

TENANTS', LEASEHOLDERS' AND RESIDENTS' CONSULTATIVE FORUM MINUTES

17 JULY 2012

Chairman: * Councillor Bob Currie

Councillors: * Mrs Camilla Bath * Mano Dharmarajah
† Kam Chana

In attendance: Thaya Idaikkadar Minute 121 - 131
(Councillors) Kairul Kareema Marikar

* Denotes Member present

† Denotes apologies received

Representatives From the Following Associations Were in Attendance

Antoneys Close Tenants' and Residents' Association
Churchill Place Tenants' and Residents' Association
Cottesmore Tenants' and Residents' Association
Eastcote Lane 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
Pinner Hill Tenants' and Residents' Association
Weald Village Tenants' and Residents' Association

121. Attendance by Reserve Members

RESOLVED: To note that there were no Reserve Members in attendance.

122. Declarations of Interest

Agenda Item 7 – Information Report – Asset Management Update; Agenda Item 8 – Information Report – Housing Business Plan Update; Agenda Item 9 – Information Report – Housing Changes Review Update; Agenda Item 10 – Information Report – Garage Strategy; Agenda Item 11 – Housing Ambition Plan No. 3 (2012/13); Agenda Item 12 – Resident Services Manager’s Report and Feedback from Other Council Led Resident Involvement Activities.

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 12 – Resident Services Manager’s Report and Feedback from Other Council Led Resident Involvement Activities

Paddy Lyne declared a personal interest. She would remain in the room whilst the matter was considered and voted upon.

123. Minutes

RESOLVED: That the minutes of the meeting held on 10 May 2012 be taken as read and signed as a correct record.

124. Public Questions, Petitions and Deputations

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

RESOLVED ITEMS

125. INFORMATION REPORT - Asset Management Update

An officer introduced a report which updated the Forum on progress made in relation to Asset Management. The officer reported the following issues:

- response repairs contracts had been awarded to the relevant contractors within the Harrow East, Harrow Central and Harrow West areas. There had been a smooth transition during the switchover process from the previous contractors to the new contractors;

- the procurement of the framework contracts to deliver planned investment works was nearly completed and would be presented to Cabinet on 19 July 2012 for approval;
- robust plans would be put in place to monitor the contractors' performance;
- the Forum wished to thank Paul Mullins, the previous Interim Project Manager for the work he had conducted on the procurement of the new repairs contractors;
- with the change of contractors, the Council was required to strengthen its client side personnel. A new structure for the Asset Management Team had been agreed and a number of roles within the new structure had been filled by existing staff. The remainder of the roles had been advertised internally and any unfilled posts would be advertised externally;
- the Repairs Charter had been implemented on 1 July 2012. The drive for this Charter had been to reflect those areas which were of most importance and to provide value for money. In addition the Chartered Institute of Housing had launched their own repairs charter which set out 6 core requirements. Having studied this document, the Council's own Repairs Charter met most of their requirements;
- in relation to the performance of the Asset Management service, it had been expected that there would be a significant dip in performance as a result of changing contractors for response repairs. However this had not been experienced;
- customer satisfaction had not dropped as anticipated in relation to the change of contractors for response repairs. Customer satisfaction surveys would now be conducted by the Council and scoring would now take place on a score between 0 -10 (10 being excellent). Any score below 6 would be followed up to identify any lessons that could be learnt;
- consultation on the Capital Investment Plan 2012/13 had concluded in June 2012. The Asset Management Team hoped to produce a 3 year investment programme as a longer time frame would provide more certainty and allow decisions to be based on actual data collected;
- in order to raise the quality of the Asset Management service, a sub-group had been created comprising of 7 to 8 Leaseholders to consider various issues. The fundamental issues related to communications, charging, billing and service delivery by caretakers and contractors. An action plan had been agreed;
- the views of the Forum, in relation to the ongoing issues of leaves blocking the gutters at properties in Milmans Close, had been

discussed by the Chairman and the Chief Executive. There were currently no plans to prune the trees. The Council had requested quotes on placing leaf grills over the relevant gutters to help prevent blockages.

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

- the next best solution to address the problems surrounding leaves blocking gutters in Milmans Close was to install leaf protectors in the relevant gutters;
- the External Decorations Programme did not address windows that needed replacing. This was dealt with under the Capital Investment Programme. A 5 year External Decorations Programme had been produced over 5 years ago but for a range of reasons was never delivered as planned. Consequently a new 5 year plan had been produced. Separate briefings could be provided for individual Tenants and Residents Association (TRA) representatives on window replacements if they required it;
- for areas that were close together, works would be conducted at about the same time on the External Decorations Programme. Information on the insulation programme would be provided at the next meeting of the Forum;
- officers would investigate an issue raised by the Leaseholder Support Group that when writing to a generic email address for the Council relating to the monitoring of the response repairs contractors, this was being blocked;
- any feedback would be welcomed if there were any other areas identified for the External Decorations Programme;
- in an individual case where the previous contractor had not performed a duty they said they had conducted, the Council had paid out compensation to the person affected and would be claiming the expenses back from the previous contractor.

RESOLVED: That the report be noted.

126. INFORMATION REPORT - Housing Business Plan Update

The Forum received a report which provided an update in respect of the Housing Business Plan.

An officer introduced the report and highlighted the following issues:

- the Council had agreed to make a payment of £88.461million to the Government. The loan to fund this payment was taken out with the Public Works Loan Board on 28 March 2012 and was a 50 year

maturity loan (repayable at the end of the 50 year term) at a fixed interest rate of 3.48%. The Housing Revenue Account (HRA) business plan model had now been updated to reflect the amount borrowed at the actual rate achieved;

- the HRA had now been remodelled to take account of the revised opening revenue position and the Major Repairs Reserve balance of £4.148 million able to be brought forward as a result of capital funding decisions in 2011/12;
- right to buy sales were previously included at a notional 3 sales per year, but for the purposes of producing an updated model, the sales numbers had been assumed using the model used by the Department of Communities and Local Government when calculating the amount of debt Harrow had taken under self financing;
- the revised projections had been included within the report and showed a healthy revenue position with revenue balances of £242 million accruing over 30 years as well as a fully funded capital programme;
- £7.7 million had been identified for investment in services, residential and response repairs and in change management;
- it was hoped that the arrangements would allow the Business Plan to have a significant influence on the budget setting process;
- there were still some areas that needed addressing. This included the rental strategy for which proposals were still under development;
- the Garage Strategy also needed addressing. This was a key consideration which needed to be developed;
- options for reducing homelessness also needed to be addressed. This involved looking at the private rental sector and services for home owners;
- it was important to note that the Business Plan was not set in stone and was constantly being developed and refined.

During the discussion on this item an officer responded to a query raised by a Member of the Forum by stating that concerns regarding the Right to Buy scheme taking property out of those eligible to be rented were noted. However Central Government regulations on Right to Buy schemes had to be followed.

RESOLVED: That the report be noted.

127. INFORMATION REPORT - Housing Changes Review Update

An officer introduced a report which set out an update on the Housing Changes Review which involved a full review of and completion of a range of housing strategy and policies as required by the Localism Act 2011.

The officer reported the following issues:

- there were 2 main policies being presented to the Forum, one on the Tenancy Strategy and one on the Housing Allocation Scheme;
- the Tenancy Strategy set out the Council's guidance on the introduction of flexible fixed term tenancies in Harrow. The Strategy was deliberately long term in its nature to allow the best use of the Council's housing stock and would provide advice for all social landlords to follow;
- consultation had taken place on the Tenancy Strategy since May 2012. Since the consultation had commenced, approximately 70% of the respondents were supportive of the Strategy and the need to make better use of the Council's housing stock;
- the Tenancy Strategy set out how it would be introduced and how it would be reviewed at the end of a fixed term period;
- the Strategy proposed income and savings limits at which a household would be deemed to be able to find suitable affordable housing. This had been an area where a range of views had been expressed and was an area for further discussion;
- several responders to the consultation had expressed a view that all new tenancies should be for a fixed period of time but should be automatically renewed in certain circumstances;
- the Housing Allocation Scheme's main objective was to reduce the amount of time people waited for social housing;
- some people had to wait for 5 – 8 years which was unacceptable as they had been identified as having a social housing need. Therefore in the current national economic climate, the only way to reduce this was to reduce the number of people eligible for social housing;
- within the report the number of bands and category of people eligible for social housing was proposed to increase from 4 to 5 bands. This would allow for a greater degree of flexibility. There would be a reduced priority for older children with a greater concentration on younger children. Medical priority criteria would also be made more robust;
- two main areas which required further discussion related to whether or not to provide a priority for those on low incomes or those who provide a contribution to the community;

- it was proposed to exclude people who did not live in Harrow, those who were owner occupiers, those who owed Council rents from those eligible for social housing;
- two key areas to address if the new Housing Allocations Scheme was adopted was consideration of how the move from the existing to the new scheme was managed.

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

- the Tenancy Strategy set out key points of a child's education and the consideration provided to this factor when renewing tenancies. If a child was in a key point in their education, the tenancy could be renewed for a limited period to allow a more stable environment;
- the existing tenancy agreements had a clause to ensure that tenants kept their gardens tidy and the Council were doing more to enforce this;
- non key repairs could be restricted if a tenant did not look after their property, so pressure could be exerted this way;
- there was a huge demand for Council and Housing Association accommodation which was difficult to meet so other options had to be investigated. Priority had to be given to those who had no other option but to live in social housing;
- people were only moved into private rented accommodation if their current accommodation was unsuitable. The new scheme would allow people to be house more quickly;
- if those in sheltered housing had the sufficient funds they could go into privately owned sheltered housing. This would be investigated.

A Member of the Forum commented that the Housing Allocations Scheme was welcomed.

RESOLVED: That the report be noted.

128. INFORMATION REPORT - Garage Strategy

An officer introduced a report which provided an update on the current position of garages owned on Council owned housing estates and the aims and objectives of the emerging Garage Strategy.

The officer reported the following key points:

- the council owned 957 garages and carports located on housing estates across the borough;

- there were currently two scales of charges for garages, with a slightly higher charge for private lettings than for those let to the Council's tenants and resident leaseholders;
- demand for the rental of garages varied considerably on different sites and depended on their condition. Some garages were in a reasonable state of repair whilst others remained void due to disrepair, vandalism and antisocial behaviour;
- some garage sites had the potential to be developed for affordable housing to contribute towards meeting the housing need in the borough;
- a garage strategy was being progressed to deal with the issues associated with garages and to make best use of the sites;
- there were currently approximately 480 void garages. Only 100 of these were of a standard that would allow them to be let. Unfortunately there was not sufficient demand on these sites to let the garages;
- there were currently 33 people on waiting lists for various garages, although the Council had prevented letting some of the garages because of disrepair;
- in recent years both the maintenance and management of garages had not been given sufficient resources or priority to optimise their use and the resultant income. Towards the end of the last financial year, the Council had invested £20000 in renovating 20 garages at Shaftesbury Circle. Following the works the garages are all ready to be let and only 3 remain void;
- if all 957 garages and carports were let, this could generate a gross annual income of £683,911. However only around 44% of this gross annual income was being realised. If nothing was done the current income received was likely to reduce year by year;
- it would not be possible to generate income from garage rents further without investing more revenue into improving the existing stock and improving the management of garages;
- a previous Garage Strategy had been presented to the Forum in 2010. However the introduction of the Housing Revenue Account Reform had brought about new opportunities to develop new affordable housing contributing to meeting the housing needs of priority households;
- the objectives of the Garage Strategy included determining which garage sites had development potential, to consider what future investment was needed to maximise income generation and to review garage rent levels and determine a rental strategy for the HRA Business Plan;

- the Council were currently in the 4th stage of the Strategy and had accumulated information on the stock condition of the garages. An initial review of the sites had divided the sites into 3 groups: those sites that have development potential; those sites that have constrained development potential and those sites that have no development potential;
- the Council were now considering how to make best use of the garage sites, on the basis of their suitability for the development of affordable housing, demand for letting and cost of repair;
- a Garage Strategy Steering Group (The Group) had been established with a range of representatives to take the strategy forward. One meeting of the Group had been held so far;
- the Group had identified that identification was required of sites attracting anti social behaviour to develop an action plan to resolve the issues;
- for those garages with development potential the Group had identified that a planning officer was required to provide planning advice. Site visits would be conducted to the sites and feasibility studies would then be commenced;
- for those sites without development potential, the Group had identified that further information needed to be collated to enable an analysis of the demand and repair status of garages in order to identify priorities for repair and subsequent letting;
- for those garages without development or garage letting potential, the Group had considered that it may be appropriate to consider a change of use for some garages that would either be community or commercially driven to bring in further income to the HRA;
- in summary, Garages needed to be robustly managed to avoid nuisance complaints and deal with and Health and Safety issues that arise.

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

- there was a difference in garage letting charges between council tenants and non-council tenants due to the rules surrounding Value Added Tax (VAT);
- it was noted that there were some concerns that garages were being used for commercial enterprises. This is why better management was required in relation to garages to ensure that there were regular inspections;

- there were issues to be resolved surrounding the locality around the garages to ensure that they were more easily accessible.

RESOLVED: That the report be noted.

129. Housing Ambition Plan No. 3 (2012/13)

The Forum received a report on the Housing Ambition Plan (HAP) which was the service plan for Housing Services. An officer introduced the report and made the following points:

- the first HAP had been produced in 2012 and comprised of an action plan to address areas of weakness. The second HAP looked at addressing changes required by Central Government in relation to Housing. This third HAP was the most comprehensive and ambitious housing service plan. Its aim was to deliver excellent services shaped and valued by the Council's communities;
- the HAP included team commitments around a number of different areas. It also had an objective for staff of getting closer to the customer;
- the HAP also contained a spreadsheet listing the projects which they would deliver and the relevant timescales. There was also a scorecard of key performance indicators;
- monitoring of the objectives contained with the HAP would be carried out internally via the housing management team, the Council's improvement board and the quarterly HFTRA Challenge Panel.

In referring the HAP itself the officer made the following points:

- the HAP contained an initial section which detailed the vision of the Plan. There was a greater onus on staff to understand and get closer to their customers;
- in the current national economic difficulties it was important to have a strong strategic core and make accurate projections;
- the HAP linked into the Council's Community, Health and Well-being Directorate's vision;
- the HAP contained the relevant engagement structure for the HAP, of which the Forum was a key component;
- the plan referenced the Housing Leadership Group which would engage all housing managers and perform a number of roles including developing new initiatives and tracking performance. This would play a key role in learning and development;

- the HAP contained a series of commitments from the Housing Management Team. This ensured that these commitments were clear and that everyone in the service understood what was trying to be achieved;
- the HAP recognised the recent achievement of the Housing Services obtaining a gold standard in their recent Investors in People Inspection. The HAP also identified key action points to maintain this award;
- the remaining sections of the HAP identified individual team commitments.

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

- Bed and Breakfast accommodation was required at times for those requiring social housing. This was always done reluctantly and any stay was always kept to a minimum;
- any complaints regarding housing services were dealt with under the Council's corporate complaints procedure. If there were still concerns after this process, complaints could be made to the Local Government Ombudsman. Under the Localism Act it was anticipated that complaints relating to housing issues would be dealt with locally with a democratic filter and then a Housing Ombudsman. There was not much information available yet about how this operation would work in practice.

Members of the Forum commented that officers within Housing Service had provided excellent customer care to some of the TRAs and they were keen to work in partnership with them to achieve the best possible outcomes.

RESOLVED: That the report be noted.

130. 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 providing feedback on a range of Council led service specific and service wide resident involvement activities.

An officer introduced the report and explained that due to the timing of the meeting performance information was still being processed and would be provided in greater detail at the next meeting.

The officer also reported the following points:

- the Council had received some benchmarking information in relation to other Councils which had demonstrated that the Council were performing well in relation to rent collection. Two statistics that were monitored were the percentage of current tenant arrears expressed as

a percentage of the overall annual amount charged to tenants in rent. The second was the amount of rent debt that was written off. The Council had been identified as being the best performing Council in London in these aspects;

- work had commenced in relation to universal credit. The main impact of this was that the Council may have to physically collect about 60-70% of the rent which was a significant change to the current collection process. A steering group had been established to look at what steps were required to address this change and awareness also needed to be raised in relation to the changes and whether direct debits could be utilised more frequently. The Council were working closely with the Citizens Advice Bureau to increase this awareness;
- work was continuing on the Council's commitment to tackling tenancy fraud. Almost one third of tenants had been visited. Extra resources had been allocated to this project because when conducting visits, other unrelated issues were being advised of providing valuable learning experiences;
- a Council officer had met recently with Housing Associations to outline the support provided by the Council in relation to tackling fraud. This involved providing training and support on investigations;
- a new way of working in relation to estate services was being piloted. This involved a mix of static and mobile caretakers and the introduction of wet cleaning in communal areas of the flat blocks;
- this year's round of tenant inspection of housing estates in partnership with Hillingdon had taken place. This involved a small group of tenants inspecting estates at random within Hillingdon and grading them. Tenants from Hillingdon also then inspected and graded an estate visited at random within Harrow. This had produced a positive outcome for the Council in that the estate within Harrow had been scored at 84%.

During the discussion on this section of the report, Members of the Forum raised a number of issues which the officer responded to as follows:

- a request for volunteers from TRAS to become involved as Tenant Inspectors had been made through the HFTRA;
- the Council had noted that there had been challenges in relation to caretaking services generally. These issues would be addressed and it was envisaged that changes to the operations of caretakers would assist in this process. Caretakers would now be required to do whatever was necessary to alleviate the issue rather than have a set time on each relevant estate;
- it was noted that TRA representatives would like for Housing Services' department to further publicise their achievement in attaining a Gold

Assessment in the Investor in People accreditation for example via the 'Homing In' publication.

The officer then presented the forum with details regarding the Sheltered Housing Review. The officer explained that it was envisaged that a report would be presented to Cabinet in September 2012, and officers were keen to input any views expressed by the Forum.

The officer made the following points:

- the key reasons for making a change in relation to sheltered housing included delivering service improvements, it provided an opportunity to modernise, to respond to a 40% reduction on Supporting People funding over the next 3 years and ensure consistency in the way all schemes operated;
- there were 18 Sheltered Housing schemes and 551 self contained flats. Each scheme had one designated warden however only 5 resident wardens currently remained. There were several wardens who were part time and tenants did not have much of a choice in who they spoke to resolve issues;
- staff usually had to work in isolation and a 40% reduction in Supporting People would mean a reduction in staff if no action was taken;
- it was therefore proposed to retain 18 frontline posts, but to divide these into 2 staff teams. The first team would focus on housing management and the second team would focus on support;
- two new posts would also be created within the proposals. One was a scheme co-ordinator and one would be a handyperson;
- more staff hours would be available under the proposals. Wardens currently worked 553 hours per week. Under the new structure 648 hours of staff time would be utilised;
- an informal consultation with staff and tenants on the proposals was conducted in 2011. Formal consultation was now taking place with staff and would close on 18 July 2012;
- the feedback received to date had been mixed. Most people recognised the need for change but concern had been expressed regarding a reduced staff presence;
- Sheltered Housing was funded through both Supporting People Grant (SPG) and HRA. The SPG was paid on the basis that Wardens spent 95% of their time providing support to all 551 Sheltered tenants, however many tenants did not require a support package;
- currently the SPG was means tested so tenants not in receipt of benefits were charged a weekly support charge of £15.25;

- the SPG needed to make savings of at least £200k by 2015. These savings could be achieved by changing the funding arrangements by moving from a long term to a short term designation. This meant that the support service would now be free but a new service charge of £15.25 would cover the enhanced housing management of sheltered housing. Tenants would be no worse off financially but receive a better service.

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

- there were issues with ensuring that any IT provided at Sheltered Housing locations were compatible with the Councils systems. It was hoped that this would still be progressed as the Council's IT infrastructure was developed;
- the support service was different to Home Care. Home care related to personal care;
- there was currently a helpline service which was utilised if wardens were not present at the site.

The Chairman requested that an update report on Sheltered Housing be provided at the next meeting of the Forum.

RESOLVED: That the report be noted.

131. Date of Next Meeting

RESOLVED: To note that the next meeting would be held at 7.30 pm on Wednesday 31 October 2012.

(Note: The meeting, having commenced at 2.05 pm, closed at 5.05 pm).

(Signed) COUNCILLOR BOB CURRIE
Chairman