



## Leasehold Panel

### Minutes of the meeting, 6 December 2007.

**1. Attendance.** Mr C Connolly, Mrs M Shaw, Mr J W Innocent, Ms A Brorsson, Mr M Ruggins, Mrs S Adewumi, Mrs D Grandson, Mrs BV Hines, Ms M Ejon, Mr M Pentol, Ms S Brown (Chair of Haringey Leaseholders Association), Ms L A Parris, Ms M Innocent, Mr S Buyukdogan (HLA Treasurer), and Mr N Martin-Clark, who chaired the meeting.

Officers. Mr N Thevanesan, Home Ownership Manager, Ms R Misir, Governance Manager, Ms S Hunter, Service Development Manager, Ms C O'Reilly, Resident Involvement Officer (Major Works), Ms G Lewis, Liaison Officer and Mr B Nicholas, Leasehold Project Officer, who took the minutes.

Apologies. Mrs A Goodhew, Ms R Batzias and Mr Laheen sent their apologies.

Chair: Mr Nick Martin-Clark.

### **2. Minutes of the last meeting (15 November 07) -**

Ms Brown requested that item 3 regarding the Terms of Reference (TOR) should be amended with the following additions (in italic script):

- o "Procedural method for changing the Terms of Reference. It was agreed that there should be a set procedure for amendments to be made when necessary *and this should be written in the TOR.*
- o Observers. It was considered that there should be a clause to allow observers to attend and speak at the discretion of the Chair and the Panel *since there is nothing about this in the current TOR."*

The minutes were then agreed as being a true record.

### **3. Matters arising.**

Ms Brown said she felt that amendments to the TOR should not have to go to the Residents Consultative Forum prior to submission to the Board for their approval.

In relation to item 4 Ms Brown queried the current provisions for reporting repairs out of hours, which she considered were inadequate. Ms Hunter responded with the information that the situation would shortly be subject to review since it had been decided that the Call Centre should be staffed by Homes for Haringey staff, commencing in April. The staff in charge of the out of hours service would then have access to the repairs reporting system so it would be easier for them to log repairs reported to them outside normal office hours. She confirmed that the phone number for the Centre (0800 195 3404) would remain unchanged.

With regard to the Decent Homes Programme (item 6) Ms Brown said that it was unfortunate that the pilot projects did not include any work which affected leaseholders since it meant that there would be no opportunity to test the systems for consulting leaseholders. Ms O'Reilly replied that the main purpose of the pilot projects was to test the basic systems which would apply to all works. Owing to time constraints Mr Akinfe had only been able to provide to the last meeting one copy of a report containing details of the Decent Homes Programme (which he had given to Ms Brown). It was agreed that in future any information presented to the Panel on the Decent Homes Programme should be provided in duplicate so that every Member could have a copy.

With regard to the new payment options (item 7), Mr Martin-Clark said it should be made clear that leaseholders would not have to pay any interest with respect to the proposed instalment periods of up to 36 months. Ms Brown asked when it was proposed that the invoices would be sent to leaseholders. Mr Thevanesan said that they would be sent after the end of the statutory consultation period (which is advised to leaseholders by means of a Section 20 Notice).

With regard to Mr Thevanesan's report on the preparations for the Annual Estimate 2008/9 (item 8 of the minutes), Ms Brown said she noted Mr Thevanesan had indicated that the Home Ownership Team would continue to promote the use of the direct debit method of payment. However she felt that many people (herself included) preferred to use standing orders and she could see no reason why this method was not receiving equal prominence. Mr Thevanesan responded that leaseholders could always pay their annual service charges by standing order if they wished and leaseholders were generally informed of this in letters regarding payment. However the use of standing orders was administratively much less efficient than that of direct debits, since a new application form had to be processed every year for each standing order.

On the other hand in the case of a direct debit the details only had to be input once, and then it was available for a variety of different payments to be made whenever required, obviously only with the agreement of the account holder. The direct debit was more efficient and also required less work on the part of the customer. Mr Martin-Clark felt it would be a good idea if some costs could be produced to provide a comparison between the use of standing orders and direct debits. He asked Mr Thevanesan if he could look into the possibility of providing some information on this matter.

- ❖ **Action point.** Mr Thevanesan to provide information on the relative administrative costs in relation to the use of direct debits and standing orders.

**4. Board succession (how Board Members will be re-elected) - Roxanne Misir, Governance Manager.** Ms Misir explained that the policy under consideration was necessary in order to fill any unplanned vacancies that might arise before the completion of the normal term of office of a Board Member. Where this occurred it would be likely that the vacancy would be notified to leaseholders through the residents' magazine, *Homes Zone*. Leaseholders would also be invited to provide nominations for the position. Ms Misir said that there were three main options which were currently under consideration:

In the first option potential candidates would go before an interview panel. This would be made up of one nominee from the Leasehold Panel, one independent Board Member, and one resident Board Member. This panel would then carry out the whole process of selection, interviewing the candidates and deciding on the most appropriate person to be the new Board Member.

The second option was for the Leasehold Panel to conduct the interviews and make the selection. Candidates could give a talk or make a presentation to the Panel and answer questions.

The third option would be for there to be a direct election held amongst leaseholders.

Panel Members made a number of observations in relation to these options. With regard to the first option, it was felt that this would mean that leaseholders would have very little input into the selection process. Mr Connolly said that if some sort of interview process was to be considered then it should probably be a combination of options one and two, since it would not really be appropriate for the Panel to conduct the selection process without representation from appropriate bodies, such as the Board, etc. Mr Connolly's proposal was put to the Panel and was endorsed by a majority as a sensible compromise. The main problem with option 3 would be that it would be fairly expensive to administer.

**5. Customer access and communications – future strategy – report on results of consultation (Comments from Residents' Groups). Sue Hunter, Service Development Manager.**

Prior to the meeting Ms Hunter had circulated a copy of her report '*Comments from Residents Groups*' and this is attached to these minutes. The report contains a summary of the feedback she had received as a result of the presentations she has made to a number of different groups (including the Leasehold Panel) on previous occasions. She explained that the current position with regard to the consultation process was that workshops were now being carried out with members of staff to consider the feedback, to assess the possibilities and make recommendations as to future strategy. Once a report had been drafted she said she would provide a copy to the Panel.

Ms Brown commented that there were a number of acronyms which she felt would not be clear to some people. Ms Hunter agreed and said she would ensure that these were clarified in the final version. The view was expressed that the use of emails could make a very useful contribution to the way of dealing with queries, but a formalisation of the way they were dealt with would increase confidence in this method. Ms Hunter said that emails should normally be dealt with according to the same rules as applied to postal correspondence. However she felt the use of emails could be made more effective if Homes for Haringey could obtain some system for providing automatic acknowledgements to the emails it received. Unfortunately there was no facility to provide this at the moment, but the matter was under consideration.

Ms Hunter continued by saying that there were some very cost effective alternatives to written correspondence and to the telephone for dealing with routine matters. These included the use of the internet (eg for making payments and for reporting repairs) and the use of the automated telephone payment system (ATPS). Ms Grandson said that she felt the handling of queries could be substantially improved if every significant enquiry was given a unique reference number. Ms Hunter responded that in order to do this it would be necessary for Homes for Haringey to have one general computerised system (or database) for logging all queries when they were received. Although it could have advantages, it would be quite expensive and require a lot of administrative effort to set up in the first place. Furthermore such a system could result in a diffusion of responsibility for ensuring that a query was fully dealt with.

In conclusion Ms Hunter summarised the general nature of the outcomes that it was expected would result from the review. Since it included a consideration of the best ways of improving the efficiency of current operations, it was important to assess the savings that could be made by moving to the use of cheaper channels of communication where appropriate (e.g. the internet). At the same time Homes for Haringey is also very committed to balancing this with the need to ensure access for all – so she said it's really about finding the right fit for the organisation as a whole.

Ways were also being looked at for achieving a more effective use of existing resources. This meant that an evaluation was being carried out as to whether a full and efficient service was best attained through the present location of offices throughout the borough. It was very important to continue the development of the overall long-term strategy, and the review was very much a part of this. Examples were the deployment of Homes for Haringey's IT programme and the use of new technology wherever this was practical and cost effective. A particularly important area for improvement was the development of systems to track the handling of queries raised by customers to ensure that they were fully dealt with.

**6. Decent homes – guide for residents (draft). Catherine O'Reilly, Resident Involvement Officer (Major Works).** Ms O'Reilly circulated a copy of the draft of the Guide at the meeting. This had been significantly revised since the last meeting of the Panel in order to take account of the views expressed during the consultation process (a copy is attached to these minutes). She began by referring to a letter (dated 30/11/07) which she had received from Sarah Rooney, Secretary of Haringey Leaseholders' Association and her response of the 5 Dec. Copies of both these letters are attached to these minutes.

In her letter Ms Rooney indicated that the HLA Committee had found the term "Other formats" somewhat confusing. Ms O'Reilly explained that this referred to the fact that residents could request copies in large print, Braille, etc, as well as having a translation into another language. The HLA had suggested that the sections which only applied to tenants or leaseholders should be in a different colour, but Ms O'Reilly said this tended to make the text more difficult to read and would not comply with the standards laid down by the Plain English Campaign. Furthermore large parts of the text applied to all residents, so tenants or leaseholders might be misled into thinking that the sections highlighted for them were of most importance.

The question was raised as to how leaseholders' costs for each project would be determined. Mr Thevanesan explained that leaseholders would only have to contribute to the costs of any works undertaken to their block. All the costs charged to each project would be coded (in the accounts) to that project and would therefore be listed in the ledger under the relevant project code with the appropriate description of the work against the item. Mr Buyukdogan suggested that these costs could be placed on the website so that leaseholders could download the details if they wanted them. Mr Thevanesan said that it would be impractical to place all the relevant ledger details on the website in a form that would be readily understandable to leaseholders.

Other Panel Members expressed the view that more details should be provided in the cost breakdowns provided both in the estimate contained in the Section 20 Notice and with the final invoice after the accounts had been

closed for each project. Mr Thevanesan said he understood that the question as to how much information it would be possible to provide with the Section 20 Notice was still under consideration. With regard to major works invoices he agreed that it would be desirable if some more detail could be provided especially in relation to larger and more complex schemes. He said he had requested for more detailed breakdowns to be provided.

Ms Lewis said that the breakdowns provided by the Home Ownership Team always made it clear that leaseholders were only required to pay towards work to the outside of the building, to the structure and with regard to communal areas. Thus the breakdown always showed that leaseholders were not being asked to pay towards internal works in tenants' flats.

The question was raised as to when the *Guide* would be sent to residents. Ms O'Reilly stated that this would be at the beginning of the project before detailed survey are undertaken. Referring to a point in the HLA's letter, Ms O'Reilly said that it was proposed to print the *Guide* every year to include updated information and amendments where necessary. Ms Brown asked for the HLA to be listed as a partner in the Decent Homes project along with the construction partners and the compliance team. Ms O'Reilly responded that as the guide had already been criticised for being too long she had limited the entries in this section to those directly involved in the organisation and delivery of the decent homes programme. The address and contact details for the HLA will be included in the contacts list at the end of the booklet.

There would always be a covering letter when the booklet was issued to residents living in a building where work was planned under the Decent Homes Programme. The letter would provide some information about the proposed works. In those blocks where work was planned newsletters would generally be issued to residents once a month to report on the progress of work. Mr Thevanesan confirmed that the members of the Home Ownership Team were always prepared to attend meetings held for residents, if requested to do so.

With regard to the requirement for statutory consultation a Section 20 Notice would be sent to leaseholders before the commencement of work. It would contain the reason for undertaking the work, a description of it and its estimated cost. It would inform leaseholders that they had a (statutory) period of 30 days to make observations in writing if they wished to do so. Homes for Haringey then had 21 days to respond to a leaseholder who had submitted observations. Panel Members felt that the statutory period was insufficient where a large amount of work was involved and where no intimation of the likely cost had been provided previously. They expressed the view that a period of 50 days would be more reasonable in such cases.

- ❖ **Action point.** Mr Thevanesan agreed to report back on the subject of the consultation period.

The question was then raised as to when leaseholders would receive the invoice for the work. Mr Thevanesan said that this would be after the end of the consultation period. Panel Members raised the question as to when they would be required to start paying the invoice for the major work. The view was expressed that this should not be before work had started on site. Mr Thevanesan responded that it would not be practical for the Home Ownership Team to monitor progress for each project in order to implement such a policy. Panel Members felt that leaseholders in receipt of large bills should have a reasonable length of time before they were required to commence payment.

- ❖ **Action point.** Mr Thevanesan said he would give this matter further consideration and advise the Panel accordingly.

**7. Discussion on options for leaseholders installing their own windows led by Nesan Thevanesan Home Ownership Manager.** Owing to a lack of time this subject was deferred until the next meeting.

The Chair thanked Ms Misir, Ms Hunter and Ms O'Reilly for their very interesting and informative reports. He then declared the meeting to be closed to further business.

- End -

21 January 2008.



## Customer access and communications – future strategy

### Comments from Residents' Groups:

#### **Turkish forum:**

- Face to face is preferred method (although people do not always write down everything you say)
- Email is OK for written confirmation
- Having a clear and complete customer record is important
- Sometimes you have to phone the call centre and then get transferred to someone else – preference is one call sorts it out
- Group members use a mixture of free phone and other numbers; free phone costs are high from a mobile
- Members of Turkish and Kurdish community still think they have to go to Apex House to access services
- The group reviewed the location map and agreed that if concessions were needed Hornsey was least important site; also the free phone number was not essential – due to the charge to ring it from a mobile
- Internet use was discussed, and language was suggested as a potential barrier. SH explained the new GRO system which uses pictures and asked the group if they would be interested in a demo [YES]. SH to arrange.

#### **Disabled People's Group:**

- HTH an issue – there is nowhere else in west of Borough – libraries a possibility. You will need to find a solution
- Phone – want a free phone AND a landline number
- Web GRO – no-one has used it. Would consider using in a CSC if there was a queue. People saw a demo during development, would be interested in another.
- Face to face preferred when complicated or clarity needed
- Feeling that for communal repairs you want to phone not use GRO – in case someone else has already reported it. (N.B. GRO does that too)

- To use more on line services people would need more help in order to help themselves; also trust is an issue – do you get an acknowledgement?
- No awareness of special needs (blue flags) in customer services?

#### **Leasehold Panel:**

- You don't get an acknowledgement (and sometimes reply) if you send a letter or email (TRUST)
- "when you phone up you get told to write in"
- Have an incentive to do it on line
- Email – sometimes you get an immediate response, sometimes it takes ages. If people were confident of a quick response more likely to use.
- Opening hours – new repairs CC welcomed as people would like to call in the evening after work (Not aware of current 8 – 8 hours 3 days per week)
- Idea – would like to be able to take mobile phone picture of dumped rubbish etc. and email/SMS it in (Hackney offer this)
- Want to know the % calls resolved first time (not just customer services)
- Want to know what % calls to ACCORD etc. are from leaseholders and how this is charged
- BWF – still a special case
- HTH – clearly can't stay – but need to find a solution

#### **Special Working Group:**

- More use of SMS
- Longer office opening hours – but piggy back on places already open (parking shop, library, Tesco etc.) Not BWF – people don't like going there. Group agreed that cost is a factor and no point spending if take is not value for money.
- Accommodation – go in with voluntary sector, Heartlands, get something that we can hand back to voluntary sector (shelf life of Homes for Haringey discussed as a problem). Or use shop fronts on estates or mobile offices (van or bus). Hire don't buy.
- Payments – like the idea of a Homes for Haringey hole in the wall where payments can be made
- Want feedback on door knocking (and pictures) – good for tenants conference

#### **Project Group:**

- Keen to explore more use of SMS – e.g. inbound "How much do I owe this week?"
- Get staff consultation right – they may have some good ideas
- Make on line available in CSCs – then if people have a choice not to wait they might use it

- Business Process Redesign – too much passing around
- Question – how many numbers to have in circulation – esp. with new repairs call centre

#### **Residents Consultative Forum:**

- There was a lot of discussion about going back to estate based services (so you don't have to call back 3 or 4 times about the same thing). We discussed this further and the group agreed that what was important was not who they spoke to or whether it was central or estate based – but that they (the customer) only needed to contact Homes for Haringey once about the same issue. To quote one of the group ***“one call should sort it out”***
- We discussed telephone numbers and the fact that a free phone is not free if called from a mobile phone. The feeling was that it would be good to publish both a free phone and a landline number – and advertise this in Homes Zone
- Online services: there was concern that people would be pushed to access services online, and there was particular concern from older group members. There was also recognition that computers are increasingly widely used. The group suggested it would be good to help people access services online and remove the fear of computers, they also suggested introducing loans to help people buy a computer
- Use of email: people were reluctant to use email as you don't get an acknowledgement and if the person you email is not there how will anyone else know? The group felt that if you emailed a central place and it was their responsibility to make sure you got an answer this would work better.
- Services in Hornsey: SH explained that the redevelopment of Hornsey Town Hall would probably mean that Homes for Haringey needed to rethink how they provide a service in the west of Haringey. The group agreed that this was an issue and a solution would need to be found. They also complimented the staff at Hornsey Customer Service Centre and the call centre staff.
- Getting it right once a tenant or leaseholder has contacted Homes for Haringey: the group made the point that Homes for Haringey also needs to get it right first time after the initial contact – e.g. repairs. Staff need to talk to each other better and get it right because the tenants time is important too – tenants don't want to have to stay home for 2 or 3 different appointments to get one repair done.

**Supported Housing forum:**

- Sheltered residents generally believe they are a separate entity and exclude themselves from the cyber age – although a small number do.
- All sheltered residents were issued with personal pin numbers to report repairs on line, it was suggested that a communal computer be installed in the lounge and managers be given a generic passwords to help residents that are unable to use a PC to report repairs.
- Once the repair is booked a text message is sent to confirm the time and date. If a mobile phone is not present, a voice message will be sent to your landline. Residents complained that the automated message was spoken at an alarming speed and were unable to retrieve the message.

**Sue Hunter,  
Services Development Manager**