

News, views and good practice ideas from in and around the region brought to you by Chelmer Housing Partnership

Homes for All

Does it get your vote?

The Government's new five-year plan for housing, 'Homes for All', places the nation's favourite tenure at the heart of its housing plans. The unashamedly vote catching strategy, which addresses the nation's nearly universal wish to get a foot on the property ladder, places housing as a key election campaign topic.

The five-year plan seeks to ensure a decent home for all – regardless of tenure – and has a clear focus on making home ownership an achievable and affordable choice for over quarter of a million low-income households.

Central to the plan is:

- A new First Time Buyer Initiative and a reinvigorated Homebuy scheme offering home ownership for low-income households under the Choice to Own banner
- A competition to design a £60k model home

- Halving the number of households in temporary accommodation
- Investing £40m in new areas for growth in the south-east

The plans have been met with varying degrees of support. While sited as a potential "win-win for the Government, housing associations and their residents" by the National Housing Federation others have shown concern over the potential financial impact and possible loss of affordable rented stock the initiatives might bring.

A foot on the ladder – First Time Buyers Initiative

The First Time Buyers Initiative will offer first time buyers an affordable route into home ownership. They'll be able to buy a share in their new home with the possibility of full ownership over time.

Initially, these homes will be built on existing public land and buyers will need to meet the cost of construction

Getting an equity share... the Homebuy way

A new and improved Homebuy scheme will provide an estimated 300,000 social housing tenants with the opportunity to own a stake in their homes.

Homebuy will sit alongside Right to Buy and Right to Acquire as an integral part of the ODPM's Choice to Own package. Under the scheme social housing tenants will be able to buy between half and three-quarters of their existing home at a discount. The Homebuy scheme is due to launch in April 2006 as a voluntary initiative. However, the Government will encourage local authorities and housing associations to offer the scheme to their tenants as one of their choices for home-ownership. Further information about the scheme will be available by Easter.

only. Landowners will preserve ownership of the land and will have first refusal for any first sale of homes.

A full copy of Homes for All is available at www.odpm.gov.uk

Can you build homes for £60K?

The English Partnerships' Design for Manufacture competition aims to show that it is possible to build a good quality, energy efficient and accessible home for just £60,000.

The competition will invite bids to develop 1,000 homes on English Partnership owned sites and will contribute to the First Time Buyers Initiative.

Further information about the competition will be available in the spring.



Partnership Practice

Some good practice ideas from Chelmer Housing Partnership.

Through a customer's eyes

A major review of CHP's continuous improvement and resident involvement strategies brought about the idea of Tenant Auditors.

An article in CHP's resident newsletter asked for volunteers and a recruitment panel assessed applicants suitability. Initially, CHP recruited six Tenant Auditors and started a detailed programme of training to equip them with the necessary skills to challenge and test CHP's services from a true customer perspective.

As part of this induction and training programme Tenant Auditors covered the history of CHP and social housing, an outline of the service to audit, confidentiality, and auditing skills and techniques.

In May 2004, CHP launched its first Tenant Auditor project as a key part of its Repairs and Maintenance Best Value Review. With continuing support from CHP staff, Tenant Auditors had the freedom to decide on the best research methods to use to get a real view of how customers see services.

While meeting strict confidentiality guidelines, auditors have full access to all areas. Working independently,

As part of CHP's drive for continuous improvement and improved resident engagement it has become one of the first housing associations in the Eastern region to have asked its tenants to audit services.

tenant auditors can carry out various checks. For example:

- Staff and tenant interviews
- Shadowing staff on repairs help desk
- Shadowing trades staff on repair call-outs
- Tenant interviews and surveys

Armed with the results of their investigations, auditors were able to share their findings, discuss the issues, and provide suggestions for improvements to senior management.

Their suggestions have formed a key part of CHP's best value improvement plan for the service. Examples of improvements made since the review based on the auditors findings include:

- Packaging repairs that are not considered urgent by estate and areas

Recruiting Tenant Auditors to drive forward continuous improvement and improve opportunities for resident influence is closely in line with the Government's commitment to empower local communities and improve local housing services. For example, self-assessment, external scrutiny and focusing on service outcomes from a customer's perspective are all key themes within the Audit Commission agenda for Housing Inspection and Tenant Inspectors are routinely part of Housing Inspections.

For more info on tenant auditors contact Lynne Foster, Operations Director, on 01245 613049, lynne.foster@chelmerhp.org.uk or Don Thompson, Tenant Auditor, on 01245 460984.

- Introducing a Minicom to enable the deaf and hard of hearing to report repairs
- Introducing hand-held computers to enable efficiencies of mobile working
- More emphasis on both pre and post inspections
- Better systems to identify special needs of disabled and vulnerable tenants when carrying out repairs

By seeing services from a customer perspective, CHP also identified that having two departments both dealing with different aspects of responsive repairs was confusing for customers so the two departments have now been combined.

All parties have considered the first tenant auditor project a success. CHP has been able to improve services and ensure they reflect customer needs. Auditors taking part in the scheme have developed new skills and experiences, which they can use in following audits or other outside work.

"I think the idea of tenant auditors is wonderful," said Don Thompson, one of CHP's Tenant Auditors. "I'm certain that giving tenants the opportunity to influence decisions will lead to better services for all CHP's customers".

CHP aims to further expand and use its pool of Tenant Audits in subsequent continuous improvement projects.

