

RESIDENTS' FORUM – 19 September 2019

MINUTES

Members Present: Lloyd Gale-Ward (Acting Chair); Eunice Sinyinza; Blossom Shakespeare; Sonia Dobson; Geraldine Grant; Ben Roe; Kevin Brown; John Rymell; Wendy Jackson.

Staff Present: Bill Henderson, Director Housing Services; Ezinne Ogbonna, Business Development Director; Graham Watts, Head of Residents Services; Nic Bliss, CoCH; Angela Wint, Senior Project Manager; Sharna Drummond, HR Apprentice; Karen Orr, Senior Resident Involvement Officer (minute taker).

Apologies: Sylvia Donaldson; Phil Williams; William Crilly; Surjeet Chana; Martin Hughes; Africa Alconchel-Guido

1. WELCOME & INTRODUCTIONS

- 1.1. Lloyd welcomed everyone and introduced Angela & Sharna - staff who were observing the Forum as they responded to the open invite for staff. Lloyd also welcomed Nic Bliss from the Confederation of Co-operative Housing. Lloyd noted that William Crilly had recently resigned from the Forum.
- 1.2. Lloyd noted that the Chair, Martin, had been unable to attend this meeting which would have been his last one after stepping down from the Board.

2. MINUTES & ACTIONS UPDATE

- 2.1. The minutes of the 27 June were agreed as a true and correct record.
- 2.2. KO reminded members they had agreed to hold an open Forum for residents once a year and a date will be scheduled into the Forum's diary for 2020.

3. COMMUNITY LED HOUSING

- 3.1. Nic Bliss introduced himself, he works for the Confederation of Co-operative Housing (CCH) which is working with other organisations and Government to set up a programme called "community led housing" (CLH). His session tonight came about as Geraldine saw his presentation at the Tpas Conference.
- 3.2. CLH was about affordable housing; community participation and consent in the development of homes, usually through a democratic membership organisation who then go on to manage those homes. There are lots of groups around the country involved like this and Nic showed some of these and the homes they built in his presentation. There are about 14,000 homes in the pipeline being developed in this way. Nic noted that his co-op had 97% satisfaction amongst its residents and they had low rent arrears. The rent is decided in a similar way to how Newlon decides their rents as both are governed by a regulatory framework. Bill noted that Newlon rents are

enormously variable. Some services are delivered by Nic's co-op and some they pay others to deliver. Like Newlon they have a set of policies and standards.

- 3.3 The level of volunteering in Nic's co-op ebbs and flows but about one third of residents do something. There are many different forms of CLH and different benefits like well-being; a village feel in the big city; lots of social support networks. In urban areas, CLH is often about building on smaller sites that other organisations can't. The development process for CLH should not be any more difficult than other ways of building homes. There were three ways to develop CLH – through grass roots groups; by existing organisations and by developer led partnerships such as a housing association recruiting and developing founder members. The CCH had worked with some housing associations where there was no existing community but the HA made the decision to set up a community group to develop homes. If Newlon are interested then CCH can talk to them about setting up such a group and scheme. There are many different approaches to setting up CLH, dependent on the outcomes wanted; what type of housing etc. CCH help work through what is the right approach for each group.
- 3.4 In England, CCH have worked with Government to set up a community housing fund to increase CLH supply and this will be £163m up to 2021. There is a different but similar programme through the Greater London Authority. The fund pays for capital and revenue - capital to contribute to building the homes and revenue to develop and train the groups plus have local "hubs" to provide advice/support. There is a hub for London and Nic can put us in touch with them. His presence tonight is part of the programme to promote CLH.
- 3.5 Members found the presentation very interesting. Bill pointed out that it would need people with enthusiasm, time and commitment behind such a community group. Newlon had experience of a tenant management organisation that had failed. John pointed out that a group could have a structure to try and prevent such failure, mechanisms to keep things grounded. Nic added that CCH advise HA's on these types of issues, it's about setting up the right framework from the beginning. Bill said that he is always open to approaches from residents to take over a service they are unhappy with but that ideas need to come from residents. Wendy agreed that it can be hard to get residents involved. Lloyd felt it would be good to have residents input at different levels e.g. start off small with say the gardening service. Geraldine and Eunice added that they would definitely be interested.
- 3.6 **ACTION:** It was agreed to find out if there is any interest from residents in a community led housing group.

4. IMPROVING COMMUNICATIONS WITH RESIDENTS

- 4.1 The last Forum agreed that members would help Newlon draft rules and tips for staff on writing to residents using an appropriate tone and style. Graham introduced his report and led a guided discussion about improving communication and their views on four key areas - about methods and words

used, examples of positive and negative communication examples and how new guidance should be rolled out across Newlon. Graham felt that resident satisfaction could be better if Newlon improve how they communicate with residents.

- 4.2 For example, many of Newlon's texts start with "Please be advised..." Newlon should be able to use words that make residents feel better even if communicating a difficult message. John noted that there was a lot to talk about in improving communications to residents. He suggested headlines that pull people into the message, such as a mail chimp with a picture and residents click on the picture to get the message. Karen added that residents would also be consulted about improving the newsletter. Bill said that Newlon could think about sending less emails and phone residents instead, as could then negotiate things better. John said that he tends to email Newlon then follow up with a phone call. Blossom thought it was better to phone and then back up with an email. Eunice felt it was key that residents' calls are noted on CRM as her experience was this did not always happen. Bill replied that all calls are recorded although Wendy recounted that she has been told "we can find no trace of you ever calling us".
- 4.3 John proposed that residents should receive a record of the conversations they have with Newlon, for example what Newlon records about their phone calls on CRM. Bill suggested that residents could have a choice and recommended getting a list together then working out what Newlon could do. Lloyd read out a bad example of a text he had recently received from Newlon. Bill also suggested that all communications from Newlon to residents should be proof read before they are sent and that they demonstrate respect for residents. So perhaps have a template plus quality control. Other suggestions included – staff buddying up to proof read each other's draft communications
- 4.4 Graham suggested that "home/s" should always be used to describe where residents live rather than "stock, properties or units" Also that the active tense should be used and that words are pared down; abbreviations are left out or explained. Karen suggested to write more like people speak. Bill thought that friendly, informal and phrasing things positively was a good approach with John adding use of plain language and avoiding clichés. Ben suggested making clear what residents could do if they don't understand something. Graham then noted that the current communications guidelines to staff are good, they just need to be built on and improved.
- 4.5 **ACTION:** Agreed that Graham would write up all suggestions and feed into work within Newlon to improve communications. The results would come back to a future Forum.

5. RESIDENT INVOLVEMENT STRATEGY UPDATE

- 5.1 Karen reported back on the results of the Forum member's survey about updating their Constitution. The Constitution will be updated to reflect these

decisions and those from the last Forum. Encouragingly, each proposal had a clear majority in favour of one option:

- The length of time a member serves on the Forum – **4 years (90%)**
- Should ex-members have just left be able to reapply – **YES (90%)**
- Forum membership should include two places for residents who have been members of the group since it started – **YES (80%)**
- Potential new members should fill in a short online application form or have it filled in for them – **YES (80%)**
- Selecting new members should be done jointly by the resident involvement team and a Forum officer - **YES (80%)**
- New members should be paired with an existing member for support - **YES (100%)**

- 5.2 Four open answers had also been received. Karen highlighted one that said “There is a vast amount of experience to be found in active Forum members that would be wasted if not utilised”. Newlon agreed and would sit down with Forum members as their terms are coming to an end to map out their skills and experiences and discuss what other involvement activities they could do. They would also be offered an exit interview to find out their views about being a Forum member and how we could improve the experience.
- 5.3 Blossom raised a query about resident Board members who serve on the Board for 9 years but do not chair the Forum. Wendy brought up that in the past that the Forum selected its own chair. Bill explained the Board had made a decision a couple of years ago that the resident Board member should automatically chair the Forum (at that time there was just one resident Board member).
- 5.4 The Forum’s 20th anniversary as a group will take place in December as it had been founded in 1999. Agreed to hold a joint Xmas and 20th Anniversary Party. All current and ex Forum members will be invited and staff who have attended over the years.
- 5.5 Blossom reported that Graham had presented the Resident Involvement Strategy at Residents’ Services Committee. Thinking about the action table for the new strategy, Bill asked what Newlon could change to make repairs better.
- 5.6 **ACTION:** Agreed that the Forum’s Constitution will be updated to reflect the survey decisions and those from the last Forum.
ACTION: Agreed that members whose terms are finishing will have a discussion with the Resident Involvement team to map out their skills and experiences; what other involvement activities they could do and will be offered an exit interview.
ACTION: Agreed to consult members about their preference for either the 19th or 26th October to hold the annual Forum tour.
ACTION: Agreed to hold a joint Xmas and 20th Anniversary Party.

6. TPAS CONFERENCE FEEDBACK

- 6.1 Geraldine fed back about attending the National Tpas Conference in Coventry this July with six other residents. They had found it very enjoyable and useful for their role on the Forum and other involvement activities. While there she had attended Nic's presentation about CLH, which had been her favourite part of the conference. She would like Newlon to support something about CLH. She ended her report by saying that every Forum member should go. Karen added that some Forum members are invited every year.

7. PERFORMANCE REPORT

- 7.1 John presented his report about the latest performance figures from the Forum's scorecard. He had a lot of questions and Karen had gathered information from other officers about these. Some of his queries had been satisfactorily answered and some were still pending. For instance, the % of residents satisfied with their last repair was 97.99%, which appeared very high. This information was being collected from residents who filled in the repairs satisfaction app. He wanted to understand why it was now so high when before it was 51%.

- 7.3 **ACTION:** Agreed to remind staff that their performance figures and notes are reviewed by the Forum and they needed to make their explanations more detailed.

8. ANY OTHER BUSINESS

- 8.1 Ben raised the issue of recent fires in London where the homes had timber cladding. His block and other Newlon homes had timber cladding. He also had a concern about residents smoking on balconies and wondered if this could be banned. Bill answered that Newlon was carrying out more fire safety work and agreed to look at this topic in a future Forum.
- 8.2 **ACTION:** Agreed to update a future Forum on fire safety, including timber cladding.