

Newlon Residents' Forum

19 May 2021

1. Welcome, Introductions and Apologies

Newlon:

Emma Preston-Dunlop (Sr Resident Involvement Officer), Graham Watts (Head of Resident Services), Judith Perry (Resident Involvement Officer), Bill Henderson (Housing Services Director), Symon Sentain (Acting Property Services Director), Duncan Lee (Head of Repairs), Matthew Phillips (Assistant Director of Housing)

Residents:

Lloyd Gale-Ward, Africa Alconchel-Guido, John Rymell, Blossom Shakespeare, Wendy Jackson, Sylvia Donaldson

Wates:

Jed Livermore (Operations Manager), Charmen Tullock (Customer Services Manager)

Apologies:

Iain Scott, Geraldine Grant, Ben Roe, Sonia Dobson

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

Some previous actions still outstanding carried over from the previous minutes.

ACTION: invite Aman (Board Chair) to August meeting

3. Contracts and services update - Invitation for report from Newlon contract managers

- Lloyd raised the issue that the term "customer" is supposed to be changing.

Customer Service Strategy

- Matthew Phillips presented the Customer Service Strategy report and suggested the following communication channels for discussion:

Automated voice recognition (Bot/AI)

- Currently tested on heating/hot water enquiries.
- John and Blossom would like an option to speak to a real person instead. Matt noted this and pointed out that a conversation with the bot is meant to only last 2 minutes and therefore be quicker than with a person.
- Lloyd wanted to know how the resident would know they are conversing with a bot and Matt explained that the bot will have a name and tell you they are a bot.

- Blossom would like more staff to be employed because Newlon is growing at a fast pace. Matt explained that they are asking for feedback during the current trial period.
- Africa inquired if there will be time to record a long and comprehensive answer by the resident for a real person to listen to. Matt replied that this is not how the bot works but instead it will figure out the problem and book the repair for the resident directly, then the Service Centre will call the resident within an hour to confirm. This is not a 24 hour service at the moment but could be extended if the trial is successful.
- John wanted to know if customer service reps will work from home or the office and Matt replied that it will be a mix of both.
- John explained that one issue that has been discussed in the past is to offer the possibility that residents can speak to a member of the Residents' Forum or a similarly knowledgeable resident instead of Newlon staff.
- John would like the system to contain shortcuts so that a caller does not have to wait in the line to listen to many unnecessary options for several minutes before even starting to engage (especially on repeat calls). Matt said he would look into cutting out unnecessary preloaded messages.

The Portal

- Lloyd would like to figure out why residents are not using it much yet. According to Matt there are currently circa 300 users.
- Bill requested that proper testing of the pilot should continue before launching something that is not ready.
- Emma wanted to know if the pilot is monitored regarding who is using it and how.
- Matt replied that data is being gathered but has not yet been analysed. Emma offered that the Think Tank could get involved in the testing and Matt was interested.
- John finds the portal great, especially as it puts things in writing which will hopefully help information being forwarded to different parties (e.g. contractors) rather than getting lost in the process of forwarding.
- **ACTION: set up the collaboration between Matt and the Think Tank**

Further Channels/Social Media

- Lloyd suggested it would be good to think about consistency and what resources are needed to staff all those points of contact. Emma agreed that the channels need to be staffed by well-organised residents (eg as being done by RAs) or professionally by Newlon, which takes a lot of time/energy and can be one directional.

Web Chat

- Wendy preferred telephone calls. Sylvia pointed out that it often takes a long time to communicate by email.
- John suggested that the same person who replies in the web chat could also reply to emails and speed up the replies. Matt pointed out that the web chat is quicker because it enables a lot of automation whereas emails take more effort. But he also agreed that it will be organised in this manner in the future. He also pointed out that email volumes have grown enormously and this situation needs to be managed better. John suggested to add an element to the process: when an email comes in, there will be an automated initial reply suggesting to people to use the web chat if they need a quicker reply.

4. Governance and Strategy

a. Resident Involvement Summary Report

- Graham presented the Resident Involvement Summary Report. We have seen a great improvement in genuine and strategic resident involvement guided by our Resident Involvement Strategy and also responding to changes in the sector (Social Housing White Paper and National Housing Federation's 'Together with Tenants' initiative). Our goal is to ensure that we enhance the residents' voice and ensure residents influence and monitor Newlon's services in order to improve them.
- Resident Services continue to monitor the actions in the three year Resident Involvement Strategy 'action plan'. In terms of Resident Involvement performance, we have seen an increase from 3 out of 5 in 2019/2020 to 4 out of 5 (scores relating to achievements within the action plan).
- Lloyd noted that he had seen a really positive direction over the past few years in terms of resident involvement. Graham noted that we will continue to implement the plan and involvement activities and also thanked our involved residents as well as Emma and Judith for their hard work over the past challenging year.

b. Residents' Forum Constitution review

- Emma presented the suggested changes to the Residents' Forum Constitution as discussed in the last meeting.
- John pointed out that the reduction in membership may be unnecessary as there are currently 11 members and 9 on the waiting list. He explained that in the past, the high number of members ensured a good turnout at meetings. Sylvia agreed with John regarding the membership number.
- John further suggested that as long as diversity is achieved, it does not matter where it is written down.
- Judy pointed out that some screening would be good and suggested that someone should talk to the people on the waiting list. John reminded people that in the past, people who were interested in joining just came along to a meeting. New

suggestion from Emma: invite all 9 people on the waiting list as observers to the next two meetings, agreed as an action. Wendy added that after the meeting, the observers should be asked about their impressions and thoughts, with time in the meeting.

- Check from Emma: keep membership it at 21 rather than 15 or 18 - yes
- 3.6: agreed
- 3.8: agreed
- 3.13: agreed
- All other administrative and logistical changes and edits were accepted.
- **ACTION: Emma will present the changes to the proposals to the constitution in the next meeting with a view to them being signed off. Documents to be sent to the members in preparation for the meeting and hard copies to be made available where requested.**
- **ACTION: Waiting list to be invited as observers to the next two meetings.**
- **ACTION: Emma to make an agenda item at the next meeting for discussion time for observers.**

5. Reality checking and service standards

- Judith presented the results from Newlon's Winter (January /February) 2020/21 Mystery Shop exercise.
- 21 Mystery Shoppers undertook 60 enquiries.
- 90% of responses to enquiries met or exceeded standards - that is a 15% increase compared to our Autumn (September/October) 2020/21 exercise.
- Upward trend relates to frequent email reminders to staff and a change in culture (2-10 culture), also clearer guidelines on checking shared inboxes.
- Improved work across teams.
- Spring exercise is taking place now with the report due in early June 2021 for the Residents' Services Committee (Newlon Board) and will also be shared with the Residents' Forum.

6. Performance Report – Housing and Property Services

- Wates had seen the report and were present at the meeting to listen to residents' feedback.

a. The Repairs Group report

- Emma presented the 7 key trends and 10 key recommendations that came from the meeting of the Repairs Group, which residents who attended had found extremely productive as it was a 'safer space' to share views and experiences.

- John stated that communication has been a key problem for many years. The use of contractors' CRM systems and the way that they do not align well with Newlon's is an ongoing issue. He requested all contractors to use Newlon's system to remedy the problems.
- Blossom asked how Wates manage their staff in order to comply with processes (for example missed appointment times or missing tools/parts).
- Jed thanked the Forum for the invite. He stated that procedures are in place but that it has been a difficult year (e.g. shortage of supplies). Charmen who is new at Wates agreed that communication is key. Both asked for examples of what Blossom and John were mentioning.
- Charmen suggested that the new reporting portal should track trends and help identify areas for improvement. She apologised to John for the ongoing communication problems and asked to allow some time to resolve the issues.
- Blossom replied that the same complaints have been fed back to Wates repeatedly over the years without any change. She requested that contractors should know what they will do before showing up to do a job, that they bring the correct tools and supplies with them, and make arrangements for parking in advance. Tenants want to be treated with respect. She pointed out that everyone has had a difficult year but these problems go back further.
- Charmen agreed that these points are fundamentals and that the parking should not be the responsibility of the tenants.
- Duncan stated that Wates staff should have parking permits for estates but that street parking is a different problem.
- Charmen suggested when resident calls up about the repair, the service centre should ask about controlled or free parking on the call and sort it in advance.
- Bill noted that responsibility sits with his Department and stated it is his remit to decide how this is handled (but it should be further noted that contractors are responsible for their own parking arrangements).
- Lloyd and Emma raised the problem of social housing stigma (how people view social housing residents can impact quality of workmanship).
- Lloyd thanked Wates team for joining and listening.

b. Property services priorities and engagement with residents: oral report

- Symon Sentain presented an oral report to the Forum.
- Symon talked about upcoming changes in laws and regulations following the Grenfell tragedy: a new Building Safety Regulator run by the Health and Safety Executive.
- He wants to work closely with residents when implementing these new legal requirements.

- He also mentioned similarly large changes for implementing the Social Housing White Paper and government measures addressing climate change (e.g. heating and ventilation).
- He stated that he is committed to work closely with residents on all those changes (e.g. by means of workshops, home visits, conversations, etc.).
- He wants to understand the residents' journey in repair reporting and arranging.
- He expressed hope that this is the beginning of a good relationship.
- Lloyd and Forum members thanked Symon and welcomed the idea to look not only at processes but also at experiences.

7. Feedback from and to: Board/Residents' Services Committee (RSC)/ Resident Panels/Groups Associations

- Blossom: looking forward to working together and reducing complaints.

8. AOB

- Emma reported Sophie Greenfield has sadly resigned due to ill health.
- Emma reported Geraldine Grant has taken a leave of absence and hopes to be back by August or October.
- The Forum sent their best wishes.