

## **HARINGEY LEASEHOLDERS' ASSOCIATION**

### **MINUTES OF THE ANNUAL GENERAL MEETING HELD AT HARINGEY CIVIC CENTRE, WOOD GREEN, N22 ON SATURDAY 20<sup>th</sup> APRIL 2013**

**Present:** Sue Brown (Chair) [SB], Nick Martin-Clark (Treasurer) [NMC], a total of 35 other members of the Association, Astrid Kjellberg-Obst (HfH) [AK-O] and Lynne Featherstone MP [LF].

#### **1 Opening Remarks and Chair's Annual Report**

The Chair welcomed leaseholders to the AGM and presented her annual report. She said that although it had been an eventful year the good news was that the HLA had been re-recognised by HfH as the leaseholder umbrella group. The new interim Director for Housing Management, Eamon McGoldrick, had made a difference by finally agreeing to talk to us. He had now left and the meeting was pleased to welcome the new Director of Housing Operations, Astrid Kjellberg-Obst, who would introduce herself later.

The Chair mentioned the improvements to the website and the sending out of newsletters and said that the HLA was now finally able to proactively set about improving the lot of leaseholders.

The Chair thanked Rita, Delsie and Nick, the long-standing committee members for their contribution during the year as well as Kate and Anne who had joined last year and made such a difference.

The Chair singled out Peter for his outstanding work as Secretary and said that it was a loss to the Association that he had taken up his position on the board of Homes for Haringey but that he was to be congratulated nonetheless.

The Chair asked for more people to join the committee and said that every little helps.

The Chair said that the previous leaseholder board member had been declared ineligible because she was subletting. This was the first anyone had heard of this rule. If subletters were not leaseholders what were they? Can subletters not vote in board elections? Were the last two elections therefore invalid? Were the decisions taken by those members also invalid? The HLA had written to the leader of the Council suggesting that the definition of leaseholder in HfH's Articles of Association be changed to give all leaseholders rights. Subletters numbered a third of the Association's membership.

The bad news was that our long-delayed appeal was being held up by a refusal by HfH to allow all the grounds of appeal, including the alleged discrimination against the HLA, to be heard. HfH had issued an ultimatum threatening to shut down the

appeal unless the HLA agreed to their conditions and HLA had had to threaten an injunction.

HfH apparently now realised they had not had jurisdiction at the time of derecognition and were proposing to hear just that argument but this would not clear the HLA's name. After what the HLA had been through an apology was required. There had also been a financial consequence for the HLA as well as time and stress. The officers responsible were still in post so there was no guarantee this sort of thing couldn't happen again.

The Chair said this was why she had been to talk Lynne Featherstone who had supported the HLA by writing to the Chief Executive of the Council who owned HfH 100%. A response was being awaited and the appeal was therefore pending.

The Chair finished on a positive note by saying that the HLA hoped to encourage the setting up of local groups and to re-open its advice centre by setting up a levy of around £2 or £3 a year on the service charge. The Chair pointed out that regular meetings with HfH on service charge issues were taking place and said that the HLA hoped to set up service charge sub-group.

There were no questions on the Chair's report, which was adopted overwhelmingly with no votes against and no abstentions.

## **2 Treasurer's Report**

NMC presented the HLA accounts for the year ending 31 March 2013. The main point was that after spending a lot of money last year this year things were getting back to normal and stabilising. The HLA had not had to spend quite so much money. Subscriptions were down again but there were about 40 that had not yet been sent to the bank so the picture was improving. The fact that subscriptions had held up even during the bad times had enabled the HLA to survive as an independent organisation.

The grant figure of £750 reflected the fact that HfH were now applying the recognition period correctly. Otherwise it would have been £1,000.

Postage, stationery and office costs included £300 redirection for the Royal Mail, £200 printing costs.

Accountancy fees covered two years' worth at £250 pa, a reasonable rate provided by our regular accountant, Dipak Shah of Nielsens.

Legal expenses were £2,200, still a lot, £1,200 left over costs for advice regarding the ombudsman. The HLA had been advised not to take the ombudsman to court. £1,000 were costs incurred recently when the HLA had been forced to threaten an injunction over the appeal.

The website cost £250 pa for hosting and support. This was unchanged.

The telephone costs were made up of the costs of having an 0845 phone-number linked to email notification as well as the costs of making calls to encourage GM attendance.

Some costs to do with the case against the HLA's former Treasurer were not shown in the accounts as they were being met by SB and NMC out of their own pockets and thus did not affect the Association. The advice from the accountant was that they did not need to be shown in the accounts but should be mentioned to the meeting.

There were no questions on the Treasurer's report, and the accounts for the year ending 31 March 2013 were adopted overwhelmingly with none against and 2 abstentions.

The Chair called for a vote on the auditors as required under the recognition criteria. The use of Niensens was approved overwhelmingly with none against and 4 abstentions.

### **3 Election of Officers and Committee Members**

#### **Chair**

Peter Gilbert took over the Chair and called for nominations for Chair. There was only one nomination, for Sue Brown, which was duly seconded. This was put to the meeting and Sue Brown was elected as Chair overwhelmingly with none against and no abstentions.

Sue Brown then resumed the Chair.

#### **Treasurer**

There was one nomination, for Anne Gibson, which was duly seconded. This was put to the meeting and Anne Gibson was elected as Treasurer overwhelmingly with none against and no abstentions.

#### **Secretary**

There was one nomination, for Nick Martin-Clark, which was duly seconded. This was put to the meeting and Nick Martin-Clark was elected as Secretary overwhelmingly with none against and no abstentions.

#### **Committee Members**

Following a question from the floor about what was involved in being a committee member Kate Worley gave an account of what it was like being a member. She said she was a believer in giving back to the community by joining together. She had gone to meetings with the committee and with Homes for Haringey and found out more about what's going on, both with the service charge and with the major works bills. When people challenged bills they were often able to get them reduced

especially with things like cleaning. Being on the committee enabled you to help other people. She had found comradeship from the other knowledgeable committee members. Everyone knew that there were challenges ahead and by being on the committee you could make a difference. Everyone had a talent to share.

Rita Batzias, Raksha Thakore, Kate Worley, Molly Ejon, Phillip Hettiarachi and Tome Moniz were proposed and seconded as Committee members. Gary Ross, the grand-daughter of a leaseholder, volunteered. NMC said that he would be welcome to participate but couldn't vote until the constitution was changed. The nominees were voted on en bloc, and were elected as Committee members overwhelmingly with none against and with no abstentions.

#### **4 Minutes of 2012 AGM**

The minutes were approved overwhelmingly with none against and no abstentions.

#### **5 Voluntary levy**

NMC said the idea had been around for 3 years. HfH had originally seemed favourable after a positive meeting in the summer of 2009. When the HLA had had an office it was popular and had handled about 600 cases over two years. That had been very expensive to run and it was hoped to set up an office now much more cheaply and keep it running on a sustainable basis. The HLA needed help from HfH with the provision of office space and there were some indications that this might be possible. The HLA could do a lot with a little but needed some increase in its funding to cover the costs of insurance involved with giving legal advice. This might be needed in the harder cases. Other cases would involve help with presentation and would not be so difficult. HfH had agreed in principle to move to a system of a voluntary levy which would provide the HLA with a sustained source of income. It involved moving from opt-in to opt-out to overcome the general apathy. The proposed level of the levy was about £2. Consultation needed to happen as the process had to be transparent. The HLA wanted to be able to put their case. The Association had a lot of work to do and all leaseholders benefit regardless of whether or not they subscribe so there was a fairness issue. For instance all leaseholders could now install their own windows whether or not they had supported the HLA. There were some legal and other administrative issues concerned with this idea. It would involve an unprecedented level of co-operation with HfH and would be pioneering. It would involve a lot of trust between HLA and HfH. The hope was that the relationship between HLA and HfH would evolve to this point of partnership. An office would allow the HLA to give individual advice and this would cement the role of the HLA in the life of leaseholders.

One member commented that a lot of support had been lost as a result of the problem with the two groups and that £20 was a lot for some people. Some people didn't know the HLA existed but an office would help with that.

A question from the floor asked what the HLA had achieved. NMC outlined the background and effect of the campaign to change HfH's policy concerning windows.

SB moved for a vote on the levy. It was accepted with 26 in favour, 1 against and 4 abstentions.

A question from the floor asked if the problem with the two groups was going to carry on because it was confusing and they couldn't stand it. SB explained that the other group had withdrawn its recognition application and the HLA was now recognised.

## **6 How to set up your own local group**

NMC said this project was at the heart of everything the HLA did because communicating with other leaseholders was key to getting successful outcomes. The HLA's database enabled the Association to put people in touch with other leaseholders in their blocks. A local group could be set up with a minimum of two people and a simple constitution. Financial help could then be given. The outreach programme dealt with this but there was limited time available for it.

Anne Gibson said that leaseholders often had problems that tenants also shared, such as cleaning. Tenants also had to pay for services, through their rents. It was important for people to work together and not be pitted one against another.

Anne Goodhew said that her estate had a residents' association made up of both and that it worked well that way.

SB said that a network of local groups would make communication much cheaper.

## **7 Astrid Kjellberg-Obst**

SB introduced A K-O and said she had only been in post as the new Executive Director of Operations at HfH for 6 weeks. A K-O said she was a melting-pot, a German who had grown up in Belgium, married a Swede and settled in London after spending time in the US. She had worked in social housing, affordable housing and the care industry since 2000 as a policy officer. She had covered marketing, debt recovery and lettings and gained an insight into the perception of services by customers. She had become the trouble-shooter. She had become the Director of Strategy and Compliance in 2005 for the Sanctuary Group. In 2008 she became the Director of Performance. In 2010 she left the Group for private reasons (starting a family) and became a consultant. Now she was looking forward to being part of a team that could see projects through over the longer term again. She knew Wood Green from her time with the Sanctuary Group.

As Director of Performance she had had direct experience of leaseholders and understood the need for a bespoke service. Leaseholders often felt that services were mainly directed at tenants. A K-O had reviewed the structure of the service to

meet best practice and that had been well received. Solutions can be found if people are willing to work together. Transparency over service charges was important.

She had also helped mediate a conflict between a group of leaseholders and the service provider. The outcome was that the policies of the organisation had to change on the ground. This eased the leaseholders' concerns greatly.

A K-O wanted a fresh start and the chance to build a relationship. She wanted to find a home for the proposals to do with the office and the voluntary levy that had been raised and looked forward to building trust over time.

The HLA were there to raise challenges and it was helpful for HfH to have a ready-made market-research resource. She was looking forward to working together.

In response to a question A K-O said that 40 posts had been suppressed.

SB thanked A K-O for coming along and said she hoped the future relationship would be productive. A K-O said she was confident of that. Leaseholders applauded.

## **8 Lynne Featherstone MP**

LF said she had come early to hear the discussions. Many dissatisfied leaseholders came to her surgeries for the individual advice the HLA was not at present able to offer. LF said she had been very encouraged by what A K-O had said and that she felt A K-O would be a welcome addition in avoiding the brick wall experience. LF said she was used to pushing the Council and HfH hard to resolve issues. The HLA was important in raising issues.

LF said it was not right that bills should be higher than the market rate and that this chimed with the complaints she received from leaseholders about high bills. Repairs and cleaning were other common complaints.

The strains and stresses over the last two years had been considerable. Having seen some correspondence it appeared that not everything had been done properly by HfH. Now that the HLA was re-recognised again everyone could work together. Leaseholders needed representation and strong fighters for real issues rather than just for the right to fight.

Accountability was important as was following the rules. Constitutions had to be stuck to. LF was glad that the HLA was moving on from its completely adversarial role as a good relationship with HfH was important.

LF was disturbed to hear how the relationship had broken down at one point. She had written a letter and was concerned by what she had seen and what had been documented. Dealing with issues within the constitution was better than setting up alternative groups and factionalism. Divide and rule did not benefit leaseholders. She hoped that her letter would highlight some of the difficulties the HLA had faced and would secure a fair appeal and a deserved apology. Derecognising HLA had not

been desirable for the organisation or for the Council or for Homes for Haringey or for leaseholders and it was an awful shame it had come to that.

LF said that the windows campaign sounded like a very good one. There was a lot of work to be done. She expressed appreciation for the work done by volunteers.

A comment from the floor was that as someone who had become a leaseholder two years ago the factional divide had been very confusing and it had been difficult to know whom to trust. When help was needed it didn't seem there was any to hand. Now it appeared things might be improving. She hoped there wouldn't be any more of that in this organisation.

Kate Worley [KW] raised the issue of sinking funds for new leaseholders and the creation of two-tier leaseholders. LF said there was no government policy on this. NMC said that leaseholders had always rejected such proposals. KW said that even HfH staff agreed it was putting people off right-to-buy.

NMC asked LF if she would support the HLA in its attempt to see the legal advice given to HfH regarding Alena Breckova's removal from the board. LF said that she would have to be approached through her constituency surgery. She suggested emailing her.

SB thanked LF for having attended. Leaseholders applauded. The meeting was closed shortly after 1pm.

Addendum:

#### Ad-hoc committee meeting in Wood Green Social Club at approx 2pm

For the purposes of co-opting Lukie Hewat to the committee so that she could sign the Data Protection Policy and confer with the Secretary about the database in the next few days an ad-hoc committee meeting was convened. Present were Kate Worley, Sue Brown, Nick Martin-Clark and Anne Gibson. Lukie Hewat was co-opted as a committee member.