

Minutes of Forum Meeting 4 November 2010

Present: 20

Apologies: 1

1 Welcome.

Everyone was welcomed to the meeting.

2. International Day of Disabled People, December 3rd

Three separate events are planned for this:

a) Radio recording - recording to take place at HFBU/DBU offices on Wednesday 10th November, 1-4pm, primarily around the theme of "food". Please let Deborah know if you are willing or intending to take part. Deborah took names

b) "Walkaround" with councillors to highlight some of the challenges of accessibility around the borough. A number of councillors have expressed willing to do this, plus Jeanette Arnold, GLA member for North London. Several routes were proposed:

- Stoke Newington Church St from Clissold Park to the fire station (highlighting length between bus stops). Then onto Belfast Road, N16
- The Narrow Way - access
- From Rowena's house (confirmed with Cllr Siddiqui)
- Homerton, near the hospital

It may not be practicable to do all walks. Forum members were asked about timing & availability, so that Deborah can try to coordinate the different routes & match up councillor/forum member availability.

Several members also brought up the topic of bus accessibility, particularly the new design - it was agreed that this might not be possible to include in the "walkabout", but would definitely be a topic for a future forum, with TfL invited to listen and respond to DBU members' concerns.

c) Social evening on 3rd December at City Edge, forum members to bring an "international" dish to share. Transport can be arranged. Deborah took names of those who will attend.

3. John Isted - Housing Demand Manager LBH

John explained the remit of his role, (managing the waiting list, medical advisory team and the lettings initiatives team), then addressed the questions posed by the May meeting of the forum.

Q Why is there only one medical advisor?

Q How can a medical advisor with no medical experience assess people's needs?

A. The reorganised medical advisory team includes people trained in assessing

medical need, and includes an OT. Forum members disputed their inclusion as "medical advisors", since OT training is not a "medical qualification" in its understood definition, but John defended the use of OTs because of their expertise in assessing people's housing needs and because Occupational Therapy is a profession within a medical framework. He also stated that access to a doctor could be provided if someone had a long-standing medical condition with which a non-doctor medical advisor was unfamiliar.

This assessed housing need applies not just to local authority tenants.

The most urgent cases, for example wheelchair users requiring adapted access, are classified as Band A and are given priority over other people on the waiting list - John's team will alert people on Band A to any new accessible property becoming available. However, there are approx 200 people assessed as Band A, amongst 17,000 on the waiting list overall, and only 1700 properties becoming available each year. People with lower need in Band B do get rehoused, but there are >1000 classed as Band B.

John added that under the right-to-buy scheme, the nicest properties, including family houses, were sold and the council was not allowed to use this revenue to build replacement homes: the pool of available local authority homes therefore includes a disproportionate number of one-bedroom or less desirable properties. Some people on the waiting list who eventually wish to exercise their right to buy might choose not to bid for housing association homes as the right-to-buy does not apply to these.

Q, What measures are in place to reduce the amount of wheelchair accessible homes being let to non wheelchair users?

A. As above, Band A people are directly sent Choice Homes & JI's admin worker will try to directly alert people to accessible homes, but in a choice-based lettings system, if wheelchair users do not like the property and don't bid, homes cannot be left unoccupied and will be allocated to someone else with a lesser degree of access need. However, these tenants MUST leave any adaptations.

Tenants who occupy accessible properties but no longer need them, if the disabled person has moved away for example, are strongly encouraged to move.

Q. Most people are not happy with the procedures when applying for housing.

A. JI explained the waiting list system (above) and also the choice bidding system. All housing is advertised in Choice Homes, available in all public libraries. Prospective tenants may bid for any homes; their success will depend on whether there are other bidders who are assessed as greater priority. Tenants are not penalised if they turn down a property they bid for but then dislike.

Q How long (in terms of time, not numbers) are people on the waiting list?

A. It varies. Some people can be rehoused very quickly if they bid for less popular properties (eg one bedroom), but others can wait for a long time. However, people are not penalised for not accepting a property - under the old system if you turned down a property you would be put back to the bottom of the list - this no longer happens.

Q But how do we even get on the housing waiting list? What are the rules?

A. By law, any local authority will add people to their waiting list - BUT councils wish to gate-keep and will prioritise their own borough's residents, so you might stand a

chance if you want to live somewhere horrible/unpopular, but not a more popular borough. You stand a better chance if you have ties with a borough (eg if you have worked in the borough for 3 out of the past 5 years or have a close relative who lives in the target borough for 5 yrs)

However, there is also the issue of whole care packages - some local authorities may be reluctant to accept people from other boroughs who require expensive care packages.

Some new-builds are pooled across boroughs, and Choice Homes advertises homes across a north-east London boroughs, including Hackney, Waltham Forest, Redbridge & Newham

Q. What about direct inter-borough transfers?

A. These are definitely possible, if you can identify someone who wants a direct swap. You do need to inform the councils and obtain permission, though.

Q. Are services from the Housing Demand Team available to lease-holders or just tenants?

A. In some circumstances: generally lease-holders (eg of an ex-local authority flat) are low priority, but if the estate is due for demolition/redevelopment then the Housing Demand Team will help.

Q. And how do I go about getting adaptations?

A. This is not the responsibility of the Housing Demand Team.

Forum members also made John aware of their experiences of forms lost by housing officials, staff changes, lack of continuity and frustration with having to deal with too many different people - we really should not have to do so much of our own admin and chasing, but experience suggests that we cannot trust staff to follow through!

Q. Forum members dislike the types of images suggested for the new key. They are confusing. Who was consulted on these designs and why wasn't DBU involved?

A. JI not sure which symbols meant, is it the blue symbol on the accessible housing register? This is the result of an inter-borough pool of accessible housing, led by the GLA; the register aims to grade housing from A-F in accessibility.

4. Recruiting a representative for the Centre for Independent Living

Hackney now has a consultant to look at this, who will be managed by an advisory board - DBU needs a rep on this. Maureen repeated her experience of being a rep on the transformation board - she felt it was empowering and made a genuine difference; on her board she is regarded as an equal amongst decision-makers.

Things to bear in mind:

- a) being a rep requires hard work and commitment to both attending and preparing for meetings
- b) Also essential to be able to challenge officers, without getting caught up in your own personal story
- c) A rep is not token but enjoys equal status. (and can be regarded as the disability expert).

- Possible to have a "lead and shadow" system, of a lead rep with a trainee backup rep.
- The consultant will have a set of recommendations for a CIL in Hackney & how it will work
- Next meeting is 12/11, so not much time. Then 2 weeks later and subsequently monthly. Allow 2 hrs per meeting plus the same in reading/preparation time.
- A member asked if training was available & whether it was reliant on being on this steering group? Informal training is available to steering group members - why not to everyone?

Gill expressed interest in serving as a rep. Maria and Susan also expressed interest in shadowing. Gill suggested that John (not at meeting) might also be interested.

5. What does "independence" mean to you?

General discussion on the concept. Suggestions included

- To do or go where I want, when I want and with whom I want, at a moment convenient to me
- And add "without being at the beck and call of council staff"
- The freedom to come and go as I please, with the security of knowing someone is there if I need them (re sheltered accommodation)
- Being able to call and receive assistance when required
- Being in control
- control, choice and enablement...
- ...add "even when you are in a minority"
- Common sense should prevail
- Assistance to do the things you can't do (or have to do) to enable you to do the things that you can and want to do!
- Not having other people make decisions for you
- The equivalent of "no taxation without representation" (American War of Independence) - "Nothing about us, without us" (Roddy Doyle)

6. Hackney Hub

Maureen showed a mock-up of the proposed web-site & on-line self-assessment form to get feedback.

7. Train the Trainer

Reminder that deadline for applications is 9th November - Deborah has application forms if you haven't already requested & received one.