

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

Date of Meeting: 17th July 2012

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

Responsible Officer: Lynne Pennington
Divisional Director of Housing Services

Exempt: No

Enclosures: None

Section 1 – Summary

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

FOR INFORMATION

Section 2 – Report

Updates from previous discussions and new items for information

1. Leasehold Services

1.1. Performance

- 1.2. Members of TLRCF may also be interested to know that following the increase in the discount for Right to Buy sales there have been 12 applications received between 01/03/12 - 27/06/12. All of these applications are at the early stages so we are unable to predict if any of these will go through to an actual sale.

1.3. Information

- 1.4. Ground Rent Notices were issues to all leaseholders during May 2012
- 1.5. Leaseholders informed us that they would like to be more involved in helping to shape housing services but with their busy lifestyles do not like having to attend evening meetings. In response to this the Leasehold Team are setting up an E-Forum. All Leaseholders who are interested in getting involved in this way should send their contact details to leasehold&RTBservices@harrow.gov.uk, placing E-Forum in the subject line.
- 1.6. In an effort to update our records we have contacted all non-resident leaseholders and asked them to provide us with the contact details of their tenants. This is particularly important when the Council needs to contact the leaseholders tenant urgently to deal with an emergency; for example, when a leasehold property is leaking into the flat below.

2. Tenancy Management

2.1. Performance

- 2.2. Unfortunately this report is being drafted before the quarter 1 figures have been collated so there very little performance information available. However we have now received some benchmarking information that underlines how well we have improved in the area of rent collection. Two statistics that we monitor are the percentage of current tenant arrears expressed as a percentage of the overall annual amount charged to tenants in rent. The second is the amount of rent debt that we write off as we have decided that it cannot be recovered. For both of these statistics the lower the figure, the better our performance is and we have now received some benchmarking

information that demonstrates where our performance compares with other Council's in London. These results are particularly good news as for both of them we are placed first amongst our peers.

- **Current tenant arrears as a percentage of the annual rent debit 1.56%** - placing us very convincingly at number 1 in our benchmark group (no one else in the group has achieved a result below 2%)
- **Rent written off as a percentage of annual rent roll 0.48%**- also placing us at number 1 of our benchmarking group

2.3. Information

- 2.4. We have started work to prepare for the impact of Universal Credit, and the ending of Housing Benefit direct payments for rent and to make plans to mitigate the effect both on tenants and on our income collection. A steering group has been established with housing officers to look at what steps we need to take both for the issues that mainly only affect housing, and those issues that would also affect other areas of the Council such as Council Tax.
- 2.5. Once it is developed a more detailed action plan will be taken to the Value for Money sub group to discuss with tenants, leaseholders and other residents. However one thing that is clear is that we need to both raise awareness with our tenants and leaseholders of the changes ahead and gather some more information about the financial circumstances of our tenants and whether they have access to the type of bank account that will allow them to set up direct debits
- 2.6. To take this forward we are working up a project in partnership with the CAB to both raise awareness and gather the information by visiting tenants and discussing the situation on a one to one basis. We are also starting to talk to banks about how we might work together to increase tenants' access to basic bank accounts.

3. Tenancy Fraud

- 3.1. Work continues on our commitment to tackle social housing fraud and there have been a number of new investigations directly as a result of information reported by members of TLRCF and other TRA members. Thank you for this and please keep putting the message out that we will investigate all concerns raised with us.
- 3.2. As reported to May TLRCF Karen Connell, our lead on Tenancy Fraud held a meeting with 7 Housing Associations who have properties in Harrow, to outline how we can support them to tackle fraud in their stock. The Council have offered the Housing Associations training and support with investigations on any cases they have and we have been supported in this work by the Chartered Institute of Housing. Any help we give to Housing

associations will be funded from the grant money given to Harrow to tackle fraud.

4. Sheltered Housing Modernisation

- 4.1. It was reported to TLRCF in May that we were aiming to take a report to the July Cabinet to seek approval for the re-organisation proposals for sheltered housing. Unfortunately this has now been delayed until September Cabinet
- 4.2. The reasons for the delay are to take on board some minor changes to the proposed staffing structure raised through the consultation with staff and some changes to the funding arrangements put forward by Supporting People. A meeting to discuss the amended proposal with staff has been arranged for the beginning of July. This will be the start of another formal consultation process in adherence to the Council's Protocol for Managing Organisational Change.
- 4.3. This means that at the time of writing this report it is not possible to include the latest position on the proposal. However it is intended to consult on the proposal at TLRCF, to inform the Cabinet report and this will be done in the form of a presentation at the meeting.

5. Resident Involvement and Activities

- 5.1. Good progress continues to be made with the review action plan with a number of actions being in progress or completed before the target dates.
- 5.2. Achievements so far are namely:
 - Revised constitutions have been adopted by HFTRA.
 - Estate representative advert has gone out in the latest version of Homing In
 - A draft Resident Involvement Strategy will be presented to the Resident Engagement Review Project Team at the end of June.
 - Estates in Bloom arranged for August 2012.

The Resident Involvement Team is continuing to work on a number of initiatives that arise from the actions within the plan. A further meeting to monitor progress with the plan will take place on the 29th June 2012, and a verbal update will be given to TLRCF.

- 5.3. The Resident Involvement Team is currently involved in the programme of Summer Events across the Borough in partnership with TRA's. At the time of writing this report, 2 of the events have taken place. Both have been successful in giving staff and TRA members to opportunity to engage with tenants, leaseholders and other residents and the second event at Weald Village had a particularly good attendance by 56 tenants, leaseholders and other residents not previously involved in working with us. A full programme of dates, times and locations can be obtained from the Resident Involvement Team.

- 5.4. The team attended a meeting of Harrow Youth Parliament on the 2nd May 2012 to make a presentation on engaging young people in developing housing services. The presentation was very well received and as a result 5 young people have come forward expressing an interest in becoming more involved and also having representation on the Housing Scrutiny Panel. See

Section 3 –Report Back from Resident Involvement Activities

6. Estates Services Steering Group (ESSG)

- 6.1 The last ESSG meeting was held on the 7th June 2012 and included discussions on Grounds Maintenance, the proposal to introduce a mix of static & mobile caretakers and the introduction of wet cleaning in the communal areas of the flatted blocks.
- 6.2 It was agreed that the trial period to introduce a mix of static and mobile caretakers would commence on 1st August 2012 and would be reviewed in 6 months. We would like to provide a cleaning service using the time freed up by the mobile and static caretaking arrangements and are developing a proposal to make the apprentice posts permanent caretaking posts, when their training is completed. A focus group was set up as a sub-group of ESSG to take this idea forward.
- 6.3 The next meeting of the ESSG is on the 6th September 2012 and the agenda will include updates on the above mentioned topics along with recharging for bulk clearance, which we didn't have time to cover at the last meeting.

7. Tenant Inspectors

- 7.1. In June this years round of tenant inspection of housing estates, undertaken in partnership with other West London Boroughs were completed. A small group of tenants have been trained to inspect estates on a purposely designed marking scheme but instead of inspecting our own estates, where of course there could be bias our tenants inspect another borough and then, in return the other borough's tenants come to us to grade our estates.
- 7.2. This is the second year that these annual inspections have taken place. Last year it was very much a pilot and each borough got to pick which of their estates were inspected- so it was not a true reflection of how good or bad things really are. However this year our tenants inspected the Hillingdon estates they selected at random. They found that these estates were not as well maintained as Harrow estates giving them an overall score of 54%. The inspection of our estates by Hillingdon tenants was quite different and our estates received a very positive result of 84%.

7.3. Officers would be interested to know if TLRCF would like to receive more information about these inspections, possibly including a report and/or presentation to a future meeting from the tenants involved. It is possible that the way these inspections are undertaken could be applied to other areas of the housing service that could be developed, if tenants, leaseholders and other residents would be interested in exploring this as an option.

7.4. Value for Money Group

7.5. The Value for Money sub group met on 15th May. Discussions included the garage strategy which is being included elsewhere on the TLRCF agenda and some opportunities that were being explored within the West London Boroughs to consider future opportunities to save money by sharing resources.

7.6. Developing Tenant Scrutiny

7.7. Two meetings have now taken place with our pilot scrutiny panel. These meetings have been utilized to map out how the panel will work. The advert to invite interest from the wider tenant and leaseholders has gone out in Homing In, with a closing date for applications of 31st July

8. HFTRA Scrutiny and Challenge Panel

8.1. The panel met on 31st May and received updates on progress with the service plan from each of the Housing divisions. Discussions took place around the possible relocation of Housing Needs staff from Civic 2, tenant and leaseholder involvement in the monitoring of the new repairs contracts, progress with review of the tenants handbook, improvements in complaints performance and a new process for referring vulnerable tenants in need of support with sustaining their tenancies.

9. Section 4 - Financial Implications

9.1. 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.

5. Section 5 - Equalities Implications

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

6. Section 6– Corporate Priorities

6.1. 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: 9th July 2012

Section 8 - Contact Details and Background Papers

Contact:

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Resident Services Manager

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Background Papers: None