

RESIDENTS' FORUM – 6 February 2019

MINUTES

Members Present: Lloyd Gale-Ward (Chair); Phil Williams; Eunice Sinyinza; Sylvia Donaldson; Kevin Brown; Blossom Shakespeare; Sonia Dobson; Surjeet Chana; Africa Alconchel-Guido; Wendy Jackson; Ben Roe; John Rymell

Staff & Board Present: Bill Henderson, Director Housing Services; Annette Morrison, Head of Quality; Nicola Baston, Board member; Graham Watts, Head of Residents Services, Karen Orr, Senior Resident Involvement Officer (minute taker).

Apologies: Martin Hughes; William Crilly; Geraldine Grant;

1. WELCOME & INTRODUCTIONS

1.1. Lloyd welcomed everyone and introduced special guest, Nicola Bastin from the Board.

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

2.1 The minutes of 31 October 2018 were agreed as a true and correct record.

2.2 Bill explained that after a selection process and following some guidance from residents, a new parking contractor – PCM – had been chosen. It will be started on one scheme, Isobel Place, to see how well it goes. PCM have given a commitment to be firmer with parking.

2.3 **ACTION:** agreed Karen to re-send the consultation on the Code of Conduct for Involved Residents to Forum members.

3. BI-ANNUAL REPORT ON COMPLAINTS

3.1 Annette introduced her report on Complaints from July to December 2018. The majority of complaints for all Stages were about repairs. Performance in responding to complaints at Stage 0 was good and for Stage 1 slipped just in September and October due to staff changes. In December, performance had improved and was 100%. Annette explained that the number of complaints drops for each ascending Stage. 53% of Stage 0's had progressed to Stage 1 over the period and this was higher than before.

3.2 There was still a backlog of Stage 2 appeals which was being addressed by having a minimum target of 10 to be reviewed each month. Nicola asked if the large numbers of Stage 2's received in November and December were a trend or blip. Annette replied that she was hoping it was a blip as less had been received in January 2019 and generally the numbers do fluctuate. It can sometimes be difficult to work out the causes. At the next Resident Services Committee (RSC), she will be providing an analysis of why residents have gone to Stage 2. Last year's analysis assessed if residents would have gone to Stage 2 anyway or was there something that Newlon could have done. Most were 50/50.

3.3 There were 29 Stage 2 complaints that had been open longer than six months, some of which were very complex. The Complaints Panel provided detailed feedback to Newlon during their review in 2018 and a summary plus Newlon's responses were provided in the report. In response to Sonia, Bill explained that the Gas Heating contract is going out to tender. The current contractors had performed very well in the past but were not now. Annette always passes back any learning from Stage Two appeals back to the relevant

contractor that delivers the service. She also noted that the current Gas Heating contractor is over represented in Stage 2 complaints.

- 3.4 Blossom had attended RSC in October with another Complaints Panel member to discuss their work. They raised issues about the ownership of repairs work between Newlon and its contractors. John mentioned the need for Newlon to centralise systems so that all parties could see the same information. Annette responded that a contractor portal is being developed where there will be greater integration of information. The Complaints Panel now recorded the learning they identified from each Stage 2 appeal. They also record whether they had identified the learning before and rate the Stage 1 response from Newlon to the complainant. The tabled summary showed the Panel was very satisfied or satisfied with Stage 1 responses (83%). Annette then judges the learning identified by the Panel, using her Ombudsman “head”. Blossom agreed with Annette, that overall, these changes had improved the Stage 2 complaints process and the learning.

4. SERVICE CHARGES

- 4.1 As a segue into his item, Bill explained that complaints cannot generally be made about service charges as there is a legal challenge process and remedies available elsewhere. However, the administration of service charges can be the subject of a complaint. Bill also made the distinction between service charges and the delivery of those services.
- 4.2 The legal definition for service charges was “a service provided alongside a tenancy or lease”. Tenants do not pay for insurance, the management of service charges or communal repairs in their as these are included in their rent, although leaseholders pay for all of these. One of the service charge principles is that residents pay for what they get. So if undercharged then the deficit will be collected from them later. If overcharged, they get a refund and these are made the next financial year. Newlon spends £9m a year on service charges, 40% of which is paid for by them and not passed on to residents as some schemes have no service charges. These are schemes with a fixed rent that goes up by inflation each year. This means if Newlon’s service charge costs go up by more than inflation then they lose money.
- 4.3 Newlon’s highest service charge is £5800 a year for a leasehold home and the lowest is £750 a year for a rented home. Bill sometimes encounters the perception from residents that Newlon don’t care or stand up enough against landlords (where Newlon is a leaseholder). However, about six years ago, Newlon took a landlord to court, on behalf of a group of leaseholders who were being over charged, and won. But spent £60k in legal fees and these costs were not recoverable. In 2017/18, Newlon paid for exactly 1001 items of bulk rubbish to be collected. All these had to be coded to the correct scheme to be recovered by service charge.
- 4.4 Issues for residents can include a poor perception of value for money; that service charges are complicated and so are difficult to understand. Residents also feel that they can be hard to challenge. Eunice agreed and explained where she lives the amount of service charge errors had been unbelievable. Bill acknowledged that historically increases could be hard to justify and affected the affordability of some Newlon homes. Sonia pointed out that the service charges for a Camden home that the Forum visited last year were higher than the actual rent. Phil felt where he lived that the cleaners were not providing value for money and Newlon did not listen to the residents. Bill thought this was more about contract management as the service improved when the cleaners employed a very good manager. It was recognised that when residents dump rubbish, the costs go on the service charges for all residents where they live. Some of these issues were inherently complicated and hard to

challenge, but if Forum members had any ideas about how they could be tackled, Newlon would listen.

- 4.5 The meeting considered the history of service charges for 3 different Newlon schemes. These demonstrated the difference made by setting service charges too low or too high at the beginning of a scheme's life and how much equipment was in the building. Bill felt it was better to set higher/more realistic service charges at the beginning of a scheme's life. If they are set too low, the deficit would have to be paid in another year on top of the actual, higher cost. There is an obvious tension between this and the job of the sales team in selling homes. Some service charge costs can also vary enormously between years such as communal repairs and bulk rubbish removal. In contrast, cleaning and energy costs will not vary much. Factors that increase costs include over specifying services, high levels of misuse, newer buildings with more required equipment; safety works; smaller and larger buildings and services managed by other landlords.
- 4.6 The information Newlon provide to residents about service charges had improved, although Bill thought it could look better. Last year Newlon set up a dedicated service charge team which is now in place and residents are getting more accurate charges and quicker responses to queries. Recruitment could be difficult as it was essential to get people with the right knowledge. A new Head of Service Charges had recently been appointed and was starting in March. Phil felt that complaints about service charges where he lived were not being dealt with. The service charge team's role was to be there for residents although there has been a low take up by residents to date. Also to stand up for residents within Newlon and do some internal challenging. If resident groups wanted to meet the service charge team and talk about their charges, this could be arranged.
- 4.7 Bill gave an update about cleaning, saying it was more about services than charges but that it did have a cost. Apart from contracts for building new homes it was Newlon's biggest single contract, about £2m a year. There had been extensive consultation during the current procurement for a new cleaning contractor to collect as much information about what residents wanted. Newlon are aiming for one contractor, toning down the specification (less detail and less work). Ben asked if Newlon specified how long the cleaners should be on site and Bill replied no, but that the standard that the cleaners were expected to meet was specified. Residents had been consulted about the frequency of cleaning, some results were surprising as Newlon thought there may be too much cleaning and residents did not.
- 4.8 **ACTION:** Agreed that Newlon would listen and consider any ideas from Forum members on tackling issues faced by residents about service charges.
ACTION: Agreed to ask the Scrutiny Panel to consider choosing service charges as a future topic to scrutinise.

5. PET POLICY

- 5.1 Africa spoke about her paper, Companion Animals at Home. She proposed that Newlon update their Pet Policy to take a companion animal approach. There were a number of residents in her area with companion animals, especially older people, those who were vulnerable and those with disabilities. She did not think it was fair that the policy excluded residents having pets in those circumstances. Blossom explained that she had to adopt her cat out when she moved to Hale Village because of the policy. John suggested resident's animals should be treated the same as residents who have music systems. As long as they were not causing any anti-social behaviour they should be allowed.

- 5.2 The benefits of having animals at home and better health outcomes was well documented. Africa noted that some other Housing Associations had updated their policies to take the companion animal approach. There followed a discussion about the benefits of companion animals and in what circumstances they could be allowed (such as only where there is a garden) and what would be unacceptable behaviour (such as loud barking). Lloyd noted that the pet policy had recently been updated.
- 5.3 Bill explained that the current policy varies from building to building. Pets are excluded mainly from new buildings. He agreed that Newlon could look at the policy, although it would be difficult to change. Cats and dogs would be the only pets that they would consider. It was an easy policy to manage at the moment. But if it changed to say animals would generally be allowed but not if they behaved badly, this would be difficult to prove and deal with. John asked why the same rules on residents' behaviour could not be applied to pets and Bill replied because Newlon was in the business of housing people. He also gave an example where Newlon had recently approved a pet because a resident had a medical need. Graham gave a relevant example where Newlon had changed their existing policy over time to allow resident to have home-based businesses.
- 5.4 John conducted a straw poll on whether members agreed that animals should generally be allowed on Newlon properties, providing that they are not adversely affecting other residents. Just five members were in favour of the proposition so it was not carried.
- 5.5 **ACTION:** Agreed that Newlon would look at their current pet policy and consider special cases where residents could have cats/dogs as companion animals in their home.
ACTION: agreed that Bill would report on this discussion to Residents Services Committee.

6. RESIDENT INVOLVEMENT & OTHER RESIDENT SERVICES ACTIVITIES

- 6.1 Karen reported on the work underway to update the Resident Involvement Strategy. A series of interactive workshops for residents/staff/Board and Committee are being held to consult on initial proposals. There were three central strands to the proposals, co-designing services; people; and ways of involving residents. It was hoped that an updated definition of resident involvement would also come out of this work. One of the key drivers was the Government's Social Housing Green Paper.
- 6.2 It was planned that the results of the workshops would feed into the Forum's planning meeting in April which the Board was also attending. Then a paper about the proposed new Strategy would go to RSC. Africa commented that reward vouchers for residents are a good idea. Lloyd suggested a link was needed for local people to get involved and Wendy agreed local involvement was critical. It was suggested that Newlon consider whether the reward incentives should be extended to local involvement as it can be very difficult to get people involved. John stated that a neutral place for local residents to meet was needed and that Newlon should pay for this. Karen explained this is part of the support already offered but perhaps more promotion was needed so that residents were more aware of it. It was acknowledged that not all residents wished to get involved but barriers should be removed.
- 6.3 Graham gave a brief update on other work of the Resident Services team. Funding from the team to support residents in different ways, such as the Hardship Fund, was being distributed. Suggestions from the Forum last year about ways to save energy and support residents in fuel poverty were being implemented through different programmes. Graham would report in more detail about these at the May Forum. The Welfare Benefits Advisor in

the team had helped residents claim over £100k in benefits this year alone. Employment was also a big focus with over 125 residents being supported.

- 6.4 The Star Awards event last year had been a success with Lloyd and Wendy receiving awards. Graham thanked Geraldine and Eunice who were active members of the planning group. Feedback from participants had been very good and there had been some useful suggestions for planning the Awards in the future. There had been a successful mini campaign to promote the benefits of resident involvement in the Board. Resulting in agreement to expand residents on the Board to two members and better representation.
- 6.5 **ACTION:** agreed that members would contact Karen with their suggestions for updating the Resident Involvement Strategy.

7. PERFORMANCE REPORT – HOUSING AND PROPERTY SERVICES

- 7.1 Bill reported that many of the Key Performance Indicators (KPI's) were displaying a green status where targets had been met and explained why other KPI's did not meet their target.
- 7.2 **Repairs:** the average number of days to complete a repair has gone up a little, so performance was down, as it can be more difficult to get contractors out over Christmas. **Neighbourhood:** satisfaction in handling ASB had also gone down a little, the target was very high and the results are generally better. The % of estate actions done by the first inspection was lower than the target. One of the reasons for this was because Newlon had recently taken back the management of the Barnsbury Estate as they had concerns about safety on the estate and many communal repairs (which count as estate actions) were not being completed. Newlon were keeping the service as consistent as possible and had taken on almost all the staff. Bill added that another issue Newlon had to address was that the estate was old and needed money and attention and they plan to do so. **Asset Management:** very few homes were having cyclical decorations done because much funding had been diverted to fire safety and electrical work. There were many fire risk actions overdue as a result of the very detailed and invasive fire safety inspections to homes. These types of inspections lead to more actions being identified and more funding being spent. The Grenfell fire was behind this. There were some water safety actions overdue. These concerned the water tanks on roofs that have to be chlorinated and taps that have to be used regularly to stop the possibility of Legionella disease.
- 7.3 Blossom reminded the meeting about the derelict flat they had visited on the Barnsbury Estate last year. They were promised updated pictures after the flat was refurbished. Agreed to chase this up.
- 7.4 **ACTION:** Agreed to provide the Forum with updated pictures of the flat they visited on the Barnsbury last year and which had since been refurbished.

8. NEXT MEETING

- 8.1 It was noted that the next meeting will be the annual planning and strategy one on Wednesday 3 April which the Board will be attending.