

TENANTS', LEASEHOLDERS' AND RESIDENTS' CONSULTATIVE FORUM MINUTES

19 FEBRUARY 2014

Chairman: * Councillor Mrs Camilla Bath

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

In attendance: * Barry Macleod-Cullinane Minute 227, 228, 229
(Councillors)

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

222. Attendance by Reserve Members

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

223. Declarations of Interest

RESOLVED: To note that the following interests were declared:

Agenda Items 7, 8, 9, 10

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.

224. Minutes

RESOLVED: That the minutes of the meeting held on 11 December 2013 be taken as read and signed as a correct record.

225. Public Questions

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

226. INFORMATION REPORT - Garage Strategy Progress Report

An Officer presented a report regarding the progress of the Garage Strategy. The following points were made:

- there would be consultation with residents about the future of the garage sites;
- some of the sites would be repaired or redeveloped, and repairs to some garages were due to happen by the end of March 2014;
- once the first pilot programme of garages had all been repaired, the demand for the garages could be gauged;
- two out of three sites on Augustine Road would be demolished;
- the tender was in progress for the contract for demolition of these sites and the cost would be finalised this afternoon;
- the residents of Augustine Road were in favour of the work;
- a Strategy Steering Group would look at options for the sites in April 2014;
- 426 out of 950 garages were currently being let, and that some were unlettable due to their condition;
- the garages were being let for £15.00 per week for Council tenants, and at a higher rate for private tenants;
- an update would be given at the next meeting.

After taking questions from Members of the Forum, an Officer confirmed that:

- the consultation regarding the Augustine Road sites took place first, then the invitation to tender, then the cost would be announced and the decision taken this afternoon;
- the tendering process was managed by the Procurement Team;

- the sites could be used as parking for Headstone Lane Station;
- there was no longer a councillor on the Strategy Steering Group, but Officers met with the Adults and Housing Portfolio Holder on a regular basis;
- Affordable Housing was one of the options that had been explored for Augustine Road, but since the publication of the report there had been a recommendation to not pursue this route;
- the flats to be built on the Alexandra Avenue site would be an extension of the existing blocks on the main road and not on Newton Park;
- the funding for the projects would come out of the Housing Revenue Account, and the profits would go back into the Housing Revenue Account;
- currently, garages were authorised for the storage of motor vehicles, and which garages could be used for other storage would depend on the Planning conditions associated with each site;
- a clause could be included in tenancy agreements outlining what can and can't be stored in garages, as Harrow Council has a duty of care to its tenants.

RESOLVED: That the report be noted.

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

A report was presented to the Forum which set out a range of information items that the Head of Resident Services wished to bring to the attention of the Forum, and provided feedback regarding a range of Council-led resident involvement activities. An Officer reported that:

- applications for leasehold and sales were both rising and debt collection rates had been improving;
- rental arrears currently amounted to £523,000, up from £440,000 the previous year, and £49,000 of arrears were attributable to the spare-room subsidy;
- many people were not choosing to downsize, which eventually would lead to legal proceedings. However, this was a last resort after mitigation had been attempted;
- the Mutual Exchange Event had attracted a lot of people, which made the event a valuable learning experience for the team involved;

- the Anti-Fraud team were working on collecting photographs of tenants, and had a target of 25 – 30 photos per month;
- the Anti-Fraud team had had continuing successes in combating fraud, and had appointed a permanent Officer;
- the work of Quality Heating, Harrow's contractors for Gas Servicing, had resulted in the lowest number of outstanding inspections for a long time – 00.26% of inspections were outstanding;
- the information distributed to new tenants was being reviewed;
- the vacant posts specified in the report had been permanently filled;
- the revised service for sheltered housing had been underway for seven months, and a free handyman service was available for sheltered housing tenants;
- the inspection process had been reviewed and inspections would be targeted and more frequent;
- the Permanent Housing Officer posts had not been filled by internal candidates, so they would be advertised externally;
- further interest had been received regarding Churchill Place Car Park, and this avenue was being investigated;
- the Resident Involvement Team had run some successful events recently which would be repeated, and were recruiting new members for the Scrutiny Panel;
- the Value for Money Group was a good group for putting pressure on officers and this was valuable to residents;
- the Group would meet less frequently, but meetings would be more focussed;

After taking questions and comments from Members of the Forum, an Officer confirmed that:

- during estate inspections, communal areas were inspected such as stairwells, garages and external areas;
- Councillors had the opportunity to note things down when they visited estates;
- the service charge to tenants was for work carried out such as maintenance and upkeep rather than the inspections themselves;
- further investigation was being carried out into an individual case brought up by a Member of the Forum;

- a deposit was taken from tenants to cover damage to communal areas, but the amount was possibly too low and would need to be reviewed;
- there had been a consultation with residents about a recharge policy and there was general agreement that tenants should pay for items they break or damage;
- that the Council would look at each case of a breakage in sheltered accommodation individually and would not charge tenants for breakages caused by accident;
- if a leaseholder owed the Council a significant amount which was not under dispute, a mortgage lender could intervene, but this was a rare occurrence and only occurred when all other options had been exhausted;
- residents would be involved in the workshop to develop the Estates' Inspection Programme;
- if fraud was suspected, evidence would have to be provided for the claim to be investigated by the Council.

RESOLVED: That the report be noted.

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

An Officer presented a report from the Interim Head of Asset Management for the information of the Forum. Apprentices were introduced from two of Harrow's Asset Management contractors. The managers and the apprentices provided a verbal report and answered questions about the apprenticeship scheme.

The following points were made:

- the apprentices felt they had benefited greatly from their placements;
- apprentices were recruited through Harrow College;
- apprenticeships were beneficial for the Borough, as they provided jobs and training to young people;
- apprenticeships were also beneficial for local businesses, who benefit from recruiting hard-working young people with a fresh perspective;
- at Mill Farm Estate, a number of residents from the area had been appointed to apprenticeships through which they could attain NVQs;
- the recharge policy had been implemented in Housing, and between October 2012 and December 2013 75 void properties had attracted recharge debts of over £44,000;

- although little money had been recovered, by informing and educating tenants the spend on clearing properties should fall;
- collecting money from former tenants is notoriously difficult, as they are often difficult to locate and on low incomes;
- under the Grants to Move scheme, the recharge debt is deducted from the grant at source, £5,500 has been recovered in this way;
- Repair MOTs had been initiated with the aim of targeting the tenants with the highest expenditure on repairs for special assessments;
- after two years it was too early to be able to recognise a significant reduction in spend, but a more detailed summary would be provided;
- a full report regarding the Better Homes Standard would be delivered after the consultation had taken place;
- joint work with London Fire Brigade had been successful in identifying tenants at a high risk of fire, and reducing false alarm calls;
- Cabinet had approved a four-year Capital Programme, which gave Officers more freedom and allowed greater savings;
- staffing updates were detailed within the report;
- Aids and Adaptations team had transferred to Housing Asset Management, and their budget came from the Housing Revenue Account and also the Disabled Facilities Grant;

After taking questions and comments from Members of the Forum, the following points were made:

- a 4-year programme is beneficial as work could be carried out at seasonally appropriate times, e.g. outdoor work could be undertaken during warmer weather;
- there had been issues with a particular property dating back to a time when Housing Services had less control, which could be rectified quickly if brought to Housing Services' attention now;
- a paper trail would be beneficial, as different information about jobs was being held on two separate databases;
- the focus would mostly be on external and rising damp, but all areas would be looked at.

RESOLVED: That the report be noted.

229. Suggestions for Agenda Items for Next Meeting

The following items were suggested for discussion at the next meeting:

- An update on the Garage Strategy;
- A special report on the upcoming brainstorming day;
- Half-price use of community halls for local residents;
- A report on the Homes for Harrow programme.

230. Date of Next Meeting

Wednesday 30 April 2014 at 19:30.

(Note: The meeting, having commenced at 2.05 pm, closed at 4.50 pm).

(Signed) COUNCILLOR MRS CAMILLA BATH
Chairman