

Items from the Tenant Only meeting held on 11/8/15

1. Reinstatement of Housing Management Consultative sub-Committee

The Chair said that Central Residents Only meeting passed a proposal asking for the reinstatement of the Housing Management Sub-Committee (HMCSC). He had been contacted by the Chair of Central and asked to raise this at the West meeting.

The proposal is that: 'The new Council administration re-instates the Housing Management Consultative Sub-Committee (HMCSC) and that this is discussed at all of the next Area Panels.' There was agreement that the HMCSC had been a useful committee, providing a city-wide perspective. The proposal was supported unanimously, and it was agreed to put it forward on the Blue Pages.

Action: *following proposal for Blue Pages: 'It is proposed that the new Council administration re-instates the Housing Management Consultative Sub-Committee (HMCSC) and that this is discussed at all of the next Area Panels.'*

Response by Ododo Dafe, Head of Income, Involvement & Improvement T:01273 293201

Thank you for raising this question. Also it is a good example of a response that should feed through to all Area Panels as it will be of citywide interest, or that tenants wish to be on the agenda of each of the panel meetings.

In response, it is important for me to initially outline that the decision regarding the abolition of the Housing Management Consultative Sub Committee(HMCSC), was not one that was taken by the then Housing Committee, and neither was it taken on party political grounds. The matter was discussed at the all-party Constitutional Working Group, and the decision was made at the May 2014 Policy & Resources Committee – which did take into account feedback from the Area Panels which in the majority wanted to keep HMCSC.

In case it helps, I have set out here some of the reasons that the change was made:-

1.HMCSC was unique - there was no other sub-committee in the council. It didn't make decisions but served a useful advisory role at the time when the Council had an executive system with only one Executive Councillor making decisions. Whereas in the current cross-party committee system, the Sub-Committee stood out as an arguably extravagant and outdated way to achieve limited consultation with a limited number of tenants – particularly when other methods were available.

2.There was significant duplication and overlap between the Area Panels and HMCSC, with both providing a forum for tenant consultation and for tenant representatives and councillors to jointly debate matters.

3. Housing, and the council generally, needed to make efficiencies in time and costs in order to meet the increasing demands made upon services – for example by higher numbers of vulnerable tenants, and as a result of welfare reforms. These conditions still exist today and are ever more important – particularly with additional changes to welfare reforms that will affect almost 70% of tenants. HMCSC required significant staff and financial resources which are more effectively used to meet tenants’ needs.

4. On the matter of costs, the following paragraphs also appeared in the report to Area Panels in March 2014:-

“...Costs are important, particularly as public funds are involved – with council rents being significantly subsidised by tax payers. There is also the issue of officer, councillor and tenant time involved in a process that is duplicated.

Any savings that can be made in these austere times is helpful to tenants in the round as the money is reinvested into housing services. There is a big demand for social housing, with an equally large responsibility on the council to provide value for money services, exercise prudence, and invest in meeting that demand.”

5. Tenants’ views could and still can be effectively represented in the consultation section of committee reports for decision making - arguably in more ways and with greater ease than for any other group of people in the city receiving council services. In addition, as with the other council committees, if residents wish, they can make deputations to the committee or submit a letter for response.

6. Housing is now one service with different and overlapping ‘customers’ or service users across the city who are not solely council tenants – for example people on the housing waiting list, home owners, private sector tenants, people in need of adaptations, homeless households. Yet only council tenants attended HMCSC.

7. There still exist a range of other ways that tenants are involved, for example Service Improvement Groups, Area Panels, City Assembly and through the Tenant and Resident Scrutiny Panel.

8. The tenants’ indicative vote was rarely used at HMCSC, and feedback from Area Panels is currently able to provide decision makers with a broader feedback base and differing perspectives.

9. Area Panels may take on more of a ‘neighbourhood governance’ role in the future and will want to increase their collaborative working style with communities and be able to increasingly influence decisions in a variety of other ways, and possibly through a number of committees, not solely Housing.

Following the Policy & Resources Committee, work was also carried out with Area Panel representatives and officers to look at how Area Panels could be further strengthened, with an example of an outcome from that being that Blue Page items are now placed at the beginning of the agenda.

A review of resident involvement is due to take place towards the end of this calendar year, and all aspects will be considered for potential further areas for improvement.

2. Estate Development Budget Quick Bids

Associations can make bids throughout the year for amounts up to £750 under the 'quick bid' system. However, this system is not very quick.

One delay in the system comes if Associations buy items from Argos. Mears has a credit limit on the amount they can spend in one month at Argos, and this is quickly passed. This means that everything is slowed down, and isn't a very efficient system.

It was agreed that this should be improved.

Action: for Blue Pages

Response from Keith Dadswell- Regional Manager Mears T: 01273 574356

We have requested an increase in our credit limit on the Mears Tuxedo card. If this isn't agreed, we will actively look to increase alternative products that can be procured through our existing supply chain.

For example, as an alternative to buying a wooden garden set from Argos, one of a comparable quality and price would be ordered from one of our existing suppliers.

3. Timely and adequate response to complaints and questions

It was noted that:

- *Complaints and questions raised by residents often do not get timely or adequate responses. For example only some points raised in an email are replied to, or there is no communication or action taken after a problem is reported.*
- *The expectation is that the resident representative will follow this up, and spend a lot of time making sure that the issue is dealt with properly.*
- *The burden of work involved in chasing things up can put people off getting involved in Residents Associations, and is generally frustrating and demoralising.*
- *There should be a change in the culture of the Council, so the expectation is on officers to respond in a timely and adequate way to complaints and questions they receive.*

It was agreed to put these points on the Blue Pages, and to ask the Council what they will do to insure more timely and adequate responses to complaints and questions.

Action: for Blue Page

Response by Janet Dowdell, Housing Customer Services Manager, T: 01273 293191

If residents have individual enquiries we encourage them to contact the Housing Customer Service team on 01273 293030, or the Mears Repair help Desk on 08000526140 when it arises. However, we understand that tenant representatives may prefer to contact officers directly to get a quick response for a resident.

Phone calls, emails, letters and complaints coming into the Customer Service Team are monitored and recorded by the team who have direct referral routes into other teams for a specialist response where required and we would encourage tenant representatives to contact the team with enquiries in the first instance where possible.

If there has been a problem with a specific issue regarding association business not being followed up, please do raise it with Becky Purnell or Janet Dowdell and they will ensure everything is being done to resolve it.

4 Estate Development Budget progress

It was noted that a commitment has been made by the Council for all Estate Development Budget (EDB) work for 2015-16 to be completed during the same financial year.

A progress report on EDB work was requested, giving information on what work is on target and dates when all work is expected to be completed.

Action: for Blue Pages

Response by Keith Dadswell- Regional Manager Mears T: 01273 574356

A list of the 2015/16 approved main bids has been sent to the Resident Involvement Team. It is anticipated that all works will be completed in this financial year. This will be circulated to all who have requested it via email or a paper copy will be available at the upcoming Area Panel.

5. Reporting fraud

Knoll Residents' Association said they have worked closely with the Council over possible cases of Housing Benefit fraud. Where this is suspected, they have reported it so the council can investigate.

They have recently been told that responsibility for Housing Benefit fraud is no longer with the Council, but with the Department for Work and Pensions (DWP). It is not clear what the process now is for reporting suspected fraud.

It was agreed to ask for clarification of the process for reporting suspected fraud under the new system.

Action: for Blue Pages

Response by Graham Davies, Senior Tenancy Enforcement officer T: 01273 293218

It is correct that all allegations of benefit fraud have to be passed to the DWP for investigation; the council is no longer involved in investigating allegations relating purely to benefit fraud. All such allegations should be passed to the DWP via email or telephone as per below:

Tel: 0800 854440

Email: www.gov.uk/report-benefit-fraud

Allegations of Tenancy Fraud such as subletting are still investigated by the council's Corporate Fraud Team. They can be contacted via:

Email: Anti-fraud@brighton-hove.gov.uk

Tel: 01273 291847
