

Housing Engagement Board
Minutes of the Quarterly Meeting
held on Thursday, 15 December 2022
from 2pm to 4pm via Zoom

Attendees: Cllr John Batchelor – Chair
Cllr Jose Hales
Dave Kelleway – Vice Chair
Jim Watson
Les Rolfe
Margaret Wilson
Peter Tye

By Invitation: Julie Fletcher (SCDC – Services Manager – Housing Strategy)
Geoff Clark (SCDC – Services Manager – Tenancy and Estates)
Eddie Spicer (SCDC – Service Manager – Housing Assets)
Martin Lee (SCDC – Housing Accountant – Finance)
Bronwen Taylor (SCDC – Resident Involvement Officer) – Minute taker
Gina Manderson (SCDC – Housing Communications Officer) – Admin Support

Apologies: Peter Campbell (SCDC – Head of Housing)
Cllr Mark Howell

1. Welcome and Apologies

The Chair welcomed everyone to the meeting at 2.02pm.

Apologies were received from Peter Campbell and Cllr Mark Howell.

2. Quorum

The meeting was quorate.

3. Minutes of previous meeting – 20 September 2022

The Chair referred to the minutes of the meeting held on 20 September 2022.

They were approved by the board as a true reflection of the meeting.

Matters Arising from previous Meeting – 20 September 2022

The matters arising from the previous meeting were listed below for noting.

3.1 Item 3.1 – Matters Arising from previous Meeting – 22 June 2022

Audit Accounts (Item 7.1)

Geoff Clark sent an email to Margaret Wilson 19 October 2022 with an explanation of the audit accounts. A copy of the email was included in the pack.

3.2 Item 4.2 – Forward Plan

The Forward Plan has been amended and a Policy Officer has been employed to look at all Housing policies.

3.3 Item 5.1 – Stigma Project Presentation

Articles on the Stigma Project results and development of the Improvement Plan would be published internally. A further article would be drafted and included in the Spring edition of the SCDC magazine.

3.4 Item 5.3 – Buy back of Equity Share Properties Presentation

1. Geoff Clark advised that the tenant that was referred to would be moving in a few weeks' time and they were working with them to address the current condition of the property.
2. Gina Manderson would include an article in a future newsletter.

3.5 Item 5.4 – Annual Report to Tenants

Gina Manderson received feedback from the board and the Annual Report was printed and posted to tenants at the beginning of November 2022.

3.6 Item 6 – Any other Business

6.1 – Meeting Start Time

The meeting invitations for December 2022 and March 2023 with the new start time of 2pm were sent on 21 September 2022.

Item 6.2 – Emergency Telephone Number

Geoff Clark advised that the emergency telephone number was active.

4. Standing Items

4.1 Update on Repairs Contract

Eddie Spicer referred to the updated report included in the pack and reported that Cambridge City Council was no longer a part of the shared heating contract that we had shared with Mears, which meant that Mears was 100% with SCDC and this had made a massive difference in freeing up time for their call centre. He said the service had been good and feedback received was also good. He added that he was pleased with the way the contract was progressing and the way the new system was being used by tenants.

The Chair asked if the increase in staffing levels had had an effect.

Eddie Spicer said that it had made a difference having more operatives and that a new contact centre advisor had been employed, making the office fully staffed.

Cllr Hales asked if there was an issue as to why Cambridge City Council had moved away from the heating contract.

Eddie Spicer said that previously the gas and heating contract was a joint contract with City, but when we went out to tender, it was included in one contract and City chose not to be included in the tendering process.

4.2 Forward Plan

Julie Fletcher referred to the Forward Plan included in the pack and said this was a standing item on the agenda. She went through the items and said that a review of the Chair and Vice Chair would be held in March 2023.

Margaret Wilson asked what the start date was for the new Resident Involvement Team Leader and asked for a meeting to be set up with him as soon as possible.

Julie Fletcher advised that his start date would be 9 January 2023 and she would arrange for a meeting to be set up as soon as he had completed his induction.

Margaret Wilson said that she had an issue with her garage.

Geoff Clark said that if it was a repair issue, to contact Mears.

Margaret Wilson said the issue was complicated.

Geoff Clark said he would contact Margaret Wilson for the details of the issue.

Eddie Spicer said that he was in the process of reviewing the best way forward for the Stock Condition Survey, which was planned to go live in April 2023, and that he would get a project group together in January 2023.

Dave Kelleway said his fears were that garage blocks would be destroyed with new houses being built on them, and that this policy needed to be handled very sensitively. He also said that the Homelessness Review which ran out in April 2023 was not due to be looked at until June 2023 and he felt it should be looked at a bit earlier.

Action by: Geoff Clark

5. New Matters

5.1 7% Rent Cap

Martin Lee said that the council could increase rents in April of each year and that it could have been increased by 11.1% this year, however, the Government had confirmed rent increases for 2023 / 2024 would be capped at 7%. He went through a slide showing the rent increases since self-financing and said that an increase of 7% was being considered.

The Chair said that it was important to implement this increase.

Martin Lee explained that over £7 million per year was paid in interest on loans. He added that the increase in rent was to keep up with the current rising costs.

5.2 Budget and Rent Setting

The Chair advised that training by Martin Lee was given to the Tenant Representatives on 18 October 2022. He added that the final budgets would be approved by Council in February 2023.

Martin Lee said that they were in the middle of setting the budget and he did not have the actual figures. He presented the draft Capital programme for 2022 / 2023 to 2027 / 2028.

Peter Tye asked if the council received income from the government for disability adaptations.

Martin Lee said that we did, however, it was not included in the budget as it was managed by the general fund.

Peter Tye asked if properties were insured against fire, etcetera.

Martin Lee said that the council had stopped insuring properties approximately 10 years ago, however, they did have a £1 million reserve for those type of occurrences. He added that blocks of flats were insured as they were a higher risk.

Geoff Clark said that tenants needed to only insure the contents of their homes. He added that we did assist them to find the right policy to suit their needs.

Dave Kelleway asked when the HEB would be part of the decision making process for the budget.

Martin Lee explained the order that was followed for the budget approval as follows:

- Leadership Team
- Informal Cabinet
- Scrutiny and Overview Committee
- Council for approval

Dave Kelleway said that he was concerned that the HEB was not a part of the formal process and that he had not seen any documents prior to the meeting. He asked when the HEB would become a part of the budget setting.

Julie Fletcher agreed that going forward we did need to plan this better and we were hoping to have more to present at this meeting. She said that once the papers had been to Informal Cabinet, the papers would be sent to the HEB to review and to make a formal response to SCDC, which would be included and taken to the Scrutiny and Overview Committee.

Eddie Spicer said that the council were currently reviewing their insurance policy to include all properties.

Margaret Wilson referred to a fire to a semi-detached council property, earlier in the year, where the adjoining privately owned house was damaged and asked if the owners could put in a claim to the council.

Geoff Clark said that the private owner's insurance company would claim from the council's insurance.

5.3 Sheltered Housing Schemes Audit Accounts

Geoff Clark explained that Margaret Wilson had been asking for copies of the Sheltered Housing Scheme Audit Accounts to be put up in communal halls for all tenants to view.

Martin Lee presented an example of the actual scheme expenditure and said that he could prepare a statement for the communal halls.

The Chair asked Margaret Wilson if she was satisfied with this response, to which she replied that she was not. She said that their hall was hired out and charged for, however, there was no record of any payments being made and that tenants wanted to know what happened to money collected by the Sheltered Estate Officers (SEO).

Martin Lee said that it would be reflected as Private Hire.

Geoff Clark said there was a receipt process and the Communal Income reflected on the statement was money collected for private hire. He added that a statement similar to the one being presented could be published for each sheltered estate and posted in the communal room.

Les Rolfe said that they required a breakdown of who paid for the hire of communal halls. He explained that he would give the SEO the information about the use of the communal hall and an invoice was issued. He said if cash was paid to the officer for the use of the hall, it should be reflected on the account.

The Chair agreed that it should be as it put the officer at risk.

Les Rolfe added that the accounts did not explain or give a breakdown of costs. He asked why sheltered leaseholders paid a 10% administration fee and general needs tenants did not pay an administration fee.

Martin Lee explained that the 10% administration fee was to cover the administration costs of preparing the statements and invoices. He said that this fee was included in the rent of general needs tenants and was shown on their rent statements. He added that sheltered tenants paid a service charge on top of their rent to cover the additional costs of running the sheltered scheme (staffing, grounds maintenance and communal room maintenance).

A discussion on rent statements was held.

Les Rolfe said that it would appear that leaseholders paid more.

Geoff Clark said that a more detailed report was needed.

Peter Tye asked if the buildings insurance charge of £65 was per person.

Martin Lee said that it was not and was divided amongst the number of properties on that estate.

Action by: Martin Lee

5.4 Communal Areas Review

Geoff Clark advised that this item would be moved to the March 2023 meeting. He explained that they had identified a risk with some items stored in commercial bins at our blocks of flats and that residents were not able to recycle refuse. He added that the emphasis of this report would change due to the historical arrangements that were made and that would impact on this review.

Geoff Clark said that Dave Kelleway had asked if Fixed Term Tenancies could be discussed in place of this item.

Fixed Term Tenancies

Geoff Clark said that this should be added to the Forward Plan and he gave a historical background on tenancies. He said that every tenant on a 10 year tenancy would be offered a secure tenancy.

The Chair said that eventually every tenant would be on this type of tenancy.

Dave Kelleway asked why tenants had not already been advised about this.

Geoff Clark said that they had looked at other councils and had taken legal advice. He said that they could not just end a contract, and that the tenant needed to bring it to an end and sign a new contract. He added that this gave us the opportunity to meet with tenants that we had not met previously and who may have other issues.

Dave Kelleway asked if the council could write to the tenants to advise them of the options.

Margaret Wilson asked if this affected the 1 year introductory tenancy.

Geoff Clark said that that was still in place.

Jim Watson said that his understanding was that the council would first check a tenant's circumstances.

Geoff Clark agreed that that was one of the original intentions.

A discussion on Fixed Term Tenancies was held.

The Chair suggested that we should immediately announce the policy so that all tenants were made aware that their tenancies were secure.

Action by: The Chair

5.5 Co-option Policy

Julie Fletcher said that the Co-option policy had had some issues with the qualifications criteria, which had been reviewed and updated. She referred to Appendix A – Qualification Criteria to become an elected Tenant Representative.

The Chair asked for the document to be approved.

Margaret Wilson proposed and Dave Kelleway seconded the approval of the document.

Les Rolfe asked for the word “leaseholder” to be added to the policy documents where applicable.

Action by: Bronwen Taylor

5.6 Mutual Exchange Policy

Julie Fletcher advised Abida Ruma had been employed to work on the housing policies and said that she had met with the HEB to discuss the Mutual Exchange policy. She said that she had taken comments on board and had been checking with other councils on best practice. She added that she was looking at different tools and ensuring that a thorough job was being done. She said that Abida Ruma would report back and meet with tenant representatives in January / February 2023 with recommendations.

5.7 New Repairs contract – Performance Review Joint Working Group

Eddie Spicer referred to the report included in the pack and advised that a meeting with Mears and SCDC officers was held at the end of November 2022, and second meeting with the group, which included Les Rolfe, Paul Bowman and Patti Hall and SCDC officers, was held on 2 December 2022. He added that they were still monitoring works on the old contract and were down to 200 outstanding jobs, which had reduced from an initial figure of approximately 750.

Julie Fletcher said that we need to review how all groups fed into the HEB.

Eddie Spicer said that the minutes from the meetings would be sent to all groups.

Les Rolfe asked for future meeting dates.

Eddie Spicer said he would send out meeting invitations for 2023.

Julie Fletcher said that these meetings needed to be before both the HPP and HEB meetings and suggested that a meeting was held to look at setting dates.

Action by: Julie Fletcher and Eddie Spicer

5.8 Housing Service Improvement Plan

Julie Fletcher referred to the document included in the pack and said that following the Satisfaction Survey, these were the key findings which needed to be actioned.

Margaret Wilson asked if the website had been improved yet as she thought that it was not designed for tenants use but for officers use.

Julie Fletcher said that redesigning the website was a huge task however it was currently being worked on.

Margaret Wilson suggested getting a group of users to test the website.

The Improvement Plan was proposed by Jim Watson and seconded by Dave Kelleway.

5.9 New Tenant Representatives Complaints Portal

Julie Fletcher advised that a new Tenant Representatives Complaints form had been designed in order for tenant representatives to escalate queries on behalf of tenants. She said that this form would only be used when tenants had followed the proper procedures and had received no feedback from their original query. She add that Tenant Representatives would be given training on the new system.

5.10 New Resident Involvement Team Leader

Julie Fletcher advised that interviews for the new Resident Involvement Team Leader role were held on 3 November 2022 and that the interview panel consisted of Peter Campbell, Margaret Wilson, Les Rolfe, Paul Bowman and herself. She said that the position had been offered to and accepted by David Armitage, and she was pleased that he would be starting on 9 January 2023.

Margaret Wilson thanked Julie Fletcher for including the tenant representatives in the interview process and for taking their comments on board.

5.11 Damp and mould

Eddie Spicer referred to the case of the young boy who passed away due to damp and mould, and said that the council was taking this issue very seriously. He said that tenants needed to report any issues, no matter how big or small, to us through Mears and should they get no response, to contact him to investigate further. He reported that specialist contractors were used and currently they were struggling with appointments as there were

a large number of cases being reported. He added that if there were urgent cases, the council would send out one of our surveyors.

Eddie Spicer said that our properties were in good condition, however, each case was very different, and all would be dealt with on their own merit. He added that there had been an increase in reporting due to the media coverage on this issue.

Dave Kelleway thanked Eddie Spicer and Peter Campbell for meeting with the HEB and HPP the day before, and said that the October 2021 Ombudsman report – Spotlight on damp and mould had 26 recommendations. He asked for a report back as to where the council was in relation to that report to be included in future meetings. He suggested that when tenants complete the Mears questionnaire, to include a question on damp and mould.

Eddie Spicer said that the Ombudsman's report were recommendations only, however, we were held by the decent home standards. He went through the report and said there were some issues that we could work on in more detail. He proposed that an additional question, "Do you have anything else to report?", could be asked when a tenant reported a fault.

Dave Kelleway asked the board to email specific issues to Eddie Spicer.

Action by: Board members

6. Any Other Business (AOB)

6.1 Stigma

Margaret Wilson said she attended a national meeting on 28 November 2022 and said she would like to give a brief summary of what was talked about, and to give an illustration of where it was not generally recognised except by those who felt that there was a stigma attached to issues. She referred to the recent appointment of the Resident Involvement Team Leader and said that the advert went out without consultation with any of the tenant representatives, and then there was a problem finding tenant representatives who were free. She said one of the stigmatising issues that tenants nationally had identified was an assumption that tenants were free because they do not work, etcetera, and said it was worth noting the unconscious stigma. She added that there were other issues that came out of the meeting and she would include a report for the next meeting. She also explained the process followed by a housing association where tenants were involved from the beginning when there was a job vacancy, which she thought was a very good idea.

Action by: Margaret Wilson

6.2 Housing Strategy Review

Julie Fletcher advised that we were about to start preparing the Greater Cambridge Housing Strategy, which covered our council stock, council tenants, existing housing in the private sector, new build developments as well how housing played a part in health and well-being, and she would contact the HEB in February 2023 for their involvement in the process. She said it was a lengthy process and would probably be published in June 2024.

Action by: Julie Fletcher

6.3 Heating System

Margaret Wilson referred to the new heating system installed in the communal rooms and said that since October 2022 the system had been turning on at all times of the day and night, however, Chris Brown had now resolved the issue. She added that there were no operating instructions in the hall.

Eddie Spicer confirmed that it had been resolved and that the system had been designed to save money.

Margaret Wilson said that they had waited too long for the instructions and one of the tenants had switched the “comfort” button on.

Jim Watson said that the heating at the Wilford Furlong rooms was not coming on.

Eddie Spicer said that the problem was with people interfering with the heating system.

7. Meeting Date

The Chair referred to the next meeting date as follows:

- 23 March 2023

8. Closing

There being no further business to discuss, the meeting ended at 3:56pm.