

**MINUTES OF HOUSING COMMITTEE HELD ON**

13 November 2008

7.30pm – 8.59pm

**PRESENT**

**COUNCILLORS**

Joshua Jolles (Chairman)

Lee Dangerfield (Vice Chairman)

Simon Carter

Bob Davis

Michael Garnett

Lesley Rideout

**APOLOGIES**

Chris Millington

**SUBSTITUTES**

Linda Pailing for Chris Millington

**CO-OPTES**

Lydia Noon (Leaseholder Rep)

Elsie Matthews (Tenant Rep)

25. **DECLARATIONS OF INTEREST**

None.

26. **MINUTES**

**RESOLVED** that the minutes of the meeting held on the 4 September 2008 be agreed as a correct record and signed by the Chair.

27. **MATTERS ARISING**

Empty Home Update (minute 20(ii))

It was confirmed that a report on the feasibility of introducing a yearly inspection regime of tenanted properties in Harlow would be received by the Committee at its meeting in January 2009.

28. **WRITTEN QUESTIONS AND PETITIONS**

A list of questions and their responses are attached at Appendix A of these minutes.

29. **NON-CONTENTIOUS BUSINESS**

**RESOLVED** that agenda item 7, Committee Forward Work Plan, and agenda item 8, Door Entry Systems, be taken as a non-contentious items.

30. **COMMITTEE FORWARD WORK PLAN**

**RESOLVED** to note the Committee Forward Work Plan.

31. **DOOR ENTRY SYSTEMS**

**RESOLVED** that further consultation would be undertaken with residents to identify door entry systems for priority flat blocks for inclusion into future housing capital programmes.

32. **TENANT & LEASEHOLDER SERVICE CHARGES – ANNUAL REVIEW**

The Committee received a report on the annual review of the tenant and leaseholder service charges that were introduced in April 2007.

**RESOLVED**

- (A) to approve the refinements to the charging methodology as set out paragraph 7 of the report;
- (B) that Officers would report back to the next Committee meeting with options to recover increased fuel costs from tenants in sheltered accommodation;
- (C) that Officers present an updated set of service charge figures to the Housing Committee in February 2009.

33. **DRAFT HOUSING STRATEGY 2008 - 2013**

The Committee received a report presenting a draft Local Housing Strategy 2008-2013, together with an updated action plan.

Whilst the Committee welcomed the draft strategy and thanked Officers for the extensive piece of work, it requested that further work be carried out to update and improve the document prior to undertaking formal consultation, particularly in relation to (i) considering the impact of the current economic climate on local housing needs (ii) incorporating the Council's new Corporate Plan and (iii) removing typing errors.

The Committee also requested that, following consultation, it approve the final strategy at its meeting in March 2009.

**RESOLVED** that

- (A) authority be delegated to the Strategic Director, Graham Branchett, in consultation with the Chairman and Vice Chairman of the Committee, to make amendments to the draft Housing Strategy for consultation following a Members' workshop in January 2009;
- (B) the final version of the Strategy be submitted to the Committee in March 2009 for approval.

34. **FORMER TENANTS' WRITE OFFS**

The Committee received a report seeking approval to write off former tenant rent arrears in accordance with Standing Orders.

The Committee expressed concern about writing off cases 1 and 6 without more specific information. Officers undertook to review the two cases, advise Members of the specific details of each case by email after the meeting and re-present the cases for write off at the next Committee meeting. The revised total proposed for write off was therefore £10,234.34.

**RECOMMENDED** to the Policy and Resources Committee that the cases listed in Appendix 1 except for items 1 and 6, equating to a total debt of £10, 234.34 be written off.

35. **REFERENCES FROM OTHER COMMITTEES**

None.

36. **MATTERS OF URGENT BUSINESS**

The Chairman permitted the following item to be received as a matter of urgent business in order that it may be considered by the Policy and Resources Committee.

Revised Housing Capital Programme

The Committee received a report proposing revisions to the Housing Capital programme 2008/09 that had arisen following a recent report to the Budget and Performance Working Party on the current economic downturn.

The Committee noted that it may be necessary for the Policy and Resources Committee to reallocate the capital receipts received from the Right to Buy sales in the second half of 2008/09 to the Council's Non-Housing Capital Programme.

**RECOMMENDED** to the Policy and Resources Committee that the Revised Housing Capital Programme 2008/09 at Appendix A be recommended for adoption by Full Council.

CHAIR OF THE COMMITTEE

**WRITTEN QUESTIONS FROM THE PUBLIC**

1. **QUESTION FROM MR THOMAS**

Kier Harlow charges for cleaning and caretaking to Harlow Council's service charge payers for the year 2008/09 show a large increase over those previously charged for Harlow Council when this work was carried out by its direct labour force.

Given the Council's duty of care towards service charge payers, what action has been taken by the Council to ensure that Kier Harlow's increased charges are:

1. Accurate
2. Fair and proportionate

**RESPONSE FROM THE CHAIR OF HOUSING COMMITTEE**

On 31 July 2008 Officers gave a presentation to a Special Leasehold Forum which explained how cleaning and caretaking charges to tenants and leaseholders are calculated.

Charges are made at the commencement of each financial year on an estimated basis with subsequent adjustment for actual charges incurred. The charges therefore are accurate upon outturn.

The selected methodology for making service charges is proportionate because each block is charged on the basis of an apportionment of the average number of hours the service is provided to each block as a percentage of the whole service.

2. **QUESTION FROM MR THOMAS**

What systems exist to monitor the attendance of Kier Harlow's staff, both in terms of attendance at a site and time spent at a site, when they are carrying out cleaning and caretaking work for Harlow Council, and what are the results obtained from these systems?

### **RESPONSE FROM THE CHAIR OF HOUSING COMMITTEE**

Kier Harlow Ltd cleaning and caretaking staff are provided with schedules of work that are required to be signed off. Monitoring of the work is carried out by Kier Harlow Ltd inspections and spot checks forming part of wider performance management and complaints processes. Where these highlight a problem further investigation is instigated internally in line with Kier Harlow Ltd procedures.

The review of these arrangements by Kier Harlow Ltd will be reported back at the Leasehold Forum on the 26th November.

### 3. **QUESTION FROM MRS NOON (LEASEHOLDER REPRESENTATIVE)**

Whereas at the special Forum held on 31st July 2008 the Council failed to satisfy Leaseholders with regard to justification for the disproportionate increases in Service Charges in relation to the services actually provided, leading to a group of Leaseholders preparing to take the matter to a Leasehold Valuation Tribunal, the said Leaseholders have become aware that a mediation service exists to help resolve such issues; would the Council be willing, in principle, to use the services of the Leasehold Advisory Service (LEASE) to mediate on this issue, in order to resolve the issues swiftly and economically, in a spirit of cooperation ?"

### **RESPONSE FROM THE CHAIR OF HOUSING COMMITTEE**

The Council is continuing to work closely with Kier Harlow Ltd, the Home Ownership Service Improvement Team, and all leaseholders to respond to any concerns raised through its performance management and complaints procedures. The Council have arranged for Kier Harlow Ltd to give an update on the cleaning and caretaking review at the scheduled Leasehold forum on the 26th November 2008.

The Council has advised of appropriate escalation routes for dealing with issues, and would welcome the use of the Leasehold Advisory Service to assist in further discussions. An application can be made by the relevant leaseholders to the Leasehold Advisory Service. The Leasehold Advisory Service will then contact the Council to seek our agreement to proceed. The application fee is £100 from each party.

