

Item No. 15.	Classification: Open	Date: 11 December 2012	Meeting Name: Cabinet
Report title:		Independent Housing Commission - Community Engagement Plan	
Ward(s) or groups affected:		All	
Cabinet Member:		Councillor Peter John, Leader of the Council	

FOREWORD – LEADER OF THE COUNCIL

As London’s largest Local Authority landlord, housing is central to everything we do as a Council. Our priority as a council is not just to ensure that all Southwark’s council homes are warm, dry and safe and to improve our housing service; but to ensure the long-term future of council housing in Southwark. This is our greatest challenge but it is central to our vision of providing a future fair for all.

On 23rd October the cabinet received the report from the independent commission on the future of council housing in Southwark. The commission looked at how we can make our borough’s council homes and housing services sustainable for the future at the quality our residents deserve.

The report described how decisions of the past and years of underinvestment had led to the challenges we face today. The report posed a number of different scenarios for the future. All of those require tough choices to be made about how and where we invest, to what standard and for whom we make council housing available.

When I first received the report I made it available to our residents. As a cabinet we then promised that we would begin an extensive and wide ranging debate on the report’s analysis, findings and conclusions. This community engagement plan is attached.

The plan is both inclusive and ambitious. It is about encouraging open discussion on the choices we together face and understanding the consequences of those choices.

We want to involve all those who will have an interest in the future of housing provision in the borough. We want to use existing, well-established forums and groups such as community councils and tenant and homeowner groups. Just as important, we want to engage new groups and in particular seek the views of young people, who have such a crucial role in shaping the borough’s future. Further, the future choices we take will ultimately have London-wide significance and so it’s important we engage beyond borough boundaries with key stakeholders at a national level too.

The way in which we engage is changing and this plan represents the start of a new and different approach. It’s an approach which builds on our innovative “community conversations” last summer. It’s also an approach that is about discussing the issues raised in the independent commission’s report in a way that is open, transparent and easily understood for all.

Finally, it is not about rushing into quick judgements. We want to take time to involve as many as people as possible and I look forward in the summer to reporting back on what we have heard about how we plan for the long-term future of council housing in Southwark.

RECOMMENDATIONS

1. That cabinet agree the proposed plan at Appendix 1 for engaging with council tenants, council homeowners, other residents and stakeholders on the independent housing commission's findings.
2. That cabinet receives a report on the outcome of the engagement exercise by summer 2013.

BACKGROUND INFORMATION

3. On 13 December 2011 cabinet made the decision to establish the independent commission on the future of council housing in Southwark. The commission's brief was to explore options for the future financing, ownership and operation of Southwark's housing stock beyond 2015/16 (when the current five year investment programme comes to an end). The aim was to examine the proposals and make recommendations for an investment strategy, for up to thirty years, that is sustainable, affordable to the council and breaks the current cycle of an escalating demand for resources to maintain the quality of the stock.
4. The commission was led by Jan Luba, a leading housing lawyer with extensive experience of work in the voluntary sector. Other commissioners included experts in housing, planning, resident engagement, housing finance and economics. The commission was serviced and supported by the Smith Institute, an independent think tank which specialises in housing and place-making. The Smith Institute provided the role of secretariat to the commission.
5. The commission's report was presented to cabinet on 23 October 2012. Officers were instructed to undertake a detailed review of the report, and draw up a plan for engaging residents in an extensive and wide-ranging debate on its analysis, findings and conclusions; the community engagement plan was to be agreed by cabinet in December 2012.

KEY ISSUES FOR CONSIDERATION

6. Housing is of key strategic importance in Southwark. It impacts not just on the physical landscape of the borough, but also on individual and wider social, health and economic wellbeing. It is therefore vital that the council develops a clear vision for the future which reflects housing's strategic role in the place-shaping agenda, helping to deliver improved health outcomes for its residents, and supporting a vibrant local economy for people on a range of incomes.
7. Southwark's current housing strategy expires in 2016. The council's response to the results of the engagement exercise outlined in this report will therefore help to inform the development of a new housing strategy, and will have implications for other council strategies and plans.

8. This report does not seek to provide a detailed evaluation of the independent housing commission's report. That work is underway but will take some time to complete. Instead the commission's report is treated as a catalyst for the first stage of an open conversation with residents and stakeholders about the future of council housing in Southwark, how many homes should be provided, to what quality and cost, and who council housing should be for and for how long?
9. There is a need for a comprehensive plan of engagement on the key issues raised in the commission's report. This needs to encompass not just those living in the council's stock, but also other residents who may, for example, be living close to Southwark's estates, or who are registered on the housing list. The council also needs to engage and learn from partners and stakeholders who may be able to advise on investment options, have experience of partnering arrangements or new models of tenant and leaseholder engagement.
10. Because of the strategic importance of council housing in Southwark, and its links to other council priorities such as economic wellbeing, and improving the health of the borough, it is of primary importance that the engagement plan is broader than just those living in or near council homes. The debate also needs to be held with strategic partners such as health and social care, other housing providers, neighbouring boroughs, and the Mayor of London.
11. The core questions the plan of engagement needs to cover are:
 - Who should council housing be for, and for how long?
 - How many homes should the council provide, and to what standard?
 - How should these homes be managed?
12. These questions will in turn raise other questions and issues, but will underpin the conversation with residents.
13. The council genuinely wishes to hear residents' and partners' views on investment options for the council's stock, and on the other issues raised in the commission's report before determining how it should respond. The investment options put forward for consideration in the commission's report as set out in paragraph 32 will be used as a starting point for discussion, but it may be that there are other viable options that are put forward. The council is open to considering all feasible options.
14. Engagement will be through existing engagement structures such as area housing forums, Tenant and Home Owner Councils, and Community Councils, but the intention is also to reach out more widely. A number of different methods of engagement will be used, some of them new and innovative, in order to generate the widest possible response on these important issues.

Engagement plan

15. Cabinet are now asked to agree a comprehensive plan for engaging with tenants, homeowners, other residents, and stakeholders on the independent housing commission's finding as set out in Appendix 1. The results of the engagement exercise will be reported back to Cabinet by summer 2013.

16. It should be noted that cabinet will also be considering a report on the future approach to community engagement on the same cabinet agenda. The plan of engagement outlined in response to the independent housing commission exemplifies this new approach to community engagement.
17. All those living in the borough will be impacted by any changes to the provision of housing over the 30 years from 2015. It is therefore vital that the consultation engages as widely as possible.
18. The council's consultation will adhere to the principles of the government's Code of Practice on Consultation to ensure that it is effective, transparent and provides information that will be used to design an effective plan for the future.
19. Tenants and homeowners living in council property have a particular stake in the future of housing and the proposals attempt to ensure that they have a strong and informed voice throughout the process.
20. The proposals include the establishment of a steering board of residents with access to independent advice and research from an expert residents' friend. This will be established through the appropriate procurement process. The consultation is the council's consultation and aims to reach as broadly across the community as possible. However the steering board will ensure that tenants and homeowners have a voice in the consultation alongside the wider community. It will also take a quality assurance role in the consultation process. It will meet up to the point where the outcomes are reported back to Cabinet.
21. The engagement will build on the experience of the "community conversations" exercise that took place in 2011 which consisted of open conversations in busy locations around the borough led by members supported by council officers.
22. The programme of consultation is designed to use a wide range of both traditional and more innovative and interactive engagement methods to reach as wide an audience as possible and encourage broad participation. The key principles of the community engagement exercise are set out in Appendix 1. In summary these are that it will be universal, impartial, comprehensive, timely and cost effective.
23. The community engagement plan gives an active role to the Southwark Youth Council, Speakerbox and other groups of young people to ensure that the voices of young people, many of who will be borough residents through the 30 year period of the future plan, are listened to. Speakerbox is a group established by the council to give a voice to looked after young people and care leavers. The Youth Council is a group run by young people in Southwark that aims to give a voice to young people.
24. It is also important that the plan considers the housing needs of tenants and homeowners when they become older people.
25. The programme aims to be inclusive and will pay attention to those who experience barriers to having their views heard and adhere to best practice in consultation.

26. The engagement plan will include a proactive communications campaign to encourage wide participation. Any publication in connection with this engagement plan will be compliant with s105(6) of the Housing Act 1985.

The independent housing commission report- key findings

27. The commission's report acknowledges the strategic importance of council housing in Southwark, noting: *'Council housing is self-evidently strategically important for Southwark: it provides rented homes for a third of the borough's residents, connects to health, education and employment, and shapes the physical landscape. Getting the strategy for council housing right is thus vital to the future prosperity of Southwark.'*
28. The report also notes *'in order to develop a long term investment strategy, the council will need to take some critical strategic decisions about how many council homes it wants to provide over the next 30 years; who should live in council housing; and how the homes will be managed and paid for.'*
29. A summary of the report's key findings is set out in paragraphs 30-36 below.

Investment options

30. The report looks back in time to establish how and why Southwark's housing stock arrived at its current position. More crucially it looks to the future, examining options for investing in the housing stock, and developing a new relationship between the council and those who live in its homes, whether tenants or leaseholders. It also considers questions about who council housing should be for.
31. The report states that it does not contain a single 'blueprint' for the future of council housing. However it should be noted that the commission did not consider wholesale transfer of the housing stock to be a viable option, given the scale of the council's historic debt, and the history of votes against stock transfer in Southwark.
32. Instead the report proposes three long-term investment options for the period from 2015 for the council's consideration, noting that each has advantages and disadvantages, and none is cost or risk free. The commission considers these options to be financially viable for the council. The three options are summarised as follows:
 - **Option 1-** a steady decline in its stock to around 30,000 properties in management. This would release funds to improve the retained stock but do nothing to address the shortage of affordable housing in the borough.
 - **Option 2-** Maintaining the stock at around the current level (39,000). This would require a substantial and ongoing refurbishment, demolition and new-build programme. This would ease (but not resolve) the borough's housing problems but would require the council to undertake a higher level of borrowing to cover the funding gap.
 - **Option 3-** A managed reduction to 20,000 homes. This would cut management and maintenance costs and release more resources for

investing in the existing stock. This would not directly address the borough's housing shortage, but could generate a large financial surplus for reinvestment, which could be used in partnership with other housing providers.

Management options

33. The report also identifies the need for a step change in the way the council manages its stock, and engages with its tenants and leaseholders. It proposes a number of different management and engagement options for the council and residents' consideration, including tenant and leaseholder compacts, increased levels of tenant management organisations or boards, and partnership models.

Meeting housing needs

34. The report is clear that issues such as demographic change, the local housing market, economic factors, and migration mean that whatever measures the council takes; demand for housing will continue to outstrip supply. Council housing is therefore viewed as a strategic asset, and therefore it is legitimate to ask 'who should social housing be for'?
35. The report notes that 'The council cannot possibly meet all housing demand in the borough, but could take the lead on developing a new agenda for council housing in London and, with the GLA and other boroughs, explore proposals to poll land and housing assets and create common housing investment funds.'
36. It also notes that 'The council could continue to give priority to those most in need. However, some reassessment of the council's lettings scheme may be justified, with possible new criteria such as allocating more homes to those in low-paid employment locally and some restrictions on newcomers to the borough.'

Community impact statement

37. The engagement plan set out in Appendix 1 outlines how the council intends to engage with the borough's residents and stakeholders on the independent housing commission's findings. The engagement plan is designed to be inclusive to all of the borough's communities, and provides a range of mechanisms to provide all residents with the opportunity to engage.
38. A community impact assessment will form an integral part of the consultation project plan. The impact assessment will validate the community engagement process by acting as a quality assurance mechanism to ensure the engagement plan takes into account all of the protected characteristics set out in the Equality Act 2010 (pregnancy/maternity, age, disability, gender and gender re-assignment, marriage or civil partnerships, race, religion or belief, sex and sexual orientation) and any adjustments that are necessary in respect of these groups. The Forum for Equalities & Human Rights in Southwark is the council's critical friend on equalities issues and will be involved in ensuring the process is thorough. The assessment will consider the following socio-demographic factors:

Factor	Consideration
Geography	The consultation process will be borough wide. Video booths, presentations, focus groups and workshops will take place across the council in order to maximise resident participation.
Age	A mix of traditional methodologies (such as attending tenants council meetings, area forums and briefing tenants and residents' associations) and the use of social media (including Twitter and Facebook) will be employed to obtain the views of residents across all age groups.
Disability	<p>We will consult with third sector and voluntary groups including organisations representing the interests of disabled residents.</p> <p>We aim to make the consultation process as interactive and accessible as possible. All events will be hosted in 'DDA' compliant buildings and any documentation produced will be available in a variety of formats (including Braille, large font and audio text).</p>
Gender	<p>Analysis of the consultation findings will explore whether or not there are any differences in resident opinion in terms of gender (and all other social characteristics).</p> <p>The consultation focus groups and workshop recruitment will take into account the need to have respondents from all genders, age and ethnicity.</p>
Household composition	<p>The consultation process will aim to minimise the burden of participation, by hosting events in locations that are easy to access for our residents and across various days and times.</p> <p>Anecdotal evidence suggests that working families or individuals with children find it difficult to participate in consultations that require considerable time commitment and conflict with work or childcare responsibilities. Therefore, by varying the type of engagement required and running events through the day, evening and weekend we will maximise the ability of respondents from all household compositions to provide their views on the future of housing in the borough (through a medium that best suits their need).</p>
Race and Religion	Southwark has a very well developed architecture of engagement through more formal community forums. These include the Disabilities Forum, Southwark Youth Forum, the LGBT Forum, the Forum for Equalities and Human Rights, the Pensioners Forum, Amador Bhubishot (Bengali community forum), the Multi Faith Forum, Southwark Muslim Forum, Southwark Somali Refugee Council, and the Refugee Communities Forum. Moreover, an offer of learning opportunities before discussions commence will be built into these consultations as well.

39. The council will use the results of this engagement exercise to inform its response to the independent housing commission's findings.
40. It should be noted that whatever option the council chooses to pursue, this will have a significant impact on communities in the borough. This will be the subject of an equalities assessment and community impact assessment.
41. Arrangements will also be put in place for engaging with key stakeholders, such as partner registered providers, to benefit from their expertise and knowledge on some of the issues raised by the report.
42. This engagement exercise will also act as a model and learning exercise for future community engagement on key issues.

Resource implications

43. There are no significant resource implications at this time, other than the resources involved in conducting a comprehensive engagement exercise.

SUPPLEMENTARY ADVICE FROM OTHER OFFICERS

Director of Legal Services

44. The Director of Legal Services notes the content of the report.
45. Section 105 of the Housing Act 1985 (HA1985) imposes requirements on a local authority to consult tenants or, to consider representations made to them by tenants or their representatives and to publish details of the consultation arrangements.
46. The Director of Legal Services notes that the planned consultation process seeks to go beyond the requirements of S.105 HA 1985 by consulting not only tenants and leaseholders but also all those who live within the borough as well as other relevant stakeholders. The Director of Legal Services also notes the plans for a substantial period of consultation, publication and the use of social media.
47. In line with the local authority's public sector equality duties to take certain steps, including steps to eliminate inequality and discrimination, the Director of Legal Services notes that the proposed engagement plan includes a plan to consult with, and make reasonable adjustments in relation to, a wide variety of residents and stake holders, in accordance with the provisions of the Equality Act 2010. The Director of Legal Services further notes that the proposed plan includes a plan for an Equality impact Assessment which, though no longer a compulsory requirement, continues to be good practice.
48. The Localism Act 2011 gives local authorities power to determine more matters, including questions such as who should qualify to be allocated council housing, at a local level. The Director of Legal Services notes that one of core questions in the proposed engagement plan deals with who council housing should be for.
49. The Director of Legal Services further notes that the proposed engagement process is but a stepping stone for further consultations and that [a] further level (or levels) of consultation may need to be undertaken by the council depending

on the proposal (s) accepted by the council at each stage.

Strategic Director of Finance and Corporate Services (FC/CE/12/10)

50. There are no financial implications directly associated with the decisions recommended in this report.

BACKGROUND DOCUMENTS

Background Papers	Held At	Contact
Cabinet paper – Establishment of a housing commission – 13 December 2011	Southwark website - http://moderngov.southwark.gov.uk/ieDecisionDetails.aspx?Id=2588	Stephen Gaskell, Corporate Strategy 020 7525 7293
Cabinet paper- The Report from the Independent Commission on the Future of Council Housing in Southwark – 23 October 2012	Southwark website - http://moderngov.southwark.gov.uk/ieListDocuments.aspx?CId=302&MId=4247&Ver=4	Stephen Gaskell, Corporate Strategy 020 7525 7293

APPENDICES

No.	Title
Appendix 1	Resident consultation and engagement programme

AUDIT TRAIL

Cabinet Member	Councillor Peter John, Leader of the Council	
Lead Officer	Graeme Gordon, Director of Corporate Strategy Gerri Scott, Strategic Director of Housing & Community Services	
Report Author	Stephen Gaskell, Head of Strategy and Partnerships Stephen Douglass, Head of Community Engagement	
Version	Final	
Dated	30 November 2012	
Key Decision?	Yes	
CONSULTATION WITH OTHER OFFICERS / DIRECTORATES / CABINET MEMBER		
Officer Title	Comments Sought	Comments included
Director of Legal Services	Yes	Yes
Strategic Director of Finance and Corporate Services	Yes	Yes
Cabinet Member	Yes	Yes
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