

TENANTS', LEASEHOLDERS' AND RESIDENTS' CONSULTATIVE FORUM MINUTES

11 DECEMBER 2013

Chairman: * Councillor Mrs Camilla Bath

Councillors: * Bob Currie * Joyce Nickolay
* Kairul Kareema Marikar

In attendance: * Barry Macleod-Cullinane Minutes 214, 215, 216
(Councillors)

* Denotes Member present

Representatives from the following Associations were in Attendance

Brookside Close Tenants' and Residents' Association
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

209. Attendance by Reserve Members

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

210. Declarations of Interest

RESOLVED: To note that the following interests were declared:

All Agenda Items

Councillor Bob Currie declared a non pecuniary interest in all agenda items in that he attended monthly meetings of the Eastcote Lane Tenants' and Residents' Association. He would remain in the room whilst these matters were considered and voted upon.

Councillor Kairul Marikar declared a non-pecuniary interest in all agenda items in that in that she was a Council tenant. She would remain in the room whilst these matters were considered and voted upon.

211. Minutes

RESOLVED: That the minutes of the meeting held on 26 June 2013 be taken as read and signed as a correct record.

212. Public Questions, Petitions and Deputations

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

RECOMMENDED ITEMS

213. Draft Housing Revenue Account Budget 2014-15 and Draft Medium Term Financial Strategy 2015-16 to 2017-18, Draft rent strategy for 2014-15

The Forum received the report of the Director of Finance and Assurance which set out the draft Housing Revenue Account (HRA) budget for 2014-15 and the draft medium term financial strategy (MTFS) to 2017-18.

An officer explained the methodology, assumptions and policies used in preparing the draft Housing Revenue Account (HRA) budget for 2014-15, and the Medium Term Financial Strategy (MTFS) 2015-16 to 2017-18. He highlighted the key points, including:

- Retail Price Index (RPI) was 3.2% in September, which resulted in a proposed average rent increase of 5.1% for 2014-15;
- future rent increases assumed a change in national rent policy in line with current consultation proposals, and were based on Consumer Price Index (CPI) plus 1%;
- service charges were assumed to increase by RPI + 0.5%;
- there would be no increase in garage rents or parking charges pending finalisation of the garage strategy review;

- utility charges would increase in line with corporate assumptions for utility costs.

He added that the budget included a HRA new-build programme for the first time in many years, which had been approved by Cabinet on 20 June 2013, and provided for up to 50 3-bed properties, including 10 for shared ownership with the remainder to be let on affordable rents.

In conclusion, he informed the Forum that the budget and MTFs projections demonstrated the HRA was forecast to remain in an extremely sound position over the next few years, and longer-term projections suggested this would continue to be the case.

In response to queries, officers clarified definitions on 'affordable' and 'target' rents, and explained the variations in figures quoted for arrears.

A TRA representative commented on the assumption that Community Hall charges would increase by 4% in line with corporate fees and charges, and outlined a proposal for estate residents and communities to pay a reduced rate for hire. A Member seconded the proposal, adding that the discount could be extended to voluntary sector groups, and suggested a pilot scheme to run from January to April to test the feasibility of the proposal.

An officer agreed to feedback the Forum's comments to Cabinet the following evening.

Resolved to RECOMMEND: (to Cabinet)

That

- (1) the proposed strategy for setting rents for 2014-15 be agreed by Cabinet;
- (2) Cabinet note the proposal to introduce a pilot scheme in which estate residents and voluntary groups pay a reduced rate for hire of community halls.

Reasons for Recommendations: To consult on proposals to be considered by Cabinet in setting the HRA budget for 2014-15.

To encourage greater use of community resources, maximise occupancy of premises, and thereby generate income.

RESOLVED ITEMS

214. Affordable Housing Programme Update - Report by Housing Partnerships and Strategy Manager

The Forum received the report of the Divisional Director of Housing which provided an update on progress on the proposed Affordable Housing Programme.

The Housing Partnerships and Strategy Manager gave a presentation, including photographs and maps, providing details of those areas that had been identified as potential sites for 'infill' development. Cabinet had approved the first phase of the programme, and it was now intended to undertake detailed feasibility studies of these sites, and appoint architects to start the design process which would enable the submission of planning applications and the appointment of building contractors.

In response to comments and queries from residents' representatives, the Chair observed that resident density would be equal to that of private developments, and the Housing Partnerships and Strategy Manager explained that development, including parking provision, would comply with Planning guidelines. She stated that the size of housing units was not fixed and would be looked at during the consultation process, and that allocation of units would be managed in the usual way through the Locata system.

In response to comments by residents' representatives about unauthorised extensions, 'backyard' developments and illegal sub-lettings, the Chair and Portfolio Holder for Housing stressed that residents should report any such instances which would be investigated. In addition, the Portfolio Holder asked for residents to inform the Council about any potential sites for development.

The Chair concluded that the programme would see the construction of 50 new, affordable homes in the next 2 years and reassured residents that the appearance and functionality of estates would be considered within the design process.

RESOLVED: That

- (1) the report and presentation be noted;
- (2) ward councillors and local TRAs are included in any consultation on development proposals.

215. Housing Project Updates: Communications Plan, Grants to Move, Mobile and Flexible Working

The Forum received the report of the Divisional Director of Housing which provided updates on the following project areas: Communications; Grants to Move Scheme; and Mobile and Flexible Working.

The Partnerships and Strategy Manager outlined the Communications Plan; communication activities taken thus far this year and activities currently planned for 2014-15. She described the tools and methods used to communicate with residents, and to evaluate the effectiveness of communications.

She then reminded the Forum of the options within the Grants to Move Scheme, its purpose, and its success to date. Further publicity was planned for early 2014, and the scheme would be reviewed at the 6 month point in March.

In response to a comment about the Mutual Exchange event, that some interested residents had not received a response to their initial enquiries, she explained that the volume of interest had been greater than anticipated. A further event was planned for 25 February 2014, which would take on board issues from the 2013 event. In addition recruitment was underway for a third officer to assist with Grants to Move enquiries.

The Forum discussed problems arising from tenancies, and Members and resident representatives were reassured that departing tenants would be charged for any necessary clearance or cleaning work done on their behalf. In respect of sub-letting, some resident representatives considered it unfair that illegal tenants should be granted an amnesty and not penalised. The Portfolio Holder explained that if an amnesty secured the voluntary return of keys and subsequent re-let of a property to a tenant in need, it could actually save on costs and achieve the desired result much more quickly. However, he re-iterated that all reported cases of sub-letting would be investigated. The Forum considered that it would be helpful to have a report on the activities to combat illegal sub-letting of council properties at the next meeting.

Finally, the Housing Partnerships and Strategy Manager informed the Forum about the department's move to Civic 1, and the use of improved IT systems to allow greater flexibility in methods and locations for work.

RESOLVED: That

- (1) the report be noted;
- (2) a report on 'Illegal Sub-Letting' be brought back to the next meeting of the Forum.

216. Resident Services Manager's Report and Feedback From Other Council Led Resident Involvement Activities

The Forum received the report of the Divisional Director of Housing which set out a range of information items raised by the Head of Resident Services, including the following:

- the Right to Buy scheme;
- leasehold service charge and major work arrears;
- income management and 'hierarchy of debt' agreement;
- home fire safety;
- free micro-chipping for dogs event;
- mutual exchange scheme;
- sheltered housing review;
- the Estates in Bloom competition.

In response to a query about the effect of the 'spare room' tax, the Divisional Director of Housing reported that the expected impact had not materialised. Staff were working to identify individuals likely to be affected, but thus far the hardship fund had not been needed.

A resident representative expressed concern about an instance where an unidentified caller had made enquiries of neighbours about new tenants, and asked if TRAs should be informed when vulnerable families or individuals had been allocated housing. The Divisional Director responded that the Safer Neighbourhood Teams would be aware of any such placements and would have liaised with Housing staff.

A Member stated that he had been informed of estate works being signed off and paid for despite the work being unfinished or unsatisfactory. He believed surveyors were inspecting and signing off their own work, which was unacceptable.

The Divisional Director explained that the industry standard was to check a 10% sample of works carried out, but that the Interim Head of Resident services wanted to broaden this and intended to carry out a review. The Interim Head of Asset Management added that customer satisfaction surveys and financial checks were also undertaken, and that complex or high value works were followed up.

The Forum agreed that this was a matter that should be looked into, and the Portfolio Holder asked that a report be brought back to the next meeting, to include details of disputed works and suggestions on how best to strengthen systems and tackle discrepancies.

The Chair asked if contractors were honouring their commitment to provide employment opportunities and engage apprentices; she asked that a report on this be brought to the next meeting.

RESOLVED: That

- (1) the report be noted;
- (2) a report on estate inspections, particularly in respect of work signed off but not completed, be brought back to the next meeting of the Forum;
- (3) a report on the employment of apprentices by contractors be brought to the next meeting of the Forum.

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

The Forum received the report of the Divisional Director of Housing which set out a range of items raised by the Interim Head of Asset Management, including:

- new contract benefits, including a commitment by contractors to provide employment and work experience opportunities;
- Quality Heating;
- void properties;

- the Asset Management Strategy, and HFTRA's contribution to developing this;
- the Better Homes Standard;
- staffing update.

Resident representatives asked for clarification on what Quality Heating contractors were required to do when carrying out works, as there was a suggestion that tenants, and not contractors, would have to remove and replace flooring.

A Member enquired about the process for inspecting voids and re-charging tenants for any necessary remedial work. The Divisional Director informed the Forum that, of £20k of charges invoiced in the last round, little had been received, although this was recognised as a problem nationally. The Interim Head of Asset Management acknowledged that it was difficult to collect payment from tenants once they had moved on, and stated that to fully address the problem it would be necessary to educate tenants and challenge tenant behaviour. She agreed to bring a report to the next meeting.

In response to a resident representative's query about the value of chasing ex-tenants for outstanding payments, she explained that cases were passed to a debt collection agency, who only received payment if the debt was recovered. The service was about to recruit a part-time 'out-of-hours' officer to assist with collection.

RESOLVED: That

- (1) the report be noted;
- (2) a report on the collection of charges for work on voids be brought to the next meeting of the Forum.

218. Suggestions for Agenda Items for Next Meeting

Members of the Forum agreed that there were sufficient reports coming back to the meeting already.

219. Any Other Urgent Business

Members of the Forum were informed that it had been intended to provide a verbal update on the Tenants' Scrutiny Panel under this item. Unfortunately the officer involved was unwell, and the Resident Representative was not in attendance, therefore it was not possible to provide the update.

The Divisional Director, Housing, agreed to circulate information on the Scrutiny review to Residents' Associations.

A Member queried the practice of contractors installing central heating, and whether it was acceptable to expect tenants to take up and replace flooring. It

was confirmed that tenants would be responsible for removing laminate flooring prior to installation.

220. Date of Next Meeting

TRA representatives queried the proposed move to a 4.00 pm start time for future meetings and discussed the practicalities of different start times. It was felt that a 4.00 pm start time would prove difficult for many representatives, given traffic issues and child care responsibilities. Those representatives present argued that the original arrangements of alternating start times between 2.00 pm and 7.30 pm allowed for a broader range of attendance across associations, thereby giving more residents an opportunity to be involved.

The Chair proposed that the next meeting on 19 February should revert to a 2.00 pm start time.

RESOLVED: That the start time of the next meeting will be 2.00 pm.

221. Extension of Meeting

In accordance with the provisions of Committee Procedure Rule 14 (Part 4B of the Constitution) it was

RESOLVED: At 9.55 pm to continue until 10.30 pm.

(Note: The meeting, having commenced at 7.30 pm, closed at 10.27 pm).

(Signed) COUNCILLOR MRS CAMILLA BATH
Chairman