Minutes of Meeting

Meeting: Members' Forum
Date: **15th July 2021**
Time: 18:00 19:30
Venue: Zoom

Members

Aurora Acone	Patricia Langford
Trevor Brewerton - Chair	Naomi Barrand
Edwina Lamond – Co-Optee	Gerald Prior
Margaret Buckell	Ann-Marie O'Sullivan
Val Kir	Sue Such
Sean Godfrey	Deborah Wills
Peter Haynes	Vic Breach - Co-Optee
Kay Sentence	David Peedle
John Smelt	Neelam Rutti

Also in attendance

Kate Wareing, Chief Executive
Lee Hayward, Director of Property Services
Jude McCaffrey, Interim Director of Housing and Communities
Jackie Logan, Resident Engagement & Communities Manager
Andrea Bain, Membership & Community Engagement Co-Ordinator
Michelle Pugh-Roberts, Co-Regulation Advisor

Observers

Angela Harding, Ahmed Rahman

1 Apologies for Absence

Vic Breach, Peter Haynes, Edwina Lamond, Gerald Prior

2 Approval of Minutes

13th May 2021 - **Approved**

3 Matters arising

There were no matters arising from the minutes of the last meeting.

4 Chairs Report

There is a lot going on at the moment. Recently myself, Vic, Martyn Thorne, Sadie Quinton and Angela Gray, met the three candidates who applied for the position of Director for Housing and Communities.
We then fed back to Kate and other senior staff our thoughts on each candidate. I think we are expecting a starting date of end of September, but hopefully Kate will be able to give you an update when she does her agenda item?
Tomorrow I will be on the interview panel along with David Peedle, for the two new Tenant Board members, as Vic and Nasreen will be stepping down having served 9 years on the Board.
Jackie and Dave Edwards ran an Environmental workshop last week, I know that Val and Bertie attended. This is the second themed project coming from the Communities Strategy, which is the role of the Forum to monitor.
Jackie has let me know that there will be a report to Forum via email in August and an agenda item for e September's meeting. If any of you want to get involved, please contact a member of the team.

As I have said in every chair update since last year, I am looking forward to us all being able to sit in the same room. It looks like the government are saying that is what we will be able to do after the 19th of July.
Although I believe companies will still have things in place to ensure the health and safety of everyone, so perhaps Kate will be able to let us know what Soha's thoughts are in her update?
I also think we need to keep in mind, that although the government say that restrictions have been lifted, Covid has not gone away, many people are going to be nervous about taking part in meetings, I think we should think about the Forum having meetings where people can also take part by joining on a zoom call. This would also be good for people who would rather not travel, especially during winter and bad weather.
Last week I asked Michelle to email the Forum to ask if there was something that you would like to talk about at the end of the meeting, with the possibility of doing a breakout session. As this is something that the Forum said they would like to do. Michelle did not receive any topics for conversation in time. Trish did ring customer services with a topic, but the message did not reach Michelle before the agenda was sent out, so we have nothing for the agenda this month.
But Trish will let you know her thought in any other business at the end of the meeting and it can be added to the September meeting agenda.
I will now pass you over to Kate for her update.

5 Update by Kate Wareing

National accountments – National policy accouchements have been mainly about development and what homes the government will make available for to buy as a housing association through the planning system. They have announced a new form of affordable housing product called First Homes. This will be discounted home ownership. Some new homes and developments will be made for people to buy outright but for a discounted price, and when they are resold, this will also be at a discounted rate. These houses will be an alternative to Rental or Shared Ownership. From our perspective, as a landlord this is likely to reduce the number of new homes on development they we will be able to bid on to buy. We are continuing to lobby local MP's and other bodies to and

alternative decision which increases the number of homes that will be available rather than substitute them, however we believe this to be a firm government guidance already in place.
Another policy that has been released is a new form of Shared Ownership. It will only apply to people who buy Shared Ownership properties in the future. The Two big changes are, how much you can buy off of us. At the moment you can buy in 10% chunks, but this has now been reduced to 1%. That gives extra flexibility, it also increased administration quite significantly.

In terms of Covid, the Government will be lifting the remaining restrictions on Monday 19th.As an employer we have a legal obligation and a moral duty to ensure we are proving a safe workplace, so we have therefore decided to keep social distancing and our current rules in place in the office.

Some of the special arrangement that were put in place due to Covid will now be coming to an end so could have an impact on some of our resident's income. Anyone who was in receipt of Universal credit and who wasn't subject to the benefit cap saw their Universal Credit go up by £20 a week at the beginning of the pandemic, however this is due to come to an end at the end of September. Also, Furlough is ending. We have already seen quite a steep increase in the number of residents that are struggling to pay their rent, particularly peoples whose workloads have been reduced. With Furlough ending we know we need support our residents as best we can.

Internal Announcements – Firstly, we are offering a full service again and we are also back to full compliance on Gas servicing. We have had our external accreditation for our Independent Living service, run by a company called Earosh and they have rated us as outstanding again. They particularly praised us for our service of Digital Inclusion during the pandemic so that's great recognition on what we do and how we do it.

At the last Board meeting we discussed whether or not we should make any significant changes to Soha's organisation structure. We are asked by our regulator once a year to talk about whether we should enter a formal partnership structure with any other organisation or whether we think being independent is still the best way of delivering our objectives. We talked about this here last year and Forum made it collectively clear that you were very happy to remain as an independent organisation, that you wanted it to stay that way. This year, again the Board and Management are in agreement with you, following the recent Board meeting.

Interviews have taken place for our new Director of Housing and Community's Manager. Mat Archer will be joining us on 28th September to take on this role. We also have Phill More joining us this week as our new Compliance Manager, who will bring us extra capacity in building Health and safety compliance.

We will continue to roll out Wi-Fi installation in Lee Court in Thame and Mary Mead in Wheatly.

We have also been doing quite a lot of work exploring new low carbon homes.

Our Development team went out to visit a development built by a company called GreenCall. The running cost for those houses are likely to be less than £200 a year so we are talking to them whether we might work with them as we Re-develop some of our own homes in the future.

6 Portfolio Holders Update

Sue Such

Achievements in the last financial year 20-21

1. Loneliness project – Successful outcome
2. Outcome for community connectors
3. Getting more people connected by loaning devices

What challenges have we faced in the last financial year?
Covid affected way to engage with residents having to use Zoom – which has been difficult for many. Paul Shackleford has been supportive to those identified with issues. Due to not being able to hold events or door knock has impacted on recruitment, especially the younger tenants. I am very appreciative to all the residents that have learned alongside us. Support and enthusiasm have been amazing the way they have worked alongside their community's

When we first went into lockdown, we moved the support to the more vulnerable tenants. Vouchers were provided as part of the hardship fund to those who were struggling financially and also shopping was done for those that where shielding/ Paul helped tenants set up an online shopping portal for many residents and also the loaning of Mi-Fi devices to those with no internet access

John Smelt – 3 New people into the IT Department. Some changes in terms of the infrastructure so a lot more resilient as a team. This does not directly impinge on the residents directly but of the running of the business so it especially important, we have a bit more on Wi Fi in properties and there is more of that to come. A new Telephone system is due and a new internal support system, so if soha employees have a problem they are much more likely to get a quick answer.

David Peedle - had a meeting with Chad Bowers and Richard Smith on the 9th July at the Porfolio annual report. Everything was explained very clearly and despite the climate of the last year both have performed very well

Bertie Doy – Estates grounds work has been working very well but there is a lot more that they could be doing which will be discussed at the next meeting.

7 Community Art Project 2022 by Jude McCaffrey

This report is about Soha's 25th Anniversary. We are here today to ask the Forums approval for a budget of £15,000. This is for the creation of the Community arts project. It is an Art project around creative writing, poems, lyrics, or music. Its specifically looking at the community's we work in, so the theme of the project is very much community and the issues of "belonging" and we think this is very relevant at the moment. This is a project that we have been working

alongside the Council, who have offered up some support through their own arts officers for 15 days. So, with that said for the 25th anniversary we will be hosting a series of events to celebrate the work that has happened over the next year around the Community art project.
Andrea Bain, who is heavily involved with the community's art project, explained that there will be a meeting on 22nd of July to choose the artists.
The steering group can give direction so if the group would like to do something visually as well then that can be put forward.

Jude asked for the Forums Approval. The Forum **approved** the budget by a show of hands.

8 Moving away from Starter Tenancy's by Jude McCaffrey

This is a proposal to move away from Starter Tenancy's. A couple things have changed since starter tenancies were first introduced. The biggest is a changed proposed by the Government. The Government will be scrapping the section 21 Notice. The Section 21 Notice is how we would end an assured shorthold tenancy and that's what we use for our assured shorthold tenants. So effectively they will be taking away the teeth, so we would not be able to end them the way we do now. We would like to propose to offer all tenants as of this coming Autumn a lifetime tenancy from day 1. This gives people that full security. Ali to that, we make sure we are given robust tenancy support from day 1, especially were we identify before they begin their tenancy that they may have some sort of vulnerabilities or other issues where we would want to help to enable them to maintain their tenancy's.
We will continue to offer the appeals process. This is where a tenant Board member (very often Vic) who would come and join a panel and hear from the tenant who has been threatened with the eviction to find the underlying cause of the reason for eviction ie unpaid rents, falling out with neighbours and work with them to resolve the issues. 9/10 we usually find the underlying cause of the issue which of course retains their tenancy agreement.

Jude asked the Forum for approval of this Proposal. The Forum **Approved** this proposal by a show of hands

9 Gas and Asbestos policies by Richard Smith

For noting only

10 Complaints report by Sam Mace

For noting only

11 Royal Scot House – Options appraisal update

This is to provide the Forum with some information on Royal Scot house and mutual options that we have been considering as a senior leadership team.
Most of you will be aware that we have been in Royal Scot House since 1997 when the association first formed, initially we leased it then bought it. It's served us well; we have 120 staff in the building which comfortable accommodates. In more recent times we purchased the West Wing and the waste land next to the

office, which at one point we were thinking of developing, but that never went forward.
The pandemic has changed things in many ways, from the way we worked in the office full time to the way we now mostly work from home full time. A discussion we have had at SLT is how we will be working in the future. What came out of that discussion was, we will be working towards a more Hybrid way of working. It will be a more flexible arrangement, with staff working from home a good amount of the week but also come to the office to meet with colleagues or corporate training, team meetings and so on. Taking all that into account we need to think is Royal Scot House still fit for purpose?
The building has an extremely poor energy performance rating. At the moment we are not fully utilising the use of the land, so we are not really putting the site to its optimum use. We carried out an options appraisal report where we looked at a number of options for Royal Scot House and the adjoining land. What we looked at was firstly, remaining at Royal Scot House and do some internal modernisation and refurbishment with similar work to the West Wing then continue to use those buildings as we do currently. What we realised when we carried out a staff survey was, we are likely to only have 40 to 50 staff in the office at any one time as a maximum. This tells us is that the office is too large. If we were going to go with that option, then we would only be working on one floor with the other floor being surplus to requirements. Other options we considered were:

- Selling the site as an office to another company.
- Sell the site with planning permission to demolish the office and west wing to build some new housing. We had valuations for both of those options. If we sold the site as an office, we would fetch approx. 1.75 million if sold it with planning permission we would get approx. 2.35 million. That equates to about 10 homes if we were to sell the office and build properties, also we would be without an office so that was an option that we soon discounted.
- SODC presented us with another option which would be to move in with them. They are currently in the process of moving as part of the Gateway redevelopment. They will be moving to the Gateway development in the next 2 to 3 years so they asked if we would like to co locate with them, sharing meeting rooms and facilities. We would still have our own office, but we would rent of SODC as a long-term lease agreement. We did explore that option thoroughly but decided we would not pursue further.
- We build out the site ourselves by re developing. That could include putting housing on the site or we could put a new office on the site with some housing around it.

This was he option that SLT favoured. A consultant carried out some viability studies for us and we believe that we could comfortably have a modern office that meets out zero carbon credentials with up to 63 surrounding flats on the site. There is obviously cost to consider but if we build homes there will be a good rental return. We have got away to go but this has been approved by SLT and it needs Board Approval. In terms of building work this would be at least 2 to 3 years away.
Currently the first floor is underway with refurb, as we no longer need two floors as the reduced number of staff in the office. We are working with Make Space Oxford to see how we can better use that space. What is intended is to bring empty spaces back into use for local entrepreneurs, charities, churches and

community groups so we are in discussion with them having our old repairs office, housing office and west wing for a low-cost rent. The idea being we want to invigorate local community's and also provide employment in our local area. This will be a short-term option for 2 to 3 years until the building is demolished ready for the new buildings.

12 Welfare into Rental income Report – Audit Report

Four residents took part in this audit and its purpose was to investigate the support available when a tenant or shared owner loses their income also to minimize the risk of evictions & reduce the amount of arrears owed to Soha. Specifically, we looked at how are the Rental Income team and Tenancy Support team coping with the rising demand for their services? Who do they sign post people to for specific services? How do they support residents that are not engaging? How long does it take to contact the resident before the arrears get too big? What is your understanding of the Hardship fund and tenancy sustainment fund? How are arrears dealt with for Shared Owners and Leaseholders?

We found that we were impressed by a commitment at all levels to finding ways of supporting tenants through an arrears crisis and sustaining them in their home. There seems to be a required level of flexibility in procedures to enable this to happen and several layers of support including money are available. We have drawn up an action plan with 10 recommendations and look forward to monitoring them in our regular meetings

Management Response – Jude McCaffrey

Soha's management thanks the audit and scrutiny group for the comprehensive and productive report into the impact of welfare reforms on rent arrears, and the management of rent arrears. Our thanks go to Sue Such, Martyn Thorn, Doreen Gow, and Bertie Doy for their work on this report, and the research into experiences of new tenants. We have reviewed the recommendations, in partnership with the Rental Income Team, and have accepted the recommendations as outlined on the attached sheet. We will report progress to the audit & scrutiny group, as well as the audit & risk committee, in six months' time. The recommendations are related to policies and procedures; rental income service; and our shared ownership service.

Date of the next meeting September 16th

ENTER DATE

Signed…………………………………………….. Date………………………………
Chair of Members' Forum