

**Tenants Talkback**  
**Minutes of Meeting Wednesday 16<sup>th</sup> January 2013**

**Attendance**

|                            |   |
|----------------------------|---|
| Maureen Montgomery (Chair) | Tenant Representative Ingatestone Village Voice |
| Chris Price (Vice-Chair)   | Tenant Representative - West Horndon            |
| Mick Greenslade            | Tenant Representative - Tillingham Bold         |
| Linda Skinner              | Tenant Representative - Pilgrims Hatch          |
| Cindy Russell              | Tenant Representative - Whittington Road        |
| Wendy Dennis               | Tenant Representative - Whittington Road        |
| Jackie Elliott             | Tenant Representative – Tollesbury Court        |
| Margaret Coxhead           | Tenant Representative - Burns Way               |
| Thelma Childs              | Tenant Representative - Burns Way               |
| Norman Miles               | Tenant Representative - Whittington Road        |
| Pat Smith                  | Tenant Representative - Wainwright Avenue       |
| Councillor Linda Golding   | Vice Chair Housing & Health Panel               |
| Malcolm Knights            | Head of Housing BBC                             |
| Robin Hill                 | Principal Officer (Estates Management) BBC      |
| Andy Long                  | Tenant Participation Co-ordinator BBC           |

**Also present:**

|                            |                                 |
|----------------------------|---------------------------------|
| Councillor Mike le Surf    | Ward Member for Brentwood South |
| Councillor Julia Morrissey | Ward Member for Brentwood South |

**1 Apologies**

|                          |   |
|--------------------------|---|
| Councillor Mrs Jan Pound | Chair Housing & Health Panel            |
| Councillor Vicky Davies  | Opposition Housing Spokesperson         |
| Carolann Pozzi           | Harewood Road Scheme Manager BBC        |
| Bob Goodwin              | Tenant Representative - Sir Francis Way |
| John Blackwell           | Tenant Representative – Greenshaw       |

**2 Minutes of Previous Meeting**

Minutes of previous meeting agreed

**3 Matters Arising**

Pat Smith requested that there be an Emergency Item on Fixed Term Tenancies  
MK confirmed that the Council has agreed an extension of four weeks to the  
Tenancy Strategy Consultation. Pat Smith expressed an interest in attending the  
next Health and Housing Panel

**4 Rent Increase / HRA Business Plan update**

MK confirmed that all BBC tenants had been invited to a Rent Increase Consultation Meeting at the Town Hall on Tuesday 8th January 2013. A copy of the presentation was handed out to those present. MK proceeded to outline the key points.

MK stated that the proposed average rent increase this year is £3.28 or 3.99%, but there is a spread, the highest increase is 7% for bedsits in Drake House because they are so far adrift from target rents.

He asked if the Talkback Group wanted to put forward an alternative to the suggested Rent Increase.

MM said that given the economic circumstances can tenants ask for a rent freeze?

MK explained that a rent freeze would result in a loss of income, impacting on the business plan for the Housing Service. A spreadsheet was shown modelling the impact of various rent increases on the business plan.

CP suggested that rent increases will eventually force more tenants into claiming benefits which would seem to be counter productive, whereas a rent cap might lead to savings in Housing Benefit payments. He asked if a balance can be achieved between the two e.g. limiting rent increases to save increases in benefit payments. MK explained that this cost / benefit is not quite so simple, because Housing Benefit is funded by Government, thus rent caps would be lost income to Brentwood tenants Housing Revenue Account, but a benefit saving to Government.

CP outlined that the Government's rent policy was set before the recession and should be reviewed because of the changes since then. He asked if there is any sign the Government will change its policy. MK confirmed there is no indication that this guidance will change, though there is local discretion within the overall

CP asked why BBC has so many empty Council properties. MK that no property is empty because it cannot be let. The target time to re-let properties is 22 days. Some properties take longer because of major works.

LS stated that when target rents were introduced in 2002 tenants were never shown the figures on which the property values were based. She believe that some factors may not have been taken into account when setting the values, for example the condition of individual properties and their location. She added that tenants have never been told what level rents are moving towards what is 80% of market rent? MK explained that the formula for rent setting is complex, but 2002 property values and target rents are readily available for individuals on request.

CP asked if tenants of houses are still subsidising service charges for flat dwellers? MK assured him they are not as the system was changed so that occupiers of flats blocks pay for the direct services they receive. He added that there is unlikely to be a major increase in service charges for 2013/14.

JE felt that residents were not getting value for money from the service charges currently being paid e.g. for caretaking and she asked if caretaking work was inspected. MK confirmed that the service charge setting formula allowed tenants to focus on the value for money of what they receive – it is open for tenants to explore different ways of obtaining these services.

NM asked, who is in charge of the communal lighting as he has noticed that lights are coming at the wrong times of the day? MK replied that BBC sets the time clocks but the Council has to keep adjusting these. He added that the Council is looking at alternative solutions for future capital programmes.

A copy of the proposed letter to be sent out to tenants in receipt of housing benefit who are underoccupying and will be affected by the room restrictions under Welfare Reform was circulated by RH who asked if any amendment was needed. No amendments were suggested but one resident asked what would happen with a couple living in a 2 bedroomed flat where the child moves out but there is a health issue with the husband and wife so they need separate bedrooms. Is there any flexibility allowing them to do this rather than downsize. MK / RH will look into the matter and report back. There were no other comments about the letter which will be sent out shortly.

PS then raised the subject of Fixed Term Tenancies. She said that while she was aware the consultation period on the Tenancy Strategy may have been extended by another four weeks BBC should be making tenants more aware that the consultation is taking place. She stated that people need to know about the implications of Fixed Term Tenancies. Do tenants realise that BBC can refuse to adopt Fixed Term Tenancies for example?

MM asked if every tenant should have been sent a letter informing them of these proposed changes. She asked if information about fixed term tenancies be sent out to all tenants so they are properly consulted.

Discussion then took place about how BBC could fully inform all residents about the consultation and Tenancy Strategy.

LS expressed concerns over the consultation and the implications of fixed term tenancies, for example, what if an existing tenant transferred to a smaller property, what sort of tenancy would they have? She felt that BBC must clarify the security factor for new and existing tenants.

MK stated that the Tenancy Strategy is a framework document – setting the parameters within which it expects every provider of social housing in the borough to work within. It is not a consultation about changing the terms of the Council's tenancy agreement, not just the Council. He added that before any changes were made to the Tenancy Agreement all tenants would have to be consulted on an individual basis. The Tenancy Strategy would be reviewed annually.

CP said it was important that BBC clarifies the impact that Fixed Term Tenancies will have on tenants. This is where a Resource Room is needed. This would provide a more pro-active way of getting the message out.

Discussion returned to the subject of the proposed rent increase. MK presented different models to explain the impact of different levels of rent increase. He demonstrated that a loss of £50,000 in one year would mean a loss of £50,000 in succeeding years so there would be a cumulative effect on the Business Plan over time. He suggested that tenant reps should take a considered view about altering the rent policy.

CP expressed concerns about the impact of the sale of Council housing in the Borough.

MK said there was an opportunity for BBC to re-invest funds by building housing on land it currently owns, such as garage areas. Once the use of this land had been maximised there may be more challenges for BBC to build further housing. Land in Brentwood is expensive to purchase.

MK asked those present to focus on the rent policy stated in the current Business Plan, and advised Talkback that if it wants to have credibility it should come forward with an alternative rent policy that works. Looking forward, if income is less then you have to reduce expenditure. How would you do that? There are opportunities to focus on Repairs and Maintenance and investing more in housing stock.

MM commented that hopefully this where scrutiny will play a part and asked, why don't we consider these options before we start looking at rent increases? MK replied that we are doing this but we must look at the long term. Referring to the Business Plan the most worrying period is 31st March 2017 when it is anticipated that reserves will be at their lowest.

MM said that given the financial restraints from the recession, Council's should still be a bit more gentle with tenants.

CP asked when will the £2 / week increase to reach target rents end? MK replied that it will end when a tenant's rent reaches the target rent for the property. It has ended already for many tenants.

Cllr Julie Morrissey said it is a big ask to expect ordinary people to understand the rent policy.

MK again encouraged the Talkback Group to think about the long term and the implications of a rent freeze should they wish to propose one.

### **Tenant Participation Update**

It was agreed that separate meetings be held for Tenants Talkback and Tenant Participation, i.e.:

#### **Tenants Talkback**

- Strategy / Rent Setting
- Business Plan
- Service Providers i.e. Repairs
- Capital Projects 50k budget
- Scrutiny
- Tenants Compact
- Revision of Talkback Constitution

#### **Tenant Participation Meetings**

- Event Planning i.e. Quiz, Roadshows
- Tenant Participation Budget – Small Projects
- Help from external agencies i.e. Community Payback
- Training Feedback and Details
- Grant Funding

### **Resource Room Update**

AL provided the Talkback Group with an update on the request for a Resource Room at the Town Hall

Brian Partridge, the Council's Head of Localism took a short paper to the Town Hall Delivery Group on this. Until BBC are clear about the future of the commercial and community areas, it is difficult to make a decision on other uses Further discussions concerning the Town Hall are to take place at the Council's Policy & Resources Board in March 2013, and BP will then be in a better position to respond after that meeting.

AL / RH suggested alternative locations. The feasibility of having a resource room at Gibraltar House will be investigated. An update will be provided at a future meeting.

## **Capital Projects Update**

AL gave an update on the latest projects:

- The fencing/shrubbery works at Greenshaw together with the installation of a patio at Harewood Road Sheltered Scheme will be completed soon.
- AL is meeting Steve Cole an architect and Ashe Green Civils with a view to putting together proposals for car parking schemes at Wadham Close and Hawksmoor Green Flats.

For any Parking Scheme to go-ahead Planning Permission is required. Drawings/Proposals will need to be produced to go with the Planning Application. These can be produced by Steve Cole but at a costs. These costs will be provided at the next Talkback Meeting for further discussion.

## **Doorstep surveys to communal blocks**

AL indicated that Council tenants in various communal flats are to receive a survey asking whether they would be interested in tenant participation and how they would like to see there area improved.

AL will visit the areas with those Tenant Representatives who are willing to get involved. A progress update will be provided at the next meeting.

## **Laptop**

AL will arrange for a laptop to be purchased for Tenant Participation as agreed at the last Talkback Meeting.

## **Events**

AL gave an update on the proposed Tenant Participation Events including the Joint Residents Association Quiz Night (**Saturday 11th May**) and the Our House Swinging Sixties Social (**Thursday 30th May**). Further details to follow

Cllr Linda Golding / AL expressed interest in holding an elderly persons day at West Horndon. This idea will be discussed at a future Tenant Participation Planning Meeting

## **Tenant Participation Planning Meeting**

Next Tenant Participation Planning is on Tuesday 5th February 2013 at 5.30pm in Meeting Room 1. The proposed agenda is outlined below.

- Frequency and Chairing of Meetings
- Events Planning / Ideas for Involvement 2013
- Feedback from Learning Exchange
- Joint Residents Association Quiz Night
- Roadshows Planning

- Training
- Funding Opportunities

**Any Other Business**

None

**Date and Time of Next Meeting**

Monday 11<sup>th</sup> February at 5.30pm in the Council Chamber