

**REPORT FOR: TENANTS' AND
LEASEHOLDERS'
CONSULTATIVE FORUM**

Date of Meeting: 8 November 2011

Subject: **INFORMATION REPORT – Resident Services Manager Report**

Responsible Officer: Lynne Pennington, Divisional Director of Housing

Exempt: No

Enclosures: None

Section 1 – Summary

1.1 This report sets out a range of information items that the Resident Services Manager would like to bring to the attention of the Tenants and Leaseholder Consultative Forum and provides feedback following discussions and questions raised at previous TLCF meetings.

FOR INFORMATION

Section 2 – Report

2.0 Updates from previous discussions and new items for information

Housing Annual Report

- 2.1. Members of TLCF may recall that Harrow submitted our first annual report to the Tenant Services Authority (TSA) in October 2010. This report detailed our self assessment against 5 national standards set by the TSA and particularly covered our plans to engage with more residents in an effective, and meaningful way. Our second report was completed in October 2011. The report was written by officers with input and quotes from residents both individually and through HFTRA. It details progress made over the last 12 months in meeting the national standards, progress with the Housing Ambition Plan, resident involvement activities and progress with our local offers.
- 2.2. For the first time the report includes performance information which compares Harrow's performance with other London Boroughs and Arms' Length Management Organisations.(ALMOs). A summary of the report is being included in the November Homing In and the full report will be available on the web site, or in hard copy for any residents who express an interest in seeing it. Officers would like to thank residents for their valuable assistance in preparing this years' report.

Leasehold Services

- 2.3. The improvements to the service put into place over the last 12 months enabled us to bill service charges to all leaseholders in August, which was a month ahead of the required date. Where enquiries about bills have been received they have generally been resolved swiftly by working closely with the Council's Asset Management Team. Where it has been necessary to do so amendments to leaseholder bills have been made promptly.
- 2.4. Leaseholder fees are currently being compared with those of other Boroughs to see if they are fair and reasonable as part of the commitment to achieving value for money. This process is called benchmarking. Where we find that our charges are higher than elsewhere we will be proposing new fee levels in consultation with the Leaseholder Support Group.

- 2.5. We have begun the formal consultation process for the Repairs and Maintenance long term agreement. A notice of intention has been served on all leaseholders
- 2.6. In August the leaseholder team billed £430,000 in annual service charges for the 2010/11 financial year. This figure is for the annual service charge only and excludes recharges for s20 works.
- 2.7. A number of leaseholders have set up repayment plans to spread the cost of their bills over 10 months. The leasehold team has been actively pursuing old debt and as a result arrears have continued to reduce. Current debt as at 12th October is £303,035.61 which is made up from £247,667.43 from annual service charges and £30,591.16 from major works. Future reports to TLCF will provide detail on progress made in further reducing the arrears on service charges.
- 2.8. However it should be noted that approximately £60k of service charges for the grounds maintenance element could not be billed as there was insufficient information provided to the leasehold team to justify the charge. Officers are working on ways to ensure this problem is resolved before next years service charges are calculated.

Tenancy Management

- 2.7.1 **Tackling Social Housing Fraud.** As previously reported to TLCF Karen Connell, Senior Professional Housing Management has been leading for Resident Services on a campaign to tackle social housing fraud such as illegal subletting in partnership with Harrows corporate anti-fraud team (CAFT). Following a successful funding bid, a specialist Investigation Officer was jointly appointed by the teams in January n a 12 month contract to focus on this important area. To date 5 tenants have given back their tenancies as evidence of fraud has been gathered. In another case a tenant has been found guilty of criminal charges for obtaining a property by deception and a court date is awaited to gain possession of the property.
- 2.7.2 As the result of an invest to save bid agreed by the Interim Director of Finance we have been able to extend the contract for the specialist fraud officer until the end of March and employ a temporary member of staff, also until March to increase the rate at which tenancy audit visits are undertaken. These visits enable us to verify who is living in the property as well as identify any possible breaches of tenancy conditions.
- 2.7.3 Residents have reported concerns to the team where they believe social housing fraud is being committed and officers are investigating a number

of such cases. This has helped to reach a situation where a number of other live investigations are at an advanced stage and it looks as though the Council is likely to re-gain possession of more properties through this initiative.

- 2.7.4 All such properties will become available for letting to households in housing need. It is estimated that social housing tenancy fraud costs the economy in the region of £900 million each year nationally and Harrow's progress in dealing with issues locally could have a significant impact on local communities.
- 2.7.5 **Income Collection- Current and Former Tenant Arrears.** Progress continues to be made in improving collection on both current and former tenant rent arrears. At the end of 2010/11 current rent arrears had been reduced to the lowest they had ever been in Harrow with a collection rate of 98.36%. In addition to continuing to pursue current rent arrears progress has been made in tackling former tenant arrears, an area that had not been tackled robustly for several years. Each of the 4 rent officers has now taken on a patch for former tenant arrears and older debts have been passed to a collection agency to progress. The procedure for writing off debts where tenants have died, or the debt is now so old it is no longer legally possible to pursue it is also under review.
- 2.7.6 Current rent arrears stand at £467,651 as at 9th October and former tenant arrears at £804,494. Progress in reducing these debts is often quite slow because where payment arrangements are reached these can take several years to reduce the debt.
- 2.7.7 The Council's scrutiny committee are investigating our current procedures to collect money owed to us, to ensure that our procedures have the correct balance between achieving value for money in income collection and ensuring that people are treated fairly and that we continue to use eviction only as a last resort. As has previously been discussed at TLCF the proposed benefit reform could have a significant impact on tenants' ability to pay their rent so any proposed changes to the rent recovery procedure will be discussed with residents, probably through the Value for Money group at a later date.
- 2.7.8 The improved income collection is having an impact on the amount of money needed to be set aside to potentially write off bad debts. Reducing arrears reduces the need for this provision and so leaves more money available to invest in services. At 1st April 2011 the total bad debt provision (rents and service charges) was £785,805. This was increased to £850,601 on 30th September- when the new year's service charges were added to the debt and also because the way this provision is calculated was changed.

2.7.9 The bad debt provision is calculated by a formula that takes account of the age of the debt. In general current and former tenant arrears have reduced by £35k so far this year, but the new methodology of ageing the former tenant arrears from date of last transaction has put more of the debt in the high risk category of 365 days plus and therefore increased the required provision. For leasehold service charges, although bills have been sent out in August 2011, their ageing is still low risk at the moment. It is therefore anticipated that as income collection continues to improve the bad debt provision will reduce.

2.7.10 **Resident Involvement.** The Resident Involvement Team are working on a number of initiatives as detailed below:

- Coffee mornings. The first event was held at Brookside Community Hall with residents of Brookside TRA invited by personal letter. The Deputy Mayor attended.
- Tenants and Residents Association (TRA) Get Together. The first get together of committee members from TRA's was held in the Civic Centre on Thursday 13 October from 6.30 to 9.30 p.m. Ian Slaney from Highways gave a presentation on what steps are necessary to organise a Street Party in preparation for the Queen's Diamond Jubilee and the Olympics in 2012. The attendees were welcomed by both the vice chair of HFTRA, Kim Chadwick, and the Resident Involvement (RI) team. There seemed to be plenty of things to discuss and judging by the lack of silence throughout the evening – it was a great success! The next TRA Get Together is planned for March 2012.
- Presentation to the HAD Deaf Drop In group. On Wednesday 12 October, following an earlier presentation to the Asian Deaf Club on Saturday 3 September, a presentation targeted at attracting more volunteers was given. One outcome of the meeting was an of a once every two months session where the council can get this groups views and opinions on a wide range of consultations taking place. This has been passed to Desiree Mahoney (Council-wide Consultation) to ensure she also has access to this group, as the opportunity is far wider than housing issues.
- Summer Events. The series of 6 events has now been completed. As this was the first year such events took place there are clearly some lessons to be learnt on what went well, and what did not work as well so meetings will be held with TRA's and HFTRA to plan 2012 Summer Events.
- Sinclair Fields. TLCF members may recall that one idea that arose from the summer events was to launch a multi- agency project to see whether funds could be raised, and support could be found to revamp these playing fields. The idea came from a group of young people who attended the summer event at Woodside. The project is progressing well and a number of partners have expressed an interest in working with us in developing the area. A resident meeting was held on Friday 7 October

where no objections were received to the project moving forward. Local residents have therefore been advised that the project will be taken forward, but that they will be kept informed before any decisions are made.

Estates Services and Sheltered Housing

- 2.7.11 **Caretaking Review.** The team are currently reviewing ways of working to enable a more proactive approach to maintaining the communal areas of estates and blocks of flats. This approach is intended to move from visiting an area and carrying out an agreed list of tasks at each visit to deciding what needs to be done at each visit according to the condition of the area or estate. Staff will work to a set of standards, illustrated by pictures to bring areas up to an agreed level of presentation. This approach will ensure that more time can be given to those areas that most need improvement.
- 2.7.12 An awayday is taking place with the staff on 28th October where the new approach will be launched. If there is more to report a by the meeting a verbal update will be given to TLCF
- 2.7.13 The other new initiative in the caretaking service is the apprenticeship scheme which is almost finalised. The scheme aims to give 2 local young people an opportunity to work with the caretakers for up to 2 years, whilst undertaking training that will lead to a formal qualification accredited to the National Apprenticeship scheme. At the time of writing this report the recruitment process is not concluded so again a verbal update can be given to the meeting.
- 2.7.14 **Parking schemes.** TLCF members will recall that officers were undertaking consultation with local residents in a number of areas of the Borough where local parking schemes are being proposed. The consultation ended and we had developed a clear plan of what would happen and were developing a timetable. However plans have been delayed because of a petition received from one area from residents who did not attend the consultation meetings. Although this only affects one proposal it has held up progress on all schemes because it is more cost effective to progress all the schemes that will go ahead together. Once the issues raised in the petition are resolved we will be able to move forward with plans for all schemes and advise residents accordingly.
- 2.7.15 **Sheltered Housing Modernisation.** The review of the sheltered housing service is progressing well. Following the consultation with tenants of sheltered housing, detailed elsewhere on this agenda, consultation has also taken place with the trade unions. A staff consultation event is planned for 19th October where draft job descriptions and the two options under consideration will be discussed. Following this event there will be further consultation with sheltered housing tenants before proposals are

finalised. The review is still on track for full implementation early in the 2012/13 financial year.

2.7.16 **Garage Strategy.** The stock condition survey of our garage stock has now been analysed and plans are being made to bring a number of garages where there is a waiting list of people looking to rent a garage up to a acceptable standard so they can be rented. However at present there is only sufficient funding available to improve a small number of garages. In addition one garage area where there have been some serious anti- social behaviour problems is being considered as a potential site for new homes. Officers will be discussing the future garage strategy at service planning meetings over the next few months and a further update will be provided to a future TLCF meeting.

Section 3 – Further Information

This report contains a number of items of information and feedback from earlier TLCF discussions that do not warrant individual reports.

Section 4 – Financial Implications

Any financial issues are contained within the body of the report.

Section 5 – Equalities Implications

There are no specific equalities implications arising from the information provided in this report. However once proposals move forward, should any equalities issues emerge impact assessments will be completed at that time.

Section 6 – Corporate Priorities

All of the above initiatives contribute to the corporate priorities, in particular united and involved communities: a Council that listens and leads.

Name: Donna Edwards

on behalf of the
Chief Financial Officer

Date: 19 October 2011

Section 7 – Contact Details and Background Papers

Contact: Maggie Challoner, Resident Services Manager, Tel: 020 8424 2473
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Background Papers: None