

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

Date of Meeting: 29 February 2012

Subject: **INFORMATION REPORT -
Resident Services Update and
Feedback from Resident
Involvement Activities**

Responsible Officer: Lynne Pennington, Divisional Director
of Housing

Exempt: No

Enclosures: None

Section 1 – Summary

This joint report sets out a range of information items that the Resident Services Manager would like to bring to the attention of the Tenants', Leaseholders' and Residents' Consultative Forum and provides feedback following discussions and questions raised at previous TLRCF meetings. It also provides feedback to TLRCF on a wide range of Council led service specific and service wide resident involvement activities.

FOR INFORMATION

Section 2 – Report

2.0 Updates from previous discussions and new items for information

Leasehold Services

Performance

2.1 The Leasehold Team has worked hard in collecting service charges invoiced and arrears. A total of £570,892.78 has been invoiced to date, this financial year. This includes £451,451.63 for annual service charges and £119,441.14 for major works. A number of payment plans have been arranged with leaseholders to assist them in managing this debt. As a result, service charge arrears have continued to reduce and the current debt as at 31st January 2012 is £118,624.47 being £97,712.34 for annual service charges and £20,912.13 for major works. This has exceeded performance targets.

2.2 The Leasehold Team are actively working with the Asset Management & Estate Services Team to improve the data received from these services and input into the service charge accounts. This will enable the service charge bills generated by the Leasehold Team to accurately reflect the cost of providing the services to leaseholders and therefore significantly reduce the number of queries raised. While we have had some success, further step improvements are expected over time.

Information

2.3 The West London Housing Directors Group has asked Harrow Council to host an initial meeting to explore Leasehold Services: Joint Working between West London Boroughs, with a view to achieving efficiency savings. The meeting is scheduled for the 6th March 2012. An update shall be reported to the next meeting of TLRCF.

2.4 The Leasehold Team will be issuing Ground Rent Notifications shortly and invoices will be sent out in April 2012.

2.5 With the proposed changes to the Right to Buy (RTB) it is envisaged there will be an increase in RTB sales post April 2012. To enable potential leaseholders to make an informed decision whether home ownership is an affordable option for them the Leasehold Team will offer all applicants an interview to discuss the Rights and Obligations of the Lease including their responsibility for the payment of annual and major work service charges.

2.6 The Leasehold Team are exploring the IT capabilities of providing service charge accounts online. Once we establish the system capacity we shall be liaising with leaseholders to identify which services they would find useful to access online, at their convenience.

Tenancy Management

Tackling Tenancy Fraud

2.7 At the beginning of this project tenants perpetrating fraud were voluntarily handing their keys back under the weight of the evidence presented to them. This has now slowed down and the investigations have to be more intense in order to get results.

2.8 A Housing Officer is undertaking specialist investigation training which will result in a qualification for her personal development, support for the Housing Management Team and the dedicated Housing Investigation Officer. Our Corporate Anti Fraud Team has limited resources to support this important piece of work which is highlighting the need for Housing Management to 'grow their own'.

2.9 There are currently 25 live cases under investigation. These cases have been identified by Housing Officers, anonymous telephone calls via the corporate hot line and discoveries from tenancy audit blitzes.

2.10 Four blitzes have taken place in the Harrow Weald and Pinner areas. The next area of the borough planned is the Honeybun estate during March. There are a high number of occupants not at home during the working day. It is intended to adapt the hours for visiting properties in order to increase the number of successful visits.

2.11 At the end of February 2012 all tenants will receive a flyer enclosed with their rent increase letters. The poster states the government proposal to make Housing Tenancy Fraud a criminal offence. Offenders could face up to 2 years in prison, a £50,000 fine and a criminal record. Tenants will be asked to contact us, in confidence, if they suspect subletting is taking place.

Income Collection

2.12 In the last report to TLRCF we anticipated further improvements in this area for the next few months. This level of performance has been sustained and at the end of January 2012 we collected 98.53% against an end of year target of 98.50%. Current rent arrears stand at is £417, 280.

2.13 The impact of tenants not paying their rent over the Christmas period was not as high as in previous years; this is potentially as a result of our campaign in the last edition of Homing In.

2.14 The service is currently working on offering a third date that rent can be paid by direct debit.

2.15 Unfortunately there have been two tenants evicted for rent arrears which has not helped former tenant arrears balances that currently stand at £805,827 compared with £816,386 previously reported.

2.16 Harrow Weald has been identified as the one of the poorest areas of the borough and it is where most of our rent arrears are owed. As part of the government agenda on Financial Inclusion we are holding our first financial session on the 18th April 2012 at Cedars School to help tenants living in that area. The CAB, Fuel Poverty, Money Advice, the Rents Team, Credit Union,

the Economical Development Team, Housing Benefit, TRA and Resident Involvement Team will be present to give advice. This session will be particularly useful to prepare tenants for the new Welfare Reforms.

Estates Services and Sheltered Housing

Parking schemes

2.17 Consultation has now been completed and as a result the controlled parking schemes are going ahead to those estates that voted in favour. Ground works have now commenced which include resurfacing where required and relining of parking bays. The next stage in the process is for the corporate parking enforcement team to undertake a public consultation regarding the controlled parking zone which will include a notice being placed in the local press and advertised on lamp columns. Once this has been completed, residents will be contacted to explain how the system will work, where to obtain parking permits along with application forms and a map showing the extent of the parking controlled area. We are expecting the controlled parking zones to be ready to go live with enforcement in April/May 2012.

Grounds Maintenance

2.18 Regular meetings are now taking place and are well attended by grounds maintenance and housing staff. A tour of the depot for an overview of the new technology and a site visit to meet the crews has taken place for members of the Estate Services Steering Group (ESSG) and housing officers. An officer from the grounds maintenance team is now attending Estate Inspections to assist with any issues that arise which has proved very successful. Costings for each estate is on track to be in place for the start of the new financial year and all maps are now complete and being finalised on the on the collective system.

Sheltered Housing Modernisation

2.19 Formal consultation with staff and tenants commenced on the 9th January 2012 and is due to close on the 5th March 2012. Consultation packs were delivered to all tenants and staff and further meetings are taking place with tenants in each scheme. Generally, feedback from both staff and tenants about modernising the service has been positive. Once the outcomes of staff consultation are known any final proposals will be considered by the Members Policy Task Group and the Tenant, Leaseholder and Residents Consultative Forum. If these groups approve the proposals in principle final approval would then need to be given by Cabinet.

3. Resident Involvement and Activities

3.1 Damian Roche from Housing Quality Network Ltd (HQN) and Toni Burke facilitated an away day with tenants, leaseholders and residents on the 5th January 2012 to examine the recommendations that had arisen from the Resident Involvement review completed in November 2011.

3.2 As a result of the day a draft action plan was prepared which set out a number of actions to be achieved by LBH, the Housing Service and Harrow Federation of Tenants and Residents Associations (HFTRA) over the forthcoming financial year (2012/13).

3.3 A further half day was held on the 10th February 2012 to agree the content of the action plan and the broadly proposed targets. The action plan was accepted by the group who agreed to go away and work with those having lead responsibility for each action to establish more specific dates for targets in the plan and to commence work on the actions. A copy of the plan can be obtained from the Resident Involvement Team on request.

3.4 A meeting has been arranged for the morning of the 13th April 2012 to monitor progress with the action plan and for the group to receive updates. It was also suggested that the afternoon be used for Damian to present an awareness raising session for the group and Members on tenant scrutiny and co- regulation. Toni Burke will be contacting Members and staff to ensure that all of those with an interest receive an invitation.

3.5 The Resident Involvement Team is continuing to work on a number of initiatives as detailed below:

- Coffee drop in sessions
- Future event planning
- Sinclair Field play area development
- Volunteer database refresh
- Website development

Asset Management

3.6 Asset Management is undergoing radical change and it has been agreed that new and improved processes will be put in place for engaging tenants' leaseholders and residents over the coming months in the management of the repairs service. A panel of tenants, leaseholders and residents have recently given up 2 full days to help assess the quality element of the response repairs tenders, which has proved to be invaluable in determining the next stages of procurement.

Estates Services Steering Group (ESSG)

3.7 The last ESSG meeting was held on the 1st December 2011 and included discussions on:

Grounds Maintenance

Parking Schemes

Apprentices

Caretaking Cleaning Standards

The next meeting is on the 1st March 2012 and the agenda includes updates on the above mentioned topic along with recharging for bulk clearance. A member of Grounds Maintenance staff will also be attending.

Housing Editorial Board

3.8 The Housing Editorial Board met on the 8th February 2012 to discuss the storyline for the next edition of Homing In which is due to be distributed in March 2012. Discussion also took place regarding having a designated section or insert within future editions of Homing In dedicated to Resident

Involvement. It was agreed that two pages would be designated in this next edition which would be increased to four in the future.

Value for Money Group

3.9 The Value for Money sub group met on the 10th January 2012. The group had previously been asked to consider which benchmarking targets they would like to track and receive reports on at future meetings.

All agreed on: Estate Services, responsive repairs, major works and former tenant arrears.

3.10 The main topic for discussion at the meeting was Support Service Charges (SSC's). Housing staff advised that a number of service charges had been identified to investigate further:

- Access Harrow
- Personnel
- Printing
- Post Room
- Cashiers

3.11 Lengthy discussion took place around how the housing service ensures that it receives the services that are charged for in full. All agreed that service level agreements should be developed that would enable close monitoring of service delivery to take place. The VfM sub group expressed interest in working with staff on this exercise.

3.12 In order for staff to provide full and detailed responses to previous queries about service charges and caretaking costs it was agreed to cancel the meeting scheduled for February and defer these discussions until the next meeting on the 13th March 2012.

Developing Tenant Scrutiny

3.13 The Resident Involvement Team is commencing work on raising awareness of the implications of scrutiny and co-regulation with staff, Members and tenants, leaseholders and residents and what the next steps for Harrow will be. A series of awareness raising sessions and briefing notes will be developed over the next two months with further updates being provided to the next meeting of TLRCF. **(See 3.4)**

HFTRA Scrutiny and Challenge Panel

3.14 The HFTRA Scrutiny and Challenge Panel last met on the 7th December 2011 where each service area provided an update on their respective progress with HAP actions.

3.15 Key discussion areas have been noted by individual service managers and will be dealt with in their respective forums.

3.16 The next panel meeting will take place on the 28th February 2012 and a verbal update will be provided to TLRCF on the day.

Proposed new activity

3.17 Resident Services are currently developing their service plan for 2012/13 and aligning key service priorities with the overarching Housing Service aim of "Getting Closer to the Customer".

3.18 The team is currently looking at the services that it provides and how they can embed the following principles within service improvement and delivery:

- Being proactive – not reactive
- Making it easy to contact us
- Being positive – I can do/help
- Putting ourselves in the customers shoes
- Being visible
- Building positive relationships

3.19 The service plan will be subject to challenge by other housing service leads in March 2012 in readiness for implementation with effect from April 2012.

Section 3 – Further Information

4.1 Resident Involvement review and action plan updates will be provided to the next meeting of TLRCF.

4.2 Progress with Scrutiny and Co-regulation updates will be provided to the next meeting of TLRCF.

4.3 Progress with Leasehold Services: Joint Working between West London Boroughs will be reported to the next meeting of TLRCF.

Section 4 – Financial Implications

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

Section 5 – Equalities implications

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

Section 6 – Corporate Priorities

7.1 All of the above contribute to the corporate priorities, in particular:

- Keeping neighbourhoods clean, green and safe.
- United and involved communities: A Council that listens and leads.

- Supporting and protecting people who are most in need.

Name: Roger Hampson



on behalf of the
Chief Financial Officer

Date: 16 February 2012

Section 7 - Contact Details and Background Papers

Contact:

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Background Papers: None