

# Ealing Council Housing Forum Annual Report 2011/12



## Message from the Chair

Welcome to the first Ealing Council Housing Forum annual report. This document details the progress the group has made since its formation in January 2011. Established to give residents the opportunity to scrutinise the performance of the Regeneration and Housing department, the Forum has played a vital role in maintaining high quality services across the borough.

In many ways, last year was a major milestone in a journey which started in 2010 with the move towards self regulation of landlords. After a lot of hard work by residents, key individuals and staff the past 12 months has seen us develop an innovative structure of involvement. This model has allowed us to shape services around the needs of residents and their priorities. The specification

for our new Repairs and Maintenance contracts were developed by residents to make them more responsive and transparent.

The Housing Forum and Scrutiny Panels are groups created by residents for residents. Their priorities set the agenda for scrutiny and they have a direct channel of communication with decision makers. To date, the groups have completed over 900 individual scrutiny checks, which have been used in performance management of teams, contracts and service providers, driving continuous improvement.

The year ahead promises a number of significant challenges but also many opportunities. We plan to build on our good work and continue to test services against resident expectations.

Hitesh Tailor

Cabinet Member for Housing

## What is the Housing Forum?

The Housing Forum is an advisory body for tenants and leaseholders of the London Borough of Ealing. The perception of residents, their aspirations and priorities for services are the drivers behind the Forum. The group enables real scrutiny and accountability of the department and its services and ultimately supports tenant led self-regulation.

The initial aim of the Ealing Council Housing Forum was to complement and enhance the performance of the Regeneration and Housing function during and after re-integration of Ealing Homes in April 2011. The Forum continues to monitor the performance of the department through tenant led 'reality checks' and larger pieces of scrutiny work. The Housing Forum works with the council's Management Team, officers and stakeholders and is given access to performance information.

### Key Objectives

- Customers are placed at the centre of service delivery
- Ensure smooth transition of services during and after the period of re-integration
- Ealing Council's housing function has embedded systems across the department, which enable resident led self-scrutiny of services provided.
- Directors and Service Heads work with service scrutiny panels and the forum in maintaining high levels of performance against the Statutory Housing Regulatory Framework
- Residents have a formally recognised strategic body that can report its findings to the Cabinet Member for Housing and Executive Director of Regeneration and Housing
- Examples of good working practice are learnt and shared across the department and with other social housing partners

### The Housing Forum will

- Meet quarterly\* to review the performance of services, as reported by service scrutiny panels and against the current KPI suite (provided by the strategy policy and performance team)
- Initiate additional scrutiny exercises where performance could be improved subject to resources
- Consult on housing policy development, future strategies, service changes and the Housing Business/Improvement Plan
- Monitor risk using the Housing Health and Safety ratings system
- Develop effective engagement amongst tenants and leaseholders especially amongst underrepresented groups
- Influence proposals to develop a cross tenure consultative body

\* under review

## Resident-led self regulation and developing the Housing Forum

Set out in the Localism Act 2011 is the importance of the role of consumer regulation in the setting clear service standards for social landlords and addressing serious failures against those standards. This concept of resident-led self-regulation was specifically developed for the social housing sector, with the aim of giving tenants more influence over the priorities and performance of their landlord.

### In simple terms

'an approach where residents' priorities, views and engagement with relevant processes are at the heart of housing organisations' frameworks for directing, accounting for, monitoring, assessing and modifying their own behaviour and performance'. CIH 2007

Early in 2011 a group of tenants visited standard bearers in resident-led self-regulation around the country - with a view to developing a new structure of resident involvement for the Council. Working closely with council officers, the group benchmarked itself against such organisations and developed the new structure with the Housing Forum forming the top tier supplemented by service specific panels.

In March 2011, adverts were placed in the resident newsletter and website asking for applications to join the new resident scrutiny panels. Over 90 residents registered an interest in joining the new panels and were invited to attend an informal interview.

Two residents from two existing groups (the Resident Council (John Hopkins) and the Ealing Homes Board (Deborah Haynes)) conducted the interviews supported by Hugh Boatswain (ex Audit Commission) with a view to recruiting members to the panels. Over 40 residents were interviewed to join the panels in a process held independently of the council.

Of the 36 residents selected to join the new groups, six residents were chosen by the interview panel to head-up each specific scrutiny panel. These panel chairs would report back their group's findings to the Housing Forum at quarterly meetings.



**Deborah Haynes – Chair, Quality of Accommodation Scrutiny Panel**  
**A resident of Hanwell, Deborah has a wealth of housing experience having spent over three years on the Ealing Homes Board.**

“Through my experience working on the Board of Ealing Homes, I have gained inside knowledge of what is expected with Housing. One of my roles on the Board was as the Health & Safety Champion. The work my team have been doing is checking on Quality of Accommodation. This involves checking on a decent homes programme and a replacement lift programme for a sheltered accommodation block. We have visited and spoken to residents about work being carried out for them by the London Borough of Ealing and have had follow up meetings with Council Officers about any concerns noted. The job seems at times very long winded but for the future of all Ealing residents, either Council or Leasehold we feel that we are making a difference for the Housing Forum.”

**Quality of Accommodation Scrutiny Panel members:** Eddie Brown, Helen Julien, Howard Franklin



**Jacob Akiwumi – Chair, Repairs and Maintenance Scrutiny Panel.**  
**Jacob recently became a Catalyst Housing tenant in South Acton. This has enabled him to give a cross tenure landlord view of R&M delivery.**

“I feel the last year has seen residents become more empowered in holding contractors to task. I have been impressed by the reception I have received from residents when carrying out interviews. Although there is room for improvement from our contractors we have now developed a constructive working relationship. I look forward to continuing to monitor the contract and communicating with my fellow tenants”.

**Repairs and Maintenance Scrutiny Panel members:** Anne Fabing, John Gashion, Grace Ismael, John Hopkins, Patrick Beirne, Halima Mohamed, Sonia Gyawu-Kyem



**John Hopkins – Chair, Cleaning and Caretaking Scrutiny Panel**  
**John is an active member of the community and Chair of the Rectory Park residents association. A previous member of the Ealing Homes Resident Council, John has also received borough wide recognition being voted Resident of the year at the (Recognising Outstanding Achievements of Residents Awards) 2010.**

“Over the last year the standards of caretaking has increased greatly and we will be working on keeping that standard up. With the start of a new grounds maintenance contract we will also be working with teams to get maximum value for money.”

**Cleaning and Caretaking Scrutiny Panel members:** Anne Fabing, Valerie Gordon, Tony Lewis, Margaret Brown and RA Chairs: John Hopkins, Eddie Brown, Livingstone St Louis, Jean Brooker, Mary Griffiths, Hussein Dima, Ken Pollington, Peter Nolan



**Neil Sarkar – Chair, Tenancy Scrutiny Panel.**

**Neil is a Leaseholder of Glendun Court in Acton and has been involved in shaping housing services for a number of years as a member of the Ealing Homes Resident Council.**

“The last year has seen my panel scrutinise the performance of the Allocations, Tenancy Management and Rents departments. Our input has seen changes brought about at sign-up for new tenants.

They now receive better advice around welfare and benefits and two new officers are being recruited to assist tenants around financial inclusion. With the impending changes to welfare reform the Tenancy Scrutiny Panel will play a crucial role in ensuring residents receive good quality advice before, during and after the changes.”

**Tenancy Scrutiny Panel members:** Sean Burke, Leta Coward, Livingstone St Louis, Abdi Ali, Michael Beaumont, Dahir Omar



**Norma Lord - Chair, Antisocial Behaviour.**

**In her day job Norma works at Ealing, Hammersmith and West London College giving her an insight into issues facing young people. She is a Leaseholder of Radcliffe Way in Northolt and is undertaking resident association training in order to further develop her activities in her community.**

“Since joining the Housing Forum my confidence has grown and I have taken advantage of numerous training opportunities in the last year, and look forward to the next 12 months with more confidence and knowledge. During the year we have worked closely with the Antisocial behaviour team in refining our scrutiny methods, we’re aware of changes being made and we are keen to carry on the work we’ve started. I also hope to get together more often with my fellow scrutineers.”

**Antisocial Behaviour Scrutiny Panel members:** Robin Baird, Linda Collet, Claudette McCrae, Baljinder Sandhu, Mary Griffiths



**Ron Kirkwood – Chair, Housing for Older People.**

**Current ROAR Resident of the Year, Ron works tirelessly in improving the lives of Sheltered Residents. Ealing resident Ron is the chair of the CASH (Campaigning for Action in Sheltered Housing) Forum, and also volunteers as a bereavement counsellor.**

“With the increasing numbers of elderly people in the Ealing Borough, it has become essential to focus attention on their housing needs.

Sheltered Housing helps to provide a safe and secure environment, while protecting their independence, they can be assured of the care and support of Sheltered Housing Officers, who will be available to provide access to any service which they may need. The Housing Forum is an excellent platform to ensure these vital services are kept to the highest standard.”

**Housing for Older People Scrutiny Panel members:** Cheryl Greaves, Naz Meray, Claire Todd, Halima Mohamed, George Lafford

## Scrutinising Services

Our model for resident scrutiny was developed as part of the re-tendering process for the repairs and maintenance contracts, which started in December 2010. Over 2000 residents took part in developing Local Standards for the new contracts, with the repairs and maintenance panel forming the selection committee and working on the contract specification. The 20 Local Standards devised by residents then formed part of the contracts' performance framework, with failure to meet standards being penalised with defect and subsequent default notices. In as many cases as possible we have aimed to tie local standard to contracts.

## Repairs and Maintenance

In the last twelve months the R&M Scrutiny Panel has undertaken 240 individual pieces of investigation work into the level of service fellow residents have received. Panel members scrutinise a batch of 60 jobs per quarter (30 per contractor) through telephone interviews with tenants in receipt of recent repairs. Their results are inputted using an online mechanism, which provides immediate reports to the council. Scrutineers receive training and expenses to carry out their work. They meet regularly with contractors to feedback tenant perception and to make recommendations for service improvement.

The Scrutiny Panel have told us	Action taken
Residents wanted a more responsive Repairs service with better communication from contractors.	Local Repairs Standards agreed with residents during the consultation on the new contracts, including: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Automated messages reminding residents about appointments (24 hours and 2 hours prior)</li> <li>Most repairs completed on first visit, and when needed, follow-on appointments arranged immediately</li> <li>Detailed programme of works provided in complex cases- Sign-off of completed works by resident (or senior caretaker)</li> </ul>
Many tenants felt simple jobs were taking longer than expected.	We have employed two multi-trade handyperson operatives in both contract areas to carry out priority work as directed by the council
Residents felt operatives were too vague about their arrival times	We put in place the option for two-hour appointment slots



## Cleaning and Caretaking

Each quarter, Chairs of local Resident Associations and members of the scrutiny panel undertake estate inspections against a robust list of local standards. To date over 180 estate inspections have been completed with results fed back to the Housing Forum.

The Scrutiny Panel have told us	Action taken
Residents raised issues around personal belongings being often left in communal areas and halls causing fire hazards.	The council have reintroduced the zero tolerance policy on tenants storing belongings in communal areas. Items are removed and stored for a period of time.
They identified the difficulties faced by older tenants in recycling and refuse disposal.	Our caretakers now provide a bespoke refuse collection service for over 75s
Residents requested additional communal cleaning on top of the weekly schedule.	Residents can now request a deep clean of their block and are invited to a post inspection.

## Tenancy

The Tenancy Scrutiny Panel carry out interviews with 30 new tenants every quarter with a view to gauging their experience of the Allocations, Tenancy and Rent Collection teams. So far the panel has interviewed 97 new residents and fed back their findings to the Housing Forum. As with the R&M Scrutiny Panel the data is inputted using an online system and officers at the council generate reports.

The Scrutiny Panel have told us	Action taken
Residents have requested more advice at sign-up particularly rent and benefits information.	Two Financial Inclusion Officers positions are being recruited to work on prevention of rent arrear debt and to assist with money management advice.

## Antisocial Behaviour

The ASB Scrutiny Panel have worked closely with the regulatory services team in monitoring cases specific to housing estates. Panel members interview 60 residents each quarter, 30 who have recently reported antisocial behaviour and 30 who have recently had their cases closed.

The Scrutiny Panel have told us	Action taken
The Forum highlighted that communication is lacking between complainants and the council. This had resulted in low satisfaction results in dealing with cases.	Scrutiny panels were engaged to interview tenants making complaints and feed back results. Team Leaders held regular supervision with those officers identified in scrutiny as not meeting standards. There has since been a review of the service with new processes and working patches.

## Quality Of Accommodation

Planning major works and maintenance to ensure homes are kept to a decent standard is a key objective of the Housing Department. The Quality of Accommodation scrutiny panel undertake inspections on major works projects. To date they have developed a set of local standards and carried out two scrutiny exercises at improvement projects across the borough.

The Scrutiny Panel have told us	Action taken
Residents have expressed a desire to be involved in monitoring the progress and quality of work on major projects. They also wanted all contractors to meet expectations set out in the Ealing Council Code of Conduct. To date, the panel have undertaken two scrutiny exercises; the lift replacement programme at Sheltered Blocks and the window, kitchen and bathroom works at Copley Close.	As a result of panel feedback all contractors (including sub-contractors) are obliged to abide with the Code of Conduct. Residents are also now involved in project set-up meetings, offered greater choice and have the opportunity to monitor contractor performance on major works.

## Housing for Older People

The Housing for Older People scrutiny panel has interviewed over 100 sheltered housing residents gauging their experience of the service. The Scrutiny Panel is made up of a cross section of the resident population with three members of the panel living in sheltered housing schemes and three general needs tenants.

The Scrutiny Panel have told us	Action taken
Through their interviews with sheltered housing tenants the panel have identified the need to increase contact with those residents who face social isolation. They also found that many sheltered residents require assistance in accessing services such as repairs.	As part of the recently re-shaped sheltered housing service we have introduced a dedicated Sheltered Housing Officer for each scheme and prioritised face-to face contact. Officers are now also required to schedule regular times to be at each scheme. We are also recruiting a Service Access Coordinator position tasked with engaging tenants in social activities and ensuring equality of access to services.



## Scrutiny Exercises

Members of the Housing Forum also have engaged in targeted scrutiny exercises into specific areas of service decided by the group such as the Complaints process. At the end of last year they selected two forum representatives to undertake a complaints scrutiny exercise. The Forum representatives were asked to:

1. Look at the current complaints process and make recommendations for improvement
2. Make recommendations in response to the government's requirement for a local 'democratic filter'
3. Audit the quality of responses to complaints.

### What the panel did:

- Interview officers who developed the current complaints policy
- Observe use of IT system by officers who log complaints and quality check responses for Housing
- Looked through performance information on complaints for the last two and a half years
- Undertook a survey of cases covering the 3 months from August to October 2011 (132 closed complaints/19 responses received)
- Selected and reviewed letters from complainants and the responses made

### What they found:

- Most complaints were about repairs to Council property (39%) followed by Homelessness (18%)
- That complaints were generally responded to in target.
- That escalation rates were fairly consistent, except in the escalation from stage 3 to Ombudsman, which has improved and reduced from 62% to 17% over the 3-year period looked at.
- The quality of responses was acceptable; in a couple of cases letters missed key information such as how to progress the complaint to the next stage.
- Staff were frustrated by the IT system in particular the ability to produce reports from the system

## Recommendations

1. A Compensation Policy is introduced, and advertised to residents alongside the Complaints Procedure.
2. A record of the amount and reason for any compensation should be regularly reported to the Forum or a scrutiny panel.
3. Improvements to the IT system so data can be easily extracted for reporting and analysis
4. Introduce a Satisfaction survey sent to complainants when their complaint is closed (adopted into process)
5. Advertise the Council complaints service more prominently on the Council's

website and via leaflets.

## Recommendations about the democratic filter

1. Set up a democratic filter after stage three with at least three residents on the panel, and members if cabinet choose this option.
2. Complaints will be anonymised to protect confidentiality
3. A compulsory comprehensive training programme to be arranged for panel members
4. Agreement to be made as to who the panels findings are reported to.

## Strategic Involvement

The Housing Forum has also provided valuable input into budgeting, rent setting and business planning. Reforms to the Housing Revenue Account and the introduction of a self-financing model has given the council opportunities to carry out large scale improvement projects on estates. Council commitments have been developed incorporating the priorities of the residents and the Housing Forum has been at the forefront of this process.

## Housing Forum members made the following recommendations;

The 30-year business plan;

- The council must make every effort to maximise the income from HRA owned properties like shops and garages. Residents would like to see regular reports on this to the relevant forums.
- A short guide to HRA reform and commitments will be included in Key Issues.

The proposed rent increase, the rationale for it;

- It is noted that the proposed increase is below the government guideline and lower than other boroughs.
- The Housing Forum will be involved in next years business planning

The 2012/13 in-year commitments to maintain, refurbish and regenerate;

- The commitments were noted and welcomed.
- These commitments should be widely communicated to tenants alongside the notice of the rent increase.
- The best way to do this is in the letter informing residents of the increase or the housing newsletter
- The commitment for the HRA to fund adaptations for disabled residents should be emphasised as many people believe it is government funded.

## Communications

Members of the Forum also formed an editorial panel for the production of the Housing newsletter. They made comments on design, content and tone and identified priorities for articles. Articles selected by residents were included in the publication and distributed to all council properties. Directors from Housing and Corporate Communications are also considering their comments on design and layout.

## Resident Scrutiny Planning for 12/13

Members of the Housing Forum and the resident Scrutiny Panels came together with Heads of Service at Ealing Town Hall on Tuesday 10 July 2012 to set priorities for the forthcoming year. These priorities will be built into the year's scrutiny programme carried out by the panels.

### Repairs and Maintenance

As part of the new Housing Regulatory Framework landlords are required to offer tenants choice around the way their repairs service is delivered. This includes potentially offering residents the chance to be paid for carrying out some of their own repairs. Over the next year the Housing Forum will explore the Pros and Cons of such a project with a view to launching a pilot.

### Quality of Accommodation

In March 2011 the Council completed its major investment programme to achieve the Decent Homes Standard in all properties (with the exception of regeneration estates). Now that this standard has been achieved the focus of the Capital Investment Programme has changed. Over the next year residents will work closely with the team on devising standards for planned maintenance on those estates that have received Decent Homes work and estates earmarked for regeneration, in the medium to long term.

### Tenancy

The Council is committed to providing lifetime tenancies for residents in the majority of circumstances. We are however considering using Flexible Tenancies, but only in defined exceptional circumstances, for example, as part of a HCA funded development programme or as part of a local lettings plan. As part of the Tenancy Scrutiny Panel's work in monitoring standards, they will also explore the potential for introducing bespoke lettings policies on key estates.

### Antisocial Behaviour

The Antisocial Behaviour function has recently undergone a large-scale review putting officers closer to the communities they serve. Under the new regulatory framework Landlords are required to publish their policies on how they work with relevant partners to prevent and tackle antisocial behaviour in areas where they own properties. Over the next year the ASB resident scrutiny panel plans to review their standards and scrutiny methods to ensure the new service meets the needs of customers.

### Leaseholder and Homeownership

Leaseholders make up a significant part of our customer base. It is important that when undertaking major works projects, communal repairs and carrying out cleaning and caretaking we ensure they and tenants receive value for money. Next year we will work with leaseholders in developing and monitoring specific leasehold standards, reporting back the results to the Housing Forum.

## Estate Services

The Regulatory Framework outlines the responsibilities of Landlords and their requirement to keep the neighbourhood and communal areas clean and safe. They are required to work in partnership with their tenants and other providers and public bodies where it is effective to do so. The Cleaning and Caretaking scrutiny panel outlined the need to develop a standard on individual estates and to work with residents and officers of other social landlords in developing and monitoring such standards.

## Housing For Older People

Ealing Council recently conducted a review of the Sheltered Housing service and the recommendations and priorities of residents have been built into our approach to delivery. We are now putting greater emphasis on accessibility of services for our older residents and ensuring there is more face-to-face contact with Sheltered Housing officers. The Housing for Older People Scrutiny Panel will play a pivotal role in ensuring the new service meets customer expectations and will develop bespoke methods of scrutiny.

## Get Involved

If you are interested in getting involved in the Ealing Council resident scrutiny panels please contact:

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