

**REPORT FOR: Tenants', Leaseholders'
and Residents'
Consultative Forum**

Date of Meeting: 19th February 2014

Subject: **Resident Services Manager's Report
and feedback from other Council led
Resident Involvement Activities**

Responsible Officer: Lynne Pennington
Divisional Director of Housing

Exempt: No

Enclosures: None

Section 1 – Summary

This joint report sets out a range of information items that the Head of Resident Services would like to bring to the attention of the Tenants', Leaseholders' and Residents' Consultative Forum and provides feedback to TLRCF on a wide range of Council led service specific and service wide resident involvement activities.

Recommendation

That the content of this report be noted

Section 2 – Report

1. Introduction

1.1 Key service priorities continue to be progressing with an emphasis on:

- Welfare reform implications for Resident Services
- Development of HAP 5 commitments and service plans

2. Updates from previous discussions and new items for information

2.1 Leasehold Services

2.2 Performance

2.2.1. The pace of Right to Buy applications and sales continues to increase. There are currently 34 Right to Buy applications in progress and 12 properties have been sold this quarter.

2.2.2. Leasehold Services has successfully collected £190,000 of the annual service charges billed in September 2013 this quarter and, an additional £42,000 collected for major work carried out this financial year.

2.2.3. This has been achieved by actively chasing leaseholders and where agreements either cannot be reached or leaseholders have failed to maintain the payment plans which have been put in place, using the Land Registry to identify mortgage lenders to negotiate payment. The Team continues to encourage leaseholders who are experiencing difficulty, to make contact so that affordable payment plans can be set up and agreed.

2.3 Information

2.3.1. The 2014/15 Ground Rent charges will be notified and invoiced to leaseholders this quarter.

2.4 Housing Management

2.5 Performance Income Management

2.5.1. There has been a steady increase in the balance outstanding of £523k compared with £433k at the same time last year. An analysis suggests that approximately £49k is considered to be attributable to spare room subsidy impact although this figure has reduced over the last month.

- 2.5.2. Many of our tenants are under occupying (see below Mutual Exchange Event) our stock and are not taking up the option to downsize to assist with their financial income gap (reduced Housing Benefit) following spare room subsidy. Reluctantly we have to initiate legal proceedings to highlight the severity of their arrears. We are finding that at this stage of the recovery process tenants will engage to prevent being taken to court. In the meantime our actual rent collection rates continue to remain in the top quartile at 99.41%.
- 2.5.3. Mitigation is being sought using the government funding of Discretionary Housing Payments (DHP). If a tenant receives Housing Benefit and still cannot afford to pay their rent they may be entitled to DHP. Harrow has some funding left in this pot which is being targeted towards applications that were initially declined and applications being made up to the end of March 2014. In some cases where applications were initially declined, this was due to the tenant not providing the relevant information to fit the criteria for payment. Officers are now providing extra help to these tenants to ensure this funding is used effectively. Approximately £100k has been identified that would fall into this category.
- 2.5.4. For some time our garage take up has been poor which affects our income. We are benchmarking against other local authorities with a view to charging a competitive rate in the future. Further detail can be found in the garage strategy progress report on this agenda.

2.6 Performance Tenancy Management

2.6.1. Mutual Exchange Event

2.6.1.1. We are preparing to hold our next Mutual Exchange event on the 25th of February. The lessons learnt from our event last year have been incorporated into our plan this year. We hope that our bid for government funding via the Social Housing Mobility Group for West London will assist in making this event another success.

2.6.1.2. We have invited all the Housing Associations with a large number of stock in Harrow to join us at this event and have invited all of their tenants too. This will help to widen the options of stock available for tenants to move.

2.6.2. Free Micro chipping Dog Event

2.6.2.1. The Dogs Trust joined us again to hold another event in the Buckingham Road area.

- 2.6.2.2. A few residents attended but many of the dog owners approached in that area reported that their dogs were already micro chipped.
- 2.6.2.3. In the spring we will continue our campaign to help Harrow resident's microchip their dogs in preparation for the introduction of the new legislation in April 2016.

2.6.3. Photographs of Tenants

- 2.6.3.1. All Housing Officers have been issued cameras to increase the number of photographs we have of tenants on file. This evidence will help with unauthorised occupancy and the tackling of Housing Tenancy Fraud.
- 2.6.3.2. Every opportunity officers have to take photos (calls to reception, interviews, tenancy sign ups) will be taken on a day to day basis.
- 2.6.3.3. A review of photographs taken during January 2014 will be taken and then individual targets set for Housing Officers.

2.6.4. Tenancy Fraud

- 2.6.4.1. At the beginning of December 2013 we successfully recruited a Housing Investigation Fraud Officer. He is based in our Corporate Anti-Fraud Team (CAFT) and predominantly manages housing cases. Since his appointment and increased working with the CAFT we successfully recovered 4 properties as a result of housing tenancy fraud. These homes will be offered to families on the homelessness list which will assist our bed & breakfast and temporary accommodation costs.
- 2.6.4.2. In total we have recovered 29 properties due to housing tenancy fraud in Harrow. This includes 2 properties we assisted Housing Associations to recover which is a criteria for the government funding. The funding is for tackling housing tenancy fraud for all social housing tenants in Harrow.
- 2.6.4.3. In November, the Housing Lead Officer for tenancy fraud was asked by the Chartered Institute of Housing to present at a seminar they were holding. The organisers were impressed with the case studies used in the presentation and have sought our permission to upload our case studies on their national website.
- 2.6.4.4. By April the following tools will be in operation to assist us with tackling tenancy fraud further:

A) Membership to the West London Fraud Hub. We will securely provide data for input into this hub with all the other West London Local Authorities. This will help us to track individuals who have tenancy interests in more than one area

B) ID Scanner. This tool will assist us to verify documents handed to us by potential applicants/tenants and throughout their tenancy if they are already a tenant.

C) Monday, 3rd February sees the start of Harrow's first anti-fraud week, part of the Council's commitment to reducing fraud and creating a fairer borough. We are focusing our resources on four key areas of local government that are impacted by fraud:

- disabled parking badges
- housing benefits and Council tax support
- housing fraud
- social care personal budgets

2.6.4.5. A full day has been devoted to housing fraud.

2.7 Gas Servicing

2.7.1. We are very pleased with the effective customer contact work of our contractors, Quality Heating. Their persistent efforts to contact tenants have resulted with the lowest number of outstanding inspections for a very long time. (99.74% Q 2)

2.7.2. Their work at the start of the process is minimising the need for Housing Officers to attend court to obtain warrants for entry.

2.8 **Information for New Tenants**

2.8.1. We are reviewing the information we supply to our new tenants and will be writing to all new tenants signed up in the last year to ask them what additional information they would like to receive in their new tenants pack.

2.9 **Recruitment**

2.9.1. We have successfully recruited permanently to the following posts in the last few weeks.

2.9.2. Housing Officer (Tenancy Audit)

2.9.3. Resident Services Project Manager

2.9.4. Tenancy Welfare Housing Officer.

2.9.5. Although all posts are much needed resources to Resident Services we are particularly pleased to fill the new post of Tenancy Welfare Housing Officer. The post will assist with the growing demand of dedicated time needed to support our vulnerable tenants. Housing Officers were finding it difficult to apportion time to these cases with other day to day priorities.

2.10 Sheltered Housing

2.10.1. The revised service is currently 7 months into implementation and is being bedded in. There is a 12 month service review period that runs to the end of June 2014 during which time opportunities for improvements can be identified – largely through monthly meetings of tenant / staff Focus Groups and HSRA meetings.

2.10.2. All staff roles have now been appointed to. External recruitment to the support team provided an excellent choice of appointable candidates. Once in post, frontline support staff made an immediate impact in achieving positive outcomes for tenants through a number of high value benefit claims.

2.10.3. The Handyman service for sheltered housing tenants is in place providing a free service for odd jobs in tenants' homes. Preventative tasks to achieve additional benefits through the Handyman role were agreed with Asset Management (including a rolling programme of checks on kitchen and bathroom fittings to prevent costly repairs).

2.10.4. We have a high number of so called unwanted fire signals which need to be reduced. We are working with H&S compliance manager & Asset Management to analyse the data received from the LFB. Also analysing Helpline call out data and drills to obtain reliable information that will enable us to put in appropriate measures to reduce unwanted fire signals and to also enable our support team to work with tenants at risk.

2.11 Estate Services

2.11.1. Estate Inspections

2.11.1.1. It was agreed that following the completion of the Resident Services restructure the estate inspection process would be reviewed and responsibility passed to each individual patch housing officer. Unfortunately it has not been possible to appoint to the permanent housing officer posts internally and the posts will now have to be advertised externally. It is proposed that once in place a workshop will be held with all relevant staff and other stakeholders to develop the estate inspection programme. We are keen to consider alternative approaches towards this process and

would welcome input from TLRCF members on their ideas improve the service.

2.11.1.2. The introduction of a wet cleaning service in communal areas of flats has commenced. The first major clean was carried out in October 2013 and will be carried out again in Spring 2014.

2.11.1.3. All Minor Estate Improvements projects have been completed ahead of schedule.

2.12 Community Halls

2.12.1. Hall let income has increased due to successful refurbishment of halls & by providing a more personal service to potential clients and also by offering discounts to regular/block bookings.

2.13 Churchill Place Car Park

2.13.1. We had been approached by a commercial Estate Agent who was interested in leasing the underground car park. No further agreement was reached as there were a number of lease issues which needed further clarification. We have since been advised by the Corporate Estates Team that the council is obliged to seek best consideration and to openly market the property. We have now received further interest which we are looking into.

2.14 Resident Involvement and Activities

2.15 Resident Involvement TRA Rep's get together

2.15.1. The Resident Involvement Team held a social event to say "Thank You" to all tenants & leaseholders that voluntarily give up their free time for the benefit of their community. All tenant representatives were invited to the function held in the members lounge. Representatives from the Scrutiny Panel, HFTRA, The Harrow Sheltered Schemes Residents Association, focus groups and estate TRA's, were thanked by the Mayor. Raffle prizes were donated by The Morrison's "in the community team". Very positive feedback was received by the Resident Involvement Team.

2.16 Scrutiny Panel update

2.16.1. The Harrow Tenants' & Leaseholders' Scrutiny Panel are currently reviewing the Estate Inspection process; unfortunately, following the recent resignation of two members of the panel, the completion of the review will now be delayed. The Resident Involvement Team is actively recruiting for new members for the panel.

2.17 Sheltered Schemes Bake-Off

2.17.1. The Resident Involvement and Sheltered Housing Teams organised a baking competition for the residents of the 18 sheltered schemes. Scheme residents were asked to have a bake off within the individual schemes then nominate their own baker to the final.

2.17.2. The 6 finalists then presented their cakes to a panel of judges made up from councillors and council staff including a semi-professional caterer.

2.17.3. The winning entry was from Alma Court.

2.18 Getting closer to our customers

2.18.1. The Resident Involvement Team are actively working to increase the involvement and awareness of council tenants and leaseholders, to what is happening in their community by encouraging residents to "Get Involved"

2.18.2. The team are making monthly scheduled meetings to all TRA chairs and also carrying out at least 25 cold call visits per month to residents, to complete a short questionnaire, to gauge awareness of residents, ask what they would like to see happen in their area and inform them of how they can be empowered to make changes to service delivery from the council.

2.19 Leasehold Support Group

2.19.1. The next meeting of the LSG is due to take place on 3rd February 2014.

Section 3 –Report Back from Resident Involvement Activities

3. Estates Services Steering Group (ESSG)

3.1 The next meeting of the ESSG will take place in February 2014.

3.2 Value for Money Group

3.2 The last meeting of the group took place on the 21st January 2014 when the group received presentations on the impact of welfare reform on rent collection and the Housemark benchmarking services report. It was agreed that from April 2014 the group would start to meet every 2 months.

Section 4 - Financial Implications

4. Any financial issues are contained within the body of the report and any service improvement issues that arise as a result of residents' ideas and suggestions will be considered within the relevant service area budget.

Section 5 - Equalities Implications

5. There are no equalities implications associated with this report. No Equality Impact Assessments have been carried out.

Name: Dave Roberts	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>	on behalf of the Chief Financial Officer
Date: 6 February 2014		

Section 6 - Contact Details and Background Papers

Contact:

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Background Papers: None