

Housing Engagement Board
Minutes of the Quarterly Meeting
held on Monday, 17 July 2023
from 2pm to 4pm via Zoom

- Attendees:** Cllr John Batchelor – Chair
Peter Campbell (SCDC – Head of Housing)
Dave Kelleway – Vice Chair
Les Rolfe
Oana Sutherland
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)
Martin Lee (SCDC – Housing Accountant)
Dave Armitage (SCDC – Resident Involvement Team Leader)
Bronwen Taylor (SCDC – Resident Involvement Officer) – Minute taker
- Apologies:** Cllr Mark Howell
Cllr Jose Hales (absent – no apology received)
Jim Watson

1. Ratification of East Co-option Board Member

Bronwen Taylor advised that following the last meeting, Jackie Wrenn, the newly appointed HEB member had resigned due to personal unforeseen circumstances. She said that the vacancy for the East was re-advertised and four applications had been received, which included two qualified applications from the East area.

Dave Armitage advised that a meeting was held on 12 June 2023 to interview the two qualified applicants. He said that both Dave Kelleway and Les Rolfe agreed on the successful candidate, however, as the meeting was not quorate, they agreed to discuss their votes with rest of the board.

Dave Kelleway said that they had discussed the candidate and had all agreed with the vote.

The board were all in agreement with the co-option of Oana Sutherland.

2. Welcome and Apologies

The Chair welcomed everyone to the meeting at 2.01pm. He especially welcomed Oana Sutherland, the new tenant representative for the East.

Apologies were received from Councillor Mark Howell and Jim Watson.

3. Quorum

The meeting was quorate.

4. Minutes of previous meeting – 23 March 2023

The Chair referred to the minutes of the meeting held on 23 March 2023.

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

4.1 Matters Arising from previous Meeting – 23 March 2023

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

Item 2 – Appointment of Chair

Dave Armitage advised that the appointment of the Chair was on the agenda at the last meeting and that Cllr John Batchelor had been asked to stand for another year, to which he had agreed.

Dave Armitage said that at the last meeting he was asked to review the Terms of Reference document, in particular item number 6, Chairing Meetings. He asked the Tenant Representatives how they wanted it reworded as he could not make changes without consulting them first.

Dave Kelleway said that the concern was that the frequency and tenure of the Chair was not reflected and he suggested that it be changed every year and be aligned with the Vice Chair. He added that he did not think that there should be a maximum term for the Vice-Chair.

Margaret Wilson said that when discussions on the terms were originally held, the thought process was that the election of the Chair and Vice-Chair should not coincide for the purposes of continuity of the board. She added that a maximum term was added so that the same person did not indefinitely run it.

The Chair said that they needed something simple and to remove any restrictions.

Dave Kelleway suggested having elections annually for the Chair and Vice Chair.

The Chair asked for any objections to which there were none.

Dave Kelleway suggested that the Chair be the Lead Cabinet Member for Housing and the Vice Chair should always be a tenant.

The Chair said that it should be left as open as possible and that some tenants may not be happy with the Lead Cabinet Member for Housing being the chair.

Dave Armitage said that he would amend the Terms of Reference document and then send it to the board to approve.

Action by: Dave Armitage

Item 4 – Minutes of previous Meeting – 15 December 2022

Bronwen Taylor amended the last sentence in item 6.3 of the minutes to read “Eddie Spicer said that the problem was that people who hired the hall interfered with the heating system.”

Item 5.3 – Sheltered Housing Schemes Audit Accounts

1.) Dave Armitage said that transparency of the accounts for sheltered housing schemes had been requested and that he had a spreadsheet with the details. He added that Marianne Crozier, the new Sheltered Estate Team Leader, was working through the spreadsheet and as soon as she had a better understanding of the details, would present the information to the board. He asked the board if they wanted this as a regular agenda item or as and when it was required.

Margaret Wilson said that they had asked for copies of accounts, showing the incomings and outgoings for the sheltered schemes, to be placed in all communal halls in order for all residents to see them.

Martin Lee said that it was agreed at the meeting in March 2023 that the assumed cost and income for the sheltered scheme, based on the service charges, should have been displayed since April 2023.

Dave Armitage said that the accounts that he was referring to was not the sheltered scheme accounts but the income that was generated from the communal halls, example, room bookings, and asked who would record this information.

Martin Lee said that he thought it would be the Sheltered Estate Officer.

Dave Armitage said that he and Marianne Crozier were busy working on this.

Margaret Wilson said that they required a straightforward book-keeping ledger with income and outgoings outside of the service charges. She said that the reason that this had arisen was because a.) hiring charges were introduced to residents who already paid which were the same for non-residents, which was unfair, and b.) it would appear that the Parish Council had been using the hall for many years without paying.

Action by: Dave Armitage and Marianne Crozier

- 2.) Eddie Spicer advised that the heating systems at the Communal Halls had been looked at by Chris Brown and he had spoken to the responsible Sheltered Estate Officers. He said they were all happy with the operation of the system and knew how to use it, and were satisfied that it was working appropriately.

Item 6.1 – Communal Areas (Flats)

Dave Armitage advised that a review was in the process of being conducted by Debbie Barrett, which was not yet complete, and that consultations would be held with residents to find out their views on the cleanliness of their blocks of flats and if they were willing to pay a service charge. He added that he was looking at in-house training on communal block inspections and asked if any of the tenant representatives would be interested in attending.

Les Rolfe said that when there were blocks of flats at the formal estate inspections, they were inspected and suitable comments were made.

Geoff Clark said that a project group had been set up to review the communal areas which Debbie Barrett reported on at the last meeting. He added that he and Eddie Spicer were meeting to discuss introducing a more formal inspection regime on blocks of flats, and what was needed to cover off in terms of what was being inspected, and then moving those areas of work onto the appropriate people. He said that when the Housing Officers were at an estate with blocks of flats, they did check on them which meant that inspections were happening all the time, but some were on an informal basis.

Item 8 – Proposed Meeting Dates for 2023 / 2024

Bronwen Taylor sent out all the meeting invitations for 2023 / 2024.

5. Standing Items

5.1 New Repairs Contract – Performance Review Joint Working Group

Eddie Spicer referred to the report included in the pack and advised that the contract was going well. He said that one or two issues had been raised by the working group and were being investigated.

5.2 Forward Plan 2023 / 2024

Julie Fletcher referred to the Forward Plan included in the pack and said that this was a standing item on the agenda on what we had been working on. She asked if there were any items that were missing or that the board wanted brought to the meeting to discuss to be added to the Forward Plan.

Margaret Wilson referred the Greater Cambridge Housing Strategy and asked what it was about.

Julie Fletcher explained that it was a joint strategy with the City Council which covered a wide aspect of housing. She said that social housing was a small element of it and it also looked at the planning side, which was linked in very closely with the new local plan, planning policies and the private rented sector, and it covered a wide range of housing topics which was bringing everything that we do, together. She added that it was a high-level document and earlier this year a consultation, looking at our key objectives and aims, was held. She said that we were almost at draft stage and that once officers had viewed it, we would share it with the board.

Margaret Wilson said she had queried this as there was all the fuss about charging for vehicles which was the Greater Cambridge Partnership and she asked if SCDC had any contact with them.

Julie Fletcher said that the links were there in terms of strategy, however, they were separate policies.

Margaret Wilson asked about the re-tender of the grounds maintenance contract.

Geoff Clark said that Debbie Barrett was working on the tender for the new contract and a decision had been made, however, it was not yet public knowledge and would be announced in the next few weeks.

Margaret Wilson asked if tenant representatives would be involved in the shaping of key performance indicators.

Geoff Clark said that the new contract would only start in September / October this year and, as soon as the winning bidder was announced, we would get together with tenant representatives to look at how we shape the new contract and set the service standards.

Dave Kelleway asked about the progress the Fixed Term Policy.

Julie Fletcher advised that as part of the policy review, there were a great deal of other policies that were aligned to the tenancy policy, which was the reason we were still working on it, although the critical thing was ending the fixed term tenancies which we had done as we were no longer offering this.

Geoff Clark said that we were consulting with those tenants whose fixed term tenancies were coming to an end and had been transferring them to a secure tenancy, which had been going well.

Les Rolfe said that the grounds maintenance contract had again been appointed without consultation with tenant representatives.

Geoff Clark said that we had previously discussed the difficulty in getting tenant engagement as this tender process was being led by the City Council with sensitive information.

Les Rolfe said that the tenants could have been involved in what they would have liked to see happen which could have been relayed back to City Council.

Geoff Clark explained that the tenders were scored together as it was one contractor who was delivering both services although they were managed separately. He said that tenants would be consulted to assist with shaping the contract and setting the key performance indicators.

Les Rolfe said that on behalf of Paul Bowman, it would be nice to see the service contract as they had never seen one.

Margaret Wilson said that at the last meeting the tenants were advised that they would have some information before the contract was awarded. She said that now that the legislation had the Royal assent to empower tenants more, were the County Council not bound by this or because they were not their tenants, they did not have to listen to them.

Geoff Clark said that as they were a separate organisation, they were not part of that process and the tender documents had gone out earlier this year. He said that the focus now should be shaping the new contract.

Margaret Wilson asked if the contract had already been awarded, how could it be shaped further.

Geoff Clark explained that they would have won the contract based upon pricing and what they were going to provide for us but that did not mean that we could not talk to them about shaping the service standards, the key performance indicators, etcetera.

Les Rolfe agreed with Margaret Wilson and said that as the contract was already awarded, they would not want new input.

5.3 New Tenant Representatives Complaints Portal

Julie Fletcher advised that the new Tenant Representatives Complaints Portal was live and available for tenant representatives to use to escalate queries on behalf of tenants. She said that the process on how to access the online form was included in the pack and asked the tenant representatives to test it.

Margaret Wilson asked if this form should be used after an initial query was raised by a tenant to which Julie Fletcher replied that it was.

5.4 Key Amnesty Campaign

The Chair referred to the reports enclosed in the pack and said that the Key Amnesty Campaign had been useful in raising awareness of tenancy fraud.

Les Rolfe asked if the 71 tenancy terminations were due to the council terminating tenancies.

Geoff Clark said that they were not and were natural terminations.

Margaret Wilson referred to the second sentence in the last paragraph on page 26 of the agenda pack and asked what was meant by “The reasons for each termination described mirrored typical trends.”

Geoff Clark advised that typical reasons for terminations were tenants passing away, going into care, transferring within South Cambs, transferring to another housing provider, moving in with family, moving out of the district for various reasons, to name a few, and the 71 terminations fell into these categories.

5.5 Estate Inspections Report

Bronwen Taylor referred to the enclosed report for noting.

Margaret Wilson asked for an explanation of the gradings of 1 to 4.

Bronwen Taylor explained that the gradings were from 4 to 1 and that four meant in an excellent condition and one meant in a very bad condition. She advised that the tenant volunteers and housing officers agreed on the gradings at each inspection.

Les Rolfe asked for the gradings document to be sent to the board.

Margaret Wilson said that there had been a couple of mentions of spraying of weeds and had been questioned in relation to nature. She referred to the pond at Wisbey's Yard and said that one had to be extremely careful with any kind of spray near water, and asked what care was taken when sprays were used.

Peter Campbell said the point of the inspections was to identify problems and it was not up to the person who identified the problem to decide what action was needed. He said that once it was reported, it would be up to the contractor to decide the best course of action to be taken.

Geoff Clark said that pesticides and spraying could be a part of shaping the new contract. He said that they were having a conversation with tenants in Cottenham about introducing a pilot project where we cut back weeds by hand instead of using pesticides to spray them. He said that we encouraged weed growth in certain areas, however, we did get complaints from some residents asking why some areas were left untidy and why they were not being maintained. He added that there was a fine balance between finding suitable areas to leave to let weeds grow and encourage biodiversity and but other areas that need to be maintained.

Margaret Wilson said that when weeds were sprayed, they often grew back as they were not cleared properly.

Action by: Bronwen Taylor

6. New Matters

6.1 Co-option of New Member (West Area)

Bronwen Taylor advised that following the resignation of Peter Tye, she had uploaded the details of the co-option vacancy and application documents for the West area to SCDC's website on 22 June 2023. She added that it was advertised in the July 2023 newsletters as

well as regularly on Facebook, and that the closing date for applications was 24 July 2023. She said that one application had been received, which would be sent to the HEB members after the closing date together with any others received.

Peter Campbell requested a letter of thanks be sent to Peter Tye.

Action by: Bronwen Taylor

6.2 Complaints

Julie Fletcher referred to the document included in the pack and said that this was discussed in detail at the quarterly Housing Performance Panel (HPP) meetings, and said that the board should refer to the tenant representatives on the HPP for clarification. She said most of the complaints received were for repairs and maintenance, which was expected and was in line with national trends. She said that although the number of complaints were very low at 2%, this was taken very seriously and we did have a robust system on place.

Dave Kelleway asked why there had been a high number of 23 unresolved complaints at stage 1.

Julie Fletcher said that a number of issues contributed to this, one being that we promoted our complaints process more, so we were probably capturing more complaints properly now than how we were before.

Geoff Clark said that some of this was down to COVID and the cost-of-living crisis.

Dave Kelleway said that a useful comparison would be against other councils.

Eddie Spicer said that post Grenfell and the regulations of the white paper had encouraged residents to put issues forward and to be more involved.

Dave Kelleway asked where the outcomes of the Ombudsman complaints were reported to?

Julie Fletcher said there was only one last year and they needed to look at how to publish the information. She added that we do have benchmarking with other service providers with HouseMark.

6.3 Policy Review

Julie Fletcher said that as Abida Ruma's contract had come to an end at the end of June 2023 and Martyn Hilliam was still on secondment, we would either be recruiting for a

new officer or Martyn Hilliam would return to that position. She reported on the policies as follows:

- Mutual Exchange Policy – to be presented to Cabinet on 26 September 2023. As representatives of the HEB, the tenant representatives could make a written statement or attend the meeting and make a statement at the meeting. Details of how to do this would be sent after the meeting as well, as the report that would go to Cabinet which would include the notes from their previous meeting.
- Damp and Mould Policy – we were working with an independent technical expert to develop this policy which would be presented to the HEB at the September 2023 quarterly meeting, if not before.
- Aids and Adaptations Policy – we were busy with the first draft. Julie Fletcher asked if any tenant representatives would like to volunteer on this group.
- Tenancy Policy – Abida Ruma had made good progress on this policy. This policy inter dependencies with the Introductory Policy and the Assignment and Succession Policy, which we needed to tie together and bring them together in terms of a suite of policies.
- Communications Standard Policy – this had come out of the service and improvements plan following the Tenant Satisfaction Survey and should be done by the end of the financial year.
- Homelessness Review and Strategy – would be presented to the HEB.
- Greater Cambridge Housing Strategy – would be presented to the HEB.

Margaret Wilson asked if Ermine Street and Shire Homes provided social housing or private renting?

Peter Campbell explained that they were two separate companies. He explained that Shire Homes was set up to do private lets which was funded through the general fund and rented properties which were not only within the district, and made a commercial return. He said Ermine Street was slightly different in that it had accommodation in the district and surrounding authorities. He said it was not social housing but was intended to provide accommodation for people who were struggling to find housing elsewhere and who were referred by our Housing Advice Service. He added that it got more complicated as we had properties that were owned by Ermine Street but were managed by Shire Homes, which provided more housing options for people who were struggling to identify options.

Action by: Julie Fletcher

6.4 Service Plan and Resourcing

Peter Campbell said that this document was produced annually which was a summary of the department, which set out who we were, what we did and what our plans were for the year. He said it included the landlord and non-landlord services. He added that it referred to Ermine Street, but had not gone into much detail, as it had its own business plan which was agreed by its own board.

Peter Campbell said that it was influenced by a number of things both internal and external within the department, such as achievements that were promised through the Asset Management Strategy, Corporate Council wide aims, for example doubling nature, and the wider changes that go on in the industry, for example the changing and increasing influence of the Housing Regulator on the way that we operate. He said that wider than this was that we tried to reflect the economic pressures on the service, which recently included refugee housing and the cost of living.

Peter Campbell referred to the document and said that we had included our service vision which the tenant representatives had helped us develop through the Asset Management Strategy. He also referred to the background of each of the five primary functions of the Housing Service and went through the document. He added that this was an internal document but it was important to get unput from tenants.

A discussion on affordable homes was held.

Julie Fletcher said that this was a current document where we were trying to set out our key priorities for the coming year and we were looking at April 2024 for the next service plan. She added it was to get input from the tenant representatives and to make sure that we had the right priorities in context of our budget constraints. She said it was to ensure that we had not missed any issues and to better understand the challenges faced by the Housing Service. She asked if the board thought if there were any missing items.

The Chair asked if a working group would be set up.

Julie Fletcher said that although this was a corporate document, input from the board, on how they would like to take this forward, would be welcomed.

Martin Lee said that last year he had presented the budget after it had been formed and the tenant volunteers had asked to be involved earlier. He said he would invite them to a meeting in September to give their input.

Dave Kelleway referred to item GTOC – 3bi in the table on page 54 of the agenda pack and asked if the maintenance programme included watering.

Geoff Clark advised that it was included for Bourn and Great Abington, and that we worked with the Parish Councils for other trees.

Dave Kelleway referred to the third item (data analysis of reasons for refusal) in the table on page 56 of the agenda pack and asked if the reports could be shared with the HEB.

Peter Campbell said they could be.

Dave Kelleway referred to the fourth item (allotments owned by the Council) in the table on page 57 of the agenda pack and said that he did not know that South Cambs had allotments.

Geoff Clark said that we did not have many and that historical arrangements were in place and this was one of the items that would be looked at by the new Lands Officer.

Dave Kelleway asked for support for allotments schemes.

Margaret Wilson referred to GTOC – 3bii in the table on page 54 of the agenda pack and asked if St Vincent's Close was one of the pilots?

Geoff Clark said it was not and asked for suggestions for wildflower areas.

Julie Fletcher asked for feedback to be sent to her and if the board would like a separate session. She said that this would be brought to the September 2023 meeting. She also asked for a few volunteers to assist with working on the Aids and Adaptations policy.

Actions by: Peter Campbell and HEB / Julie Fletcher

7. Any Other Business (AOB)

7.1 Stock Condition Survey

Les Rolfe referred to the Stock Condition Survey and said that he thought that the tenants were going to notify Housing and that they could make appointments if they needed to. He said he had received a complaint from a tenant who had tried to make an appointment but could not, however, when he got back from shopping one day found them sitting on his doorstep and was told that they had come to look at his house. He said he did not think that this was acceptable.

Eddie Spicer agreed that it was not appropriate at all and asked Les Rolfe to send him an email with the details, and he would investigate. He advised that they were working in batched areas and every property that was to be visited would have been sent a letter advising them of when they would be in the area to do the survey, and that if they would prefer to, they could make an appointment.

Les Rolfe asked if shared equity properties were going to be inspected?

Eddie Spicer advised that they were not on the first round of the survey.

Dave Kelleway said that he had also received the letter and that only 20 minutes was allocated to the survey, which he did not think was enough time for the inspection of both the inside and outside of the property.

Action by: Eddie Spicer

7.2 Reporting of parked vehicles on grass areas

Oana Sutherland asked how to go about reporting parked vehicles that were hit and damaged by delivery and other vehicles.

Geoff Clark said that this had been raised at the Parish Council and SCDC were going to make sure that the current parking arrangements were being used appropriately. He added there were reports that some people who did not live locally were using the parking spaces. He said that the council were looking at increasing the number of parking spaces without taking away from our green spaces and would consult with tenants to find out what they would like to see happen.

8. Proposed Meeting Dates for 2023 / 2024

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

- 28 September 2023 (Zoom / venue to be confirmed)
- 14 December 2023 (Zoom / venue to be confirmed)
- 28 March 2024 (Zoom / venue to be confirmed)

9. Closing

There being no further business to discuss, the meeting ended at 3:55pm.