

TENANTS', LEASEHOLDERS' AND RESIDENTS' CONSULTATIVE FORUM MINUTES

27 FEBRUARY 2013

Chairman: * Councillor Bob Currie

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

In attendance: * Kairul Kareema Marikar Minute 173-183
(Councillors)

* Denotes Member present

Divisional Director of Housing

The Chairman circulated a card for Members of the Forum to sign for the Divisional Director of Housing expressing their condolences for one of her relatives who had passed away.

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
Harrow Sheltered Residents' Association
Harrow Weald Tenants' and Residents' Association
Kenmore Park Tenants' and Residents' Association
Little Stanmore Tenants' and Residents' Association
Weald Village Tenants' and Residents' Association

Residents from Honeybun Estate, Meadfield - Kings Road, Milan Close and William Allen House were also in attendance.

173. Attendance by Reserve Members

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

174. Declarations of Interest

Agenda Items 7 – Head of Asset Management’s Report, 8 – Housing Complaints Handling, 9 – Cash Incentive Schemes for Council Tenants and 10 – Resident Services Manager’s Report and Feedback from Other Council Led Resident Involvement Activities

Councillor Mano Dharmarajah declared a non pecuniary interest in the above items in that he was a member of the Eastcote Lane Tenants’ and Residents’ Association. He would remain in the room whilst these matters were considered and voted upon.

Councillor Kairul Kareema Marikar declared a non pecuniary interest in the above items in that she was a Council tenant. She would remain in the room whilst these matters were considered.

175. Minutes

RESOLVED: That the minutes of the meeting held on 19 December 2012 and of the special meeting held on 31 January 2013 be taken as read and signed as correct records.

176. Public Questions, Petitions and Deputations

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

RESOLVED ITEMS

177. Housing Complaints Handling

An officer introduced the report which explained that the Localism Act had changed the way in which housing landlord complaints were handled from 1 April 2013. The report set out the proposed next steps for the housing service to ensure that it met the requirements set out in the Act. The officer made the following comments:

- from 1 April 2013, all complaints about housing landlord services would be referred to the Housing Ombudsman (HO) following completion of the landlord’s own complaints procedure;
- there would be a new role for MPs, local councillors and tenants panels as designated persons who would be able to have a role in resolving complaints;

- there had been ongoing discussions with the Forum, other social landlords and other local authorities;
- Appendix 1 to the report contained a new escalation paragraph example which would be sent out with stage 3 complaint responses;
- information on the new complaints procedure would be included in Homing In and briefings would be offered to Councillors;
- the Localism Act did not provide much detail on the role of a designated person and the HO had advised that they would not be providing any additional guidance. The Act did state that a designated person might help to resolve a complaint in one of two ways; they could attempt to resolve the complaint by making a recommendation to the landlord or they could refer the complaint in writing to the HO;
- to date there had been no interest expressed by tenants in establishing a tenants' panel to act as a designated person.

Members of the Forum asked a number of questions to which the officer responded to as follows:

- the tenants' panel would comprise of other tenants of the social landlord. There was no requirement that they were members of a Tenants' and Residents' Association but they must be tenants of that particular social landlord;
- the Localism Act did not allow the social landlord to establish a panel, it was the responsibility of tenants to approach the landlord to be asked to be recognised as a tenants panel and as a designated person. Landlords would support any tenants who approach them to be recognised as a tenants panel;
- the role of the designated person was to put forward recommendations to the landlord or complainant on how they should resolve the complaint and to act as an advocate;
- a Councillor acting as a designated person had two options for resolving a complaint, one was to make recommendations to the landlord or complainant and the other was to refer the complaint in writing to the HO;
- the designated person could be any of the 600 English MPs and any of the 63 Harrow Councillors;
- information about the new process would be sent to all Councillors via their group officers and briefings and training would be offered to Councillors;

- the Localism Act did not prescribe a minimum number of tenants for a tenants' panel. The Council would work with and support any tenants panel;
- a progress report would be presented to the Forum in 6 months.

RESOLVED: That the report be noted.

178. Head of Asset Management's Report

An officer introduced the report which set out a range of information and discussion items for the Forum's attention. The officer made comments including the following:

- a meeting with the Fire Service Borough Commander had taken place on 12 February 2013. One of the immediate outcomes of the meeting was that smoke alarms would be fitted in the properties of vulnerable people;
- further consideration had been given to tenant inspectors carrying out inspections on completed repair and health and safety works. Discussions had taken place with the Senior Professional – Communities and Investment, as trained tenant inspectors had been used for Estates Services;
- it had been decided to establish a training programme for any tenants or leaseholders who were interested in undertaking an inspector role. Anyone who was interested should approach the Head of Asset Management or the Head of Resident Services;
- the overarching commitment of Asset Management in their service plan would remain the same as last year. It was proving challenging to measure success against the commitment. It was suggested that the measure of a first class asset management service be based on a combination of value for money, quality performance measures and customer satisfaction measures. A first class service would be dependent upon Harrow rating in the upper quartile for all the key performance indicators for the measures;
- Quality Heating, the gas contractor had indicated that they would be willing to take calls for heating and hot water breakdowns direct from tenants. There were a number of advantages including a faster response, a dedicated Resident Liaison Officer for Harrow, longer telephone opening hours and specialists answering calls who may be able to diagnose the issue immediately;
- the new service from Quality Heating would be delivered within existing resources and the only cost would be for an IT upgrade to allow the contractor to feed in to the Council's system in real time. This cost would be a one off cost and would be funded from within existing budgets;

- performance data on the proposed new arrangements would be reported to the monthly contract appraisal panels. There would be intensive management of the new scheme for the first 3-6 months to ensure that the service was operating well;
- there were risks associated, such as call centre staff shortages and IT failures but to minimise these Quality Heating would be required to confirm that suitable procedures were in place;
- works had commenced on the Repairs MOTs and 5 had been completed. It was anticipated that 15 would be completed by the end of February. The target groups were the 100 most prolific callers to the repairs system and elderly and disabled tenants. It was expected that this work would be linked with the gas safety inspections;
- the recharge procedure for voids had commenced on 1 January 2013 and it was focused as a preventive measure to encourage people to leave properties in a good condition. £6706 had been raised as recharges in January;
- it was proposed to go live with recharges for responsive repairs from April 2013.

The Forum Members raised the following points on the Quality Heating proposal:

- specialists answering the phone would help to alleviate some of the detailed knowledge issues with Access Harrow;
- some tenants had concerns about the service offered by Quality Heating;
- there were concerns about the emergency out of hours service and the quality of the call responses;
- there had been instances of contractors not attending appointments and not having the correct equipment;
- the work carried out by Quality Heating was to a good standard and they provided a good service.

The officer made the following comments in response:

- the current monitoring programme would be used to ensure that jobs were completed and the Council would still have overall control;
- the Service Level Agreement (SLA) with Access Harrow would be reviewed for future years;

- it appeared to be a good service for tenants as they would be dealing directly with the experts and there would be fewer stages in the process. The service would be reviewed and reconsidered if it appeared not to be working properly;
- Quality Heating had provided assurances that staff would be trained, callers would not receive a recorded message and all incoming calls would be recorded and monitored for quality purposes.

The Chairman requested that Quality Heating be invited to attend a future meeting of the Forum in approximately 6 months.

RESOLVED: That the report be noted.

179. Cash Incentive Schemes for Council Tenants

An officer introduced the report which explained that social housing stock in the borough of Harrow was limited and in increasingly high demand. The report outlined some ideas on a variety of schemes which could help to free up properties in the Council's housing stock by offering cash incentives to tenants to move elsewhere. Funding for the schemes had been allocated within the HRA budget and MTFs for the period 2013-14 to 2016-17 approved by Cabinet on 14 February 2013, and within the HRA business plan to 2018-19 subject to Cabinet approval. The officer made comments including the following:

- cash incentives were one way to achieve the best use of limited social housing stock and they would also offer options to be tenants whose 5 year fixed term tenancy were not renewed;
- the cash incentives would only be paid to tenants who met certain criteria and who left vacant possession of a Council property;
- the benefits of a cash incentives scheme included realising family-sized accommodation for re-letting, encouraging under-occupying tenants to downsize and increasing the options available to council tenants;
- there was currently a scheme which offered incentives for under-occupying tenants to downsize to another social housing property. Tenants had their removal costs covered and were paid £1,500 per under-occupied room in their home when they downsized. The maximum amount which would be paid was £4,500 and the average payment was £2,400. There were approximately 30 tenants a year who downsized under this scheme;
- the current scheme could be enhanced by increasing the financial incentive offered per bedroom or the additional services offered. In addition, the scheme could be extended to include tenants wanting to move to social housing outside of London;

- an incentive could also be offered to households which would be affected by the 'bedroom tax' from April 2013;
- incentives could be offered to tenants wanting to move to an assured tenancy in a privately rented property . This might be appropriate for older tenants wanting to move to an older persons' housing scheme. It was proposed that the incentive could be up to £20,000 dependent upon the size of the property being vacated;
- consideration could also be given to paying an incentive to tenants seeking to downsize to a property with an affordable short hold tenancy of at least 2 years in some exceptional circumstances;
- cash incentives could be offered to tenants wishing to move outside the UK. The proposed incentive would be up to £20,000 depending on the size of the property being vacated. There would be a limited application of this incentive and the Council may not be able to stipulate the type of tenancy that was taken overseas. Tenants would be made aware of the potential insecurities of their tenancy if they moved abroad;
- tenants could be offered an incentive to move into a shared ownership property. A lump-sum cash payment of £12,000 would be offered, dependent on the size of the property being vacated, which could be used to cover a deposit or pay legal fees. At present, 61 Council tenants had registered an interest in purchasing a shared ownership property;
- incentives could be offered to tenants wanting to purchase their own home and there were 2 schemes which were being considered. One was to offer a simple payment to tenants and this could be used to meet any financial difference between the maximum obtainable mortgage and the price of the property. The other option was to offer tenants an interest free loan of £80,000 over 5 years to contribute to the mortgage;
- any cash incentive scheme operated by the Council would need to be approved by the Secretary of State;
- it was hoped that the cash incentive schemes would result in the release of 12 properties over the next 2 financial years which would save on the costs of homelessness to the General Fund;
- further consideration would be given to a number of issues regarding cash incentives, such as sustainability of the scheme and the need for an agreement to reclaim any incentive should a tenant move within a short time of receiving the incentive.

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

- the 5 year fixed tenancy period came into affect following a successful one year probationary period;
- the incentive scheme was limited to the budget available. Housing Options offered an advice service and if there were no suitable council properties available consideration would be given to privately rented accommodation;
- the Council had no plans to convert warehouses into accommodation units but this may be an option considered by developers;
- partners, such as Housing Associations, would be encouraged to offer similar incentive schemes;
- the implications of the welfare benefit cap were matters for further consideration as the proposals for cash incentives were developed;
- a system would need to be put in place to monitor any person who was given a cash incentive for moving abroad;
- a Resident Services event was taking place on 23 April 2013 to facilitate potential interest in mutual exchanges. This event would also be used to discuss the cash incentive options;
- the Council was not working directly with other boroughs but had researched what incentive schemes others had in place;
- the comments of the Forum and Tenants' and Residents' Associations about the schemes were welcomed.

RESOLVED: That the report be noted.

180. Resident Services Manager's Report and Feedback from Other Council Led Resident Involvement Activities

The Forum agreed to consider the report as a matter of urgency in order to receive the most up to date information.

An officer introduced the report which set out a range of information for the Forum's attention and provided feedback to the Forum on a wide range of Council led service specific and service wide resident involvement activities. The officer made the following points:

- since 1 April 2012, 13 properties had been sold under Right To Buy and 10 more were likely to be completed by the year end;
- MyHarrow accounts were being developed for leaseholders and it was anticipated that these would be live by the start of the new financial year;

- notification of Ground Rent due would be sent to leaseholders within the next month, this was not a request for payment but a legal requirement;
- leaseholders would be billed shortly for their contribution to the cost of a number of major works schemes. Surgeries would be held by the Leasehold Team to discuss individual payment options;
- there had not been a seasonal increase in rent arrears over Christmas and the total rent arrears for February of £382,654 was the lowest ever;
- 350 tenants who would be affected by the bedroom tax had been contacted and encouraged to attend an event to consider the implications;
- a third direct debit payment date would be introduced from 1 April 2013;
- officers were meeting with the Credit Union to help develop information to support tenants with their budgeting skills;
- work had commenced on the tenancy agreement review and the alterations would include the tenure changes from the Localism Act and new clauses about keeping animals and succession rights. Consultation with staff and the Harrow Federation of Tenants' and Residents' Associations would commence by the end of February and tenant consultation would take place from the beginning of March 2013. It was anticipated that the new agreement would be in place by the middle of June;
- the Tenant and Leaseholder Scrutiny Panel was considering new tenant 6 week visits as its first item. The progress reported to the Panel was good and 100% of visits had been achieved. The Panel would be making recommendations to the Forum in due course;
- a mutual exchange event was being held on 23 April to help those affected by the bedroom tax to downsize their accommodation. The Sheltered Housing Team would be attending the event;
- Barnet Homes had visited the Council to discuss good practice regarding how to manage tenancy fraud and it was hoped that following the success of the meeting, further meetings would take place;
- a bid had been submitted to the Department of Communities and Local Government to develop the tenancy fraud team. Over the last 2 years the Council had recovered almost one property per month following a fraud investigation;

- during December 2012 and January 2013, 3 out of 4 stage one complaints were responded to on time but 3 stage 2 complaints had been received;
- work to implement the Sheltered Housing review was ongoing and all current permanent staff had been successful in gaining a position in the new structure. The remaining posts would be advertised for internal applicants within the next week;
- managers had visited all of the 18 schemes to discuss the new service with tenants and to ensure that there was understanding of the changes to the service;
- the Resident Involvement Strategy (2013-2016) was being reviewed and would be circulated in March 2013;
- the Resident Involvement Team had helped to support a completion ceremony at Meadfield and the event had been very well attended;
- the Resident Involvement Team had commenced a door knocking exercise to generate an improved response from residents in TRA areas where attendance at meetings had been poor;
- the terms of reference of the Estates Services Steering Group (ESSG) were being reviewed and consideration was being given to widening the membership. The next meeting of the ESSG was on 6 March 2013;
- the trial period for the new way of working for caretakers was nearing completion and the trial was being reviewed. The feedback to date had been positive;
- there had been a reduction in the number of members on the value for money group and staff would be considering ways to help recruit new members. The meeting in February had been cancelled and the next meeting in March would be considering an update on Public Liability Insurance;
- the service review for six week tenant visits was on target for completion by the end of March 2013;
- the next meeting of the Scrutiny and Challenge Panel was due to take place on 4 March 2013.

A Member of the Forum commented that the date of the ESSG meeting was incorrect and the Chairman advised that the Garage Strategy meeting scheduled for 6 March 2013 would be cancelled.

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

- some of the information contained within the report would be available on the website and selected parts would be included in Homing In;
- the Value for Money Group was established approximately 2 years ago and considered matters such as insurance, ground maintenance costs, support service charges and service level agreements;
- the recent information about negative interest and paying for bank accounts related to commercial and not personal accounts;
- information on the news feature about targeting fraud had been made available to Members and officers but the meeting with Barnet staff had been officer based;
- the full report with the results of the Citizens Advice Bureau project on welfare reform awareness would be shared with Members when it was ready.

The Chairman requested that a report be presented to the next Forum meeting on the work programme of the scrutiny panel.

RESOLVED: That the report be noted.

181. 2013/2014 Meeting Start Times

The Forum agreed that the start times of the meetings for the Municipal Year 2013/14 should continue to alternate between a 2.00 pm start time and a 7.30 pm start time as listed below.

Wednesday 26 June 2013 – 7.30 pm
Thursday 24 October 2013 – 2.00 pm
Wednesday 11 December 2013 – 7.30 pm
Wednesday 19 February 2014 – 2.00 pm
Wednesday 30 April 2014 – 7.30 pm

RESOLVED: That the start times for future meetings of the Forum be agreed.

182. Suggestions for Agenda Items for Next Meeting

The Chairman advised that any suggestions should be sent to the Head of Resident Services.

183. Date of Next Meeting

Wednesday 24 April 2013 – 2.00 pm.

(Note: The meeting, having commenced at 7.35 pm, closed at 9.44 pm).

(Signed) COUNCILLOR BOB CURRIE
Chairman