COUNCIL

Meeting: Thursday, 14th August 2014 at 18.00 hours
in Civic Suite, North Warehouse, The Docks, Gloucester, GL1 2EP

ADDENDUM

4.	**HOUSING FUTURES - OUTCOME OF FORMAL CONSULTATION ON HOUSING TRANSFER (PAGES 3 - 14)** Appendix C: Independent Tenant Advisor's Report

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The Gloucester City Council Housing Stock Transfer Proposal

TPAS Independent Tenant Adviser Report

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Foreword

Contents **Page**

List of Appendices

TPAS, Suite 4b, Trafford Plaza, 73 Seymour Grove, Old Trafford, Manchester, M16 0LD

Section 1 Independent Tenant Adviser role

1.1 Background

TPAS (the national Tenant Participation Advisory Service), was appointed to the role of Independent Tenants' Adviser by the Housing Futures Residents' Panel in 2011 to provide tenant support, advice, capacity-building and empowerment through the Housing Options Study process.

The outcome of the Housing Options Study concluded that the best interests of council tenants and the future of the housing service would be served by means of the Housing Stock Transfer option.

In February 2012, TPAS was re-appointed by the Housing Futures Residents' Panel to provide ongoing Independent Tenant Advice and support through the next stage where the panel would work closely with the council, GCH, and a range of specialist advisers on the development and consideration of Housing Stock Transfer proposals.

This report provides an overview of the role of council tenant influence, empowerment and tenant and resident consultation as part of the process conducted throughout the Housing Stock Transfer project to the end point of the Stage 1, Formal Consultation Phase.

1.2 The Independent Tenant Adviser role

Provision of advice, support, development, and empowerment of the main tenant representative body

The main representative body is the Gloucester City Homes (GCH), Customer Forum a tenant organisation made up of a large number of representatives drawn from across Gloucester neighbourhoods and communities. Customer Forum is fully constituted and is accountable to wider tenants, residents, and communities across Gloucester neighbourhoods in areas where GCH operates. Customer Forum follows the best practice accountability standards recognised by TPAS including provision of open meetings and publication of all meeting paperwork (these are published on the Gloucester City Homes website). An attendance register is kept and the register of membership has maintained a level of 50+ throughout the process.

During the Housing Options Appraisal Process, Customer Forum appointed a sub-committee role to ensure close focus on the Future of Housing Project; the sub-committee is known as, the Housing Futures Residents' Panel (HFRP). The HFRP membership is made up of nominees approved by the Customer Forum and is required to provide routine updates to Customer Forum meetings.

TPAS has provided direct support to members of HFRP and Customer Forum throughout the Process. This has included, working to develop capacity of members to ensure a good understanding of key policy, practice, and options in addition to, providing support, mentoring advice throughout meetings, activities and in the production, development, and management of its own newsletters, independent website, and social media accounts.

1.3 Wider tenant, leasehold tenant, and community engagement

TPAS has delivered considerable fieldwork such as door-knocking and quality checking GCH staff team door-knocking campaigns; attendances at local neighbourhood level including tenant and resident meetings; supported sheltered housing schemes; sessions at local neighbourhood community centres; attended sessions organised by Gloucester City Homes such as community road-show events; community barbecues, scheme tea and talk sessions. TPAS has also held weekly market stalls providing information and advice to tenants and leaseholders through June to August at Kings Square in the centre of Gloucester.

1.4 Independent evaluation of information produced by the Council, and, Gloucester City Homes (Arms Length Management Organisation)

Throughout the process TPAS has maintained its role in checking the fairness and accuracy of information to be published to tenants by the council and GCH. This has included all newsletters, leaflets, flyers, and other canvassing information used across the life of the project. The range of information sources used included:

- Housing Futures magazine
- Your Homes, Your Future, Your Choice council and GCH magazine
- Information booklets on specific issues e.g. Rents, Tenancy Rights and Security of Tenure etc.,
- The Offer to Tenants, Easy Reader Guide, DVD
- Letters and other direct communications with tenants

1.5 Liaison an interaction with the Housing Futures Project Team

Since the commencement of the process TPAS has been fully included in meetings of the Project Team, sub-project meetings, and events. TPAS has been party to all planning and negotiations that have taken place.

1.6 **Summary statement**

As ITA we have had access to all the information that has been prepared by the Council and GCH so that we can confirm its impartiality, and comment on any aspect of concern. TPAS advice has been accepted throughout the process. We can also confirm that the process followed by the Council has met Government guidelines and has at every stage been robust and thorough.

As ITA we conclude that tenants, leaseholders and shared-owners across Gloucester have had access to the full range of information that has been presented to them through a range of different mediums to enable them to consider the issues and options during the housing stock transfer process and to allow them to make an informed choice when and if the Council proceeds to ballot. This has included up to 3 home visits, with repeat calls being made to try to ensure that as many tenants as possible are contacted personally and directly throughout the process.

There has been a robust approach taken to ensure that all tenants including leaseholders & shared-owners have been inclusively involved. The approach has taken into account residents needs and preferences for communications and engagement. This has increased the number of direct contacts and interaction with Council's tenants across the City. These interactions have been continuously quality checked by TPAS through a system of observations and monitoring to ensure that information on the proposed transfer and discussions about the proposed transfer are delivered factually and impartially throughout.

Section 2 Gloucester City Council Tenant Representation

2.1 Housing Futures Residents' Panel – Stability of the membership

HFRP is the key tenant representative mechanism responsible for engaging closely with the Housing Futures Project Team it is an appointed sub-group of the wider tenant representative Customer Forum. This project has been fortunate in that the HFRP membership has remained stable throughout both the Housing Options Appraisal and continued through the Housing Stock Transfer process. Considering that the collective processes commenced in 2010/11 this is remarkable and a credit to both the members themselves and the efforts to maintain strong and productive relationships of officers and local members of the council, GCH and Housing Futures Project consultants. TPAS views that the high standards of inclusive working, transparency of decision-making, and recognition of tenant volunteer contributions set jointly by the lead officers of the Council and GCH, at the start of the process, are key factors.

2.2 Housing Futures Residents' Panel – Capacity Building

The approach to capacity-building has, in the view of TPAS, been empowering throughout by engaging members of HFRP consistently in key fact sessions, and, ensuring that the follow-up independent sessions with the ITA offered the time and opportunity to raise queries and form challenge facts to be raised at Project Team meetings. A key example of tenant influence emerged from initial plans for tenant and project communications these were advocated by the Communications Adviser to be joint publications. Following discussions and re-negotiations subsequent publications were agreed to be jointly issued by HFRP and TPAS: Members of HFRP were keen to establish a clear line of independence from the council publications.

The process set in place for sharing of key information followed a 4-stage system to help ensure that the capacity of HFRP would be well equipped to engage in discussions and decision-making at all stages. The diagram below sets out, the process showing that the initial topic would be introduced to HFRP meetings by the relevant consultant, followed-up by an ITA facilitated discussion analysing the extent of understanding across the membership of HFRP ,and, assessing the potential impact for wider tenants and residents. Findings of the analysis would determine need for a separate follow-up and bespoke training session focussing on areas of weaker understanding.

HFRP Meeting with Project Team members - Topic Introduction 1	HFRP meeting with TPAS (independent) - Analysis 2	Bespoke follow-up Session with TPAS and Specialist Consultants 3	HFRP Accountability 4
• Consultant Overview Presentation • Initial HFRP questions	• What we understand and what we don't? • Impacts for wider tenants and residents? • What follow-up training and learning needs we have?	Consultant bespoke presentation addressing: • HFRP Key Questions and Challenges • Exploring further impacts for wider tenants and residents	HFRP Chair Reporting to Customer Forum

These sessions were attended by HFRP and would always include a 'speakeasy' question and answer session with the relevant consultant and attended and independently facilitated by TPAS. Key sessions included:

- **Impartial and unbiased representatives**
- **Consultation and Diversity Issues**
- **Tenancy Rights' Secure v. Assured Tenancies**
- **Landlord Selection**
- **Government Rent Policy changes**
- **Gloucester City Council Valuation**
- **Business Plan Training**
- **Gloucester City Council Business Case**
- **The Governance Solution**
- **HFRP Chair Training at TPAS Head Office**

Note: This session was specific to the development and management of the HFRP independent website www.housingfutures.co.uk and alignment to HFRP independent social media Facebook and Twitter accounts.

2.3 Transfer HFRP sub-groups

There were two key sub groups where appointed representatives attended meetings with Housing Futures Project Consultants, ITA staff team members and officers of the council and GCH, these were:

- **Communications Sub Group**

In line with the project Communications Strategy HFRP representatives attended all meetings with the Communications Adviser, officers representing communications teams of the Council, GCH and TPAS. These sessions reviewed all proposed publicity and communications, responses to local media coverage relating to the developing proposals for transfer and development of the council's offer to tenants. All proposed communications were discussed and open to HFRP influence. In particular the developing Offer to tenants was subject to three full day sessions where all HFRP members worked with TPAS to scrutinise the Offer to tenants. The final draft of the Offer Documents was subject to further scrutiny and sign-off at Customer Forum.

- **Tenancy Sub Group**

During these sessions, HFRP representatives were provided with presentations from Trowers and Hamlins and worked through successive drafts of the proposed new tenancy agreement. The final draft was reported back to the full HFRP meetings and thereafter taken to Customer Forum for final approval.

Section 3 Independent Tenant Adviser Consultation

3 Wider Tenant and Community Consultation Programmes

3.1 Informal Consultation

During the informal consultation phase running from January through until mid July 2014 TPAS was supported consistently by HFRP representatives and completed programmes of initial briefings, follow up visits and question and answer sessions to:

- Sheltered Housing Schemes
- Tenant and Resident Groups
- Specialist Sessions e.g. Sheltered Housing Group

In addition. TPAS organised Market Stalls sessions with HFRP representatives each Friday and Saturday between June and August 2014, (see Appendix 1 Informal Consultations).

3.2 Formal Consultation activities lead by GCH and, observed and attended by TPAS

These sessions were largely organised by GCH, they were attended by TPAS and HFRP ensuring that there would be local tenant representative and independent tenant advice available to all those tenants and residents attending. These events included:

- Afternoon Tea Sessions at most sheltered schemes
- GCH Road Show Events
- Doorstep surveys and quality checks, (see Appendix 2 Formal Consultations)

3.3 Response to consultations

In general the response to consultations was variable with specific TPAS informal events ranging from 0 – 10 attendees through to smaller number of others with attendance at 25+. Certainly, where there are more active local representatives sessions achieved greater attendances particularly the case at Parklands and St. James TRA, Matson and Robinson TRA, Broom House, Oliver Close and Halford House Sheltered Schemes.

Attendances at the Market Stall sessions proved disappointing with less than 125 tenants visiting the stall over the 2-3 month period.

The GCH Road Show events were far more popular although discussions taking place amounted to an average of 10 interested tenants speaking to TPAS per session.

The most effective means of consultation was achieved by the GCH lead telephone and door-knocking survey programme (during both the informal and formal Stage 1 consultation phases), where direct contact at household level was targeted. TPAS supported these processes and as a result there was an increase in uptake of direct contact with TPAS through the Freephone Advice line, ITA email account, and requests for ITA Home Visits.

3.4 Key issues and queries communicated by tenants to TPAS

Contact with TPAS from tenants and a very small number of resident leaseholders have distinctly fallen into a narrow range of concerns, as follows:

- Rent Setting rules post transfer
- Right to Buy post transfer
- Security of Tenure post transfer
- Right to Exchange post transfer
- Concerns about what would happen to services and staff if transfer does not go ahead

3.5 TPAS Quality Checks on GCH Door-step and Telephone Surveys

Quality checks were introduced and agreed by TPAS and the Housing Futures Project Team shortly prior to the start of the Stage 1 Consultation. This was felt to be necessary due to the low-level contact with tenant and resident leasehold households generally across the period of the project. The survey work would obviously make direct contact with far more households and a full 100% target had been agreed by the projects team.

Separately, sampling of opinions conducted independently by the Communications consultants had identified consistent findings across two sampling stages of 60 - 65% in favour of the councils' proposals for Housing Stock Transfer.

TPAS quality checks were designed to assess the quality of GCH staff conversations directly with tenants and leaseholders, this specifically to ensure that all tenants surveyed:

- Had received the Offer Document package
- Were confident in their understanding of the information provided
- Understood that they could request additional independent support and advice
- If in doubt, would be given clear unbiased help to work through the advantages and disadvantages of the proposals without any undue pressure placed on them for, or against the transfer
- Where struggling due to health and, or communication difficulties, would be encouraged to access independent support whilst also accessing their own family, friends and, or support workers to be with them

The process adopted by TPAS and GCH was designed as follows, for TPAS Independent Tenant Advisers to:

- Observe GCH staff conducting door-step surveys inclusive of general needs housing, supported housing and sheltered housing
- Observe GCH staff conducting telephone surveys and responding to direct call-back requests
- Listen to audio recordings of GCH staff conducting surveys

Where a TPAS Adviser had concerns the process in place agreed was to raise weaknesses directly with the staff member, to highlight the case for follow-up observation. In the event of any ongoing weakness at the second observation TPAS would raise the issue with the Programme Manager advising GCH to take immediate action.

GCH had previously conducted training sessions with all staff; across the observations conducted only one GCH officer was given improvement advice by TPAS. On the second observation of the same officer there was no further cause for concern. TPAS concludes that the training and preparation of staff has been effective.

Section 4 Independent Tenant Advice requests and responses

4.1 TPAS Free phone service frequency of use

Use of the free phone service has been sporadic although relatively limited throughout. Following the distribution of publications there has been a pattern of slight increase in calls received. However, during the period of formal consultation and since the door-step and telephone survey work commenced, there has been an increase in requests for telephone and home visit support from TPAS. The level of calls received during Stage 1, whilst still limited to less than 150 instances, has more than doubled that of the previous period.

4.2 TPAS ITA e-mail account

Less than a handful of tenants have made use of the ITA e-mail, those that use the facility did raised queries specifically related to the Right-to-Buy protections detailed in the Offer Document.

4.3 Home Visit requests

There has been a steady flow of home visit requests picked up through the door-step and telephone survey work. At the time of writing this stands at a total of 35 visits since the commencement of the Stage 1 Consultation. Largely, these have been requested by older tenants concerned about their security of tenure in the future.

4.4 Inaccurate Information and views

There have been remarkably few instances of inaccurate information and views circulating in respect of this transfer process to date. Those noted have largely appeared in local news blogs and bulletins , they have been most often based on misleading and inaccurate facts about the legal status of housing associations, status of governance membership, a lack of understanding of housing finance, and, rules around rent setting. Where necessary, TPAS working with HFRP has responded pointing out the correct and relevant facts.

Section 5 Observations, conclusions and recommendations

5.1 Strong Relationships

Throughout the process there has been close working relationships between the main tenant representative body, the Housing Futures Project Team and Board. Representative tenants have been freely able to attend council meetings including at times of critical decision-making and approval. Throughout, the Council has offered tenant representatives the opportunity to speak and comment during meetings prior to making their decisions. TPAS endorses this good practice approach.

Outside of formal meetings, local elected members have been responsive, supportive, and communicative with tenant representatives regardless of their political leanings. This has included meeting with tenants to help them work through particular aspects of concern and to ensure that active tenants are well supported in their respective roles.

5.2 Tenant Empowerment

Tenant representatives in Gloucester have benefited from a strong spirit of openness and inclusion and this has led to a deeper level of empowerment than is usually observed by TPAS.

Capacity-building has taken a different approach with tenant representatives following a process of introduction, follow-up information, thinking time, and options to query and challenge the HF Project Team directly. HFRP have been supported by the ITA throughout.

Strong relationships have been of benefit to the overall process. There has been a noted respect where tenants have drilled down and challenged information provided during HFRP meetings, Customer Forum meetings, during sub-group sessions and meetings with project consultants and officers.

The HFRP membership has committed highly to this process and has been in attendance at almost every consultative activity amounting to approximately 75 separate field events. This on top of HFRP meetings at least monthly since 2011, sub-group meetings at least monthly since September 2013, bi-monthly Customer Forum events, Housing Futures Board Meetings and Council Meetings, numerous one-day training events, and, days spent working through various documents such as the draft business plan and Offer to Tenants.

The level of independence that HFRP and Customer Forum has maintained in running its own website and social media without any form of interference is unprecedented in the experience of TPAS.

5.3 Effective engagement of wider tenants, leasehold tenants, and communities

Expectations were set high by both tenant representatives and officers of the council and GCH in respect of local tenant and community engagement. As one method failed to meet set expectations project reviews identified alternative approaches that were planned and actioned. TPAS acknowledges the high level of all round commitment applied throughout the process. The house-to-house surveys planned to ensure a sound tenant understanding of the process and implications for all households has markedly increased confidence that, during a tenant ballot most will be in a good position to decide which way vote.

5.4 Accurate and Unbiased Information and Support

TPAS is also confident that council tenants affected by the proposals have had considerable opportunities to access unbiased and factual information provided at all stages. Efforts to provide and simplify information have included:

- Production of a pictorial user guide to benefit those with communication difficulties
- DVD with subtitles for the hard of hearing

- Specialist interpreters accessible for those tenants who either have no or, weak English language or reading skills

TPAS has experienced a high respect for the role of Independent Tenant Adviser from all parties involved. Throughout the development of all information TPAS views have been respectfully invited, heard, discussed, and amicably agreed.

5.5 TPAS confidence

TPAS has worked closely with tenant representatives since the start of this process. The express wishes of tenants during the Housing Options Appraisal, was clear that there was strong support for:

- The Option of least disruption to tenants
- A locally-based organisation
- A high quality service
- Support for Resident and Community Engagement

During the Landlord Selection process HFRP critically examined (scrutinised), alternative providers and used their own scoring criteria to select their preferred option, GCH.

Since landlord selection, work on the Offer Document has been intensive and continually reflective of wider tenant intelligence to inform negotiated priorities. TPAS believes that the Offer to tenants is as fair and as accurate as possible providing, a clear basis for tenants to indicate their views in a tenant ballot process.

5.6 Compliance with Statutory requirements

TPAS believes that the tenant consultation process delivered throughout the project fully meets the requirements as set out in, ***The Housing Act 1985: Schedule 3A – consultation before disposal to private sector landlord Statutory guidance – paragraph 3: requirements as to tenant consultation.***

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