



Leasehold Panel

Minutes of the meeting, 8th June 2009

1. Attendance: Mr Martin Laheen (Chair), Ms Rita Batzias, Mrs I J Rose, Ms Sylvia Morgan, Ms Shirley Perlman, Mr Roger Kemp, Linda Chrysostomou, Mr Michael Ruggins, Mrs Anne Goodhew (Vice Chair), Mr Frank Tunney, Mr F Edwards, Mrs M Shaw, Mr Joseph Sefain, Miss A Marangou, Ms Sue Brown (Chair of Haringey Leaseholders' Association), Ms Ana Maria Florin (16)

Chair: the meeting was chaired by Mr Martin Laheen.

Apologies: Ms Millie Mboizi, Ms Anne Crellin, Mr Nick Martin-Clark, Mr M Pentol, Ms Lesley Ramm and Ms Sylvia Patterson.

Officers: Mr Nesan Thevanesan, Head of Home Ownership; Mr Martin Hoctor, Repairs Client Manager; Mr Paul Cox, Senior Home Ownership Officer, Mr Michael Bester, Major Works Lead Officer, Mr Bruce Nicholas, Leasehold Project Office and Mr Nick Claxton, Senior Home Ownership Officer, who took the minutes.

2. Repairs Ordering Schedule – Mr Martin Hoctor, Repairs Client Manager

Mr Hoctor started by explaining that the repairs service currently uses a pre-priced schedule of repairs for all the work it undertakes. The schedule comprises over 5,500 different categories or types of repairs. Most repairs start with a call from a tenant or leaseholder to the Call Centre. Since the staff in the Centre are not technically qualified, the wide range of the different types of repairs makes it quite difficult for them to log a repair, because there are so many items to choose from. Thus there are 66 different types of glazing repairs listed.

To address this problem a process of simplification is being introduced, so in the case of glazing there will only be 6 different types of repair in future. Mr Hoctor explained that the new schedule of rates would reduce the overall number of repair types to a total of 200. These would be more general and hence much easier for the Control Centre to use when logging customers' repairs reported on the phone.

The new policy will mean that the repairs operatives will have to ascertain the exact nature of the work when they arrive at the property where the repair is

required. In order to ensure that they have the necessary materials and equipment new vans will be introduced with racks for storage. Under the old policy the repairs operatives had to select the tools and materials they thought would be required before they set out for each job. This could result in time wasted if they found they did not have what was required for the work to be carried out.

As part of the new procedures, the depots will undertake a process of dynamic scheduling which will enable them to monitor the progress of each job on site. This will help to improve quality and efficiency. It is expected that the new policy will result in an increase in the number of repairs orders carried out without requiring amendments to the descriptions and reduce the number of visits required for each job. This will help to reduce costs. The new policy is planned to be introduced at the end of July.

Ms Batzias welcomed the proposals if they resulted in improvements in the system for making appointments. Mrs Goodhew agreed and expressed the hope that the new policy would include making improvements in the methods of ordering special items, such as those requiring specific measurements. She asked what the quickest way to report a repair was. Mr Hoctor replied that generally the quickest and most efficient way was to phone the Call Centre. Mr Ruggins asked when the new system would be put in place. Mr Hoctor replied that it was planned to commence later this year. Mr Laheen thanked Mr Hoctor for his presentation.

3. Key Leaseholder Scheme – Paul Cox and Nick Claxton, Senior Home Ownership Officers.

Mr Cox explained that the role of key leaseholders would be to review quarterly repairs reports prior to invoicing, and to undertake block or estate inspections to verify that the work had been completed to the required standard. Mr Thevanesan added that the scheme would expand to include major works and consultation, as well as mystery shopping (phone calls to test services) and the monitoring of day to day services. Mr Cox and Mr Claxton had recently met with CityWest, where a similar scheme is operating successfully and who have around 150 leaseholders participating. A meeting with Homes for Islington was to be held shortly.

With regard to the inspection of completed repairs, Mr Hoctor explained that at present between 5 and 10% of the work was covered. In future it was proposed that local residents could assist in the inspections, if they were prepared to volunteer to do so. This would be of great assistance in helping to ensure effective monitoring of the completed work. Ms Brown enquired as to whether residents would be able carry out inspections on their own (after normal office hours). Mr Hoctor said that there would be some work for which this would be appropriate.

Mr Cox advised the Panel that the first meeting of the Key Leaseholders Working Group had taken place recently with Mr Laheen and Ms Brown representing the Panel. He said that there were still 3 places to fill. Ms Brown said that the HLA had agreed in principle to publicise the scheme subject to confirmation by the HLA committee.

Mr Claxton asked whether the Panel had any comments on the draft flyer which would be sent to all leaseholders in order to ask people to volunteer to become Key Leaseholders. Mr Laheen requested that the advantages to leaseholders in joining the scheme (i.e. access to repairs reports prior to invoicing) be highlighted. Mr Kemp asked whether Key Leaseholders would represent blocks or estates or both. Mr Claxton said this would be for individuals to decide and that if several people were prepared to volunteer to be Key Leaseholders for any block or estate this would be welcomed.

⇒ **Action point 1.** It was agreed that the flyer would be amended as indicated above following which it would be distributed to all leaseholders as an enclosure with the June issue of Homes Zone to be despatched at the end of the week.

Mr Ruggins asked what types of repairs Key Leaseholders would be concerned with. Mr Thevanesan replied that this would apply to any works chargeable in the Actual bill. Mr Sefain asked whether a Key Leaseholder would liaise with other leaseholders regarding service charge queries. Mr Claxton said it was envisaged that Key Leaseholders would have an important role in making an initial assessment of queries and taking up important issues.

Mr Ruggins asked what would happen if some blocks and estates were not represented. Mr Claxton replied that under representation in some areas would be inevitable but recruitment would be an ongoing process.

4. Decent Homes Questionnaire - Mr Michael Bester, Major Works Lead Officer.

Mr Bester presented a copy of the draft questionnaire to the Panel and apologised that it had not been circulated previously with the notice for the meeting. In order for the Panel to have sufficient time to comment on the draft questionnaire, Mr Bester invited feedback to be sent to him via email at Michael.Bester@homesforharingey.org.uk.

He explained it was intended that the questionnaire would be sent to a leaseholder in receipt of a major works bill. The questionnaire would be enclosed with the final account for the major work. Mr Bester informed the Panel that he had presented a copy of the questionnaire to the last meeting of the ALMO Benchmarking Group (it consists of a number of ALMOs including Homes for Haringey, who meet on a regular basis.) They have a policy for

benchmarking important types of work (to enable comparisons to be done of performance in each borough). The Benchmarking Group is considering using the same format amongst its members to collect benchmarking information.

Mr Kemp asked whether HfH could be independent in deciding the questions in their surveys. Mr Bester responded that in order to benchmark effectively, the same core questions must be adopted by all participating ALMOs with exactly the same wording, as any discrepancies could lead to differing interpretations of the questions which might affect the results. However Homes for Haringey could decide on additional questions but these would not be then used for benchmarking purposes.

⇒ **Action point 2.** It was agreed that the Panel would review the draft questionnaire and provide Mr Bester with feedback via email.

5. Report from Sublet Group – Anne Goodhew, Vice Chair

Mrs Goodhew reported to the Panel that the Sublet Group had met on 28th April and 3rd June, with the following items being discussed:

- Some leaseholders have still not registered that they are subletting, so it is necessary to increase general awareness that they are required to do so (under the terms of the lease).
- Discussion is taking place to see if other Council departments can notify Home Ownership of details where leaseholders are not residing in their properties.
- The pack for leaseholders who are subletting is being revised.
- A welcome pack for sub lessees is being drafted.
- An annual newsletter is being considered.
- A workshop is likely to be held in September or October.
- An article will appear in Homes Zone detailing the work of the Group.
- Newlon Housing Trust has agreed to include information from HfH in their welcome pack to new tenants.

Mrs Goodhew explained that the cost of the administration in relation to the registration of sublet properties may well be recovered through a charge to be levied across the board, as all residents will benefit from the work involved. It was agreed that this decision would be referred to the Leasehold Panel in due course.

Mr Thevanesan emphasised that HfH is not against subletting, but that it needs to keep a record of the relevant details so as to be able to contact the leaseholders and their tenants in case of emergency or other problems and to provide information to the sub lessees. The landlord is required to do this under the terms of the lease. Ms Morgan asked if leaseholders could enquire whether a property was being sublet. Mr Thevanesan replied that Home Ownership would be able to confirm whether this was the case, but the main

issue was to address any problem which had arisen regardless of the letting arrangements.

6. Motion concerning digital TV conversion – Anne Goodhew, Vice Chair.

Mrs Goodhew proposed the following letters to be written from the Leasehold Panel:

- To Dr Michael Jones, Chair of the Board, to ask if the subject is to be discussed at the next Board meeting on 3rd August 2009
- To Cllr Claire Kober, Leader of the Council, to ask what the Council's policy is on this subject and how it has been decided
- To Cllr Gorrie to thank him for his response to the letter and say that the panel:
 - Wishes to seek the support of the Liberal Democrats for the right of leaseholders to choose not to have the council service if they don't want it, as has been agreed by Islington
 - Would be grateful if the LD representatives on the Board could raise this matter at the next Board meeting on 3rd August 2009
- To Ms Lynne Featherstone MP, referring to Cllr Gorrie's helpful response and asking if she could give leaseholders' case publicity on her website
- To the Rt Hon David Lammy MP to ask him for his support
- To local papers, such as the *Independent* and the *Journal* to say what the Panel has done so far and explain leaseholders' concerns about the apparent policy adopted by the Council and the lack of consultation
- To provide the above people a statement of the strong views which leaseholders hold on this subject, summarised as follows:
 - In order to continue the service to its tenants the Council has to convert the communal TV aerials in its blocks of flats to receive digital broadcasts by 2012
 - It has opted to install IRS (multi aerial) systems, providing a wide range of services
 - But most leaseholders are already receiving a superior service through their telephone and cable service providers at much lower cost
 - The charges to leaseholders regarding the Council's proposals are working out at between £400 to £800 in some cases, plus an annual maintenance charge which has not yet been decided.
 - The Leasehold Panel believes that leaseholders should be allowed to opt out of having the Council's IRS systems, as is the policy in the Borough of Islington.
 - The Panel wishes to record the fact that leaseholders and tenants have not been consulted on the Council's policy on the installation of IRS – consultation on such issues has been the normal procedure up to now.

- The lack of consultation is very disappointing since it was for this reason that Homes for Haringey set up the panels for leaseholders and tenants to make their views known to the Board.

The Panel decided unanimously in favour of all the letters proposed by Mrs Goodhew.

- ⇒ **Action point 3.** Mrs Goodhew to write to the letters as indicated above.

7. Minutes of the last meeting – 13th May 2009

Mr Bester advised the Panel that the charge to be made for three year interest-free loans for major works (over £10,000) had been reduced to £200 from the £250 referred to in the minutes. It was agreed that the minutes were a true record of the meeting of the 13 May. Mrs Goodhew apologised that she had not yet written to Mr Martin-Clark on behalf of the Panel to thank him for his work as Chair.

- ⇒ **Action point 4.** Mrs Goodhew undertook to write a letter to Mr Martin-Clark.

At the last meeting Mr Dalliday had queried the Council's policy in respect of the discounts available on the rental of garages to leaseholders who were pensioners. Mr Thevanesan reported that Sharon Morgan, Head of Tenancy Management North had provided information as follows. At present the garage rents vary between the different sites across the borough. However within each site the basic rent is the same for each user. Lettings to private tenants (or for a second garage let to a leaseholder) have 15% VAT added to the rental charges. This accounts for the main variation in rents between individual lettings.

In view of the low level of occupancy (approximately 50%) the rents have remained frozen for a number of years. However, some residents have retained historic rents levels as a result of a previous review so that the rents they pay differ from the rates now set for new lets. A review of the garage charges is to be carried out during the current financial year.

At present leaseholders are not entitled to the reduction made for tenants who are elderly or disabled (£2.00 a week at the current time). This will be reviewed at the same time as the review of garage rent charges, but it is unlikely to be until the end of the financial year.

Mrs Goodhew raised the question as to why leaseholders who were pensioners could not be allowed the discount right away. She proposed that the Panel should raise this question as a matter of urgency. The Panel agreed this and Mr Thevanesan said he would raise the matter and report back to the next meeting.

- ⇒ **Action point 5.** Mr Thevanesan agreed to raise the question why leaseholders who were pensioners could not be entitled to the discount with immediate effect.

8. Impact Assessment

The Panel decided to choose the Sublet Group as the subject for assessment for the current year. This will entail a review later in the year to assess whether the outcomes have met the Panel's objectives and whether the Panel believes that the consultation on this subject has been effective.

9. Forward agenda proposals

The Panel agreed the list of proposals which had been circulated with the agenda. Mr Kemp suggested that it would be a good idea to have a talk on estate improvement work – priorities and planning. This was agreed.

- ⇒ **Action point 6.** Mr Thevanesan to arrange presentation by Asset Management on estate improvement work.

10. Any other business

Houseproud scheme – re-launch (loans for the over sixties and the disabled). Mr Thevanesan reported that the Houseproud Scheme was originally launched 3 to 4 years ago. Although there had not been very much interest from leaseholders up to now, it was expected that this could change owing to the Decent Homes Programme. He therefore proposed to “re-launch” the scheme. However it would now be necessary to pay the Housing Information Trust £3,000 each year to cover their administration costs.

Mr Thevanesan therefore asked the Panel to agree for there to be a trial period, with a review after the first 6 months to ascertain whether it would be worth proceeding. Mr Ruggins asked if the poor uptake was due to a lack of publicity or understanding by leaseholders. Mr Thevanesan replied that leaseholders had not had to face such large bills in the past. Furthermore it had been decided to reduce the charge for this type of loan, so this may result in greater level of interest in the scheme. The Panel agreed Mr Thevanesan's proposal and decided to invite a representative from the Home Improvement Trust to give a talk on the subject.

- ⇒ **Action point 7.** Mr Thevanesan to arrange presentation by the Housing Information Trust

The Chair requested nominations for the Chair of the meeting scheduled for 1st July 2009. It was agreed that Mr Roger Kemp would chair this meeting.

Dates of Future Meetings: 1 July, 28 July, 9 September & 7 October.