

Name:	<b>Business Planning - Service Improvement Forum (SIF)</b>
Date of Meeting:	8 November 2022
Time of Meeting:	10am
Location:	Zoom

<b>Present:</b>	
Kevin Farrell (KF)	TPAS (Chair)
Eunice Clarkson (EC)	Resident
Maureen Kershaw (MK)	Resident
Nicola Sharp (NS)	Resident
Christopher Sharp (CS)	Resident
Hina Gillani (HG)	Resident
Jude Thompson (JT)	Resident
Deborah Pepper (DP)	Resident Observer
Sharon Gillott (SG)	Board Observer
Christine Fox (CF)	Director of Neighbourly Places
Epiphany Kidd (EK)	Senior Manager Neighbourly Places
Sophie Jenkins (SJ)	Interim Senior Manager Business Assurance
Lisa Stead (LS)	Tenant Engagement Officer
Oliver Jaques (OJ)	GEM Tenant Engagement Officer (Minutes)
Jane Grace (JG)	Staff observer (new Senior Manager Business Assurance)
Martyn Broadest (MB)	Director of Home
Guy Millichamp (GM)	Director of Finance and Resources
Helen Lennon (HL)	Chief Executive
Richard Baggott (RB)	Senior Manager Customer Experience and Change
Louise Handley (LH)	Senior Manager Human Resources and Org Development
Marko Aprcovic (MA)	Senior Manager Property Services
<b>Apologies:</b>	
Jai-Ana Simon (JS)	Resident Observer

<b>Actions Arising from this Meeting</b>		
1.	EK to provide an update to MK and EC on sub-letting.	EK
2.	EK to obtain contact number of EC's neighbour who wanted to speak to a CHO after a dispute on scheme, and ensure the tenant receives a call.	EK
3.	Resident SIF members and observers to be invited to attend an additional meeting with HL and GM once further information is released by Government on rent setting.	HL/GM

4.	MA to inform MK who to contact regarding what the service charge includes.	MA
5.	MB to discuss issues raised by CS about recent repairs visits outside of the meeting.	MB
6.	MA to discuss roofing issue raised about Endecliff Mews with MK and JT outside of the meeting.	MA
7.	OJ to contact organisers of the 'Meet the Regulator' event to obtain feedback.	OJ
8.	LS to check the appetite of resident SIF members for an in-person meeting for the Action Planning SIF in March 2023.	LS

## 1. Introductions and Minutes of September "Resident Priorities" SIF

KF welcomed all staff and resident attendees, outlined the purpose of the Business Planning SIF. Two observers, JG and DB, were welcomed. SG was attending as Board observer.

EC and MK queried a potential missing paragraph from previous minutes on sub-letting. CF stated there were notes on page 3 under 'Connect's approach to Housing Management', EK confirmed that she had discussed sub-letting with JT but would also provide an update to EC and MK outside of the meeting. **(ACTION 1)**.

Actions arising – noted that all actions were completed, except:

LS stated that for Action 5, SJ had spoken to MA to confirm that he will cover this under the agenda item on Resident Priorities. MK queried that Action 10 hasn't been completed (repairs phone line message), RB reassured that the message had been changed several times, but there was a technical error that reinstated the out-of-date message. RB agreed to investigate and update the message, later in the meeting RB confirmed this will be completed today.

The minutes were agreed as a true record.

## 2. Performance report (presented by SJ)

Evictions: remain within the target (below 10), with one eviction due to rent arrears. Evictions are a last resort, Connect aims to sustain tenancies and provide support where possible.

Rent arrears: within target. Proactive work is in place to support residents, particularly with the cost of living crisis, including a 'welfare call' campaign.

Tenancy turnover: has increased but remains within target. Higher turnover is due to an established trend between the summer holidays and Christmas, so no concerns at present.

Tenant satisfaction + net promotor score: satisfaction has decreased marginally and is below target of 90%, whereas net promotor has increased slightly and remains within target. Increase in repairs completed on time, improvements in repairs response times, and an increase in percentage of calls answered and speed of answer should, over time, lead to improvements in tenant satisfaction.

Anti-social behaviour: increase in reports from 159 to 169 and remains high compared to last year's figure, with notable increases in assaults and criminal activity. Deep dive into ASB ongoing and findings to be considered by Management Group on 29 November, to be shared with SIF members once complete, and to inform co-design of strategy next year.

### **3. Rent increase briefing (presented by GM)**

- In response to high inflation rates, the Government has intervened in the usual rent setting formula of CPI + 1% and is consulting on a rent cap. No announcement has yet been made on what formula will apply. It is possible it will be early December before the rent setting formula is announced.
- This uncertainty has an impact on the ability of all Housing Associations to set their annual budgets, and not only for the next financial year but also the following years as future income projections will be affected.
- There is a difficult balance to achieve between affordable rents for residents, an adequate income stream to provide revenue to maintain properties and invest in building programmes to increase social housing supply and the Housing Benefit bill for the Government.
- The financial modelling provided by GM in item 3 of the papers indicates a potential rent cap could result in £1 Million reduction in projected income. The Service Improvement Forum will be a key forum for discussion on some of the difficult decisions that may need to be made once the position is clear on the rent formula to be applied.

An open discussion highlighted the following themes from SIF members:

- Appreciation that rents will increase and that Connect is effectively in 'limbo' until the formula is published – DP
- Connect needs to retain and hold fast to its values and remain a caring housing association – NS. GM noted that arrears had, so far, not increased significantly.
- Whether there is a Plan B in relation to the cost-of-living crisis - particularly in relation to single parents, tenants living with disabilities and those experiencing poor mental health – HG. HL noted she would cover this under a later agenda item.

### **4. Tenant engagement incentives update (provided by EK)**

EK confirmed that recipients can now determine whether they receive their incentive as a voucher or cash and that the Connect Leadership team has approved the scheme.

## **5. Half-year updates against the 2022-23 Change Plan (provided by RB)**

Request for papers be provided in a font of a size to make information accessible - EC

Apologies given and explanation provided in relation to the printing issues caused by the power cut at Roundhay Road office – LS

RB talked through the sections that SIF has previously chosen track, highlighted on the Change Plan update (Item 6b). Each SIF priority was addressed.

### Discussion and clarification questions

Query about which CHOs were covering which patches following changes in the CHO team – EC. EK explained that 3 CHOs were covering 2 patches each at present, with an additional one focusing on community development. EK to obtain contact number of EC's neighbour who wanted to speak to a CHO after a dispute on scheme, and ensure the tenant receives a call.

### **(ACTION 2).**

Reference made by SIF member to a group they are involved in which is experiencing similar issues around the need to incentivise and recognise the work of volunteers – NS.

Important to have clear expectations and commitments for people that volunteer their time – DP.

Recognition that residents are the 'experts' on the resident experience – NS.

RB highlighted difficulties gaining access to real-time reporting in relation to measuring the impact of communications activity. The importance of this was acknowledged by RB, who then highlighted the cyber incident as one of several reasons for the pause, but the plan is still to deliver on this priority by the end of the financial year.

LS highlighted the Tenant Engagement team's ongoing work to diversify engagement activities, noting targeted recruitment to recruit residents to projects and activities that are relevant to their interests. LS also mentioned the importance of the new incentives scheme.

## **6. Chief Executive updates (discussion led by HL)**

### Cost of Living update

HL posed an open question to resident SIF members 'how do SIF members feel about the state of the nation, in the broader sense not just limited to Connect'. Responses were:

- Still in a period of flux post-covid, people are still frightened of going out. Also, many people are losing jobs/having hours reduced, and the disruption caused by Government instability has added to people's unease – JT
- War in Ukraine, food and fuel price increases and Covid lingering with the possibility of more outbreaks is causing pressure on people's circumstances – CS
- An existing coffee and chat group has decreased by 30 people due to concerns about Covid - NS

HL noted this was the most challenging operating environment she had faced in her housing career. Key challenges are linked to political change at a pace not experienced before, which in turn makes it hard for housing associations to deliver consistently against established business plans.

In a climate of austerity public services have been withdrawn, reduced or restricted; leaving many people with no support and the impact of that unmet need then falls to housing associations to address.

In relation to the 'Plan B' question posed by HG in an earlier discussion HL outlined the 4 key priorities Connect is focusing on:

Customers - providing not only a safe and affordable home but also identifying what Connect can do to help people through tough times.

Colleagues - the external environment impacts on colleagues in two ways, immediately in that cost-of-living impacts on colleagues too but also as they work alongside customers who are experiencing difficulties this impacts on colleagues' wellbeing.

Financial viability - in an external environment where costs are increasing, and income is not increasing in line with inflation due to alterations to the rent increase formula.

Climate crisis - as fuel costs increase, residents are now turning to Connect to act by improving insulation and fuel efficiency in their homes.

Following discussion, it was agreed that once there is clarity on the rent setting formula, then an additional SIF meeting would take place to discuss the impact, Connect's options and how to communicate this with residents. This meeting would be outside of the normal SIF cycle, may be short notice and without advance papers. **(ACTION 3)**.

HL also highlighted the following areas of work and projects that are taking place:

- Customer Task and Finish Group - made up of Board members and senior staff is meeting to look at how the customer voice is heard and influences at Connect.
- Partnership working to combat the cost-of-living crisis. Linking in with the 'Warm Spaces' initiative and what is happening in neighbourhoods as well as strategic partnership working through the West Yorkshire Housing Partnership.
- Communication on support available - Connect colleagues involved in day-to-day contact with residents are being trained to identify where residents may be facing financial difficulties and signpost people to the Money Matters team.

HL posed another open question – ‘what else could Connect do to be a caring Association?’:

There was appreciation for Connect’s approach and being involved in the Warm Spaces initiative as there was a lot of fear amongst residents about heating their homes due to the cost - NS

The cost and availability of local transport was a potential barrier to accessing Warm Spaces - EC

Connect could look to involve residents and people accessing Warm Spaces at Connect in co-delivering services and activities to improve morale and self-esteem as well as addressing loneliness and the energy crisis – DP

#### Lessons from cyber incident:

The importance of insurance became very apparent as it meant access to experts to deal with the incident.

The inability to be able to communicate timescales for system recovery impacted hugely on colleagues' ability to plan and prioritise how to respond to the incident and impacted on their wellbeing during the recovery period. Cloud-based back up of systems are now in place and will prevent this situation occurring again.

Connect was already in a good position in relation to cyber security but the incident has highlighted the need to remain ever vigilant. Measures include applying for enhanced accreditation in cyber security and ongoing training in cyber security for Connect colleagues.

Assurance can be provided to the Board and SIF in the findings of the recent In-Depth Assessment (IDA), where the Regulator of Social Housing was confident in Connect’s governance of the incident and measures in place. HL apologised to SIF members for the disruption caused. Thanks were given to HL for the steps taken to deal with the incident and improve cyber security – CS.

### **7. Scrutiny recommendation updates (presented by SJ)**

SJ proposed that SIF consider signing off the two remaining scrutiny recommendations.

- Approval of the new Connect Commitments is a later agenda item.
- Annual shampoo of carpets and steam cleaned vinyl flooring at Hawthorn Mill – shampooing was completed in October and is now added to the annual schedule. The Estates team stated that steam cleaning vinyl flooring could cause damage and it is therefore recommended that it is disinfected instead.

SIF agreed to recommend to the Audit and Risk Management Committee signing off the actions.

## **8. Policy approval**

There were no policies for approval.

## **9. Review of Connect Commitments update - (presented by OJ)**

OJ presented an update on the Connect Commitments (CCs) review.

The new CCs being considered for approval by SIF, and recommendation to Board, were explained:

### *Repairs*

- You will consider repairs completed by Connect to be good or outstanding
- You will consider your home to be well-maintained and safe to live in
- When repairs are carried out in your home or communal areas, all staff - in-house team or external contractor - will work in a professional manner, leaving homes clean and tidy
- We will make all emergency repairs safe within 24 hours (follow-up work may be classed as non-emergency)
- We will aim to complete non-emergency repairs within 15 working days (MB attended the meeting to discuss repairs response times).
- We will keep you informed about your repair when it is not possible to complete in one visit

### *Value for services you pay for*

- We will seek feedback from residents who receive paid-for communal services such as gardening or cleaning at least once a year, and will publish the results
- We will ensure that you know what you are paying for and what your service charge includes
- We will be transparent about balancing quality of service and keeping costs to a minimum
- Information on how Connect spends your rent will be accessible

### *Planned work*

- We will seek feedback when planned work is completed, so you can tell us about the quality of the work
- If follow-up work (defects) is required, Connect or the contractor will respond within 10 working days – or sooner if work is urgent
- We will provide at least 6 weeks' notice for planned work in your home, and discuss aims for completion with you

- When planned work is carried out where you live, all staff (in-house team or external contractor) will work in a professional manner, leaving homes clean and tidy

#### Queries and questions from residents

Query in relation to the Connect Commitment 'we will ensure that you know what you are paying for and what your service charge includes'. How is Connect going to ensure this is achieved? – MK.

Query in relation to how SIF could judge against this commitment – MK.

LS advised that service charge schedules are issued each year with the rent increase letters, and communal notice boards are kept up to date with the relevant information. MB noted there is also a satisfaction question asked around Value for Money in resident surveys.

MA agreed to contact MK in relation to Endecliff Mews Service charge. **(ACTION 4)**.

#### Discussion on the target for non-emergency repairs:

In the context of a 30% increase in demand for repairs over the past five years, increased turnover of technicians, increased material costs, reduced availability of materials and COVID backlog, there was a proposal to amend the target for completion on non-emergency repairs to 28 days by MB. It was noted that the present target had not formed part of the consultation, and the feedback was that any target set should be met.

#### Comments on request to amend target for non-emergency repairs:

If repair work is completed on time in relation to the target, relaxation would be acceptable. SIF members' major concern was that repairs were completed as a first-time fix, without repeated follow up visits – EC.

MB agreed that repeat visits are inefficient working practice, but there were times when technicians needed to balance doing a job properly with completing it at first visit

Request to discuss personal repairs experience involving two visits – CS. MB will discuss with CS outside of the meeting. **(ACTION 5)**.

SIF approved the new Connect Commitments for recommendation to Board in February 2023.

## **10. Resident Priorities 2022-23 - Service Managers' initial responses**

### Communication - RB

Priorities area are keeping people informed and keeping our promises and Connect are taking actions to constantly improve.



We are already utilizing CustomerSure to listen to and use feedback better, it was affected by the cyber incident but is now back up and running.

Case manager is to be introduced, a tool that will track, manage and audit the transfer of information. This will see the removal of the need for emails and human intervention in the transfer of information which can lead to errors.

Communications manager is to be introduced to allow a two-way texting service with residents.

Real time rent account queries are to be introduced, this will allow a resident to raise a query in relation to their account and a response to be provided in real time.

Expressions of Dissatisfaction are the topic of the upcoming scrutiny review.

Connect is compliant with the Housing Ombudsman's new Complaint Handling Code, ahead of schedule; and the new Complaints policy and procedure will be available on the website soon.

The Communications team was highlighted as a real asset, increasing Connect's presence on social media and making communication to residents clearer and more regular.

#### Repairs - MA

*Gutter programme* - the last 18 months have seen a proactive approach to gutter cleaning rather than a programmed approach. Gutter cleaning requirements are identified by a combination of the Estates team feeding back information on a weekly basis and the in-house surveyor whose role it is to check gutters for any damage.

Query - will there be a gutter programme next year - MK

MA responded that gutter issues are being addressed on a daily reactive basis, there will not be a programme as Connect will be focusing on doing work as and when it is required.

Query - if there are roof remedial works required will these be addressed whilst gutter work is being carried out - MK

MA explained that a leak in a roof would be considered a reactive repair, not planned maintenance work. MA agreed to follow up on the specific issue raised with MK and JT outside of the meeting - **(ACTION 6)**.

*Increased performance in non-emergency repairs* - this had been discussed under an earlier agenda item. In addition, the Repairs team are now on top of the backlog created due to Covid. Whilst performance has improved, the existing target of non-emergency repairs being completed within 15 working days is unrealistic.

*First time fix* - performance improved but still below target. Availability of materials, and performance of suppliers is as important as cost.

Query - do the Repairs team have enough technicians - EC

MB responded – it's not a simple yes/no answer. We do have enough resources to deliver the work, but high turnover is impacting us as the private market is currently paying higher rates and therefore attracting technicians away from Connect.

#### Landlord / Estate Services - MA

*Ensuring residents fully understand what they are paying for regarding communal services –* addressed by bringing the estates team in-house and the ability for Connect colleagues to work flexibly i.e., start and finish times to reflect weather conditions. We are moving away from specifying when we will visit, focusing instead on outcomes which is making sure that estates look nice and well-maintained. Communal notice boards will be updated and Connect will be held to account in this via performance against the Connect Commitments.

*Listen to and feed back to residents when they tell Connect that the scheduled works may not be happening –* Connect colleagues who manage this service are now visible and regularly on site. Alongside this informal feedback mechanism, co-production methods are being used, for example at Newall Close allotments. The in-house service means we can listen and respond to residents' feedback more effectively than was possible with contractors.

*SIF feel that Connect need to focus on what the issues are and implement an action plan that gives greater transparency to residents paying service charges -* Connect has addressed the work required due to missed visits from contractors in the handover period to the in-house and has also refunded residents who have been charged for a service they didn't receive. Final letters were distributed to residents this week.

#### Tenant Scrutiny - LS

The new Scrutiny Panel has now met, there are some new faces and four existing panel members. The first session looked at the topic, Expressions of Dissatisfaction (EODs), and RB attended to provide information on EODs and complaints.

Next steps are for the panel to meet again to finalise the scope, which will then inform the project plan.

#### Post-COVID plans - LH and RB

##### *LH from staff perspective*

Post Covid, Connect like many employers, is working through the best model to deliver a great service to customers as well as provide a productive working environment and positive work life balance for colleagues.

Connect value collaborative working so there will not be a move to fully remote working, it is most likely that a 'hybrid' model will be adopted. Technology is now in place to support this with hybrid meetings are now successfully taking place.

##### *RB from customer perspective*

3 key elements are involved in any decision around 'ways of working' - communicating, collaborating, and performance. Research shows people are more productive working from home, but that work takes place in isolation so collaborative thinking suffers. For the Housing Liaison Officers remote working has presented some challenges but new technology means they can work more effectively in a hybrid way.

Resident comment - some organisations are trialling two weeks at home and two weeks in the office approach, which is working well - JT

LH responded that Connect is adopting an approach that trusts teams to adopt the working approach that works best for the service and the team. Connect is a very diverse organisation, so one size will not fit all. We are looking at events to bring people into the office, for example 'Catch up Connect' and a recent Macmillan Coffee Morning.

### **11. Any other business**

JT gave an update on a recent "meet the Regulator" event. Residents and staff from several social landlords were in attendance.

Topics included Tenant Satisfaction Measures, a tenant survey carried out by the regulator that included communication and repairs. There was discussion around themes such as transparency and accountability. It was a good information gathering/sharing day and will help with thinking about how we can improve things at Connect.

OJ asked residents to keep an eye out for other similar events. OJ will follow up with event organisers for some feedback. **(ACTION 7)**.

### **12. Date of next meeting**

Action Planning SIF, 14 March 2023

LS will be in touch with resident SIF members to clarify their preference of in-person or online for the next meeting. **(ACTION 8)**.