland' consultations. I was asked to approach the tenant to ask why this was the case. Their response, edited to preserve anonymity, is shown below:

Appleby Business Centre, Bridge Street, Appleby in Westmorland, Cumbria CA16 6QH
Telephone: 017683-52347 or 52165 Mobile: 07971-321863. Fax: 017683-52546.
E-Mail: Adrian.waite@awics.co.uk. Website: www.awics.co.uk.

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Dear Adrian,

Thanks for your mail.

When I first wrote you, everything was up in the sky, so to speak. It was the article in the local rag, that first got me going, enhanced by the Warden; X here and the other inmates. Normally, I keep away as far as possible in viewing local meetings etc.

However the upshot was later where clarification came to light. X did know, after all and so did the local committee that meets here once a month, alas, all was informed to keep it quiet, and not to say anything.

With a letter from me, another from another inmate and a Petition from all at (this scheme) winged its way to Alan Melton; Leader of Fenland District Council.

His reply, contradicted those who should have kept quiet, and in that his officers should have told everyone in September.

Frankly, I wish I had never bothered with the whole thing. Do not get me wrong, here in (this scheme) is like a palace compared to where I was (before), but for the life of me, I always get involved with matters, that are best left to the hidden agenda people, like your good self with Fenland Option.

I have to admit, that I do not know much about Fenland Option or what it is all about, although I have had the paper work handouts, it does not really explain the factual, more fictional, if you see what I mean.

Logically, the Warden fiasco, should have been open and above, without reading from the newspaper. Options Fenland, failed to convey the facts as soon as they was known, for any future developments, the question raised would be, "What other surprises are we going to have."

Kind Regards

T

E-Mail Three:

Dear Adrian,

Thank you for your newsletter for June. Very informative with good reading.

There are a few pointers which have never surfaced within the managing tenant consultation, indeed, less informative within the recent questionnaires.

I have been housed previous in Margate with Thanet Housing Association, and there are pitfalls, that as yet have not been realised by the Fenland Working Group, or if they know of such things, keeping quiet about it.

Do not get me wrong. I feel a Housing Association a good thing, ideal to relieve the burden on the local council, creating more homes etc. However, there is the fact that the Rent with the Housing Association will go up, much higher than the local council provide.

I once questioned Thanet Housing Association , that they was a profit making organisation, they in turn rebuked this argument, but it is a fact of life, that have to make a profit in order to pay their staff and provide funds for building new homes as well as workforce ,etc . In doing so the question of maintenance is lower than the local council, for with Thanet Community Housing Association, they brought in private contractors to do the building of new homes and upgrade old properties as well as providing general maintenance, the later very rare and hard to obtain, for with all the other work being carried out, maintenance was a distant item where the workforce was stretched.

I had a complaint once with Thanet Community Housing Association and their contractors. It was a logical complaint, which had, the owner of the contractors coming to see me on the issue. My flat was being upgraded, so the bathroom and kitchen was the main structural work. Rampage out all the kitchen fitments and bathroom, I had then to wait nearly a workforce replacement equipment, consequently, I lived on a kettle and used other persons toilet for a week, all because; a) The Bathroom and Kitchen Equipment had not arrived and secondly, the work force was over stretched to install.

The second item which has not been discussed is upon the Wardens. Will they still be available with the proposed housing association and will they still be allowed to keep their homes? For if you take away the homes, you will surely lose the Wardens who do a very fine job indeed. Though I strongly suspect that the proposed housing association will take away such dwellings for the sake of profit, disregarding the tenants concerns.

Kind Regards

T

Dear T,

Thank you for your e-mail. I am pleased that you found the newsletter informative and good reading.

Thank you also for your comments about Options Fenland and for the information about the Thanet Housing Association.

I think that in the past Housing Associations tended to put up their rent faster than local authorities so that their rents are now usually higher. The government, though, now has a policy of 'rent convergence' that means that council and housing associations should have rents at a similar level by 2012. This means that rents would go up by roughly the same amount regardless of whether the council keeps the homes or transfers them to a housing association.

AWICS Independence.....Integrity.....Value Adrian Waite (Independent Consultancy Services) Limited

One of the things that tenants said they wanted when we did the 'Fenland Standard' consultation was a dedicated warden in each sheltered scheme. The Working Group is planning to make this binding on any new housing association and I would presume that this would include continuing with the wardens' homes.

I hope that you find this useful and thank you again for contacting me.

Yours sincerely,

Adrian (Waite)

5.4 Conclusions

5.4.1 The Independent Tenants' Adviser's website appears to have been a source of information during the 'Options Fenland' process.

6. Pool of Opinion Consultation

6.1 Introduction

6.1.1 Following the decision of the Options fenland Working Group to consult tenants further about the potential for a large scale voluntary transfer of the housing stock, 'AWICS' was appointed to act as administrator for the consultation.

6.1.2 A newsletter was sent to all 4,909 tenants and leaseholders which contained a 'tear-off' return section in which tenants and leaseholders were asked whether they agreed with the working group's recommendation for stock transfer; if so, why; and if not, what option they would prefer and why. Each tenant and leaseholder was also provided with a freepost return envelope. These news letters were despatched to arrive on Monday 10th May 2005.

6.1.3 The Independent Tenants' Adviser wrote to all tenants on Friday 21st May to remind them of the opportunity to take part in the consultation.

6.1.4 Tenants and leaseholders were given the opportunity to complete their returns over the telephone by calling the freephone helpline.

6.1.5 During the consultation period, the Independent Tenants' Adviser attended meetings in all parts of the district and the meeting of the Tenants' Forum. At these meetings presentations were made on the options available and the advantages and disadvantages of each that had been identified by the working group. Opportunities were provided for tenants and leaseholders to ask questions and discuss issues. Tenants and leaseholders were encouraged to respond to the consultation.

6.1.6 We also developed a web-based system to provide a detailed analysis of the responses that were received.

6.2 Level of Response

6.2.1 The number of responses to the consultation that were received was 1.312 being 26.7% of the total. It is understood that this is a typical level of response to a consultation at this stage of an options appraisal.

6.2.2 An analysis of responses by geographical area showed a different level of response in different areas as shown below:

	Returns	Total	%
Chatteris	153	416	36.8
Whittlesey	167	496	33.7
Rural areas	374	1,190	31.4
March	249	800	31.1
Wisbech	369	1,978	18.7
Leasehold sublets	0	29	0.0
Total	1,312	4,909	26.7

6.2.3 It will be seen that the level of returns from Wisbech is significantly lower than in the other areas. It is not possible to establish exactly why this is the case although it may be due to differences in the demographic characteristics of tenants in Wisbech that make them less prepared to engage with a consultation process than tenants in other areas. It is recommended that the Council consider the implications of this for any future consultation with tenants on stock options or other matters.

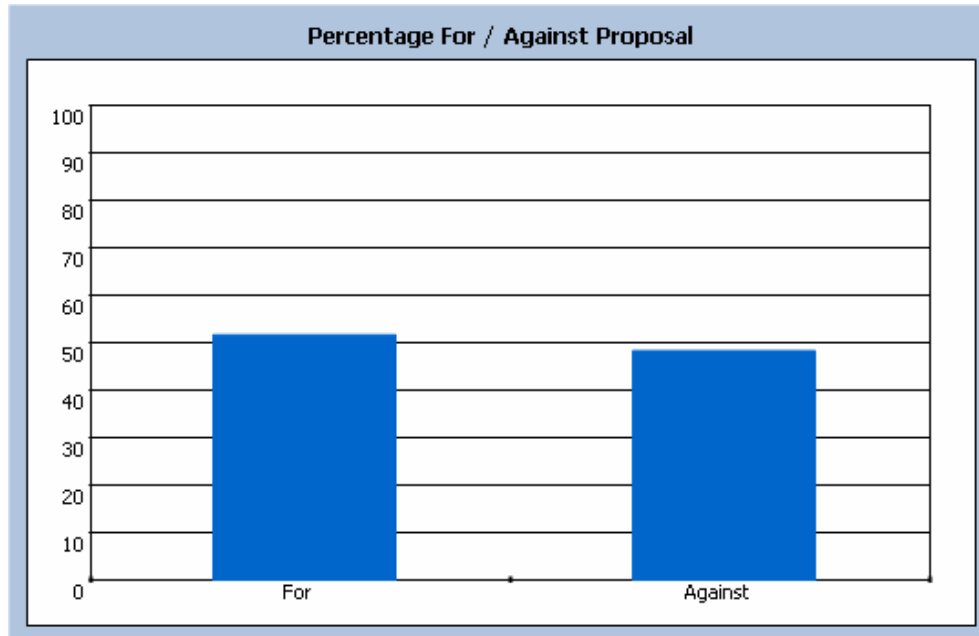
6.2.4 An analysis of responses by tenant type showed a different level of response amongst different groups of tenants as shown below:

	Returns	Total	%
Tenants:			
General	1,020	4,276	23.9
Sheltered	278	536	51.9
Leaseholders	14	97	14.4
Total	1,312	4,909	26.7

6.2.5 It will be seen that the level of returns from leaseholders is significantly lower than the average, perhaps reflecting a view amongst some leaseholders that 'Options Fenland' is less relevant to them than it is to tenants. The level of returns among tenants of sheltered housing is significantly higher than the average. While it is not possible to say exactly why this is the case, it may be because many of the meetings that were held during the consultation period were held in sheltered schemes, combined with the fact that many sheltered tenants were attracted to the option of a stock transfer because they believed that it offered particular advantages to them.

6.3 Outcome of the Consultation

6.3.1 The overall result of the consultation was 679 (51.7%) for stock transfer and 633 (48.3%) against transfer. This is shown in the diagram below. Of those who were against transfer, three favoured a 'mixed' approach while the remainder favoured stock retention. Respondents were very evenly divided between favouring and opposing stock transfer.



6.3.2 A geographical analysis shows that the balance of responses in favour or against the proposal to transfer the stock varied slightly between areas:

	For	Against
Chatteris	88 (58%)	65 (42%)
Whittlesey	97 (58%)	70 (42%)
Wisbech	188 (51%)	181 (49%)
Rural areas	191 (51%)	183 (49%)
March	115 (47%)	132 (53%)
Total	679 (52%)	633 (48%)

6.3.3 It is not known exactly why there are these geographical variations, and in particular, why March is the only part of the district where a majority of the respondents opposed stock transfer. However, the main conclusion to derive from this analysis is that respondents were relatively evenly divided in all parts of Fenland.

6.3.4 An analysis of responses by tenant type is shown below:

	For	Against
Tenants:		
General	479 (47%)	541 (53%)
Sheltered	190 (68%)	88 (32%)
Leaseholders	10 (71%)	4 (29%)

6.3.5 This analysis shows a significant difference in responses between tenant types. Of the small number of leaseholders who responded, most favoured stock transfer. Most sheltered tenants also favoured transfer. However, general needs tenants were more evenly divided with 47% favouring transfer and a small majority being opposed. The different attitudes to stock transfer among sheltered tenants and general needs tenants are significant.

6.4 Detailed Analysis of Consultation - Transfer

6.4.1 Respondents were asked to give two reasons in support of their preferences, although this was not compulsory. This was done by providing two empty boxes on the form to complete so that respondents were not 'led' into giving particular reasons through being presented with a 'menu'.

6.4.2 The reasons that respondents gave for preferring transfer are summarised in the table below:

	Number	Proportion
More investment in homes	202	15%
Only way forward	108	8%
Better management	86	6%
More affordable housing	84	6%
Environmental improvements (e.g. security lights)	62	5%
Repairs to homes more frequent	39	3%
More tenant participation	11	1%
Do not like Council	9	1%
Other	146	11%
None	611	45%
Total	679	

6.4.3 It should be noted that as respondents were asked to give two reasons, the total reasons given are 1,358 being 679 multiplied by two. This means that as 15% of the reasons given were 'more investment in homes' this response was given by 30% of responders. Those who gave no reasons are recorded as having given no reason twice.

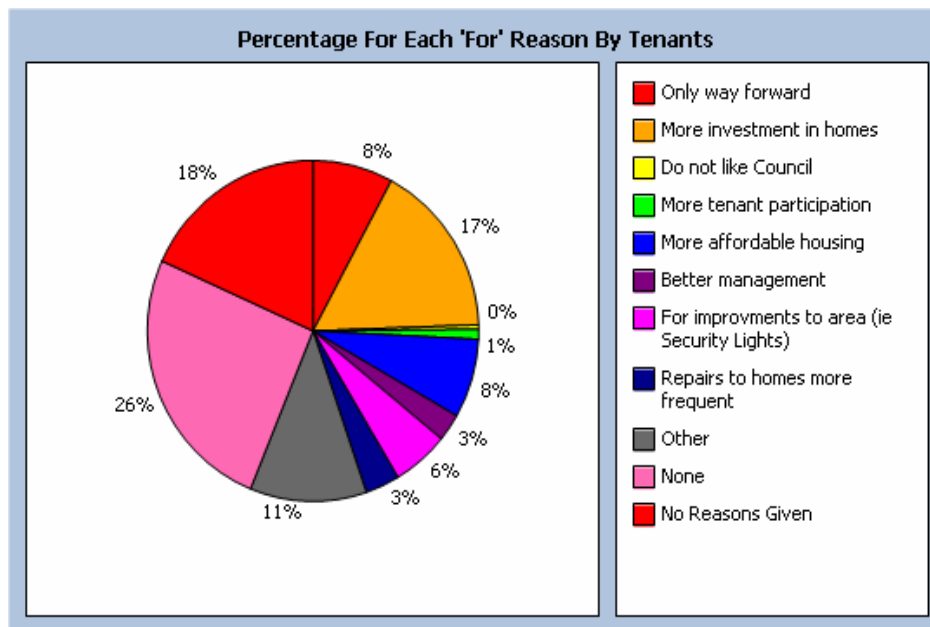
6.4.4 Responders, who favoured transfer, where they gave a reason, did so because they saw a potential housing association delivering more investment in homes and neighbourhoods, better management and more affordable housing. As a result it represented the 'only way forward'. These conclusions are similar to those of the working group.

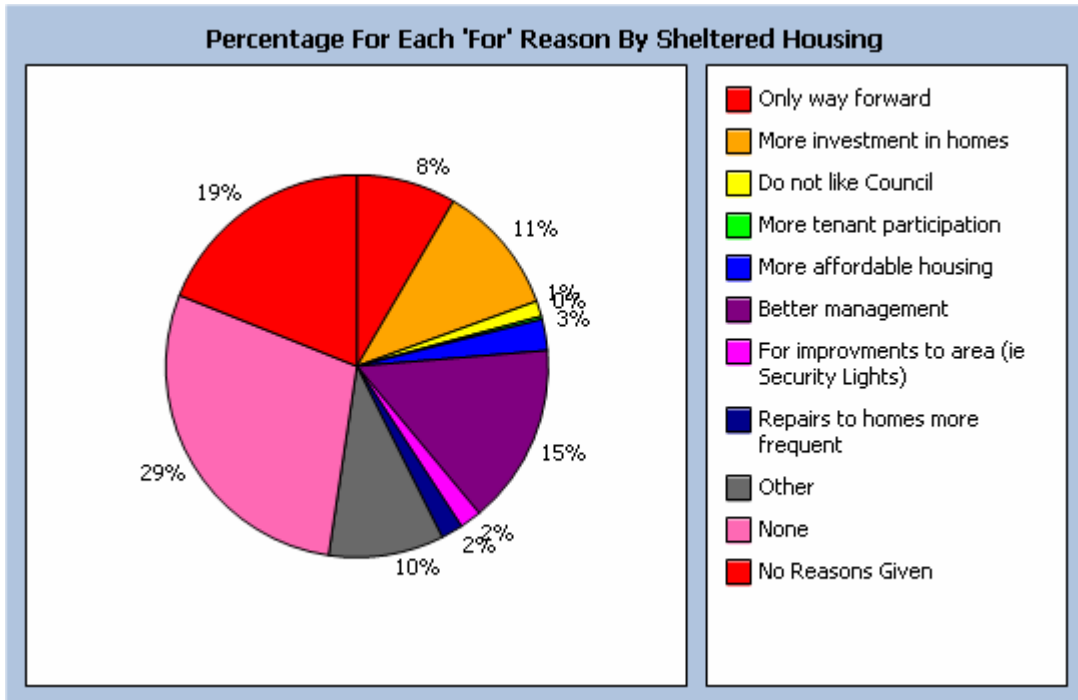
6.4.5 The proportion of responders giving each reason were similar in each geographical area, with the exception of the proportion giving 'better management' as their reason for preferring stock transfer. This is shown below:

Chatteris	22%
Rural areas	17%
Whittlesey	11%
Wisbech	9%
March	5%

6.4.6 It is not clear why this reason was quoted by the largest number of responders in Chatteris and the fewest in March. A possible explanation is that people in Chatteris feel remote from Fenland Council while the location of the Council offices in March means that people in March feel closer. This may lead to a view in Chatteris that transfer to a housing association could improve management. However, further research would have to be done to confirm why these differences appear in this consultation.

6.4.7 There are differences in the reasons given in support of stock transfer by general needs tenants and sheltered housing tenants. These are shown in the graphs below:





6.4.8 General needs tenants most frequently cite more investment in homes (17%), the only way forward (8%) and more affordable housing (8%) as the reason for preferring a stock transfer. However, for sheltered tenants the most often quoted reason is better management (15%) with the wish to see a dedicated warden in each sheltered housing scheme being mentioned frequently. Other reasons included more investment in homes (11%) and the only way forward (8%), but only 3% mentioned more affordable housing.

6.5 Detailed Analysis of Consultation – Retention

6.5.1 Respondents were asked to give two reasons in support of their preferences, although this was not compulsory. This was done by providing two empty boxes on the form to complete so that respondents were not 'led' into giving particular reasons through being presented with a 'menu'.

6.5.2 The reasons that respondents gave for preferring retention are summarised in the table below:

	Number	Proportion
Satisfied with Council	177	14%
No need for change	107	8%
Don't like housing associations or privatisation	38	3%
Concerns at rents	32	2%
Concern at tenants' rights	10	1%
Houses already modernised	7	1%
Transfer will not help sheltered schemes	6	1%
Other	119	9%
None	770	61%
Total	633	

6.5.3 The main reasons given by respondents who favoured retention were that they were satisfied with the Council and that they could see no need for there to be a change. These are general expressions of satisfaction and resistance to change rather than the identification of specific objections to stock transfer. However, a large proportion of these respondents did not give any reason.

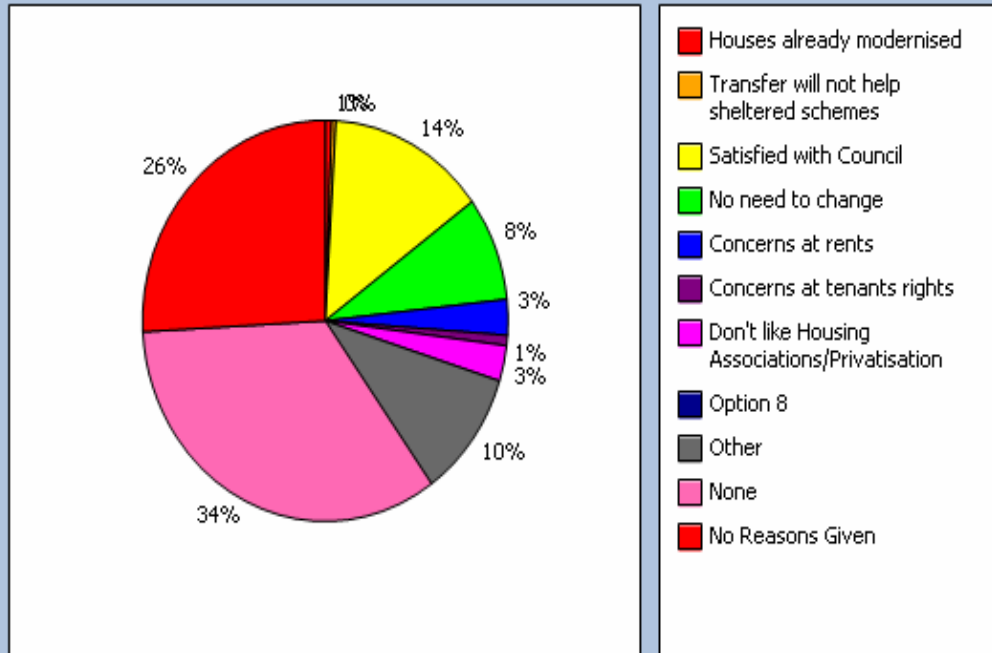
6.5.4 A similar proportion of respondents gave the same reasons for preferring retention to transfer in different geographical areas, except that there are differences between areas in the proportions favouring retention because of satisfaction with the Council. This is shown in the table below:

March	36%
Rural areas	30%
Chatteris	28%
Whittlesey	26%
Wisbech	22%

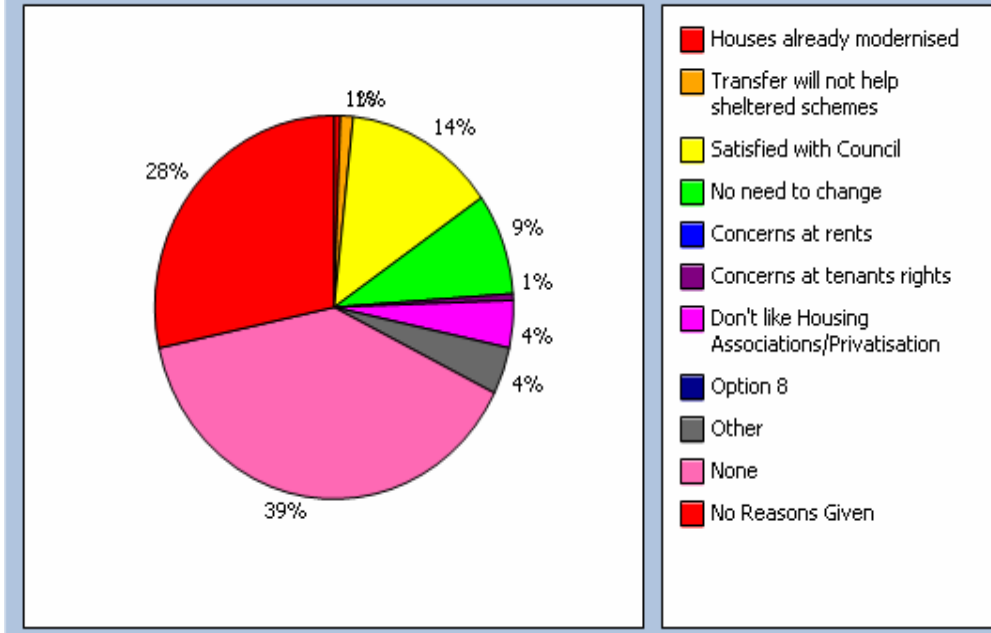
6.5.5 It is not clear why there should be these differences, although it has been suggested that high levels of satisfaction in March may arise from the relatively good condition of the housing stock, whereas relatively low levels of satisfaction in Wisbech may arise from the condition of some of the housing stock and circumstances in some neighbourhoods. However, further research would have to be carried out to identify the reasons behind different reasons being given in different areas.

6.5.6 The reasons given by respondents who favoured retention are analysed between general needs tenants and sheltered tenants in the graphs below. It will be seen that the reasons given by the two groups of tenants are similar.

Percentage For Each 'Against' Reason By Tenants



Percentage For Each 'Against' Reason By Sheltered Housing



6.6 Weighted Result of Consultation

- 6.6.1 While the majority of respondents agreed with the working group's preference for stock transfer, we have seen that a majority of sheltered tenants favoured transfer while a majority of general needs tenants favoured retention. The proportion of sheltered tenants who responded to the consultation was also greater than the proportion of general needs tenants who responded to the consultation.
- 6.6.2 The results of the consultation have therefore been used to produce an estimate of what tenants and leaseholders as a whole are thinking. This is done by assuming that the general needs tenants who responded are representative of general needs tenants as a whole, sheltered tenants who responded are representative of sheltered tenants as a whole and leaseholders who responded are representative of leaseholders as a whole. This calculation produces an estimate that 2,444 tenants and leaseholders may favour transfer while 2,465 may favour retention.
- 6.6.3 This analysis suggests that tenants and leaseholders as a whole are more evenly divided than those who responded to the consultation and that there is probably a small majority of tenants and leaseholders that favour retention. However, this calculation makes assumptions about the views of 3,597 people who have not expressed any views and must therefore be treated with caution.

6.7 Conclusions

- 6.7.1 The results of the pool of opinion consultation show that the tenants and leaseholders of Fenland District Council are evenly divided on the question of whether the Council should transfer or retain its stock.
- 6.7.2 A small majority of those who responded to the consultation favoured stock transfer, although a weighted analysis suggests that a small majority among the tenants and leaseholders as a whole may favour retention.
- 6.7.3 This suggests that if the Council wishes to proceed to a ballot for a stock transfer and have confidence that tenants and leaseholders will support the proposal, it will have to persuade more tenants of the benefits of transfer. This is particularly the case with general needs tenants.

7. Conclusions

7.1 Meetings

7.1.1 Meetings at Tenants' Associations have given us an opportunity to brief tenants on 'Options Fenland', answer tenants' questions and facilitate discussion among tenants. However, the communication has not been a one-way process. We have also listened to tenants and have found that many tenants have serious concerns and firmly held opinions about their homes and neighbourhoods. 'Options Fenland' has provided a mechanism for tenants to make their views known and we would suggest that the Council and the Tenants' Forum continue to develop ways in which tenants can communicate their concerns and ideas and have them acted upon.

7.1.2 We were pleased to see the creation of a new Tenants' Association at Thorney Toll during the 'Options Fenland' process. The Tenants' Forum also demonstrated a pro-active approach in proposing its own stock retention model to the Council in place of those that had been prepared by the lead consultant.

7.1.3 We found that Council officers are strongly committed to supporting the Tenants' Associations and many are prepared to attend Tenants' Association meetings regularly. However, we attended some meetings where officers were in danger of out-numbering the tenants! We would suggest that the Council and the Tenants' Associations consider what should be an appropriate level of officer support for a meeting of a Tenants' Association.

7.2 Skills Audit & Selection of Working Group

7.2.1 Some of the training needs that were identified have not been addressed during the 'Options Fenland' process (for example, making meetings effective), while other needs are ongoing. It has also been established that the training needs of tenant representatives are often the same as those of Councillors, Council officers or the Council's partners. Joint training exercises have proved successful during 'Options Fenland' and we would suggest that the Council consider further joint exercises in future.

7.3 Freephone Helpline

7.3.1 We received many calls about 'Options Fenland' and were able to provide tenants with information that helped them to come to their own conclusions about stock options.

7.3.2 We also received many calls about problems that tenants experience with their homes or neighbourhoods. When we received such calls we made the appropriate Council officer aware of the problem or concern that had been raised.

7.3.3 Clearly many tenants found the availability of a freephone helpline useful for this purpose. We would therefore suggest that the Council consider whether they should offer a similar freephone helpline service that would enable tenants to raise their problems or concerns or to provide feedback on the services that they receive. The service could either be provided by the Tenant Participation Officer or by an independent person funded by the Council but responsible to the Tenants' Forum.

7.4 Website

7.4.1 The Independent Tenants' Adviser's website appears to have been a source of information during the 'Options Fenland' process.

7.5 Pool of Opinion Consultation

7.5.1 The results of the pool of opinion consultation show that the tenants and leaseholders of Fenland District Council are evenly divided on the question of whether the Council should transfer or retain its stock.

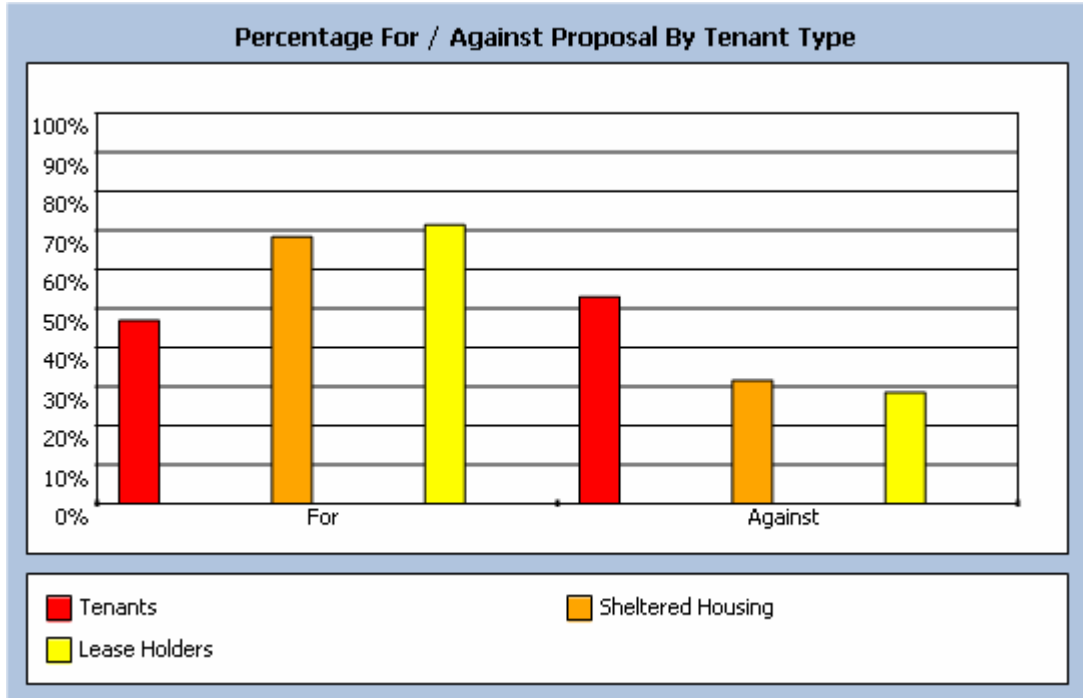
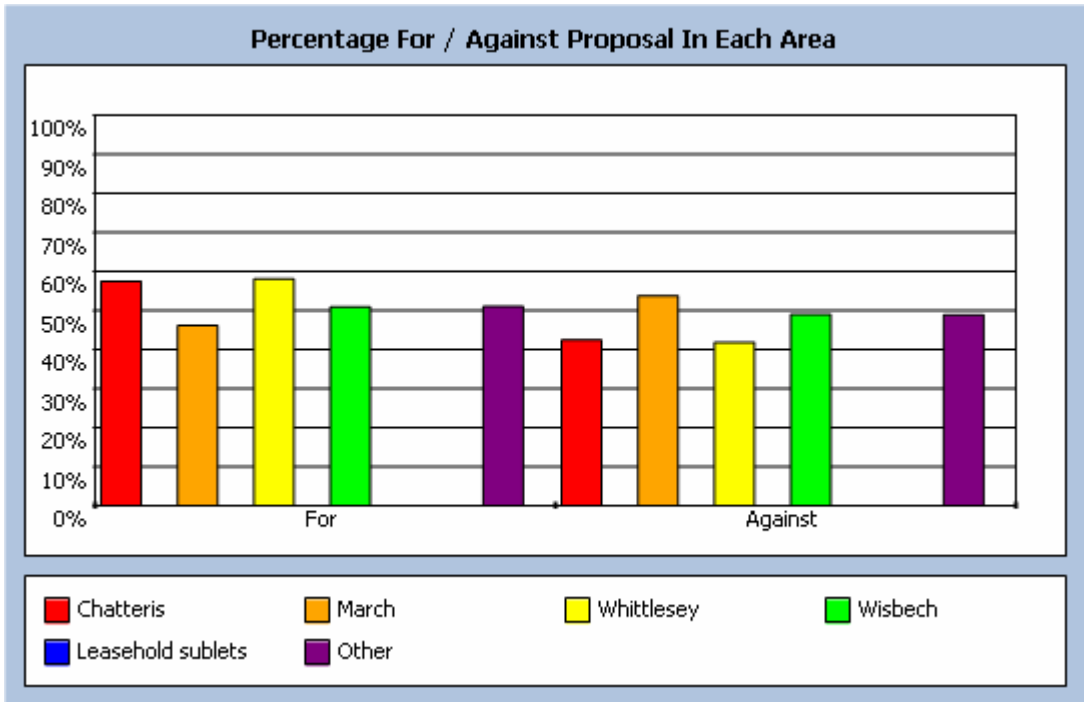
7.5.2 A small majority of those who responded to the consultation favoured stock transfer, although a weighted analysis suggests that a small majority among the tenants and leaseholders as a whole may favour retention.

7.5.3 This suggests that if the Council wishes to proceed to a ballot for a stock transfer and have confidence that tenants and leaseholders will support the proposal, it will have to persuade more tenants of the benefits of transfer. This is particularly the case with general needs tenants.

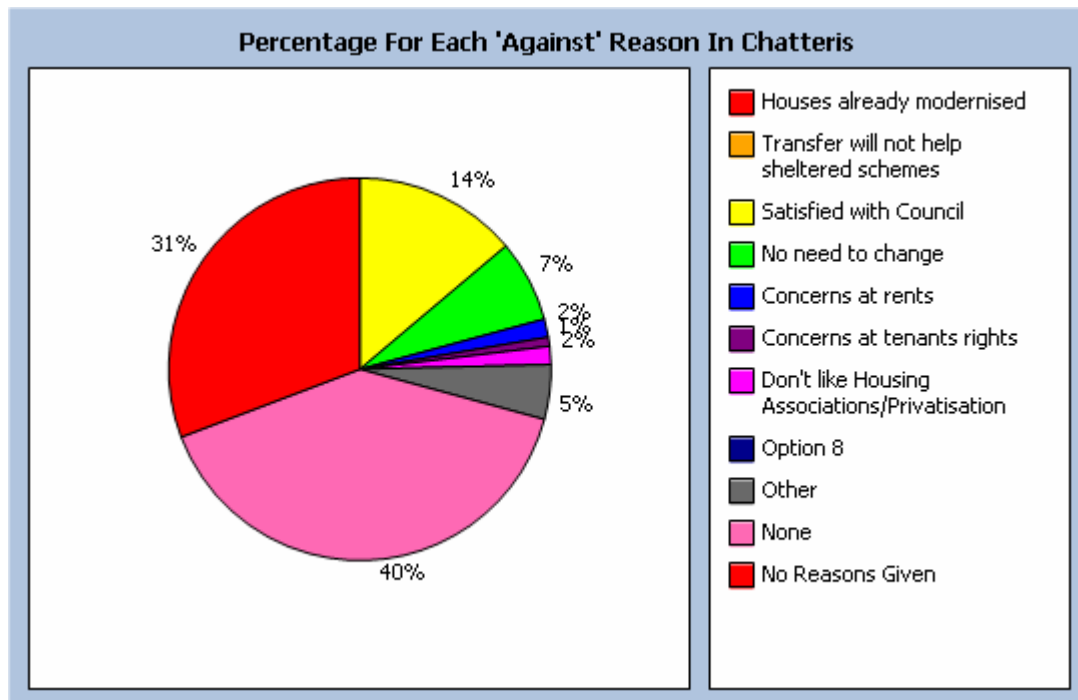
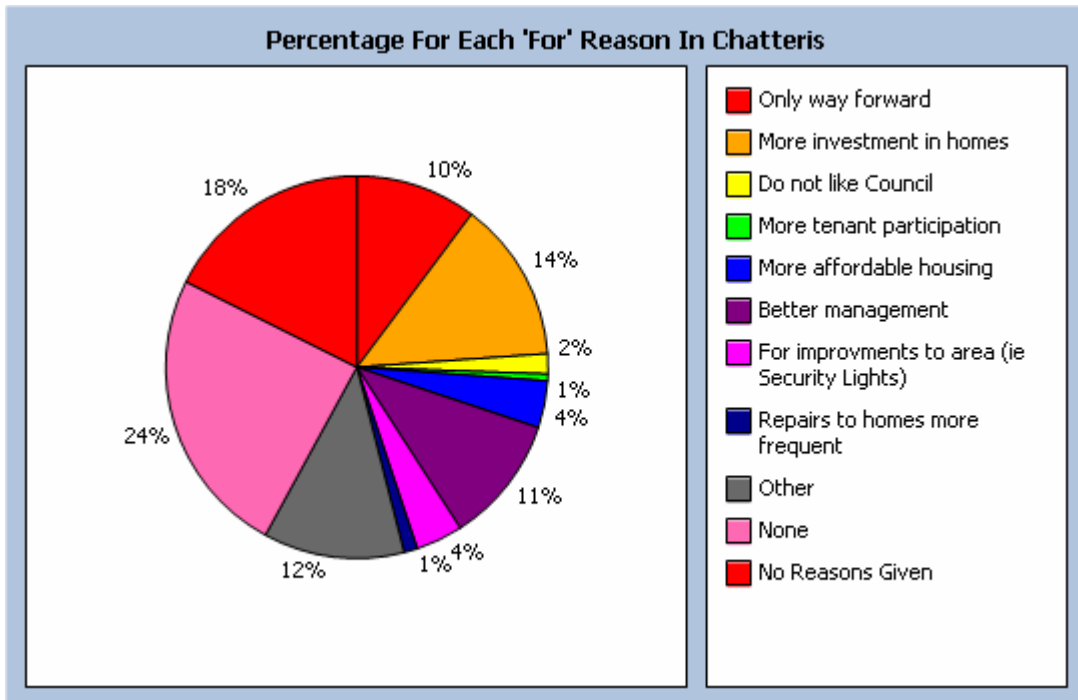
Adrian Waite
June 2005

Appendices

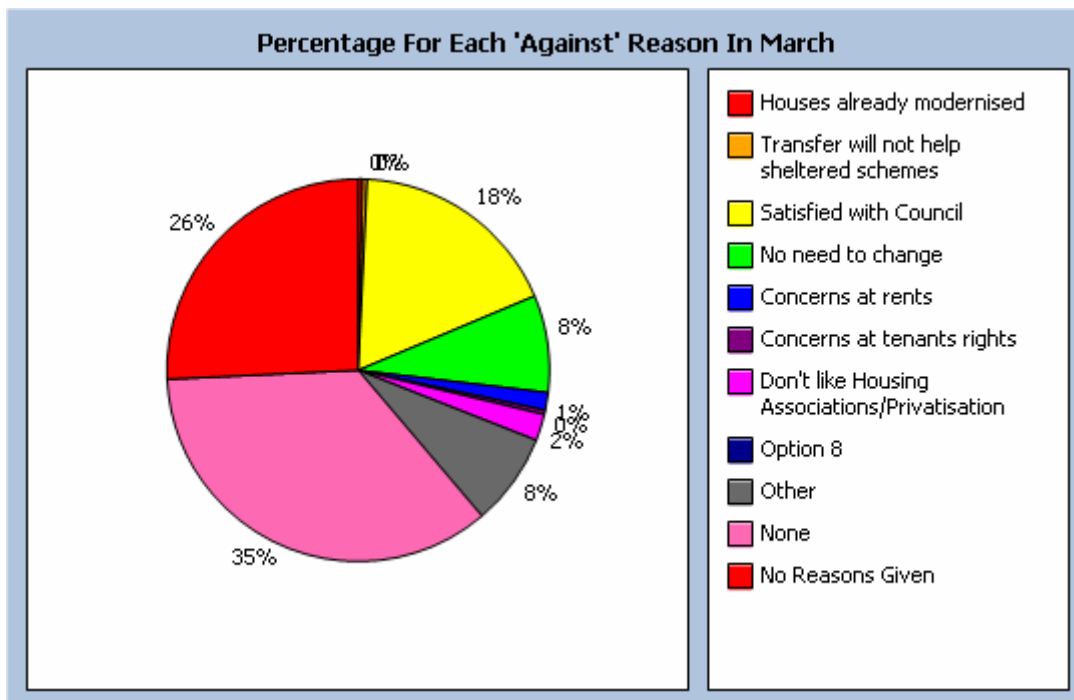
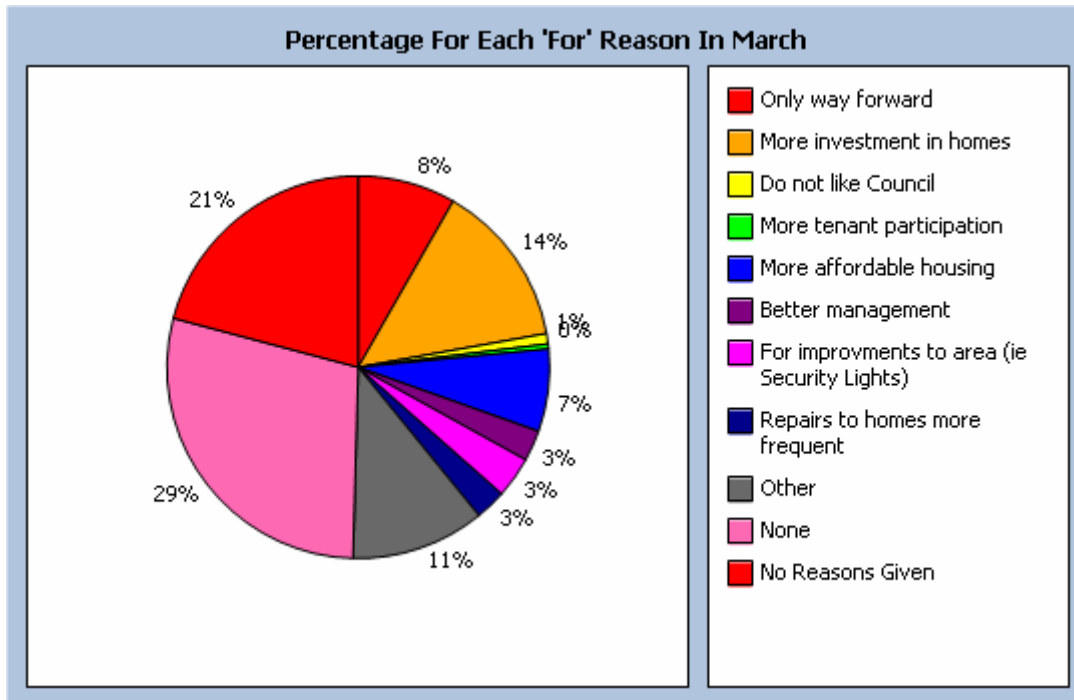
Analysis of Result of Consultation by Area and Tenant Type



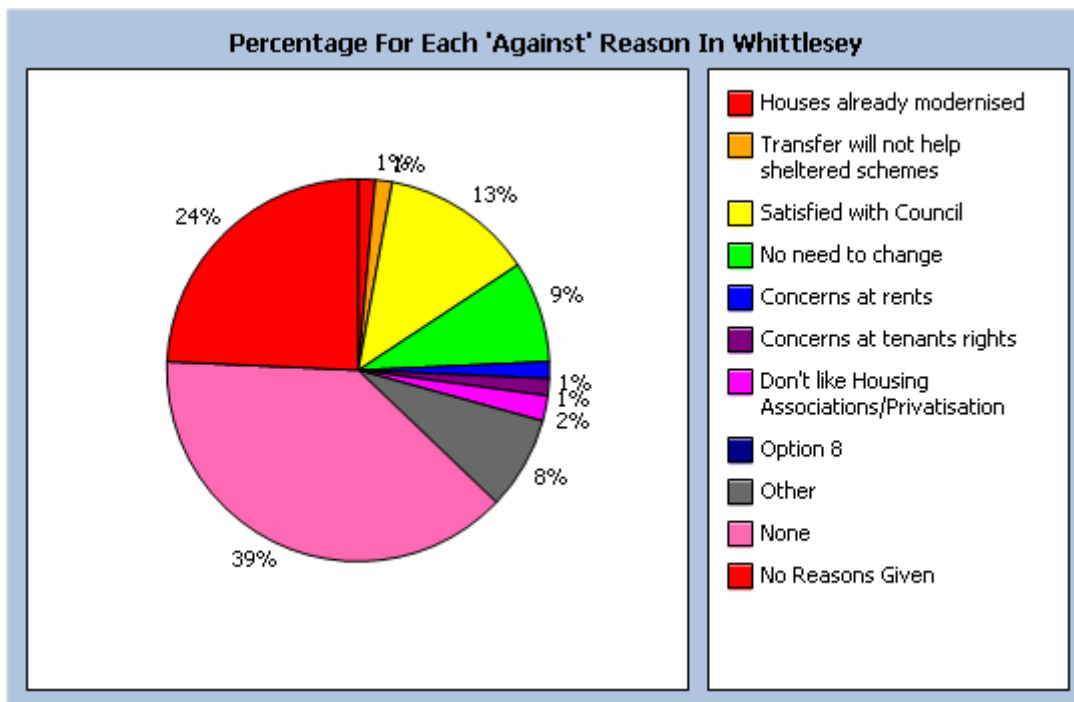
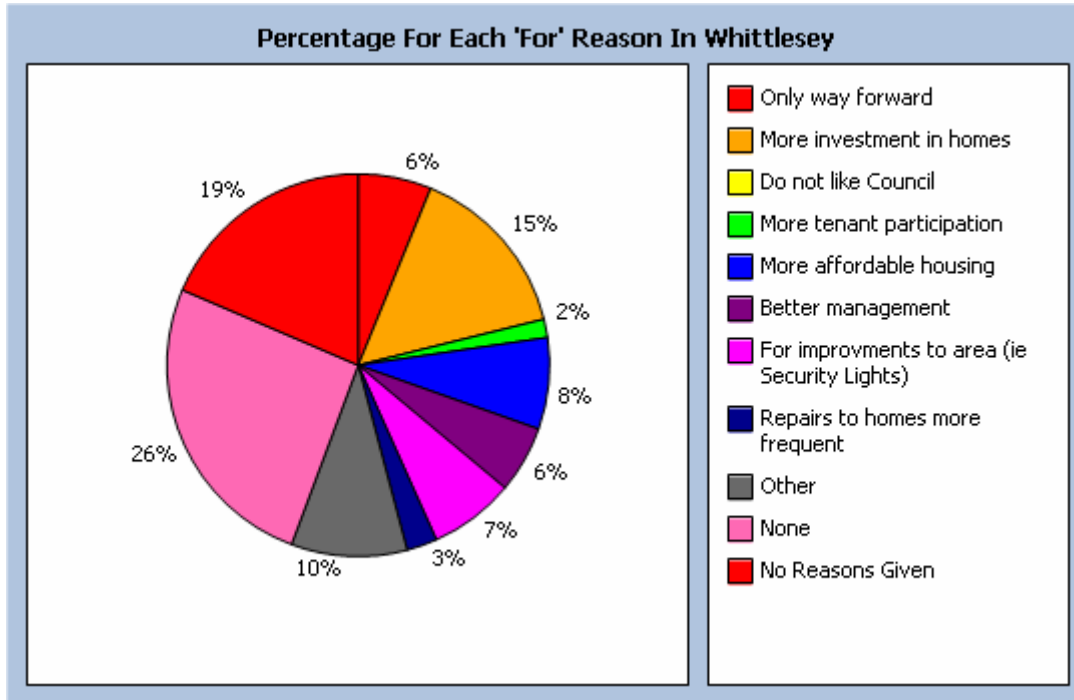
Analysis of Result of Consultation in Chatteris



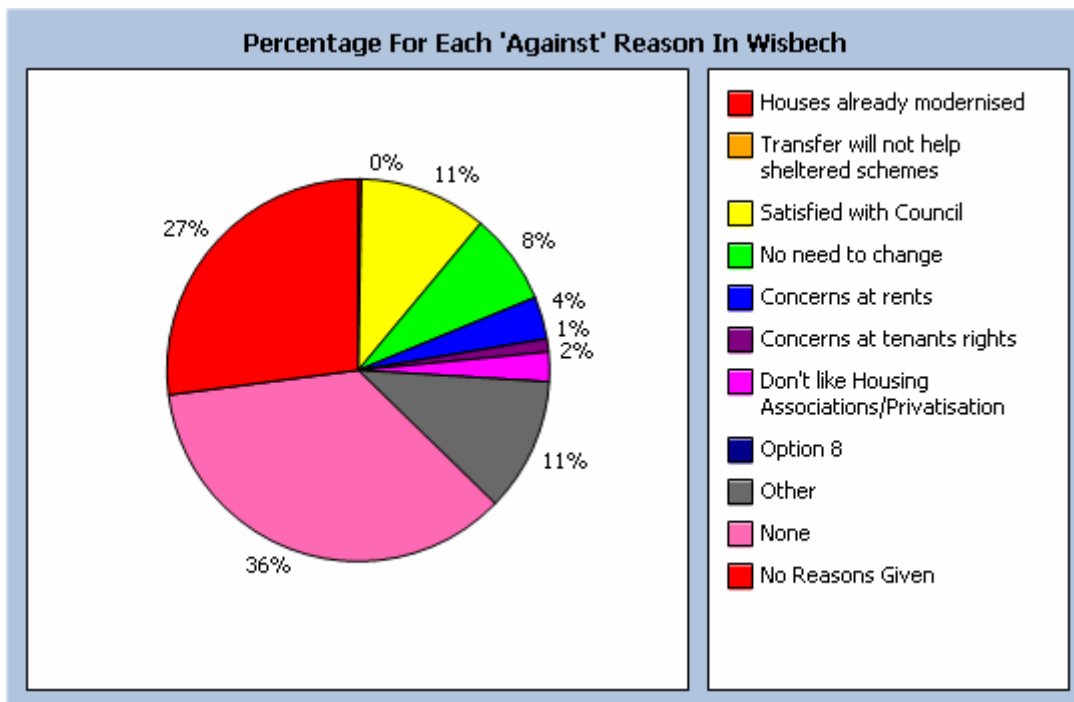
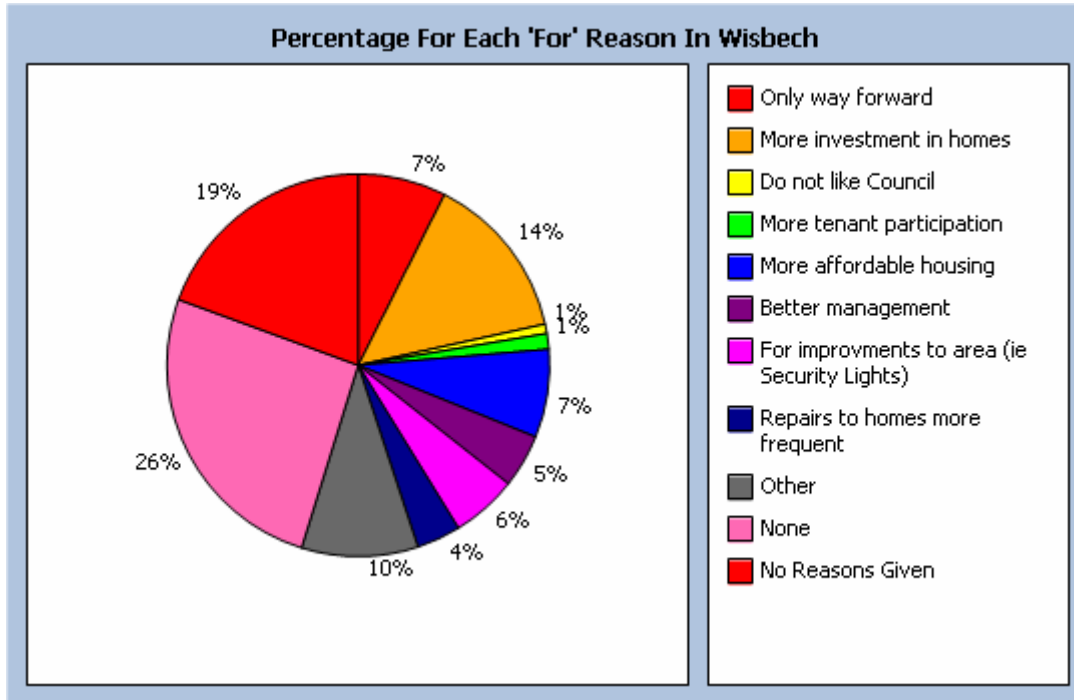
Analysis of Result of Consultation in March



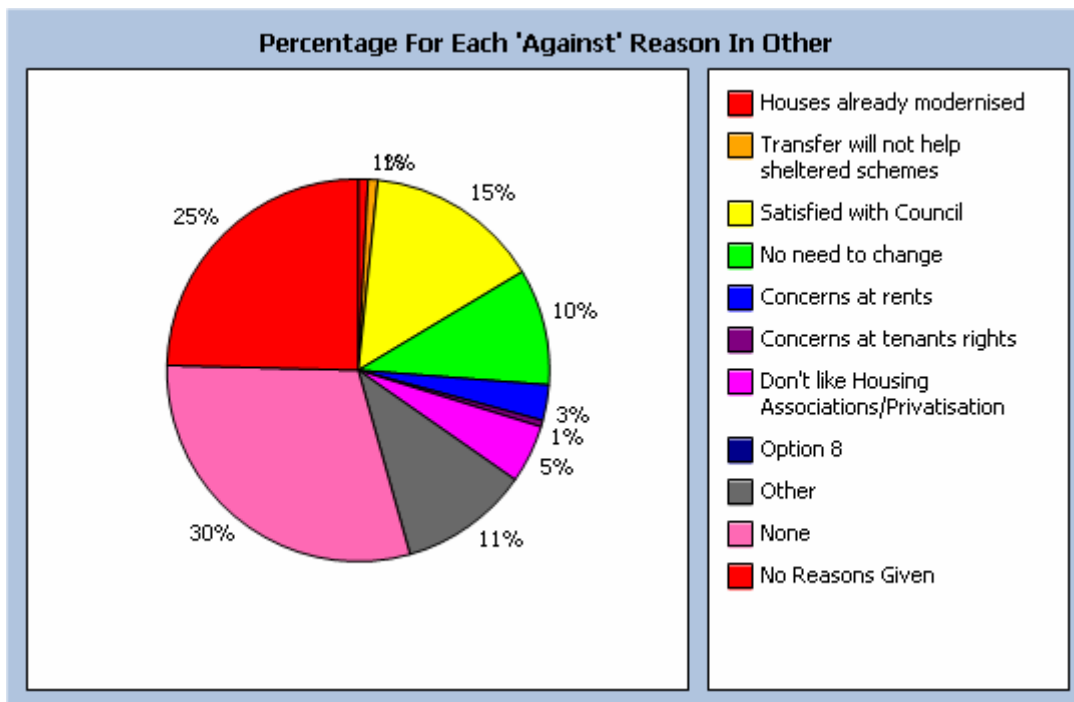
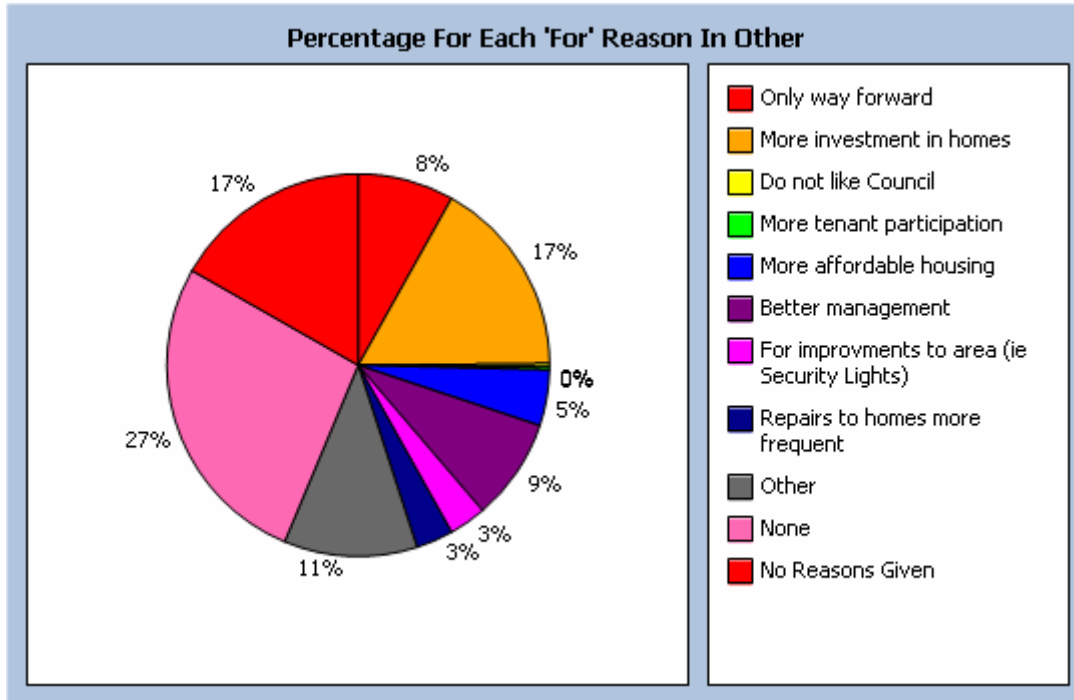
Analysis of Result of Consultation in Whittlesey



Analysis of Result of Consultation in Wisbech



Analysis of Result of Consultation in Rural Areas



Detailed Overview

Fenland Response System

Break Down Of Results- Statistical Overview

Breakdown of 'For' Reasons

Reason	Votes	Percentage
None	359	26.4%
No Reasons Given	252	18.6%
More investment in homes	202	14.9%
Other	146	10.8%
Only way forward	108	8.0%
Better management	86	6.3%
More affordable housing	84	6.2%
For improvements to area (i.e. Security Lights)	62	4.6%
Repairs to homes more frequent	39	2.9%
More tenant participation	11	0.8%
Do not like Council	9	0.7%

Breakdown of 'Against' Reasons

Reason	Votes	Percentage
None	439	34.7%
No Reasons Given	331	26.1%
Satisfied with Council	177	14.0%
Other	119	9.4%
No need to change	107	8.5%
Don't like Housing Associations/Privatisation	38	3.0%
Concerns at rents	32	2.5%
Concerns at tenants rights	10	0.8%
Houses already modernised	7	0.6%
Transfer will not help sheltered schemes	6	0.5%
Option 8	0	0.0%

Preference of 'Other Options'

Options	Votes	Percentage
Stock Retention	630	99.5%
Mix Of Options	3	0.5%
Private Finance Initiative	0	0.0%
Arms Length Management	0	0.0%

For Reasons Within Areas						
Reason	Chatteris	March	Whittlesey	Wisbech	Leasehold sublets	Other
Only way forward	18 10.2%	19 8.3%	12 6.2%	28 7.4%	0 0.0%	31 8.1%
More investment in homes	24 13.6%	32 13.9%	29 14.9%	53 14.1%	0 0.0%	64 16.8%
Do not like Council	3 1.7%	2 0.9%	0 0.0%	3 0.8%	0 0.0%	1 0.3%
More tenant participation	1 0.6%	1 0.4%	3 1.5%	5 1.3%	0 0.0%	1 0.3%
More affordable housing	7 4.0%	16 7.0%	15 7.7%	28 7.4%	0 0.0%	18 4.7%
Better management	19 10.8%	6 2.6%	11 5.7%	17 4.5%	0 0.0%	33 8.6%
For improvements to area (i.e. Security Lights)	7 4.0%	8 3.5%	14 7.2%	21 5.6%	0 0.0%	12 3.1%
Repairs to homes more frequent	2 1.1%	6 2.6%	5 2.6%	14 3.7%	0 0.0%	12 3.1%
Other	21 11.9%	26 11.3%	19 9.8%	37 9.8%	0 0.0%	43 11.3%
None	43 24.4%	66 28.7%	50 25.8%	97 25.8%	0 0.0%	103 27.0%
No Reasons Given	31 17.6%	48 20.9%	36 18.6%	73 19.4%	1 100.0%	64 16.8%

Against Reasons Within Areas						
Reason	Chatteris	March	Whittlesey	Wisbech	Leasehold sublets	Other
Houses already modernised	0 0.0%	1 0.4%	2 1.4%	1 0.3%	0 0.0%	3 0.8%
Transfer will not help sheltered schemes	0 0.0%	1 0.4%	2 1.4%	0 0.0%	0 0.0%	3 0.8%
Satisfied with Council	18 13.8%	48 17.9%	18 12.9%	39 10.8%	0 0.0%	54 14.8%
No need to change	9 6.9%	22 8.2%	12 8.6%	28 7.7%	0 0.0%	36 9.8%
Concerns at rents	2 1.5%	4 1.5%	2 1.4%	13 3.6%	0 0.0%	11 3.0%
Concerns at tenants rights	1 0.8%	1 0.4%	2 1.4%	4 1.1%	0 0.0%	2 0.5%
Don't like Housing Associations/Privatisation	2 1.5%	6 2.2%	3 2.1%	9 2.5%	0 0.0%	18 4.9%
Option 8	0 0.0%	0 0.0%	0 0.0%	0 0.0%	0 0.0%	0 0.0%
Other	6 4.6%	21 7.8%	11 7.9%	41 11.3%	0 0.0%	40 10.9%
None	52 40.0%	95 35.4%	54 38.6%	129 35.6%	0 0.0%	109 29.8%
No Reasons Given	40 30.8%	69 25.7%	34 24.3%	98 27.1%	1 100.0%	90 24.6%

For Reasons By Tenant Type			
Reason	Tenants	Sheltered Housing	Lease Holders
Only way forward	75 7.8%	32 8.4%	1 5.0%
More investment in homes	159 16.6%	42 11.1%	1 5.0%
Do not like Council	4 0.4%	5 1.3%	0 0.0%
More tenant participation	9 0.9%	1 0.3%	1 5.0%
More affordable housing	72 7.5%	10 2.6%	2 10.0%
Better management	25 2.6%	58 15.3%	3 15.0%
For improvements to area (i.e. Security Lights)	53 5.5%	7 1.8%	2 10.0%
Repairs to homes more frequent	32 3.3%	7 1.8%	0 0.0%
Other	109 11.4%	37 9.7%	0 0.0%
None	245 25.6%	109 28.7%	5 25.0%
No Reasons Given	175 18.3%	72 18.9%	5 25.0%

Against Reasons Tenant Type			
Reason	Tenants	Sheltered Housing	Lease Holders
Only way forward	6 0.6%	1 0.6%	0 0.0%
More investment in homes	4 0.4%	2 1.1%	0 0.0%
Do not like Council	151 14.0%	24 13.6%	2 25.0%
More tenant participation	91 8.4%	15 8.5%	1 12.5%
More affordable housing	31 2.9%	0 0.0%	1 12.5%
Better management	9 0.8%	1 0.6%	0 0.0%
For improvements to area (i.e. Security Lights)	31 2.9%	7 4.0%	0 0.0%
Repairs to homes more frequent	0 0.0%	0 0.0%	0 0.0%
Other	111 10.3%	7 4.0%	1 12.5%
None	368 34.0%	69 39.2%	2 25.0%
No Reasons Given	280 25.9%	50 28.4%	1 12.5%