

BRIGHTON & HOVE CITY COUNCIL

HOUSING MANAGEMENT CONSULTATIVE COMMITTEE

3.00pm 27 SEPTEMBER 2010

COUNCIL CHAMBER, HOVE TOWN HALL

MINUTES

Present: Councillors Caulfield (Chairman); Allen, Barnett, Fallon-Khan, Fryer, Mears, Pidgeon, Randall and Simpson (Opposition Spokesperson)

[**Note:** Councillor Mears chaired the meeting up to and including item 26. Councillor Caulfield chaired the meeting from item 27 onwards.]

Tenant Representatives: Ted Harman (Brighton East Area Housing Management Panel), David Murtagh (Brighton East Area Housing Management Panel), Jean Davis (Central Area Housing Management Panel), John Melson (Central Area Housing Management Panel), Stewart Gover (North & East Area Housing Management Panel), Heather Hayes (North & East Area Housing Management Panel), Tina Urquhart (West Hove & Portslade Area Area Housing Management Panel), Beverley Weaver (West Hove & Portslade Area Housing Management Panel), Chris Kift (Hi Rise Action Group), Muriel Briault (Leaseholders Action Group), Colin Carden (Older People's Council), Tom Whiting (Sheltered Housing Action Group) and Barry Kent (Tenant Disability Network)

PART ONE

25. PROCEDURAL BUSINESS

25A Declarations of Substitute Members

25.1 Councillor Fallon-Khan declared that he was attending as a substitute for Councillor Simson.

25B Declarations of Interests

25.2 Councillors Barnett, Simpson and Randall, Heather Hayes and Ted Harman declared a personal interest in any discussion on the LDV as they are Board Members of Brighton and Hove Seaside Community Homes (the Local Delivery Vehicle).

25C Exclusion of the Press and Public

- 25.3 In accordance with section 100A(4) of the Local Government Act 1972, it was considered whether the press and public should be excluded from the meeting during the consideration of any items contained in the agenda, having regard to the nature of the business to be transacted and the nature of the proceedings and the likelihood as to whether, if members of the press and public were present, there would be disclosure to them of confidential or exempt information as defined in section 100I (1) of the said Act.
- 25.4 **RESOLVED** - That the press and public be not excluded from the meeting.

26. MINUTES OF THE PREVIOUS MEETING

- 26.1 Councillor Simpson asked for news about the Water Meters Working Group. She was informed that there had been a meeting with Southern Water to consider a pilot for bulk water metering. A further visit to blocks was needed to look at the feasibility of this project. The working group would then be reconvened.
- 26.2 John Melson informed the Committee that two representatives had been elected by the City Wide Assembly to negotiate with Southern Water. These negotiations would be independent of the council.
- 26.3 The Chairman reported that the next City Wide Assembly would be held on 20 November 2010 and the matter would be discussed at that meeting.
- 26.4 Councillor Fryer referred to paragraph 13.11 of the minutes held on 14 June 2010. She queried whether tenants representatives were able to vote on the Committee prior to 2008. The Chairman confirmed that tenants ' representatives had always had an indicative vote.
- 26.5 Stewart Gover referred to paragraph 12.3 of the minutes of 14 June 2010 in relation to the Tenants' Handbook. He stressed that it was important to ensure that tenants adhered to the rules set out in the handbook. Meanwhile, he was pleased to report, that following his petition to the Queen, he had now received a reply setting out clear rules relating to the succession policy for council properties. The rules were very fair. The Chairman thanked Stewart for his work on sending the petition to the Queen. She agreed that the Tenants' Handbook rules needed to be adhered to. Chris Kift concurred and stressed that it was a legal document.
- 26.6 **RESOLVED** – That the minutes of the meetings held on 14 June and 1 September 2010 be approved and signed by the Chairman.

27. CHAIRMAN'S COMMUNICATIONS**Housing Local Delivery Vehicle**

- 27.1 The Chairman reported that she was pleased to report that "Brighton & Hove Seaside Community Homes" had formally responded to the council's offer in regard to setting up a housing local delivery vehicle.

27.2 Their proposals would give the council a capital receipt and additional investment to help refurbish the housing stock. The Chairman was very grateful for the hard work the Board had undertaken to reach this position. Housing staff were now carefully reviewing the offer and the council was now prepared to negotiate on all aspects of the proposed deal. This was a big step nearer to achieving the goal of securing additional investment in the housing stock. There would be a report to HMCC and Cabinet on the progress made in reaching a deal with funders.

28. CALLOVER

28.1 The Chairman asked the Committee to consider which items listed on the agenda it wished to debate and determine in full.

28.2 **RESOLVED** - That all items be reserved for debate and determination.

29. PETITIONS

29.1 There were none.

30. PUBLIC QUESTIONS

30.1 There were none.

31. DEPUTATIONS

31.1 There were none.

32. LETTERS FROM COUNCILLORS

32.1 There were none.

33. WRITTEN QUESTIONS FROM COUNCILLORS

33.1 There were none.

34. TENANCY VISITS

34.1 The Committee considered a report of the Acting Director of Housing which explained the rationale and process for undertaking tenancy checks. The report explained that regular visits to all tenants were an expectation of the Tenant Services Authority, and nationally accepted good practice in tenancy management. The purpose of tenancy checks was to ensure tenants were complying with tenancy conditions and to identify support or welfare needs; to ensure the property was occupied by the legitimate tenant(s) and to inspect the condition of the property and identify any work that tenants or the council needed to carry out. The standard letter sent to tenants with a questionnaire was circulated as Appendix 1 to the report.

34.2 The Housing Manager reported that feedback had been received regarding identification. The request for bank/building society statements as forms of identity had not gone down well and would be removed from the list.

- 34.3 Councillor Fryer said she completely supported tenancy visits but it could be recognised that it could be a very sensitive area. She suggested that ID might be asked for later in the visit in a more sensitive way. Councillor Fryer referred to paragraph 3.2 in the report and asked how many unmet support needs had been identified. The Chairman suggested that a report could be submitted to a future meeting setting out the value of visits with statistical information.
- 34.4 Councillor Pidgeon stressed that the letter should have stated that it was also available in Braille or audio as many tenants were blind or partially sighted. He thought that the person checklist should not ask people about life insurances and other personal matters.
- 34.5 The Chairman stressed that the only objective was to receive a form of identity. The Council would be looking at acceptable forms of identity in the future. In the meantime, checking ID was the only evidence the council had in preventing tenancy fraud.
- 34.6 The Assistant Director, Housing Management reported letters were available in Braille and large print. There were Braille and large print versions of the Tenants Handbook. Tenants' checks could update officers on information about people's needs.
- 34.7 John Melson mentioned that he had just had a Tenancy Visit. He had not found it intrusive. Officers had not been interested in the content of documents, and were only using them as a form of ID. This was not made clear in the letter. Mr Melson considered that the letter could be worded in a friendlier manner. Meanwhile, he stressed that there was also a problem with leaseholder fraud and that problem should be addressed.
- 34.8 Chris Kift noted that the circulated letter was different from the original letter that had been sent out. No complaints had been received after it was changed. He made the point that the letter should state which officer would be calling. He suggested that instead of making a list of possible ID, the letter should simply ask for printed formal ID. Many older people were frightened by such a long list. He thought the letter and questionnaire should be reconsidered.
- 34.9 The Chairman reported that there was an item on Tenancy Fraud on the next HMCC agenda in November. Suitable forms of ID could be discussed at that meeting. She made the point that officers should wear ID, and that the wording in the letter should be reconsidered. However, she considered tenancy visits were valuable.
- 34.10 Councillor Simpson suggested that it would be helpful if the letter was printed in size 14 font or above. She made the point that tenancy visits should be carried out in a sensitive way and if works had been carried out to a property, officers should acknowledge people's age and disabilities, and not charge tenants for unauthorised works carried out under a previous tenancy.
- 34.11 Councillor Randall felt that tenancy checks were a good way of collecting information about vulnerable tenants. He also recognised that fraud was a serious issue. Councillor Randall thought the tone of the letter needed some consideration, but it was important to carry out this work.

34.12 Councillor Mears stressed that tenants had signed up to have tenancy visits in their tenancy agreement.

34.13 **RESOLVED** – (1) That the rationale and process for undertaking tenancy visits be noted.

35. HOUSING REVENUE ACCOUNT 2009/10 FINAL OUTTURN AND FORECAST OUTTURN FOR 2010/11 AS AT MONTH 4

35.1 The Committee considered a report of Acting Director of Housing which presented the Housing Revenue Account 2009/10 Final Outturn and Forecast Outturn for 2010/11 as at Month 4.

35.2 Councillor Randall was pleased to note that money had been spent on long term empty properties. He referred to paragraph 3.2.4, which reported that leaseholder service charges income was projected to underachieve. He asked for more information. The Head of Financial Services reported that bills were sent to leaseholders in August each year. Officers had to make estimates for works and it was difficult to judge accurately.

35.3 The Chairman stressed the importance of maintaining reserves for emergencies. The Assistant Director, Housing Management agreed that it was prudent to keep a level of reserves as it was not known if there would be unforeseen expenditure.

35.4 Councillor Mears highlighted the need to invest in housing stock. It was important that the council had the resources to improve people's homes.

35.5 **RESOLVED** - (1) that it be noted that the final outturn for the HRA for 2009/10 was an overspend of £0.280 million. This represents a variance of 0.58% of the gross revenue budget of £47.949 million. General HRA revenue reserves have reduced by £0.280 million to £3.622 million as at 31 March 2010.

(2) That the forecast outturn position for 2010/11 as at Month 4, which is an overspend of £0.038 million, be noted.

36. CONSULTATION DRAFT OF RESIDENT INVOLVEMENT STRATEGY

36.1 The Committee considered a report of Acting Director of Housing which provided an update on the progress to adopt a revised Resident Involvement Strategy first reported in June 2020.

36.2 The Head of Customer Access & Business Improvement informed the meeting that the Tenant Compact Monitoring Group had met on 13 August 2010 to consider the responses received to the strategy. Their conclusions were set out in the report.

36.3 John Melson made the point that the strategy set out what officers would do for the tenants; but it did not set out what tenants had to do in return. He felt it was necessary to show how tenants should be accountable to the council. Mr Melson considered that the council should have a Residents' Overview and Scrutiny Panel. Many other local authorities had such panels.

- 36.4 Mr Melson considered that the consultation should be wider. Meanwhile, there was a need to look at the functions of the current residents' groups.
- 36.5 Tom Whiting agreed that there should be a Residents' Overview and Scrutiny Panel. He asked if there was an organisation chart and hoped someone would produce one, with formal communication lines. Chris Kift replied that there was a chart in the Tenants' Handbook.
- 36.6 **RESOLVED** – (1) That the endorsement of the broad framework of the Resident Involvement Strategy, as proposed by the Tenant Compact Monitoring Group be noted, subject to the continuing work set out below.
- (2) That it is noted that the Tenant Compact Monitoring Group is recommending that the groups, while organised by officers, should be "Tenant/Leaseholders Only" with officers attending only by invitation.
- (3) That the proposal from the Tenant Compact Monitoring Group, that four smaller working groups be established to examine, in detail, the consultation responses to the four objectives within the Resident Involvement Strategy, be endorsed, namely:
- **Objective 1** Provide a wide range of opportunities for residents to be involved in their housing.
 - **Objective 2** Develop, a framework for agreeing local offers and priorities with our residents.
 - **Objective 3** Involve residents in the development of housing policy and the design and delivery of housing services.
 - **Objective 4** Involve residents in monitoring and scrutinising our performance in delivering housing services.
- Each working group will examine the comments and suggestions received in the consultation process and will determine what further consultation with all customers might be required.
- (4) The Tenant Compact Monitoring Group is recommending that the groups, while organised by officers, should be "Tenant/Leaseholder Only" with officers attending only by invitation.

37. CUSTOMER ACCESS PHASE 2

- 37.1 The Committee considered an update report of the Acting Director of Housing concerning the review of customer access arrangements for the Housing Management Service and presented a number of proposals for consideration by Committee Members.
- 37.2 Councillor Fryer asked whether sharing space with the Children and Young People's Trust was purely office sharing or if there would be a particular benefit in having the CYPT staff in the office. The Head of Customer Access & Business Improvement reported that the CYPT staff needed accommodation. Space had become available in Lavender Street as housing teams were working more closely together at the Supercentre.

- 37.3 John Melson mentioned that there was already a free phone number for Mears. He asked why this number could not be used as the basis for the proposal in the report. The Assistant Director, Housing Management agreed that it would make sense to eventually have a single number. Initially, there would be a number for repairs and another number for the remainder of tenant management matters.
- 37.4 Chris Kift pointed out that many lines were still 292929. He stressed that there was no point in phoning this number as there was often no response. This needed to be sorted out. Councillor Mears felt that Mr Kift had made a good point. Freephones were useful as long as someone answered them.
- 37.5 Councillor Simpson agreed that it was a good idea to reduce the number of different telephone numbers. This was more efficient. However it could be a problem for older tenants. A sizable proportion of older tenants were not happy with new telephone systems. Councillor Simpson was worried that the option would be lost for face to face contact.
- 37.6 The Chairman stressed that it was not proposed to close services in local offices, or to reduce face to face contact.
- 37.7 The Head of Customer Access & Business Improvement reported that the council now had specialist teams and wanted to highlight how residents could access services in a better way, if they chose to. The council wanted more staff out on the estates and for them to work more effectively.
- 37.8 Stewart Gover made the point that tenancy management was an entirely different matter to repairs and maintenance. He considered that one number would not be appropriate.
- 37.9 Beverley Weaver referred to 2.1 of the report regarding a single point of contact. She mentioned that tenants were not notified when officers were moved to another office. She also questioned how officers would be able to spend more time out of the office, and how older tenants would access their housing officer. The Chairman stressed that the housing officers would stay the same and the service would be accessible. The Head of Customer Access & Business Improvement agreed that there were no plans to change that aspect of the service. The proposals would bring about more effective working and would enable officers to make visits to tenants such as the elderly.
- 37.10 Chris Kift considered the report to be good and supported the idea of a single point of contact. However, he pointed out that some people still had dial phones. He hoped that even with one point of contact, it would still be possible for people to contact individual officers.
- 37.11 Beverley Weaver questioned whether one point of contact would reach all tenants.
- 37.12 The Head of Customer Access & Business Improvement informed the Committee that trials at Selsfield Drive had shown that 80% of queries could easily be dealt with by Housing Management Advisors. She hoped that residents would trust Housing Management Advisors to be effective. The idea was to deal with the majority of queries

at the first point of contact. Face to face contact in housing offices would not change and was likely to improve.

- 37.13 David Murtagh confirmed that tenants using Selfield Drive were receiving answers to questions and were happier as a result.
- 37.14 Tom Whiting informed the meeting that he had no problem with Selsfield Drive. He had not noticed any change, but confirmed he had always received a good service.
- 37.15 **RESOLVED** – That the following proposals that are being considered by Phase 2 of the Customer Access Review be noted, along with the above comments of Members.

(1) A single point of contact is established for all Tenancy Management telephone calls, emails and written enquiries.

(2) That one free phone and one local number is introduced for Repairs and Tenancy management and telecoms technology is utilised to route calls to the correct destinations.

(3) That some Children & Young People's Trust services are provided from the Lavender Street Housing Office as part of a co-location arrangement with local housing area staff continuing to be based at that housing office.

(4) That work continues on looking at providing access to housing management services through 'Community Contact Points' in libraries.

Note: Stewart Gover abstained from agreeing resolutions 1 & 2 above.

38. MOBILITY SCOOTER STORAGE

- 38.1 The Committee considered a report of the Acting Director of Housing concerning proposals to ensure the safe storage of mobility scooters. Officers and tenant representatives had explored a number of storage options for residents to ensure residents had access to mobility aids whilst ensuring that neighbouring residents were safe in the event of a fire.
- 38.2 The Chairman reported that there had been an increasing number of mobility scooters used by tenants in recent years. There was a need to be responsible in the way they were stored. The report was before members for comment and feedback. There would be further reports to the HMCC.
- 38.3 The Housing Manager reported that a project working group had been set up to look at this issue. There were many matters to consider such as the planning process for the building of mobility scooter stores, the electricity supply and how to pay for scooter storage.
- 38.4 The Chairman mentioned a suggestion that the Homemove website should have a symbol to show if a block was scooter friendly. She acknowledged that the cost of electricity in communal areas could be high due to people recharging scooters. The

Chairman mentioned a shared scooter scheme and suggested this model could be used across the city.

- 38.5 Councillor Simpson welcomed the report, which was addressing a problem and was looking at different solutions for different blocks. She hoped that the council could share the results of the research with housing associations.
- 38.6 The Chairman asked the Assistant Director to take the report to the Social Housing Landlords' Forum.
- 38.7 John Melson referred to the expense of charging mobility scooters. He suggested that people should be metered individually for this service rather than imposing a community charge. Scooter users could use their mobility allowance to pay for the charge. However, he did not agree with charging for scooter storage, as no-one had chosen to use a scooter. It was the equivalent of using a bus pass.
- 38.8 Councillor Simpson asked if the identification of blocks for scooter stores was phase 1 of the project, and suggested that there must be other areas where there was a demand for storage.
- 38.9 The Housing Manager replied that the first phase was to look at common ways in blocks, where there was a fire risk. These were the areas that needed to be tackled immediately.
- 38.10 Barry Kent referred to paragraph 5.1.1 in the report which stated that a typical scooter would use an expected £5.00 per month in electricity charging. He questioned the amount and said that he had an electrician friend who thought that £1 - £3 was a more likely figure. Meanwhile, the letter from the East Sussex Fire & Rescue Service had stated that, if scooters could not be charged in an outside area, all charging should be carried out inside the flat by removing the battery. Mr Kent stressed that large scooters had bulky batteries. He also stressed that the storage sheds needed to have enough space for the scooter and for the user to exit the store.
- 38.11 Ted Harman also referred to the letter from East Sussex Fire and Rescue Service. The letter suggested that mobility scooters should be charged in the day and should not be charged at night. Mr Harman stressed that if mobility scooters were not charged at night, they would not be ready for use during the day. Barry Kent agreed and stated that it took a number of hours to charge a mobility scooter. The Chairman replied that she could not comment on the letter from the Fire Service, but agreed that some of their suggestions were not practical. There was a balancing act between having safe blocks and meeting the needs of tenants.
- 38.12 Councillor Randall suggested that new housing schemes should have provision of scooter storage designed into the scheme. He liked the idea of sheds for scooters.
- 38.13 Beverley Weaver agreed with John Melson that there should not be a charge for scooter storage. People with mobility scooters were often Blue Badge holders.
- 38.14 The Assistant Director, Housing Management stressed that every case would be assessed individually. The key to the report was that one size did not fit all.

38.15 The Chairman asked tenants in the public gallery for their views. Faith Matyszak reported that she would be discussing the report at the Tenants' Disability Group. Maggie King agreed that everyone needed to be treated as an individual. Valerie Paynter asked how the priority site list was compiled. The Housing Manager explained that high rise properties in the city were the priority. This was where there were problems with mobility scooter storage.

38.16 **RESOLVED** – (1) That the following proposals be noted, along with the above comments of members of the HMCC.

- Build external stores where planning considerations allow and where there is known demand.
- Convert, where appropriate, miscellaneous rooms for scooter storage in consultation with local residents.

(2) That it be noted that a policy on the use of mobility scooters for residents of Council housing is being developed. A draft policy will be presented to a future meeting of Housing Management Consultative Committee.

39. HOUSING MANAGEMENT PERFORMANCE REPORT (QUARTER 1)

39.1 The Committee considered a report of the Acting Director of Housing which set out the Quarter 1 report for Housing Management performance for the financial year 2010/11. As a result of a review of benchmarking by HouseMark and the introduction of a new single National Club, comparative data was not available in the format used to date. How best this new data might inform future reports was being investigated and would be commented on in the Quarter 2 report.

39.2 The Head of Customer Access & Business Improvement reported that the July figure for rent collection had improved and was 98.41%. This was the highest collection rate in the South East.

39.3 Councillor Allen congratulated officers on the rent collection figures. He asked why the % of rent lost due to voids was rising. He also asked why there was a reduction in the total former tenant arrears (exclusive of Temporary Accommodation).

39.4 The Head of Customer Access & Business Improvement explained that the increase in rent lost due to voids was due to the number of empty properties. The current rate of empty properties was 1.4%. The Chairman reported that reserves were being used to bring empty property back into use.

39.5 Councillor Allen was informed that he would be given a written response with figures as to why there had been such a big reduction in tenant arrears.

39.6 Beverley Weaver referred to paragraph 3.1.3 and asked for an explanation about re-charges. The Head of Customer Access & Business Improvement explained that the £37,000 referred to the amount charged to people. The amount collected had increased and the amount charged to people had also increased.

- 39.7 Stewart Gover referred to the average recharge debt being £649. He considered this figure to be low and stated that it could cost between £3,000 to £6,000 to put right a trashed property.
- 39.8 Heather Hayes supported the recharging of tenants who had vandalised properties but expressed concern that tenants who had improved properties by putting in good doors and kitchen units had been recharged after they had agreed to be downsized to smaller properties.
- 39.9 **RESOLVED** – (1) That the report be noted.

40. CONTRACT FOR COMMUNAL DIGITAL TV SYSTEM FOR COUNCIL HOUSING

- 40.1 The Committee considered a report of the Acting Director of Housing which explained that presently most of the council's blocks of flats had analogue communal TV aerial systems. The South East (including Brighton & Hove) analogue signal would be switched off in January 2012. The majority of TV sets and aerials not converted to digital by the switchover date would no longer be able to view TV programmes. To meet this deadline a contract needed to be awarded as quickly as possible.
- 40.2 Stewart Gover made the point that most of the Lewes Road corridor was in the shadow of the Downs and might need repeaters for good reception. He was concerned that money should not be spent on a digital system until it became clear that people could receive the system.
- 40.3 The Chairman agreed that reception was an issue and she had been discussing this matter with the Assistant Director, Housing Management. Mark Dennison would be the point of contact for tenants.
- 40.4 The Head of Property & Investment informed members that the council had to invest in the digital switchover. By 2012, there would be no provision for communal aerials. The onus was on the providers to overcome problems of reception, and this was matter was being considered.
- 40.5 **RESOLVED** – (1) That the report be noted.

The meeting concluded at 5.49pm

Signed

Chairman

Dated this

day of

