



Leasehold Panel

Minutes of the meeting, 15 September 2011

1. Attendance: Ms Rita Batzias, Mr Piers Johnson (Chair of the Leasehold Panel), Mr Peter Gilbert, Mrs A Mackiewicz, Miss M Rawitzer, Miss P Furse, Ms Alena Breckova, (Leasehold Board Member), Mr Omari, Mr Doug Evans, Miss M Merrick, Mrs Shirley Perlman, Ms Lucille Parris, Mr Michael Ruggins, Mr Nick Martin-Clark, Mrs M Irving, Mr Ian Lush (Chair of the Key Leaseholders Group), Ms Molly Ejon, Mrs D Grandson, Mrs Anne Goodhew (Vice Chair of the Leasehold Panel), Ms Millie Mboizi and Ms Lynne Zilkha (21).

Apologies. Mrs M Shaw, Ms A Joslyn and Ms Sue Brown

Chair: Mr Piers Johnson chaired the meeting

Officers: Mr Nesan Thevanesan, Head of Home Ownership, Mr Aaron Peake, Project Officer, Chief Executive Office, Ms Arshi Zaman, Manager, Projects Team, Mr Phil Bennett, Senior Project Manager, Housing Information Team, Mrs Pari Kotecha, Team Leader, Home Sales, Home Ownership Team and Mr Bruce Nicholas, Leasehold Project Officer who took the minutes.

2. Actions that Homes for Haringey have taken in response to the August disturbances (7 to 10 August), and initial future plans – Aaron Peake, Project Officer, Chief Executive's Office

Mr Peake commenced his talk by explaining that generally speaking no damage was caused to properties belonging to Haringey Council apart from some damage caused by vandalism to the North Tottenham Area Office. It had had to be closed temporarily and the staff transferred to 13 – 27 Station Road. The Ashley Road Repairs Depot suffered an arson attack but no damage was actually caused to Council property.

The Council had set up a Gold Group with the Police and Paul Bridge, Chief Executive of Homes for Haringey had attended the daily meetings. On the 11th, 12th and 15th of August colleagues had gone

door knocking at short notice to speak to residents in the areas most affected by the disturbances. Around 300 residents were visited and 100 food parcels were distributed.

Homes for Haringey's staff hand-delivered 6,000 letters to North Tottenham residents. The letter gave emergency contact information for residents and information about Haringey Council's Community Assistance Centre. Local businesses provided generous support to the Centre but fortunately only a small number of residents had to be catered for.

Paul Bridge toured the affected areas with front line officers to ascertain residents' needs. Visits had taken place over several weeks and Mr Peake said that they had now visited the majority of Homes for Haringey's residents where the disturbances occurred. Some were planning to set up local residents associations to encourage closer community ties.

Homes for Haringey would join the Council in promoting a focus on youth engagement which would mean an important role for its Youth Outreach Officer, Marlon Bruce. In particular, Homes for Haringey planned to offer training courses, such as for IT, etc which would provide accreditation to qualify young people to go onto more advanced courses. The Council had set up a Community Panel consisting of ten people chaired by Councillor Claire Kober, Leader of the Council, to help build a stronger community; resident Board Member Georgina Walters would be representing Homes for Haringey on it.

The Property Management Department of Homes for Haringey (formerly Asset Management) would be working closely with the Council to provide advice and support where appropriate. Mr Peake concluded his talk by stating that Homes for Haringey would join all efforts in support of young people and which fostered closer relations with the Police.

Mr Johnson asked where the money would come from since funding for youth provision had been cut. Mr Peake replied he understood that consideration would be given to these matters, but in the interim it should be noted that the government had pledged £20 million in relief money to Haringey and Croydon. Other likely sources would be the Mayor of London Fund, and partners Homes for Haringey had developed over the years.

The question was raised as to what action could be taken in future should similar disturbances recur. Mr Peake responded that the Council's emergency plans had provided a very good basis for

providing relief to the areas affected. Mrs Goodhew said she understood that the Council's Area Committees would help to supplement the efforts of the Community Panel. Mr Peake agreed and said that these committees would undertake a very important role in listening to residents views throughout the borough.

Mrs Goodhew also raised the question whether the need to re-accommodate the people made homeless would impact on the Council's resources in respect of temporary accommodation. Mr Peake replied there would be no direct impact since the Metropolitan Housing Association was addressing these matters.

3. Report back on the service excellence review (the best channels of communication for residents, finding efficiency savings and protecting services) – Arshi Zaman, Manager, Projects Team

Ms Zaman gave a presentation:

Summary of consultation results: survey, panels and focus groups

Survey results – Ms Zaman began by explaining that 5000 survey questionnaires had been sent out to a random selection of tenants and leaseholders. 1005 had been returned which was a very good rate of response. 50% said that they had contacted Homes for Haringey more than 3 times last year. 13% had not contacted HfH at all. The 'Top 5 reasons' why people had contacted HfH were: Repairs, Rent/Service Charges, Complaints, Decent Homes and Housing Advice.

She said that 70% of people were 'satisfied' or 'very satisfied' with the contact. Most people contact HfH by telephone, 74%, either through the Call Centre or a direct number. This decision was based on convenience, 49%; or because it gets their issue resolved 31%. They would prefer Homes for Haringey to contact them mainly by telephone 41% or by letter 38%. Otherwise 9% would prefer to be contacted by e-mail, 9% by text

The majority of people who said they had an estate notice board, do check it she said: 43% said 'Yes', 43% said 'Sometimes'. 41% of people said they did refer to their Tenants/Leaseholders Charter. Most people were happy with content of Homes Zone (80-90% 'O.K', 'Good', 'Very Good'). Half the respondents had a computer at home, but usage of the website was low. Usage of the internet at libraries was very low, so Ms Zaman said there is clearly a need to promote how to use the content on our website, particularly the Graphical Repairs Ordering System. Therefore Homes for Haringey would need to promote any

new channels carefully and its staff, whether they were talking to someone over the phone or in person, would have a key role in this. The Post Office was the most used local service.

Views from the Panels – Ms Zaman had attended the following panel meetings and summarised their views as follows. At the Tenancy and Estate Management Panel they felt that increasing the quality of responses over the phone was very important; libraries and Wood Green Customer Services as service locations. Homes for Haringey should make their communication campaigns effective. The Supported Housing Group said revive Silver Surfing please!

The Disabled People's Group: less 'procedure' and 'just doing the basics', more information/help upfront. A lot of older/disabled people are not online and may also need more attention and information. Quality again....Leasehold Panel: Digital exclusion should not also mean exclusion from services.

Focus Groups Feedback

The main points Ms Zaman said were as follows. The telephone service needed improving. There was awareness of the website, but usage varied. The consensus was that they would try Digital TV services. Their views on how to promote new services: letters, e-mail, texts, Homes Zone, demonstration. On face to face: mixed views on when they would want to visit. Homes Zone and the Council's Haringey A-Z are looked at. They wanted to be able to have appointments with Home Ownership staff face to face. They would use ASB and Environmental Services by phone.

Next steps

Ms Zaman concluded that they would use these results to achieve improvements, in the context of efficiency. Perhaps the Tenants and Leaseholders Charters should be arranged in an A-Z format. The forward strategy and options would be based on these findings.

She then asked Panel Members for their views on the results. Ms Batzias said she sometimes finds emails difficult to understand. Mr Johnson asked as to what would be the next step in implementing any changes proposed. Ms Zaman said that it would be necessary to consult with the Council. Customer Service Centres were only provided at two locations and they constituted rather an expensive service, so it would be necessary to consider alternatives.

Mr Johnson enquired whether there would be training to enable staff to be fully aware of any changes. Ms Zaman agreed that it was very important for staff to be aware of all the available information channels. Ms Rawitzer queried the reliability of the information

obtained from the survey, etc. Ms Zaman replied that other information from general feedback received from residents generally supported the findings she had referred to.

Ms Rawitzer stated that leaseholders had strong views about the repairs service and service charges, but she felt these issues had not been addressed in the survey. Mr Johnson suggested that such matters could be considered at future meetings of the panel. He commented on the fact that only 9% expressed an interest in receiving information by email although 50% had access to the internet. Ms Batzias felt that most people feel they receive too many emails. Ms Merrick said she found it difficult to pay on the automated telephone payment service. Mr Thevanesan replied that there was also the option of paying the Home Ownership Team over the phone.

Ms Zaman concluded by noting that there would always be criticisms of the services provided, but that the important thing was to keep them at the minimum level.

4. Resident Portal ('See My Data') – Demonstration of the proposed system to give leaseholders online access to the main information regarding their service charge accounts – Phil Bennett, Senior Project Manager, Housing Information Team

Mr Bennett explained that the SeeMyData system provided a self service system which would enable residents to access their account information, similar to online banking. It provided secure access to records such as accounts. At present Homes for Haringey was in the pre-procurement phase and was planning to buy this system.

Access would be provided in a number of different languages. It would link up with the graphical repairs system, reporting other issues and making payments for service charges. It could be integrated with email or text. It could be used to provide information on planned maintenance, to provide copies of the lease, and so on. Mr Thevanesan said that the estimates and actuals would be posted on it which could save money on postage.

Ms Breckova asked how much the system would cost and whether it would result in an increase in service charges. Mr Bennett replied that the cost would be quite low – the cost for the system itself would be restricted to the annual licence fee of around £20,000 per annum. He said it would use information which would be sent to it each day from the relevant systems. Hence it would not provide direct access to computer systems which would minimise security problems. Mr

Thevanesan pointed out that the license fee cost equated to about £1 for each resident.

Ms Breckova asked whether leaseholders would receive any savings from the system. Mr Thevanesan said that there would be savings in postage. The more people who signed up to it the greater the savings would be. It would also provide an easier service to use. It could provide information about when cleaning was scheduled to take place, copies of the leaseholder publications and so on. Ms Zilkha enquired whether the same system would be used for tenants. Mr Bennett said that it was planned to include information for tenants in the system.

Mr Ruggins asked whether leaseholders would be charged the set-up fee. Mr Bennett responded that it was not proposed to charge this to leaseholders. It would be a fairly cheap system to set up and run, since Homes for Haringey had the means to maintain it in-house. Mr Johnson asked about the schedule for implementation. Mr Bennett said it would take 3 months to set up and 5 months to make it fully operational.

5. Proposal for the introduction of an annual charge for leaseholders who sublet (rent out) their properties – Pari Kotecha, Team Leader, Home Sales, Home Ownership Team

Mrs Kotecha referred to a paper she had circulated with the agenda. She said there were 1,400 leaseholders who had registered their sublets with the Council and 300 who had not done so but had advised that they were not living in the property. She explained there was a fee of £50 which could be charged under the terms of the lease, but to date the Council had not done this. It meant that up until the present all leaseholders had been paid the cost of administering this service.

She said that at previous meetings Panel Members had objected in principle to the costs incurred for individual leaseholders being charged to everyone. Furthermore she pointed out that there was a significant amount of administration involved in this type of work. Since the number of people subletting had been increasing in recent years, the amount of administrative work had also been increasing.

The question was raised whether there would be an annual charge for subletting. Mr Thevanesan said it was proposed there would be. It was necessary to cover the costs of registering changes to leaseholders' contact details and those of their tenants, of providing general information and of dealing with any queries. Obtaining the contact details was necessary so that leaseholders could be contacted if there was an emergency such as a major leakage of water or gas. Other

problems could also occur from time to time which meant the landlord must hold up to date contact details.

Welcome visits to new sublessees (leaseholders' tenants) were undertaken by the Tenancy Management Officers to make sure they were aware of the rules for disposal of refuse, etc. The question was raised whether sublessees caused a lot of problems. Mrs Kotecha responded that the main issue was not that they created an abnormal number of problems but the fact that the Council had no legal relationship with sublessees. It was necessary to ensure it obtained the necessary details for the sublessees through the leaseholders who had let out their flats in order to ensure access to the flat could be obtained at short notice if necessary.

Ms Zilkha said annual charges would deter leaseholders from registering. Furthermore subletting was not the same as assigning the lease, as referred to in clause 4(24). The lease did not refer to assured shorthold tenancy agreements, so it did not cover their registration. Ms Breckova agreed and said the proposed charges were not covered by the terms of the lease. Mr Thevanesan replied he felt confident that the £50 charge was specifically referred to in the lease in relation to subletting. He also understood that the other charges were covered by Schedule 11 (Section 158 of the Commonhold and Leasehold Reform Act 2002).

- **Action point.** Mr Thevanesan agreed to obtain legal advice on these matters.

Further comments were made as follows. Ms Zilkha: only leaseholders whose sublessees caused problems should be charged. Mr Martin-Clark: it was inconsistent that leaseholders should have to pay where their sublessees had not caused any problems. Mr Ruggins: the proposed charges did not distinguish sufficiently as between leaseholders who caused problems and the majority who did not. Mr Thevanesan replied that separate charges were proposed for leaseholders whose sublessees caused significant problems. Hence leaseholders whose sublessees caused no problems would not pay for those who did so.

- **Action point.** In response to a request from Mr Johnson, Mr Thevanesan agreed to provide a list of the actual proposed charges at the next meeting.

6. Feedback on the Actuals and from the survey questionnaire – Nesan Thevanesan, Head of Home Ownership.

Mr Thevanesan drew attention to the fact that there had been a reduction in the management fee from £270 to £262 for many leaseholders in the Actual Account 2010/11 issued in August. The actuals had been issued even earlier this year so this had given leaseholders longer to pay. Key Leaseholders would receive reports of day to day repairs in the near future which would list the property cost of each repair.

Mr Thevanesan thanked everyone who had returned the survey questionnaire provided with the actuals. He noted that about 60% were happy with the information they received about the actuals. For the other services generally about 50% were satisfied, 13% had no opinion and 37% dissatisfied.

Mr Lush said he believed there should have been more questions about the services and value for money issues rather than the information provided with the actuals. Mrs Goodhew felt the surveys were not really worthwhile in view of the low rate of response. Mr Thevanesan responded that it was an inexpensive method of providing leaseholders with the opportunity to comment on the services they received.

7. Report back from the Key Leaseholder Group (29 June 2011) – Ian Lush, Chair of the Group

Mr Lush said there had been a very interesting talk given by Angela Anderson, Control Centre Manager in the Repairs Department on how it should operate. He said that the standards they had set were very high but unfortunately there were some failures of delivery concerning the services. With regard to insurance claims for repairs, these were not being dealt with properly.

Thus damage caused to communal areas on account of accidental damage and anti social behaviour was often not claimed under the insurance policy which resulted in higher charges to leaseholders. The Group also considered that repairs reports needed to be made clearer in order for Key Leaseholders to be able to check them properly.

Mrs Grandson said the Call Centre continued to discriminate against leaseholders who reported repairs. Mr Lush commented that it would be interesting to see the results from mystery shopping, whether these confirmed that leaseholders were treated differently.

8. Minutes of the meeting of the 5 July 2011 –

The minutes were agreed as a true record.

It was agreed under matters arising that Mr Johnson should represent the Panel at the Core Group, which was now convened by Property Management (formerly Asset Management).

Mr Johnson thanked the speakers for their interesting presentations and then closed the meeting.