Minutes of Meeting

Meeting: Board Meeting
Date: Thursday, 30 November 2023
Time: 6.00pm
Venue: Board Room, Royal Scot House

Present:

Naomi Barrand	Dave Lakin	Peter Sloman
Janet Crooks	Emma Luddington (online)	Martyn Thorne
Victoria Dingle	David Mody	Kate Wareing
Jenny Ekelund	Peter Nkum	

Apologies:

Hayley Smith	Marisa Elliott	Jude McCaffrey

Also in attendance:

Matt Archer, Director of Housing and Communities
Lee Hayward, Director of Property Services
Nasreen Hussain, Director of Finance and Resources
Craig Dransfield, Head of Development
Penny Finburg, Head of Finance and Treasury
Liz Roberts, Communications Officer (Taking minutes at this meeting)

Observers
Margaret Buckell, Members' Forum
Bertie Doy, Members' Forum
Charlotte Copcutt, Complaints Officer (from item 24)

Declarations of Interest

All Board members who are also residents declared an interest in item 25, the Rent Changes 2024/25 paper.

Announcements

The Chair of the Board welcomed Margaret Buckell and Bertie Doy from the Members' Forum and Charlotte Copcutt, Complaints Officer, as observers.

22a. Approval of Minutes

A member asked that it be added to the minutes of the Board meeting held on 19 October 2023 that the Board had agreed a review of the Annual Treasury Plan at the January 2024 meeting.

Resolved:

That the minutes of the Board Meeting held on 19 October 2023 be signed as a true and accurate record subject to the inclusion of the date for review of the Annual Treasury Plan 2023/24.

22b. Personnel and Remuneration Committee Minutes

The Chair of the Personnel and Remuneration Committee gave a verbal update of the meeting held on 24 November pending the formal minutes being available. She noted that:

a) the Committee would seek approval for the appointment of a Board member with lead responsibility for complaints at the Board meeting in January 2024.
b) a decision on the proposed Board Chair recruitment process would be sought at point 28 in the agenda of the current meeting.
c) a discussion on the results of the employee survey had been recorded; the Committee would make it available to any interested Board member.

Resolved:

That the Board notes the verbal update of the minutes of the Personnel and Remuneration Committee.

23. Matters Arising Tracker and Wallboard Ideas

<u>Tracker Items</u>

The Chair noted that:

a) item 54 would be discussed at the January Board meeting
b) item 55 could be removed from the tracker
c) item 74 could be removed from the tracker following discussion at the current Board meeting
d) item 77 will be presented at the February Board meeting
e) item 88 could be removed from the tracker following discussion at the current Board meeting
f) item 100 could be removed following discussion at the current Board meeting

g) item 104 could be removed
h) items 7 and 17 could be removed from the tracker following discussion at the current Board meeting

Wallboard Items

The Chair invited members to reflect on any additional items for inclusion on the Wallboard. No questions were raised or comments offered in response.

Reports

24. Chief Executive Key Issues Update

The Chief Executive provided an update to members on key external trends and internal issues. There were no questions.

External Update

The Vice-Chair commented that she had read an article from the Housing Ombudsman in the press indicating a 323% rise in findings of severe maladministration findings against providers. The Chief Executive said that she believed this to be the result of greater focus on formal complaints in the last couple of years and the spotlight on disrepair. Soha had not yet had such a judgement made against it but was expecting to receive a complaints procedure non-compliance notice soon: the case is currently with the Ombudsman. The Complaints Officer advised that the Ombudsman is routinely taking six months to investigate cases.

Internal Update

The Chair remarked how pleasing the staff survey results were.

A member commented that signage advertising Frances Curtis Court on the Wallingford bypass was now improved.

Resolved:

The Board notes the update.

25. Rent Changes 2024/25

The Chief Executive presented the report supported by the Director of Finance and Resources to ask the Board to consider the rent increases payable by residents from 1 April 2024.

Confidential items were discussed. Further information is contained within the Confidential Minutes.

26. Appointment of External Auditor

The Chair of Audit and Risk Committee presented the report detailing the targeted procurement process which has been undertaken to appoint a new External Auditor for Soha.

Resolved:

That the Board approved the appointment of appoint Bishop Fleming as Soha's External Auditor from the financial year ending 31 March 2024 for an initial appointment of three years.

27. EDI Strategy 2023-26

The Director of Housing and Communities represented the Head of Housing in presenting this paper. He explained that improvements since the last strategy included focused staff training and more data being captured.

The Personnel and Remuneration Committee had looked at the strategy at its meeting on 24 November and agreed that measures of success for the strategy were not just the hard targets around data completeness but also the customer insight and 'nimble' approach to communication which would follow from that.

He further commented that data collection is a rolling process as the make-up and circumstances of households change. Knowing our residents through the various routes we deploy to meet and listen to them enables us to be alert to recording their needs.

A member said that she had commented by email to the Head of Housing when the paper was published. She shared the requests she had made to him and his responses with the meeting.

a) With her experience of reverse mentoring with an individual with disabilities in her own organisation, she asked that Soha ensure it was proactive in publicising reasonable adjustments which could be made for employees or for residents. The Head of Housing had said that this needed to be front of mind in staff training.
b) She further asked if a plan to conduct training around language for resident-facing teams might be introduced.

The Chief Executive agreed that these were in the action plan to deliver the actions arising from the strategy.

A member, in absentia and through the Chair, had asked if Soha intended to ask individuals with lived experience of protected

characteristics to design services. The Director of Housing and Communities noted that listening to residents in addition to a more formal consultation structure was part of the more 'nimble' approach.	
A member asked if Soha would take the formal role of advocate for any resident needing and wishing for one but without the support structure to appoint one themselves. The Director of Housing and Communities agreed to consider this further.	**MA**
On the subject of resident consultation, the Vice-Chair, who is also a member of Soha's combined staff and residents EDI group, commented that the group's thinking is often informed by their conferring with the residents' Disability Action and Awareness Group.	
The Director of Housing and Communities was asked by two members if EDI is collected on all members of a household or only those on the tenancy agreement, noting that a disabled child or one with special needs changes the dynamic of family life and could possibly impact on a tenancy. The Chief Executive responded that we collect information only on those on the tenancy agreement but agreed to take away the challenge to make household data collection as comprehensive as possible. The Director of Housing and Communities noted that, if residents tell us about the specific needs or protected characteristics of household members, we are able to record that data: this is another example of why getting out to meet and listen to residents is so important.	**MA**
A member noted that not all protected characteristics were presented in the paper; she also commented that Soha engages on behalf of those not presenting protected characteristics yet clearly vulnerable. She suggested that the EDI Strategy could better reflect all the work already done in this area and not just that which we do to comply with legal requirements.	
Resolved:	
That the Board approves the EDI Strategy 2023-26.	
28. Chair of the Board Recruitment Process	
The Board discussed the recommendation of the P&R Committee to employ Campbell Tickell to provide external facilitation for recruitment of the next Chair of the Board with Jenny Ekelund being the lead Board member for the process.	
A member asked that the newly approved EDI Strategy be deployed in this appointment.	
Resolved:	

That the Board approves the recommendation of the P&R Committee to employ Campbell Tickell to provide external facilitation for recruitment of the next Chair of the Board in addition to Soha conducting its own advertising. The Board further approves that Jenny Ekelund be lead Board member for this process.

29. Customer Service and Engagement Update

The Director of Housing and Communities presented the update, which foresees a quarterly review, and asked for comments. The Chair suggested it be reviewed instead bi-annually. **MA**

The Chief Executive noted that a workshop with Soha's co-regulation residents on the proposed Consumer Standards which she had attended in October had been instructive both about their perception of Soha's perceived strengths, and about what residents felt was lacking, including how we handle complaints and proactive and coherent communications. It was clear that staff should be connecting together better as an organisation; how we are performing on that, in residents' eyes, could be monitored alongside our Consumer Standards compliance. **MA**

Resolved:

That the Board notes the update with a request for the Board to be updated on progress at six-monthly intervals.

30. Local Context and Level of Utilisation of Temporary Accommodation for those Experiencing Homelessness

This paper was presented for information and discussion on next steps. The context is that homelessness amongst those in temporary accommodation is on the rise and Board members were invited to reflect on whether helping to address the situation in our operating territory should be a more proactive part of Soha's mission and purpose.

A member commented that while Soha is playing a part – as outlined in the paper, it would seem that we offer assistance with assets that aren't prime stock. He wondered if Soha should consider building just with alleviating homelessness in mind.

The Chair asked the Chief Executive to outline the next steps which could be for discussion at the Board Away Day in April 2024. The Chief Executive proposed to outline what other housing associations are currently doing in this sphere and modelling what, if Soha were to provide more homes for those in temporary accommodation, we would **KW** have to forego in order to fund this. She invited comments to her separately in preparation for producing this report.

A member asked if Soha would consider contacting the Ministry of Defence (MOD) direct about repurposing and managing military stock. The Director of Property Services advised that our primary Councils were leasing homes from the MOD for Afghan refugees and that Soha is providing the maintenance for these.

Resolved:

That the Board discussed the initial report with the request that it be examined at the next Board Away Day in April 2024.

31. Mid-Year Performance Reports Q2 2023/24

This item contains all Executive Team reports about Soha's performance during the first six months of 2023/24. Questions and comments were taken together for all reports.

a) **Performance Report – September 2023**
b) **Acuity Survey Results Q2 2023/24**
c) **Delivery against Corporate Plan Action Plan – 6 Month Update**

The Chief Executive commented that our sentiment based KPIs are off track against the performance measures we set ourselves last year. However set against other housing associations, how we are doing comparatively shows us in a better position as satisfaction levels have dropped across the sector.

A member asked if any of the budget overspends were likely to be recurring items; the Chief Executive responded that Repairs and Estates would recur. She added that we have identified what would allow us to achieve the 3% efficiency target but the IT is not yet in place to do so and we do not expect to realise these efficiencies in this financial year.

A member commented that the rents team should be congratulated on achieving a Q2 total current arrears statistic of 4.5% against target of 4.8% and the Director of Housing and Communities noted this for conveying to the team.

A member commented that he was struck by the development pipeline dwindling. The Head of Development responded that Soha's appraisal assumptions will need reviewing to ensure they are realistic before re-commencing new business activities. He is considering the use of ARK consultancy benchmarking data. However, the Board will need to approve the assumptions before they can be implemented.

A member asked for clarification on whether our sales strategy includes selling off-plan or is based exclusively on sale-at-handover. The Director of Housing and Communities confirmed that off-plan sales were common. With regard to the TSM results, the Chief Executive commented that they should guide our focus. The complaints handling statistic in its current form is not the most useful metric to judge our complaints handling because it is answered by many residents who have reported a problem (eg with a neighbour) rather than made a complaint. The Director of Property Services offered highlights from the performance statistics for which he is responsible, saying that the increase in repairs satisfaction was pleasing although there were still issues with contractor performance. Soha was now able to offer repairs across all trades within the priorities we publish. 'Time taken to complete repairs' satisfaction was rising. There has been a huge increase in the number of orders put through to contractors – investigations into and remediation of damp and mould had doubled. With regard to Planned Maintenance there were very few homes not complying with the Decent Homes Standard and we were on target to get them up to par. The Planned Maintenance budget was very close to being on track with the budget. A member commented that the number of stock condition surveys already completed was impressive; the Director of Property Services commented that we were on target to complete a review of all our homes within four years.	
The Chair asked that a formal paper on budget variance be presented to the Board in January.	**KW/NH**
Resolved: **That the Board discussed and notes the reports.**	
32. Health and Safety – Six-month Update The Director of Property Services commented on the use of Alertcom lone worker alarms saying that Soha was looking to change providers in the coming year. With regard to Reinforced Autocleaved Aerated Concrete (RAAC), the Director of Property Services confirmed one specialist survey had taken place at Lee Court, Thame and no RAAC had been identified. A further update will be provided once all remaining blocks of flats and schemes have been inspected by Soha Technical Officers.	

A member, commenting on the number of actions arising from Fire Risk Assessments, asked if Soha should have predicted and rectified these in advance, especially as the FRA report arrives some months after the inspection. The Director of Property Services assured the Board that Soha would have been told immediately if any inspection had discovered high risks. As for the issue of lower risk actions which the inspection uncovered, he commented that housing officers are trained in fire risk but they do not have the same specialist eye as a professional Fire Risk Assessor. The Director of Property Services advised that the Social Housing Decarbonisation Funded programme to bring some 600 properties, currently below EPC rating C has started. He commented that otherwise all Soha's homes had cavity and loft insulation. In relation to the comment in the update that '*staff have been sent reminders about completing outstanding modules ASAP'*, a member requested that the Director of Property Services convey to staff the message from the Board that it requires staff to complete health and safety training, escalating non-participation to Line Managers if necessary. **Resolved:** **That the Board notes the update.** **33. Development Update - Hurdle Rates** The Head of Development brought this update with a request that the Board approved additional stress testing be undertaken for larger schemes as noted in Appendix A. There were no questions or comments. **Resolved:** **That the Board approved Appendix A to the Development Update.** **34. SP32 Tenancy Policy** The Director of Housing and Communities brought the Tenancy Policy with a request that it be approved. There were no comments or questions for him. **Resolved:** **That the Board approved the revised Tenancy Policy.** **35. Any Other Business**	**LH**

a) The Chair reminded Board members to RSVP to the office Christmas lunch on 14 December between 12 and 2 had they not done so already. b) The Chair advised that the staff survey had suggested that it was necessary to communicate to staff who makes up the Board and the role it plays. She and the Vice-Chair would be conducting a Friday Briefing to staff on Teams on 12 January. It will take place from 10 – 11am and any Board member wishing to join in presenting would be most welcome. Please contact the Chair. **36. Date of Next Meeting** The date of the next Board meeting will be **Thursday, 25 January 2024** at 6.00pm in the Board Room at Royal Scot House. Please note the on-line drop-in session with SLT is between 5.00 and 6.00pm to discuss any reports on the agenda. The meeting ended at 8.18pm. Signed:_________________________ Date: __________	**ALL** **ALL**