

RESIDENTS' FORUM – 27 SEPTEMBER 2016

MINUTES

Members Present: Martin Hughes (chair); Sylvia Donaldson; Sonia Dobson; Lloyd Gale-Ward (vice-chair); Lindsey Malcolm; Wendy Jackson; Rob Page; Ruth Cadby; Phil Williams; Geraldine Grant (observer); Murielle Dauti (observer); Eunice Sinyinza (observer).

Staff & Board Present: Steve Hitchins, Board Member; Bill Henderson, Housing Services Director; Graham Watts, Community Services Manager; Annette Morrison, Quality Manager; Karen Orr, Senior Resident Involvement Officer (minute taker).

Apologies: William Crilly; Jon Hill; Liz Ellston; Fiona Campbell

1. WELCOME & INTRODUCTIONS

- 1.1. The chair welcomed all participants including Geraldine, Murielle and Eunice who were attending as observers and potential new Forum member.

2. MINUTES OF THE PREVIOUS MEETING

- 2.1 The minutes of 27 July were agreed as a true and correct record.

3. MATTERS ARISING AND UPDATE ON ACTION POINTS

- 3.1 Noted that Newlon are currently unable to send texts just to those residents directly affected by communal repairs in the block where they live.
- 3.2 Noted that the information about the type of calls Newlon receives by residents was considered by the Scrutiny Panel when they looked at Customer Contact on 15th September. Members commented they would still like this information to come to the Forum.
- 3.3 **ACTION:** Agreed to request that Newlon investigate whether it will be possible in the future to tailor texts about communal repairs to just those residents directly affected and not those living in the same block but in a different core (entrance).

ACTION: Agreed to bring information about the type of calls received from residents to a future Forum.

4. COMMUNITY SERVICES UPDATE

- 4.1 Graham Watts, the Community Services Manager, gave a presentation about this new service and team. From December 2015 until April 2016, the Newlon Fusion team came in house to Newlon Housing Trust and after then became the Community Services team. The team has five staff with Graham as Manager. Fusion still exists as a channel for charitable funding. The aim of designing this new team was to streamline services. It provides support to residents on welfare benefits advice and financial inclusion services; employment & training opportunities, and runs two Community Centres at Barnsbury & Lascar Wharf plus managing the hardship and tenant welfare funds. There are two main goals – helping

residents stabilise in their homes and having a business focus to the work. One aim is that income from hiring the Centres will pay for the cost of running them. Wates – the repairs contractor – have social value commitments written into their contract with Newlon, such as employing residents as apprentices. The team works with them to ensure these are met.

- 4.2** At the end of July, performance was looking good with the team just ahead of their targets for the first three months of 2016/17. They aim to handle 120 cases of welfare benefit advice and secure £50,000 in welfare and other benefits for residents over the year. This will also help Newlon achieve its income targets. For the future, the team is planning to offer online hall bookings. Ruth asked how residents find out about Community Services. Graham replied that they have been setting up a system for other Newlon teams to make referrals to them; he's been presenting a roadshow to all internal teams; they have produced posters and written four knowledge based articles so that the Service Centre can send residents directly to them. Ruth also asked if the team are expected to fundraise. Graham replied, not so much, but there are targets set about ensuring they bring funds back into Newlon. Bill noted that Fusion had a fundraiser and that it can be difficult to raise funds because it's very competitive and because of Newlon's turnover.
- 4.3** Martin asked how about the apprenticeships taken up by residents and are they for anyone in the household. Graham clarified there was a commitment from Wates to fill the vacant apprenticeship roles. Two have been filled, which are now vacant, and one didn't work out. Apprentices can be household members. Wates have also given a small grant towards improving the Community Centres. Community Services (CS) are working with Wates about potential work placements. Robert asked if there had been any feedback about why residents had left apprenticeships. Graham said that two young apprentices had struggled with time keeping and other issues. Through this experience, CS have learned they needed a better way to connect the College with the day to day employer and the CS's Information, Advice and Guidance Officer to ensure support.
- 4.4** Graham gave some good news about his team's work. The unpaid work placement roles for residents have resulted in some gaining permanent employment with Newlon. There are plans to increase the numbers of work placements from the current six to fifteen. The team's Welfare Benefits Advisor has been successful in helping residents claim benefit they were entitled to. The latest Newlon News highlighted a resident's story who had kept their tenancy as a result of this type of advice. One of the challenges for the team had been the transition from a larger Fusion team to a smaller team of six. Also, it has been important to clarify with key teams at Newlon about the services that CS no longer provide, such as energy conservation. Robert asked if they had turned away any residents because of this and Graham replied that they try to refer residents to other organisations if they can. In conclusion, the team were well placed to achieve their performance targets and manage their budget. This is a proving year for the new team and beyond it, they'll continue as part of a five year vision, and will be thinking about how to adapt to new challenges and priorities.
- 4.5** Graham asked Forum members about their suggestions for what the CS team could be doing in future and said that he would take any back. Wendy asked if the team offered help to older residents. Graham replied that they do provide this help, mostly through the community centres. Wendy pointed out the centres are working on estates but many older residents live in street properties. Graham agreed this could be an area of work to look at. He also wanted the Forum's views about residents, usually in street properties, who were unable to keep up their gardens. Wendy noted there are residents who like gardening but don't have gardens and they could be matched up with residents who have gardens. Graham noted that his team had been looking at a few possible matches. Bill thought even

with the help of voluntary groups it could be costly as some co-ordination by Newlon would still be needed. Other suggestions were – an exercise programmes in street property areas; there doesn't seem to be anything for older residents; Sonia suggested residents spending time with older residents or doing messages for them; Ruth suggested volunteering programmes that older residents could be signposted to; Lindsey suggested that Newlon finds out what's being done by charities etc in the boroughs that Newlon work to signpost residents and make clear what community services don't do.

- 4.6** Bill injected some caution, Newlon could do more and do different community services but starting something new would mean stopping something that's already happening or fitting it in. Members thought that more signposting of residents to these type of services elsewhere could help "join the dots". Although it was recognised that some form of co-ordination by Newlon would still be needed.
- 4.7** Graham asked about residents in rent arrears and at what point could Newlon intervene earlier and pro-actively before the arrears get too high and evictions take place. Interventions could be help with budgeting; help with welfare benefits or other support. Lindsey suggested providing advice to residents about factors they should be aware of that could precipitate arrears. Sonia asked about residents having problems with their hours of work being reduced. Graham replied that often Housing Benefit does not tell Newlon they are not paying the whole rent and arrears can build up. Graham suggested fluctuating hours of work could be one area for his team to focus on. Sonia also asked if the Income Recovery team have access to records about new residents' work. Bill replied that in fact he and Graham had been talking about this recently. Newlon ask new residents questions about income and check they have a proper employment contract, depending on which Newlon accommodation they are going into. Increasingly, in General Needs housing we are doing affordability tests and turning some people away because the benefits system will not support them.
- 4.8** Another area the CS team are looking to do more work next year is digital inclusion. They are trying to link to employment, welfare benefits and Universal Credit (which is applied for online). It is a smaller part of the work now than it has been in the past. Ruth noted that there is an assumption that everyone is computer literate but even people who are can forget their digital skills. Bill said that the main plank of Newlon's digital strategy is that it wants to persuade residents who can already use digital technology to use it with us rather than force people who can't. Graham concluded by saying members can ask any further questions through the "My Newlon" portal on the website or through Karen.
- 4.9** **ACTION:** Agreed Graham to consider the ideas suggested by Forum members in planning future work for the Community Services team. To be reported back to a later Forum.

5. LEASEHOLD SERVICES

- 5.1** Bill Henderson, Housing Services Director, reported on the levels of satisfaction amongst Newlon's leaseholders and analysed the reasons behind it. Leaseholder satisfaction has been consistently lower than tenant satisfaction. It is generally lower across social housing but at Newlon it is less lower than elsewhere. Wendy asked if Newlon were bad or did leaseholders have higher expectations. Bill acknowledged getting first year defects in their new homes dealt with could colour leaseholders' perceptions. Phil thought that leaseholders paid a higher service charge and therefore complained more. The service charge can depend on the lease and size of the property. Service charges generally go up

and are a big point of contention with leaseholders. Querying them is quite legalistic and to date Newlon has not lost any service charge challenge. Newlon constantly get service charge queries such as about communal repairs and some can be difficult to answer. Robert wondered if leaseholders are getting what they pay for in their service charge e.g. the concierge service. Annette noted that an FAQ's and a glossary of service charge terms and what applies to leaseholders or tenants is now going out to residents with their Service Charge Statements.

5.2 Bill analysed complaints from leaseholders to look for causes of dissatisfaction and had tried to differentiate between repairs and defects when looking at these. Bill agreed to send the FAQ's and Glossary of Terms to Wendy, for her building. Ruth wondered if our sales people are as clear as they need to be at the point of sale. Bill explained that our sales team feel that sometimes potential buyers are not listening. Lindsey noted that residents' mortgage provider should talk about the service charge. Bill added that the lawyers should also go through the lease line by line but this does not happen much now. Bill would like to see a process where service charges can be reviewed without taking up too much time, where there is openness and transparency. Within the regulations we are expected to send every Residents Association a set of accounts and we will.

5.3 ACTION: Agreed that Bill will send the FAQ's and Glossary of Terms to Wendy for her building.

6. RESIDENT INVOLVEMENT STRATEGY UPDATE

6.1 After discussion, members agreed the proposed improvements to the reward vouchers scheme so that it reflects the additional responsibility being taken on by some involved residents. The vouchers are an incentive to encourage residents to get involved and are paid for most involvement activities.

6.2 The Forum were invited to select one of their members to attend the HQN Residents Network Conference on 1 December with the resident involvement team. Matt Phillips, the Head of Customer Service, has confirmed that the "% of calls answered in target" KPI does not include data on whether requested call backs (Q buster) were received by residents within the 30 minutes target. Instead, Q Buster statistics are reported to the Trust Executive Team (TET) meetings. The Forum said that they would like to see the same QBuster statistics that TET get.

6.4 ACTION: It was agreed that the Chair of the Scrutiny Panel will receive £50 in vouchers for attending & chairing each panel. It was also agreed that the Scrutiny Panel member leading on the topic for a meeting will receive an additional £30 in vouchers on top of their attendance vouchers - in recognition of both their enhanced roles. Retrospective payments will be made for the last two meetings.

ACTION: It was agreed to email a reminder to all Forum members about the invitation to attend the HQN Residents Network Conference.

ACTION: Agreed to provide statistics, as part of the Housing Services Performance Dashboard that the Forum receives each meeting, on whether residents receive their requested call back (Qbuster) within the 30 minute target.

7. FEEDBACK FROM & TO THE BOARD/RSC/SCRUTINY PANEL

- 7.1 Martin gave feedback to members from the Chair of the Newlon Board. She was impressed with the involvement work they were all collectively doing. Residents' discussions and comments were being listened to by the Residents Services Committee (RSC) and the Board. Steve informed the Forum that Catherine Ross and Steve Akeju are retiring and John Cross and Matt Champion were joining the Board at tomorrow's AGM.
- 7.2 Lloyd feedback that the two key agenda items from this meeting – Community and Leaseholder Services - had gone to the RSC that he had attended earlier in the month.
- 7.3 Ruth informed members about the last Scrutiny Panel which looked at Customer Contact and Matt Phillips, the Head of Customer Services, had come along to discuss. He had provided a really good, thorough report on this topic. Matt was very agreeable about what he could rather than couldn't do – such as saying what position in the queue a caller was at. Ruth also commented that it was important to get the timing of Panel meetings right so that their recommendations can feed into the Forum and then up to the Residents' Services Committee. Ruth explained that one of the Panel members takes the lead for each topic and in liaising with Newlon staff about the information needed for the meeting. She felt that the Panel was getting better and being more effective each time.

8. KEY PERFORMANCE INDICATORS, INCLUDING DEFECTS

- 8.1 Bill spoke about the latest performance figures up to the end of August. Areas where performance is going well include voids and arrears. There are some issues with complaints but not major ones. A few staff may have lost focus on dealing with complaints and we'll speak with them. Newlon are now trying to measure how quickly we deal with something at the first point of contact, this is still a work in progress. On CRM, staff now have to record the fact they're doing something and close the case. Lindsey suggested the addition of a trend line from the previous year for the number of homes improved and Bill agreed this could be added as a one off.
- 8.2 **ACTION:** Agreed to add a one off trend line from the previous year for the number of homes improved.

9. Any Other Business

- 9.1 Ruth raised the issue of estate inspectors inspecting internal communal areas in street properties without notifying residents that they were coming and upon arrival not ringing the bell to enter. The visits result in items in hallways being ticketed for removal by residents. Bill explained these visits were fire risk assessments (FRA's) and Newlon have a plan to carry them out for all its street properties. Bill agreed to look into these issues.
- 9.2 Sylvia raised the issue of exit doors on a block being designated as a fire exit but opening inwards. Bill agreed to look into.
- 9.2 **ACTION:** Agreed Bill will look into estate inspectors and other visitors being required to ring resident's bells and whether all items in hallways always have to be moved.

ACTION: Agreed Bill will look into whether a fire exit door is a proper fire exit.