

Housing Engagement Board
Minutes of the Quarterly Meeting
held on Tuesday, 20 September 2022
from 1pm to 4pm via Zoom

Attendees: Cllr John Batchelor – Chair
Cllr Jose Hales
Cllr Mark Howell
Dave Kelleway – Vice Chair
Jim Watson
Les Rolfe
Margaret Wilson
Peter Tye

By Invitation: Julie Fletcher (SCDC – Services Manager – Housing Strategy)
Geoff Clark (SCDC – Services Manager – Tenancy and Estates)
Eddie Spicer (SCDC – Service Manager – Housing Assets)
Rebecca Gane (SCDC – Leasehold Services Team Leader)
Bronwen Taylor (SCDC – Resident Involvement Officer) – Minute taker
Gina Manderson (SCDC – Housing Communications Officer) – Admin Support

Apologies: Peter Campbell (SCDC – Head of Housing)

1. Welcome and Apologies

The Chair welcomed everyone to the meeting at 1.04pm and advised that Jennifer Perry had taken an ill-health early retirement, adding that the recruitment process would start shortly. He added that John Taylor had resigned and thanked him for his time and contribution to the board.

Councillors Jose Hales and Mark Howell advised that they need to leave the meeting at 1.55pm as they had training at 2pm.

Apologies were received from Peter Campbell.

2. Quorum

The meeting was quorate.

3. Minutes of previous meeting – 22 June 2022

The Chair thanked Dave Kelleway for chairing the previous meeting and referred to the minutes of the meeting held on 22 June 2022.

They were proposed by Les Rolfe and seconded by Jim Watson as a true reflection of the meeting.

Matters Arising from previous Meeting – 22 June 2022

3.1 Item 3 – Minutes

Co-option Process (item 61)

The Co-option Policy has been added to the Forward Plan.

Dave Kelleway said that as there was a vacancy, this needed to be looked at sooner than December 2022. He added that Peter Campbell had been looking at the policy and suggested that it be looked at between meetings.

The Chair said that he would organise this with Peter Campbell.

Update on Doubling Nature Project (Item 5.2)

Geoff Clark confirmed that when major work to trees had been completed, the parish council for the ward where the tree was located was notified. They were also advised when new trees were planted.

Dave Kelleway said that some trees that had been planted by the parish council had been chopped down without their knowledge and they should be advised before work was done.

Geoff Clark advised that some of that work had been done through the tree audit and that SP Landscapes had advised the council that the trees were in a very poor condition and that the work needed to be done urgently. He added that the onus was on the council for maintaining those trees and to get the work done quickly when they were in a dangerous condition. He said that going forward the council would advise parish councils when tree surgery work was being planned.

Audit Accounts (Item 7.1)

Geoff Clark has contacted Margaret Wilson.

Margaret Wilson said that she had asked for audit accounts for the communal halls for all sheltered accommodation which had not been received.

Geoff Clark asked if they were the audit accounts for the communal room itself?

Margaret Wilson said that it was for the expenditure and receipts so that the residents who pay the service charges could see what had been spent and received.

Geoff Clark said that Rebecca Gane could explain how it worked for leaseholders and he would set up a meeting with Margaret Wilson, Les Rolfe and Rebecca Gane.

Action by: Geoff Clark

3.2 Item 5.1 – Estate Inspection Policy

1. Geoff Clark requested the HSO team to include adjoining roads in future Estate Inspections if time permitted.
2. Victoria Laxton, the HSO, sent an email to Les Rolfe on 23 June 2022 explaining that the storage container belonged to the contractors who were carrying out refurbishment work at the blocks of flats and that it would be removed once the work was completed.

Les Rolfe referred to last week's estate inspection and said that the HSO was reluctant to walk around the sheltered estate as this was the responsibility of the SEO. He added that although she had previously gotten into trouble for reporting issues at a sheltered estate, we still inspected the sheltered areas.

Geoff Clark said that it made sense to have both the HSO and SEO attend estate inspections when there were both general needs and sheltered houses on the estate.

Bronwen Taylor said that the SEO was going to attend the inspection, however, was sick on the day.

3.3 Item 5.2 – Key Amnesty in relation to Tenancy Fraud

Rebecca Gane will give a presentation on Empty Properties and Repairs under item 5.3 of the agenda.

4. Standing Items

4.1 Update on Repairs Contract

Eddie Spicer referred to the updated report and communication letters included in the pack, and said they had been sent to residents, members and staff, and the media.

The Chair said that following the results of the STAR survey, tenants preferred being contacted by post or phone.

Eddie Spicer said that all communication letters had been posted and that the type of communication would be tailored to each tenant and recorded on the system.

Margaret Wilson said that the South Cambs portal was still difficult to use and her main concern was who made a decision on the type of repair. She said an example was that her front porch could have asbestos, however, it had only been painted over and she asked who she needed to contact.

Eddie Spicer said to contact Mears and should the job fall out of their remit, then they would forward it to the council.

Dave Kelleway asked if the council knew where all asbestos was.

Eddie Spicer said that they did and that there was a programme in place to review it regularly. He added that it did not need to be removed unless it was dangerous.

4.2 Forward Plan

Julie Fletcher referred to the Forward Plan included in the pack and said that this would be a standard item on the agenda. She said that due to the resignation of John Taylor, she would bring the Co-option policy forward. She added that Budget and Rent Setting would be looked at in December 2022 instead of October 2022. She asked the board if other items should be added.

Dave Kelleway said that the Co-option policy needed to be tweaked before advertising for a new board member and that the Mutual Exchange Policy was urgent.

The Chair said that there were a lot of items for the December 2022 meeting.

Julie Fletcher said that the Garage and Land Review could be moved to March 2023.

The Chair said that once the amendments had been made, the document could be circulated.

Action by: Julie Fletcher

5. New Matters

5.1 Stigma Project Presentation

Julie Fletcher gave a presentation on the findings of the Stigma survey which she said came about from the national focus following the Grenfell disaster and the outcome of the Social Housing White Paper. She said the main theme coming out of the survey was that tenants were not being listened to, that their views were not important and that there was a stigma attached to those living in social housing. She said that the next steps were working on a Housing Service Improvement Plan, developing the Communication Service Standards, communicating more widely including sending out positive messages and mandatory training for housing staff.

The Chair said that this was prime material for the South Cambs magazine, to which Cllr Hales agreed.

Margaret Wilson said that she found this a very interesting and valuable exercise, and hoped that South Cambs took it as a learning curve.

A discussion on the results of the survey was held.

Margaret Wilson said she thought that planners should be more involved and social housing should be indistinguishable from privately owned housing, and not hidden away.

The Chair said that council houses on modern estates are now the same as private houses and are situated in “ace” positions with lovely views over the countryside.

Julie Fletcher said that the other arm that she works in was planning policy and making sure that as best as possible, we do integrate the social housing.

Action by: Julie Fletcher

5.2 Complaints Toolkit

Julie Fletcher referred to the document included in the pack. She also referred to item 8 of the “Complaints Handling Code – Self Assessment” document and said that a service manager group was being set up to look at trends.

Dave Kelleway referred to item 3.1 on page 55 of the pack and asked if the “complaints officer” would be trained to handle complaints.

Julie Fletcher said Grace Andrews was the dedicated complaints officer and that part of her role was to make sure that complaints were dealt with properly.

5.3 Buy back of Equity Share Properties Presentation

Geoff Clark advised that there had been some questions about equity share properties and Rebecca Gane had been invited to present on this topic.

Rebecca Gane went through the document on Equity Share Properties included in the pack.

Les Rolfe asked from the older style leases, where you have to buy back, why do not have to go back into general stock?

Rebecca Gane explained that those properties that were 75% owned and were part of the general fund we were legally not allowed to put them into general stock and they had to remain as equity share which was dictated by the Secretary of State. She added that anything that was purchased back that was less than 75% owned would go back into general stock and goes into rented, and would be available for rent.

Les Rolfe asked why one was being used as temporary housing?

Rebecca Gane said that when first time buyer leases are bought back by the council, they are used as temporary accommodation. She added that there were legal reasons behind that, which were historic.

Les Rolfe said that a property on his sheltered estate, that had been bought back by the council, was being used as temporary accommodation and housed tenants that are not suitable tenants for a sheltered estate.

Geoff Clark said that some properties were originally designated for first time buyers and shared ownership on certain estates, when they were built, and were part of the planning regulations. He added that when they came back to the council, they did look at the original leases designed around those properties, however, there were some inherent legal difficulties around changing those leases and bringing them back into general needs properties. He said they do serve a purpose in providing temporary accommodation for homeless families at short notice, as opposed to using other forms of temporary accommodation such as bed and breakfast. He added that the council does have a pool of about 30 properties around the district that were used for this purpose and said that he thought the property that Les Rolfe had referred to was on the edge of the sheltered estate.

Les Rolfe said that it was on the edge of the estate, however, one had to drive through the estate to get to it and that it was the bane of all the tenants. He added that the current tenant was running a car breakers business from the side access.

Geoff Clark said that he would have a conversation separately with Les Rolfe.

Margaret Wilson referred to a property next door to her that had been empty for 4 years and before the tenant passed away, had been living in a care home for 18 months. She asked how the council dealt with such cases.

Rebecca Gane said that they are aware of this particular property and that it was with the council's litigation team. She added that this case was a particularly long process as well as being unique.

Peter Tye said that this was a good article and asked for it to go into the next magazine.

The Chair said that it could go in the magazine.

Action by: Geoff Clark and Gina Manderson

5.4 Annual Report to Tenants

Gina Manderson presented the draft Annual Report to tenants and asked for feedback from the board.

Dave Kelleway said that the report looked good.

Peter Tye asked if it was necessary to include the number of complaints, and asked if it was counterproductive and not in context, due to COVID-19.

Margaret Wilson said that she thought that complaints could be conveyed as a positive and not always in a negative light.

Gina Manderson said that this was something to look at.

Action by: Gina Manderson

5.5 Tpas Conference Feedback Reports

Margaret Wilson referred to the feedback reports included in the pack and said that she had nothing further to report.

Dave Kelleway thanked the tenant volunteers for attending the conference.

Julie Fletcher said that she hoped that the work we were doing was worthwhile.

6. Any Other Business (AOB)

6.1 Meeting Start Time

The Chair requested for the meeting start time to be changed from 1pm to 2pm.

The board agreed with the time change.

Bronwen Taylor said she would re-send the meeting invitations with the start new time.

Action by: Bronwen Taylor

6.2 Emergency Telephone Number

Margaret Wilson referred to a house fire on her estate the day before and said that when she tried calling the emergency number it had been discontinued. She said that she phoned the council's number and was told by the customer services officer that that was the only number they had.

Geoff Clark said that he would look into the issue of the telephone number.

Action by: Geoff Clark

6.3 Recruitment Process

Julie Fletcher referred to the recruitment documents in respect of the Resident Involvement Team Leader role and thanked the board for their comments. She said the interview panel would comprise of 2 officers and 2 tenant volunteers, and each person could submit 4 questions. She requested that questions or suggestions were submitted through Dave Kelleway.

6.4 Grant to Purchase and Plant Trees

Geoff Clark said that we have received a grant of £49,000 to purchase and plant trees within the county council, which will see 40 new trees.

Dave Kelleway asked why it was only 40 new trees and had the areas already been identified.

Geoff Clark said the grant included the aftercare of the trees for the next 3 years, and yes, the areas had been identified.

7. Meeting Dates

The Chair referred to the meeting dates as follows:

- 15 December 2022
- 23 March 2023

8. Closing

There being no further business to discuss, the meeting ended at 2.58pm.