

# **Newlon Residents' Forum Minutes, 10<sup>th</sup> February 2021**

**Members present:** Africa Alconchel-Guido, Blossom Shakespeare, Ben Roe, Geraldine Grant, Iain Scott, Lloyd Gale-Ward (Chair), Sonia Dobson, Sylvia Donaldson, Wendy Jackson, Eunice Sinyinza, Kevin Brown

**Staff present:** Bill Henderson, Director Housing Services; Graham Watts, Head of Residents Services; Emma Preston-Dunlop (minutes), Senior Resident Involvement Officer, Joe Molloson, Head of Communications, Scout Burghardt (note taker)

**Apologies:** Sophie Greenfield, John Rymell, Judith Perry, Resident Involvement Officer, Surjeet Chana (who is resigning because the meetings clash with her work commitments - Emma to make a note to thank her for her work)

## **1. Welcome, Introductions & Apologies**

- 1.1 Lloyd welcomes everyone to the first meeting of the year
- 1.2 note: instructions how to join the meeting on the phone may be incorrect. no need to use 44 but instead just a 0

## **2. Minutes of previous meeting, matters arising and outstanding action points**

- 2.1 On point 3.4 Iain remembers not taking part in that discussion of in what ways to measure things - would like to have his name taken out of this part
- 2.2 Minutes discussed in relation to ongoing actions
- 2.3 Annette noting on topic of complaints that quality and conflict resolution teams have recently undergone training; that the new draft of complaints process is almost completed and currently at the solicitors and will be circulated once it is back; and that the situation with the new compensation policy is at a similar stage.
- 2.4 Geraldine asked about the advantages of the new complaints procedure. Annette pointed out the 20 day period in which a response has to take place - even during Covid times
- 2.5 Iain asked why the panel was removed from the process and that he was told that this would slow down the process and impact on the 20 day response time. Annette agreed that this was the reason.

## **3. Governance and Strategy**

### **3.1 Resident involvement summary update**

- 3.1.1 Emma reports that resident involvement strategy is being reviewed with a focus on how to engage and involve residents. The approach to scrutiny of Newlon's services is going to focus on communication with residents and the question where to make the most impact with resident involvement. Investigation how to improve processes of scrutiny and outcomes. The goal

is to let all measures feed into scrutiny rather than have a separate scrutiny panel. Introduction of report cards.

- 3.1.2 The Think Tank will be starting in earnest in March with 183 people (100 confirmed and 83 agreed but not yet actively involved). Next step: activate those 83.
- 3.1.3 Mystery shopping exercises going well and positive numbers are increasing. Readers' panel now shifting focus to be more of a communications panel.
- 3.1.4 Formation of a new repairs group: 10 residents plus 4 in the wings to jump in when needed (much interest in this).
- 3.1.5 Encouraged residents to sign up for Tpas membership after a Tpas event using their Newlon landlord membership and 8 have so far.
- 3.1.6 Newlon has officially adopted the Together With Tenants charter - the Board agreed it and details are on the website.
- 3.1.7 White Paper training events: residents encouraged to take part and there is funding in the budget which can be used to send residents to events.

### **Comments and feedback**

- 3.1.8 Lloyd commented it was great to see the improvements, especially Scrutiny to have a wider scope.
- 3.1.9 Query from Wendy. She and other residents have not received rent statements for at least 18 months and she inquired if anything was being done about this. Bill to sort this out
- 3.1.10 Bill noted that residents associations are a lot of work but great help for Newlon. Emma noted that two new residents groups are forming at the moment.
- 3.1.11 Lloyd asked when the first report card will be made available. Graham explained that his initial draft was too long and detailed. He will gather a small group of residents to look at the report and help him figure out what performance measures are needed and then finalise the report card. Lloyd pointed out that Tom is developing a risk strategy Graham replied that indeed there was much cross-over and that is one of the things being changed.

### **3.2 Reviewing the Forum's Constitution**

- 3.2.1 Emma: Suggestion to reduce numbers in the constitution from 21 to 15. In the past, the working number has been 12 to 13 in any meeting and has never been as high as 21. Also introducing a membership time limit of 3 years, legacy members, and a 2 meeting probationary period for new members. In relation to a Barnsbury representative, the constitution refers to BELMO and is out of date, needs changing. Reference to an annual performance checkup for Forum members and training opportunities.
- 3.2.2 Inquiry from Iain what would happen to his current situation. Graham replied that the constitution still states BELMO which needs to be updated and that Iain would stay on as a voice and 'representative' for Barnsbury.

- 3.2.3 Geraldine noted she does not see a problem in reduction to 15 members. Blossom inquired how new people would be onboarded and what would happen to Board members. Bill said that it was up to them to decide if 3 years felt like it was a good time period. Lloyd inquired when this new period would start and if it would be backdated. Graham suggested to draft a timeline of who joined when and suggested a new proposal could be brought to the September meeting
- 3.2.4 Wendy asked what the performance checkup would involve. Graham explained that the Board has a similar system and that this was more about looking at skills and how to build them and that the system was meant as support rather than a test to pass.
- 3.2.5 Iain asked what if no replacement can be found at the end of someone's service. Use legacy members? Emma added that it was also important to think about diversity and suggested that in such a case it could be possible to extend the membership of present members to maintain a better ratio. Lloyd suggested to check what other housing associations do in relation to these questions.
- 3.2.6 Blossom pointed out that there were people waiting to come on the Forum but it was also a question of commitment and to be mindful not to end up with all new members at the end of the pandemic period. Sonia wanted to know if the aforementioned new groups were all new people. Graham replied that the new groups contained a mix of residents and said that there was a list of people who were interested to join the Forum and some were also on other panels or groups. He also pointed that leaving the Forum would not mean finishing one's involvement.
- 3.2.7 Geraldine suggested increasing the period from 3 to 5 years in order to enable people to see projects through. Bill suggested that a 3 year term could also mean that members could reapply rather than just have to stop. Emma pointed out that a selection process was only necessary when more than 15 people were going for the 15 spaces.

**Actions:**

- **Staff to come back to next Forum with practical timeline and steps for refreshing constitution and putting in place terms and changes.**
- **Rent statements query – Bill, Joe, Wendy**
- **Smaller residents' group to review report card – Graham**
- **Repairs group meeting summary for next Residents' Forum meeting – Emma/Graham**
- **Refresh the Forum waiting list**

## **4. Reality Check**

### **4.1 Mystery Shopping update**

- 4.1.1 Graham announced there is a Mystery Shopping activity underway right now. This is 1 of 3 per year. The reports are taken seriously by staff and

management, some teams have integrated this into annual performance reviews and feed this into their performance-related pay. Responsiveness from staff appears to be very high in the current exercise. The resulting report will be circulated to Forum members.

**Actions:**

- **Mystery shopping report to be circulated**

## **5. Service Standards update**

### **5.1 Complaints Report**

- 5.1.1 Annette stated that the emphasis is on learning and improvement. These need to be more embedded in the organisation. She talked about the areas for improvement and change found in the self-assessment. It was found that the residents' panel involvement in complaints procedure was hindering the 20-day turnaround time. Instead, the goal is to involve residents in the bigger picture about learning. There was a meeting with them yesterday about this. Once the policy is agreed, it will be made public.
- 5.1.2 Iain was concerned that dropping the residents' complaints panel was causing a loss of perspective.

Annette pointed out that some of the employees are residents too. She said it had been very helpful when they reviewed the Stage 2 complaints but it is not possible to meet the time-scale with their involvement in the process.

Bill agreed that something was indeed being lost but that he hoped the gain in timeliness was worth it.

Iain pointed out the difference between a policy-shaping group and a group who is on the resident's side when it comes to complaints. He asked if the 10-day process of getting information to the residents' panel could be shortened. He thinks having that panel is a real bonus for the residents and its loss is great.

Bill replied that some complaints require thousands of emails and correspondence to be viewed and Annette mentioned that some reports require the officers to read through 500 plus pages of documents.

- 5.1.3 Geraldine asked when the policy would be ready. Annette said that the solicitor had to sign it off and she expected to hear back next week.

### **5.2 Service Standards Report**

- 5.2.1 Annette said this would go to the residents' services committee very soon so if there are comments from the forum, please send them by the end of the week (12/2/21) so she can include them.

**Actions:**

- **Once agreed, complaints process and compensation policy to be made available to the Residents' Forum**
- **Comments for RSC from the Resident's Forum re Service Standards Report to Annette ASAP (for 12/2/21)**

## **6. Communications reports**

### **6.1 Empathy project**

- 6.1.1 Joe asked for feedback on his paper. He wants to know if Newlon is empathetic enough as an organisation or if it puts processes before people.
- 6.1.2 Blossom brought up the use of templates in communications with residents. She raised the issue that some people don't proof-read and many just copy-and-paste. Instead, staff needed to be more mindful of who is reading something and remember that the letters are sent in the name of a big organisation to individuals. She stated that she sees many letters that don't even relate to the case on hand.
- 6.1.3 Geraldine does not think Newlon puts themselves into the place of residents and that there is no space to take individual needs into account but rather that the attitude comes across as "this is how it is and it has to be accepted". She wants decisions to be more humane and resident-focused.
- 6.1.4 Iain brought up a current complaint where an elderly resident reported a non-functional shower and was left 3 months for a fix to be proposed. When Iain raised a complaint, a small amount of compensation was offered rather than addressing the actual problem. Iain stated that inconvenience cannot be monetised and compensation is not appropriate in some cases.  
Bill agreed that Newlon should be more human about these things, but pointed out that compensation is a way of saying "Sorry", a tangible thing to give when an error cannot be undone. He said that compensation amounts are currently increased. Joe pointed out that a small compensation amount can be worse than not starting the conversation about it in the first place. Iain stated that once the resident is offered compensation, the real point is lost and instead one enters into a negotiation about amounts.
- 6.1.5 Ben suggested that when a repair is booked, it would be good to ask the resident for availability.  
Lloyd said that when people don't have familiarisation with the persons they are interacting with, they can be very cold and that a "them and us" attitude is not great. Bill suggested that email is used too much and people should pick up the phone more often to encourage interpersonal connection and communication, especially where bad news needs to be conveyed. Ben suggested to add a line to emails offering the option of calling but that phone queuing systems are not a great experience.
- 6.1.6 Joe pointed out that last year all members of staff had to do a resident involvement activity which was well received with residents and staff alike and this would be done again this year. Eunice wanted to know if compensations are generally offered before the issue is resolved or after. Bill said it should be as early as possible in appropriate cases. Sylvia thought the issue should be resolved first
- 6.1.7 Joe said that empathy is hard to quantify, hard for an organisation to do and a mixed approach is needed, and that staff should be in contact with residents as much as possible. He thanked everyone for their feedback.

**Actions:**

- **Feedback via email to Joe**
- **Investigate the use of templates and copy and paste in letter writing to individual residents – how to make improvements**
- **Investigate repair booking/resident availability options**
- **Examine culture of email vs phone**
- **Find out when Resident Involvement staff activity will be taking place and report back to Forum**

**7. Feedback From and to the Board and RSC**

7.1 Blossom announced there was a new Chair of the Board and she expects changes because of his large housing experience and the fact that he puts tenants before money. She talked about how Newlon had started out as social housing and has since moved a little away from that. She hopes that the new Chair would get Newlon back on track in this regard.

Lloyd stated that he hopes that this new approach might get staff closer to residents.

7.2 Blossom also noted that some members who were at the end of their membership have left.

7.3 Sophie wants the housing announcement from the government concerning money for cladding to be put on the agenda for the foreseeable future.

Bill announced that Newlon will bid on the funding for cladding (£3.5bn) but that there was not enough of it (£15bn? required).

Sonia inquired if that money was for the leaseholders and Bill replied that this was indeed the case. He stated that the work was very costly but it was a cost to Newlon, not residents. He expressed concern that this would take money away from cyclical repairs, etc. He stated that Newlon was going to try to get the cost as close to zero as possible by claiming from builders, insurance etc. He explained that the issue is actually what is behind the cladding, not cladding itself. He also pointed out that rents could not be raised to cover this cost because rents are externally regulated.

**Actions:**

- **Invite the Chair of the Board to a Forum meeting**

**8. AOB**

8.1 Eunice inquired if emergency services have free access to gated blocks of flats or do they have to be let in. There were several issues in her block in recent months where police and the fire brigade were not able to get in and even had to pull down a fence to gain access. Bill promised to find out more from the experts and considered adding a fireman's key. He is taking this specific case on to get resolved.

**Actions:**

- **Investigate access for emergency services across gated properties**

**The date for the next meeting is not yet set.**