



Newcastle Tenants Federation

# **Our Vision for the Housing Management Service**

**October 2002**



## Introduction

The quality of the housing management service is of crucial importance to tenants in Newcastle. Good quality housing management has a key role to play in sustaining successful communities. It is just as important as the financial investment in council homes. (*Tenants Conference report 2001*)

Whilst there are strengths to the existing service, improvements are needed. In fact we believe the service should be radically overhauled. A new vision is needed which can inform the development of a dynamic and responsive service that continually improves. In this report we have set out the vision that tenants representatives have for an improved housing management service and some of the ways we think it can be delivered. We are submitting this to the council's best value review team in the belief that it has an important contribution to make to achieving best value.

All the ideas in this report have emerged from discussions the Federation has had with tenants and residents groups from across the city and we have identified our sources throughout the report. In September 2002 we held two open meetings for tenant representatives from across the City to discuss the draft vision, identify any gaps and to seek their agreement to this report. Following this, information was included in 'Tenants News' October 2002 and every tenants and residents groups will receive a copy of this report.

## **Our vision for the service**

The housing management service should be a service that is delivered as part of a comprehensive package of services to estates. It should be a neighbourhood service with locally based, highly trained staff.

*(Tenants Conference report 2001, Case for Change 1998)* It should be a service that understands fully the needs of its users and is developed in response to these needs. It should be a flexible service that is not afraid to change and find new ways of doing things to meet challenging situations. It should be a service that is wholly accountable to tenants. There should therefore be clear service standards and a wide range of ways in which tenants can get involved in developing, monitoring and evaluating the service. *(Tenant Involvement Advisory Group 8th March 2001)*

## Key Points

- The housing management service should be delivered in close co-ordination with all other relevant services. There is a need to build on current good practice and ensure there is co-ordinated working within the community and housing directorate, council and other agencies.
- The network of locally based housing offices is a strength of the current service. We need to make sure that these are accessible to all, provide confidential interview rooms and are attractive environments.
- Tenants value the local presence that estate staff have and we support any measures that allow housing officers to spend more time on estates. In addition, we would like to see greater 'on the spot' management through an enhanced caretaker role or the newly created neighbourhood warden posts.
- Housing forums need to be established so that tenants can continuously monitor and look for ways to develop the housing management service.
- Service standards need to be developed for each element of the service so that tenants know the level of service they should expect to receive.

- Tenant compacts provide a useful tool to produce these standards and need to be developed at a citywide, neighbourhood and local estate level.
- A more strategic approach to tenant involvement needs to be developed. Everyone needs to be clear about the methods that will be used to consult tenants and residents groups, individual tenants and hard to reach groups within communities.
- Greater support is needed for staff to make sure that all tenants receive a high quality housing management service.

## **Housing Management: part of a comprehensive package of services to estates**

When discussing the housing management service tenants nearly always talk of the need for more 'joined up' working. (*Tenants Conference report; Repairs Best Value report 2000; Case for Change*) The need for 'joined up' services has also been highlighted by government and council policies. However what is meant by joint working in practice is not necessarily clear. We mean that the housing service should be delivered in close co-ordination with other relevant services. Joint working must start with the council and within the community & housing directorate. (*Report to officers meeting Sept 2000*) For example, tenants have identified the need for greater co-ordination between local housing managers and more centralised teams such as capital investment team. (*Business plan open meeting May/June 2002*)

Tenants identified other examples of the need for 'joined up' working in their response to the repairs best value review. The fact that repairs workers often have more contact with tenants than any other council officer was recognised. These workers should therefore be encouraged to pick up on and refer on any wider issues they come across in the course of their work. (*Repairs Best Value report*)

There are examples of joint working by housing officers in Newcastle and this good practice should be shared and built upon. One example is the surgeries by the community and housing managers from the West End and a Community Psychiatric nurse in the Hadrian Clinic. (*Cruddas*

*Park EHMC May 1999)* Another example is the joint work of community and housing managers and youth workers in tackling some anti social behaviour in parts of the city.

The starting point for developing 'joined up' working has to be an understanding of the roles and responsibilities of other departments and agencies and a common approach to problem solving. As a way forward we think regular contact between key agencies should be developed through multi agency panels in each neighbourhood. Panels such as this already exist in some parts of the city, for example in Cowgate. The good practice and lessons learnt by these panels should be used to develop this proposal further. Care will have to be taken to make sure that joined up working on the ground is matched by co-ordination at a strategic level within directorates and agencies.

The role of area committees should be developed to bring together and monitor the work of different agencies to make sure that where possible all work is coordinated.

## **A neighbourhood service with locally based, highly trained staff**

### **Neighbourhood housing offices**

The existing network of neighbourhood housing offices is a strength of the current service and offers a good starting point for the new service we want to see. However some of the offices are cramped with difficult access and poor facilities. In particular, the current opening hours inconvenience many tenants. *(Officers meeting 17th Oct 2001)*

Whilst there is a move in the council to create 'one stop' shops there is still a need for locally based housing offices. These offices need to be accessible to all, provide confidential interview rooms and offer an attractive environment for tenants and staff.

We think all housing offices should provide a range of services including rent collection, taking repairs reports, processing housing benefit, access to tenancy and benefit advice.

The offices should also be a contact point for other council services. One suggestion is a free phone that can be used to directly access envirocall and other key council services. All offices should publicise and promote council and other services relevant to the communities they serve through the information they display and distribute. Currently the information displayed in many offices is jumbled and out of date and immediate steps should be taken to tackle this. *(Repairs Development Group July 2002)*

The opening hours of offices should be reviewed. One immediate change we would like to see is an end to lunchtime closing and the introduction of at least either Saturday morning or one late evening opening. *(Repairs Development Group March 2001)*

### **Locally based staff**

Tenants have repeatedly asked for housing officers who have a better understanding of the local area and spend more time out on estates. *(Tenants Conference report; Tenant Involvement Advisory Group 8th March 2001)*

One implication of the introduction of the 'Your Choice' lettings policy is that more officer time will be freed up to deal with general estate management. *(Council's response to Federation's concerns Dec 2001)* We should make the most of this opportunity to make sure that estate officers do have a greater presence on estates.

One issue of importance to tenants is that greater support is given to new tenants in the first months of their tenancy. *(Case for Change, Your Choice Open Meeting Feb 2002)* We think all new tenants should be given a welcome pack with local information and receive a follow up visit within 15 days of taking up a tenancy. More than one follow up visit should be made to anyone considered vulnerable. We would also like to see local staff carrying out an annual visit to all tenants on their patch.

In addition to a more pro-active estate officer role tenants have frequently identified the need for greater 'on the spot' management through an estate caretaker. *(Case for Change; BKW report 2001; Tenants*

*Conference report*) The estate caretaker would have responsibility for overseeing the general upkeep of the estates. Their responsibilities could include: being a point of contact for any tenant needing assistance; ensuring the estate is kept clean and clear of rubbish; that communal repairs are carried out; that street lighting works; that empty properties are kept tidy and secure and that any vandalism is reported and dealt with. The service provided will be wider than a purely housing service and will be a visible presence on hand to deal with issues as they emerge.

We would like to see this proposal developed further as a way of developing more effective estate management in Newcastle.

The newly created neighbourhood warden posts in Byker and Cowgate go some way to meeting this proposal. These posts need to be monitored to evaluate their effectiveness and to decide whether they can be developed in other parts of the City. Officers, councillors, tenants and residents groups and individual tenants need to be involved in this process.

## **An Accountable Service**

The move from a committee system to cabinet style local government has meant that there are no structures at a local level for monitoring and developing the housing service. Tenants have expressed great confusion about how decisions are now made and how they can influence them. *(Tenants Conference report)*

There is an urgent need to address these concerns if the fundamental best value requirement of tenant involvement in the continuous improvement of the service is to be met.

### **Housing forums**

We suggest that housing forums are set up at neighbourhood/ward or area level to develop and monitor the service and the implementation of service standards.

There should be greater devolvement of budgets to local level to allow scope for local schemes and initiatives to be developed. The spending of these budgets should be accountable to and monitored by tenants.

There is a need for greater transparency and coordination of expenditure on estates. In particular, tenants have asked that spending on works through the environmental stewardship scheme be co-ordinated with any housing improvements to make maximum impact. *(Tenant Investment Forum and Best Value Focus Group August 2002)*

## **Service standards**

If the housing service in Newcastle is to be made accountable tenants must know what level of service they should expect to receive. Tenants have identified concerns about inconsistent levels of service across the city and the need for more transparency in the way the service is delivered. (*Tenants Conference report*)

There should therefore be a set of clearly publicised service standards for each element of housing service which tenants have been involved in setting and monitoring. There should be citywide core standards with scope to introduce separate local standards at a neighbourhood level and eventually at a more local estate level. This could be achieved through the use of tenant compacts.

The citywide and neighbourhood standards should focus primarily on landlord and environmental issues but could then be expanded to include policing, health, education and other related issues. An estate based compact can include all these issues from the outset.

## **City-wide Compact**

The following act as examples of the type of services and standards that could be included in a citywide compact. It is not intended to be an exhaustive list, other issues such as support services to tenants, customer care and street lighting should be considered.

- Estate Inspections

*Estate officers will carry out a twice-yearly inspection of all estates; a report will be produced with a timetable for action.*

Target 100%

- Repairs

*Appointments will be made for all non-urgent repairs.*

Target 90%

- Tenancy Enforcement

*A receipt will be issued when you report a problem.*

Target 90%

*We will take your concern seriously and discuss a range of options for sorting out your problem.*

Target 100%

*We will keep in regular contact with you and keep you informed of progress.*

Target 100%

### Empty Homes

*All empty homes to be repaired and ready to let within 4 weeks.*

Target 90%

*Homes should be cleaned and repaired to an agreed standard before they are let. All new tenants should sign a satisfaction card included in their welcome pack.*

Target 100%

- New Tenants

*All new tenants should be visited in their home within 15 days.*

Target 100%

- Improvement Schemes

*A tenant satisfaction survey and evaluation meeting with the Tenants and Residents group will take place after all improvement works are completed.*

Target 100%

- Communal grounds

*Grassed areas will be cut every two weeks between April and October and all grassed edges will be maintained.*

Target 80%

*Shrub beds will be cleared of litter, weeds and pruned once a month between May and September.*

Target 85%

### **Themed Compacts**

In addition to the above, themed compacts could be developed around services to particular groups of tenants such as tenants of sheltered housing and other communities of interest. Again these compacts should include clear standards and targets to allow tenants the opportunity to monitor and evaluate the effectiveness of the service they receive.

## **Neighbourhood/Local compacts**

To date Newcastle has not developed any local compacts although progress is being made towards this in two areas of the city. Although we feel that it is important to allow these to develop at a pace determined by local tenants we think that there is an urgent need to have published service standards relevant at a neighbourhood level. We therefore propose that neighbourhood compacts are developed as a way of kick starting the process, and that they incorporate and build on the Citywide standards, as outlined above.

The neighbourhood compacts can be developed with the tenants groups in each area covered by a community and housing neighbourhood office. This would not prevent more local, unique, estate compacts being developed at any point. In fact, the neighbourhood standards will inform and help to shape the local compact. We propose that Newcastle City Council needs to take a proactive role in the development of neighbourhood compacts.

## **Monitoring & developing the compacts**

Both the citywide and neighbourhood compacts need to be regularly monitored and reviewed if they are to be effective. Although there are already mechanisms in place to monitor the citywide compact in practice this doesn't happen as effectively as it should. Similarly, the development of local compacts has taken a long time to get off the ground. We believe that part of the reason for this has been that there

is no officer time within the council particularly focussed on tenant participation. We therefore endorse the council's recent decision to create a specific post within the council to address this.

We suggest that local community and housing staff should have responsibility for the monitoring and development of neighbourhood compacts. Staff should involve tenants through tenants & residents groups and local forums. Ways of involving tenants not involved in organised groups also need to be identified. We suggest that one way of doing this would be to organise an annual neighbourhood housing event to which all tenants in the neighbourhood are invited to discuss and review service standards.

Ward committees could oversee the development of neighbourhood compacts and be the mechanism for enforcing the compacts. If a tenants and residents group wants to develop an estate based compact, the ward committee can also monitor progress. The Kirklees idea of serving improvement notices on the council for non-enforcement could be developed.

Area committees should receive bi-annual reports on all the neighbourhood compacts and have more of a strategic overview of their development. The Tenant Involvement Advisory Group should receive an annual report of the progress being made by neighbourhood compacts.

## **A service that understands fully the needs of its users.**

Effective tenant involvement is the key way to develop a truly responsive service that fully understands the needs of its users.

Newcastle council has a good track record of supporting tenants groups and the Federation. However in spite of this tenant involvement is often ad hoc and uncoordinated.

### **A strategic approach**

There is therefore a need to develop a more strategic approach, building on the good practice that exists. The development of a specific resource within the council focussing on tenant participation is vital to achieving this systematic and co-ordinated approach to tenant involvement. We think however that the new post has to have a strategic role and that the council must identify how tenant participation in general, and the development of compacts in particular, is going to be promoted and developed.

### **Standards for tenant involvement**

The community and housing directorate needs to develop and be clear about the specific methods they will use to consult tenants and residents groups, individual tenants and hard to reach groups within communities. These can become service standards in the neighbourhood and thematic compacts.

There are already some published standards about the relationship between the council and the Federation (*Citywide Compact 2000*) however these need to be developed further.

Standards around the relationship between local staff and tenants associations need to be developed and included in neighbourhood compacts. In particular, it should be a responsibility of any council officer present at tenants meetings to follow up all issues relating to council services raised and report back on a way forward.

Systematic ways of involving tenants who are not part of organised groups need to be identified.

A range of methods to measure tenant satisfaction also need to be identified. This could include surveys and reality checks. There should be clear internal mechanisms for dealing with complaints. All complaints should be logged, including informal complaints, and viewed positively as feedback on the service. (*Repairs Best Value report*)

Feedback to tenants on the outcome of any consultation or involvement is vital. Too often this doesn't happen and tenants don't know how their views have been taken into account. This can discourage them from getting involved in the future and leaves the council open to accusations of 'not listening'. (*Federation's letter to council re repairs July 2002*)

## **A flexible service that is not afraid to change**

Our vision will only become a reality if there is a cultural and structural change in the organisation. It will be essential to create a culture where innovation is valued and respected and that staff in neighbourhoods exchange their ideas and good practice.

The council has many dedicated and committed housing workers but we are concerned about the low morale amongst some staff. We are also concerned about the confusing management arrangements around support services such as caretakers and porters (*Support Services open meeting September 2001*) and the number of staff on temporary contracts. All of these issues need to be addressed.

We believe that the necessary changes can be made to give staff greater support create a better working environment and in turn make sure that tenants receive a high quality service.

One idea worth exploring is the use of a peripatetic pool of workers who can provide cover in neighbourhood offices when staff are on long term sick. Thereby reducing the need to move estate officers who know their patch to other offices to cover staff absences.

## **Background Information**

'Your chance to have a say' Tenants Conference Report 2001 - Newcastle Tenants Federation

Achieving Best Value in the Repairs Service June 2000 - Newcastle Tenants Federation

'Living the High Life' - Cruddas Park Tower Blocks tenants Group 2000

Case for Change - Scotswood Estate Housing Management Committee 1998

Tenant Involvement Advisory Group 8th March 2001

'Your Choice' - Council's letter in response to Federation's concerns December 2001

'Your Choice' - Tenants Federation's open meeting February 2002.

'Save our streets - Save our community' Beechgrove, Kenilworth, Warrington (BKW) Tenants Group 2001

Tenants Federation's report to officers meeting Sept 2000

The Business Plan - Tenants Federation's open meeting May/June 2002

Cruddas Park Estate Housing Management Committee May 1999

Officers meeting 17th Oct 2001

Repairs Development Group July 2002

Repairs Development Group March 2001

Citywide Tenant Participation Compact 2000

Tenants Federation's letter to council re repairs July 2002

Support Services - Tenants Federation's open meeting September 2001

Capital Investment Forum meeting and Focus Group August 2002

Tenants News (issues July 2002, February 2002, December 2001, October 2001)

Community and Housing Select Committee Meetings (May 2002, March 2002, October 2001)

**All background papers are held at:**

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