

**TENANTS' AND LEASEHOLDERS'
CONSULTATIVE FORUM****24 JANUARY 2007**

Chairman: * Councillor Mrs Camilla Bath

Councillors: * Don Billson * Phillip O'Dell
* Bob Currie

* Denotes Member present

Tenants and Leaseholder Representatives

Representatives from the Following Associations were in attendance:

Cottesmore Tenants' and Residents' Association
Eastcote Lane Tenants' and Residents' Association
Pinner Hill Tenants' and Residents' Association
Weald Tenants' and Residents' Association
Weald Village Community Association

(In total, 7 representatives were in attendance.)

PART I - RECOMMENDATIONS - NIL**PART II - MINUTES****33. Attendance by Reserve Members:****RESOLVED:** To note that there were no Reserve Members in attendance at this meeting.**34. Declarations of Interest:****RESOLVED:** To note that the following prejudicial interest was declared:

<u>Agenda Item</u>	<u>Member</u>	<u>Nature of Interest</u>
10. Review of Garages and Car-Parking Charges	Councillor Bob Currie	Declared a prejudicial interest in that his son rented a garage from the Council. Accordingly, the Member left the room and took no part in the discussion on that item.

35. Arrangement of Agenda:**RESOLVED:** That all items be considered with the press and public present.**36. Minutes:****RESOLVED:** That the minutes of the meeting held on 30 October 2006 be taken as read and signed as a correct record.**37. Public Questions:****RESOLVED:** To note that no public questions were received at this meeting under the provisions of Advisory Panel and Consultative Forum Procedure Rule 16 (Part 4E of the Constitution).**38. Petitions:****RESOLVED:** To note that no petitions were received at this meeting under the provisions of the Advisory Panel and Consultative Forum Procedure Rule 14 (Part 4E of the Constitution).**39. Deputations:****RESOLVED:** To note that no deputations were received at this meeting under the provisions of Advisory Panel and Consultative Forum Procedure Rule 15 (Part 4E of the Constitution).

40. **Housing Revenue Account (HRA) 2007/08 to 2009/10:**

In response to a reference from the Cabinet meeting held on 14 December 2006 which asked the Forum to consider the draft Housing Revenue Account (HRA), the Forum received a report of the Director of Financial and Business Strategy setting out details of the HRA for 2007/8 to 2009/10.

An officer explained that the report proposed a rent increase of 4.7%, and that the budget did not reflect the outcome of rent restructuring and proposed increases to be presented later in the meeting, such as garages, car parking spaces and leasehold charges. The Forum heard that these would be included in the final budget. It was also added that the budget did not assume any increases in energy charges at the present time, and factored in approximately 15 'right to buy' transactions annually.

Upon opening the item to questions, the Forum heard that some of the account surpluses listed in the report would be put towards meeting the Decent Homes Standard by 2010 and would also be used to reduce borrowing where possible. The Forum heard that the Council was working towards rent convergence with Registered Social Landlord (RSL) levels by 2012.

It was explained that the £400,000 contingency for 2008/09 and 2009/10 was deemed to be at a prudent level; the current contingency was said to be between £500,000 and £600,000. An officer added that the size of this fund was comparatively small when placed in the context of an overall HRA income of £20,000,000.

A TRA representative queried why the account was predicted to show a balance of approximately £6,000,000 in 2007/08, when the 30-year HRA business plan did not predict that level of balance. In response an officer commented that the balance had accumulated over some time, and that the brought-forward balance had been excluded from the HRA forecasts.

A resident questioned whether, in light of the report, officers thought the options appraisal was now inaccurate. An officer responded that accurate financial forecasting was difficult over long periods, but that it did seem that accumulated balances may have been under-estimated.

In response to the discussion, a Member requested that a report reconciling the early years of the HRA business plan with outturn be provided, together with an explanation of brought-forward balances, and brought to the next meeting of the Forum.

RESOLVED: That the report be noted.

41. **Rent De-Pooling:**

The Forum received a report of the Head of Housing, outlining progress on rent de-pooling. It was explained that rent de-pooling meant the separation of service charges such as ground maintenance and caretaking from basic rents.

It was also explained that in seeking to meet rent convergence with Registered Social Landlord (RSL) rents by 2012, the maximum increase in rent that could be levied would be 5%. This would help ensure that increases in the service charge would be capped pending the introduction of rent de-pooling. In addition, any shortfall in income as a result of this limit would be met by the rent constraint fund, provided by central government, which would reduce Harrow's negative subsidy to government.

The Forum heard that Tenants would be consulted on the process of rent de-pooling at meetings to be held in February 2007, before the changes were implemented in April 2007.

RESOLVED: That the report be noted.

42. **Review of Garages and Car-Parking Charges:**

The Forum received a report of the Head of Housing, which outlined proposals to increase rents for garages and car-parking spaces.

An officer stated that there was a need to examine the costs in relation to these properties and their relative commercial values, in order to maximise income. It was added that currently, whilst rents were comparable to those of other boroughs, they did not reflect relative market values in Harrow.

The Forum heard that there was a need to balance the requirements of Housing Revenue Account (HRA) financial targets and local affordability, and to this end the

preferred option was to raise rents to a level between peer London borough averages and local market rates.

In response to a resident's question, an officer explained that the current 'voids' or vacancy rate on garages and parking spaces in the Borough was low, and did not have an adverse effect on income. It was added that voids would be restored and brought back into use.

Regarding potential use of garages for commercial purposes, the Forum heard that in such instances, rent would be reappraised to include factors such as Value Added Tax (VAT), although there could be potential planning issues if properties were used for alternative purposes. It was added that any variation in the price structure or regulations governing use of such facilities could be put to tenants.

RESOLVED: That the report be noted.

(See also Minute 34).

43. **Review of the Leasehold Service:**

The Forum received a report of the Head of Housing, setting out proposals to revise the management services charges provided by the Home Ownership Team.

An officer explained that an increase in charges was necessary, in order to contribute more towards recovering the costs of services provided. To this end, it had been recommended that the collection rate be increased from 10% to 20%.

The Forum heard that it was also proposed that charges for legal enquiries and services be increased, in line with peer boroughs such as Camden. In addition, charges for major works would also be reformed to include a separate 10% fee for administering the contract and supervising works on site.

An officer advised that progress had been made in the collection of outstanding debt, with £1,112,051 invoiced since July 2005.

On opening the item to questions, a leaseholder representative queried why the increases were not subject to a graded increase. In response, an officer replied that the projected fees were in line with those levied by high performing authorities.

In response to a question from the Chairman, an officer explained that alternative ways by which to pay the charges were being examined, as well as other methods such as leaseholders buying in to improvement contracts.

The Forum heard that of the total amount of debt outstanding, £449,350 had been collected. An officer stated that debts which had been outstanding for over a year would be examined to determine whether they should potentially be written off.

RESOLVED: That the report be noted.

44. **Housing Capital Programme for 2007/2008:**

The Forum received a report of the Head of Housing, which set out the housing capital programme for 2007/2008, and including the Decent Homes work programme.

An officer explained that the Decent Homes work programme had been developed using a stock condition database, with information collected in 2003 and 2005, with further updates since that time. This database had been used to identify properties in the worst condition, which had been prioritised for improvement works.

The Forum heard that the proposed budget for the programme for 2007/08 stood at £7.3 million, which included an increase in investment necessary to meet the decent homes standard by 2010.

In addition, the Forum heard that there would be consultation meetings between January and March 2007, at which progress towards meeting the decent homes standard would be explained, with a further meeting scheduled to discuss proposals to 2010.

In response to a resident's question, an officer explained that the stock data held on the database was of high quality, and that any inaccuracies in the data would be addressed within the next 1-2 years. It was added that any concerns residents had as to the accuracy of the data in specific instances could be raised at consultation meetings.

In response to a Member's query, an officer responded that the Corporate Property Team was responsible for monitoring the delivery of the capital programme.

The Forum heard, in response to a Member's question, that officers were looking to reinstate external decoration to the capital programme, after its removal owing to budget cut-backs.

RESOLVED: That the report be noted.

45. **Progress on Delivering Minor Estate Improvement Works:**

The Forum received a report from the Head of Housing, which outlined progress on delivering Minor Estate Improvements (MEIs) in 2006/07, and proposals for improvements in 2007/08.

An officer explained that a number of projects had been successfully delivered in 2006/07, with some schemes due for completion in early February 2007. Three schemes had been discontinued.

A Member queried whether a project planned for 2007/08 in Wealdstone was to be considered in conjunction with another Urban Living project in the area. Officers said they would explore this, if there were relevant linkages.

In addition, progress on a car-parking scheme in Hamilton Crescent, and proposals for additional lighting in alleyways in Chenduit way were also discussed.

RESOLVED: That the report be noted.

46. **The Caretaking Review:**

The Forum received a report of the Head of Housing, which set out plans to review the caretaking service.

An officer explained that there was a need to undertake the review in order to make the service more effective and responsive to tenants' and residents' needs. It was added that the review would be completed at the end of March 2007, after which a report would be brought back to the Forum.

On opening the item to questions, the Forum heard that there would be no additional costs associated with the review, other than those of staff time and consultancy fees.

RESOLVED: That the report be noted.

47. **Progress Report on HIPSP:**

The Head of Housing presented a report which provided the Forum with a progress update on the Harrow Integrated Property Services Partnership (HIPSP).

The Forum heard that the Council's preferred partner would have been selected, and contracts would be in place and operational, by July 2007. An officer stated that tenants and leaseholders, as well as elected Members, would be among the constituent groups involved in the evaluation team.

RESOLVED: That the above be noted.

48. **Proposed Changes to the Warden's Service:**

The Forum received a report from the Head of Housing, which set out plans to vary the warden's service in Sheltered Housing schemes.

The Forum heard that the proposed changes had been formulated as part of the Older People's Housing Review. It was explained that the current arrangement of one warden per housing scheme would be replaced with two teams of seven staff, with each team covering approximately half of the sheltered housing schemes.

An officer stated that this would allow greater flexibility and more targeting in the provision of the service, and would assist in meeting the Council's medium term budget plans, as agreed at Cabinet on 14 December 2006. It was explained that information packs would be produced and distributed to tenants, and meetings would be arranged to allow for comments on the proposals.

In response to questions, the Forum heard that wardens had been consulted on the proposals, along with Trade Unions, and that their comments had been incorporated when developing the proposals. It was added that there were currently no plans to

vary the employment arrangements of wardens, or the mixture of permanent to temporary contracts.

An officer explained that the service was funded partly through the Supporting People Grant, provided by the Department for Communities and Local Government, and partly through the Housing Revenue Account (HRA), which covered salary costs.

RESOLVED: That the report be noted.

49. **The Revised Tenancy Agreement:**

The Forum received a report of the Head of Housing which set out proposed variations to the tenancy agreement, and revisions to garage licenses.

An officer stated that there had been 19 public meetings at which tenants and residents were consulted on the proposed agreement. Feedback at these meetings had been worked into the revised agreement where appropriate, appended to the officer report. In addition, it was explained that introductory tenancies would not be pursued as they did not represent an effective use of resources in view of proposals for secure tenancies.

The Forum heard that in relation to garage licences, consultation would take place by statutory notice, with licence holders given 4 weeks to agree the proposed changes.

RESOLVED: That the report be noted.

50. **Date of Next Meeting:**

RESOLVED: To note that the next meeting of the Forum would take place on 1 March 2007.

(Note: The meeting having commenced at 7.35 pm, closed at 9.55 pm)

(Signed) COUNCILLOR CAMILLA BATH
Chairman