

TENANTS', LEASEHOLDERS' AND RESIDENTS' CONSULTATIVE FORUM MINUTES

10 MAY 2012

Chairman: * Councillor Bob Currie

Councillors: * Mrs Camilla Bath * Barry Macleod-Cullinane (2)
* Mano Dharmarajah

In attendance: * Kairul Kareema Marikar Minute 112-119
(Councillors)

* Denotes Member present
(2) Denotes category of Reserve Member

Representatives From the Following Associations Were in Attendance

Antoneys Close Tenants' and Residents' Association
Elmgrove Tenants' and Residents' Association
Harrow Federation of Tenants' and Residents' Associations
Harrow Weald Tenants' and Residents' Association
Kenmore Park Tenants' and Residents' Association
Leaseholder Support Group
Little Stanmore Tenants' and Residents' Association
Weald Village Tenants' and Residents' Association

108. Attendance by Reserve Members

RESOLVED: To note the attendance at this meeting of the following duly appointed Reserve Member:-

Ordinary Member

Reserve Member

Councillor Kam Chana

Councillor Barry Macleod-Cullinane

109. **Declarations of Interest**

Agenda Item 7 – Introduction to the New Contractors; Agenda Item 8 – Localisation of Council Tax Reduction; Agenda Item 9 – Information Report Interim Housing Finance Business Partner – Outline of Role and Draft Work Plan 2012-13; Agenda Item 10 – Information Report – Resident Services Manager’s Report and Feedback from Other Council Led Resident Involvement Activities; Agenda Item 11 – Information Report – Asset Management Update; Agenda Item 12 – Year End Position Statement

Councillors Bob Currie and Mano Dharmarajah declared personal interests on the above items in that they attended monthly meetings of the Eastcote Lane Tenants’ and Residents’ Association. They would remain in the room whilst the matters were considered and voted upon.

Councillor Kairul Marikar declared a personal interest in the above items in that she was a tenant of the Council. She would remain in the room whilst the Forum considered and voted on the matters before them.

Agenda Item 8 – Localisation of Council Tax Reduction

Paddy Lyne declared a personal interest in that she was the Chair of the Citizens’ Advice Bureau and the Vice-Chair of the Harrow Association of Disabled People. She would remain in the room whilst the matter was considered and voted upon.

110. **Minutes**

RESOLVED: That the minutes of the meeting held on 29 February 2012 be taken as read and signed as a correct record.

111. **Public Questions, Petitions and Deputations**

RESOLVED: To note that no public questions were put, or petitions or deputations received at this meeting.

RESOLVED ITEMS

112. **Introduction to the New Contractors**

The Chairman welcomed the new contractors to the meeting, which included representatives from Linbrook Services Ltd, Slade (London) Ltd and Quality Heating Service Ltd.

The representative from Linbrook Services Ltd addressed the Forum and stated that they were specialists in maintenance and had been in existence for 42 years. They believed that their customer service was second to none.

The representative from Slade (London) Ltd expressed their delight at having entered into a contract with the Council and they were also based locally. The organisation had been in existence for approximately 47 years.

The representative from Quality Heating Service Ltd stated that they were specialists in repairs, servicing and central heating installations for Local Authorities and Housing Associations. They had a large portfolio of clients and had approximately 18 years experience.

An officer suggested that there would be a visit to Quality Heating Service Ltd to observe how the contract would work, which could also include Members of the Forum.

RESOLVED: That the introductions be noted.

113. Localisation of Council Tax Reduction

An officer introduced a presentation which related to the Council Tax Support Scheme. The officer reported that Central Government were reforming the welfare system which included the Council Tax Support Schemes. The officer reported the following points:

- Council Tax for Harrow was set by the Council on residential property. The Council collected this tax and this was used to fund approximately 20% of the services provided;
- the Government gave money to Local Authorities to support people who could not afford to pay Council Tax themselves. This was assessed on a means tested basis. The Government set the rules on who could be entitled to this benefit;
- if there was an increase in Council Tax claims, more money was paid out by the Government to Local Authorities. It is paid straight into the Council Tax account;
- the Government was now proposing to make significant changes to welfare benefits. The basic intention proposed was to end the Council Tax Benefit Scheme and ask Councils to set up their own schemes;
- there had been little information provided on what these local schemes would need to entail. There had been a consultation held at the end of last year;
- some of the information which had been made clear was that the amount of money provided to support the scheme would be cut. It was envisaged that from April 2013 there would only be 90% provided of the current allocation;

- there was a possibility that the remaining 10% of funds would have to be sought within the Council's existing budget to deliver this shortfall, although this was not yet clear. It was not envisaged that the position would become clear until September 2012;
- at this stage it was therefore expected that the Council would have to save approximately £2.8 million next year and £3.8 million the year after;
- any new scheme implemented by the Council had to achieve financial savings in order to address the shortfall. The Council wished to give residents an opportunity to give their view on any new local Council Tax Support Scheme;
- it was expected that Councils would be required to have a new scheme agreed by January 2013 and implemented by April 2013. If this did not take place, the Government would enforce the current scheme, which meant that the Council would have no option but to fund any shortfall;
- there was a short timescale from when Local Authorities had been advised of the proposals to the need to implement the change;
- financial help with Council Tax would now be awarded as a discount and not a benefit. This therefore may encourage more people to apply because there would be no stigma;
- there would be no changes for pensioners. National rules would be put in place to protect them. Funding for pensioners would come out of the funds the Council would receive which would mean less for those at a working age;
- councils could decide their own rules for the new scheme but had to support the most vulnerable and should not discourage people from working;
- the Council was looking to discuss this issue with as many residents as possible. A multi steering agency had been set up to look at the interests of the borough. A broad spectrum of organisations were involved in this including the Citizens' Advice Bureau and the Harrow Association for Disabled People;
- there would also be consultation directly with residents. Further information on issues was awaited before this commenced. This consultation would be conducted via telephone surveys, workshops and resident panels;
- after the consultation, all comments would be collated and a report composed to reflect these. Cabinet would then be asked to make a decision on the content of a new Council Tax Support Scheme.

During the discussion on this item, Members of the Forum raised a number of issues which officers responded to as follows:

- the new scheme was not something which the Council had a choice on whether to implement or not. The new scheme was a requirement of the Government and would be provided for legislatively;
- one of the purposes of consultation with residents was to understand how it could affect those who were homeless and / or unemployed. The Council were additionally working with JobCentrePlus on developing the new scheme;
- Council Tax Benefit and Housing benefit were dealt with by the Local Authority at present;
- it was unlikely that the Council would be able to fund any shortfall experienced from the current levels of funding, as a result of the implementation of the new scheme;
- it was unclear at this stage whether there would be an increase in contribution made to the GLA as a result of the new scheme. The Council were currently liaising with them on this issue;
- a review of collection and enforcement of Council Tax would form part of this new scheme. The Council needed to assess the issues surrounding this;
- it was difficult to confirm exactly when the consultation would take place with residents as the Council were awaiting confirmation from the Government on when this could commence. The Council were aware that there could be added complications with the consultation process given the Olympics and the summer holiday period. If confirmation was received soon, the consultation would start in June till September 2012. However even if confirmation was not received until much later on, the consultation would still have to end in September as the timescales were too tight. The majority of other Local Authorities were consulting for a much shorter period of time;
- officers would be willing to attend a future HFTRA meeting on 2 August 2012 to set out details of the report to a wider range of residents.

During the discussion on this item, Members of the Forum made a number of comments as follows:

- there were concerns that the scheme was more focused on achieving savings rather than assisting residents;
- there would be different schemes operating across different Councils which would make things confusing for residents;

- a large proportion of tenants were on benefits and this would potentially have a significant effect on them;
- Housing Benefits form had to be made more user friendly to allow residents to complete them and more advice and help made available.

The Chairman commented that the report was of interest to the Forum and requested that officers keep the Forum updated on the progress of the project.

RESOLVED: That the presentation be noted.

114. INFORMATION REPORT - Interim Housing Finance Business Partner - Outline of Role and Draft Work Plan 2012-13

The Forum received a report which introduced Dave Roberts, the Interim Housing Finance Business Partner and to outline his role and work plan over the coming year.

The officer introduced himself and explained that he had a wealth of housing and finance experience. He explained that the Housing Revenue Account (HRA) was expected to deliver significant savings over the next 30 years and his role was to determine the extent of the savings and how these savings could be applied.

He reported that he had a draft work plan contained in the report which provided a flavour of what he would be doing. This involved working on a draft rent strategy, a draft garage and facility charges report and a draft outline business plan.

During the discussion on this item, Members of the Forum raised a number of issues which were responded to by officers as follows:

- as part of some of the strategies there would be consultation carried out with relevant stakeholders;
- the draft outline business plan was intended to be submitted to the Cabinet meeting in July 2012. It was envisaged that the plan would be fully in place by the end of the current financial year;
- the levels of debt contained in the HRA were always kept under review. Currently there was a low interest rate on the repayment of the debt. This may not be available in the future so this was considered a correct position for the current situation. Refinancing was always an option for the future or alternatively the money could be invested to produce higher dividends;
- officers were confident that the HRA was financially robust. There would be challenges in the next 5 years as a result of investment in the repairs service and improvements to homes.

A Member of the Forum commented that it was important to be mindful of spending commitments and ensuring that financially everything was sound otherwise there would be difficult consequences and decisions to make in the future.

RESOLVED: That the report be noted.

115. INFORMATION REPORT - Resident Services Manager's Report and Feedback from other Council Led Resident Involvement Activities

The Forum received a report which set out a range of information on performance in Resident Services and housing wide resident involvement activities. An officer introduced the report and explained that there had been some further updates since when the report had been published. The officer reported the following points:

- the final year end figures for leasehold income and rent collection were within a few pounds of the estimation. This had therefore exceeded initial targets but the Council would not become complacent;
- at the last meeting, officers had reported attempting to look at opportunities for joint working and leaseholder services across the West London Boroughs. A meeting had been hosted by the Council, where it had become apparent that there were differences in the way that different teams were set up and organised and there was a large amount of local knowledge. The group would therefore be recommending to the West London Directors Group that there was little merit in exploring joint working further at this stage;
- ground rent notifications had been issued in advance of the actual demands being issued;
- a technique called shuttle mediation had been used to resolve a long standing anti social behaviour complaint. This meant that the complaint was resolved without going to court. This technique involved both parties being placed in different rooms with a mediator meeting with them separately to propose a solution;
- a Financial Inclusion Awareness Roadshow had taken place on Wednesday 18 April 2012 for residents living in the Harrow Weald area. The event was not as successful as it could have been. This may have been due to its publicity. However there were a number of positives and work was taking place to make the events more successful in the future;
- every Council had to have an agreed Tenancy Strategy by 15 January 2013. The document had been prepared and a handout would be provided to Forum Members on where this could be accessed for the purposes of consultation. This consultation would also ask whether the Council should use Introductory Tenancies;

- in relation to welfare reform, universal credit would be paid monthly in arrears. The income management processes, may as a result, need to be revisited;
- the Council was working closely with Housing Associations in relation to Tenancy Fraud. Properties recovered by the Council could be offered to homeless families and those on the housing register;
- there had been significant consultation carried out on Sheltered Housing Modernisation. It was hoped that a report on this subject would be presented to Cabinet in July 2012. The Forum would be kept updated of any progress made;
- progress had been made in relation to the Resident Engagement Review Action Plan. The Plan had contained a number of actions for officers, TRAs and HFTRA to conduct. The work surrounding the plan had demonstrated an excellent partnership arrangement;
- the Resident Involvement Team hosted a TRA Get Together on the 5 April 2012. Presentations were conducted by young people and were getting more involved. This was a successful event;
- a Tenant Scrutiny and co-regulation awareness raising session was held on 13 April 2012.

During the discussion on this item, Members raised a number of queries which officers responded to as follows:

- details of the Council's building insurance cover had been sent to tenants without postage stamps. The Council had apologised for this and would investigate claims that tenants were being asked for evidence prior to being provided with any refund for paying the postage fee;
- proposals had not yet been finalised for the Sheltered Housing Modernisation project. Essentially it would relate to changing the way in which these services were provided and differentiating between the support provided and the management of the scheme. This would provide increased flexibility;
- it had been accepted that there were issues of communication and consistency in the past relating to Sheltered Housing. However things were now improving and the review conducted would ensure that the situation improved;
- 11 properties had recently been recovered due to tenancy fraud. Another 130 potential cases were currently being investigated. Instances of Tenancy Fraud were usually discovered via informants or from tenancy audit visits.

During the discussion on this item a Members of the Forum commented that the Financial Inclusion Awareness Roadshow had a disappointing turnout. However if a school was used and the event held at the time they departed to go home, it may attract parents to utilise the event.

RESOLVED: That the report be noted.

116. INFORMATION REPORT - Asset Management Update

An officer introduced a report which updated the Forum on progress made in the Asset Management Team on the repairs procurement exercise, client side restructure, Milmans Close, the repairs charter, performance and the draft future investment plans.

The officer reported the following issues:

- the Forum had met the new response repairs contractors introduced earlier in the meeting. They would commence in July 2012 to ensure that they commenced working just before the current contractors term ended. This would ensure continuity. All of the new contractors had local links and were keen to deliver a good service to the Council;
- the Asset Management team's new structure had been agreed and staff consulted. However there had been a delay encountered due to a non-agreement with one of the Trade Unions. A final meeting would be held after which a ringfencing task would be conducted and a recruitment process conducted. Officers were confident that the current contingency plans were effective and ensure as little disruption to the service as possible;
- a site meeting had taken place at Milmans Close on 9 March 2012. The report had highlighted some issues raised and some of the responses provided. One of the main issues raised related to treating and pruning trees which were causing leaves to block gutters in some houses. This had to be conducted through the Parks Department and permissions had been sought for them to complete the work;
- an order had been raised to replace and fix the waste pipes at Milmans Close. There had been issues regarding rear balconies, boundaries and the boiler house. These would all be considered at a further site visit to be arranged;
- a copy of the Repairs Charter had been included in the reports. This would now be determined via a Portfolio Holder decision as the Cabinet meeting in May had been cancelled. This Charter would be implemented when the new contracts came into operation on the 1 July 2012;
- in relation to performance figures of the service, the year end figures would be presented to an upcoming meeting of the Improvement Board. There was an expected dip in performance from the current

response repairs contractor as they reached the end of their contract and started to demobilise staff;

- the Future Investment Plans contained a draft Fencing Renewal Plan. This was split into 2 phases with Phase 1 being the main priority for the year and Phase 2 as a back up list if achievable.

During the discussion on this item, Members of the Forum raised a number of issues which officers responded to as follows:

- emergency repairs would include issues such as burst pipes and flooding caused by radiators;
- discussions had taken place with the Parks Department who felt that they did not have the resources to clear the leaves which were blocking gutters in Milmans Close. There was sympathy expressed for residents that this was being funded from the HRA;
- the exact number of tenants utilising the Council's negotiated Insurance Scheme was not available at the meeting. However this was something which was being publicised in the 'Homing In' publication;
- if development of property took place by a tenant, they may require approval from Housing Services and planning permission. If this was conducted without permission, then an investigation may take place and the tenant may be asked to reinstate or the work would be done to reinstate and a charge would be made.

During the discussion on this item, Members of the Forum made a number of comments as follows:

- there was concern that Leaseholders and Tenants were being charged for having to pay for the clearing of leaves blocking gutters. It was felt that this was the responsibility of the Parks Department and a refund of money needed to be sought;
- in relation to the Draft Fencing Plan, it was important to ensure that places were assessed properly before installation to ensure that there was no future need to replace them due to a change in foreseeable circumstances.

RESOLVED: That the report be noted.

117. Year End Position Statement

The Divisional Director of Housing Services verbally updated the Forum that in terms of revenue, the HRA was currently scheduled to be on budget with an approximate amount of £50,000 underspend. In relation to Capital, the position was the same as at reported at the last meeting. The General Fund was also coming in on budget.

RESOLVED: That the verbal update be noted.

118. Suggestions for agenda items for next meeting

The following were suggested as agenda items for the next meeting of the Forum:

- Update on the Localisation of Council Tax Reduction;
- Update on Garages within the borough;

RESOLVED: That the items be noted.

119. Further Announcements

A Member of the Forum expressed concern that a number of the reports presented to the Forum had been for information purposes only and not for consultation purposes.

The Divisional Director of Housing Services responded by saying that a number of reports on the agenda for this meeting were providing information on where the Council was in terms of its consultation processes. Additionally some reports had been listed as for information but in reality were designed to consult with the Forum. There was maybe an exercise to therefore make this clearer.

RESOLVED: That the comments be noted.

120. Date of Next Meeting

RESOLVED: To note that the next meeting would be held at 2.00 pm on Tuesday 17 July 2012.

(Note: The meeting, having commenced at 7.30 pm, closed at 9.48 pm).

(Signed) COUNCILLOR BOB CURRIE
Chairman