

# Open Communities Independent Tenant Advisor

---

Final report to:  
FoSTA & Stevenage Borough Council



**Nic Bliss – Open Communities**  
**September 2011**



## 1 Introduction

- 1.1 Open Communities were recruited on 27/6 2011 by the Stevenage Tenants Federation (FoSTA) and Stevenage Borough Council (SBC) to act as an Independent Tenant Advisor in relation to the Council's proposal to transfer management of their homes back into SBC from Stevenage Homes (SHL).
- 1.2 Our role as Independent Tenant Advisor was to support tenants and leaseholders in relation to the Council's proposal to transfer management back to SBC; to provide advice to SBC on aspects of the consultation process; and to assess, analyse and summarise the opinion of Stevenage tenants and leaseholders from the various methods of consultation.
- 1.3 These methods of consultation included:
  - a test of opinion sent to all tenant and leaseholder households analysed by Open Communities
  - a telephone survey of a random sample of about 17% of tenants
  - a series of 7 drop-in sessions open to all tenants and leaseholders
  - attendance at an SHL Customer Conference
  - an independent advice line operated by Open Communities
  - a meeting with the tenant/leaseholder members of the Steering Group
  - engagement with FoSTA – the Stevenage Tenants Federation

## 2 Summary of key points

- 2.1 Of those who have participated in the consultation programme, tenants and leaseholders have clearly demonstrated their support for SBC's proposal to transfer management of their homes back to SBC, with only a small minority opposing the proposal.
- 2.2 There are a number of reasons for the support of SBC's proposal that include:
  - general support for the Council
  - general support for the principle of council housing
  - people being happy before the transfer of management to Stevenage Homes
  - perceptions that service provision will be better under SBC



- support for potential savings
  - perceptions that the housing service will not be significantly different under either option
  - negative perceptions of the performance of SHL
  - in some cases potentially inaccurate perceptions that SBC will be in a position to resolve problems caused by the overall financial situation and by changes in national Government policy
- 2.3 Amongst those who were opposed to SBC's proposals, there was a strong degree of advocacy for SHL. Many of those tenants and leaseholders who have been more closely involved in SHL tenant participation activities strongly identify with SHL, consider that it has performed well and therefore were opposed to SBC's proposal.
- 2.4 If SBC chooses to transfer management of the housing service, given that these tenants and leaseholders will need to form the nucleus of tenant participation within SBC, SBC will need to carefully consider how to encourage them to identify with and participate in an SBC housing service.
- 2.5 Particular concerns raised included:
- maintenance of quality of service under SBC
  - maintenance the HRA business plan ring fence
  - opportunities for resident involvement under SBC
  - service and improvements related issues, particularly in sheltered housing
- 2.6 We were concerned about the limited involvement of FoSTA, as the representative body for tenants and leaseholders, in SBC's options appraisal process. Apart from this, we were satisfied that SBC's consultation process was robust, comprehensive and gave adequate opportunity for tenants and leaseholders to express their views.
- 2.7 We would expect a central tenant body like FoSTA to be the hub of resident involvement in a landlord, integrated into decision-making structures. FoSTA's lack of understanding of strategic housing issues gave us cause for concern that resident involvement may not be embedded into decision-making and the service culture in Stevenage, although it is difficult for us to fully assess this within the period we have been involved.
- 2.8 Regardless of the outcome of SBC's options appraisal, we recommend that there is a need for an independent and



comprehensive review of resident involvement focussing on best practice and on impact assessment of benefits for tenants and leaseholders.

- 2.9 We are concerned that this options appraisal will not result in a long term solution on its own that will tackle the financial shortfall. Difficult decisions will need to be taken that will require a strong and embedded partnership with tenants on strategic, policy and services issues, through an effective resident involvement and empowerment strategy.

### 3 Our work programme

- 3.1 The elements of the work programme that we agreed with Marcel Coiffait (SBC) and Les Isaacs (FoSTA) on 28/6 were as follows:

- reading and assessing background material
- attending a meeting with the 3 tenant/leaseholder members of the steering group responsible for making a recommendation to SBC
- examining and commenting on consultation material and the script to be used for the telephone surveying
- providing a freephone and freepost address for tenants to communicate with the Independent Tenant Advisor
- attending the customer conference
- meeting with FoSTA (it was initially agreed to attend one FoSTA meeting and a further one to present our final report, but during the programme we also attended a further meeting to present an interim report)
- attending 7 drop in sessions
- receiving and analysing test of opinion leaflets
- producing a final report setting out the views expressed by tenants through the various different means outlined above
- presenting the final report to FOSTA and to the Steering Group

- 3.2 We have been presented with and have considered the following material:

- *Housing Futures Project Options Appraisal* ConsultCIH May 2011
- *Organisational Issues* ConsultCIH
- *Service performance analysis of Stevenage Homes* ConsultCIH May 2011



- *Financial Evaluation of Future Options to Manage the Council's Housing Stock* ConsultCIH
- *Self financing report* Tribal May 2011
- SBC Scrutiny Report Overview October 2010 (together with 4 appendices)
- FoSTA meeting minutes – 3/3 2011
- FoSTA meeting minutes – 6/4 2011
- FoSTA meeting minutes – 4/5 2011
- FoSTA meeting minutes – 1/6 2011
- Housing Futures Options Appraisal – ConsultCIH presentation to FoSTA 30/5 2011
- Housing Futures Options Appraisal – ConsultCIH presentation to FoSTA 4/5 2011
- *Partners to a better future for Stevenage* – SHL 2011 strategic objectives

3.3 We commented on the Council's consultation leaflet on two occasions (both sets of comments were forwarded to the FoSTA Chair).

3.4 In our first set of comments:

- we expressed concern about factual information in the draft leaflet requesting that the leaflet confine itself to reflecting the points raised in the independent financial consultant reports
- we suggested that the leaflet should refer to the Independent Tenant Advisor
- we suggested that SBC indicate that if management of the homes is transferred in house that involvement should be through other means than just through an advisory board
- we made a number of comments on presentation (the initial draft was wordy and repetitive and we were concerned that not many tenants would read it)
- we suggested simplifying the test of opinion questions to make it easier for tenants to respond

3.5 In our second set of comments:

- we suggested specific phrasing regarding reference to Independent Tenant Advisor to ensure that tenants were



clear regarding our role and our independence from SBC and SHL

- we made some suggestions regarding particular wording to make it clear that the decision had not already been made
- we made a suggestion regarding simplification of the description of SHL
- we requested clarification of certain figures and suggested ways to ensure that they accurately reflected the conclusions of the Tribal self-financing report
- we made some suggestions relating to further presentational issues

3.6 Most of the comments we made were incorporated in the final leaflet. Some further comments were made on the leaflet by FoSTA Les Isaacs, some of which were incorporated in the final leaflet. Concerns were expressed to us by FoSTA member Ted Jones about the leaflet. On discussion, he expressed the view that the leaflet should have specified how much decent homes funding had been brought in as a result of SHL.

3.7 Having met with Steve Partridge (ConsultCIH) to discuss the ConsultCIH report on 1/7 and Scott Crudginton (SBC Finance Director) to discuss the Tribal report on 8/7, we are satisfied that the contents of the reports are as robust as could be expected of such independent financial reports. We are not aware of any specified challenges to either report.

3.8 On the basis of the information provided to us, we concluded to SBC that we were satisfied that the consultation material was factually correct and accurately reflected what was included in the independent financial consultants' reports and the conclusions of the Steering Group.

3.9 We also met with SHL Chief Executive Lorraine O'Brien on 27/7. She agreed that the leaflet was factually correct, but expressed concern that the leaflet did not present a balanced viewpoint. She forwarded SHL's 2011 strategic objectives document to us, which assesses SHL's recent achievements and how they could cut costs. We welcome the service improvements and many of the aspirations set out in the report, but given that the consultation leaflet acknowledges that services have improved



under SHL, we did not consider that SBC's consultation leaflet contradicted it.

- 3.10 We commented on SBC's telephone survey script on 3/8. Most of the script had been drawn from the consultation leaflet and so the only comment we made was that we advised SBC to include reference to the service improvements made by SHL to ensure balance (this was added to the telephone script).
- 3.11 At the Steering Group meeting on 31/8 where our draft report and the findings from the telephone survey were presented, we were asked to confirm in our final report that the questions asked in the test of opinion and the telephone survey conformed to what would be expected in a consultation process. We can confirm that this is the case.
- 3.12 There has been some expectation amongst some stakeholders that the test of opinion was a formal ballot which would determine the outcome of the proposal. This was not the situation. SBC had used a steering group to arrive at a recommendation and had generated a consultation process to gather tenant and leaseholder views regarding the SBC steering group recommendation. In such a scenario, it would be expected that SBC would explain how the recommendation had been arrived at, and ask for views about the recommendation. This is what the consultation material did.
- 3.13 A consultation process uses various different approaches to gather opinions. These opinions then form part of the evidence that the decision-makers take into account when making their decisions. Where opinions expressed in a consultation process are mixed, the decision-makers may consider that other factors are of more importance. Where a consultation process yields majorities in favour of a particular viewpoint, or only a small number of people opposing a recommendation, it would be expected that the decision-makers would pay more heed to the outcome of the consultation process.
- 3.14 In this case, the purpose of SBC's consultation process was to find out if there are significant tenant and leaseholder views regarding the SBC steering group recommendation that might give SBC a particular reason to support or reject the recommendation. It was also a qualitative consultation, in that it was seeking to identify key issues and concerns that may need to be addressed regardless of what decisions SBC takes following the consultation.



## 4 Tenant and leaseholder views

### Test of opinion responses

- 4.1 The test of opinion is a key part of SBC's consultation programme in that it gave an opportunity to all 8,174 SBC tenant households and 1,297 SBC leaseholder households to respond to the consultation.
- 4.2 Test of opinion leaflets were circulated on 22/7 with freepost envelopes (addressed to Open Communities offices in Liverpool), and the closing date for them being received was 8/8. A facility was also provided for tenants & leaseholders to return responses to the Customer Service Centre, where responses were put in a sealed box, the contents of which were couriered to Open Communities offices on 9/8. A total of 1,211 responses were received as below (35 of which were received at the Customer Service Centre).

	<b>Number received</b>	<b>Total number of households</b>	<b>Response rate</b>
Tenants	1106	8,174	13.5%
Leaseholders	105	1,297	8.10%
<b>Total</b>	<b>1,211</b>	<b>9,471</b>	<b>12.79%</b>

- 4.3 If grossed up to represent the total population of tenants and leaseholders, the results are accurate overall to within a sampling error of  $\pm 3.3\%$  at the 95% confidence limit.

### Demographic information

- 4.4 Responses were received from tenants & leaseholders of the following genders:

<b>Gender</b>	<b>Number received</b>	<b>Total number of tenancies</b>	<b>Indicative response rate</b>
Female	698	6501	10.73%
Male	454	3920	11.58%
Transgender	3		
Transexual	2		
Prefer not to say	14		
No response	40		

NB. SBC/SHL profiling data only includes records of male and female genders.

- 4.5 Responses were received from tenants & leaseholders of the following ages:





<b>Ages</b>	<b>Number received</b>	<b>Total number of tenancies</b>	<b>Indicative response rate</b>
Under 16/18	1	25	4.00%
16/18-29	41	1276	3.21%
30-39	64	1598	4.01%
40-49	139	2253	6.17%
50-59	164	1578	10.39%
60-69	252	1374	18.34%
70 and over	504	2279	22.11%
Prefer not to say	18		
No response	28		

NB. the response rate is indicative only. SBC/SHL profiling data refers to all tenants (ie. including joint tenants – not households or leaseholders). The "number received" refers to both tenants & leaseholders. The test of opinion referred to ages under 16. SBC/SHL profiling data refers to tenants under 18.

4.6 As noted, the response rate above is only indicative, but it is clearly the case that response rates from those aged under 50 are statistically less reliable than those aged 50 and over.

4.7 Responses were received from tenants and leaseholders regarding disabilities as follows:

<b>Considered to have disability</b>	<b>Number received</b>	<b>Total number of tenancies</b>	<b>Indicative response rate</b>
Yes	493	1199	41.12%
No	618	9227	6.70%
No response	100		

NB. the test of opinion asked for information on disabilities in a different way from SBC/SHL profiling data. Of the 493 respondents who responded, 105 indicated that they have a hearing impairment or are deaf; 37 indicated that they have a mental health disability; 36 said they were visually impaired or blind; 127 said they have a long standing illness; 171 said they had a physical impairment and 40 said they preferred not to say.

4.8 1078 respondents indicated that they are White British; 16 White Irish; 6 European; 6 other white background; 2 white and black Caribbean; 3 white and black African; 3 other mixed background; 8 Indian or Pakistani; 6 Bangladeshi; 7 Caribbean African; 4 other black background; 2 Chinese; 9 other; and 22 prefer not to say (39 no responses). SBC/SHL profiling data records race and ethnicity in different ways, but 1078 White British represents 89.02% of respondents, which compares to 80.45% White British respondents in the SBC/SHL profiling data.

4.9 Responses were received from tenants and leaseholders regarding sexuality as follows:



<b>Sexuality</b>	<b>Number received</b>	<b>Total number of tenancies</b>	<b>Indicative response rate</b>
Bisexual	9	22	40.91%
Gay man	6	16	37.50%
Heterosexual	759	5694	13.33%
Lesbian	3	31	9.68%
Prefer not to say	140	1554	9.01%
No response	294		

## Responses to the test of opinion

4.10 Respondents said that they felt they understood the changes being proposed as follows:

	<b>Tenants</b>		<b>Leaseholders</b>		<b>Totals</b>	
	<b>Nos</b>	<b>%</b>	<b>Nos</b>	<b>%</b>	<b>Nos</b>	<b>%</b>
Very well	408	36.89	40	38.10	448	36.99
Fairly well	531	48.01	47	44.76	578	47.73
Not very well	105	9.49	12	11.43	117	9.66
Not at all well	24	2.17	4	3.81	28	2.31
Don't know/ not sure	29	2.62	1	0.95	30	2.48
No response	9	0.81	1	0.95	10	0.83

4.11 84.72% of respondents considered that they understood the changes being proposed either very well or fairly well. 11.97% considered that they understood the proposed changes either not very well or not at all well.

4.12 Respondents supported or opposed Stevenage Borough Council's proposal to directly manage their homes as follows:

	<b>Tenants</b>		<b>Leaseholders</b>		<b>Totals</b>	
	<b>Nos</b>	<b>%</b>	<b>Nos</b>	<b>%</b>	<b>Nos</b>	<b>%</b>
Strongly support	388	35.08	44	41.90	432	35.67
Tend to support	292	26.40	36	34.29	328	27.09
No feelings either way	224	20.25	14	13.33	238	19.65
Tend to oppose	70	6.33	1	0.95	71	5.86
Strongly oppose	96	8.68	7	6.67	103	8.51
Don't know	33	2.98	3	2.86	36	2.97
No response	3	0.27			3	0.25

4.13 62.76% of respondents tended to or strongly supported SBC's proposal (61.48% of tenants; 76.19% of leaseholders). 14.37% of



respondents tended to or strongly opposed the proposal (15.01% of tenants; 7.62% of leaseholders).

4.14 Respondents supported or opposed the proposals as follows in relation to their age:

<b>Ages</b>	<b>Number received</b>	<b>SS</b>	<b>TTS</b>	<b>NF EW</b>	<b>TTO</b>	<b>SO</b>	<b>DK</b>
Under 16	1	1					
16-29	41	12	11	12	1	2	3
30-39	64	19	15	16	5	8	1
40-49	139	52	37	29	2	12	7
50-59	164	63	42	28	10	17	4
60-69	252	90	67	49	13	26	7
70 and over	504	176	150	94	38	30	14
Prefer not to say	18	10	3	3		2	

SS – strongly support; TTS – tend to support; NFEW – no feelings either way; TTO – Tend to oppose; SO – strongly oppose; DK – don't know; NR – No response

4.15 Lower percentages of households aged under 50 responded to the test of opinion. Support for and opposition to SBC's proposal by age was as follows:

- of those aged under 40, 54.72% tended to or strongly supported SBC's proposal, whilst 15.09% tended to or strongly opposed the proposal
- of those aged between 40 and 49, 64.03% tended to or strongly supported SBC's proposal, whilst 10.07% tended to or strongly opposed the proposal
- of those aged between 50 and 59, 64.02% tended to or strongly supported SBC's proposal, whilst 16.46% tended to or strongly opposed the proposal
- of those aged between 60 and 69, 62.30% tended to or strongly supported SBC's proposal, whilst 15.48% tended to or strongly opposed the proposal
- of those aged over 70, 64.68% tended to or strongly supported SBC's proposal, whilst 13.49% tended to or strongly opposed the proposal

4.16 222 of those who support's SBC's proposal did so because they felt being managed by SBC would be better. 145 referred to supporting SBC because of the potential savings. 35 indicated



that they thought that SHL's service is poor, whilst 24 supported the proposal on the basis that the service would be either the same or better. Other points made by those supporting the proposal included that it "makes sense"; that there is no benefit to outsourcing any more; concern expressed that SHL do not manage voids well; concern expressed that the homes might be sold off; and one respondent said "I thought I was a council tenant".

- 4.17 Of those who opposed the proposal, 77 considered that SHL performs well; 28 were generally happy with SHL; 13 indicated that they are happy with the way things are, and why is there a need for change; 4 said that SBC performs poorly; and 4 said that they would not want savings to be made by "sacking staff".
- 4.18 43 did not consider that there would be any difference between SBC and SHL managing the homes (a further 18 suggested that both approaches would be good). 32 respondents considered that they did not have enough information to make a decision. 14 considered that the proposed change would happen regardless of tenant views. 6 respondents said that they were elderly and did not wish to express a view.
- 4.19 Other points made by a small numbers of respondents included:
- some were concerned about rent levels & tenancy rights
  - some consider that service charges are not value for money
  - some considered that both options are poor and wanted other options, although some specifically referred to not supporting any housing association proposal
  - some asked about the criteria used to determine which homes get improvements before others
  - some wanted tenants to be involved in saying how savings should be used
  - one respondent suggested employing local people

## Telephone survey

- 4.20 The telephone survey is an important part of the consultation process because it enables consultation with a sample of tenants who may not have otherwise responded. The telephone survey was carried by independent consultants Voluntas during August. Their detailed findings are shown in their separate report.
- 4.21 Voluntas's summary states that:



- their survey was of a random sample of 1,413 tenants from 8,115 tenanted addresses
- if grossed up to represent the total population of tenants, the results are accurate overall to within a sampling error of  $\pm 2.4\%$  at the 95% confidence limit
- 64% had read the leaflet which outlined the changes
- 67% felt they understood the changes proposed
- 42% strongly supported or tended to support the proposal to bring management of council housing back into SBC (rather than continue with SHL)
- 41% of tenants had no feelings either way regarding the proposed change to bring management of council housing back into SBC (rather than continue with SHL)
- for residents expressing support, there is a strong sense of things being better with SBC. Better services and value for money feature prominently as an advantage of the proposed change.
- there were no clear disadvantages mentioned by tenants regarding the change however those tenants who oppose the change gave a high level of advocacy for SHL.

## Drop in sessions

4.22 Drop-in sessions can be helpful in consultation processes because firstly they are an opportunity for consultees to raise and discuss issues if they wish to, and secondly, they enable a debate on the issues. However, traditionally only small numbers of tenants usually attend drop-in sessions.

4.23 We carried out the following drop in sessions:

<b>Date &amp; time</b>	<b>Venue</b>	<b>Attendance</b>	<b>Notes</b>
25 <sup>th</sup> July 10am - 12pm	Springfield House Community Centre Old Town	2 tenants	Including a FoSTA representative and an SBC councillor
25 <sup>th</sup> July 2pm – 4pm	Bedwell Community Centre	9 tenants	Including 3 FoSTA representatives and an SBC councillor



<b>Date &amp; time</b>	<b>Venue</b>	<b>Attendance</b>	<b>Notes</b>
25 <sup>th</sup> July 5pm – 7pm	The Oval Community Centre	4 tenants	Including 2 FoSTA representatives
26 <sup>th</sup> July 5pm – 7pm	The Hyde Out Shephall	16 tenants	Including 1 FoSTA representative & an SBC councillor; 2 other SBC councillors also in attendance
27 <sup>th</sup> July 10am – 12pm	St Peters Community Hall Broadwater	6 tenants	Including 1 FoSTA representative
3 <sup>rd</sup> August 10am – 12pm	Customer Service Centre	4 tenants	
3 <sup>rd</sup> August 2pm – 4pm	Scarborough Centre	15 tenants; 1 leaseholder	Including 1 FoSTA representative

NB. the notes column identifies tenants in attendance who were also either FoSTA representatives or SBC councillors. Tenants attending drop in sessions who were not FoSTA representatives or SBC councillors can be identified by subtracting those identified in the notes column from the total number of tenants in attendance. For example, the Springfield House session was only attended by a FoSTA representative and an SBC councillor (who were both tenants), whilst the Hyde Out session was attended by 14 tenants who were not FoSTA representatives or SBC councillors.

4.24 The drop-in sessions were arranged by Stevenage Borough Council. All bar one of the sessions were attended by a FoSTA representative (the Customer Service Centre drop-in session was the only one where we spoke to tenants on a one to one basis – the other sessions were meetings with those tenants who attended). One SBC councillor (who is also a tenant) attended 3 of the sessions; another SBC councillor (who is also a tenant and a SHL board member) attended one session; one session was attended by 2 other councillors. In total the drop-in sessions were attended by 47 different tenants.

### Service quality

4.25 Opinion was divided at the drop-ins about SHL and SBC. Some tenants held strong views that SHL service quality is good. Several references were made to improvements in the repairs service. Some tenants considered that SHL are prompt (“not sure that SBC will be the same”). Some tenants said that SHL “chase up complaints”. Some referred to SHL communications being better than SBC’s. A leaseholder referred to the quality of training provided by SHL on repairs issues. Two attendees particularly said “we have never had a problem with Stevenage Homes. We are quite happy with them. They are not fantastic but they are better than the Council”.



- 4.26 Some tenants referred to “leaving things as they are” because SHL is doing a good job, and some referred to SHL now being readily accepted by tenants. Others were concerned about the proposed management change because of their perceptions of SBC and what might happen to SHL service improvements under SBC (“the Council take a long time to get things done – what will happen to the housing service”, “will the Council delay doing repairs in order to save money?”, “will the Council give the same service? Will they deal with complaints? Will they fob people off?”). One tenant noted that SHL is solely focused on housing, and that the service might suffer because SBC has other concerns.
- 4.27 Others held strong views that service quality is not good under SHL. We received a large number of specific service complaints at the drop-in sessions, including:
- one tenant said he had noticed repairs taking longer in the last two years
  - several complaints from sheltered housing tenants – some about a lack of improvements and facilities - eg. disabled toilets and dropped kerbs; one reference to a long wait to get a slope installed for a wheelchair for health and safety reasons, which eventually the tenant paid for themselves; one reference to a long wait for the installation of a wet room – leading to the tenant putting in a request for a transfer
  - and some about management of sheltered schemes:
    - ◆ some said that they are frightened to raise issues with their warden
    - ◆ some that their warden “handles situations badly”
    - ◆ some referred to a specific situation where a tenant urinates in corridors and all over the communal toilet and other tenants are expected to use the same facilities
    - ◆ some referred to tenants not using mobility scooter pads and SHL “does nothing to deal with it”
    - ◆ one tenant referred to confusion regarding putting sand on paths in winter due to SHL being responsible for some paths and SBC for other
    - ◆ one group of sheltered housing tenants said “SHL are too strict and there is no care – they just don't comfort people any more - we are just expected to sit around all day”.



- concerns about lack of action regarding anti-social behaviour issues, with a perception that SHL gives the impression that “we can’t do anything”. Two joint tenants who reported anti-social behaviour from another tenant which resulted in the alleged perpetrator increasing the anti-social behaviour (spitting on the tenant’s front door) and what the tenants perceive as victimisation against them regarding items in the communal hallway which no other tenants had received.
- several concerns raised about SHL not replacing or providing fencing
- concerns that an extractor fan not being replaced leading to mould problems
- concerns about the quality of homes when let
- reference to 6 months to get guttering fixed
- several references to a long time between inspectors inspecting works and them being carried out (one reference to two sets of inspections and then very little communication regarding works)
- a reference to a “very rude inspector” who told the tenant that “there’s no money and no work will be done and you should do it yourself”. The tenant went on to say that “I can’t get anything done but they keep promising things will be done”.
- reference to improvements to security on flats taking a long time
- one tenant who reported a series of problems with improvements – installation of a boiler in the airing cupboard resulting in a high pitched humming sound that disturbs the tenant; concerns about conduits that weren’t done right first time; plug sockets installed where the tenant didn’t want them; leaks caused as a result of faulty installation of a shower taking several attempts at fixing with plastering work still needing to be redone; workmen leaving the tenant’s towel dirty. This tenant considered that repairs work was not done right first time or even second time and that the general approach appears to be to get works done solely to tick a box that they are done. However, they did say that





some of the problems were due to the contractor Connaught, and that the contractor Apollo was better – with the supervisor ringing up every day to check on progress.

- two joint tenants referred to repairs problems – an old toilet system that had taken 14 attempts to repair, with the tenants being told to use a bucket for a two week period when they could not flush the toilet. The tenants considered the number of repairs was a false economy and that the system should have been replaced at the outset; the tenants were told that a 2007 bathroom replacement programme had missed them by mistake and that there was now no possibility of their bathroom being replaced until 2012; a condensation problem that took a long time to resolve

4.28 We would caution that by their nature, drop-in sessions tend to attract tenants who see them as a means of raising issues that they feel have not been dealt with properly. Clearly we are also not in a position to establish the facts about the issues that were raised, and there could be any number of mitigating factors. As well as this, we would speculate that there would be many stories where tenants have been very satisfied with how repairs and improvements have been done. Indeed several tenants, including some who were unhappy about other SHL service issues, particularly referred to the quality of improvements to bathrooms and kitchens. Nonetheless, we were struck by the unusually high number of specific service complaints at the drop-in sessions from what was a comparatively small number of attendees.

4.29 Opinion was also divided about SBC service quality. Some tenants remembered a previous poor housing service under SBC whilst others had the opposite opinion (one tenant referred to repairs being done within 4 hours under SBC). One tenant said that SBC “managed well with the money it had” and another that the only reason SBC had not been effective was because it didn’t have the same level of resources.

4.30 Because the Customer Service Centre is managed by SBC, its services were considered by some to be a barometer of potential SBC effectiveness. It was noted that Customer Service Centre performance indicators had always been poor. Nonetheless, some tenants were happy with the service they had received from the centre. Others considered it to be poor – some particularly mentioning the way that the centre deals with repairs requests – sometimes resulting in the wrong workman



being sent to jobs – and then tenants perceiving SHL's repairs service to be ineffective as a result of this.

- 4.31 A number of tenants referred to difficulties caused by having what are perceived to be “two layers of administration”. It was felt by some that this enables “everyone [ie. SBC and SHL] to pass the buck”. Some tenants expressed concern that “they don't seem to work together much” and a FoSTA representative particularly noted that more would have been achieved had SBC and SHL worked together more effectively.
- 4.32 One tenant suggested that SBC management would enable councillors to resolve tenant concerns more efficiently. Other tenants expressed particular concern about the potential involvement of politicians.
- 4.33 Some tenants did not consider that there would be substantial changes to the housing service if the homes are managed by SBC. One tenant of 40 years said that he had not seen any difference in the service under either SBC or SHL.

### Tenant involvement

- 4.34 Some scepticism was expressed about whether SBC would involve tenants in decision-making, although it was pointed out that SBC had engaged with FoSTA prior to SHL being established, and that it is possible for Stevenage residents to raise issues with the Council. One tenant expressed concern that the potential costs of involving tenants will force SBC to involve tenants less. Some tenants did not like tenants being “bribed” to attend focus groups, although it was noted that attendance at the drop-in sessions was generally low. Some tenants particularly remarked that they found the recent Customer Conference useful and were positive about focus groups.
- 4.35 There were mixed views about the relative “cultures” of SBC and SHL. One tenant considered SBC to be good at communicating. Some sheltered housing tenants expressed concern that SHL “treat us like children. They talk down to us”. They went on to say that if they raise issues “nothing ever comes back. We are told that someone else is dealing with it, but no one ever does”. Another tenant said “we are not respected as tenants” by SHL – “the letters they write are very rude; they never praise tenants; their attitude is horrible – that council housing is for difficult people. There is no emphasis on council housing communities”. Conversely some tenants referred to SHL having a better culture



than SBC - one tenant referred to SHL engagement “like dealing with a family member, whereas SBC is someone you don’t know”. Another particularly said that SHL is customer friendly – “they get back to you when you raise an issue - they remind you with texts about appointments”.

## Financial issues

- 4.36 Given the importance of financial issues within the proposal to change management arrangements, there were various requests for explanation, and a number of comments were made relating to the finances:
- some of these comments related to understanding national Government policy – eg. a lack of understanding as to why tenants’ rents do not pay for the housing service; concern being expressed that currently debt-free SBC were being forced to take on new debt; concern that self-financing is penalising councils that have performed historically better; . A recurring comment was that Government policy could change in the future – leading one tenant to suggest that the Government will be forced to subsidise Council housing again in the future, whilst others expressed concern that future Government policy changes could cause further financial problems to SBC’s HRA business plan
  - some scepticism was expressed about whether the level of savings identified will be made, although amongst others there was an agreement that reducing senior management salary costs was desirable. One tenant who had supported SHL’s establishment had been shocked at SHL’s senior salary costs.
  - concerns were expressed that the £18m to £25m savings identified from management changes were far from sufficient to deal with the anticipated shortfall in the business plan. In the light of this, some tenants wanted reassurance regarding the HRA ring fence (ie. they were concerned that SBC will use rent income for other SBC activities) and questioned how SBC had been using income from council housing sales.
  - there was also a perception amongst some attendees that the SBC and SHL Finance Directors had not seemed to have had regular dialogue with each other



## Process issues

- 4.37 Some concerns were expressed about the consultation process being used:
- the shortage of notice for drop-in sessions
  - a suggestion that the consultation document may be “loaded”. One tenant said that it only included the views of SBC and that they would have wanted to hear SHL’s views. A recurring theme was that tenants felt like SBC’s proposed change will happen regardless of tenants’ views. One tenant felt that the proposal to change management had come without much warning.
  - concern that some tenants may not have received the consultation material and that joint tenants only received one test of opinion leaflet
  - concern about the confidentiality of test of opinion responses being left at the Customer Service Centre (we did explore this issue and were satisfied that the way that responses were handled conformed to our expectations)
  - concerns about the process used in the steering group
  - concerns that it was not explained in the leaflet why the test of opinion responses should be sent to Liverpool
- 4.38 Some tenants expressed concern that the proposed change of management may lead in some way to a proposal to transfer the homes to a housing association. Some tenants pointed out that SHL had only been set up because it was recognised that tenants would not vote to have their homes transferred to a housing association (referred to as a private company by some tenants). One tenant particularly suggested that they would be prepared to pay a higher rent than go to a housing association.

## Customer conference

- 4.39 We attended the SHL Customer Conference on 2/7, which was attended by 99 tenants & leaseholders. Their age range was as follows:



<b>Age range</b>	<b>Percentage</b>	<b>Age range</b>	<b>Percentage</b>
Under 18	1%	50-59	8%
18-29	8%	60-69	20%
30-39	4%	Over 70	24%
40-49	12%	Prefer not to say	23%

4.40 The Customer Conference took place prior to circulation of the consultation leaflet, and was the first opportunity for many of those present to discuss issues relating to the proposed change of management. The conference was an important part of the consultation process because attendees would have probably included most of the tenants active in tenant participation activities in SHL.

4.41 The following points were raised by conference attendees:

- there was a question about whether the Independent Tenant Advisor would be able to ensure that the consultation questions were not leading.
- concern was expressed that SBC's consultation programme will be lip service and that the decision had already been made. There was general agreement that this was a concern.
- a question was asked about whether SHL is in a better position to raise income from other sources than SBC (ie. through carrying out work for other council departments or other organisations).
- concern was expressed that the consultation is actually about transferring the homes to a housing association.
- a comment was made that the savings would not be so high because there will be redundancy costs. It was said that the costs of "top level" redundancies could be very expensive and wipe out the benefits of other savings. It was also noted that there would be one off costs of transferring management back to SBC (ie. branding on vans, offices etc). These points were subsequently addressed in the consultation leaflet.
- a question was asked about how savings made would be used under SBC, with concern being expressed that SBC might use savings to fund other SBC projects.



- concern was expressed that tenants would not have opportunities for real involvement under SBC. This was a general concern amongst all those present at the conference.
- there was concern that service quality would decline under SBC, a concern shared by most present. However a group of tenants at one table suggested that if the same staff were transferred back to SBC it would be likely that service quality would remain the same.
- a number of conference attendees considered that SHL was a success and there was general agreement to a tenant who said “we should stay with it”.
- there was a reference to tenants not liking change – “we were asked to agree to change to set up Stevenage Homes, and now we are being asked to change back again”. Another tenant expressed concern about the Government continually making policy changes.

### **The Independent Tenant Advisor freephone**

4.42 Open Communities operated an Independent Tenant Advisor freephone (as well as a freepost address and an e-mail address). The methods of communication are there to provide an opportunity for tenants to make contact with the Independent Tenant Advisor, but traditionally very few tenants make use of these services (it is a service that Open Communities do not charge a fee for).

4.43 There were 5 queries to the Freephone line:

- one query related to only one test of opinion form being sent to joint tenants. SBC responded that the test of opinion is part of their consultation process and is not a ballot, and that it is being carried out in accordance with accepted practice. We had made it clear from the outset that the test of opinion would only be one part of the consultation activities. Joint tenants were in a position to include their comments on the form and were also able to feed in their views through the other methods of consultation.
- one query was a request for copies of SBC's finance reports, which SBC had needed to consider confidential because



they included reference to staffing matters and to the contract between SBC and SHL. We suggested to SBC that they should prepare a report that summarised the non-confidential aspects of the reports.

- one comment referred to the consultation material as biased in that it did not specify any reasons for retaining SHL.
- the son of an elderly tenant rang the Freephone line following their parent being rung as part of the telephone survey. This query was referred to SBC and we were informed that the issue was dealt with to the satisfaction of the son at the earliest possible occasion.
- a reporter from a local Stevenage newspaper contacted the Freephone line seeking the figures from the test of opinion. We declined to give them any information.

## **5 Meeting with members of the Options Appraisal Steering Group**

5.1 We met with Les Isaacs, Gervase Muller and Jo Martins on 8/7. Les and Gervase were tenant members of the Options Appraisal Steering Group, whilst Jo was a leaseholder member. Les is the Chair of FoSTA, and Gervase and Jo are members of the SHL Board. The following issues were raised at the meeting:

- whilst Jo, as a long term member of the SHL Board considered that he understand the issues under discussion, concern was expressed that there had not been enough time for Les and Gervase to digest information given to the Steering Group (particularly the financial information). It was suggested that reports “came thick and fast” and that participants did not understand the need for the speed of the decision making process. However, it was noted that all members of the Steering Group had signed up to the group's timetable.
- concern was expressed that some information had been given in such a way as to lead participants to a particular conclusion, and it was considered that an Independent Tenant Advisor should have been employed at an earlier stage.
- it was considered that the group's recommendation had been largely made in respect of financial considerations (one participant expressed concern that he had been told that it



was wrong that he had voted with his heart and not with his head).

- concern was also expressed that:
  - a) it may not be possible to maintain the level of savings suggested by ConsultCIH year on year
  - b) the Tribal Report on the self-financing business plan had not been presented to the Steering Group meaning that they had not been presented with any evidence regarding the need to make savings
  - c) there had been a lack of financial information presented to tenants on the HRA Business Plan and on the savings anticipated by ConsultCIH

## 6 Meetings with FoSTA

6.1 We met with FoSTA on three occasions:

- on 8/7 - this meeting was attended by 12 FoSTA representatives, 1 tenant representative from the Scrutiny Panel, and 4 other tenants who had previously attended an SBC tenant focus group on options. A number of issues were raised at this meeting which were raised with SBC.
- on 3/8 – this meeting fed back SBC's responses to the issues raised at earlier FoSTA meeting and at the Customer Conference.
- on 17/8 – this meeting was held to present an initial draft of this report to FoSTA on a confidential basis. This meeting was only open to FoSTA members (and not to SBC councillors, SHL Board members or SBC/SHL staff). 10 FoSTA members attended the meeting.

6.2 FoSTA agreed the following points at the meeting on 17/8:

- FoSTA considered that they could have more helpfully supported tenants and SBC had they been involved in options appraisal discussions at an earlier stage.
- in particular, FoSTA would have wanted to have been consulted on the test of opinion leaflet and the script for the telephone survey. The FoSTA chair was consulted on the test





of opinion leaflet, but it was felt that this put him in a difficult position, especially given that there was very little time for him to consider substantial issues.

- FoSTA also considered that it would have been beneficial for an independent tenant advisor to have been available at an earlier stage.
- FoSTA was particularly concerned about the lack of information they received about financial issues. The two presentations they received from the financial consultants were about process and did not include any financial information. FoSTA considered them to be ineffective, full of jargon and confusing. They were also concerned that it was difficult to get answers to the questions they were asking.

As a result of our raising this concern with SBC, SBC Finance Director Scott Crudington delivered a presentation to FoSTA on 3/8 on the HRA Business Plan. FoSTA representatives found this presentation extremely helpful and clear, and would welcome ongoing dialogue with Scott on financial issues.

- concern had also been expressed about why the independent financial advisor reports central to SBC's proposal had been confidential. SBC subsequently explained that the reports contained confidential staffing and contractual information. FoSTA suggested that it would have been helpful to understand the reasons for confidentiality at an earlier stage.
- there had been discussions at FoSTA about other options that could have been considered, most notably the "CoCo option" developed by National Federation of ALMOs. SBC explained that the National Federation of ALMOs had published this option after SBC had initiated its options appraisal and so it had not been possible to include it as an option. FoSTA would welcome further discussion with SBC regarding future options.
- FoSTA had reiterated concerns raised by tenants at the Customer Conference that SBC management of housing may lead to a loss of the tenant voice. For this reason, they proposed an independent review of resident involvement under either option, a proposal that SBC officers responded to positively. FoSTA hopes that a strong partnership approach, founded on mutual trust and respect, can be



developed between FoSTA, tenants generally, SBC officers and councillors.

- FoSTA is keen to ensure that transferring management back to SBC does not lead to a drift to poor standards. It was noted that one of the reasons why SHL had been established had been to improve standards from the poor rating that SBC had previously received from the Audit Commission. If SBC choose to transfer management, FoSTA is committed to working in partnership with SBC to ensure that the 2 star standards achieved by SHL are maintained under SBC management.
- FoSTA had also expressed concern about possible loss of senior governance and management expertise. SBC explained that if SBC choose to transfer management, there will be an appropriate process to select the most suitable candidates for senior posts. If it is chosen to transfer management, FoSTA request that:
  - (a) there is dialogue with FoSTA about the senior staffing structure in the SBC housing department
  - (b) FoSTA is represented in the recruitment processes for the new senior staff posts (it was noted that FoSTA were involved in the recruitment of some senior staff in SHL).

## Other issues

- 6.3 During the consultation process, we were made aware that a group calling itself *Save Stevenage Homes* had circulated a leaflet and had made contact with a local Stevenage newspaper. We have not seen either the newspaper article or the leaflet, but we have been informed that both suggest that there are links between *Save Stevenage Homes* and FoSTA.
- 6.4 We discussed this issue with FoSTA. They acknowledged that the approach taken by some FoSTA members in relation to the *Save Stevenage Homes* campaign had been ill advised. FoSTA would have welcomed more comprehensive information and independent tenant advice at an earlier stage to have helped them not to have made such mistakes.
- 6.5 We were also informed that the newspaper article referred to tenants initiating the development of a tenant management organisation (TMO) to manage SBC's council homes. Local



authority tenants have a legal “Right to Manage” their homes, whereby they can enter into a legal agreement with their local authority landlord to manage some or all of the housing management functions. Exercising this right requires that a membership based tenant group carries out a lengthy “Right to Manage” process, that can be partially funded by Government, which would include development of tenant competences to operate a TMO; extensive work to ensure that all tenants are encouraged and supported to participate; a ballot of all tenants and leaseholders to demonstrate tenant support for a TMO; and extensive partnership working with the local authority to establish the TMO.

- 6.6 FoSTA recognise that any proposals to establish a TMO have no bearing on SBC’s current consultation on direct management of the housing service.

## 7 Conclusions

- 7.1 Of those who have participated in the consultation programme, tenants and leaseholders have clearly demonstrated their support for SBC’s proposal to transfer management of their homes back to SBC.
- 7.2 In the test of opinion, from a sample size of 12.79% (13.5% of tenant households; 8.1% of leaseholder households)
- **62.76%** of respondents tended to or strongly supported SBC’s proposal (61.48% of tenants; 76.19% of leaseholders)
  - **14.37%** of respondents tended to or strongly opposed SBC’s proposal (15.01% of tenants; 7.62% of leaseholders).
- 7.3 Over half of respondents from all age ranges tended to or strongly supported SBC’s proposal, with slightly lower percentages amongst the under 40s (54.72% as opposed to the highest percentage in support amongst the over 70s of 64.68%). The highest percentage of those opposing the proposal was amongst those aged between 50 and 59 (16.46%).
- 7.4 Opinion was divided at the drop-in sessions regarding SBC’s proposal. Some of the 47 attendees considered that SHL’s services are good, whilst others considered them poor. An unusually high number amongst the attendees at the drop-in sessions reported particular service problems. Similarly, there



were mixed views of SBC's existing services or potential housing services.

7.5 In the telephone survey, from a sample size of 17.41% of tenant households

- **42%** of respondents tended to or strongly supported SBC's proposal
- **11%** of respondents tended to or strongly opposed SBC's proposal

7.6 There are a number of reasons for the support of SBC's proposal that include:

- general support for the Council
- general support for the principle of council housing
- perceptions that service provision will be better under SBC
- support for potential savings
- perceptions that the housing service will not be significantly different under either option
- negative perceptions of the performance of SHL
- in some cases inaccurate perceptions that SBC will be in a position to resolve problems caused by the overall financial situation and by changes in national Government policy

7.7 Many of those tenants and leaseholders who have been more closely involved in SHL tenant participation activities strongly identify with SHL, consider that it has performed well and therefore were opposed to SBC's proposal. This was particularly reflected at SHL's Customer Conference and amongst FoSTA members (although FoSTA is officially neutral on the issue).

7.8 If SBC chooses to transfer management of the housing service, given that these tenants and leaseholders will need to form the nucleus of tenant participation within SBC, SBC will need to carefully consider how to encourage them to identify with and participate in an SBC housing service.

7.9 Particular concerns raised included:

- maintenance of quality of service under SBC
- maintenance the HRA business plan ring fence
- opportunities for resident involvement under SBC
- service and improvements related issues, particularly in sheltered housing



7.10 We were concerned about the limited involvement of FoSTA, as the representative body for tenants and leaseholders, in SBC's options appraisal process. In particular:

- sufficient emphasis was not placed on ensuring that FoSTA and the tenant representatives on the options appraisal steering group were kept up to speed and involved from an early stage in the process
- FoSTA seemed to be very unaware of the key financial issues that underpinned SBC's proposal
- tenants did not have independent advice at an early enough stage in the process
- apart from FoSTA's chair, FoSTA were not asked their views on the consultation material

7.11 Our brief engagement with FoSTA and our observation of the consultation process would suggest to us that resident involvement may not be embedded into the culture of the housing service in Stevenage. There could be a number of factors behind this:

- a "traditional" approach to tenant engagement in Stevenage. ALMOs nationally have been noted for their pioneering approach to strengthening tenant involvement. In their 2011 corporate strategy document, SHL list a range of activities that have started to be introduced, but because we have not witnessed most of these, it is not possible for us to determine how far the engagement culture has moved.
- problems with regards the development of Stevenage's HRA business plan
- a general lack of understanding of the business effectiveness of successful tenant involvement and empowerment
- a general lack of definition of the role and remit of FoSTA in the resident involvement strategy
- consequent alienation in FoSTA leading to some chaotic behaviour .

7.12 Regardless of the outcome of SBC's options appraisal, we recommend that there is a need for an independent and comprehensive review of resident involvement focussing on best practice and on impact assessment of benefits for tenants and leaseholders.



- 7.13 We are concerned that this options appraisal will not result in a long term solution on its own that will tackle the financial shortfall. Difficult decisions will need to be taken that will require a strong and embedded partnership with tenants on strategic, policy and services issues, through an effective resident involvement and empowerment strategy.

### **Nic Bliss - Open Communities – September 2011**