



Tower Hamlets

ANNUAL REPORT

To Tenants 2003-2004

Foreword by Cllr Edgar

Welcome to the Council's Annual Report to tenants, our report back to you on the housing service for 2003/04.

Since our last report, we have a new Director of Housing Management and a renewed emphasis on improving the service you receive. How tenants bid for a home, day-to-day care of estates, how we carry out major works, and how we get your involvement and feedback – have all come under the spotlight as we build on our aim of delivering an excellent service.

Tenants are vital to this. Many of you have been directly involved in service improvement initiatives and we have been looking for ways to make sure that your views are heard. This has included putting in place regular surveys so that you can let us know whether you received a good service and help us improve our services for the future. This year we launched our Core Service Standards, so that you know exactly what you can expect from us – and what to do if we get it wrong. And of course, many of you are involved in Housing Choice, our resident-led programme to bring much-needed investment into our estates.

In the coming year we will be working to build on the improvements we have made so far, and continue to learn from the feedback you give us.



Housing Choice

The council has been consulting residents through the Housing Choice programme to see whether their estate should be managed by a different landlord, who can afford to bring in the investment needed to repair and maintain their homes.

So far, three areas, Mile End, Tarling East and Crossways estates, have voted to transfer. Mile End East will be run by EastendHomes, a new housing association set up by the council; Tarling will transfer to Tower Hamlets Community Housing; and Crossways will transfer to Swan Housing Association. Residents on these estates can look forward to millions of pounds worth of improvements and a real say in how their homes are managed.

Residents from 41 Estate Steering Groups, representing over 75% of Council homes have selected a preferred RSL partner. They are now working on the detailed proposals for their estates, on which residents will be invited to vote.



HAVE YOUR SAY

Transfer can only go ahead if tenants vote in favour. Nothing can change unless residents agree. If you would like to get involved, or want to find out more about Housing Choice contact the council's Consultation and Participation Team at: Block D, 3 Millharbour, London E14 9XP. Tel: (020) 7364 0721. Or contact your independent residents' advisor, appointed by tenants to give impartial advice on Housing Choice, on Freephone (0800 317066).

Estate Steering Group chosen	RSL partner
Alfred-Malmesbury	Old Ford HA
Avebury (Avebury East & Avebury West)	Swan HA
Barleymow	EastendHomes
Birchfield	Swan HA
Boundary Housing Group	Southern
Bow Bridge	Poplar HARCA
Chicksand West	EastendHomes
Cleveland	BGVPHA
Collingwood and Horwood	EastendHomes
Columbia (Dorset, Goscoigne/Virginia, Newling)	Guinness Trust
Coventry Cross West	Poplar HARCA
Cranbrook	Swan HA
Crossways	Swan HA
Devons	Poplar HARCA
Dinmont	Spitalfields HA
East India (Aberfeldy, Brownfield & Teviot)	Poplar HARCA
Exmouth	Swan HA
Glamis	EastendHomes
Globe Town (Formerly Rogers)	Swan HA
Granby-Hereford	Swan HA
Holland	EastendHomes
Isle of Dogs (Westferry, Cubitt Town, Island Gardens)	EastendHomes
Isle of Dogs (Barkantine, St Johns Millwall (Kingsbridge), Samuda)	Toynbee HA
Lansbury	Poplar HARCA
Leopold-Burdett (East Leopold, West Leopold/Burdett)	Poplar HARCA
Lincoln	Poplar HARCA
Locksley	BGVPHA
Longnor Norfolk & Osier	THCH
Mansford	THCH
Mile End East (Bede, British St, Eric & Treby)	EastendHomes
Norton House	THCH
Ocean NDC	Sanctuary HA
Parkside (Lakeview, Lanfranc, Locton, Ranwell)	Old Ford HA
Parkview & Approach	Old Ford HA
Roche	BGVPHA
Shadwell & Solander Gardens	EastendHomes
Sheltered Blocks	BGVPHA
St George's	EastendHomes
Tarling East	THCH
Wapping (Royal Mint & Riverside)	Guinness Trust
Withy House TMO	Spitalfields HA

IMPROVING SERVICES

New director makes service improvement her priority

Maureen McEleney became Director of Housing Management in December 2003. Maureen has long experience of housing in Tower Hamlets, having worked for the council for 16 years. She had been acting director since April 2003.

Maureen has emphasised that one of the directorate's key priorities is to improve services. "This is a challenging time for housing. Residents know only too well that the council does not have the resources it needs to bring our estates up to a decent standard.

But that makes it all the more important that we use the resources we do have as efficiently and effectively as possible.

Involving residents is essential and people have already been involved in developing some of the pilot projects and in producing our core service standards which set out exactly what people can expect from the council. The tenants compact group also has a key role in ensuring an effective voice for residents.

"We are currently rated by the government as a good service, and we want to change that to excellent by providing the best possible service to residents."



Improving services – residents have their say

Residents played a key role in improving housing services through our New Ways of Working projects. These were pilot projects set up to look at how we could improve key areas and the views of both the residents who use the services and the staff who operate them were crucial in ensuring their success.

There were eight projects:

- improving how we sign up new tenants
- looking at customer satisfaction
- using technology to improve processes, such as emailing rent books
- Turning Turin Around – environmental improvements on the estate
- Giving the local Tenants Associations in South Poplar a say on how we monitor performance
- tenancy audits
- improving repairs and repairs reporting
- developing core standards for the service.

These schemes are already showing some good results. Some, such as core standards and tenancy sign ups, have now been put into practice across the borough.

A service improvement group has been set up in the housing directorate to take the work forward.

Best Value

Like all councils, Tower Hamlets' services are regularly monitored by the Audit Commission to ensure that public money is spent efficiently and effectively. This year the Audit Commission judged that the council's repairs and maintenance section is a 'fair' service, with 'promising' prospects for improvement.

This is an improvement on the last inspection, which gave us 'uncertain' prospects for improvement. The inspectors highlighted that they had identified a number of areas where improvement has already taken place in the delivery of both major works and responsive repairs.

It also identified areas where we need to improve and made a number of recommendations around increasing resident involvement in these services and strengthening monitoring.

An action plan to address the recommendations made by the inspectors has been developed and we will continue to build on the improvements we have already made.



Core Service Standards

The council launched a set of core standards that set out what residents can expect from the council's housing staff. Developed in consultation with tenants, leaseholders and council staff, and covering all housing services, they set out the level of service every officer needs to meet in their daily work.

The core standards establish four principles to govern our work

- our customers will come first in all that we do.
- we will behave with integrity, trust and respect towards all our residents and each other.
- we will all work towards delivering an excellent housing service.
- we will strive for management excellence.

A leaflet on the standards is available from Housing Offices and One Stop Shops.



A new way of letting homes

Bidding for new homes was made easier for residents on the Tower Hamlets housing list with the introduction of a new fully-automated online and telephone bidding system launched in April 2004, which enables residents to use these easy-to-operate options to register their interest for a home.

The new system, which is available in six languages (English, Sylheti, Somali, Cantonese, Vietnamese and Urdu) gives applicants the chance to place bids at any time of the day by visiting www.thhs.org.uk or calling 0845 270 2400. Online, applicants are able to view pictures of all available homes and detailed information on individual properties and the local area. Both systems also enable residents to cancel bids if they change their minds.

Consulting on major works

The council now issues a major works consultation pack whenever major works are proposed.

The new pack, developed in consultation with tenants and leaseholders, explains what major works are, what kind of consultation residents can expect, different ways leaseholders can pay their share and details on how to contact us if things go wrong.

OUR PERFORMANCE

On 1 April 2003, Tower Hamlets was responsible for 24,503 rented homes. By 31 March 2004, the number had fallen to 23,490 - mainly because 815 tenants bought their home under the Right to Buy.

Empty Homes

Last year we re-let our empty homes within an average of 5.19 weeks.

On 31st March 2004, 489 Council homes were empty; 2.01% of the Council's rented housing stock. 226 of these are 'long-term' empty homes, which need to be demolished or renovated. The other 263 are 'short-term' and are either on offer, waiting for a tenant to move in, or awaiting minor repairs.

The number of homes occupied unlawfully at the end of last year was 33. If you suspect a Council home is not occupied by the legal tenant contact your Local Housing Office so that we can investigate.

Repairs

We aim to complete all repairs to a good standard within a set number of days, according to their type and urgency.

During 2003/4:

- we carried out 86,555 repairs
- 93.90% of urgent repairs were completed in government time limits.
- the average time taken to complete non-urgent repairs was 3.8 days.
- 91% of all completed repairs were carried out using the appointment system and 86% of appointments made were kept.
- 16% of repairs were inspected after they had been completed to make sure they were up to standard.

Our most recent survey found 84% of people using our repairs service were satisfied with the service.

24-hour Repairs Help Centre

English: 0800 376 1637

Bengali: 0800 376 1638

Minicom: 0800 376 1636 (for those with impaired hearing)

Supporting vulnerable tenants

A new Tenancy Support Team, based at Gladstone Place, is building on the council's work with tenants who might otherwise be unable to stay in their homes.

The team gives people the support they need to live independently. They work with vulnerable tenants, helping them to tackle issues that might otherwise cause them to lose their tenancy, such as drug, alcohol or mental health problems, or anti-social behaviour.

The Tenancy Support Team will work with tenants to try to solve problems as quickly as possible, although they must have the motivation and want to work with the team.

Team Manager, Mike Allred says, "This isn't about holding the tenant's hand forever, but working to the point where we are able to withdraw. Sometimes, helping people into job opportunities might be all that's needed."

The team can be contacted on (020) 7364 5544

Rehousing

Last year

- we provided 2,376 households with a home in 2003/4: 1373 were re-housed by the Council, 335 by Common Housing Register Partner Registered Social Landlords and 668 by other Registered Social Landlords after being nominated by the Council.
- with our Common Housing Register partners we re-housed 388 tenant households from the Housing list who were overcrowded and 120 tenant households who were under-occupying their homes.

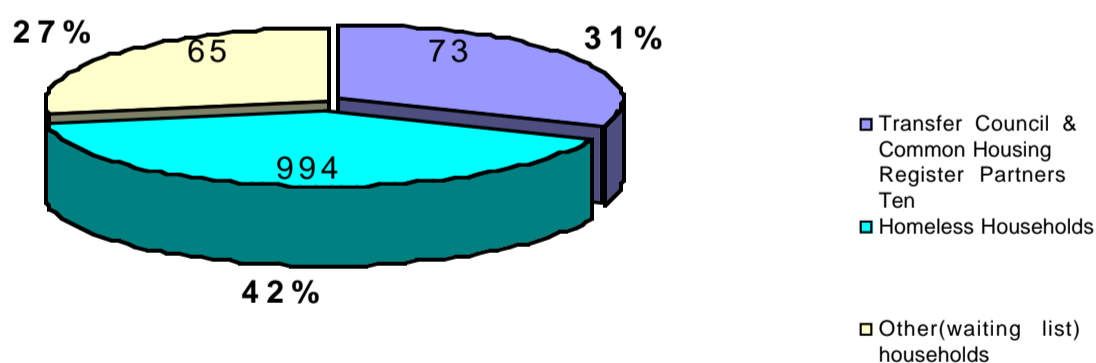
Tackling Poor Housing

Last year, we spent over £50 million repairing and improving homes as part of our capital programme including over £33 million on refurbishment and planned maintenance of Council housing. Works included:

- rewiring to 1466 homes
- new windows for 762 homes
- new doors for 560 homes
- structural works on 1938 homes
- insulation for 420 homes
- roof repairs to 542 homes.

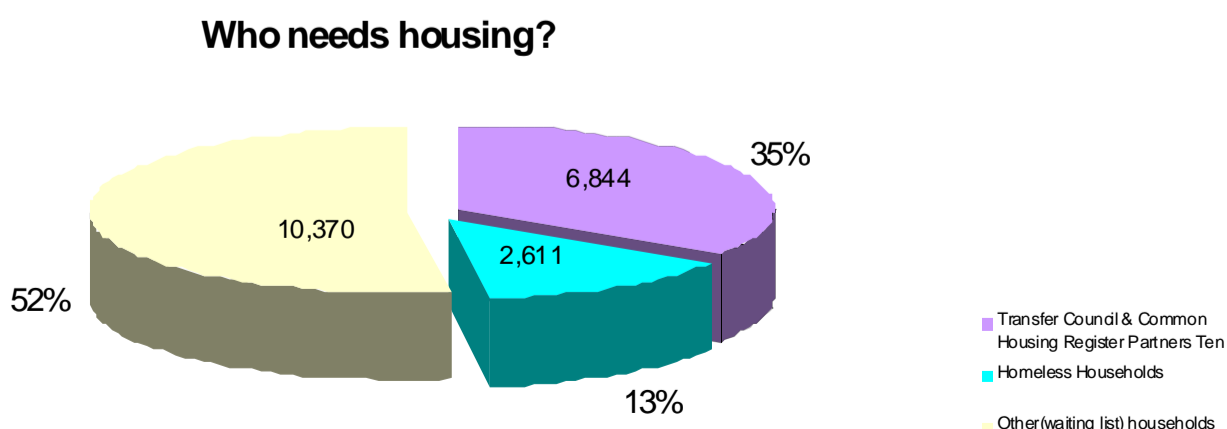
In addition 4,090 homes benefited from improvement work on common areas such as lifts, and 732 homes benefited from environmental improvements carried out around their blocks.

Rehousing in Tower Hamlets



Who needs housing?

On 1st April 2004, we had 19,825 households seeking re-housing:



Rents -showing where the money goes

Rent notices got a new look in April when the Council started to list service charges separately from rent. Previously, the charges, which cover services such as caretaking, grounds maintenance and cleaning, were included in a lump sum with rents.

The new-style statements, introduced in line with government guidance, mean that people can see exactly what they are paying for. The different format doesn't affect anybody's housing benefit and the total amount paid remains the same.

Other options when you want to move

We are particularly short of family sized homes (4 bedrooms or larger), ground floor properties and homes with gardens so we encourage applicants to consider all the housing options available to them. For example, to encourage people who have more bedrooms than they need to move to a smaller home we pay our tenants one of the most generous grants in London.

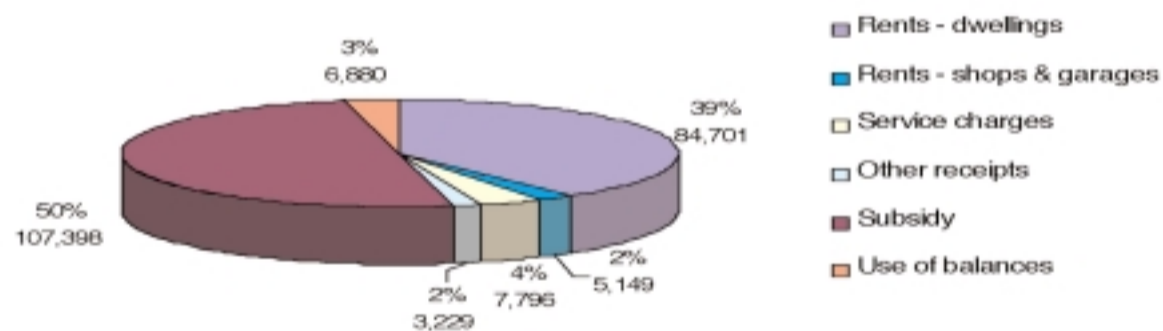
The grant is currently £500 for each bedroom given up, an extra £1,000 if your home has 4 or more bedrooms, and a £500 bonus for giving up a ground floor property to move to a home with one bedroom. It can also be given to people who mutual exchange. Last year the grant helped 67 families to move to smaller homes.

Because we don't have as many properties available as there are people waiting to move, a mutual exchange can improve your chances of moving if you are a Council or Registered Social Landlord tenant. Last year we helped 187 families exchange their homes. Your Lettings Team may be able to help you find a partner to swap with.



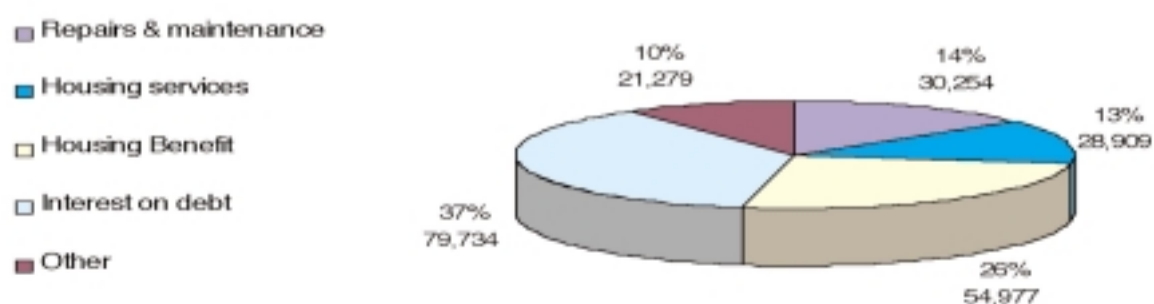
What your Housing Management Service costs

In 2003/4 the average cost of the housing management service per property per week was £31.09. This covers caretaking, concierges, and communal heating as well as Local Housing Offices, ordering and inspecting repairs, lettings, rents and tenant consultation. The money to pay for this service, to cover Housing Benefit and to pay for repairs comes principally from rents and government subsidy.



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Tackling arrears

Following a review of the rents service a new team has been set up specifically to recover arrears from former council tenants who ended their tenancies owing rent. The Former Tenants Arrears (FTA) team's responsibilities include recovery work, tracing forwarding addresses, making and monitoring agreements to clear arrears by instalments and overseeing legal action to recover rent arrears.

Last year

- the average weekly Council rent in Tower Hamlets was £70.10.
- the total amount of rent due, including arrears from previous years, was almost £90 million.
- we collected almost £86 million, rent collected as % of annual debit is 96.07%.

Collecting the rent due is important for all of us. Most tenants who had difficulties in paying their rent made - and kept - agreements to pay their arrears. Nevertheless we were forced to evict 89 families who didn't keep to agreements made with court orders. We will continue to take tough enforcement action against those who won't pay their rent.

If you are having problems paying your rent, we can help, and it is important that you contact us as quickly as possible.

Housing Benefit

The Housing Benefits team won an 'excellent' rating from government inspectors in its annual Comprehensive Performance Assessment for the second year in a row.

Inspectors look at such issues as strategic management, customer services, tackling fraud and processing claims. On average it took us under 42 days to deal with a new claim for housing benefit in 2003-04, comparing well with other London boroughs.

Tackling homelessness

Following a review of homelessness in the borough the Council launched a homelessness strategy setting out the priorities for addressing homelessness, which includes reducing overcrowding and targeting resources towards people at risk.

Last year the Service:

- * received over 4,000 applications from households for homeless assistance.
- * accepted a duty to provide a home for 1657 individuals and families.

The two biggest reasons for homelessness were the breakdown of arrangements with partner, friends and relatives (60%) and domestic violence (9.5%).

On 1 April 2004:

- * there were 2,900 households in temporary accommodation - over half of them (53%) in Tower Hamlets
- * the proportion of homeless households in Bed and Breakfast hotels was 9.84%.

The average stay in Bed and Breakfast hotels was 12.59 weeks.

Homeless Services are at Block B, 3 Millharbour, London E14 9XP.

For an advice contact: Assessment Duty Team on (020) 7364 7474



WORKING FOR A BETTER QUALITY OF LIFE

Tackling Anti-Social Behaviour

Anti-social behaviour, which can cause misery for residents, is a key priority for the council and its partners. The Anti-Social Behaviour Control Unit works with the police, local residents and other local agencies to take action against perpetrators of Anti-Social Behaviour.

In the year to April 2004, the council brought nine anti-social behaviour orders (ASBOs). An ASBO can be used to ban somebody from carrying out specific acts or entering particular areas. If the person breaks an ASBO they can be prosecuted.

The council also made 52 Acceptable Behaviour Contracts (ABCs). These are voluntary agreements whereby a person who has been involved in anti-social acts agrees to stop doing them. The threat of legal action provides an incentive to ensure that they stick to the contract.

We have increased CCTV coverage by installing 40 additional street cameras, and a further 350 cameras on public transport networks. This has helped to reduce street crime by 15%, burglary by 10% and vehicle crime by 20%.

If you are having problems with anti-social behaviour in your area you can report it on the Anti-Social Behaviour Hotline - 0800 917 5918.

Problems with noise?

Contact:

Noise Team, Environmental Health - (020) 7364 6800

Night Noise Patrol (8pm - 4am) - (020) 7364 7070

Staying independent

If you're frail or disabled we can help you remain independent in your own home by adapting it to meet your needs - this might mean putting in grab rails or a ramp and wider doors if you use a wheelchair. Contact: Occupational Therapy on (020) 7364 5948.

Help with decorating

Last year 954 residents, either over 70 years old or disabled and over 60, had up to two rooms decorated.

* 96% of those surveyed were happy with the scheme and the quality of the decorating.

Helping local people into work

The council's Local Labour in Construction scheme aims to help local people find work in the construction industry. Last year it provided training to over 3000 people, while its job search and advice arm, Docklands Recruitment, a partnership with Job Centre Plus, found work for 286 people.

Other successes include:

- Opening of a computer training centre in partnership with Laing Training
- Monitoring of over 25 sites each year to encourage employers to meet the council's target of 20% employment of local people in construction jobs
- Operating the pathway to Skilled Employment, a construction apprenticeship scheme. LLiC currently have 55 employed apprentices working for companies who work in the Borough.
- Youth projects and school visits to raise awareness of a career in construction among young people

Contact: (020) 7364 1126

PRIVATE SECTOR

New service for leaseholders

The Private Housing Improvement Team (PHIT) is now able to offer its services to right-to-buy leaseholders with the launch of its new private sector renewal strategy. Small grants or loans are available for those who are eligible, to help them either improve the inside of their homes or pay the charges resulting from major works to their block.

In the past the team had only been able to award grants to owner-occupiers, private tenants and in some cases RSL tenants. Extending the scheme to leaseholders is part of the council's aim to improve the quality of life for everyone living and working in Tower Hamlets.

Cash Incentive Scheme

In 2003-04 we spent £1,206,000 in grants of up to £29,000 helping 71 Council and housing association tenants to buy a home privately; the homes they gave up were then let to people on our housing lists.

Contact Marketing and Development Team (Cash Incentive)
Tel No: (020) 7364 2927

Home Ownership Service

Approximately 12,215 Council tenants have now exercised their Right to Buy and become leaseholders.

Last year we:

- sold 815 homes under the Right to Buy
- collected over £7.6million in service charges.

Housing Advice

For advice about private sector tenancies or problems with your landlord, contact:

Housing Advice, 255 Cambridge Heath Road, E2. (020) 7364 3558

Housing Advice, Block B, 3 Millharbour, E14. (020) 7364 7151

Putting things right

Despite our best intentions, there will be times when we make mistakes. If you can't sort out the problem with the member of staff you've been dealing with, you should fill out a Complaints Form at your Area Office or ring the Hotline.

COMPLAINTS HOTLINE

English
(020) 7364 4164

Bengali
(020) 7364 4163

Minicom
(020) 7364 4853

Private housing improvements

Grants and loans are available to enable homes to be repaired, improved or adapted. A new grant can help vulnerable people move to a more suitable home. Grants are also available to owners of empty properties to encourage them to bring the properties back into use.

Contact: Private Housing Improvement Team, Block C, 3 Millharbour, London E14 9XP. Tel No: (020) 7364 0821.