

## **SOUTH LAKES HOUSING TENANTS' COMMITTEE MINUTES**

10:30am Thursday 8th March 18 held in the  
Windermere Suite, Bridge Mills, Kendal

Present: Stephen Bolton (Chair)  
Charles Howarth  
Wendy Orr  
Paul Athersmith  
Dorothy Dixon  
Win Sayers  
Sue Layfield  
Jim Layfield

Guests N/A

Staff in attendance: Lyn Richardson - Community Engagement Officer- Minutes  
John Mansergh – Assistant Director (Quality & Performance)  
Simon Hughes- Income Manager  
Alison Kinnon- Director of Customers and Communities

Apologies: John Short, Loraine Birchall, Kenny Mayo, Mavis Nelson

As above

### **ACTION**

#### **1. Minutes of previous meeting (18th January 2017)**

Agreed as a true record.

#### **2. Matters arising**

Charles mentioned that he has not received the information about the detailed breakdown of Voids which was requested at the last meeting. John advised that he would email the information out during the meeting and Lyn will include in next pack of information to Tenants committee at the next meeting.

LR

#### **3. Tenants Committee Code of Conduct**

Stephen introduced the Terms of Reference and asked that any tenant who is wearing the SLH badge whether at Tenants Committee or representing SLH elsewhere should abide by the code. He also asked that even travelling to and from meetings, events or training that you are still accountable and should consider this when doing so.

He also commented that during meetings could everyone direct questions through the Chair and not shout across the table as this leads to disruption and confusion.

#### **4. Rent Collection and Arrears Recovery Policy**

The policy has been reviewed and amended to reflect organisational changes, specifically when specialist teams were created in January 2017.

The team are preparing for the challenges and risks associated with introduction of Full Service Universal Credit (December 2018 Barrow & September 2018 Kendal).

Simon commented that where the Full Universal Credit service has been implemented there had been significant impact on rent arrears.

SLH currently has 108 tenants on Universal Credit and 50% of tenants are on some form of Housing Benefit. It is estimated that by 2022, 1,500 tenants will be migrated across from Housing Benefit to Universal Credit which will present a significant risk to SLH when collecting rent.

Currently £50,000 worth of arrears is attributed to those on Universal Credit which has been calculated by Chris Parks and presented to the Assistant Finance Director as 'a risk' to future income collection levels.

There will be a greater focus on preventative, as well as reactionary work within the team. Emphasis to be placed on newly developed pre-tenancy process which is now reflected in the policy.

There is an increased emphasis on using multimedia with respect to communications and obtaining rent arrears. Currently 2 letters are sent regarding arrears and then 3<sup>rd</sup> letter is to take action. The team are now looking at whether this could be done through text messaging or other multimedia.

There will also be more emphasis on a culture of "Rent First" for the tenants and ensuring they pay their rent in advance as stated in the Tenancy Agreement.

The policy includes enhanced performance monitoring and auditing of Officers work. Including reporting to board, Tenants Committee and Housemark.

Stephen asked if tenants could be made to pay in advance. Simon commented that robust checks are now in place which also looks at how they will pay and how they can sustain this. The team also looks at tenants who have a vulnerability such as not able to use I.T., which may delay them being able to make a payment.

There were some questions around if someone is homeless and how would we take up references. Simon explained that we rely on the homelessness section to do the necessary checks. SLDC make the necessary recommendations.

Alison explained that SLH works with vulnerable tenants to get basic bank accounts with Barclays. There are also other options such as Eden and South Lakes Credit Union for those that are unable to get a bank account.

Jim asked what will be the debt level for SLH once there is the move to full service. The Income and Financial Inclusion Team Leader has predicted that when the roll out takes place there will be 254 tenants on Universal Credit which will have a significant impact on rent arrears.

There are currently 44 tenants who have over £1,000 arrears and 5 tenants who have been evicted due to rent arrears in this financial year.

## **5. Governance and Financial Viability**

John advised that the Board met in February and the budgets for 2018/19 have been approved, this includes the 1% decrease in rent, £10M for developments and £4.3M for major repairs. Despite the reduction in rent now in its 3<sup>rd</sup> year of 4, SLH continues to be in strong financial health.

Alison outlined that the Board approved rent setting in line with the Welfare Reform Act for Social and Affordable Rents. In relation to shared ownership properties these

are set in line with the lease agreement. This will play a bigger part in the future as more shared ownership stock developed. The service charge (or sometimes called amenity charge for sheltered housing) are estimated for the year but then the actual costs are taken into account and this is charged over the next financial year. This obviously means that sometimes this can be higher or lower depending on costs occurred over the financial year. There is no increase in garage rent for 2018/19. In line with the proposals previously put forward to and supported by this committee. The rent is now charged over 52 weeks, which means there will no longer be rent free weeks.

Jim asked about the confusion with tenants in sheltered claiming benefits for the service charges. E.g. cleaning. Alison explained that the benefits for those in sheltered are the same as those in general needs and those claiming Housing Benefit can claim for costs relating to the service charge. However, if you are not eligible for Housing Benefit then these charges have to be paid for by the tenant themselves. Alison also explained that most tenants will see a reduction in their service charge this year due to the movement of staff to the hubs as this has reduced costs significantly.

Win asked about grounds maintenance costs at Yewbarrow Lodge, however the grounds around the scheme have remained with SLDC so there is no cost to tenants, for the extended area.

There was an open discussion about charges relating to scooters and how they are stored. It concluded that tenants can ask for a scooter store and electrical point but this will be at their expense and needs to be determined if it is suitable for the property they live in.

John continued with the rest of his update. There has been a recent Board Effectiveness Review carried out by a consultant who concluded that the Board are governing well. There were some minor recommendations including changing table layout so that communication is easier and also that the Audit and Risk committee should review its Terms of Reference.

It was also raised regarding the length of office for some roles being different such as 5 years for Vice Chair and 3 years for the Chair. This was agreed to be reviewed so that it is consistent. The report also highlighted the need for a Job Description for the Vice Chair so they are accountable rather than just filling in when the chair is not available.

The Board have approved open recruitment for the role of Chair as John Holmes is due to step down at the end of April. As discussed previously at this meeting the role will be based on their skills rather than by who they are representing. There are some internal candidates who are interested, but it will be open to everyone. There will be a selection panel including 3 members one of whom is Loraine. There is also a sounding group established, of which Charles is a member. Stephen indicated his support for the process which incorporates tenant involvement.

The role of Chair is not paid but the Board has the ability to offer remuneration and it was agreed that the chair will stand for 3 years, to be reviewed through annual performance appraisal and not exceeding 9 years.

The advert will go out on 9<sup>th</sup> April, followed by interview on the 16<sup>th</sup> April. There are currently 11 out of 12 positions on the board filled so 1 vacancy is still available.

John explained that the Board is also reviewing its Shareholder Membership Policy and wish to consult Tenants' Committee. Currently, tenants and leaseholders can become a shareholder at the cost of £1. This entitles the shareholder to attend the

Annual General Meeting and Special General meetings, and to receive a copy of Management Accounts and vote on constitutional changes. There are currently 20 shareholders, 12 of which are tenants and leaseholders, this has reduced from 30 at transfer. The reduction is due to tenants leaving tenancies, death and removal if non-attendance at two consecutive meetings without sending apologies.

The process for admitting new shareholders is currently closed as a review takes place of this policy. The Board want to have more engaged shareholders who attend more than 1 meeting a year whether this is through Tenants Committee, Complaints Panel, and Scrutiny group or through other engagement processes e.g. social media and telephone surveys. This would then take away the element of someone not being engaged with SLH for several years attending an AGM and then voting without the full knowledge of the issue.

All members of the Committee agreed with the principle and everyone was in favour of the change in shareholder policy, in that it refers to 'active engagement' and that membership can be suspended if this criterion is not met. The Committee wish to ensure that disabled people are not excluded.

## **6. Service Standard Monitoring**

John briefly went over the latest monitoring report and referred to the 'Online portal' that is off target. The portal, to be branded as 'My Account', has gone through a number of cyber tests which had highlighted some problems before it can go live. These have now been fixed and subject to further internal testing then the product will be ready for Tenants' Committee to test.

There are also some difficulties with the captcha code as people are unable to read it due to the contrast colours and the letters being to random.

When the system is 'live', tenants will be able to check repairs, order repairs, make a payment and check their balance.

John to amend wording on pg3 regarding rent statement. Currently it says quarterly rent statements, but this will be changed to 6 monthly rent statements. JM

Charles commented on the '79% of all calls resolved first time' as a well done to the customer services team.

Also, John has asked that information on pg8, 5.6 that repair jobs need to be separated out in to SLH and Castles & Coasts Housing Association (C&CHA). Currently the figure is being skewed by how jobs are scheduled and coded up by C&CHA. JM

## **7. Rethinking Social Housing**

John presented 'Rethinking Social Housing' which is a workshop to inform a review of social housing being conducted by the Chartered Institute of Housing.

Following the presentation John asked a series of questions and Alison noted the Answers;

### **1) What is Social Housing?**

Properties for rent at less than private

Good quality housing for those that cannot afford it.

Needs led

Phrase loaded with stigma, it should be rebranded.

**Key words;** Affordable and secure, Meeting local needs, Stigma

**2) What does Social Housing do?**

Providing housing for those who cannot or do not want to buy/rent their own home.

Stepping stone

Better than being in private landlord housing of poor quality

Fair and Non-discriminatory

**Key words;** Affordable, Fair and good quality

**3) Who is Social Housing for?**

Anyone/Everyone

Decent people looking for a decent home

Those that are in need, people in need

Cannot afford other options

Local people

Vulnerable

**Key words;** In need, local connection, cannot afford

**4) What should the role and purpose of Social Housing be?**

To fulfil a basic need

Encourage change of attitude of Social Housing

Affordable home for decent people

Role of investing in local community

Prioritise housing need

**Key words;** In need, affordable, cannot afford

**8. Repairs Scrutiny group**

The next Scrutiny group is reviewing 'repairs' and will be on 12<sup>th</sup> April (11.00am-1.00pm), 26<sup>th</sup> April (10.30am-12.30am) and 10<sup>th</sup> May (1pm-2pm).

Charles Howarth, June Peckston, Paul Athersmith and Stephen Bolton put themselves forward. Lyn to send out letters to those interested to confirm time and dates.

LR

**9. February Board Minutes**

John explained that the board minutes contain a lot of information that is confidential and cannot be shared at the Tenants Committee meeting. John explained that this will continue in the future and asked the committee if a solution would be to either have redacted minutes or a briefing from John instead. The committee were in favour of briefings to replace full board minutes. John also explained that the board minutes are summarised and published on the SLH website if committee members wanted further details.

John has already covered most of the Board minutes in his earlier agenda item. He noted that there is a Board Development away day on March 22<sup>nd</sup>. There are also discussions between SLH and Eden Housing Boards which is very much a conversation about relative risks and challenges faced by both Associations.

There are some acquisitions in the pipe line including Great Places (Nether Kellet), 60 Guinness Homes near to Dean Gibson School in Kendal and Ulverston Town Hall.

There has been an amendment to SLH Seal process (used in legal documentation). It has been approved that not only Board Directors can now sign but also any member of the Executive Management Team.

It has been approved that JLT Speciality Ltd will be the insurance provider for the next 3 years with the possibility of an extension for up to a further 2 years. The insurance will start 1st April 2018. It was difficult to get quotes due to the flood event 'Storm Desmond'. The market leader for insurance with Housing Associations felt there was some innovative flood defences implemented by SLH, but would like to see a proven track record before tendering in the future.

Charles asked what would happen if we don't find an insurer? In this case the different requirements of insurance would be broken up and alternative brokers found for each element.

## **12 Scoping the policy on introducing service charges for new tenants in flats**

Alison started by saying SLH are looking to introduce service charges for new tenants in flats.

A project task and finish group has been established. The initial meeting was to scope out what services would be included in the new charge and what would not. It is envisaged that grounds maintenance, communal electricity (communal lighting and door entry system), communal cleaning (entrance and stairs including windows) and the uplift of bulk refuse.

Dorothy queried the service charge for Grounds Maintenance and how SLH will make this fair in terms of some flats will have more open space than others. Alison confirmed that the charge will be only for the area pertinent to that property. Still undecided is whether to apply an Administration fee under the new service charge but this is still under review.

The following will not be included in the new Administrative Charge; quarterly checks of emergency lighting, legionella testing, fire risk assessments, periodic electrical checks, electric checks, buildings insurance, communal repairs, communal water and communal painting.

Several questions followed regarding if mattresses or other items were dumped then whose responsibility it would be. Alison said that should these charges be included it would be assigned to the block of flats or estate where the item had been dumped. She confirmed that this will only affect new tenants in flats. Dorothy mentioned that leaseholders used to pay for some of these charges and asked if this is now going to be reinstated? Alison confirmed that it might be reinstated.

Ullswater Close is an example of where the Service Charge has been implemented across all flats and where all flats contribute to the uplift of items dumped.

Charles said 3% of his rent went towards paying for grounds maintenance and asked if his rent would go down? Would the new service charge be used as an extra form of revenue?

Alison commented that the tenants' rents would not go down due to the introduction of service charges, she advised that social rents are set according to a formula set by the Regulator for Housing.

Stephen added that SLDC charge £30 per item and are unable to guarantee when they will take it away e.g. 3-piece sofa is £90

Jim asked how the formula for charges will be worked out as there must be a difference between costs in Grange and Ulverston. Alison reiterated that the charge is only being looked at for new tenants in flats and they will be charged the actual charge for that block for those particular services.

It is hoped that the new service charge will be approved by Board at the end of the year ready to be implemented for April 19.

### **13 Members' Reports**

*Tenant Scrutiny Panel* - Due to weather conditions the group did not meet as planned but will meet after this meeting. A final report will be produced for the next meeting.

*Cumbria and North Lancashire Forum* - Dorothy reported that the meetings are going well and that the last meeting focused on storage of Motorised vehicles. There was a presentation by Lancashire City Council on how they consulted with tenants and then implemented the motorised storage unit. Dorothy also explained that the next Awareness day on the 20<sup>th</sup> June will be around Universal Credit and budgeting skills.

*Dowkers Lane development Launch* - Again due to weather this has been postponed until 16<sup>th</sup> March. Stephen Bolton offered his apologies as he is unable to attend. Dorothy commented that the properties look absolutely brilliant and have been completed to a high specification. Win stated that she is delighted that new houses are being built and asked how that will affect our current waiting list. John explained that there will still be a high demand and there will be lots more properties built over the coming years.

### **15 Next Meeting- 10<sup>th</sup> May 10.30am-12.30pm Windermere Suite**

The meeting closed at 12:50pm