

Appendix 2

RESIDENT INVOLVEMENT IN HARROW



A REPORT FOR HARROW RESIDENTS,
COUNCILLORS AND STAFF

August 2007

CONTENTS

Summary and Recommendations	3
Introduction	10
1. Harrow Federation of Tenants and Residents Associations	11
(a) Greater involvement	14
(b) Involving freeholders	15
(c) Incorporating Neighbourhood Representatives	17
(d) Extending diversity	19
(e) Supporting Tenant and Resident Associations	21
(f) Finances	23
(g) Limited company status	25
2. Tenant and Leaseholder Consultative Forum	27
3. Residents' Empowerment Working Group	30
4. Tenant & Resident Associations and other representatives	31
(a) Gaps in coverage	33
(b) Low levels of involvement	34
(c) Developing new officers	36
(d) Increasing diversity	37
5. Housing staff	39
6. Funding issues and opportunities	41
7. Communication	45
8. Options for the future	47

SUMMARY AND RECOMENDATIONS

This report has grown out of FIRST Call's work with tenants and leaseholders, other residents, Council staff and elected members in Harrow over the last six months. The key points (with our recommendations in italics) are set out below.

1. Harrow Federation of Tenant and Resident Associations

HFTRA needs to develop a culture where all members are fully involved in the development of policy and procedure. We see the revived Management Committee as an essential part of this work.

We recommend:

- *The Management Committee must meet frequently (at least six times a year).*
- *Committee members should receive specific training for their new role as soon as possible.*
- *HFTRA officers should also be required to undertake training relevant to their work for the Federation.*

HFTRA should ensure that all Tenant and Resident Associations (TRAs) that belong to the Federation meet the Tenant and Leaseholder Compact requirements, and the Federation should intervene to support struggling associations.

We think it is reasonable to adopt requirements similar to the following for new and existing TRAs:

- *At least one of the key officers (Chair, Vice-Chair, Secretary and Treasurer) must be a council tenant.*
- *All TRA general and committee meetings should have a specific agenda item to discuss housing management issues that concern tenants and leaseholders.*
- *All member TRAs should send a copy of their Constitution, any Standing Orders and supporting papers to the HFTRA office.*
- *TRAs should also send Minutes of all their General and Committee meetings and their annual accounts to HFTRA.*

The Neighbourhood Representative option (elected representatives

for areas without a TRA) still has to be developed in Harrow. The Federation needs to consider how to incorporate them fully.

Our recommendations for neighbourhood representatives are:

- *A joint Council-HFTRA induction and training programme.*
- *HFTRA and Council to actively promote Neighbourhood Reps.*
- *Neighbourhood representatives, including those representing less than thirty properties, should need the written support of at least thirty per cent of the council households they represent.*
- *Only genuine neighbourhood representatives should have the right to membership of the Federation. Individual residents have no automatic right of audience at HFTRA meetings, and should be encouraged to become neighbourhood representatives. .*

Not all areas are covered by a TRA, and most of the existing TRAs report problems with the level of resident involvement.

We recommend the Federation:

- *Sets regular meetings for the Way Forward group, or 'mainstreams' this work into Committee and General Meetings.*
- *Draws up a plan to increase diversity and representation within HFTRA and TRAs, with clear aims, a timetable and realistic targets that can be monitored.*
- *Promotes plans for new BME and Young Persons Forums more widely, working with other local community groups.*
- *Arranges high quality diversity training for its members and other TRA officers, tailored for the specific needs of resident representatives.*
- *Encourages TRAs to send newer members to HFTRA General Meetings (e.g. as an observer) to gain experience & confidence.*
- *Sends its own representatives to Harrow's Community Cohesion Management Group to develop good working links with other community groups and ensure residents' concerns are noted.*

A number of TRAs are struggling and need support from the Federation. This includes poorly attended TRAs and those that are barely active or ineffective due to lack of resident involvement.

We recommend that HFTRA adopt the following measures urgently:

- *Make contact urgently with every TRA that has not attended its last three general meetings to discuss their individual issues.*
- *Ensure that all its member TRAs meet all the requirements set out in the Tenants and Leaseholders Compact, including:*
 - *Regular quorate committee meetings.*
 - *Public meetings at least twice a year.*
 - *Newsletters / information produced at least twice a year.*
 - *A constitution based on the Council's model constitution.*
 - *An equal opportunities programme, with evidence of action.*
 - *Up to date financial records available for inspection.*
 - *Evidence of support from at least 10% (preferably, 33%) of the council households in the TRA's area.*
- *Arrange meetings with the Chair of all associations experiencing problems to develop a support plan from HFTRA and the Council.*

HFTRA now receives a delegated budget from the Council. The Federation's ability to run this budget effectively will be vital to any plans to expand its work in future years.

We recommend that:

- *HFTRA's Management Committee should always consider the Business Plan and Budget within six weeks of the AGM.*
- *The Treasurer should present an update on HFTRA's financial position and issues at all Committee and General meetings.*
- *HFTRA should strongly encourage all members to undertake relevant training in the coming year, to avoid the serious underspending in this area in recent years.*

The Federation will examine a suggestion that it converts to company status over the coming year. We feel that HFTRA does not currently have the capacity to take on company status, so development work will be needed to make such an option viable.

Our main recommendations around company status are:

- *The Federation should not rush into a hasty decision. The consensus needed for such a change is not in place, and a full debate on potential advantages and risks still needs to be held.*

- *In addition, we feel the Federation first needs to show that it can work effectively under the current arrangements, e.g. by*
 - *managing the new devolved budget during 2007-8 without significant underspends or deficits.*
 - *developing the capacity and skills of its members through a genuine commitment to training and development.*
- *If Federation members do decide to develop the proposal in more detail, we suggest a company limited by guarantee, possibly with charitable status, rather than a shareholder body.*

2. Tenant and Leaseholder Consultative Forum

The TLCF has the potential to develop as an effective consultation forum on both policymaking and performance monitoring. However, over-crowded agendas and lack of opportunity for full discussion mean that residents have not always felt the Forum has allowed them to explore issues in enough depth.

Residents were very complementary about the single-topic Forum held in June on the Housing Strategy, which allowed more discussion and had residents, staff and members working together in small teams.

Our recommendations for TLCF are:

- *Greater use of small discussion groups, plenary feedback sessions and an organised but informal atmosphere that encourages people to discuss issues and put forward ideas.*
- *Shorter agendas, or a mixture of relatively straightforward items (e.g. performance indicators) with one or two in-depth topics.*
- *Clear arrangements for HFTRA to discuss the agenda while it is being prepared and to put forward its own suggestions.*

3. Residents' Empowerment Working Group

Over time, HFTRA became disengaged from the work of REWG. This caused concern about reporting lines and areas of responsibility among some HFTRA members.

In fact, REWG has not met for several months. We believe HFTRA

and TCLF are now capable of taking over the Group's work.

- *We recommend that REWG should be formally abolished.*

4. Tenants and Residents Associations

We have already noted our concerns about inactive TRAs and those failing to fulfill their potential.

We recommend that:

- *HFTRA and Tenant Participation hold joint meetings to plan and co-ordinate development and support work for new and existing TRAs.*
- *HFTRA and TPOs meet with TRA Chairs to agree action plans with each association.*
- *The inactive Miscellaneous Properties TRA is a suitable case for joint development work between HFTRA and housing staff.*
- *The HFTRA, tenant participation officers and other housing staff should promote the new neighbourhood representative option.*

Most TRA officers told us they were concerned about low attendance at meetings. We feel TRAs should consider more proactive ways of engaging with residents. To increase involvement TRAs will probably have to go out to residents, not expect them to seek out their TRA.

Our main recommendations in this area are that:

- *TRAs should develop new ways to keep in touch with residents, e.g. more outreach work and one-to-one contact (e.g. stalls, drop-in surgeries, street contacts, websites, email, etc).*
- *TRAs should also develop stronger links with other local community groups, e.g. sharing information, publicising meetings.*
- *HFTRA should act as a clearing house to share ideas and good practice between TRAs*
- *The problems caused by lack of local venues need to be taken into account in the Council's Community Hall review.*

TRA Chairs also reported concerns that residents are not volunteering to serve as officers and committee members.

Possible measures include:

- *Allocating small, discrete projects to members, rather than requiring a long commitment as an officer or committee member.*
- *"Shadowing" existing officers to gain experience and confidence.*
- *More training for all members to develop skills and confidence.*

TRAs also expressed concerns that they were unable to attract significant numbers of younger residents and tenants from minority ethnic communities. This has obvious implications for their representativeness and their aim to speak on behalf of all residents in their area.

We suggest individual TRAs consider the following ways to involve under-represented groups of residents:

- *Diversity training, including officers and committee members.*
- *Develop good working relationships with local community groups, faith centres, "community champions" etc and keep them informed of the association's work.*
- *Consider "mother tongue" subgroups where there are a significant number of residents with a shared background.*

We recommend HFTRA:

- *Develops a plan to increase diversity and representation in member TRAs as quickly as possible.*
- *Includes increased diversity in all action plans for TRAs.*
- *Ensures that funds are made available to provide diversity awareness training for TRA activists.*

Harrow Council puts significant resources into tenant participation, but they are finite and need to be used to best effect. We feel it is as important to develop a culture of Best Value in resident involvement as in any other part of housing management.

Our recommendations are:

- *HFTRA to carry out a Value for Money review of their work with the help of the Council to identify areas where existing resources can be used more effectively.*
- *HFTRA considers training on grants and bid writing to access additional sources of funding for specific projects.*

Generally communications seem reasonably good at senior level (e.g. between HFTRA officers and senior managers). However, several TRA Chairs felt communication was not so good at lower levels in the housing department, e.g. communication with contractors.

Our recommendations for better communication include:

- *An annual Tenants Conference for all members, not just strategy “stakeholders”.*
- *Stronger promotion of TRA events & activities, e.g. in "Homing In".*
- *Making the new HFTRA website more interactive, e.g. an online forum for tenants and leaseholders to discuss housing issues.*
- *More TRAs should be encouraged to develop their own websites.*
- *TRAs (and possibly housing staff) should consider new ways of keeping in touch with their residents (e.g. email and SMS mobile ‘phone texts).*
- *TRAs should consider raising their local profile with more outreach work (e.g. social events, tabletops, drop-ins, etc).*
- *TRAs and HFTRA should share information on their activities with other community groups in their area as well as their residents.*

INTRODUCTION

In December 2006 FIRST Call was appointed as an Independent Residents' Advisor in Harrow. Part of our task has been to examine resident involvement in Harrow and to make recommendations for improvements.

This report sets out our findings. Key points and recommendations are summarised on pages 3 – 10 and discussed in the main report.

Generally, we consider the overall plan for resident participation in Harrow (as set out in the Tenant and Leaseholder Compact) is sensible and fit for purpose. Throughout this report, we have suggested ways in which structures like the Tenant and Leaseholder Consultative Forum (TLCF), the Harrow Federation of Tenants and Residents Associations (HFTRA) and individual residents groups can become more effective. But these recommendations should mainly be seen as ways to improve the existing structures for participation.

In our experience, when the basic framework for resident involvement is sound, the next step is to develop and embed a culture in which all partners – resident representatives, council staff and elected members – are constantly looking to improve the ways in which tenants and leaseholders are involved in decisions.

Often this step needs a major change in attitudes. It requires individuals and organisations to examine the effectiveness of their current work and to challenge existing ways of doing things. However, we believe the benefits that flow from this new way of thinking about participation invariably justify the effort.

We hope that the comments and suggestions in this report will help residents and other stakeholders in Harrow to build a strong culture of excellence in the area of tenant and resident involvement.

Finally, we would like to record our thanks for all the kindness and assistance shown to us throughout our work. Limited space means we cannot list everyone, but we would particularly like to thank all the officers and members of HFTRA, the officers and residents of the individual TRAs, senior managers and tenant participation staff at Harrow Council, and Councillors Bath and Currie. We have been very impressed by both the commitment of all these people to resident involvement and their willingness to share their experience with us, and we are extremely grateful for all their help and advice.

1. HARROW FEDERATION OF TENANTS AND RESIDENTS ASSOCIATIONS (HFTRA)

We believe a strong, proactive Federation is essential to support existing TRAs and extend the scope of resident participation. HFTRA needs to develop its capacity to deliver this support.

Over the last few months, we have seen the hard work that HFTRA officers and other members have put in to strengthen the Federation and to prepare for the challenges it faces in the future.

The Federation's strengths include the experience and commitment of its members, the dedication of its officers, and relatively generous resources (e.g. a part time officer worker and a devolved annual budget representing around £4 per household).

The key developments within the Federation during the last six months have been:

- The election of a strong team of officers at the AGM in June;
- The re-establishment of the Management Committee;
- The development of a 'Way Forward' group to boost resident involvement across the borough;
- The appointment of a new officer post for 2007-8 to raise strategy and policy work higher up the Federation's agenda;
- Updating of the Federation's Constitution and Code of Conduct;
- Transfer of a devolved budget from the Council to the Federation;
- The resolution of issues that had been taking too much of the officers' time, such as the level of attendance allowances, and
- Improved working relations with the Portfolio Holder and senior housing staff.

However, we certainly do not want to encourage any complacency. HFTRA has improved in recent months, but it still has a long way to go before it can represent Harrow's tenants and leaseholders with the effectiveness they deserve.

Our work with Federation officers and other members have alerted us to a number of issues that have the potential to cause internal

conflict or distract the Federation's from its essential work:

- The need to adopt a more “bottom up” style of decision making, in which all members are involved in the development of policy. At the moment most proposals are initiated by officers rather than general members;
- The role of freeholders in Tenant and Resident Associations (TRAs) funded from the Housing Revenue Account, an issue that has emerged again following HFTRA meetings where the Berridge TRA was represented by two freeholders;
- Uncertainty over the status of Resident Representatives (often seen, incorrectly, as unelected individuals who speak on behalf of their neighbours in areas without a TRA). Several officers raised this with us, and it was discussed at the Federation's first “Way Forward” meeting;
- A lack of diversity at HFTRA meetings, in particular a shortage of Black and minority ethnic (BME) representatives and younger residents at HFTRA meetings;
- The need to maintain contact with all TRAs and to support those experiencing problems (highlighted by the absence of several TRAs from all HFTRA meetings during the last six months);
- Future funding if the Federation takes on new projects and supports new TRAs, an issue raised with us by HFTRA officers, and
- The recent proposal to convert HFTRA into a limited company to establish greater autonomy and independence. Several TRAs have raised concerns with us and the issues are discussed in more detail later in this section.

The Tenants and Leaseholders Compact sets out the responsibilities HFTRA has agreed to accept during 2006-9. The table below sets out our assessment of HFTRA's current performance and highlights areas where it needs to develop its potential to meet its obligations.

Task	Current performance
Involve customers in the provision of housing services	<p>Yes, for active TRA members. But only half Harrow's tenants and leaseholders are covered by a TRA, and several associations are not in regular contact with HFTRA.</p> <p>As a result, HFTRA cannot yet claim to involve all residents. The Federation needs to work to establish strong TRAs throughout the borough.</p>
Monitor performance and service delivery	Not involved in any systematic monitoring of performance, although specific problems do sometimes reach HFTRA through its members.
Develop new ideas and methods for solving council housing problems	In recent months, the Federation has tended to concentrate on internal issues, rather than producing new ideas on wider housing matters. We would like to see the Federation become much more involved in the development of new solutions to existing housing problems.
Influence policies and practices	Some input through TLCF, but we would like to see HFTRA take a stronger lead here in 2007/8.
Consider wider community problems and find solutions	Some signs of development here (e.g. some members are keen to be more involved in policy making around anti-social behaviour). An area that should be developed in 2007/8.
Advise managers on local priorities in housing services	Involved in Minor Estates Improvement Budgets decisions. Needs to develop stronger consultation arrangements, e.g. meetings with housing managers.
Advise managers on development of strategy	Some involvement in the 2007 Housing Strategy through TLCF and Tenants Conference. An area where HFTRA could develop a more active role.
Liaison with other groups and organisations	Very limited contact with other organisations. Would be a good idea to develop links with other local community groups and regional / national tenants' bodies in 2007/8.

Table 1: HFTRA responsibilities under the Tenant Compact

HFTRA has spent the last few months addressing internal problems and developing its potential to engage more effectively in future. The challenge for the Federation during the next year will be to deliver actual **outcomes**, such as wider involvement and more support for struggling TRAs. The rest of this section gives our suggestions and recommendations to help HFTRA achieve this.

(a) Greater involvement within the Federation

Officers are elected to carry out the day-to-day running of HFTRA by the Federation's membership. This requires them to carry out a delicate balancing act; they must be able to provide vision and leadership, while at the same time building up the consensus and support that will be needed for any changes that they want to introduce. Committee members must also be willing to share some of the responsibility for policy making; it is not fair to allow all this work to fall on the officers.

We think Federation officers have sometimes adopted too top-down an approach to policy making in the past, which can upset the general members. A recent example is the proposal to convert to a limited company, seen by some members as an attempt to hurry the proposal through without giving them the opportunity to consult fully with their own TRAs. Officers must remember that the power to make major decisions always rests with the Federation as a whole, so that a consensus must always be built before any major change can be made.

Equally, members need to understand that the Federation does need to change the way it works if it is going to meet its commitments to residents under the Tenants and Leaseholders Compact. "Business as usual" is simply not an option if HFTRA is going to represent tenants and leaseholders effectively. Therefore, members need to understand why changes will be necessary.

For these reasons, we welcome the re-establishment of the Federation's Management Committee. We see it as an important way to involve more members in the Federation's work and ensure that new and better ways of working have their full support. In addition, the Committee must have the power to influence policy, it must be able to hold officers to account when required, and it must not be allowed to become a mere talking shop.

We do have a concern about the lack of recent training undertaken by HFTRA members. Less than £200 was spent by HFTRA on training for tenant representatives in 2006-7 (less than 1% of the year's expenditure). This is not a new problem: the Audit Commission noted the same problem in their 2004 Inspection report.

We think the Federation should definitely do more to promote the benefits of training, and to encourage members to take advantage of its training budget. We are also worried that most individual members do not seem to appreciate the importance of training; attendance at our own training sessions, designed to help resident representatives become more efficient in their work, was far too low. We are worried that this could reflect a complacent attitude among members, who may believe that there is no need to update and improve their skills.

We consider it is essential that members of the Management Committee:

- *Meet frequently.* At the very least, there should be a meeting every two months, to ensure that officers receive regular advice and feedback from the entire Committee. We suggest these meetings should be held halfway between General Meetings.
- *Receive extra training for their new role as soon as possible.* Suitable topics would include governance, financial training. Other training that will help them face the challenges facing the Federation includes diversity awareness (several TRAs have reported they have trouble attracting Black and minority ethnic tenants) and team building skills.
- *Make some essential training a requirement for HFTRA officers* (e.g. finance training for the Treasurer, minute taking for the Secretary, Chairing skills) within two months of their appointment, unless the Committee considers they already have sufficient knowledge and experience for their post.

(b) Involving freeholders

As more homes are sold under the Right to Buy, the Federation will need to face the challenge of representing TRAs that have a large proportion of freeholders. The issue surfaced this year, when the new Berridge TRA had problems recruiting council tenants to its committee. We are pleased that the Berridge officers have made

significant efforts to recruit more tenants to their Board, and we note that a local tenant is now attending HFTRA meetings as one of its representatives. We hope this TRA will continue its work to encourage more tenants to take an active part in the running of their association.

We believe it is essential that every TRA is fully involved with housing management issues that affect tenants and leaseholders. Council tenants will have their own specific concerns that can be drowned out if an association is dominated by freeholders. Associations are funded from tenants' rents and service charges (although Pinner Hill TRA's very effective fundraising means that most of its money comes from residents across all tenures), and they have the support of tenant participation staff employed by the housing department. As a result, council tenants and leaseholders have a right to expect TRAs to concentrate on their issues.

Having said this, anything that reduces freeholders' involvement in residents group is likely to disadvantage council tenants as well as freeholders. All residents need to have a strong, united voice in their negotiations with the Council and other organisations such as the police. TRAs can also play an important part in building stronger, more "sustainable communities" by breaking down the barriers between tenants and homeowners. In addition, most TRAs are not in a position to turn away suitable committee members because of their tenure.

At the moment, there is no clear definition of the proportion of tenants and leaseholders to freeholders that is needed to qualify as a "real" tenant and resident association. We have heard informal rules of thumb such as "there must be at least one tenant on the committee" or "at least sixty per cent of the members must be tenants". In fact, there are no criteria currently in place, and we doubt whether it would be useful to set an arbitrary limit. Rather, we feel TRAs need to ensure that tenants and leaseholders' issues are always at the heart of their work. We believe HFTRA's should always focus on a TRA's effectiveness at representing all the council tenants and leaseholders in its area.

The following suggestions may be useful as a starting point for a discussion on the level of tenant participation that should be expected from any TRA, regardless of the proportion of tenants in the

neighbourhood.

We think it is reasonable to adopt requirements similar to the following for new and existing TRAs:

- *At least one of the key officers (Chair, Vice-Chair, Secretary and Treasurer) must be a council tenant.*
- *Membership of the TRA must be open to all eligible council tenants and leaseholders.*
- *Membership must be free to tenant and leaseholders, to reflect the support that associations receive from the HRA, including the support of tenant management officers. Of course, tenants would remain free to make voluntary contributions.*
- *All general and committee meetings should have an agenda item to discuss housing management issues.*
- *A copy of the TRA's Constitution, with any Standing Orders and supporting papers, to be sent to the HFTRA and the Tenant Participation team.*
- *Copies of the Minutes of all General and Committee meetings, and the annual accounts at the AGM, to be sent to the HFTRA (if the TRA is a member) and the Tenant Participation team within twenty-eight days.*

(c) Incorporating Neighbourhood Representatives

The Tenants and Leaseholders Compact (Section 8.1.1) sets out the framework for local representation in areas that do not have an active tenant and resident association. The two main methods described in the Compact are:

- (a) "Local contacts": unelected tenants and leaseholders who volunteer to be a contact point between their neighbours and the Council, and
- (b) "Neighbourhood [or block, or street] representatives": individual tenants or leaseholders who have been elected by other local residents to act on their behalf. In areas with more than thirty homes, at least one-third of the local council households must sign up to support the representative. The level of support can be lower in small blocks: a representative with the support of

just two households in a block of eighteen flats could be recognised as a representative.

The Compact (Section 8.2.1, “Requirements”) makes it clear that elected neighbourhood representatives who are recognised by the Council are entitled to be members of HFTRA. The unelected “local contacts” do not seem to have any right to be members.

Currently there are no neighbourhood representatives on the HFTRA, and some HFTRA officers have expressed concern about their future incorporation in the Federation. Their main concerns are:

(a) a belief that neighbourhood representatives are not elected, or they are not accountable to local residents. In fact, as described above, they are elected by residents, although it is unclear how tenants and leaseholders would be able to withdraw their support from them at a later date.

(b) that the small areas of housing that they cover would give them disproportionate voting rights. The new Federation Constitution allows member TRAs to have two votes at meetings, while a neighbourhood representative would have a single vote. Therefore, a TRA representing several hundred households would have twice the votes of a representative representing, say, half a dozen households.

Although we appreciate the point, we do not think this should prevent the incorporation of neighbourhood representatives into the Federation. No HFTRA members have expressed concern at smaller TRAs having the same number of votes as large ones. The Federation could solve the issue of votes for members who represent small numbers of households by amending its Constitution to allow extra votes based on the number of properties covered, but we suspect this would run into opposition from many of the smaller TRAs.

(c) some Federation members believe neighbourhood representatives should be incorporated into a revived Miscellaneous Properties TRA. This is an interesting proposal, but it appears to run counter to the vision for representatives set out in the Tenant and Leaseholder Compact. It seems impossible to force representatives who are recognised in their own right to join a wider TRA against their will.

We feel that neighbourhood representatives are a sensible way to

arrange representation in smaller neighbourhoods, and on estates where there is not yet enough support for a full TRA. Including neighbourhood representatives can only strengthen the Federation's coverage and legitimacy.

Nevertheless, the Federation will need to ensure that the representatives really are speaking on behalf of all the council households they cover, not just a small clique. Like other members, neighbourhood representatives who are members of the HFTRA should be expected to undertake training to improve their skills and knowledge.

Our recommendations for neighbourhood representatives are:

- *The Council and HFTRA should agree an induction and training programme for new and existing neighbourhood representatives.*
- *They should also actively promote the neighbourhood representative option to ensure as many council tenants and leaseholders are represented at HFTRA and TLCF.*
- *We feel all neighbourhood representatives, including those representing less than thirty properties, should need the written support of at least thirty per cent of the council households. A representative who does not have the support of three residents in a street of twenty-five households can hardly be described as genuinely representative. This recommendation would require an amendment to the Tenant and Leaseholder Compact.*
- *Only genuine neighbourhood representatives should have the right to membership of the Federation. Individual residents have attended the Federation's last two general meetings (June 2007) in a private capacity, and have expected to take part in the debates as if they were elected representatives. They should be encouraged to become neighbourhood representatives, rather than attending in a purely private capacity.*

(d) Extending diversity

In a diverse borough like Harrow, it is essential that the Federation shows it takes diversity issues seriously. Unless it can demonstrate the will to tackle problems of under-representation by younger tenants and leaseholders and by Black and Asian residents, its

claims to represent all Council tenants and leaseholders could be open to challenge.

There is a noticeable absence of Black and Asian representatives at HFTRA meetings, and a shortage of residents in their twenties and thirties. This is not surprising: TRAs usually send their most experienced officers along to Federation meetings, who are likely to have been involved in resident participation for many years, and this will naturally exclude younger or newer residents. Coupled with the unwillingness of some able BME tenants to put themselves forward as TRA officers (discussed in the chapter on TRAs), this means that the Federation and its member associations are missing vital sources of new activists.

To make the problem worse, we have encountered racist and sexist attitudes among a few TRA officers in Harrow. We must stress that these are only a small minority of the activists with whom we have worked. But at least two of these officers were in positions where their views could send out a strong message to women or to BME residents that their involvement is not valued by their TRA.

The Federation's new "Way Forward" group has been set up to increase involvement, especially among groups that are currently under-represented. It has held one meeting. As far as we know, no follow-up action has taken place and at the time of writing a second meeting has not been arranged. Good intentions need to be turned into action quickly in this area. The Federation should not let this important initiative fade away before it has had a chance to deliver any benefits.

We have been pleased to see the Federation's plans to develop BME and Young Persons' Forums advertised on the new website (www.harrowfed.co.uk). However, these are currently plans that are just starting to be developed. As yet there have been no meetings of the forums. The Federation needs to make sure that these imaginative new ways of attracting under-represented groups receive all the support they deserve from both Federation members and from other community organisations that already have contact with these residents.

To sum up, HFTRA is beginning to face up to the problem of under-representation. The challenge now is to put its good intentions into practice as soon as possible.

We recommend the Federation:

- *Sets regular meetings for the Way Forward group. A possible alternative would be to 'mainstream' the group's work by making it an agenda item at all Committee and General Meetings, but we are worried that some focus might be lost in general meetings.*
- *The group should draw up a plan to increase diversity and representation within HFTRA and member TRAs, with clear aims, a timetable and realistic targets that can be monitored by the Federation.*
- *Promotes its plans for a new BME Forum more widely and encourages local BME community groups to become involved in its development.*
- *Similarly, promotes its plans for a Young Persons Forum and makes links with organisations working with younger people and young families.*
- *Arranges high quality diversity training for its members, and encourages all TRA officers to take part. This should be tailored for the specific needs of resident representatives, rather than a general diversity awareness package. For example, it needs to provide practical advice on ways to break down barriers to tenant and leaseholder involvement.*
- *Encourages TRAs to send newer / younger members to HFTRA General Meetings (e.g. as their second representative or as an observer) to gain experience and confidence and to contribute to the Federation's work.*
- *Sends representatives to Harrow's Community Cohesion Management Group. This will allow the Federation to develop good working links with other community organisations working in Harrow, and HFTRA would be able to represent its residents' concerns on a wide range of community issues. More details are available from the Council's Policy and Partnership team, who would welcome HFTRA representatives on to the Group.*

(e) Supporting TRAs

Not all associations attend HFTRA meetings. For example, associations such as Churchill Place have not attended any meetings

during the last half-year.

The Federation needs to make contact with these associations urgently to find out why they are not coming to meetings. Failure to attend may be a signal that a TRA is experiencing problems and that it could benefit from help and support from the Federation.

In addition, HFTRA often has very little information on the work that these TRAs are carrying out. The Federation needs to insist that members give it sufficient information about their working arrangements.

We recommend that the Federation adopt the following measures as an urgent priority:

- *Make contact urgently with every TRA that has not attended its last three general meetings to discuss their individual issues and to develop a clear picture of their current work and any problems.*
- *Ensure that all its member TRAs meet all the requirements set out in the Tenants and Leaseholders Compact at Sections 6.4 and 8.1, including:*
 - *Regular quorate committee meetings.*
 - *Public meetings (open to all tenants and leaseholders) at least twice a year.*
 - *Newsletters / information produced at least twice a year.*
 - *A constitution based on the Council's model constitution.*
 - *An equal opportunities programme, with evidence of action.*
 - *Up to date financial records available for inspection.*
 - *Evidence of support from at least 10% of the council households in the TRA's area. [Section 8.1.3 suggests at least 33%.]*
 - *TRAs that fail to meet the requirements in the Tenants and Leaseholders Compact need effective, well-planned support from HFTRA and the Council immediately.*
- *Arrange meetings with the Chair of all associations experiencing these problems to develop a support plan setting out the help that HFTRA and the Council will give to make sure the TRA can meet its obligations under the Compact.*

- *Insist that all its member TRAs send the Federation office annual returns giving basic information, including:*
 - *Names, contact details and tenure of all officers and committee members;*
 - *The TRA's annual accounts, and*
 - *The minutes of all general and committee meetings (these should be forwarded to the HFTRA office throughout the year).*
 - *The HFTRA also needs to keep a copy of each TRA's constitution on file and receive notification of any amendments.*

(f) Finances

Last year the Federation's main expenses were:

- (a) grants to TRAs (£2,750 in 2006/7, representing 14% of total HFTRA spending during the year)
- (b) officers' attendance allowances for work at the office (£3,697, or 19% of the year's costs)
- (c) office equipment, including hire of the photocopier (£3,681, representing 19% of total costs), and
- (d) rent for the HFTRA office at the Civic Centre (£2,650, or 13½% of costs).

During the last year, the main financial problems were:

- Significant underspending on some key budget heads, e.g. training. This was seen as "good housekeeping" by Federation officers. We cannot support this position. Good quality training is an investment that builds up the ability to work on behalf of tenants and residents. In our experience, effective organisations are very keen to train and develop their members.
- Too much focus on the attendance allowances paid to officers for Federation work. The problem here was that discussion of this issue took up a lot of officer time over many weeks, which could have been devoted to other issues affecting all residents. The establishment of a devolved budget has helped to defuse this issue at the moment, but the 2006/7 budget is a tight one

and careful monitoring will be needed throughout the year on major budget items, including attendance allowances.

- An expensive photocopier contract, inherited from an earlier administration. This will cost around £5,000 during the year (around 20% of the total budget). The HFTRA is trying to re-negotiate the budget, but we cannot see what incentive the supplier will have to vary the contract terms.

We believe the Federation should allow for the full contract costs of the photocopier in this year's budget. If a reduction can be negotiated, this will provide a welcome windfall that can be diverted to other heads or, we suggest, be set aside as a contingency fund.

HFTRA now has a devolved budget of £24,690 for 2007-8, funded from rents and service charges. Federation members owe a duty to all Harrow tenants and leaseholders to ensure the money is used as effectively as possible.

A key challenge over the coming year will be to move from an organisation that focuses on costs and savings to one that is concerned with principles of best value and the most effective use of financial resources. In other words, HFTRA members need to be assessing how the Federation can get the best possible results from the money it receives.

Looking ahead, if HFTRA is successful in its aims to develop new TRAs and to bring residents' representatives into the Federation, it will need a larger budget to cover the extra grants, training and other support involved. The answer would seem to be to build an element of formula funding into the finances, with extra funds dependent of the number of active TRAs and representatives that are members. However, HFTRA and the Council should be concerned with the quality as well as the quantity of work carried out, and ensure that the tenants and leaseholders who ultimately pay HFTRA's budget are receiving good value for money.

We recommend that

- *HFTRA's Management Committee should always consider the Federation's Business Plan and Budget within six weeks of the AGM. The Committee can delegate production of the Plan and Budget to officers, but we believe the Committee should have*

the power to agree or amend both these documents.

- *The Treasurer should present an update on the Federation's financial position and any related financial issues as a separate agenda item at all Committee and General meetings.*
- *HFTRA should strongly encourage all its members to undertake relevant training in the coming year, and to use the funds that have been set aside for their training needs. We have made some suggestions for suitable training throughout this report.*

(g) Limited company status

HFTRA is currently exploring a proposal that it should convert to a limited company. This is an interesting proposal that the Federation will be considering over the next year. However:

(a) the June 2007 General Meeting has decided that a final decision should not be made until June 2008 at the earliest;

(b) some members are unhappy with the way this proposal was introduced for the first time under Any Other Business at the end of the 2007 AGM. This caused concerns that it was a top-down project developed by officers without prior discussion with the TRAs;

(c) several members have told us that they do not understand why such a change is needed. They feel they have been told about the possible benefits of a change, but not given any reason why such radical change is necessary.

Company status is a powerful legal and financial tool, but it is not suitable for every organisation. It brings extra responsibilities and risks. The real question that HFTRA members should ask themselves is *why* they would want to convert to a company. For example, would company status allow the Federation to carry out its work more effectively, or allow it greater autonomy from the Council?

Company status would give the Federation an independent legal identity. It would allow the Federation greater control over its financial affairs, and it might allow HFTRA to claim back useful amounts of VAT.

However, we feel that HFTRA needs to show that it can manage its affairs properly under the existing arrangements before it considers taking on the challenges of a limited company. For example, HFTRA

has yet to demonstrate that it can manage its newly delegated budget properly. In 2006/7, there was significant underspending by HFTRA, and spending on training was very low (less than £200 for the year, about 1% of total costs). However, training and capacity building are the very activities that we would expect to see from any organisation that plans to improve performance and expand its work into new areas.

If the Federation does decide to develop the proposal further, we think that a company 'limited by guarantee' is more suitable for a voluntary organisation like HFTRA. Under this model, TRAs would become "members" rather than "shareholders". A company limited by guarantee cannot distribute profits to shareholders. It could apply for charitable status, which would make extra sources of funding available to the Federation.

If HFTRA decides to develop this proposal in more detail, we suggest its members need to consider the following issues:

- What happens if the company goes into deficit? An independent company could not expect the Council to bail it out.
- Does HFTRA has the skills & capacity to deal with the extra legal and financial responsibilities involved in the running of a company? If not, what would need to be done to achieve this - training, new members, etc?

What will happen to the Management Committee under the proposal? Will Committee members become Directors?

- How frequently will shareholder meetings be held? This would obviously affect the shareholders' ability to monitor the Board.
- Would the directors expect to be paid? If so, why and how much?
- Are the reasons for converting to a company sound ones? It has been suggested that HFTRA Limited could operate a Service Level Agreement (SLA) with the Council? But would the benefits of an SLA justify the extra risks that come with company status and a more commercial relationship with the Council?
- What will be the terms of the Service Level Agreement? Will Harrow Council be buying services from HFTRA under the SLA, or will the Federation be buying goods and services from the Council? What will these be? And what conditions will the Council want to

include in the contract to make sure it gets value for money?

Our main recommendations around company status are:

- *The Federation does not rush into a hasty decision. Presently, we simply do not think the Federation is ready to change status. The consensus needed for such a change is not in place and a full debate on potential advantages and risks still needs to be held.*
- *In addition, we feel the Federation first needs to show that it can work effectively under the current arrangements, e.g. by*
 - *managing the new devolved budget during 2007-8, delivering its spending plans without either a significant underspend or a deficit;*
 - *in particular, show that it is serious about improving the capacity and skills of its members through a genuine commitment to training and development;*
 - *develop a more proactive and innovative approach to issues such as low participation and diversity, and*
 - *show that it can support struggling TRAs and adapt to the emerging challenges of incorporating freeholders and neighbourhood representatives into the participation structure.*
- *If the Federation members decide to develop the proposal in more detail, we suggest a company limited by guarantee, possibly with charitable status, to provide extra regulation and access to additional funding streams. This would probably be a better model than a shareholder organisation.*

2. TENANT AND LEASEHOLDER CONSULTATIVE FORUM

We believe the Tenant and Leaseholder Consultative Forum (TCLF) demonstrates the Council's support for resident consultation on strategy and policy issues. We have been impressed by the commitment of senior housing staff and Members to the Forum's work.

Nevertheless, we feel that the Forum's effectiveness could be

improved. At times, we have noted the following issues at its meetings:

- Not always designed to encourage a full, structured discussion of issues by tenants;
- Attempts to cover too much material in a single session;
- Not designed to catch estate-level issues;
- Emphasis is on policy development rather than service delivery;
- Inadvertently sets up an “us-and-them” dynamic between housing staff and residents.

Our assessment of the Forum’s performance against the Tenants and Leaseholders Compact is summarised in the following table, based on Section 8.1.3 of the Tenants and Leaseholders Compact.

Task	Current performance
Co-ordinated consultation with a link to elected Members.	Co-ordination does not seem to extend to shared control of the agenda, which appears to be set by the Council side. Otherwise, seems a genuine spirit of co-operation at meetings. Portfolio holder and one other councillor attend meetings.
Consider borough-wide housing issues	Yes, TLCF appears to meet this role effectively. However, some residents’ representatives have told us they would like a similar opportunity to raise local, estate-based issues.
Consider wider community issues, e.g. crime and anti-social behaviour	Not really considered at the Forums we have attended. For example, the HFTRA Chair and some other members are keen to discuss management issues around mental health and vulnerable tenants, but do not seem to have considered TLCF for discussion of this issue.
Set clear service standards & targets	Yes, TLCF seems to be an ideal arena for this type of work.

Table 2: TLCF responsibilities under the Tenant Compact

Consider different approaches to participation and review council policy	The small group approach (see below) could ensure residents' representatives have enough opportunity to discuss ideas in sufficient depth during an evening. We feel that a single large meeting might not provide enough time for a full debate involving everyone on complex policy issues.
Assess the results of compacts and agreements	Yes, TLCF seems an excellent setting for reviewing performance on contracts and agreements. For example, it would seem to be a suitable place to monitor contractor performance.
Refer matters as necessary to the Council	Packed agendas seem to leave residents little room to raise additional issues.

Table 2 (cont): TLCF responsibilities under the Tenant Compact

Overall, the Forum provides a useful arena for discussion, but we have sometimes felt that residents have too little opportunity to discuss items in depth at the meetings.

We feel that the “single issue” TLF meeting on the Housing Strategy held in June provides a good template for future Forum meetings. All the residents we spoke to after the meeting were very positive about the way it had been designed and run. The key points they made were:

- Work in small groups (with reporting back at the end) allows more opportunities for discussion and greater involvement in the final decisions;
- Mixed groups of officers, members and residents working through the issues helped break down barriers between these groups, and
- A single item for the evening allowed enough time to debate the issues properly.

This echoes similar praise we heard from residents for the Housing Strategy Conference in May.

We consider that this meeting provides a good model for future consultation sessions. Of course, not all Forum meetings can be devoted to a single issue, and for some topics more emphasis may need to be given to providing information rather than a full debate. Nevertheless, we feel that the interactive approach used at this meeting is more likely to engage and empower residents. (We also think that TRAs might want to consider how far they can adopt this small group approach in their own meetings.)

Our recommendations for TLCF are:

- *Greater use of small discussion groups, plenary feedback sessions and an organised but informal atmosphere that encourages people to discuss issues and put forward ideas.*
- *Shorter agendas, or a mixture of relatively short straightforward items (e.g. monitoring of performance indicators) combined with one or two in-depth items.*
- *Clear arrangements for HFTRA to discuss the agenda while it is being prepared and to put forward its own suggestions.*

3. RESIDENTS' EMPOWERMENT WORKING GROUP

The Residents' Empowerment Working Group (REWG) grew out of the 2005 Housing Stock Options Appraisal. Its remit included resident consultation on capital works and service delivery. It ensured that residents were represented effectively in the development of a range of housing policies, including the Decent Homes programme, introductory tenancies and the Right to Manage proposal.

Unfortunately, HFTRA became disengaged from the Group's work during the last two years. As a result, some HFTRA members have reported confusion about REWG's role and we have even heard worries that it could weaken the Federation's role as the main voice for residents. In addition, we feel that their absence from REWG meetings meant that Federation officers did not always have enough appreciation of the issues around major projects.

In fact, REWG has not met for more than six months. While it was

obviously sensible to set up a separate working group to take the appraisal's findings forward, two years on we believe issues around major works, tenants' rights and housing services could now be dealt with by the Tenant and Leaseholders Consultative Forum and regular tripartite meetings between HFTRA, the Council and contractors.

- *As a result, we recommend the REWG should be abolished. This will clarify reporting lines and avoid duplication of effort.*
- *It is important that the work the REWG carried out on behalf of residents, e.g. monitoring contractors and service standards, continues within the TLCF or at regular Council-HFTRA meetings.*

4. TENANT AND RESIDENTS ASSOCIATIONS AND OTHER REPRESENTATIVES

We have been impressed by the commitment and local knowledge of the officers and members of Tenant and Resident Associations in Harrow. However, we feel most TRAs are not as effective as they might be. Some of the reasons for this include:

- Gaps in coverage: only half the Council's tenants and leaseholders live in areas covered by a TRA
- Low levels of attendance at TRA meetings (often described to us as "apathy" by TRA officers)
- Lack of activists willing to take posts as existing officers retire, leading to concerns about the long-term viability of some TRAs
- Problems attracting Black and minority ethnic residents and younger residents to meetings
- Frustration at poor communications with parts of the Council, e.g. lack of contact with contractors before Decent Homes work.

The following table attempts to summarise how well TRAs are meeting their responsibilities under the Tenants and Leaseholders Compact (especially Section 8.1.1).

Task	Current performance
To act as a democratically accountable, representative body	For some TRAs low levels of involvement, very small committees and infrequent public meetings mean they may need support to become more representative and effective.
To canvass tenants' and leaseholders' views	Some TRAs need to consider more proactive ways of capturing the views of residents who do not attend their meetings, including under-represented groups such as younger families and tenants from ethnic minorities. Some TRAs report that low numbers of activists make effective canvassing, e.g. door knocking, very difficult.
Monitor performance and service delivery	This happens to some extent. But several TRAs report problems actually getting specific service issues resolved. Some Chairs have suggested regular meetings with service managers in areas like caretaking and grounds maintenance.
To take part in consultation and negotiation	Appears to vary between TRAs. This may depend in part on the personality and networking skills of individual TRA officers, especially the Chairs.
Take part in estate inspections and walkabouts	Yes, these are held every six months in most areas. Generally, residents seem satisfied with the walkabouts, but we have heard complains that some work identified on walkabouts is not carried out in a reasonable time.
Represent residents' views in discussions with other local organisations	Generally, we feel TRAs should be trying to build stronger links with other statutory and voluntary sector organisations working in their neighbourhood.
Work with other partners, e.g., police, health and housing associations	Some TRAs (e.g. ELTRA, Cottesmore) do invite their local Safer Neighbourhood team. Partnership working with local housing associations, health trust, town planners, highways, etc generally seem poor or non-existent at TRA and Federation level.

Table 3: TRA responsibilities under the Tenant Compact

Of course, the level of engagement varies considerably between TRAs, but we feel the table gives a reasonable summary of the strengths and the problems we have encountered in our work with individual TRAs.

(a) Gaps in coverage

Tenant participation officers (TPOs) have told us that residents who are interested in setting up new TRAs in their areas have approached them during the last few months. However, they have put off this development work due to pressure on resources within the team.

This development work needs to start at once. We feel this work should be co-ordinated with HFTRA's own "Way Forward" initiative, designed to increase levels of resident involvement across the borough. The Federation can bring invaluable resources to development work (e.g. start up grants, funds for training, members' own experiences of setting up an association, a "residents' eye" perspective on the issues, and above all their enthusiasm for involvement). While Tenant Participation staff should obviously carry out the bulk of this work (it is, after all, an essential part of their job), we believe that new TRAs can only benefit from a co-ordinated approach that draws on the experience of existing activists.

In addition, some existing TRAs need to receive more support to deal with problems such as low involvement by tenants, issues around representation (e.g. low levels of participation by Black and minority ethnic residents) and support for new officers to replace those who want to stand down.

Tenants in street properties are not currently represented, following the demise of the Miscellaneous Properties TRA. HFTRA's Way Forward group has identified this as an association that could potentially be revived, but so far no action has been taken.

Both the Tenant Compact and HFTRA's new Constitution make provision for "neighbourhood representatives", elected residents who are willing to act as representatives in neighbourhoods where there is no TRA. So far, this form of representation has not been developed very extensively.

Although significant numbers of new resident representatives could create some concerns within the existing resident involvement

structure, the Tenant and Leaseholder Compact requirements (the support of at least 30% of council households in areas of more than thirty homes) means that neighbourhood representatives are required to gain a similar level of local support as formal TRAs. We believe this is a sensible solution to the problem of representation where there is not yet enough support for a formal TRA.

We recommend that:

- *HFTRA and the Tenant Participation Officers (TPOs) hold regular joint meetings to plan and co-ordinate development and support work for new and existing TRAs.*
- *HFTRA and TPOs meet with TRA Chairs to agree action plans and targets for support work with each association.*
- *We believe that a revived Miscellaneous Properties TRA would be a suitable case for joint development work between the Federation and tenant participation staff, and suggest that this work starts at once.*
- *The HFTRA, tenant participation officers and other housing staff promote the new neighbourhood / street representative option as widely as possible, with TPOs and HFTRA agreeing a training and support package for new representatives.*

(b) Low levels of involvement

Many TRAs reported concerns at low levels of involvement at public meetings. Only one TRA (Brookside Close) reported that it is satisfied with the level of attendance at its meetings.

In Harrow, as elsewhere, the dominant model of local involvement focuses on the public TRA meeting and the newsletter. There are things that can be done to make meetings more interesting and useful, and many of these were covered in our training session on “Effective Meetings”. These include more work in small groups, breaks and ‘social’ items, a stronger focus on interaction and discussion throughout the entire meeting, etc. Nevertheless, attending public meetings will always be a minority interest, unless a particular issue is currently affecting almost everyone in the neighbourhood.

To be genuinely representative TRAs increasingly need to go out to

their residents, rather than expecting the residents to come to them. In our experience, most people want relatively focused answers to their own questions, or to raise a specific problem that affects them personally, without committing themselves to further involvement. But these contacts can also be an opportunity for tenant activists to pass on information or discuss other issues.

Methods that may help TRAs reach these residents include:

- Websites, which have the potential to give residents information quickly and to allow very focused discussion through email or (better for encouraging other members) online forums. Only two TRAs seem to be using websites. For many TRAs, setting up and maintaining an active site will be a daunting task. However, HFTRA does have members who are experienced in web development, as well as a budget for training. The Federation could also develop a basic template to get TRAs started, after which each TRA would generate its own content.
- Stalls (“table-tops”) in prominent places, street representatives and informal drop-in sessions can all allow residents to raise individual concerns, without having to give up a whole evening to attend a meeting. (Although this might seem a selfish attitude to some activists, not all residents have the time or confidence to attend formal meetings.)
- Regular contact with other local community groups, faith centres, etc can help TRAs discover the concerns of residents who are not attending their own meetings, while publicising the TRA’s own work. This approach may also help address some of the issues around diversity and the representation of minority tenants, since several TRAs have reported problems attracting BME residents to their own meetings.

We strongly believe that TRAs must always look for new ways to engage their residents in ways that suit individual residents, rather than expecting individuals to adapt to the TRA’s own traditional ways of working. If this seems a rather general comment, it is because each TRA will need to develop approaches that seem to suit their own local communities.

We are very aware that this sort of cultural change can be difficult, especially for tenant activists who have spent many years working in

a culture of formal meetings. We are not suggesting that these new approaches should replace meetings, rather that they should complement them. This may initially mean some extra work on the part of associations.

Some TRAs have explained that the lack of local community meeting halls is a barrier to greater involvement. TRAs without a nearby available community hall include Cottesmore and Weald TRAs. This creates at least two problems for these TRAs:

- Holding meetings outside the estate increases distance from the residents' homes, discouraging attendance, and
- TRAs are unable to set up local community initiatives such as mother-and-toddler groups, play schemes, etc or hold local fundraising events.

Our main recommendations in this area are that:

- *TRAs need to develop new ways to keep in touch with residents who do not attend public meetings, e.g. more outreach work and one-to-one contact (e.g. stalls, drop-in surgeries, street contacts, websites with contact email addresses, etc).*
- *TRAs should also develop stronger links with other local community groups, e.g. sharing information on local issues, publicising meetings and campaigns, etc.*
- *HFTRA should act as a clearing house to share ideas and good practice between TRAs, promoting examples of successful involvement from neighbourhoods both within and outside Harrow. The Federation's "Way Forward" group is an obvious candidate for this work.*
- *The problems caused by lack of local community venues need to be taken into account in the Council's Community Hall review.*

(c) Developing new officers

Visiting TRA meetings, we were struck by the number of promising members (often relatively young residents from BME communities) who seemed to have the potential to serve as TRA officers. These were people who were willing to give up evenings to attend their local association's meetings, but they were often uncomfortable when

asked whether they had considered serving as officers, feeling that they did not have the experience or did not want to commit themselves to a formal post. (A second issue was that some of these residents were freeholders, a topic that is discussed later in this report.)

TRAs need to identify and encourage these members. Possible measures include:

- *Allocating small, discrete projects to members, rather than requiring a year long commitment as an officer or committee member. TRAs should consider drawing up a list of members' skills and areas where they are willing to carry out such work.*
- *"Shadowing" (understudying) existing officers to gain experience and confidence.*
- *Training, especially in areas where the TRA identifies gaps in its current skills. This could include areas such as fundraising and grant applications, where some TRAs have identified a gap in their knowledge. These are areas where members can make a real contribution on individual time-limited projects.*
- *An induction for members who do become officers, including a formal handover session with the previous post holder.*

(d) Increasing diversity

In many ways, our observations on TRAs in this area echo our comments in the section on HFTRA. Several Chairs told us that they were concerned at their TRAs' failure to attract enough residents from all sections of their neighbourhoods. In particular, some TRAs are struggling to attract younger residents, and also tenants from black and minority ethnic backgrounds. Some had attempted to attract these residents through community events (e.g. Diwali celebrations; children's activities), but they reported that this did not seem to build up long-term involvement in the TRA's work.

We have already suggested that most residents, regardless of background, are unlikely to want to commit to regular, formally structured meetings. Some of the barriers to involvement by under-represented groups may be:

(a) lack of time: younger residents with families may not feel able to

give up an evening after work;

- (b) lack of confidence: the formal structure of most TRA meetings, with set agendas run by a group of people that already know each other, can be intimidating for many people. This can be a particular problem for younger people and those from other cultures, who may not be as familiar as older white British residents with conventions that have been largely adopted from trade union and political meetings.
- (c) cultural barriers: not all cultures have a strong tradition of formal involvement through specialist organisations such as TRA. Often community activity is organised more informally, e.g. through family and friends, through faith centres or individual community leaders.
- (d) language barriers: housing management jargon can be confusing enough for people who speak English as a first language! People who are still learning English may find it very hard to follow debates unless someone is prepared to make time to help them during their first few meetings!
- (e) attitudes: younger people and residents from BME communities may have had bad experiences of formal groups in the past, where they may have encountered ageist or racist attitudes. TRAs may need to make a special effort to show they are different. Unfortunately, we did hear some racist comments from a handful of activists around the borough that made us feel not everyone from other communities will always receive a warm welcome. Racist and other discriminatory attitudes normally weaken TRAs badly by robbing them of the support of large sections of their residents, so TRAs should always tackle these attitudes among their members.

We suggest individual TRAs consider the following ways to involve under-represented groups of residents:

- *Consider diversity training for your TRA, especially officers and committee members*
- *Develop good working relationships with local community associations, faith centres (churches, temples, mosques, etc), “community champions” and other local groups. Include them in mailouts, invite to meetings and events, etc, and ask them to*

refer tenants and leaseholders' concerns to your association.

- *Bear in mind issues when arranging meetings or other events: this requires an awareness of diet, prayer requirements, religious and other festivals and holidays, jargon and language, "common knowledge" about our culture (which may not always be so common for people who did not grow up in the UK).*
- *"Mother tongue" meetings (in effect, a sub-group of the TRA for people with a shared background) can be a useful way of getting local residents involved in housing issues. But*
 - *this does require a reasonable number of people from the same community living in the neighbourhood.*
 - *it also needs at least one resident from the community who is willing to set it up and develop it.*
 - *it needs to work in co-ordinate with the main meetings, with information and ideas (and over time members) flowing between the main TRA meetings and the sub-group.*

We recommend HFTRA:

- *Ensures that the Way Forward group develops an action plan to increase diversity and representation in member TRAs as quickly as possible.*
- *Makes increased diversity a key aim in the action plans it draws up for individual associations.*
- *Ensures that funds are made available to provide diversity awareness training for TRA activists.*

5. HOUSING STAFF

During the last few months, we have been very aware of the significant amount of time that senior housing staff have given to resident participation, especially meetings with HFTRA, TLCF meetings and consultation of the new Housing Strategy. This amount of high-level involvement is unusual, and reflects very favourably on the senior management team and their commitment to resident participation.

At times we have sometimes felt HFTRA officers believe they need to deal with the most senior member of staff, rather than the most appropriate one. For example, HFTRA has suggested regular liaison meetings with senior housing staff on services such as cleaning and caretaking. We think this is an excellent idea, but we believe that it will be more effective if the managers who are actually concerned with specific service delivery are encouraged to attend these meetings, rather than more senior strategic managers. The staff that are best placed to deal with problems and take on board tenants' comments should be at these meetings, not necessarily the ones with the highest position in the hierarchy.

Throughout our work in Harrow, the tenant participation team has been under-strength due to staff illness. Tenant participation officers have told us that this has prevented them from developing new projects as strongly as they would like, e.g. supporting the development of new TRAs. One TRA Chair told us that he believed the team should have been able to find the resources for this vital work, even with a key member of staff absent. Whatever the reasons, we are concerned that opportunities for development work were lost, since we feel extending TRA coverage is vitally important work. Development work that tenant participation officers (TPOs) have carried out, e.g. support for the new Hatch End TRA, shows the value of this approach and should be extended to other neighbourhoods.

We feel that tenant participation officers need to be free to concentrate on specialist areas of work, especially developing and supporting TRAs, resident representatives and other methods of resident involvement. TRA officers and committee members should be able to call on their expertise and knowledge in these areas.

In general, residents should not expect TPOs to be their main liaison to sort out housing management issues. For established, effective TRAs it will usually be more important to have a housing manager at their meetings than a tenant participation officer. TPOs are a valuable specialist resource, and their skills need to be used as effectively and productively as possible.

We see the development of strong TRAs as a vital task for both the HFTRA and tenant participation staff in the coming months. Because their work will overlap in so many areas, lines of communication between HFTRA and the tenant participation team need to improve.

We feel that HFTRA's concern to stress its independence from the Council, and the tenant participation team's need to concentrate on existing projects while it has been under strength, have combined to create a situation where genuine partnership working between the two sides is too limited. TPOs and HFTRA are not co-ordinating joint support programmes for ailing TRAs, nor are they really working together to develop new ones. Measures such as joint training (Tenant Compact, section 8.2) do not seem to be taking place.

- *We recommend that HFTRA officers hold regular meetings with TP staff to develop and review joint packages of support for existing TRAs, new associations, community associations and resident representatives.*
- *In addition, we feel HFTRA members and TRA officers should take part in joint training sessions with tenant participation staff (as suggested in the Tenant and Leaseholder Compact) and other council staff to build up shared knowledge and partnership working.*
- *Regular meetings should be developed between HFTRA and service delivery managers to consult on policies, procedures and problems in specific service areas such as repairs and grounds maintenance.*

6. FUNDING ISSUES AND OPPORTUNITIES

Recently the housing department has needed to exert very careful control over its finances. To their credit, housing managers have been able to protect HFTRA's budget. But the need for financial restraint has produced some relatively minor cutbacks whose symbolic impact among activists has been greater than one might have expected (e.g. attendance allowances, refreshments at residents' meetings).

In fact, Harrow Council has devolved a budget of almost £25,000 to HFTRA. We have heard estimates of the housing department's total expenditure on resident participation work, including the cost of staff time and other forms of consultation, of £150,000+. We feel this level

of funding should provide sufficient resources for effective resident involvement in a borough with around 6,000 properties.

We have already mentioned the importance of a Best value approach to make the most effective use of limited resources. As a result, we feel that residents' representatives and housing staff should always have two questions in mind:

(a) What do residents actually receive for their money?

(b) What can we do to provide better value (that is, better or more resident involvement for each pound spent)?

We are not suggesting that Harrow and HFTRA do not provide good value for money now. Our point is that they should constantly be checking to ensure they continue to do this. For example, we have not heard HFTRA officers discussing how to gain the maximum benefit from the Federation's devolved budget. We feel that both tenant representatives and tenant participation staff need to focus on the outputs of their work (what is actually delivered) in return for the resources that are put into resident involvement in Harrow.

Our view is that the Council is currently providing adequate resources to HFTRA and TRAs, given the present level of involvement. But several members of HFTRA have asked how additional projects and a higher level of involvement can be resourced in the future.

Firstly, there may be scope for efficiency savings in future, releasing money for new work. For example, HFTRA is currently tied into an expensive photocopier contract. When this ends in a couple of years, savings can be transferred to other parts of the Federation's budget.

Secondly, this year's Federation budget does contain an element for development work and the costs of setting up new TRAs. If the Federation is able to deliver this work during 2007-8, this would strengthen any case for additional funding in future, possibly based on a formula which reflects the number of TRAs and neighbourhood representatives supported by the Federation and the proportion of the borough's residents represented by active functioning TRAs.

We also feel that the Federation and some stronger TRAs could, with training and support, apply for external grants for more 'community based' projects, e.g. on community development and cohesion.

The table on the following page gives an indication of the types of

grants that could be considered by HFTRA and their members for possible bids.

Initially we would recommend relatively modest bids for discrete, easy to manage projects: this should allow the Federation to develop a track record for successful delivery that will open up the possibility of larger, more ambitious bids in the future.

<p>Awards for All England Website: www.awardsforall.org.uk Grants £500 - £5,000</p>	<p>For small, non-profit community groups. Funds projects to involve people in their community through sports, arts, social, environmental & other community activities</p>
<p>Reaching Communities Website: www.biglotteryfund.org.uk</p>	<p>Voluntary groups can apply. Theme: building strong communities with active citizens working together to tackle their problems.</p>
<p>Community Foundation Network www.communityfoundations.org.uk</p>	<p>Open to local voluntary groups. Small grants for projects promoting community & voluntary sector activity.</p>
<p>Garfield Weston Foundation www.garfieldweston.org Typically, grants to around £25,000</p>	<p>Wide range of grants for community, sports, environment, etc. Grants to community groups have included funding for community halls.</p>
<p>Connecting Communities Plus Website: www.cdf.org.uk Grants £6,000 - £12,000</p>	<p>Supports projects to increase race equality & improve community cohesion. For locally run voluntary and community organisations with an income of less than £50,000 / year.</p>
<p>North West London Community Foundation Nwlcommunityfoundation.org.uk</p>	<p>Themes including community development, bringing communities together, social exclusion & isolation, disadvantaged young people.</p>
<p>Gannett Foundation Fund harrowtimes.co.uk/gannettfoundation</p>	<p>Organisations applying would need charitable status. Grants to £5,000 for local community issues.</p>

Table 4: some possible funding sources for projects

The Federation would not need to convert to a company to access any of the grants listed overleaf, although the protection of limited liability for officers and the extra governance and reporting requirements imposed by the Companies Act might mean this option would suit an ambitious Federation at some stage in the future.

We think there are several advantages to bids for grant funding. This money does not come from the Housing Revenue Account, so tenants and leaseholders do not pay directly for the extra work that the Federation plans to develop.

This may be particularly important for “housing plus” or neighbourhood projects that would benefit everyone in the community, not just tenants and leaseholders. In addition, the discipline of competitive bidding means the Federation would need to be very clear how it would deliver the work and be able to convince a funder that the project really is viable.

Funding bids should not replace existing resources for tenant involvement, but they could provide extra funds to allow them to develop new areas of work. By building up its experience of bidding, the Federation could also act as a source of advice and assistance to individual TRAs looking to develop more local bids for their own individual neighbourhoods.

Our recommendations on finance for resident involvement are:

- *HFTRA, with the help of tenant participation staff, to carry out a Value for Money review of their work to identify areas where existing resources can be used more effectively. (Alternatively, specialist staff elsewhere in the Council might be able to do this work. There is a risk that any savings could be transferred to other areas of housing work rather than reinvested in resident participation).*
- *HFTRA makes contact with bid staff in Harrow Council and considers training on grants and bid writing. It would also be sensible to consider project management training for all but the smallest projects.*
- *HFTRA and larger TRAs develop a greater concern for Best Value in the use of their resources (both financial and human, e.g. making the best use of their activists’ time and knowledge).*

7. COMMUNICATIONS

Communications between senior housing staff, the Portfolio Holder and HFTRA officers seem to us to be generally good. We have been pleasantly surprised by the amount of time that senior managers and key councillors have devoted to resident involvement in general, and especially their frequent meetings with HFTRA officers.

We have already noted the lack of contact between a few TRAs and the HFTRA, and made some recommendations to address this problem. Otherwise, HFTRA does seem to provide a good setting for TRA representatives to share information and ideas.

We have also discussed ways to make the TLCF more effective by allowing fuller debate at its meetings. Again, we believe that TLCF is a suitable forum for consultation on policy and strategy.

We are aware that many TRA officers consider service delivery problems are of greater importance to their members than housing strategy issues. Two TRA Chairs told us that “big money items [i.e. programmes costing millions of pounds] should be left to the officers”, explaining that their residents were more concerned with individual problems like disrepair that affected their own homes and streets. We think this view is completely wrong. Well-constructed policies and programmes that are implemented properly should reduce problems for tenants at the delivery stage, so TRAs need to be involved in major policy decisions.

We feel communications are generally good at senior levels, e.g. between HFTRA officers and senior housing managers. However, the flow communication does not seem to be as good at lower levels. TRA officers often complained to us about poor communications with the call centre and with contractors. For example, one TRA Chair recounted her anger that Decent Homes work had started on her estate without the TRA knowing it had started, and without any idea who to contact with residents’ queries and problems. It remains to be seen whether the appointment of the Kier Group will improve communication between contractors and associations, which we are told has been very frustrating for both TRA officers and for the residents they represent.

In addition, several TRA officers have told us about local issues

(generally relatively minor disrepair and maintenance problems) which have not been resolved despite the TRA reporting them some months ago. HFTRA has recently tried to capture these outstanding problems at its general meetings.

Because of these concerns, HFTRA officers have recently requested regular meetings with service managers in areas such as repairs and maintenance, to address members' issues around service delivery. We think this is a very sensible suggestion. We suggest the council staff at these meetings should be the managers with daily operational responsibility for the individual services, rather than more senior managers who normally attend TLCF meetings.

The Council's main methods of communicating with all tenants on general housing management issues are "Homing In" (the tenants' newsletter) and STATUS and other surveys.

"Homing In" regularly carries articles on tenant participation (e.g. an article on Pinner Hill TRA in issue 39, and a more general article entitled "What is a TRA?" in the previous issue). Some TRA Chairs have suggested that it would be a good idea to include more news from the TRAs. While we think that there is already a reasonable coverage of tenant participation issues in the newsletter, given all the other material that needs to be covered, we think it would be useful to advertise upcoming TRA meetings and other events in Homing In, and to give contact details if the TRA agrees to this.

Our impression is that Harrow Council does take the results of its resident surveys very seriously and we were pleased to see it discussing the implications with HFTRA officers. Our only suggestion in this area is that surveys tend to produce quantitative rather than qualitative information, so it might be useful to carry out some further feedback to explore the reasons behind the results. The recent Housing Strategy Conference was very successful, but we did notice that most of the tenants and leaseholders who were invited were TRA officers. A more general Tenants Conference once a year, open to all tenants, might provide an additional chance to explore housing issues with a wider range of tenants.

HFTRA has recently set up its own website, which we see as an excellent development. We suggest this should be developed not just as a way of giving residents the latest information on the Federation's work and local housing issues, but also as an interactive method to

collect views, issues and ideas from tenants and leaseholders across the borough.

Our main recommendations for better communication with tenants and leaseholders include:

- *As noted, consideration to holding an annual Tenants Conference for all members, not just strategy stakeholders.*
- *“Homing In” and other Council information to promote local TRA activities more strongly.*
- *The Federation should consider making its website more interactive, e.g. possibly an online forum for tenants and leaseholders to discuss issues and keep in touch with their residents’ representatives.*
- *TRAs should be encouraged to develop their own websites (at the moment only two TRAs have a web presence), drawing on the expertise of HFTRA officers, or having their own page for announcements on the Federation website*
- *Telephone text (SMS or Short Message Service) messages can be a good way of getting important information (e.g. reminders on meetings and consultation events) out to residents.*
- *TRAs should consider raising their local profile with more outreach work (e.g. social events, tabletops, drop-ins, etc)*
- *TRAs and HFTRA should share information on their activities with other community groups in their area (e.g. including them on mailing lists, sending invitations to meetings and events, etc) as well as residents.*

8. OPTIONS FOR THE FUTURE

At the end of June FIRST Call began a boroughwide Pre-Feasibility Study into the Right To Manage. This work will test the level of support among tenants for Tenant Management Organisations (TMOs) in Harrow either at estate level or across the whole borough.

This survey will continue throughout the summer, with our staff

visiting all council homes across the whole of Harrow. We will present our findings and recommendations at the end of this work.

If there is sufficient support to take the proposal further, additional development work and consultation will be needed before residents are asked to make a final decision whether to set up a TMO. If there is insufficient support, there will be no point spending more central government funds on the proposal.

A Tenant Management Organisation increases the potential for resident involvement at the top of the body. Residents who are running an estate-based TMO can reasonably expect to keep in touch with their neighbours' concerns. But a boroughwide Organisation would only increase responsiveness if Board members are constantly kept informed of the issues that affect the remaining six thousand tenants and leaseholders they are serving.

FIRST CALL is committed to offering all residents in Harrow the chance to continue the Right To Manage investigation to the second stage (the "Feasibility Stage"). However, we recognise that residents may not wish to pursue such an option. In either case, we are sure residents and the Council will continue to investigate options to extend tenant involvement. Some suggestions are:

Management Board: There could be places for residents on a new Harrow Housing Management Board. This would enable elected tenants and leaseholders to have direct input in the decision making process and procedures. Residents' representatives could make decisions in partnership with elected councilors and senior housing staff. It could fulfill a highly valuable role, which would require serious commitment from residents' representatives, the full support of residents in general, political support from the Council and training support.

Policy Groups: Harrow residents could help influence the development in housing policy in a new type of partnership, with policy groups covering a wide range of topics such as repairs, estate services, sheltered housing and staffing. It could be a developing tool as Harrow works for continual improvement and this group offers the chance to shape our policies.

Informal/Ad Hoc Groups: For those who do not want to join a

Tenants' and Residents' Association but still want to have a say, there are less formal ways to be involved. Often people want a relatively "low commitment" channel to feed through their views or organise a community event, and ad hoc groups provide a way to represent such views informally. There could be single issue groups, for instance on anti-social behaviour or contractor performance.

Interest Groups: Councils like Harrow can sometimes find it difficult to talk to certain groups because of their lifestyles. Setting up interest groups could be an effective way of collecting their thoughts. For example, by using consultation events managed by local youth groups (e.g. using a running web site for a few weeks or months), with results fed to the Council, text messaging, stalls at major youth events, housing staff and TRAs could reach a whole new range of young people (and through them, their parents). Other support and consultation networks designed to match the preferred styles of engagement of communities could also be set up for Black and ethnic minority tenants, young parents and disabled people.

Editorial Panel: "Your Home" goes out to all tenants in Harrow. The Council could set up roving Editorial Panels featuring representatives from all communities to take part, offer their views about what should be the key stories, researching them and ensuring they go to print. This method of involvement can be developed via media and presentation courses to interested parties. This way, the Council will be "on the pulse" about the issues, sources of pride and concerns about the local services being provided. It can be possible to plant and then grow a new level of involvement and engagement via the media. This could then of course encourage new levels of involvement across a whole range of areas.

Other Methods: Of course, Harrow should continue to develop input and feedback from existing structures, for example TRAs, Forums, HFTRA, etc. as well as sheltered housing surgeries, drop-in sessions, surveys and questionnaires, mystery shoppers and focus groups.