

# **Rochford District Council Stock Options Appraisal Consultation**



**Prepared by the Independent Tenant  
Advisor  
*Your Choice* Housing Consultants**

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**Contents**

<b>1.0</b>	Acknowledgements	3
<b>2.0</b>	Introduction	4
<b>3.0</b>	Tenant Empowerment and Communications Strategy	4
<b>4.0</b>	Capacity building with the Board	4
<b>5.0</b>	Consultation programme	5
<b>6.0</b>	Tenant and leaseholder views	8
<b>7.0</b>	Summary	9

## **1.0 Acknowledgements**

On behalf of the entire *Your Choice* team I would like to express our thanks to the Rochford Housing Options Appraisal Board (RHOAB), Tom and Betty Childs, Virginia Wade-Bain, Rene Nelson, Rob Westbrook, Jean Bull, Cllr Gibbs, Cllr Choppen, Cllr Lumley, Cllr Vince, Judy Gloyens, Angela Baldock, Acting Inspector Kevin White, Trisha Leahy and John Pritchard.

I would particularly like to praise the tenants and leaseholders who provide their time on a voluntary basis.

I also want to thank Sarah Schofield who has provided us with a great deal of support throughout the consultation programme with help organising events and activities.

The team have thoroughly enjoyed working with the Board and the tenants and leaseholders in Rochford and hope that we may continue supporting you through the implementation of your chosen option.

*Alan Townshend*

**Alan Townshend**

**Managing Director**

***Your Choice* Housing Consultants**

## **2.0 Introduction**

The Government require all councils with housing stock to undertake an appraisal of the available investment options to achieve the Decent Homes Standard by December 2010.

Tenants and leaseholders should be at the heart of the decision making process and to support tenants Independent Tenant Advisors are appointed to ensure they receive balanced information and are able to make a well informed decision based upon the full facts.

Following a competitive selection process conducted by members of the RHOAB, *Your Choice* Housing Consultant (YCHC) was appointed as the Independent Tenant Advisor in July 2004.

## **3.0 Tenant Empowerment and Communications Strategy**

An integral part of the Options Appraisal is to empower tenants and leaseholders through knowledge and information in order that they can make a well informed choice. The Community Housing Task Force (CHTF) requires a strategy on how this will be achieved within the required timetable at the outset of the project.

Communication with tenants, leaseholders and other stakeholders throughout the Options Appraisal is very important. This needs to be considered at the start of the process and must link with the Empowerment Strategy.

YCHC worked with RHOAB to develop the Tenant Empowerment Strategy and made comments on the Communications Strategy which were agreed by the Board and "signed off" by CHTF.

The Tenant Empowerment Strategy has a life beyond the Options Appraisal and it is expected that tenant participation will be enhanced throughout the project and through the implementation of the chosen option.

## **4.0 Capacity Building with Board Members**

In order to raise awareness and understanding of the key components of the Options Appraisal YCHC carried out a training needs analysis with RHOAB to identify priority areas for training. A range of training was carried out to meet these needs and included the following;

- Options Appraisal and process
- Housing Finance – HRA and Capital
- Stock retention

- ALMO and Gateway
- Stock transfer

Additional capacity building was undertaken by the a range of consultants and officers which included;

- Decent Homes
- Stock Condition Survey and outcomes
- PFI and mixed solutions
- Financial policy issues
- Housing Needs Study

Additional training needs that were identified in the analysis will need to be considered by the Council in the near future and details of these are included in the Tenant Empowerment Strategy.

YCHC also carried out a number of awareness sessions for all of the council's staff in order that they understood the components of the Options Appraisal and what the options would mean for them as members of staff.

## **5.0 Consultation Programme**

The consultation programme was agreed with RHOAB at the start of the project and was targeted into two distinct phases. Phase one was capacity building for tenants and leaseholders on the Options Appraisal and providing information. Phase two came after the Council had completed the financial review and identified the required investment to achieve Decent Homes and other tenant improvements.

Phase one consultation included the following;

- meetings at all the council's sheltered housing schemes
- public meetings for tenants and leaseholders
- drop-ins at various locations across the district
- newsletter
- freephone help line

Attendance at all of the sheltered housing scheme meetings was very good and over 200 tenants attended these sessions. Public events were not well supported and were not particularly successful.

RHOAB members attended and supported all of our events and we thank them for their support.

In considering the low levels of attendance at meetings on the phase one programme, it was agreed that phase two would consist of door to door

consultations rather than a lot of public meetings which had previously proved unsuccessful.

Phase two started just prior to the release of the council's financial information and focused on how each of the options could meet the required investment for Decent homes and other improvements.

When the financial report was released RHOAB decided to discard the retention option as the Council could not meet the investment required for Decent Homes from available resources. The PFI option was also discarded as the council's housing stock does not fit the criteria for PFI. Therefore, the consultation focused around the two remaining viable options of ALMO and transfer and what each means in terms of tenants rights and investment into the council's homes.

Activities in phase two included;

- door to door surveys – 369 completed
- telephone surveys/panel – 54 completed
- home visits – 16 completed
- second newsletter
- meetings at all the sheltered housing schemes (12) – more than 100 tenants seen
- public meeting for tenants and leaseholders – 7 attending
- leaseholder meeting – 4 attending
- focus group with applicants from the housing register- 45 attending
- stakeholder meeting with local community – 50 plus attended
- freephone calls – 99 callers

During this phase of consultation more than 700 tenants and leaseholders were either seen or spoken to about the options. This equates to approximately 38% which is very high for a consultation project of this nature.

The results from the telephone and door to door surveys were as follows;

### **Telephone Survey**

	<b>Number</b>	<b>%</b>
<b>Stock retention</b>	<b>9</b>	<b>30</b>
<b>PFI</b>	<b>0</b>	
<b>ALMO</b>	<b>17</b>	<b>57</b>
<b>Transfer</b>	<b>4</b>	<b>13</b>
<b>Rather not say</b>	<b>11</b>	
<b>No reply</b>	<b>17</b>	
<b>TOTAL</b>	<b>54</b>	

The percentage results are calculated against the number of respondents that indicated a preference (30). If all the “rather not say” responses choose the same option the results could be very different.

### **Door to Door Surveys**

	<b>Number</b>	<b>%</b>
<b>Stock retention</b>	<b>117</b>	<b>47</b>
<b>PFI</b>	<b>1</b>	
<b>ALMO</b>	<b>111</b>	<b>44</b>
<b>Transfer</b>	<b>21</b>	<b>9</b>
<b>Rather not say</b>	<b>65</b>	
<b>No reply</b>	<b>54</b>	
<b>TOTAL</b>	<b>369</b>	

The results from the door to door surveys show a stronger preference for the Council remaining as the landlord. The preferences for stock retention were before the release of the financial report and move to two options.

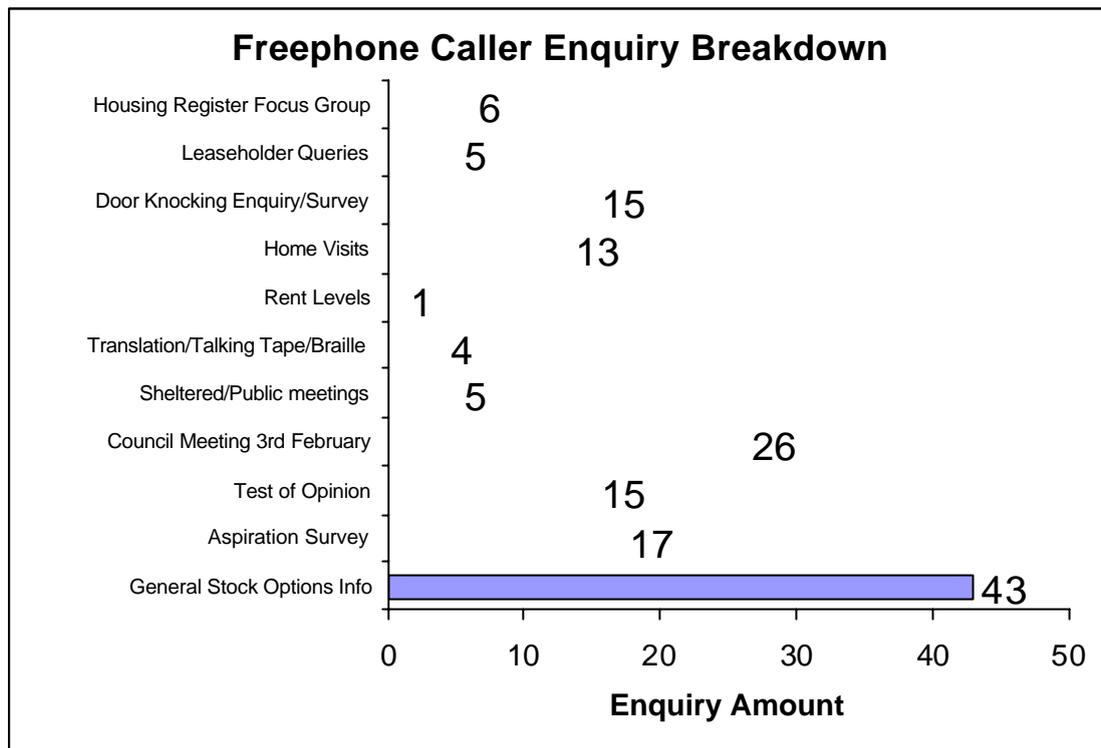
The amount of consultation activity undertaken by YCHC and the Council has made a significant difference on the level of understanding and knowledge about the options.

#### **5.1 Freephone Help Line**

A freephone help line has been provided for tenants and leaseholders throughout the duration of this project and has been very well used in comparison with other ITA contracts that YCHC have undertaken.

The freephone service is provided Monday to Friday from 9am to 5pm with an answerphone available after 5pm and on weekends and bank holidays. Any messages left are responded to on the next working day.

In total there have been 150 callers on the freephone which are categorised as illustrated in the bar graph.



The chart indicates that the most common form of enquiry was for general information about the options, which can include information on rent levels and tenancy rights. Other popular enquires were in response to the aspiration surveys and test of opinion and in connection to meeting invitations.

### 5.0 Tenants and leaseholder views

Throughout the consultation programme tenants and leaseholders have been generally happy with the Council and the services they receive. As a result there had been no desire to consider alternative options until the advice that retention would not meet the Decent Homes Standard and could not be considered.

During the consultation programme tenants and leaseholders were asked to indicate what the most important improvements to their homes and communities and what they thought about the council's housing service. The results were as follows;

The two most important things to tenants about their housing service and tenancy were:

- rent levels
- repairs and maintenance.

Tenants' top three priorities for investment were:

- ❖ new windows
- ❖ new bathrooms
- ❖ better car parking provision.

Tenants and leaseholders know why the Council can not continue as they are now and understand that the improvements offered by an ALMO, if the additional funding is realised, will be focused around achieving Decent Homes. In comparison, tenants and leaseholders understand that transfer will offer an opportunity for more improvements to be undertaken.

This information was made very clear in the council's last newsletter and will help tenants decide what option to choose in the test of opinion.

## **7.0 Summary**

There has been a considerable amount of consultation activity undertaken during this project which has given tenants and leaseholders sufficient opportunity to find out about the options.

Tenants and leaseholders have actively participated in the process to date and those that have attended our meetings used the freephone service or attended other consultation events would appear to have gained a basic understanding of the options.

A postal "test of opinion" survey seeking the views of tenants and leaseholders for either the ALMO or transfer options is being carried out and the results of which will be reported to RHOAB on 17<sup>th</sup> March 2005.