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**Stevenage Borough Council**

**Housing Futures Project**  
**Options Appraisal**  
**Equalities Impact Assessment**

**FINAL**  
**7 SEPTEMBER 2011**

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## 1 Introduction

### 1.1 Background and overall summary

ConsultCIH was appointed to facilitate and support an appraisal of future options for the management and maintenance of the council housing stock in Stevenage.

The project has looked at two options: continue with the council's Arms Length Management Organisation (ALMO) Stevenage Homes Limited (SHL), or bring the service back in-house to be run directly by the council.

The appraisal has taken place as part of a wider Housing Futures Project which is also considering the HRA business plan for self financing, due to be implemented April 2012. Options for addressing business planning issues will be considered in a second phase appraisal.

Stevenage Borough Council requires all matters reported to Executive and full Council to be accompanied by an Equalities Impact Assessment relating to the process, policy or proposals which are under consideration. This report represents the Equalities Impact Assessment (EIA) relating to the Option Appraisal project and should be read in conjunction with our main report and that of the Independent Tenants Adviser being considered at the same time.

Our general conclusions are that there is a low risk that the views and opinions of different groups within the tenant and leaseholder community might be mis-stated as a result of the project work undertaken and that, where there may have been an over-representation of views of particular groups, it is from those groups that are considered to be vulnerable and therefore in need of positive representation. Positive steps have been taken to secure the views of the diversity groups.

Our overall view is therefore that, in considering the recommendations within the various reports before the meeting (22<sup>nd</sup> September 2011), the Council is able to rely on the fact that the results of the project represent fairly the views of the diverse groups within the community of tenants and leaseholders in Stevenage and that these views have been captured appropriately to inform the development of the council's policies in the future.

Effective housing services contribute positively towards the quality of life for people who are vulnerable but the decision as to whether to retain the ALMO or bring the service in house does not itself have any specific equalities impact.

In drawing these conclusions, we have also noted that the disproportionately high apparent response rate from disabled people could suggest that the council (and Stevenage Homes) review the records of people who consider themselves in this group.

### 1.2 Methodology

EIA is the process used to consider whether any current or proposed activities or policies promote or affect equality of opportunity, positive attitudes to and good

relations between disabled people, black and minority ethnic people, men, women, transgender people and people of different ages, religion and belief, or sexuality. The EIA process also considers activities, processes and policies to ensure that they do not disadvantage different groups or contravene human rights.

In the context of this option appraisal project, we have set out a three-stage process for consideration of the EIA. These are:

1. Initial assessment – an assessment as to how the process or policy decision (in this case the Option Appraisal project and the decision as to which option to recommend to the council for agreement) will impact on different groups within the community and contribute towards a positive contribution for and from all groups.
2. Monitoring – this has primarily been undertaken during the course of the project during two consultation phases and in the conduct of two separate surveys of opinions within the tenant and leaseholder community, including how the process has taken account of the diverse needs of different groups within the tenant and leaseholder community and how any under-representation has been addressed.
3. Evaluation and conclusions – taking all the evidence into account, we have evaluated the outputs and concluded as to the overall impact from an equalities perspective.

It is also important to note that our assessment applies to two distinct areas within this project:

- The process that has been carried out, for example: have different groups been given an opportunity to participate? What was the balance of views given in the surveys of opinion compared to the diversity of the tenant and leaseholder population as a whole?
- The outcome of the decision, which is to recommend that the council brings its housing landlord service back in house, for example: is this decision likely to impact positively or adversely differentially on the diversity groups within the tenant and leaseholder population?

Our assessment follows this methodology and is set out below. The material has been drawn from a combination of our own experience, material collected during the initial consultation phase of the project and, importantly, from the work of the Independent Tenants Adviser in reporting the outcomes of the two surveys of opinion that were undertaken.

## 2 Initial Assessment

In making our initial assessment, we have considered the following key issues. Firstly, does the service covered by the project cover the provision of services which could improve outcomes for the diversity groups? Secondly, could the

methodology for capturing views assist in ensuring that the views of the diversity groups are appropriately represented in the project?

## 2.1 Key issues identified

The following are relevant considerations in developing the initial assessment of the potential equalities and diversity impact for an option appraisal process.

### *Focus on those in need*

Services to council tenants, and to an extent, leaseholders are generally focused on those in housing or other need.

Multiple vulnerabilities are found within council housing tenant populations which are disproportionately represented compared to the overall population.

Key examples are:

- The elderly – a higher proportion of elderly and therefore vulnerable people live in council housing compared to the wider population. The proportion of tenants and leaseholders over 60 is currently 35% compared to 18% in the population of the borough as a whole<sup>1</sup>.
- The disabled – a higher proportion of disabled people live in council housing compared to the wider population. The proportion of tenants and leaseholders registered disabled recorded by the council and Stevenage Homes is currently 11.5%. Whilst this is low compared to the 15% in the population of the borough as a whole who have a long term limiting illness<sup>2</sup>, it is likely that the numbers of registered disabled is much lower.
- The vulnerable – families in multiple need or experiencing challenging life situations are disproportionately represented in council and social housing.
- Gender – although partly as a result of the disproportionately higher number of elderly within the tenant and leaseholder population, there is also an over-representation of women - 63% of tenants.

### *Aiming to reach hard to reach groups*

From an equality and diversity perspective, it is therefore vital that vulnerable groups are actively encouraged to participate and all are given an opportunity to feed in their views in a positive way. As for many consultation processes for council tenants and leaseholders, the initial assessment suggests that specific efforts need to be made to encourage participation.

At the same time, it is important that those of working age (those who are economically active) are given an opportunity to participate actively. As many consultation events have traditionally been held during working hours, it is important that there are opportunities for 'out of hours' events to attract participation.

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<sup>1</sup> Census 2001

<sup>2</sup> Census 2001

### *Views towards management of the housing stock*

After over 20 years of 'stock options appraisals' and following every council going through the process of 'decent homes options appraisal' between 2001 and 2005, there is some evidence that there can be differences in the views and opinions expressed by different groups of tenants. These diverging views are not always easy to predict and can vary significantly between groups within authorities and between authorities. Generally, there is evidence of the following.

Elderly people and/or those that have held their tenancies the longest tend towards a more positive view of the 'traditional' form of council housing management.

Younger people tend to be less concerned with who is the landlord or manager of the service, compared to the quality of the services being provided.

From an equality and diversity perspective, it is vital that the process undertaken therefore ensures that:

- People from all groups equally have the opportunity to input their views
- The views of different groups are fairly represented in the process and in the final decision taken by the council.

### *Key diversity strands identified as significant within this project*

Our initial assessment of the potential impact on equality and diversity is therefore focused on the following strands:

- Age
- Gender
- Disability.

It is also appropriate to consider the race/ethnicity strand specifically in the context of the appraisal.

Other diversity strands are identified as less likely to be significant in the context of the population of council tenants and the nature of the project

- Religion (linked to ethnicity/race)
- Sexuality - LGBT (Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Transgender).

Nevertheless, some data relating to the latter strand has been collected during the consultation phase of the project.

## **2.2 Initial assessment - summary**

As council housing services tend to be focused on people who are in need or otherwise vulnerable, and that these are people that might find it difficult to contribute to the debate, there is a risk that the process may under-represent the views of vulnerable groups without specific opportunities being available to participate.

During the consultation and surveys undertaken in the project, it is essential that effective monitoring of the numbers and participation levels is undertaken to ensure that the views of all groups are fairly represented in the final outcome.

The specific strands identified with the highest potential impact relate to women, the elderly and disabled tenants.

### **3 Monitoring the input of views: consultation**

During the course of the project, there were two distinct phases of general consultation. These were:

1. The initial activities undertaken with tenant and leaseholder groups in the period before the Steering Group carried out its initial appraisal of the options. These took place from early April to the end of May.
2. Consultation activities conducted by the Independent Tenants Adviser (ITA) before and during the period when the test of opinion surveys were undertaken. These took place from the start of July to the end of August.

A review of the surveys of opinion is set out below.

#### **3.1 Initial consultative activities**

Further details can be found in our overall report to the council appended to the main report from officers. In summary, the main findings are as follows.

Meetings were held with the tenants group FoSTA. Although a federated group of tenants, we found that there is an under representation of younger people and those from ethnic minorities within FoSTA. This would also appear to be the case within the Leaseholder Panel. However, it is extremely important that the views of active tenants are gathered within an appraisal of this nature so as to accept advice and guidance on wide ranging consultative activities.

The Focus Group held in early May with a group tenants from the wider Stevenage reference group comprised 12 tenants. There was a balance of men and women who attended the group with a slightly higher proportion of elderly participants. The event was positive and provided a key set of views and opinions around the relative importance of objectives which were subsequently adopted by the Steering Group in the methodology adopted for the initial appraisal of the two options.

The response within the project to the early consultative activities was to ensure that there were the widest possible opportunities available to all groups to participate in the consultation process with the ITA appointed.

#### **3.2 Consultation activities undertaken by the ITA**

Further details can be found in the report provided to the council by the ITA (Open Communities) appended to the main report from officers. The report is comprehensive and covers a range of activities including a Customer

Conference, drop in sessions, a freephone service and other meetings. In summary, the main findings are as follows.

Seven drop-in sessions were held with attendance from 56 tenants (including FoSTA representatives). These sessions were held in locations with easy access and were advertised widely. All tenants were given the opportunity to attend.

The Customer Conference in early July was attended by 99 tenants and leaseholders. 57% of attendees were over 60 meaning that, as with other face to face meetings/events, the elderly were disproportionately represented at this session. All tenants and leaseholders were given the opportunity to attend.

As with the initial consultation work, the most important assessment to make from these face to face events is to ensure that an appropriate representation of younger and working age tenants were able to provide their views in the tests of opinion.

### **3.3 Consultation activities – summary**

All tenants and leaseholders were given the opportunity to attend events. Measures were taken to facilitate the participation of all groups from within the tenant and leaseholder community.

The over-representation of older people at such events is not uncommon in his type of project. This is positive in that it represents a focus on the views of those who are particularly vulnerable. In addition, in this context, it is important that appropriate steps are taken to facilitate the input of views of younger people.

## **4 Monitoring the input of views: surveys/tests of opinion**

In order to demonstrate the commitment to gathering the views of as many tenants and leaseholders as possible and giving everybody the opportunity to input their views directly without the need to attend a meeting, the council undertook two separate surveys in order to test the opinion of tenants and leaseholders. Reference can be found to the overall results in our main report to the council and in the ITA's report. In particular, detailed statistics relating to the diversity strands are reported in tabular form in the ITA report. These are summarised below in order to inform our overall assessment.

### **4.1 Survey questionnaire**

Questionnaires were sent to all tenants and leaseholders in paper format. Information contained within the form:

- Identified contact points for those who might find it difficult to fill in the form or otherwise understand the material covered, including translation services,
- Asked for equalities monitoring information (on a voluntary basis).

In order to reassure tenants and leaseholders around probity, the Independent Tenants Adviser received the forms and collected and analysed the results, reporting them to the council in its overall report.



As we have set out in our overall report, overall response rates were 12.8%; 13.5% of tenants returned the form and 8.1% of leaseholders. We consider that these return rates compare favourably to other similar questionnaires distributed to council tenant and leaseholder populations in recent similar exercises.<sup>3</sup>

In order to achieve 95% confidence that the results were within 4% of the outcome of the survey, a random sample of around 550-600 returns would have been required out of the population of just over 10,000 tenants and leaseholders. Return rates overall were around double this amount.

However, given the disproportionate representation of some groups within the tenant and leaseholder population, the following additional monitoring outcomes are relevant.

Gender: response rates from women and men were almost equal with the proportions of people who responded as follows: women 60% and men 40% compared to 63% and 37% respectively in the tenant and leaseholder population as a whole.

Age range: elderly tenants were more likely to respond to the questionnaire with %age returns ranging from <5% (for those under 40) to 20% for those over 60 and 22% for those over 70.

245 tenants and leaseholders under the age of 50 returned the questionnaire. Compared to the number of tenants and leaseholder overall below 50 (5,152), this represents 4.8%. This level of random sample from a population of this size suggests 95% confidence that outcomes will be within a 5% variation.

Disability: the indicative response rates from disabled people were 41.1% compared to 6.7% for those without a disability.

For this strand, the amount of non-disabled returns was 618 out of a total non-disabled population of just over 9,000 which is sufficient of a random sample to provide 95% confidence in variation up to 4% from the survey result.

It might be noted in passing that this could suggest that the council's tenancy records require review and/or update as this disparity in result could suggest that many tenants (and leaseholders) consider themselves as having a disability which is unrecorded in the council's records.

Ethnic minority: Non White British respondents represented 89% of the questionnaire returned. As set out in the ITA report, the monitoring within the council and Stevenage Homes is undertaken slightly differently, with 80% recorded as White British in the customer profiling data<sup>4</sup>.

This suggests that the response rate from non White British tenants and leaseholders was in the region of 6% (133 out of an estimated 1,900), a random sample which is equivalent in statistical terms to the responses of younger people (see above).

<sup>3</sup> Other recent examples of which we are directly aware include Derby (9%) and Hounslow (12%).

<sup>4</sup> White British members of the whole population of Stevenage represented 94% in 2001.

Of the other diversity strands under consideration, the following are summary points.

Responses from those who indicated that they were gay men or bisexual were 37% and 40% respectively, suggesting that recording within the tenant profiling is under-stating the extent of gay men and bisexuality.

Conversely, responses from those who indicated that they were lesbian were lower at 9% but as there were only three responses, the sample size is too small to draw any conclusions.

## 4.2 Telephone sample survey questionnaire

The telephone survey was stratified to ensure appropriate input from different groups and was undertaken by researchers Voluntas. The outcomes are presented in the ITA report.

The following steps were taken to ensure appropriate stratification and that the response rates achieved were sufficiently large to give a high degree of confidence to the outcomes.

In particular, the survey (and therefore the time taken) was extended to ensure that younger tenants, and those in general needs housing were more fully represented in the survey than had initially been recorded.

The number of surveys undertaken overall was 1,413 and therefore greater than the return rate from the questionnaire; and the number relating to each of the diversity strands results in a potential sampling variation of +/- 3-4% (at the 95% level) as a maximum for each group.

In turn and in summary:

Type of housing: the survey was stratified between general needs and sheltered housing; 932 (66% of those surveyed) are living in general needs housing which is 89% of the total stock.

Given the greater propensity of those in sheltered housing to participate in the survey, the number of surveys of general needs tenants was increased to a level which provides for a higher degree of confidence in the results. 932 represents nearly 13% of all general needs tenancies which is well in excess of the need to provide less than 3% sampling variation at 95% confidence.

The risk that the views of general needs tenants have been under-represented or mis-stated in the survey is therefore very low. Conversely, 55% of all sheltered tenants participated in the survey, a majority of this group.

Gender: Women represented 65% of the sample survey (men 35%) compared to 69% (31% of tenants overall<sup>5</sup>). There is a low risk that the results of the survey have mis-represented the views of men and women.

Age range: 14% of respondents to the survey were under 40 and 28% under 50 compared to 29% and 50% of tenants respectively. Conversely, 58% of respondents to the survey were over 60 compared to 39% of tenants overall.

The views of elderly tenants were therefore over-represented in the sample. However the number of surveys of those under 50 was just under 400 representing a response rate of c10% for this group which is sufficient to increase confidence in the results.

Of the very youngest tenants, 2% of the survey came from those between the ages of 16-24 which is close to the 3% of overall tenants represented by this group.

Whilst the numbers of older tenants form a greater proportion of the response to the survey than in the tenant population as a whole, the volume of surveys of younger tenants is sufficient to ensure statistical confidence that the views of younger tenants are appropriately represented in the results.

Disability: 37% of respondents to the survey were disabled compared to 11% of tenants overall. This is an over-representation in the sample survey; however, the volume of non-disabled respondents was nearly 900, well in excess of the survey size required to achieve high levels of confidence.

Again, taken together with the responses to the questionnaire (41% disabled), this outcome might suggest that the council and Stevenage Homes currently under-record the level of disability in the tenant and leaseholder population.

Ethnic minority: 92% of sample survey respondents considered themselves White British compared to 89% in the questionnaire and 80% according to the council and Stevenage Homes' records. Non White British survey respondents therefore numbered 110 which is an estimated 5% of the non-White British population as a whole.

For the other diversity strands under consideration, the sample survey asked respondents to indicate sexuality. Response sizes were small compared to the overall population of tenants.

## 5 Overall evaluation and assessment

The project processes that have been undertaken have been designed to encourage participation of all diversity groups and to address areas with a risk of under-representation throughout.

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<sup>5</sup> Proportion applies to tenants only – compared to combined tenants and leaseholder quoted at section 4.1.

In the initial consultation stages, and in the events/drop-ins and customer conference, the representation of elderly people ensured that the views of active tenants from a significant minority of the tenant and leaseholder population were received.

Random and sample surveys were undertaken to ensure that all tenants were able to input their views.

Where the telephone survey sampling was achieving an over-representation of elderly tenants, sample sizes were increased so as to achieve higher statistical confidence for younger tenants and those living in general-needs housing.

In overall terms, there has been a greater representation of views from the elderly and the disabled. In the context of an EIA, this can be seen as positive in that these groups are seen as vulnerable and in higher need than other groups within the community.

To address potential under-representation of views from younger and non-disabled tenants, sample sizes need to be higher to ensure the risks of mis-stated outcomes. The sample sizes from both the survey and the questionnaire provide maximum sample errors which give us confidence that the overall outcome is sound from each of the diversity groups

Views about the service have been offered throughout and have been provided to the council for action as appropriate.

Our general conclusions are that there is a low risk that the views and opinions of different groups within the tenant and leaseholder community might be mis-stated as a result of the project work undertaken and that, where there may have been an over-representation of views of particular groups, it is from those groups that are considered to be vulnerable and therefore in need of positive representation. Positive steps have been taken to secure the views of the diversity groups.

Our overall view is therefore that, in considering the recommendations within the various reports before the meeting (22<sup>nd</sup> September 2011), the Council is able to rely on the fact that the results of the project represent fairly the views of the diverse groups within the community of tenants and leaseholders in Stevenage and that these views have been captured appropriately to inform the development of the council's policies in the future.

Effective housing services contribute positively towards the quality of life for people who are vulnerable but the decision as to whether to retain the ALMO or bring the service in house does not itself have any specific equalities impact.

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