

## RESIDENTS' FORUM – 28th October 2020

### MINUTES

**Members present:** Lloyd Gale-Ward (Chair), Eunice Sinyinza, Sonia Dobson, Ben Roe, John Rymell, Africa Alconchel-Guido, Blossom Shakespeare, Sylvia Donaldson, Geraldine Grant and Iain Scott.

**Staff Present:** Bill Henderson, Director Housing Services; Graham Watts, Head of Residents Services; Emma Preston-Dunlop, Senior Resident Involvement Officer (minutes); Judith, Resident Involvement Officer.

**Apologies:** Wendy Jackson, Sophie Greenfield and Surjeet Chana

#### 1. Welcome and Introductions

- 1.1 Lloyd welcomed everyone to the 'virtual' Residents' Forum via Zoom with a round-up of positive things that had happened since August for us as individuals.

#### 2. Minutes and Action Update

- 2.1. The minutes of the previous meeting were discussed in relation to outstanding actions.
- 2.2. John queried whether the customer service team asked what problems they had since August that might make answers low in terms of positivity. Graham responded that yes, they had fed back that something technical can take time and that the chain of contact is the main challenge, the continuity of communication. Generally, the Service Centre does better than some teams but high volume does affect things and in the new report these problems are still reflected. Geraldine enquired was there a case that residents are sent a message that there is a delay and Graham responded that yes, the next report highlights the need for acknowledgement which is a key point of the 2-ten standard. The report shows improvement overall.
- 2.3. With reference to cycling John made a comment regarding free cycle storage for housing associations regarding sheds for ten bikes outside a property. Worth following up, he thought, as well as free training available via TfL. Africa asked for clarification and John wasn't sure how it was funded. Bill responded that TfL was very short of money currently. Emma remarked that local and national bike organisations offer training (low cost and free).
- 2.4. Graham noted a key action regarding the Wates contract review. Moving forward, two separate panels will be being set up looking at the contract KPIs. More details to follow.
- 2.5. Graham noted a request to make the Residents' Forum meeting packs smaller which we have attempted to do to allow for more time for discussion.

### **3. Forum Update: Governance and Strategy, Communications, and Performance**

- 3.1 Graham remarked that in relation to the Resident Involvement Strategy, the team were still moving forward. The strategy had been approved by the board in September 2019 – our 2019/2020 review of actions placed us at a 3/5 (fair) performance level, which we aim to improve. Graham said he was glad to have Emma Preston-Dunlop (our new Senior Resident Involvement Officer) on board to pick up these actions along with the team. He committed to bring reports to the Residents' Forum each meeting and to report on progress.
- 3.2 Lloyd commented on resident involvement in Zoom calls. Ben and Iain were able to give feedback as they took part. Ben gave a report on how things were run, gave positivity to staff, as did Iain. Bill stated that staff really appreciated it – either they never really meet residents or only at the end of a tense transaction. The Service Centre sometimes feels underappreciated and they felt it was engaged two-way process.
- 3.3 Bill commented regarding improving Newlon's response to complaints. There is a new Complaints Code from the Ombudsman and recently more interest in this area from the government. Most points of the Code we can comply with, however two we don't:
  - 3.3.1 Timescales – This currently goes to a resident panel, which builds in delay which may no longer be possible because of the Ombudsman's deadline. Bill wanted feedback on how to keep resident involvement in this process without this panel.
  - 3.3.2 Showing we've learnt from complaints – Bill cited examples of leaks and ASB, that we need to learn and listen and involve residents in complaints. Blossom responded that it is about integration and not passing the buck, and that skill sharing is very important regarding awareness and understanding. More people should be trained to feel confident to deal with complaints. If teams deal with things straightaway and don't treat residents as a tick box exercise there will be better rapport and it will minimise the complaints process. Iain commented that shared caseloads amongst teams is good for load balancing but bad for accountability and there is something to be learned from "the old way" of assigning cases. John seconded this. Blossom remarked that chains and processes of communication are important. John suggested that Zoom and video calls are more personal for customer services and Bill agreed that he would like that for sensitive matters because it's easier to empathise. There was a conversation regarding the conflict between teams and individuals taking responsibility - for example it is half term this week and a good opportunity to emphasise teamwork. Iain remarked that people feel removed if not directly attached to a complaint. Bill said that he thought sometimes this was conscious and that there should be the feeling of the individual being within a team. Iain mentioned the modern concept of protectionism always giving organisations anonymity and John mentioned how local authorities never want to take responsibility. Bill stated it was better to avoid lengthy post-mortems, admit you're wrong and sort it out. However, the Ombudsman has more levels of bureaucracy (stage one, stage two).

Geraldine agreed with Bill's quick and uncomplicated approach. Bill remarked that it's quicker and cheaper for Newlon and uses less energy. Newlon spend a lot of money on staff dealing with complaints and he would rather spend that money on the service.

- 3.4 Bill then moved on to ask about resident involvement and complaints - whether you check for empathy and appropriate language? John suggested allocating an area or demographic for resident to resident conversations, a type of advocacy. Emma queried whether advocacy skills would be required for this. John didn't think so; Geraldine remarked that she felt this would just be lengthening the process. Emma asked how you would measure this resident involvement and Iain and John felt they had sufficient ways.
- 3.5 Bill asked Blossom how we show that we are learning from complaints. Lloyd remarked that potential learning could come from analysis of the business review. Blossom stated we could go back and look at complaint feedback forms. She continued by saying that as soon as the complaint comes in action it the best way possible and ask the tenant what they really want; call them. Money is always an issue. Compensation is not always the right way and should be dealt with individually, case-by-case.
- 3.6 Bill remarked that we spend £20,000 a year on compensation, which is very little. We spend much more than this amount on staff dealing with complaints. Compensation has got to be fair and reasonably consistent – small amounts can be insulting. It's Newlon's responsibility to make compensation amounts reasonable. Iain agreed that low compensation was not okay, that people will be more likely to appreciate a missed appointment to be rescheduled to a weekend, as an example. He asked what the complaint driver was and Bill responded this was left to the resident. Iain replied that possibly there was scope for third party, a resident liaison to couch their complaint.

**The Forum received the Governance and Strategy, Communications, and Performance update and directed staff to continue to implement the actions and embed resident involvement across the organisation.**

#### **Actions:**

- Review the role of residents on Complaints Panels in light of the Ombudsman's deadlines
- Look into training for staff regarding complaints
- Endeavour to deal with more complaints before the Ombudsman is involved
- Analyse business review and complaint feedback forms
- Revisit compensation levels to make sure they are fair and are consistent
- Explore possibility of resident to resident support

#### **4. Contracts and services update**

- 4.1 Graham explained that Newlon's Resident Involvement Strategy and indeed the sector's approach post Grenfell tragedy is about amplifying the voices of resident involvement and getting residents engaged strategically – helping us make decisions and monitoring things. The key is contracts. The procurements presentation at the last meeting highlighted a £500,000 saving

on cleaning contracts upon review involving residents. There have been three surveys recently – concierge, grounds maintenance and the Barnsbury Estate. The highlights of the concierge and grounds maintenance surveys will be used to shape the contract to be set in April by Bill and Matt with the estates team at the helm. The three contracts involved sending 5,000 surveys to which we had over 1,200 responses. There were six £100 incentives given and residents were very engaged. John remarked that 1,200 is an awful lot and Emma said that she was really pleased. Lloyd commented that he thought there could have been a higher response if there has been a bigger gap between surveys. He received texts that he felt were too similar too close together. The concierge survey was quite mixed but helpful and the gardening and maintenance survey was positive. Blossom commented that both were positive where she lives.

- 4.2 There is one particular concierge who can be grumpy, unapproachable and can appear rude. Bill was glad for the feedback.
- 4.3 Lloyd remarked that the job title of ‘concierge’ was seen as a bit of the issue and may be misleading. He queried that their role was pretty much security. Bill responded that residents expect them to do more than they do – they mainly check equipment. John noted that the job title causes confusion and Bill stated that one line in the service charge regarding security needs to be changed. Bill remarked that there is an issue with branding the service as ‘concierge’ and also that complacency has crept in.
- 4.4 John discussed deliveries and the role of concierge. Blossom remarked regarding what used to be the norm at Hale and how parcels are currently left in the communal area. She stated that people do favours for neighbours. Bill stated there was a major problem with parcels and the Fire Brigade talked to us. He said not to blame individual couriers but to blame courier companies.
- 4.5 Sonia and Eunice have local WhatsApp groups for taking parcels and wondered whether this could be encouraged. In contrast, Geraldine stated there is very little security in her building and neighbours have built in an element of trust and friendliness, buzzing in anyone who rings the intercom. John wondered whether a solution similar to Amazon lockers might be considered.

**The Forum received the contracts and services update and directed staff to continue to implement the actions and embed resident involvement across the organisation.**

**Actions:**

- Use survey information to shape contract renewal
- Update the line in the service charge regarding security
- Revisit the concierge branding making sure residents and contractors are fully aware of the boundaries of the service, and Newlon’s role in reinforcing those boundaries
- Review survey timings for maximum resident impact
- Investigate parcel solutions further with resident input

## **5. Autumn Mystery Shopping report**

- 5.1 The Forum received an overview of the results from Newlon's Autumn 2020 Mystery Shop exercise from Graham. The report summarised the feedback from Mystery Shoppers who undertook 56 enquiries (or 'tests') to determine how Newlon staff are performing against the 2-ten (responsiveness) standard. The exercise was expanded across Newlon this time.
- 5.2 The mystery shopping regarding service standards is really effective. It provides excellent feedback and gets staff thinking, and the good news is we are getting better – responsiveness has improved to 73% responsiveness on the 2-ten standard (up from 50% in Autumn of 2019).
- 5.3 Graham remarked it was good to get genuinely high quality responses against KBAs. There were instances where the chain of contact sometimes gets broken and there are areas that need more attention such as checking shared in boxes and carrying forward requests. We are working towards more staff consistency, and looking for staff to take ownership and to get back to people. There were only two 'no replies'. John enquired whether the KBAs were available to residents and Graham responded yes, but not all; staff will attach a KBA to an email if relevant and the portal will be a place where self-help will be available. John asked if this was a bot and Bill replied not yet. Lloyd remarked on the 6% increase on the spring exercise, and wondered had a decline been expected. Graham responded that shared in-boxes were crucial. The Fire Safety team hired a liaison officer to handle crucial communications. All teams are directed to check communication channels because we need more than ever to be conscious of resident enquiries.
- 5.4 Bill remarked that people now know about the tests and want to do well.
- 5.5 Emma wondered whether it was okay for departments with large volume to settle for silver, which the results imply. Iain commented that perhaps calling them gold, silver and bronze wasn't helpful and you should align awards with the results you want. Judith commented that they had pushed 2-ten rather than bronze, silver and gold levels.

**The Forum received the report and directed staff to implement the solutions as noted above with the goal of improving responsiveness and increasing resident satisfaction.**

## **6 Feedback from and to: the Board/Residents' Services Committee (RSC)/ Resident Panels**

- 6.4 Blossom noted that they were looking for a new chair of the Board to replace Sarah and has been successful. Staff are being kept working from home for the time being. She remarked that the Board was pleased with the work the Forum is doing. Lloyd said he was on the panel for the new Chair recruitment and that they had recommended a candidate. This will be announced at the December board meeting when Sarah Ebanja has stepped down. Lloyd

remarked on the resident involvement on the panel – nine residents were involved in recruitment sessions. The candidate is very strong and the unanimous choice.

6.5 Blossom reminded everyone that there is support for people struggling and they can get support from Newlon.

6.6 Geraldine requested contact details of Forum members. Emma has these and asked if members minded them being circulated. The response was positive so Emma will do this for those who were in attendance.

**The Forum received the feedback and look forward to the announcement of the new chair of the Board.**

**Actions:**

- Emma to circulate Forum members' contact details (those in attendance and to check with others) to all members

**7 AOB**

7.4 Sonia remarked that since there is no Christmas get-together she was interested to see what would happen. Might there be a Zoom event?

7.5 Eunice noted that Wendy had left a message for Emma in error on her phone.

7.6 Blossom had been having issues with email from various Newlon addresses.

**Actions:**

- Emma to contact Wendy and send a hard copy version of the Forum pack.