

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

26 SEPTEMBER 2012

Chairman: * Councillor Bob Currie

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

* Denotes Member present
Denote category of Reserve Members

Representatives From the Following Associations Were in Attendance

Churchill Place Tenants' and Residents' Association
Eastcote Lane Tenants' and Residents' Association
Harrow Federation of Tenants' and Residents' Associations
Honeybun Estate Tenants' and Residents' Association
Kenmore Park Tenants' and Residents' Association
Little Stanmore Tenants' and Residents' Association
Milman Close Tenants' and Residents' Association
Weald Village Community Association
Weald Village Tenants' and Residents' Association

137. Attendance by Reserve Members

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

Ordinary Member

Councillor Kam Chana

Reserve Member

Councillor Susan Hall

138. Declarations of Interest

Agenda Items: 4 – Information Report: Housing Tenant and Leaseholder Survey 2012; 5 – Information Report: Housing Complaints Handling

Councillors Bob Currie and Mano Dharmarajah declared non pecuniary interests in the above items in that they attended monthly meetings of the Eastcote Lane Tenants' and Residents' Association (TRA). They would remain in the room whilst the matters were considered and voted upon.

139. Deputations

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

RESOLVED ITEMS

140. INFORMATION REPORT: Housing Tenant and Leaseholder Survey 2012

An officer introduced the report which outlined the proposals for the 2012 tenant and leaseholder survey which would be carried out in October 2012.

The officer made the following comments:

- the survey was sent out every two years by post to tenants and leaseholders and used to inform service changes;
- the survey would be sent out on 6 October in hard copy and would also be available for completion online;
- the survey was being administered by an independent research company, BMG;
- the survey would be sent to all 4,500 sheltered tenants, leaseholders and general needs tenants. A reminder would not be sent to general needs tenants but would be sent to leaseholders and sheltered tenants;
- a tenant and leaseholder advisory group had been established which had been involved in the preparation of the survey. In addition, there had been consultation with Harrow Federation of Tenants' and Residents' Associations (HFTRA), Leaseholder Support Group (LSG) and the Housing Editorial Board;
- a meeting with BMG was taking place on 27 September and any comments raised by the Forum would be taken to that meeting;

- the survey included a set of core questions which would be used for benchmarking purposes and a set of service specific questions;
- the survey was being publicised and there was a prize draw to encourage people to complete the survey. There was an option for people to opt out of the prize draw;
- unnecessary text had been removed and the questions had been streamlined. Questions relating to complaints and anti-social behaviour would be dealt with separately.

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

- the cost of a 4 page survey booklet and one reminder being sent to leaseholders and sheltered tenants was £12,600. The costs of advertising and translations had been included but the costs of officer time had not been;
- the tender had been offered to 6 companies and two had submitted bids. The fee to BMG included the mail out, compilation of the data, presentations of the results and workshops;
- the suggestion of selling advertising space on the survey would be raised with BMG;
- the cost of the survey would be approximately £2,300 lower if the survey was only sent to 40% of general need tenants as in previous years;
- the survey was not directed at freeholders;
- posters advertising the survey would be displayed on all notice boards and so in theory everyone would be aware;
- for sheltered tenants, it would be better if assistance in filling in the survey was not given by wardens as some of the questions were about the wardens. Contact numbers would be included and an officer would attend events at sheltered accommodation to raise awareness of the survey. The wardens were aware that a survey would be sent out;
- it was anticipated that the final report and survey results would be available in January and that a report outlining the initial results would be submitted to the Forum meeting in December.

An officer then outlined the changes to each of the surveys and explained how they differed from the version included on the agenda.

The officer made the following comments regarding the draft tenant satisfaction survey;

- an introduction and instructions on how to complete the survey would be included at the beginning. A positive opt in for information to be passed to the Council would be included as would an opt out for the prize draw;
- questions about the length of tenancy, length of residence at the property and the number of people who resided at the property had been included;
- a question about the welfare benefits changes and the potential implications had been included to ascertain the general level of understanding regarding these issues;
- in the general services section, a question about health and safety had been added;
- the section titled advice and support had been removed;
- in the contact and communication section a question had been added about access to the internet and 'My Harrow' had been added as an option in the question about preferred methods of communication;
- the question about satisfaction with gas servicing had been removed;
- the questions relating to estates had been amended to include grass cutting and grounds maintenance. In addition, the section had been amended to reflect the estates survey;
- a new section had been included about involvement, with questions about groups and how to contact them.

The officer advised that the draft sheltered tenant satisfaction survey was the same as the general survey except that the estates section was not included and there were some additional questions about the service in their sheltered housing scheme.

The officer outlined the changes to the draft leaseholder satisfaction survey:

- the estates section was the same as the general survey;
- the external repairs question remained;
- the survey included the question about access to the internet.

The Members of the Forum made a number of comments about the surveys, to which the officers responded by making the following points:

- it was not compulsory to complete the questions in the equality monitoring section. The Council had a duty under the Equalities Act 2010 to ask these questions and the information was then used to help shape services;
- the monitoring form, was a corporate form which was based on census categories and has been adapted to reflect Harrow's local communities;

- consideration would be given to explaining that gas servicing was obligatory as a part of the survey;
- the question about benefits changes would be general and the aim was to gauge awareness of the issues and to help shape communications;
- the addition of a question about knowledge of the procedures to make appointments with officers would be raised;
- BMG would be supplied with data of when properties last had repairs carried out to ascertain whether the responses related to the previous or current contractor. The current contractor had taken over on 1 July 2012;
- the equality monitoring form was a corporate one and queries regarding the categories would be reported.

RESOLVED: That the report be noted.

141. INFORMATION REPORT: Housing Complaints Handling

An officer introduced the report which explained some of the changes for handling complaints relating to Council landlord services introduced by the Localism Act 2011. The officer made comments including the following:

- the Council had a three stage internal complaints procedure. Under the current arrangements, once this procedure had been exhausted complaints were investigated by the Local Government Ombudsman if the complainant remained dissatisfied with the final response;
- from April 2013 the Housing Ombudsman would take over investigations of complaints about the council's landlord functions, not the Local Government Ombudsman;
- the Localism Act also required that complaints pass through a democratic filter in an attempt to find a local resolution. Members of Parliament and Councillors were defined by the Act as a Designated Person. The filter could take the form of a tenants' panel, which had to be recognised by the landlord. The Act did not contain much detail and this had led to differing opinions over the implementation and application of the democratic filter. A meeting had been arranged to discuss this with the Housing Ombudsman and West London Councils;
- clauses within the Act stated there were circumstances in which the democratic filter did not have to apply, in particular where the landlord had robust internal procedures. There was some confusion on how this would be applied operationally, as the view of the Housing Ombudsman was that that a local resolution should be sought before the complaint was investigated;

- under the present arrangements, if someone was dissatisfied with the outcome of the final decision then the matter could be forwarded to the Local Government Ombudsman within one year. Under the new arrangements the matter would have to be forwarded to the Housing Ombudsman within 8 weeks;
- it was only landlord complaints which could be referred to the Housing Ombudsman, all other complaints relating to housing needs and homelessness would still be referred to the Local Government Ombudsman;
- if a complaint was a cross-departmental one, it would be for the Ombudsmen to decide which would deal with the matter.

The Members of the Forum made a number of comments to which the officer responded as follows;

- in 2011/12, there had been 190 complaints made against the Council as a landlord and of these 7 had been investigated by the Local Government Ombudsman. The outcomes of the complaints investigated were that 3 had reached a local settlement, 3 had been concluded as having insufficient evidence of maladministration and 1 had not been investigated. There had been no decisions against the Council;
- the decision of the Housing Ombudsman would be final and would be enforceable with court action;
- the outcome of the meeting with the Housing Ombudsman would help to clarify the situation regarding the democratic filter;
- a report would be submitted to the next meeting of the Forum to outline the final arrangements.

RESOLVED: That the report be noted.

(Note: The meeting, having commenced at 3.20 pm, closed at 4.13 pm).

(Signed) COUNCILLOR BOB CURRIE
Chairman