



**INDEPENDENT TENANT ADVISOR
REPORT**

**Presented by
OPEN COMMUNITIES Ltd.**

July 2014





EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

At the conclusion of this phase of the stock transfer process, the Customer Working Group and Durham County Council can be assured that tenants and leaseholders have been provided with the impartial knowledge and support that has enabled them to make an informed decision on the future ownership and management of the Council's housing stock.

The Customer Working Group have been fully involved in the stock transfer process and the Council's decision to propose the transfer of its housing stock.

Open Communities has worked with the tenants and residents of Durham and partner organisations to ensure that tenants are have been in the driving seat of the council's stock transfer proposals. The activity and input from all of the tenants on the CWG has shown a high level of knowledge and awareness and a real desire for meaningful participation in shaping the transfer proposals.

Open Communities are happy to confirm that the consultation and participation programme has been comprehensive, thorough and appropriate and the Customer Working Group has been comprehensively engaged throughout. CWG members have been proactive in their involvement throughout the process and have ensured the views of the wider tenant network have been clearly put forward. It has been clear that CWG involvement has been focussed on what is best for the tenants of Durham as a whole.



THE STOCK TRANSFER PROCESS

Key elements of the ITA role are detailed below, followed by ITA comments:

Some of the key milestones of the ITA's role were:

- **Publicising the role and scope of the ITA via FREEPHONE postcards, attendance at appropriate meetings, drop in sessions and events and contributing to Council communications**
 - Comment: Tenants have had the opportunity to engage via a variety of methods
 - Comment: Council-issued stock transfer communication materials have been assessed to ensure validity and fairness
- **Providing clear information regarding the need for and the role of the Stock Transfer consultation and participation process via meetings, drop in sessions, events and the FREEPHONE service**
 - Comment: Tenant representatives on the CWG have been fully engaged with all of the issues underpinning stock transfer as have those tenants who played a part in the wider consultation process
- **Establishing an effective working relationship with the Customer Working Group built on trust, honesty and transparency**
 - Comment: CWG members have managed the ITA contract and activities and have directed the consultation. CWG members have been proactive in this process, suggesting topics for discussion and ensuring key issues are discussed in detail
 - Comment: The CWG went through a period of considerable change when two members were elected on to the 'shadow board' of County Durham Housing Group. This could have adversely affected the effectiveness of the CWG, had it not managed it the way it did. A new chairperson and vice chairperson were formally elected into position and assumed their roles seamlessly. It is to the group's credit that it continued to work for the benefit of the wider tenant community while these changes took place.
- **Providing a FREEPHONE service throughout the process which offered all tenants the opportunity to discuss the stock transfer proposals in the detail they desired.**
 - Comment: Take up of the FREEPHONE service has picked up considerably since the publication and delivery of the Offer Document. The majority of calls reflected a desire among tenants to know more about the stock transfer process. Not all calls were focussed on the transfer process and those tenants who used the FREEPHONE service to report day to day housing management issues were forwarded on to the relevant staff to address their queries. (see FREEPHONE breakdown attached)



- **Providing independent and impartial advice in clear terms throughout the process.**
 - Comment: CWG have confirmed they have had access to impartial advice throughout
- **Assessing baseline information provided by Durham County Council and its consultants, in particular consultation material, the Offer Document and the accompanying DVD.**
 - Comment: Information has been shared with CWG directly from communications consultants allowing them the opportunity to raise questions, clarifications and issues
 - Comment: These issues have been openly discussed at CWG meetings
- **Ensuring that information provided throughout the process was fair, balanced and factual.**
 - Comment: I can confirm information provided has been comprehensive, fair and factual
- **Contributing to the Communication Strategy agreed with Customer Working Group and partner organisations.**
 - Comment: CWG have been fully engaged in reviewing and agreeing these documents
- **Developing and encouraging a pre-meeting with Customer working Group members where no Council or landlord officers were present to enable a free exchange of views with the ITA.**
 - Comment: CWG have had opportunity to engage with the ITA free from influence from any partner organisations.
 - Comment: CWG members showed a high level of knowledge of the key themes of stock transfer as well as a high level of confidence in questioning and testing information put to them by Durham Council
- **Regularly reviewing council information on the stock transfer process in such a way as to allow clear examination of the implications of stock transfer and 'stay as you are'.**
 - Comment: CWG members have an informed and rounded view of the implications of both 'yes' and 'no' votes
- **Ensuring the involvement of all stakeholders and explaining the implications for them.**
 - Comment: Leaseholders have been engaged at an appropriate level
- **Attending a series of meetings and key events with CWG members - as well as tenants not involved in the formal consultation activity - across Durham to raise the profile of the stock transfer process and potential outcomes, giving tenants the opportunity to raise issues or concerns and communicate the interim decisions emerging. The following meetings/events were attended:**



- Comment: Attendance was generally high across the activities. The general feeling could be described as 'open' to the idea of stock transfer with healthy and relevant comment and discussion on the potential outcome. CWG members played a supportive and positive role in the sessions - ensuring that tenants had the opportunity to talk to fellow tenants about the transfer proposals

Our general activity included providing advice, guidance and clarity at the various meetings/events across the county including

Customer Working Group meetings,

- Provide general advice/support to CWG in discussing service provision
- Discuss and explain specific aspects of the stock transfer process/proposals
- Advise on and respond to general issues/questions
- Support and advise CWG to question key aspects of the proposal
 - nature of the group structure
 - implications for each of the three landlords
 - effects of government policy
 - future for customer involvement under the new arrangements.
- Shape formal CWG statement for the Offer Document
- Promote involvement in the Tenancy Agreement Working Group
- Discuss and review election of a new Chair and vice Chair for the group.
- Facilitate workshops on various specific housing and related services
- Discuss appointment to shadow Board.
- Priorities for the offer document.

Tenancy Agreement Working Party Meetings

Advised on various technical issues in relation to draft tenancy agreement

Public events

'Thank you' event at Durham City Homes

Drop-in events across the County

Stock Transfer Project Steering Group

Communications Work Stream

Discuss and contribute to the Council's communications programme



PROJECT MANAGEMENT ARRANGEMENTS

Open Communities fielded an experienced and skilled team to ensure that the project was delivered in full and on time and to the satisfaction of all stakeholders.

The project was project managed by one of our Directors supported by experienced Associate Consultants.

KEY STAFF

Tom Hopkins

Tom was the Managing Director of Open Communities at the commencement of the process. Tom left Open Communities at the end of 2013.

Ray Coyle BA (Hons) MCIH - Director

Ray has worked as Independent Tenants Adviser for many stock options processes including Liverpool, Manchester, Blackpool, Stoke Vale of Glamorgan, Conwy, Ceredigion including working on projects culminating in ALMO, stock transfer, retention, PFI and mixed models.

Prior to becoming a consultant Ray worked in tenant participation for a Manchester based registered social provider and worked for the homeless charity SHELTER. Ray is a Housing and Development graduate, a qualified member of the Chartered Institute of Housing and has detailed knowledge of tenant participation and current housing issues. He is a tutor and assessor for the Chartered Institute of Housing on their distance and blended learning programmes

Paul Bayman

Associate Consultant

Vastly experienced in resident involvement and community consultation, North East based Paul has assisted Jamie in delivering the ITA role, notably in facilitating a Customer Working Group team-building event, attending Study visits and participating in open-day consultation events.

Rob Mallet BA FCA

Independent Tenants Financial Advisor

An experienced Senior Financial Executive, Rob has offered a detailed knowledge of housing and voluntary sector finance to the Open Communities ITA team. Well respected within the housing sector his track record has included presenting to the National Housing Federation on finance issues, developing innovative finance models and responsibility for finance at one of the country's largest housing organisations.

Rob's specific role within the team has been to assess the financial elements of the Stock Option Study and his experience and skills at assessing detailed business plans and potential options has highlighted key issues, concerns and advantages to tenants. Working with the partner organisations, Rob has assured the Customer Working Group that they have been able accurately assess the options.



Rob has worked directly with Jamie to ensure that the complex, detailed and in-depth financial considerations have been broken down and translated into terms which allow tenants to make informed decisions about the options in line with their priorities.

BACKGROUND TO OPEN COMMUNITIES

Open Communities Ltd. is a regionally based, Government approved, accredited, independent training and advisory agency which specialises in developing resident involvement within social housing and regeneration proposals.

TRACK RECORD

The company was formed in 2005 and has offices in Liverpool and Cardiff. There are currently over 20 full and part time staff and Associate Consultants who are employed by Open Communities.

Open Communities has a staff team with a vast experience of Independent Tenants Advisor work including having acted as ITA on over 40 projects across the country including some of the most challenging and ground breaking projects to have taken place.

Open Communities also manages a wide range of tenant empowerment projects across England and Wales, funded by both the Westminster and Cardiff governments. The invaluable experience gained from these projects has been used to assist tenants in negotiating their housing future.



LEAD ADVISOR SUMMARY COMMENTS

As lead Independent Tenants Advisor to the process, I am entirely satisfied that the Customer Working Group has been given the information and support to assist them to understand the implications of both stock transfer and stock retention. The CWG has embraced this process and shown a high level of knowledge of and commitment to the stock transfer consultation programme, ensuring that it did not lose sight of the fact that it was representing the views of the wider tenant network.

This is particularly commendable, given the changes in CWG members, with the loss of the chairperson and vice chairperson - midway through the process - to the shadow board of the prospective new parent company.

Generally, the group, individually and collectively, have carried out their role selflessly and in the interests of all of the tenants in the County. It has displayed a readiness to effectively question the Council's proposals and has retained an open and pragmatic approach to the transfer process. It has ensured the views of the wider tenant community have been taken into account in shaping and developing the Offer the Council put to the tenants of Durham.

Specifically, the message delivered to full Council by the Chairperson of the CWG was focussed, relevant and powerful. It effectively encompassed the collective view of the CWG which, in turn, has represented the 22,^{***} tenants of Durham County. The work of the CWG in this process has been fundamental in ensuring that tenants have been at the heart of the Council's transfer proposals

The CWG recognise the need for tenants to continue to play an active part in delivering housing services - regardless of the outcome of the stock transfer ballot. There is a strong foundation in place to build on and ensure the collective voice of tenants in Durham will continue to be heard

Raymond Coyle BA (Hons) MCIH
Director, Open Communities
July 2014

CUSTOMER WORKING GROUP COMMENTS

Here