

TENANTS', LEASEHOLDERS' AND RESIDENTS' CONSULTATIVE FORUM (SPECIAL) MINUTES

4 DECEMBER 2012

Chairman: * Councillor Bob Currie

Councillors: * Mrs Camilla Bath * Susan Hall (1)
† Mano Dharmarajah

In attendance: Thaya Idaikkadar Minute 154
(Councillors)

* Denotes Member present
(1) Denote category of Reserve Members
† Denotes apologies received

Representatives from the following Associations were in attendance

Brookside Close Tenants' and Residents' Association
Eastcote Lane Tenants' and Residents' Association
Harrow Federation of Tenants' and Residents' Associations
Harrow Weald Tenants' and Residents' Association
Kenmore Park Tenants' and Residents' Association
Little Stanmore Tenants' and Residents' Association
Pinner Hill Tenants' and Residents' Association
Weald Village Tenants' and Residents' Association

151. 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 Susan Hall

152. Declarations of Interest

Agenda Item 4 - Housing Changes Review Update: Consideration of key housing strategies and policies including Tenancy Strategy and Policy, draft Housing Strategy, Homelessness Strategy, Private Sector Housing Strategy and Allocation scheme and Housing Business Plan/Asset Management Plan update

Councillor Thaya Idaikkadar declared a **non pecuniary** interest in the above item because his mother resided in sheltered accommodation in Harrow.

Councillor Bob Currie declared a **non pecuniary** interest in the above item in that he attended monthly meetings of the Eastcote Lane Tenants' and Residents' Association.

Councillor Susan Hall declared a **pecuniary** interest in Appendix 6 of the above item, the Consultation Draft Private Sector Housing Strategy 2012-17, by virtue of being a private landlord; she left the room during consideration of this item and took no part in the meeting for the duration of this item.

153. Deputations

RESOLVED: To note that no deputations were put at this meeting.

RECOMMENDED ITEMS

154. **Housing Changes Review update: Consideration of key housing strategies and policies including Tenancy Strategy and Policy, draft Housing Strategy, Homelessness Strategy, Private Sector Housing Strategy and Allocation scheme and Housing Business Plan update**

The Chair welcomed all present and expressed his satisfaction at the large turn out of representatives of tenant and resident organisations, although he also noted that no leaseholder representative was present.

In response to a query, an officer stated that a copy of the Housing Allocation Scheme could be provided to individuals or organisations who requested it, and that copies had been made available in group offices and the Members' Library.

An officer explained that various Housing policies and strategies had been reviewed in the light of the Localism Act 2011, and the Forum was asked to comment on the revised documents. The Tenancy Strategy and Tenancy Policy would be submitted to Cabinet on 13 December 2012 for formal approval, along with consultation drafts of the Housing Strategy, Private Sector Housing Strategy, Homelessness Strategy and Allocation Scheme. The Council had to have an agreed Tenancy Strategy in place by January 2013.

The Localism Act conferred new powers on the Council, and the revised policies and strategies detailed how the Council would respond to the new requirements, taking into account the current economic climate, and local circumstances in Harrow – namely:

- a low supply of social housing (10% of the total);
- twice as many people were in privately rented housing compared to social housing;
- Harrow was a high cost area in which to rent or buy;
- benefit cuts were likely to increase the incidence of homelessness;
- introduction of the benefit cut in April 2013 would mainly affect people in private rented housing.

Earlier discussions with resident groups suggested that there was support for more affordable housing, flexible tenancies, a review of the allocation scheme with re-prioritisation of applicants, and a pragmatic response to families on benefits who would not be able to afford private rented housing, to include housing options outside Harrow if this would best meet their housing needs.

Draft Housing Strategy

The main objective of the Housing strategy was to increase the supply of affordable housing and make the best use of the Council's assets.

Representatives of Resident Organisations requested clarification on the following points.

Opportunities to develop land

The Council would consider all suggestions for potential development – garages, derelict sites, car parks – although the loss of car parks could create different problems in respect of parking and traffic movement and would be subject to planning.

What will happen to existing tenants if their benefits are capped?

This would predominantly affect people in the private rented sector, although officers were aware of 19 Council tenants who may be affected. The CAB are working with the Council to speak to households about the welfare benefit changes and the best ways to assist tenants.

The Tenancy Strategy and Policy

The strategy proposed that tenancies were let for an initial one year probationary period, and on successful completion, the tenancy could be let for a 5 year period, and then reviewed. In most cases it was anticipated that the tenancy would be renewed unless the tenant did not abide by the tenancy regulations, or experienced a material change in circumstances which could dictate a change of tenancy (e.g. to a smaller or larger property) or an end to their entitlement (e.g. if they move into a higher income bracket).

The strategy would provide advice and guidance for social housing landlords on the Council's approach to flexible tenancies.

Representatives of Resident Organisations requested clarification on the following points.

Will upper income limits be raised in line with inflation?

The policy would be reviewed annually and figures could be reviewed and changed as part of this process.

If a tenant exceeds the income limit but has a disability or other special need, will this be taken into account?

All circumstances could be raised and taken into account at the review meeting.

Will the age of children be taken into account, particularly at key stages in education?

There would be provision and guidance in the strategy to accommodate this, and circumstances could be taken into account at the review meeting. If families were moved into a property better suited to their needs, every attempt would be made to accommodate them in the same area.

Will there be an appeal process ?

Yes, at allocation and following reviews.

How will the new strategy affect the tenant's 'Right to Buy', can the Council refuse to sell Council housing given the short supply?

The 'Right to Buy' was an entirely separate process and the Council could not prevent or inhibit a tenant's right to make a 'Right to Buy' application.

There was a general discussion about whether it was possible to provide suitable alternative, grouped housing for older residents whose homes were now too big or unsuitable for them, in order to release their properties for families. New developments were often designed to integrate differing demographic groups, and avoid the creation of 'age silos', but some residents commented that they would prefer to live among people in a similar life situation to themselves, with similar needs. Officers acknowledged the need for housing options that encouraged tenants to downsize.

Homelessness Strategy

The strategy proposed two key policy changes as a result of the increasing levels of homelessness and welfare benefit changes:

- providing suitable private rented housing rather than social housing to discharge the Council's legal duty to homeless families;
- providing housing options that included moves out of Harrow and London where this would best meet the housing need of the household.

Representatives of Resident Organisations requested clarification on the following points.

Will we move local people out so that people can move in from inner London?

There is no evidence that families are moving from inner London to Harrow in large numbers. Inner London households are also affected by the benefit cap and would face the same affordability issues in Harrow as local people.

Private landlords usually let for one year – how will this work with the strategy?

There was a successful 'Help to Let' scheme which supported landlords in finding and retaining suitable tenants; landlords generally preferred a stable tenancy.

How will we support people to help them move back if their circumstances merit this?

In the new Allocation scheme proposals, people would have a higher priority if they moved out of the borough compared to households living in temporary accommodation in the borough.

The Allocations Scheme

An officer outlined the objectives of the draft Allocations Scheme - to reduce the number of people approved for social housing and reduce the length of time taken to allocate suitable accommodation. The following policies would be introduced to achieve this:-

- a residency requirement of 5 years before consideration;
- an income and savings policy, to determine those most in need and unable to avail of alternatives;
- re-prioritise categories – applicants in Band D would no longer be allowed to bid for properties, but would be offered advice about alternative provision;
- higher priority would be given to :-
 - families with two fewer bedrooms than they need;

- households in low paid employment, including accepted homeless applicants in low paid work (or volunteering in the local community) or who have had to be housed outside Harrow;
- ex and serving members of the armed forces with an urgent housing need;
- people who could demonstrate a benefit to the community;
- priority would be reduced for:-
 - families who were only one bedroom short for their number;
 - families whose number included children over 21 years who were not carers or who did not require care.

Representatives of Resident Organisations requested clarification on the following points.

Where will the over 21s live as there isn't any other housing for them?

They would not need to move. However, having children aged over 21 would not increase priority for a move to larger social housing.

What is the maximum age at which the Council recognises that children of opposite gender should not share?

Once a child is aged over 10 years they would be considered to have a need for their own bedroom. However if they currently live in a 2 bedroom property they would only be one bedroom short and thus would not be considered a high priority for rehousing. Social tenants can seek a mutual exchange and all tenants could move to larger private rented accommodation.

The Divisional Director of Housing Services informed the meeting that these were unprecedented times for the service, with reduced housing stock and ever increasing numbers requiring accommodation. It was vital that those most in need were catered for, and equally important to be honest with those who had no realistic chance of getting social housing. In order to make the best use of the available stock, the service would consider placing some families outside the borough.

The Private Sector Strategy

Harrow had a successful lettings agency which advised tenants and landlords, and supported both in retaining their tenancies. The Strategy would contain proposals to expand the supply of homes through the private sector; to ensure minimum standards and enforce against failing landlords. It would also support residents with increasing needs to remain in their homes through adaptations.

The Forum discussed the number and nature of empty properties in the borough, and effective reporting and investigative mechanisms to bring empty properties back into use, including the use of media to improve awareness of the problem.

Asset Management Strategy

An officer explained that this strategy was at an early draft stage and would be consulted upon in due course. The draft 3 year investment programme would be submitted to the Forum meeting on 19 December 2012. The strategy would set out the department's plans for investing in housing stock and other community buildings. It would capture priorities and provide detail on procurement, and would consider other future initiatives, such as a garage strategy, or climate strategy, which might inform policy.

Housing Business Plan Update

Plans for the operation of the new Housing Revenue Account (HRA) were not yet finalised, but were focused on finding a balance between costs and income. There were 7 properties going through a 'Right to Buy' application, with 10 more in the pipeline; it was not possible to ascertain if this was an isolated situation, or the start of a trend which could pose a risk to budget planning and affect future rents. It was also difficult to predict the outcome of changes arising from welfare reform, although strategies were in place to minimise the potential impact.

Representatives of Resident Organisations requested clarification on the following points.

Why is the Council selling housing stock at this time, can you not refuse?

The cannot stop tenants from exercising their 'Right to Buy' (RTB), which is an entirely separate process. It is not actively encouraged, and we are considering offering financial incentives as a possible alternative to RTB.

Does the Council buy back properties that have been sold under this scheme?

This is being considered but we would concentrate on buying back properties with vacant possession so that they could then be re-let to a household in priority housing need. The Council would not want to buy a property with a sitting tenant as this would offer no benefit.

Access Harrow and the One Stop Shop are a big charge on the HRA – the service is often poor, are they really value for money?

We can review this provision and consider if the department is getting value for money from the arrangement.

The Forum considered measures to ensure that new build schemes included a proportion of affordable housing; if the development was on Council owned land, this was mandatory, but if private land then negotiations were pursued through the planning process. The Forum also noted the varying levels of demand for different sized properties.

In summary, the Divisional Director of Housing Services stated that the Tenant Strategy and Policy would be recommended to Cabinet for approval, with the broad support of the Forum, noting concerns raised.

The remaining draft strategies would return to the Forum for discussion once the formal consultation period had closed. Officers would continue to meet

with tenant and resident organisations to discuss options and hear residents' views.

Resolved to RECOMMEND: (to Cabinet)

That

- (1) the final version of the Tenancy Strategy be approved;
- (2) the final version of the Tenancy Policy 2012, which would introduce 12 month probationary tenancies followed by fixed term 5 year flexible tenancies for all new Council tenants from 1 April 2013 be approved;
- (3) consultation drafts of the Housing Strategy, Homelessness Strategy, and Private Sector Housing Strategy be approved;
- (4) the consultation draft of the proposed, amended Housing Allocation Scheme and transitional arrangements to now place all homeless households in band C, regardless of whether they are in emergency Bed and Breakfast or hostel accommodation, or in longer term temporary accommodation be approved;
- (5) the concerns of Tenants', Leaseholders' and Residents' Consultative Forum members about the impact of welfare reform on client groups be noted;
- (6) it be noted that there would be a review of the Tenant Strategy and Policy in one year.

It was also

RESOLVED: That

- (1) the report be noted;
- (2) a report on Access to Harrow, the One Stop Shop, and other in-house support services would be submitted to a future meeting;
- (3) a report on a system for tenants to notify officers of issues would be submitted to a future meeting.

Reason for Decision: To ensure that TLRCF is consulted on key housing strategies and policies and to enable feedback to be made to the Council to assist with the decision making process.

(Note: The meeting, having commenced at 2.00 pm, closed at 4.15 pm).

(Signed) COUNCILLOR BOB CURRIE
Chairman