

# RESIDENTS' FORUM – 31 October 2018

## MINUTES

**Members Present:** Martin Hughes (Chair); Phil Williams; Eunice Sinyinza; Lloyd Gale-Ward (Vice-Chair); Blossom Shakespeare; William Crilly; Sonia Dobson; Wendy Jackson; Ben Roe; Geraldine Grant; John Rymell; Robyn Riddett (observer); Surjeet Chana (observer)

**Staff & Board Present:** Bill Henderson, Director Housing Services; Annette Morrison, Head of Quality; Duncan Lee, Head of Repairs and Maintenance; Graham Watts, Head of Residents Services; Karen Orr, Senior Resident Involvement Officer (minute taker).

**Apologies:** Africa Alconchel-Guido; Lindsey Malcolm; Sylvia Donaldson; Kevin Brown.

### 1. WELCOME & INTRODUCTIONS

1.1. Martin welcomed everyone and introduced Surjeet and Robin who were both attending as observers with an interest in joining the Forum.

### 2. MINUTES OF THE PREVIOUS MEETING, MATTERS ARISING, ACTION POINTS UPDATE

2.1 The minutes of 25 July were agreed as a true and correct record.

2.2 Duncan responded to the July Forum's suggestion about the possible introduction of resident involvement into signing off communal repairs. Explaining that communal repairs are initially reported by the Estate Inspectors (EI's) and then signed off by them as completed at a later visit. If residents were to be involved he suggested the best time would be during an Estate Inspector visit with Bill agreeing that could happen. Duncan said it may be an issue for Housing rather than Repairs and Maintenance. If reported communal repairs are not completed then the Estate Inspectors can report to the Wates supervisor who can escalate them to Duncan. How often Estate Inspection visits take place depends on the building but some are managed by managing agents or building owners and so are not visited by EI's.

2.3 It was recognised that the suggestion for resident involvement in signing off communal repairs arose because of the issues with the Hammond Court bin store and the lack of reaction from Newlon. Noted that the customer portal being developed will allow residents to report communal repairs. If they are repeatedly reported this will be an indication that they haven't been done.

2.4 **ACTION:** agreed further exploration of possible resident involvement in signing off communal repairs, specifically during an Estate Inspector visit.  
**ACTION:** agreed that the suggested installation of bollards at Fenton Street should have been resolved by now and there was no need to wait for a Forum meeting to ask if it was still an issue. Instead the Resident Inspector there should be contacted directly by Estates.

### 3. NEW RESIDENT SERVICES TEAM

3.1 Graham Watts, Head of Resident Services, introduced the structure and work of the new Resident Services team – a merger of Community Services and Resident Involvement teams. Community Services supports residents to stabilise in their homes by helping with training, employment, welfare benefits and advice - which is becoming more of an issue

with the introduction of Universal Credit (UC). They also manage community centres and the hardship fund. The merger with Resident Involvement brings an enhanced focus to how residents are supported. The new team brings a holistic approach to working with residents by looking at the non-housing issues. They do not do everything but will provide other elements of support that mean residents are more satisfied in their homes.

- 3.2 This coming year there will be a focus on some of the issues raised in the Government's Green Paper on Housing. This includes listening to feedback from residents and supporting them in shaping Newlon services and perhaps providing new ones (new services may relate to supporting residents with energy saving and conservation raised by the Forum last year as a priority). Resident Services are looking carefully at other ways of enhancing community development Newlon's programmes including expanding into new areas that are priorities for the Forum and the community.
- 3.3 Some work is being done on UC with the Income Team, looking at how it is affecting rent payment as it is paid direct to residents who then pay it to Newlon. Also UC is an online benefit, which is another challenge, especially for residents not adept at using computers. At the moment only a few hundred Newlon residents are claiming UC but that number will grow. Bill noted that if residents on UC get into arrears, Newlon can ask that it is paid direct to them. Noted that UC does not include payments for Council tax and Resident Services can help with this as well. The team has an incredible Welfare Benefits advisor, Noori, who is very successful and dynamic. The Welfare Benefits Service is promoted through the newsletter and residents can access it by contacting the Service Centre or contacting Resident Services directly. Bill reported that Newlon are now evicting less residents and doing better than others in the social housing sector. Martin asked if this was because Newlon's policies were different and Bill agreed, explaining that Newlon focuses on the overall income Newlon can get from or indeed for a resident. Graham reported that his team were nominated for their Welfare Benefits work and were runner ups in the 2018 UK Housing Awards. It is a small team with the different roles set out on page 34. Judith and Karen (Resident Involvement) are now part of the team and Graham is very excited about the new shape of services for Newlon residents.
- 3.4 **ACTION:** Forum members were encouraged to email Graham with any ideas about how Newlon could do things differently or shape their service in a different way.

#### 4. COMMUNAL REPAIRS

- 4.1 Duncan gave an update on communal repairs. In the past, communal repairs were not being proactively identified and this led to more resident dissatisfaction. Currently, 70% of communal repairs costs was spent on electrical items. Of those, 90% to 95% were related to the replacement of light fittings and bulbs. Duncan clarified that some of these are being replaced because of the heat in corridors rather than because of any damage. The fittings were being replaced with LED units as they are generally cheaper to run and more tolerant of the heat but unfortunately some of these were also burning out. It was acknowledged that overheating in corridors of buildings with a central boiler unit was not just a Newlon problem. Lightbulbs that can be reached by the cleaners are replaced by them. For health and safety reasons, any lightbulbs above a certain height are replaced by the handymen. Surjeet asked why the LED's in her block were on day and night. Duncan clarified this had recently been investigated at another block, De Havilland. It had been found that their microwave sensors had not been adjusted correctly when the LED's were fitted. There had been a backlog of electrical work, but over the last few months 92% had been completed within target with an average of 15 days for each job.

- 4.3 Martin asked about the time period between cyclical decoration works being carried out and Bill explained that it used to be seven years but was longer now because of the cost of fire safety work being carried out. Almost all the cyclical works planned for this year are not taking place. Robyn queried how residents would find out what communal repairs are being done by the handymen, would they have access to that information. Duncan replied that jobs raised for the handymen are held on a different part of Newlon's CRM (customer relationship management) system – the Estate Actions part – and are given a unique estate actions job number. Individual repairs are held on a different part of CRM and are given a unique CRM job number.
- 4.4 Issues consistently coming up in new developments are picked up by Mike Levy, Head of Design and Procurement in the Business Development team. There is considerable liaison between Property Services and Business Development about these types of issues, so that future developments can avoid them. Bill added that estate gradings have improved because of the handymen service. There are just one or two buildings which have been downgraded because of the state of communal repairs.
- 4.5 Residents should report communal repairs by contacting the Service Centre. In response to a query about a front entrance door which was out of line for over five weeks and which residents had received no communications about, Bill acknowledged that there are sometimes gaps for specialist repairs and it is more straightforward for Wates communal repairs. Noted the issue about ownership/responsibility and communications for complex communal repairs.
- 4.6 Residents will be able to check if communal repairs have been done where they live on the customer portal that Newlon is developing. Noted that Eunice had been involved in recent testing of the portal and thought it was good. Annette added that there will be a targeted launch of the portal to residents and additional testing about residents using the portal to make payments. Not all blocks have resident inspectors as there has been targeted recruitment. The resident inspectors go around blocks with the Estate Inspectors, not the person who may have reported a communal repair. Residents should only receive texts for communal repairs such as front entry doors and lifts which are related to their building. These can help avoid many residents calling in about a communal repair after it has already been reported.
- 4.7 **ACTION:** Agreed to clarify who has ownership/responsibility and should communicate to residents about complex communal repairs that require specialist expertise.

#### **4A REPAIRS SATISFACTION CRM APP**

- 4A.1 The Forum had requested last July that there was an option for residents to complete the repairs satisfaction survey by email instead. This had now been incorporated. A trial of the satisfaction app was carried out from the end of August for two months by three Wates operatives. Duncan then explained how the process works. On the day an operative completed a repair in a resident's home, they give their hand held device to the resident to fill in the app satisfaction questions. The operative cannot see the resident's answers. Most residents opted to answer the questions on the operative's hand held device and some chose to answer by email. The trial results highlighted that two questions were very similar. Also that the question about a follow on appointment only needed to be asked if the resident stated that the works were not completed. Revisions to the questions were then made and the app is now in use by all Wates operatives. If a resident answered no to any question they are asked if they would like a call back from the contractor to discuss.

- 4A.2 Duncan also clarified that residents are given information by the operative at the start, assuring them that once they complete the questions, their answers are sent off electronically. A random selection of residents who have completed the questions will be contacted to check that they answered themselves and that they were not filled in by the operative. If the satisfaction app goes well, Newlon will consider extending to the gas contractor. Geraldine pointed out that for some repairs, the resident will not have had time to check that they are satisfied with it. Duncan replied that if residents are asked about their satisfaction too long after repairs have been completed, many don't answer. Also if the only people who answer have a complaint, this can skew the results.

## **5. LETTINGS AND TENANCY POLICY**

- 5.1 Annette reminded members that the Lettings and Tenancy Policy is bought annually to the Forum for their views. The Policy outlines who is eligible for what type of housing, what type of tenancy they would get and how Newlon sets their rent. The policy covers a range of lettings and tenancy matters such as transfers and succession. Her paper summarises the changes that have been made this year and includes an excerpt from the Tenancy Standard as issued by the Social Housing Regulator. This year's changes have not been huge. One of the changes relates to starter tenancies for single people as the proposed introduction of the restriction of Housing Benefit payable to under 35s on a room in a shared house basis was halted. Newlon had prepared for this by changing the Starter Tenancy Policy. Under the proposed restrictions single people under 35, if they did not have a job or child would not be able to afford the rent for a self-contained flat. However as the restriction was not introduced the Starter Tenancy Policy was changed back.
- 5.2 Annette explained the flat sitting part of the policy where General Need's tenants are able to request approval for temporary absence (a maximum of two years) from their home for specific reasons, such as a job abroad or care of a sick relative. Some restrictions have been added to this policy, including putting a limit of maximum years such an arrangement can be place for. If permission is not sought and the tenant is absent, Newlon would assume that they were sub-letting which is a breach of the tenancy. Shared owners are covered by a sub-letting policy and the criteria covers extenuating circumstances.
- 5.3 Most General Needs tenants when they move into a Newlon home have a starter tenancy. Where visits are made at three months and then reviews at six and nine months. Previously three reviews were carried out. After a year if everything is satisfactory, the tenancy will be converted to a full tenancy. If things are not going well then the Starter Tenancy would be extended to 18 months. The change to the policy is that reviews will be carried out at 4 and 9 months, and where resident is vulnerable a visit will take place at 1 month.
- 5.4 Fixed term Tenancies – these are to be changed from 2 years to 3 years. A member asked what would happen for residents on intermediate rent, coming up to retirement or who become ill and don't have the same income. Annette explained that intermediate renters with fixed term tenancies have their eligibility reviewed every two years, which will be increased to three years under the proposed changes to Newlon's policy. Eligibility includes the ability to pay and that their income meets the criteria. If their income was too great or too small then their tenancy would not be renewed and the tenant would not be rehoused by Newlon. Newlon are also looking at reviewing Assured Shorthold tenancies for intermediate rent to ensure the tenants still meet the criteria and that their rent reflects 70% of the market rent.

- 5.4 In response to a query about succession, Annette replied that there are grounds that need to be met for succession that depend on the type of tenancy. For a joint tenancy, if one tenant dies that the surviving tenant will succeed. For other types of succession it is dependent on Newlon and the type of accommodation. For example, one adult child of a tenant who died could not succeed to a four bedroom house but they could be offered a one bedroom home. Succession is also dependent on eligibility. Such as the succeeding tenant, in the example above, having lived in the home before their parent died.
- 5.5 **ACTION:** Agreed that the proposals from a member about pets would be deferred to the February meeting as they had been unable to attend this one.

## 6. PERFORMANCE REPORT – HOUSING AND PROPERTY SERVICES

- 6.1 Members looked at the Key Performance Indicators (KPI's) with a red status. Bill reported that the KPI for Anti-Social Behaviour (ASB) was not much lower than the target. Martin thought the number of overdue fire risk actions (FRA's) was too high at 782. Bill explained that Newlon would like to have no overdue FRA's but these could include something simple such as the need for a sticker on a door or clutter in walkways. FRA's had been a priority for Newlon since Grenfell.
- 6.2 Blossom asked whether Newlon should check if smoke alarms in residents' homes are working. Bill agreed to find out. Annette added that for some smoke alarms, residents cannot change the batteries themselves. If this is the case, they should report this to Newlon who will deal with replacing them.
- 6.3 **ACTION:** agreed that information about Building Services KPI's to be included in the performance report for all future meetings.  
**ACTION:** agreed to investigate if Newlon should check whether smoke alarms in residents' homes are working.

## 7. RESIDENT INVOLVEMENT UPDATE

- 7.1 The proposed changes to the wording in the Code of Conduct about bringing Newlon into disrepute were included in this meeting's papers but Africa had been unable to attend and speak to them. It was decided that members would be consulted digitally instead of bringing to another meeting. Noted that the Scrutiny Panel last week had proposed another amendment. They have recommended that the section of the Declaration Form which asks for details of potential conflicts of interest includes an additional option. This is intended to cover the situation where an involved resident, as defined in the Code, is also a Newlon member of staff or related to one. The Complaints Panel will also be consulted about the Code of Conduct. Bill agreed that amendments to the Code relating to involved residents could incorporate proposed amendments.
- 7.2 Members discussed possible resident involvement in contract management. Bill said he would welcome the involvement and input of residents in contract management. Quality and cost were issues for residents and members would have had different experiences of those. Newlon wanted some reflections of residents' perspectives on those. Members noted that they had already had some involvement and appreciated it. A member raised their experience of problems with the lift maintenance service with appointments not being kept and it was agreed to investigate this. Bill clarified that Newlon do not carry out cleaning of

residents' windows as this was their responsibility and most are designed to be cleaned from the inside.

- 7.3 Robyn asked how residents find out about Newlon's responsibilities for their building such as window cleaning. In her experience, the Service Centre did not always know about that level of detail. Bill replied that when residents move into new homes they should be informed about the level of Newlon's services. Signs should be on the noticeboard which set out the cleaning service for that building. He encouraged residents to go to the Service Centre in the first instance. If they did not know the information requested, they would find out and get back to the resident. Robyn also raised issues of defects in her new building and waiting for two weeks for a reply to emails about them. Bill informed that when new buildings are handed over to Newlon, staff have to be told what goes on them and acknowledged that sometimes mistakes are made. Robyn raised a number of other queries and Martin suggested that it may be better if they are dealt with by Bill offline.
- 7.4 Members were reminded that 1<sup>st</sup> November was the last day to nominate for the Star Awards. Multiple nominations for different people and self nominations were accepted.
- 7.5 The Forum's Xmas party will be held on Wednesday 5 December and Karen reported that the Scrutiny Panel had also been invited.
- 7.6 Lloyd raised that it was reported at the last Residents Services Committee that 25% of Newlon's homes account for 66% of repairs needed. Martin asked if this was due to larger homes, possible over-crowding and more wear and tear. Bill replied this was more likely to be about the age and type of building. Mark Newstead, the Director of Property Services and he had discussed this issue. Bill reported that they are harder to look after and satisfaction is lower where the repairs cost is higher older homes. Martin reported that Mark was planning to delve deeper into the figures and give more detail at a later date. He also wondered if resident satisfaction is lower in street properties. Agreed to include this issue in a future topic for the Forum about street properties.
- 7.7 **ACTION:** Agreed Karen to consult members digitally about a member's proposed changes to the wording in the Code of Conduct about bringing Newlon into disrepute.  
**ACTION:** Agreed that the Code of Conduct, as it applied to involved residents, could incorporate proposed amendments from the Forum, Scrutiny and Complaints Panels.  
**ACTION:** Agreed to investigate if there has been a problem with the lift maintenance service.  
**ACTION:** Agreed to put the topic of street properties on the agenda of a future meeting and include the lower satisfaction rates of residents who live in them.  
**ACTION:** Agreed to deal with queries from a member outside of the meeting.

## 8. FEEDBACK FROM AND TO THE BOARD/RESIDENTS' SERVICES COMMITTEE

- 8.1 Martin reported there was no feedback from the Board.
- 8.2 Noted that John has also be chosen as the Scrutiny Panel as their performance representative at their meeting last week.

## 8. NEXT MEETING

- 8.1 It was noted that the next meeting will be held on Wednesday 6 February 2019.