

# Housing Engagement Board

## Minutes of the Quarterly Meeting

held on Thursday, 14 December 2023

from 2pm to 4pm via Zoom

- Attendees:** Cllr John Batchelor – Chair  
Peter Campbell (SCDC – Head of Housing)  
Dave Kelleway – Vice Chair  
Bob Buss  
Jim Watson  
Les Rolfe  
Margaret Wilson
- By Invitation:** Julie Fletcher (SCDC – Service Manager – Housing Strategy)  
Geoff Clark (SCDC – Services Manager – Tenancy and Estates)  
Eddie Spicer (SCDC – Service Manager – Housing Assets)  
Sue Carter (SCDC – Service Manager – Housing Advice and Options)  
Dave Armitage (SCDC – Resident Involvement Team Leader)  
Bronwen Taylor (SCDC – Resident Involvement Officer) – Minute taker  
Gina Manderson (SCDC – Resident Involvement Communications Officer) –  
Admin Support
- Apologies:** Cllr Mark Howell (absent – no apology received)  
Cllr Jose Hales (absent – no apology received)  
Oana Sutherland

### 1. Welcome and Apologies

The Chair welcomed everyone to the meeting at 2.02pm.

Apologies were received from Oana Sutherland.

The Chair asked what the situation was with respect to the substitute for councillors.

Peter Campbell advised that following the Resident Engagement Framework Review meeting held with tenant volunteers the previous week, this issue would be put forward as a formal proposal as part of the new structure.

## **2. Quorum**

The meeting was quorate.

## **3. Minutes of previous meeting – 28 September 2023**

The Chair referred to the minutes of the meeting held on 28 September 2023.

Margaret Wilson asked for the following amendment to be made:

- page 5 – item 4.1 – second paragraph, second sentence – should read her neighbours kitchen wall

Subject to the correction, the minutes were approved by the board as a true reflection of the meeting.

### **3.1 Matters Arising from previous Meeting – 28 September 2023**

The matters arising from the previous meeting are listed below.

**Item 3.1 – Matters Arising from previous Meeting – 17 July 2023**

**Item 4.1 – Matters Arising from previous Meeting – 23 March 2023**

**Item 2 – Appointment of Chair**

The Chair advised that at the previous meeting, the following amendments to the Terms of Reference (ToR) document had been requested and been made:

- 6.1** SCDC will provide an experienced person to chair the meetings for the first year.  
Afterwards the HEB members will nominate and vote for a chair.

has been replaced with:

The Chair will normally be the Lead Cabinet Member for Housing and the Vice Chair will be an elected tenant representative unless none was available.

- 6.2** HEB will elect a Vice-Chair. Any HEB member, willing to undertake relevant training, may put their name forward.

has been replaced with:

The Vice-Chair will be an elected tenant representative unless none are available.  
Any HEB member, willing to undertake relevant training, may put their name forward.

- 6.3** The words “suitably trained” have been removed from this point.

### **Item 5.3 – Grounds Maintenance Contract**

Geoff Clark advised that the first workshop with Paul Bowman, Les Rolfe, Jim Watson, Debbie Barrett and Marianne Crozier had been held on 8 November 2023. He reported that they focused on the grounds maintenance service standards and had spent some time on the grass cutting schedule. He said that they took away some action items to compare what was in the current document with what they would like in the new contract. He said that Debbie Barrett would be discussing the grass cutting schedules with SP Landscapes and setting up performance meetings with them.

Geoff Clark said they had met again the day before and the tenant volunteers had provided feedback on what they would like to see in the service standards document. He said he would redraft the document with the agreed changes after which they would have a final sign off meeting. He added that the new Lands Officer would be making sure that the maps were accurate and up to date.

Dave Kelleway asked if there would be a change to the frequency of grass and shrub cutting.

Geoff Clark said that no changes had been made to the contract yet and that there was still some work to be done on the document. He said that if further cuts were added to the contract, it would affect the cost.

Les Rolfe said that it was not that SP Landscapes were not doing what they were contracted to do, but they were not doing it at the right time of the year.

### **Item 5.5 – Access to reports and confidential matters**

Dave Armitage to report back on the guidance received from the Data Protection Officer under item 5.5 of the agenda.

### **Item 6.1 – Stock Condition Survey and Energy Certificate**

Eddie Spicer emailed the following documents to the HEB on 28 September 2023.

- Government guidance to HHSRS (142631) which will detail for you the 29 areas that are looked at and scored accordingly
- 3 x documents showing the questions being asked of the Stock condition survey
- 2 x excel files with examples of the data being collected (no actual data from SCDC)

### **Item 6.3 – Tenant Satisfaction Survey**

Julie Fletcher advised that there had been tenant input and that the survey had been sent out the previous week. She said the survey would be open for two to three weeks and we should receive the results from MEL Research by the end of January or beginning of February 2024.

Les Rolfe said that at least three quarters of the questions were not relevant to leaseholders and suggested that it should say not to answer them if a tenant was a leaseholder.

The Chair asked Julie Fletcher to raise this with MEL Research.

Julie Fletcher said that she agreed that guidance to which questions should be answered by leaseholders should have been included in the survey and she had raised this with MEL Research, who had advised that they would be able to identify the tenure type. She added that they were standard questions that had to be asked which were taken from the Tenant Satisfaction Measures. She said that under the new regulation we did not have to include leaseholders in the survey, however, it was SCDCs decision to include them.

### **Item 6.4 – Decoration Grants**

Eddie Spicer confirmed that decoration grants were stopped about 9 years ago due to the cost.

## **4. Standing Items**

### **4.1 Repairs Performance Group**

Eddie Spicer referred to the annual report included in the pack and said that over-all it had been a really good year in terms of progress, getting the results we wanted, constant improvement and that a great deal had been learnt. He said that improvements had been put in place in terms of communication, for example, the contact centre at Mears, changing the call routing so that there were no delays, only one phone number and employing additional staff at Mears. He said that this had improved customer satisfaction, the volume of complaints and the service that we gave.

Eddie Spicer said that the repairs had been very good, however, there had been fluctuations in the voids due to the markets and the number of voids we had. He added that the number of jobs / calls had increased as the new contract was now a heating and

repairs contract, and previously we were looking at data for repairs only. He referred to the Complaints on page 37 of the pack and said that this gave a good breakdown of what areas the complaints were in.

The Chair said that this was a good report and presentation and added that the video was also very informative.

Margaret Wilson said that a communal job had recently been done and the workmanship was excellent, however, that communication via the office staff in respect of appointments were letting Mears down.

Eddie Spicer asked Margaret Wilson to send him the details and he would follow up with them.

## **4.2 Forward Plan 2023 / 2024**

Julie Fletcher referred to the Forward Plan included in the pack. She said the first draft of the Greater Cambridge Housing Strategy would be ready to go out to consultation in mid-January 2024 and she would arrange a briefing session with all tenant representatives. She said the strategy was on all homes and not a focus on our council homes. She went through the items planned for the coming months, as follows:

- January 2024 – Empty Property Re-let Disposal and Standards – to consider the findings and recommendations – due to other priorities, this may have to be pushed back
- March 2024 – Tenant Satisfaction Survey – to report on the results of the survey
- March 2024 – Communications Standard – to consider and make recommendations
- June 2024 – Mutual Exchange Policy – to give a follow up report six months after implementation
- June 2024 – Council Stock Condition Survey – to report on the results of the survey

Julie Fletcher said the Forward Plan was there for the board to give feedback on what they would also like to discuss.

## **4.3 Estate Inspections Report**

Bronwen Taylor referred to the reports for September and October 2023 included in the pack for noting. She said a field, Electric Vehicle (EV) Charging Points, had been added to

the Estate Inspection questionnaire form in order to identify any suitable and accessible spaces in communal parking areas that could be utilised for EV charging points.

Les Rolfe said that the form stated, “not to include disabled bays, allocated parking bays or tenants off street parking” and said he understood that parking bays were not allocated to tenants. He asked what was meant by “tenants off street parking”.

Eddie Spicer said that some new developments had allocated parking’s to tenants and that tenants off street parking was the parking within the curtilage of their property, for example a driveway or rear access parking. He said that EV chargers would only be installed if it was possible and where there was a need.

Margaret Wilson referred to an EV grant that was awarded earlier in the year and said that these grants were only available if the EV charging points were for the general public use. She asked if this grant would be used for the installation of the charging points referred to in the EI report.

Eddie Spicer said that the EV charging points was being led by a different department and if they were installed in a public access area, then they would be available to all residents and not just SCDC tenants.

Margaret Wilson asked how it would work with public access if one was installed in a parking bay at a communal hall.

Eddie Spicer explained that it was still a public parking area and most parking spaces were not dedicated to the communal room.

Peter Campbell said that the EV charging points were for the benefit of the general community and not of an individual. He added that our insurers were being stricter on where they were installed after the fire incident at Luton airport.

## **5. New Matters**

### **5.1 Homelessness Review**

Sue Carter reported that SCDC were currently consulting on their new homeless strategy and that every five years they carried out a review of homelessness in the district and published a new homeless strategy. She said that since the last review and strategy were written there had been significant external factors affecting the homeless services, including the pandemic, the war in Ukraine and the ongoing economic situation which continued to place increased pressure on household budgets.

She said the review highlighted a number of trends regarding homelessness in the district, as follows:

- Homelessness in the district remained high, with an average of 453 homeless applications each year.
- Applicants may approach us when they were threatened with homelessness, which was called the prevention stage, or when they were already homeless, which was called the relief stage. At either stage we would try to work with them to help them resolve their homelessness. In recent years, more people were approaching us once they were already homeless rather than the earlier stage when they were threatened with homelessness.
- The main cause of homelessness was due to family and friends no longer being able to provide accommodation, followed by the end of an assured shorthold tenancy and then domestic abuse. This was the same nationally.
- Applicants tend to be of working age, with very few applications from those under 18 or over 65.
- More applicants were employed than solely in receipt of benefits.
- The ethnicity of our applicants matched the proportions within the 2021 census.
- The highest support need for our applicants was mental health, followed by physical health and disability.
- Levels of rough sleeping within the district were low, although they increased last year, however from the annual estimate they had declined slightly this year.
- Temporary accommodation increased during the pandemic and remained high, and numbers were increasing nationally. At the end of the last quarter, 67 households were in temporary accommodation.
- We currently had over 2,000 applicants on the housing register. The highest proportion of these were single people.

Sue Carter said that following on from the Homeless Review the priorities for the next Strategy were grouped into two main aims, as follows:

## **Homeless prevention, early intervention and support**

- Promoting early intervention to increase the opportunities to prevent homelessness.
- Ensuring we prevented and intervened to resolve rough sleeping. (Whilst numbers were low, there was a lot of housing need from single people).
- Money advice for those on a low income, including those in employment, to help with affordability which we wanted to continue with.
- Ongoing support and assistance for tenants and landlords in the private rented sector.
- We worked with a lot of vulnerable people and we wanted to ensure we provided an inclusive service that took into account their needs, particularly in view of the high level of applications we received from those who had experienced domestic abuse and high levels from those with mental and physical health needs.

## **Housing options**

- Firstly, those available for single people. Along with shared accommodation provided by Shire Homes Lettings, in the Houses in Multiple Occupation, we had a project planned with Ermine Street Housing to provide additional single person self-contained accommodation.
- Reduce the use of B&Bs, which was unsuitable as a form of temporary accommodation. The issue of increasing temporary accommodation was a national problem at the moment but we would be taking what action we could to minimise this for SCDC.
- Increased provision within Shire Homes Lettings to provide privately rented accommodation which we always ensure was affordable and in good condition.
- The Council and Housing Association new build programmes.

Sue Carter added that tenants could respond to the consultation through the website and the links were included in the agenda pack.

The Chair said that the national local housing allowance was being reviewed and upgraded, and asked if it would make a difference.

Sue Carter said that due to the vast area covered, it may not make as big an impact as we were hoping for.

The Chair thanked Sue Carter for the update and said that if anyone would like to participate in the survey, the link was under item 5.1 on page 48 of the agenda pack.



## 5.2 Tenancy Policy

Julie Fletcher referred to the documents included in the pack and said that this was the formalised Tenancy Policy which had been reviewed following the decision to no longer issue new fixed term tenancies. She said that it had been reviewed to ensure that the policy aligned with that decision and that it was in compliance with all the relevant legislation. She said that in the new year we would look at the Introductory Tenancy Policy, the Lettings Policy, the Succession and Assignment Policy, the Tenancy Fraud Policy and the Policy on the use of Council housing as Temporary Accommodation to ensure that they were aligned and fit for purpose. She added that we would have a Policy Officer back in post which meant we would be able to move forward with those policies quite quickly.

Dave Kelleway asked that when the policies were reviewed would it be in conjunction with the HEB. He also asked if the policies referred to in item 13 on page 61 of the agenda pack could have live links to the website.

Julie Fletcher said that they would be in conjunction with the HEB. She said that once the policies were reviewed, they would be posted on the web and the links would be made available.

## 5.3 Improvement Plan

Julie Fletcher said that she had hoped to present a more detailed Improvement Plan to the board today and apologised that it was not available. She said one of the main issues being looked at was communication and that we were looking at a draft communications standards document which was on the Forward Plan for March 2024. She added that it would be both an internal and external facing document, and some of the points were:

- Recruitment of new staff – there had been tenant involvement in the recruitment of some senior staff.
- Corporate induction process – a short video for new staff would be produced as we wanted to instil a culture of working with tenant volunteers.
- Housing systems – work had been done in the back office on the updated version of the Housing Management system.
- New team in housing – they would be focussing on the new system and would be a knowledge base for our customers. A new Team Leader, from a housing association with a background in customer insight, has been appointed from mid-

January 2024 and she would bring a great deal of expertise and skills which would compliment the technical abilities within the team.

Julie Fletcher added that Martyn Hilliam who had been seconded into working on the back-office system would be returning to Housing Policy, which meant we would have the additional resource to look at policies. She said she would provide a more detailed update on the improvement plan at the next meeting.

#### **5.4 Resident Engagement Framework Review**

Dave Armitage referred to the workshop held on 6 December 2023 and said that a proposal was presented and had been agreed to in principle. He said he would arrange a meeting with the tenant volunteers who were not at the workshop to update them on the new structure.

#### **5.5 Access to Confidential / Personal Data**

Dave Armitage said he had a meeting with the Information Governance Team and that as an organisation we had a common law duty of confidentiality, which meant that any information that we shared with tenant representatives would have to have an evidence-based need for the information to be shared. He said that some personal information could be shared but not anything that could identify a person. He added that a Confidential Information Policy, which would be advised on by the Information Governance Team, would be drawn up with the tenant representatives and officers.

The Chair asked how this was being communicated to the tenant representatives.

Dave Armitage said that with the new framework going forward there would be a series of meetings to discuss the details of the framework and this would become part of that process.

#### **5.6 Tpas National Scrutiny Conference Report**

The Chair referred to Paul Bowman's report included in the pack for noting and said it was a good report.

Margaret Wilson apologised that her report was not included and said that it would be available before the next meeting.

## **6. Any Other Business (AOB)**

### **6.1 Accounts in Communal Halls**

Margaret Wilson said that the accounts had still not been displayed in the communal halls.

Geoff Clark said that Marianne Crozier was attending to this issue.

The Chair said that this should be an easy issue to resolve.

Geoff Clark said he would follow this up with Marianne Crozier.

Les Rolfe said that as a leaseholder he received more information, however, they would like a breakdown of the charges.

Margaret Wilson said “outside” people were being charged the same rate as a tenant to hire the hall, which did not seem right.

Geoff Clark explained that if the hall was being used for a function for tenants only, then there was no charge, however, if it was a private function, there was a charge.

Les Rolfe said that although the charge of £5 was cheap, private hire should cost more.

**Action by: Geoff Clark**

## **7. Proposed Meeting Dates for 2023 / 2024**

The Chair referred to the proposed meeting date for 2023 / 2024 as follows:

- 28 March 2024 (Zoom / venue to be confirmed)

## **8. Closing**

The Chair wished everyone a Merry Christmas and a Happy New Year.

There being no further business to discuss, the meeting ended at 3:08pm.