

TENANTS', LEASEHOLDERS' AND RESIDENTS' CONSULTATIVE FORUM MINUTES

31 OCTOBER 2012

Chairman: * Councillor Bob Currie

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

In attendance: Kairul Kareema Marikar Minute 142-150
(Councillors)

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

Representatives From the Following Associations Were in Attendance

Eastcote Lane Tenants' and Residents' Association
Harrow Weald Tenants' and Residents' Association
Kenmore Park Tenants' and Residents' Association
Woodlands Community Tenants' and Residents' Association
Harrow Federation of Tenants' and Residents' Associations
Weald Village Tenants' and Residents' Association

142. 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

143. Declarations of Interest

Agenda Item 7 – Information Report – Rent and Housing Finance Overview Workshop, Agenda Item 8 – Resident Services Manager’s Report and Feedback from other Council Led Resident Involvement Activities, Agenda Item 9 – Information Report – Housing Complaints Handling and Agenda Item 10 – Information Report – Head of Asset Management’s Report

Councillors Bob Currie and Mano Dharmarajah declared non pecuniary interest in 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.

Councillor Kairul Marikar who was not a Member of the Forum declared a non pecuniary interest in the above items in that she was a Council tenant. She would remain in the room whilst the Forum considered the matters before them.

Agenda Item 8 – Information Report – Resident Services Manager’s Report and Feedback from other Council Led Resident Involvement Activities

Paddy Lyne declared a non pecuniary interest in that she was Vice-Chair of the Harrow Citizens’ Advice Bureau (CAB). She would remain in the room whilst the matter was considered.

144. Minutes

RESOLVED: That the minutes of the meeting held on 17 July 2012 be taken as read and signed as a correct record and that the minutes of the special meetings held on 26 September 2012 be taken as read and signed as a true record, subject to the following amendments to the list of representatives from the following Associations which were in attendance:

deletion of Honeybun Estate Tenants’ and Residents’ Association, Milman Close Tenants’ and Residents’ and Weald Village Community Association.

145. Public Questions, Petitions and Deputations

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

RESOLVED ITEMS

146. INFORMATION REPORT: Rent and Housing Finance Overview Workshop

The Divisional Director of Housing Services introduced a report which outlined the proposed approach to a rent and housing finance workshop and which sought ideas for obtaining maximum attendance. The Divisional Director of Housing Services made the following comments:

- the aim of the workshop was to provide basic information regarding the Housing Revenue Account (HRA) and the rent options which would help to facilitate detailed and meaningful discussions when the rent options were next considered;
- the workshop was proposed to help address concerns raised at the previous meeting regarding the complicated nature of the rent options;
- it was proposed that the workshop would commence in the late morning and finish on the early afternoon. Lunch would be provided and the travel costs of those who attended would be reimbursed;
- senior housing managers would be in attendance.

A Member of the Forum commented that more than one session would be required if all the attendees were to understand the issues and rent options. It was suggested that information about the workshop could be circulated in the Harrow Federation of Residents' and Tenants' Association (HFRTA) mail shot to its database of contacts.

The Divisional Director of Housing Services welcomed the offer of publicity for the workshop and advised that it was anticipated that the workshop would be held towards the end of November.

In response to various issues raised by Members of the Forum the officer advised that Councillors would be invited to the workshop and that the workshop would initially be organised as a daytime session. Attendance would then be reviewed to ascertain whether or not an evening session would be required.

RESOLVED: That the report be noted.

147. INFORMATION REPORT - Resident Services Manager's Report and feedback from other Council led Resident Involvement Activities

An officer introduced a report which set out a range of information and provided feedback on various Council led service specific and service wide resident involvement activities. The officer reported the following points:

- there had been increased interest in Right to Buys. To date, there had been 25 applications and 7 properties had been sold. This was an increase on the previous year when no properties had been sold;

- the Frequently Asked Questions (FAQs) and explanations which had been sent out with the annual service charge bills to all leaseholders had been well received and received positive feedback;
- at the start of quarter 2 rent arrears were at an all time low of £394,753. In August there had been a seasonal increase in rent arrears which was due to the summer holidays and this was historically the case. The current figure for rent arrears was £446,000. In addition, the collection rate of 96.14% was higher than at this time last year when it was 95.19%. The introduction of a third direct debit payment date was being pursued and when the additional date was set it would be promoted;
- the feedback from the Citizens Advice Bureau (CAB) project which had involved visiting tenants indicated that tenants were aware of the forthcoming changes with the introduction of universal credit and that they had various concerns. In addition, most of the tenants visited had a transactional bank account, the majority stated they did not have monetary concerns and all of those visited would prefer to have the direct payment of rent continue. A report could be submitted to a future meeting of the Forum which included an analysis of the feedback if requested;
- the number of completed tenancy audits was ahead of schedule at the end of quarter 2;
- there had been an increase in efforts to help encourage tenants to move out of larger properties they were under occupying and during this year 18 tenants had moved as a part of the occupation scheme. Some tenants had registered to move to the Olympic Park which would be providing supported and disabled adapted properties shortly;
- it was proving more challenging to achieve progress regarding tenancy fraud as further investigations were required and tenants were more willing to be legally challenged before terminating the tenancies. There had been 4 successful cases this year. A Channel 4 news piece regarding tenancy fraud and featuring the Council was due to be shown on 8 November 2012;
- there had been a decrease in the number of complaints received in quarter 2 and of those received 17 had been resolved at stage 1, there were no complaints at stage 2 and one at stage 3;
- the proposal to remodel the Sheltered Housing Service was approved by Cabinet at its meeting on 13 September 2012 and it was anticipated that the new staffing structure would be in place by 1 April 2013. Tenants would be introduced to any new staff and a Service Review Working Group was being established to ensure that the service operated well. Some of the members of the Service Review Working Group would be visiting Hammersmith and Fulham Council;

- the Resident Involvement Review action plan was now complete and any remaining issues and actions would be addressed in the draft Resident Involvement Strategy. The project team had now completed its role and as a result had folded;
- the annual election process for Sheltered Housing representatives was complete and the Housing Sheltered Residents' Association would receive continued support from Resident Services;
- the winners of the Estates in Bloom competition held on August 2012 was Grange and the Sheltered winners were Sinclair House;
- the programme of summer events across the borough with the Tenants' and Residents' Associations (TRAs) had achieved varying degrees of success in engaging new tenants and leaseholders. The events had also been used to carry out consultation on the changes to Council Tax benefit;
- the HFTRA and Resident Involvement Team had hosted the second TRA 'get together' on 4 October 2012 and all contributors were to be thanked for involvement. The event had been well received and the feedback positive;
- the Estates Services Steering Group (ESSG) had met on 29 August 2012 and considered various issues including the new window cleaning contract. The next meeting of the ESSG would be held on 28 November 2012 where updates would be received and recharging for bulk clearance would be considered;
- the new working arrangements for caretakers had commenced on 1 August 2012 and these arrangements would be reviewed in 6 months. The initial feedback had been positive;
- the Value for Money sub group had met on 18 September 2012 and considered the HRA efficiencies and how these were invested;
- appointments had been made to the permanent Tenant and Leaseholder Scrutiny Panel. The first meeting had been held on 25 October 2012 and Martin Biswell, a tenant from Kenmore Park had been selected as the permanent Chairman of the Panel.

Members of the Forum expressed the view that the report was excellent and that the two interim appointments of the interim Head of Asset Management and the interim Head of Resident Services had been a success.

Members of the Forum raised the following issues which the officers responded to as follows;

- a record was kept of the complaints and the stage 1 complaints related to the delivery of services;

- initially there had been confusion regarding the installation of computers in sheltered housing. It was planned that computers for the wardens would be installed first and that the computers for sheltered housing tenants would then be installed and be connected to the same network;
- the review working group would include representatives from the sheltered housing blocks;
- it was accepted that HFTRA was also helping to support Housing Sheltered Residents Association;
- the Head of Service, Access Harrow would be attending the Value for Money sub group in November, not in October, to discuss the development of SLAs for Support Service Charges including Access Harrow;
- the increase in the collection rate was due to the team and there had been some movement of resources within the team to enable this;
- there had been 4 successful cases relating to tenancy fraud this year and there were 5 more investigations which were due for completion by the end of the year;
- there were various reasons why the computers had not been installed in the sheltered accommodation blocks which included network issues for the staff computers, a change in the IT provider resulting in a lower priority for the project and the sheltered housing review which resulted in different working arrangements with staff working from a hub and using IT on a mobile basis. The installation of computers for tenants in sheltered accommodation would be revisited and the computers would not use the Council's network;
- a communication plan to make residents and tenants aware of the welfare reforms had been developed. In addition, due to a restructure of Resident Services 13 full time equivalent posts had been created and some of these would deal with income management;
- photos of all new tenants were being taken to facilitate tenancy audits and staff were taking the opportunity to update tenants' records;
- the CAB were trying to identify those people who would require assistance as a result of the welfare reform changes;
- the rent arrears included in the report related to current tenants and were therefore all recoverable. It was harder to recover rent arrears from previous tenants and in some cases a recommendation was made to write off the arrears;

- incentives were being considered as part of the scheme for encouraging tenants to move out of large properties they were under occupying.

A Member of the Forum thanked the officer for their work on the Tenant and Leaseholder Scrutiny Panel and commented that Harrow was in a better position than other authorities.

RESOLVED: That the report be noted.

148. INFORMATION REPORT - Housing Complaints Handling

An officer introduced a report which updated the Forum on the changes for complaint handling relating to council landlord services introduced by the Localism Act 2011. The report included the points raised at the meeting between the Housing Ombudsman Service and several London Local Authorities. The officer reported the following comments:

- the democratic filter would apply to all landlords of public rented housing and would apply to complaints about the council's landlord functions;
- a complainant would have to wait for 8 weeks after the end of the final stage of their landlords complaint policy, before approaching the Housing Ombudsman (HO) if they had not involved a designated person;
- the timeframe for complaints to be referred to the Housing Ombudsman was 6 months. The referral period for complaints to the Local Government Ombudsman (LGO) was 12 months;
- the introduction of the democratic filter was designed to give the complainant more choice and the HO viewed the role of the designated person as one of a mediator who would be able to make recommendations but not decide the outcome of a complaint;
- the Localism Act gave automatic recognition to any MP in England or a Harrow Councillor as a designated person. A designated tenants panel could be a designated person once it had been recognised by the landlord. The emphasis would be on the designated tenants panel to make an approach to the landlord to be recognised as a designated person. Under the Localism Act 2011 landlords were discouraged from actively establishing a designated tenants panel;
- a landlord was not able to refer a complaint to the HO, it was only the designated person and the complainant who were able to do so;
- it was the view of the HO that a 3 stage internal complaints process was outdated. The current Corporate Complaints Policy was being reviewed and consideration was being given to a two stage process;

- it was intended to reconvene the former 'Tenants Complaints Feedback Panel' and nominations for representatives were sought;
- a progress report would be submitted to the Forum meeting in December.

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

- the present complaints process had three stages, with each stage of the complaint being considered by a more senior officer. If the complainant was not satisfied with the outcome of the internal complaint then the matter would be referred to the LGO;
- in some cases the complaints progressed to stage 2 as the service delivered had not met the expectations of the complainant;
- the HO did not expect landlords to have panels in place by April 2013. A designated tenants panel was one of the options to perform the role of the designated person;
- any complaints about non-landlord functions and private rented landlords would still be submitted to the LGO and complaints from tenants would be referred to the HO.

Members of the Forum commented that the London Borough of Richmond had a tenant champion whose role was to assist tenants with the complaints process and it would be beneficial to make contact with the relevant people there and to give consideration to how that model operated. In addition, requests for representatives for the 'Tenants Complaints Feedback Panel' could be included in the mail shot sent out by the HFTRA.

RESOLVED: That the report be noted.

149. INFORMATION REPORT - Head of Asset Management's Report

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

- the recruitment to the new Asset Management staffing structure was nearly complete and two new staff members were awaiting their start dates. The post of empty homes coordinator was still vacant and there were temporary arrangements in place until the post was advertised again in January;
- the asset management structure now consisted of 3 teams with one responsible for delivery, one for preparing and planning future years investment and one for responsive repairs;
- the key priority for asset management was now to deliver services which would involve providing good value for money, improved

consultation, the establishment of robust contract management arrangements, adopting a joined up approach with Resident Services and improved communication and partnership working with tenants and leaseholders;

- performance information relating to the new contract for the responsive repairs had been delayed and this was partly due to problems with the interfaces between the Council's and the contractors computer systems. Early indications were that the new contractors were working well as the number of recalls had fallen and the predicated savings were likely to be achieved;
- contractor appraisal panels were being established and these would include tenant and leaseholder representatives and contract surveyors. The panels would meet on a bi-monthly basis and consider performance, customer satisfaction and complaints. Updates and feedback from these panels would be included in future reports to the Forum;
- a challenge panel for the capital programme had been established which would call in the contractor managers to explain the current status of projects. The panel was proving to be a success;
- an asset management board had been created and the board would receive reports from the contractor appraisal panel and the challenge panel;
- the council's internal auditors had been invited to assess the arrangements and the Forum would be advised of any additional elements introduced as a result of the audit when it had taken place;
- the capital programme of £9 million was ambitious and all the work which was carried forward from the 2011/12 programme was currently on site or completed. £7.7 million of works had been procured and £5.2 million was on site or completed;
- there was a need to plan the future capital programme to ensure that it was procured and delivered on time. It was anticipated that a 3 year outline programme would be submitted to the Forum meeting in February. Early planning of the capital programme would help to provide more procurement opportunities and a potential reduction in costs. It was anticipated that more kitchens and bathrooms could be replaced;
- consideration was being given to including works to assets which were not homes, such as fences, garages, car parks and options for sheltered housing;
- asset management was adopting a 30 year view and it was important to decide how to prioritise future improvements. It was important that tenants and leaseholders were involved in the process;

- progress was being made on the health and safety programme and work orders were being raised as a result of the inspections;
- the commencement of the repairs MOTs had been delayed due, in part, to delays in recruiting staff. The programme was now due to begin in November.

Members of the Forum raised a number of queries which officers responded to as follows:

- information about the appraisal panels could be included in the mail shot sent out by the HFTRA;
- the improvements to assets that were not homes would be in addition to the minor improvements which were revenue, not capital funded;
- the interface issues between the Council's and the contractors computer systems had not effected delivery or resulted in any set backs. The problems had resulted in a delay in the performance data being available to the Council. The issues were now resolved and had been centred on how information was passed to a computer programme;
- when officers visited properties they did have a short audit checklist but the possibility of aligning health and safety assessments with tenancy audits would be considered;
- it was accepted that a contingency plan could have been in place to address any IT issues which had resulted from the new contract and the need for computer systems to be compatible;
- there was an effort to make the client side stronger and if the Clerks of Work were alerted to an issue they would make a visit. In the first instance they would try to resolve any issues and if this failed they would report the matter to the contracts manager. Two Clerks of Works to monitored the capital programme;
- subject to receiving legal advice, consideration would be given to either employing tenants or asking tenants to volunteer to inspect works.

A Member of the Forum commented that the success of the asset management in procuring £7.7 million worth of works from a £9 million budget was not advertised and that asset management should have a magazine.

RESOLVED: That the report be noted.

150. Date of Next Meeting

RESOLVED: To note that a special meeting would be held at 2.00 pm on Tuesday 4 December and that the next ordinary meeting would be held at 2.00 pm on Wednesday 19 December 2012.

(Note: The meeting, having commenced at 7.30 pm, closed at 9.26 pm).

(Signed) COUNCILLOR BOB CURRIE
Chairman