

Response to Scrutiny Working Group Report on Leaseholders and Customer Care

Recommendation	Response / Comments	Date	Update – October 2008
<p>R1 Housing should explore the potential merit of establishing a new borough-wide leaseholder’s forum. The Working Group would suggest that any new forum should see a balanced range of representation including: Council officers, Councillors, Leaseholder Representative Bodies. Functions of this forum might include; inter alia,</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • User test service charges • User test all future communications • Measure performance against an agreed set of performance indicators. • Review all communications with leaseholders in an effort to reduce the number of complaints and minimise the number of leaseholders withholding payment. This would include more detailed 	<p>The housing service will investigate the potential merit of establishing a new borough-wide leaseholders forum. In doing this the service will look at the role of existing mechanisms for consulting with tenants and leaseholders and look at those issues which are common to both tenants and leaseholders eg performance standards and monitoring, and those which are specific to leaseholders eg service charges, leaseholder communications etc.</p> <p>Existing mechanisms which will be considered in the review include the role of the leaseholders subgroup of the Borough-wide Compact Group as well as the Resident Involvement Register where recent workshops have been held with tenants and leaseholders on resident involvement and estate management, including standards.</p> <p>The review will also take into account the proposed establishment of Tower Hamlets Homes and the arrangements for leaseholder and Councillor board members as well as the current review of the Tenant Compact.</p> <p>It is proposed that a specific leaseholder workshop</p>	<p>December 2008</p>	<p>Proposals for the future THH resident involvement structure have been developed in consultation with the resident group set up to consider resident involvement. In addition a number of focus groups have been held with leaseholders on specific issues including communications, service charges and performance.</p> <p>The proposals for the future THH resident involvement structure set out a range of options including an option for a boroughwide leaseholder forum reporting to an overarching resident panel. Consultation on the options is currently being carried out through a survey of residents on the Getting Involved Register which is scheduled to complete in</p>

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<p>explanation of service charges including the differences and reasons for estimated and actual bills and why leaseholders in the same block may be paying different levels of charge</p>	<p>of the resident involvement register is held to discuss current arrangements for leaseholder consultation and develop proposals for consideration.</p> <p>The issues to be discussed will include service charges, communications and performance indicators, however it will also be important to ensure that those issues that equally affect both tenants and leaseholders are also addressed.</p>		<p>September.</p> <p>When finalising the proposals for future resident involvement structures all feedback will be taken into account.</p>
<p>R2 Housing should deliver greater transparency on the deliberations and decisions of Due Regard Panels (for Major Works) including giving leaseholder representatives an opportunity to present their case against works to the panel, providing feedback to local leaseholders on the outcomes and reasons for its decisions.</p>	<p>The Due Regard Panels are an innovative area of leaseholder engagement in major works schemes, creating a forum where leaseholders views or concerns on any major works proposal can be considered.</p> <p>This area of work can be developed further and the proposals made will be addressed as part of this process.</p> <p>Increased transparency will be provided by setting out further information regarding the due regard panels, incorporating circumstances in which they will be held, arrangements for making representations and feedback mechanisms to leaseholders.</p>	<p>September 2007</p>	<p>The procedure in respect of the Due Regard Panel has been amended and further information regarding the panels has been provided.</p>

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<p>R3 Housing should implement a key lessee system, seeking maximum estate coverage, similar to the one delivered by City West Homes.</p>	<p>The housing service is keen to explore further ways of engaging leaseholders in all aspects of the service.</p> <p>We will explore this potential initiative further with City West Homes in order to gain a better understanding of how the key lessee system operates, the resources needed to service and support this, and its effectiveness.</p> <p>The housing service will also explore the extent to which this initiative can be linked to current leaseholder involvement through the Resident Involvement Register.</p> <p>It is intended to develop recommendations for action by November 2007.</p>	<p>December 2008</p>	<p>We have explored this initiative with City West Homes.</p> <p>Relevant aspects of the City West key lessee scheme have been built into our proposals for service charges and estate inspections as well as leaseholder consultation.</p>
<p>R4 The key elements of service provision at a local level, such as cleaning, need to be subject to greater independent quality review and that the involvement of leaseholders in estate inspections needs to be enhanced. The Working Group believes the key lessee system would support this.</p>	<p>The current process of estate inspections is currently being reviewed to increase effectiveness and improve resident involvement. This includes looking at who attends estate inspections, what is looked at as part of estate inspections, what services are involved and how feedback is provided. This recommendation will be incorporated as part of this work.</p> <p>Resident Involvement in Estate Inspections is now monitored through the LHO performance returns.</p>	<p>October 2008</p>	<p>A caretaking residents panel has been established and this panel has agreed new caretaking service standards and response times which are now being implemented.</p> <p>The Caretaking Residents panel has also identified a resident monitoring panel</p>

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	<p>The resident involvement register workshop recently considered this area and made a number of proposals for enhancing estate inspections which will also be incorporated.</p> <p>The estate inspection process is being reviewed as part of the Housing Management Improvement Project, this is intended to improve the gathering and recording of information, such as caretaking/cleaning standards; horticulture; communal repairs. Estate inspection reports will be recorded using mobile technology enabling repairs to be issued on site.</p> <p>A relaunch of the estate inspections is planned for later in the year. This recommendation will be incorporated in this relaunch.</p>		<p>who are scheduled to receive training on monitoring standards. The panel will be undertaking regular monitoring of cleaning standards on estates from October 2008.</p>
<p>R5 Housing should conduct a review of its leaseholder communications, and guidance pack with a view to increasing accessibility and penetration of leaseholders.</p>	<p>The housing service is proposing to issue a regular leaseholders newsletter similar to the arrangements currently in place for tenants.</p> <p>It is proposed that the leaseholder workshop drawn from the resident involvement register be asked to consider current and proposed communications, to prioritise the areas for review and take an active role in this process.</p>	<p>Commence review November 2007</p>	<p>A leaseholders focus group was held to discuss communications.</p> <p>A readers panel has now been established.</p> <p>Leaseholder information is now included as a specific section of Open Door, our</p>

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			newsletter to all residents. The leaseholders guide is currently under review.
<p>R6 Housing must publish the “apportionment of time” data that informed the Housemark benchmarking exercise. Housing should undertake, in partnership with leaseholders, a review programme focused on improving service charge transparency and data provision.</p>	<p>The apportionment of time data that informed the housemark benchmarking exercise has been placed in the public domain. The apportionment of time data will be regularly and routinely collected from relevant services and the housing service will look at the best way of routinely reporting on this. The leaseholder workshop will incorporate work on identifying the key areas where service charge data provision can be improved and a programme of work developed to achieve this.</p>	April 2009	<p>The housemark benchmarking exercise has been placed in the public domain.</p> <p>Further work is needed with leaseholders to develop this area.</p>
<p>R7 Housing should send all leaseholders – and tenants – the caretaking schedule for their block, details of the annual horticultural maintenance programme, and clarify which other blocks are included in the estate cleaning service charge. The Working Group would also encourage Housing to consider including full details of the works covered by the block maintenance charge in the</p>	<p>Many leaseholders will already have a copy of the current caretaking schedule for their block, however we will further extend this to be accessible to all residents and cover further areas including horticulture and map site areas.</p> <p>We will therefore develop information that can be made available at all offices and on the Tower Hamlets/Tower Hamlets Homes website and provide further information on these issues in the proposed leaseholder newsletter.</p> <p>We will also improve the detail of the information provided regarding block maintenance charges</p>	August 2008	<p>Caretaking schedules have been placed in the noticeboards of each block and work is ongoing to provide similar information on horticulture. We are also making this information available on our website.</p>

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‘Actual’.	including use of the Council’s website and explore the potential to include this information with the actual bills.		
R8 The Working Group welcome the steps being taken to improve staff training and Leaseholder open days. These actions should be maintained and embedded further to improve leaseholder engagement.	<p>The housing service is continuing its programme of leaseholder open days and are looking to develop this to provide leaseholder surgeries linked to the production of estimated and actual bills.</p> <p>A schedule of Open Days for 2008/09 will be developed.</p> <p>Staff training programmes on leasehold issues now form a core part of the housing training plan.</p>	Annual review 31.03.09	Completed and subject to annual review.
R9 Housing should ensure that it implements and embeds fully all aspects of the Council’s Customer Promise, in both process and culture.	<p>Specific training has been carried out in recent months on the Council’s core values and this work will continue.</p> <p>A specific customer care element of the cross service leaseholder training has been put in place providing training for all front line staff including caretakers, housing officers and technical staff. A further training and staff development programme is being developed.</p> <p>Monitoring systems are in place to monitor the</p>	Annual review 31.03.09	<p>Completed and subject to annual review.</p> <p>All staff transferred to THH received a specific induction on the values and customer ethos of THH, and this is ongoing.</p>

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	<p>extent to which each area of service meets the requirements of the Customer Promise and this needs to be extended to ensure all services can be monitored in all areas of the promise. The move to consolidated service locations will assist in this process.</p>		
<p>R10 There is clear evidence that a significant number of leaseholders lack confidence in the current Alternative Dispute Resolution (ADR) scheme's independence and fairness. The Working Group believe that 3 options should be considered by Housing and Cabinet, following consultation with leaseholders and their representatives:</p> <p>i. Relaunch the current ADR scheme. There would need to be clear communication to leaseholders that the system had changed and what the improvements were intended to achieve. This would include: clearer information about the new transparent ADR process including;</p>	<p>The three options put forward will be evaluated and consultation carried out.</p> <p>We will also use the Leaseholder Workshop to explore how to make information on the scheme clearer, provide a more streamlined process and use the corporate complaints procedure for stage 1 and 2 complaints with the potential for the ADR independent mechanisms to replace the stage 3 process.</p> <p>Information from other Local Authorities does however suggest that the principles of the current scheme are good practice in that it:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - is available for any dispute affecting service charges - offers a three stage resolution process - provides a range of independent routes for resolution administered by the Chartered Institute of Arbitrators. 	<p>Commence November 2007</p>	<p>Discussions have taken place with THLA and a paper setting out four potential ADR options has been developed.</p> <p>This paper is currently subject to consultation with THLA.</p> <p>Once agreed a wider consultation involving a range of stakeholders will be carried out and firm recommendations developed for THH Board and the Council's Cabinet.</p> <p>In the meantime, we have been obtaining improved feedback from the current scheme and we are continuing to ensure</p>

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<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - That the ADR is one option and clearly set out the different options, and when each one is most appropriate. - Clearer guidelines around the specifics of the process, including the rights and responsibilities of both parties. ii. Disband the ADR process and make all complaints go through the corporate complaints procedure. If this option was taken it would be necessary for an option of arbitration/ mediation to take place between stage two and three of the complaints procedure. iii. Develop a new ADR scheme reflecting current industry best practice 	<p>It Any revised scheme or replacement proposals will be accompanied by clear information on how the scheme works and the roles of all parties.</p>		<p>leaseholder service charge disputes are properly investigated and settled where possible.</p>
<p>R11 The current relationship between the ADR scheme, the use of a Leaseholder Valuation Tribunal and Corporate Complaints Process is not clear. As a matter of urgency, Housing should, in</p>	<p>It is agreed that further clarity should be provided on the current routes, and further development of this will be linked to recommendation 10.</p> <p>Clear guidance for staff and leaseholders will be produced.</p>	<p>November 2007</p>	<p>This recommendation is linked to recommendation 10 above.</p>

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<p>consultation with key leaseholder groups, provide clear guidance to staff and leaseholders on the role of each process.</p>			
<p>R12 The Working Group would encourage Housing to adopt a model which includes:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • officers within the central team being given geographical patches to provide a more cohesive service • Specific Leaseholder Officers within the Local Housing Office, proportionate to the number of leaseholder properties • More leaseholder services to be provided at the Local Housing Office. 	<p>The housing service will explore the recommendation of Overview and Scrutiny. The first stage of the Local Housing Office reconfiguration to provide four customer access centres concentrates on consolidating existing services. A further phase of work is planned following the reconfiguration to look at what other services could be provided from the customer access centres and this element of the recommendation will be considered as part of this second stage assessment.</p> <p>The proposed future structures for the home ownership service are currently being reassessed and a customer services team with a geographical focus is being proposed as part of this process.</p> <p>The potential to provide more information to leaseholders and answer a broader range of queries on leaseholder issues accessing centrally maintained databases will be developed as part of the move to customer access centres and</p>	<p>April 2008</p>	<p>Restructuring of Local Service Centres and the Home Ownership Service has now been completed and alignment to LSC areas has been carried out wherever possible.</p> <p>We are in the process of carrying out a trial, giving teams within the central leaseholder teams specific responsibility for each LSC area. We will keep this under review to ensure close working continues to develop between the central team and the LSC offices.</p>

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	particularly the proposed co-location with one stop shops enabling a broad range of enquiries to be answered at the first point of access.		
R13 Housing should review the current contract with Citizens Advice Bureau (CAB) so that it provides a service that deals specifically with managing the financial issues faced by leaseholders.	<p>The current contract with the Citizens Advice Bureau does provide leaseholders with access to specific workers to address the financial issues faced by leaseholders.</p> <p>This contract is due for renewal next year and therefore a re-tendering process will be carried out with a reviewed specification to ensure an effective, value for money service is provided.</p>	April 2009	A report on the CAB and the options available has been prepared for further discussion.
R14 Housing should meet with Tower Hamlets Community Credit Union to explore developing specific support for leaseholders so that they can access affordable loans.	<p>Arrangements will be made to meet with Tower Hamlets Community Credit Union to explore the options that the credit union can offer in respect of providing assistance to leaseholders.</p> <p>The housing service will also explore whether standard information on advice agencies can be incorporated with all relevant correspondence to leaseholders.</p>	November 2007	Initial discussions held with TH Credit Union in 2007. A bid has been made for Supporting People funding to develop specific proposals. This has been discussed with TH Credit Union who are taking proposals to their Board in Sept/Oct 2008.
R15 Housing should provide clear guidance to leaseholders on the law surrounding statute barred debt.	<p>It is anticipated that issues around statute barred debt should be a relatively short term issue as old disputes are resolved.</p> <p>The extent to which any debt may be statute barred is dependent on the date the debt was incurred, the terms of the debt, as well as the dates</p>	April 2008	Information is provided on a case by case basis as the extent to which any debt is statute barred depends on the particular circumstances of each case.

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	<p>on which residents were alerted and reminded of the debt.</p> <p>The housing service will review the information it provides to leaseholders in respect of arrears to address the issue raised in this recommendation.</p>		
<p>R16 Communication underpins how the Council deals with local residents. In improving the responsiveness of services , the Council needs to invest further so that communication is clear, accessible and appropriate to services. This is particularly important in explaining the reasons for the way that services are delivered, particularly where individual charges are being raised.</p>	<p>Communications team will review with Housing their current communications channels and materials to ensure that future work is properly targeted, accessible, clear and concise.</p>	<p>By early Autumn 2007</p>	<p>Tower Hamlets Homes (THH) has invested in a permanent Communications Manager to enhance and improve communications with THH residents.</p> <p>A communication protocol has been established between the Council and Tower Hamlets Homes (THH) communications team to ensure targeted and precise communications.</p> <p>These include a strategy for the Estate Improvement Programme and the launch of the Overcrowding Strategy. Regular liaison meetings take place between the LBTH & THH Communications colleagues.</p> <p>A THH website has been</p>

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			<p>established. THH is communicating regularly with tenants and leaseholders through the 'Open Door' newsletter which is distributed every two months. A communications strategy will be considered by the THH board in October.</p>
<p>R17 The Council needs to explore further how it can get closer to customers. For front-line high volume services such as housing, it would seem beneficial to have a strong connection between service providers and localities. This seems to provide the greatest potential to build a strong customer relationship based around both ownership and accountability.</p>	<p>The Council's current proposals for access to front line services will integrate the provision of housing services with other front line services accessed through One Stop Shops as well as expand the range of services accessed through the Council's call centre. By 01.04.08 It is recognised that there can be benefits from having a strong connection between service providers and localities and the Council is therefore looking at what services can be located in the local centres proposed including caretaking and ASB. In addition where physical location is not proposed the Council is looking at whether central teams can be patch based to give geographical alignment.</p>	<p>April 2008</p>	<p>South Poplar OSS opened in April 2008 and proving to be a popular location for customers. The five OSS are working with the LSC's to provide services to customers.</p>
<p>R18 The Corporate Complaints Process is a crucial part of the Council's delivery of the</p>	<p>Leaflets on the various complaints processes are promoted. The leaflet and publicity on Corporate Complaints, available to customers and staff,</p>	<p>February 2008</p>	<p>Procedures have been put in place and are working well in relation to complaints</p>

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<p>customer promise. The Council should ensure that its relationship with any other statutory or non-statutory processes that directorates may use is clear to both staff and residents.</p>	<p>clearly states this procedure does not replace any formal appeal process or other statutory complaint processes. This leaflet and accompanying publicity will be reviewed by the end of the year with an opportunity to check and improve clarity.</p> <p>The Corporate Complaints team passes on any complaint that has to be dealt with by any other process to the appropriate person/team. Regular training for staff on complaints is held, in which the different statutory procedures are described. Each Directorate has a designated complaints officer who advises staff on complaint matters and can identify appropriate procedures to be used. The effectiveness/reach of this training and the information on the Council's website will be reviewed</p>		<p>monitoring between the Council and THH. The complaints procedure is promoted on THH website.</p>
<p>R19 The Customer Promise is a vital statement of the Council's culture and delivery of Excellent Public Services. The Council should develop clearer mechanisms for ensuring both the spirit and content of the Customer Promise are being delivered in Directorates.</p>	<p>Customer Promise standards are already embedded and monitored for the high volume services being dealt with by the Council's Contact Centres. The Action Plan agreed to support the new Customer Access Strategy includes a number of actions regarding performance monitoring. Work is nearly complete on benchmarking costs per contact with other boroughs and work also being undertaken to identify robust measurements of quality and customer satisfaction rather than just speed, which is line with the Varney report on</p>	<p>April 2008</p>	<p>New performance indicators have been agreed as part of the development of the new Strategic Plan. A review of the Customer promise is also under way and will be presented to Members in due course.</p> <p>New methods to monitor customer satisfaction have</p>

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	<p>efficiency. This will also include a review of the Customer Promise and the type of indicators included within it, including more meaningful monitoring in future.. We are also looking to add to the services delivered through the Customer Access division, allowing these services to benefit from the quality control processes already in place and being continually developed within the division.</p>		<p>now been put in place. These include kiosks in OSS and automated surveys with the contact centre as well as mystery shopping.</p>