

Questions from Residents

Items from the Central Residents Only meeting 21/9/18

Question: Leaseholder charges

Jane Thorp gave the background to the situation with major works and charges to leaseholders at Hanover RA (previously Highden, Westmount and Crownhill).

- *In 2015 residents were told that they would be getting new roofs.*
- *There was then no further information about this for some time. When residents followed it up, they were told that the work had been delayed.*
- *In 2016 an individual resident made a Freedom of Information request, which they then made public. This said that the planned work was for new roofs, windows and cladding. When residents followed this up, they were told by Martin Reid that the only work planned was for new roofs.*
- *At a recent Residents Association meeting a leaseholder said that the sale of her flat had just collapsed, as it was discovered that there were major works scheduled which would cost each leaseholder £44,000. This is for roofs, windows and cladding.*
- *Geoff Gage, who was at the meeting, then told residents that this work would not happen until after 2020 and was under review.*

Jane Thorp said this experience exemplified the disrespectful and unreasonable way that the Council treated their leaseholders and made the following points:

- *Communication with leaseholders is practically non-existent and often contradictory. Jane has been trying for years, with no success, to get clear information on the situation with major works at Highden, Westmount and Crownhill.*
- *Leaseholders only found out about possible bills of £44,000 when someone tried to sell their flat. This is not acceptable.*
- *After years of neglect, all of the work is done at once. A responsible landlord would have ensured regular maintenance and replacement which would keep the properties in better condition and spread bills over a more manageable time scale. It is totally unreasonable to suddenly spring huge bills on leaseholders.*
- *For an unspecified period of time, leaseholders will be in a situation where they are unable to sell their flats, face the prospect of huge bills and have uncertainty over their futures. This is not acceptable.*

- *The bottom line responsibility of the Council must be to provide accurate, clear information well in advance to their leaseholders. Consultation must take place at an early stage and throughout the process.*

It was agreed that these concerns need to be raised at Area Panel.

Response

The discussion at the Hanover Residents meeting concerned a request by a leaseholder prior to sale of their property as to whether there was future works planned for the blocks.

As requested, and in line with our agreed approach to transparency and early information sharing on prospective works costs, we responded with an estimate and brief details of possible works that may be considered within the next five years. As part of this response an estimated cost was placed on these works.

It was stressed that the costs were an estimate only and that the final schedule of works had not been agreed nor confirmed.

The leaseholder contribution is an estimate only at this time.

The full extent and specification for the works has not been agreed and will not be finalised until Spring 2019 with a view to tendering the project in 2020, but no firm start date is programmed.

The works to the blocks have been considered for a number of years and in various forms. However, there will be a complete review of the specifications received and works required for tender purposes.

Residents and leaseholders have been aware of the possibility of proposed works since 2014.

As part of our resident engagement we will offer the various options that are available for the works. The provision of external wall insulation will not be considered as an option following Planning considerations. However, this cannot be provided until we have reconsidered the works. We will be considering repointing, brickwork repairs and cavity wall insulation.

Until such time as we have budget costs for the works we cannot offer firm costings, anything at this stage is estimated.

With regard to several packages of works being carried out at once. This is one consideration but not firm, we will offer residents alternatives.

One of the high costs of any project is scaffold and access and therefore to split the works in stages does result in this being charged on each stage. Hence our suggestion that we encompass all works as one project.

From a leasehold point of view consideration should be given to these several phases of works as it is possible that the end cost over a period of say 15 years may exceed the 'one off' cost. We would offer these alternatives at engagement.

With regard to repairs, elements of the structure do have a useful life span and many elements do reach the end of this and hence replacement is the only option over further patch repairs. In particular, roofing and cavity wall insulation. It can of course be argued that major repair works would require access (scaffold) and costs would likely be high as a result and we do therefore consider as to whether such repairs are cost effective.

There is a question of how much notice do we give for future major works, this could be a number of years, but at all times budgets lead the works planned and advance notice of say five years may not mean the works will be carried out in that period of time.

To be able to advise residents of proposed works we need to have in place a firm specification and details of all elements of the works proposed and a reasonably accurate estimate of the costs involved. Ideally we would prefer to tender the works and have an accurate figure to present; hence long term advice is not always practical or appropriate.

We also offer a range of payment support options to residential leaseholders who may face charges for major works.

**Martin Reid, Head of Housing Strategy, Property & Investment, Telephone
01273 293321**

Items from the East Residents Only Meeting 6/9/18

Question: Estate Development Budget – Main bids

Deadline for bids

The deadline for submission of bids is usually November, for a decision the following April. However, in June this year Associations were told that the deadline would be the end of July. This left insufficient time for Associations to plan consultation with local residents, put information in newsletters or hold meetings. As a result, several Associations did not submit bids by the deadline and there are fewer bids this year. The meeting felt that Associations which hadn't yet submitted their bids should be allowed to do so.

Fencing

There seems to be some inequality in the process for submitting bids for fencing. Woodingdean submits bids for fencing each year, but some other Associations are told that they cannot submit fencing bids, even when there are issues of safety. There is now a proposal from the council to remove fencing from the EDB list of permitted items. This would lead to a further imbalance between areas where there are communal areas and facilities owned by Housing, and areas where these don't really exist (such as Woodingdean, Manor Farm and most of Whitehawk).

Action

The meeting agreed to submit a request to the Area Panel on the future of the Estate Development Budget and the inclusion of fencing in the budget.

It is requested that the proposal to remove fencing from the EDB list be reconsidered, taking into account:

- *the significant impact this can have on an overall area*
- *the lack of other opportunities to improve an area where there aren't any Housing owned communal buildings or areas.*

Response

Deadline for bids

The council's internal audit team carried out an audit of the Estates Development Budget in 2017. The audit identified that additional steps were needed in the procedure for processing and pricing bids to ensure there is contract compliance and value for money for the EDB as with other areas of work carried out within the repairs partnership. As a result of the audit the Property & Investment team now check a percentage of Mears' quotes for EDB work before the April voting panels.

To allow for this to take place, this year's application form for EDB main bids advised 'tenants associations should hold a general meeting to discuss potential bids before the third week in July...' and that 'draft bids should be sent to RIT@brighton-hove.gov.uk by the end of July 2018 with final bids being submitted by Friday 16 November 2018.

By early September we had received over 90 bids from groups, which is no less than in previous years. However, in hindsight I can see that having two dates may have been confusing and it may have been simpler to have one earlier date, for example the end of September for bids to be submitted. We will make this change next year.

The current deadline remains mid November. However, to allow time for pricing and checking we do need to know what type of bid an association is considering before then. This allows officers to offer support, carry out checks and plan for pricing when the bid is submitted.

Fencing

A task and finish group of residents is currently reviewing the EDB scheme. This group is working on a set of proposals to go forward for wider consultation, so that all residents have an opportunity to comment on changes that are being considered.

There has been discussion on whether fencing to individual properties should, or should not, be on the list of items that residents can bid for and the group's final decision on this will be included in recommendations that come to a future panel. No decision has yet been made on this issue.

Any changes that are agreed will come into effect for the 2020/21 round of bidding; there are no changes to the current guidelines, which permit fencing to individual properties, and so associations can still bid for funding for this in the 2019/20 programme.

Hilary Edgar, Housing Service Operations Manager, Telephone 01273 293250

Items from the North Residents Only Meeting 13/9/18

Question: Reports at Area Panel

There was agreement that the Council's quarterly performance reports given at the Area Panel are not useful, despite the frequent changes to the format. There is still too much information on specifics, which are hard to follow and more detailed than needed quarterly.

The meeting asked for some constructive thinking – involving residents, officers and Councillors - about what information is necessary and useful for Area Panels, and in what format. One comment received was that this type of information is only necessary in one out of four Area Panels, or annually.

Response

I am sorry to hear that residents in the North Area do not find the performance report and summary overview, useful. These are intended to give residents information on how each part of the Housing service is performing through the use of a traffic light rating system and for this to inform discussion, questions and requests for further information.

In response to the North resident only meeting's suggestion an item has been included in the agenda for each of the four Area Panels on how residents would like to receive this information in future, if at all.

Hilary Edgar, Housing Service Operations Manager, Telephone 01273 293250

Items from the West Resident Association Meeting 11/9/18

Question: Blocked drains

The group agreed there needs to be regular maintenance of drains in order to prevent blockages and to reduce risk of flooding and expensive, disruptive clean-ups. There was concern that blockages are already developing and that the situation will get worse as it gets colder. It was agreed to ask if drain clearance is happening as part of ongoing maintenance and if there's a schedule for this which could be shared with resident associations.

Response

We do not feel that a planned programmed of maintenance would be cost effective for this type of work across all of the housing stock. Where we are aware of specific issues in blocks or areas we will put in a programme of checks to ensure problems are addressed before they have a significant impact, where this can be anticipated. We aim to rectify the issues on drainage as soon as they arise, and residents should continue to report these to the repairs help desk on Freephone 0800 052 6140 or our local number 01273 294409, or email us at BHCC.repairs@mearsgroup.co.uk

We will continue to review our approach to planned maintenance programmes alongside our contractors and where it is felt that this would be effective both in terms of cost and addressing potential issues we will pursue this as an option.

If residents have concerns about a specific drain or soakaway, please let me know as there may be an underlying issue that needs to be investigated.

**Miles Davidson, Housing Sustainability & Affordable Warmth Manager,
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