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Questions and Responses from re-housing workshop

This is a list of questions generated by a workshop focussing on re-housing residents which took place at the Reaching out to Blackwall community gathering on 3 November 2007. The facilitated workshop was attended by over 50 residents and involved two experts from Tower Hamlets Council – Robin Sager and Rafiqul Haq.

The questions below were put forward by the residents at the workshop and the responses have subsequently been developed by Tower Hamlets Council. Where it is not possible to answer specific questions at this stage we have provided a reason why and, where possible, given an indication of when this should be possible.

Questions from workshop:

- 1. We've heard there may be up to 3000 new homes in Blackwall Reach. How many of these would be for us (on site existing council tenants and leaseholders) and how many would be rented or leased by private and other landlords?**

The number of new homes to be built is not yet known but will depend on several factors such as the agreed development option (such as whether to repair or replace Robin Hood Gardens). What is known is that the more that can be built, the more that will be available for affordable rent, which local people can apply for.

At present, the Government has set a minimum requirement of 35% for the amount of affordable housing which has to be included in any new developments. This means that at least 35% of the new housing built at Blackwall Reach would be either affordable rented, or 'intermediate' housing such as shared ownership to help people get onto the 'housing ladder' of owning their own home.

- 2. How much will monthly payments for tenants change as a result of this regeneration?**

Rents would be set in line with Government policy. This means, limits would be set on what you could be charged and how rents would increase, with the intention of keeping rents affordable.

By April 2012 rents for Registered Social Landlord (RSL) and Council homes are gradually being converged to be the same for similar properties. The rents in new homes would therefore be the same whoever is managing and building them.

- 3. At the moment we pay for gas and water as part of our rent. How will this change as part of the new regime?**

This will depend on how the homes are built (or refurbished) and who manages them.

Whether homes are new or refurbished, the homes will be more energy efficient and will therefore be cheaper to run.

In addition, if homes are redeveloped, gas, electricity and water charges would be related to what each individual family consumes. This is different to the current situation in Robin Hood Gardens where each tenant pays an average share of costs even if they use less or more gas, electricity and water than other residents.



4. After the regeneration, do the existing on site residents have first priority to come back?

Once the preferred regeneration option for the neighbourhood has been identified, a clear re-housing strategy will be developed which sets out the relevant re-housing choices for Council tenants, leaseholders and freeholders. Council tenants will be encouraged to apply for homes they are interested in and leaseholders and freeholders to negotiate for what is best for them, so those who wish to remain in or return to the area have a good chance to do so.

5. How will the Council deal with the elderly, disabled and otherwise vulnerable tenants during the re-housing process?

We will do all we can to deal with vulnerable tenants as sensitively as possible and, where necessary, will work with other agencies and care providers.

All Council tenants will have the opportunity of home visits from a Council lettings officer to make sure their re-housing needs are up to date, and where necessary a medical assessment would be made for any special requirements.

6. How will the Council deal with the elderly, disabled and otherwise vulnerable leaseholders during the re-housing process?

As for vulnerable tenants, we will do all we can to deal with vulnerable leaseholders as sensitively as possible and, where necessary, work with other agencies and care providers.

7. Many of us don't want to change the Council for a different landlord. What are the implications of this?

The re-housing strategy mentioned in Question 4, would allow for Council tenants who wish to remain as Council tenants to apply for homes managed by the Council/Tower Hamlets Homes (the Council's Alms Length Management Organisation or ALMO for short). There will be options available such as whether to apply for homes in the area or outside the area, Council managed homes or Registered Social Landlord (RSL) managed homes, new homes or older properties.

8. How long will this regeneration take, especially the re-housing process? We need clear timelines of what will happen at which stage.

While there is not yet an agreed development, the anticipated timetable is that the works would continue until 2015. Re-housing would be carried out in stages, with some homes being vacated before others.

9. If we are re-housed temporarily, what will the quality of our temporary accommodation be? Will it be comparable to our existing accommodation?

If temporary re-housing becomes necessary any temporary accommodation would have to be suitable for the needs of each tenant.



10. Will temporary re-housing be sensitive to the fact that many of us need to be near Woolmore Primary School as a workplace as well as a school for our children?

The Council is aware of the importance of minimum disruption to children's schooling and this would be an important factor in the allocation of any temporary or permanent housing. This process would be managed as part of the re-housing strategy.

11. We need to know details of the phasing of this regeneration. Will all re-housing be carried out before any demolition?

Residents will be involved and informed throughout the process. All re-housing for each block would be carried out before that block is demolished.

12. What will the configuration of the new accommodation be like? We need to know how many rooms we will be allotted etc. If it isn't possible to know this now, when will we know?

Detailed design specifications will be developed, including resident consultation, once the decision to proceed with the regeneration is taken by Tower Hamlets Cabinet in spring 2008.

Information on the size of properties tenants can apply for will be advised following the re-housing application and assessment. Visits from a lettings officer and special surgery sessions will be offered to help with the application and offer advice.

13. Most of us are opposed to the idea of a temporary move. What are the implications of this?

As with other options for re-housing, a single move may be preferred, although this may restrict tenant's opportunities. If new homes suitable for a tenant's needs can be built in the area before a temporary move is necessary then these may be the homes a tenant would choose to apply for.

14. Will everyone be re-housed equally, or will preference be given to anyone for any reason?

There will be priority rather than preference for re-housing. For example, if the re-housing process is phased, tenants in homes required to be cleared first will have higher priority than those not needed to be moved until a later date.

Tower Hamlet's lettings policy applies equally to everyone who applies for re-housing or is on the housing list. It includes a commitment to delivering quality services to all and to, respond positively to the needs and expectations of all users of the service.

The Council is committed to eliminating discrimination on any grounds including race, gender, disability, age, sexuality, religion or belief. This commitment derives from a respect for every individual.



15. What does the refurbishment option involve in terms of temporary or permanent re-housing for tenants?

If the refurbishment option is chosen, those living in Robin Hood Gardens are still likely to require re-housing due to the works required. A re-housing strategy would be prepared and there would be an assessment of tenants' needs and preferences, including whether a temporary or permanent move would be most suitable.

16. When will an individual needs assessment be carried out for tenants? Who will do it?

Once a scheme has been agreed and the Council has decided that re-housing is necessary, 'Decant Status' is awarded to the homes affected, and work would begin on carrying out needs assessments for re-housing purposes. This could happen in spring/summer 2008. The current Tower Hamlets Council practise is to allocate a lettings officer to work with the tenants who need to be re-housed and offer advice on applying for available homes. Home visits and special surgeries would be offered to provide advice to tenants.

17. When will an individual needs assessment be carried out for leaseholders or freeholders? Who will do it?

Having exercised the Right to Buy, or purchased their home on the open market, leaseholders or freeholders would not have a needs assessment for re-housing, although applicants for housing living with them may wish to apply to join the housing list to apply for housing in the normal way.

However it is recognised that home owners are an important part of the local community.

The Council, or its housing association partner, would negotiate with affected home owners to agree the full market value of their homes. Individual valuations and negotiations would be carried out. Resident leaseholders can expect to receive full market value, plus statutory home loss and other compensation payments for the inconvenience caused.

Options for leaseholders would include making their own arrangements by buying elsewhere or, if their preference is to stay in the area, having the opportunity to buy a replacement home in the new scheme, perhaps on a flexible shared ownership basis. These options will have to be developed with the Council's housing association partner, once they are brought on board.

18. Some of us live with relatives. We have made separate applications for housing to the council and are on a waiting list. How would the demolition option affect us? (ie would they get the same decant status as secure tenants?)

To qualify such applicants must be able to prove that they have lived with the tenant in the property as their only or principal home continuously for at least 12 months before the re-housing scheme was agreed (ie 'Decant Status' awarded). They must be eligible to be on the housing list. Their application will be placed in the priority Community Group with a preference date the same as the date the re-housing was agreed, meaning they can then apply for advertised vacancies.



19. What about children over 18 who live with parents who are secure tenants?

Children of secure tenants over the age of 18 and living with their parents are considered as immediate family and included in the tenant's application, unless they themselves are living with a partner (married or not) and/or have their own children. If this is the case they should join the housing list to apply for housing themselves.

20. When will we know for sure which option is going ahead?

It is anticipated that Tower Hamlets Cabinet will make a decision on whether to proceed with the regeneration in spring 2008.

21. The school is at the centre of this community. Will the regeneration proposals make sure that the normal functioning of the school is not disrupted in any way, at any point?

The project team would work closely with the school and the Council's Children's Services department, to minimise disruption to the pupils and staff at Woolmore School, and to ensure classes can continue during the development work.

22. We want the answers to all these burning questions in a written form.

Answered

23. Will there be communal heating for everyone?

This will partly depend on whether Robin Hood Gardens is retained, as currently most of the homes there are individually heated. The type of heating system used for new homes will be carefully considered. Any new homes would be designed to be easy and cheap to heat and may include communal heating if practical and economic to do so.

24. Will there be a written Guarantee of Return for current residents of Blackwall Reach?

Until a decision on the development options is made and a final regeneration scheme agreed we cannot develop the detailed re-housing strategy for this area. As we do not yet have a clear idea of the type and quantity of homes required for re-housing, it would be unrealistic and unfair to make promises at this stage.

However, for those wishing to remain in or return to the Blackwall Reach area, the re-housing priority would allow real choices, including the options to return and a good chance to do so.

25. If they [the partners] don't keep to their word, (ie if we are not happy with the housing we are given - either temporary or permanent) how do we appeal?

It is not a question of residents being given housing on either a temporary or permanent basis, as during any re-housing the applicants have the chance to choose the homes they wish to apply for themselves. As far as possible the re-housing process is designed to meet tenants' needs, and it is managed closely with residents.



26. If we are not happy with the housing we are given (either temporary or permanent), how will we be compensated?

Again, it is not a question of residents being given housing on either a temporary or permanent basis as during any re-housing the applicants themselves choose the homes they wish to apply for which should prevent people being dissatisfied with their accommodation.

27. The re-housing process needs to be made much clearer. Will re-housing be based on needs or want? If it is based on the council's assessment of needs alone, we may end up with a worse offer than our current accommodation.

The re-housing options and process will be made clearer during the home visits, during which tenants needs are assessed. Re-housing will be based on a combination of the applicant's needs and what the applicant wants and bids for within the Council's 'Choice Based Lettings' system.

28. Will we have Secure Council Tenancy or Assured Tenancy, if we want to stay in Blackwall Reach?

While the new homes are likely to be built on Council land, it is likely that they will be built by a developer working with a registered Social Landlord. If this is the case the homes would most likely be let as Assured Tenancies.

29. Can there be a ballot to decide if RHG is redeveloped or refurbished?

There will not be a ballot on the options. Feedback however from the home visits, the group meetings and the community gathering on 3 November has all been included in the formal report on the public consultation process which will be considered by Tower Hamlets Cabinet. While this first phase of consultation ended on Saturday 17 November 2007, residents and other stakeholders will still be able to make their views known to the 'Local Voices Group' initiated at the community gathering.

If the project goes ahead there will be further extensive consultation with residents about the options for re-housing and about the design and planning issues.