



## CUSTOMERS AND COMMUNITIES COMMITTEE

11 September 2014

### PRESENT:

#### Directors

Robert Buckley (Chair)  
Joanne Carr  
Pauline Dillon  
Eileen Gill  
John Hamilton

#### Advisers

Neil Bouch	Director of Customers and Communities
Kevin Johnson	Head of Customer Services
Julie McCartney	Head of Neighbourhood Services
Deborah Ewart	Housing Services Manager
Louise Taylor	Involvement and Diversity Manager
Teresa Smare	Neighbourhood Services Manager
Craig Gandy	Neighbourhood Services Manager
Jonathan Graham	Rent and Income Manager
Stuart Gibson	Governance and Risk Officer

#### Also Present: -

David Hewitson	Chair, TALISMAN
Steve Carr	TALISMAN
Margaret Gale	TALISMAN
Elizabeth Bird	TALISMAN
Carole Cutter	TALISMAN
Clare Butterfield	Mentor, TALISMAN

#### Apologies

Sheila Bouitieh  
Kathryn Ferdinand  
Gordon Spring

### 11 MINUTES

The minutes of the last meeting of the committee held on 8 May 2014 were approved as a correct record.

### 12 TALISMAN – REVIEW OF VOIDS

The committee was informed of the outcome of the review by TALISMAN of how the Company manages voids, particularly in respect of the knock on effect of the under-occupation rules.

TALISMAN conducted this review in eight months and used all resources available to ensure sound and accurate evidence was collected.

Overall, the review has highlighted 7 areas of positive practice covering both TGHC and Mears involvement in this work.

There have also been 23 recommendations which if implemented could result in improved asset management, potential cost savings and a better service to tenants.

The committee expressed its concern that the review would have been completed sooner if there hadn't been delays in receiving the presentations from TGHC and Mears Officers and also delays visiting void properties when work carried out was completed. It was agreed that processes would be put in place to ensure these types of delays did not occur in future reviews.

- RESOLVED – (i) That the outcome of the review by TALISMAN of how the Company manages voids be noted.
- (ii) That a formal response to TALISMAN's recommendations be requested from the Voids Service Area to be presented to the next committee and subsequently to report this response and action plan to TALISMAN.

### **13 VEXATIOUS CONTACT GUIDE**

In May 2014, the Board received a report outlining the findings of the review of Complaints and Compliments within the Company. At this meeting, the Board approved a revised policy for complaints and compliments and associated recommendations. This included a recommendation to introduce an approach to vexatious contact.

The Local Government Ombudsman provides guidance on managing unreasonable complainant behaviour or unreasonably persistent behaviour. It is now regarded as commonplace to have a procedure or guidance of this nature in place.

A Vexatious Contacts Guide was submitted. This covers all contact which could be considered vexatious, rather than being restricted solely to complaints.

The procedure ensures that the Company will apply this in a fair and consistent way through involving the service manager, Head of Service and the complaints officer in this process. This will help to identify the most appropriate action to take such as introducing a single point or method of contact.

The customer would be notified by the complaints officer of the Company's intention to apply this procedure and the reasons why.

Service managers have identified potential cases to be considered as vexatious contacts and these will be discussed in further detail before making any decisions about applying the procedure.

- RESOLVED – (i) That the Board be recommended to approve the Vexatious Contact Guide attached at the Appendix to these minutes and an update by provided through a future Complaints and Compliments Update report.
- (ii) That the guidance be rolled out to all employees.
- (iii) That summary information on vexatious contacts be provided through the six monthly update on complaints and compliments presented to this committee.

#### **14 TALISMAN – PROGRESS REPORT**

The committee received an update on progress against actions identified in TALISMAN reviews completed to date and a general progress update.

At its meeting in February 2014, the committee was informed that most of the actions following the review of anti-social behaviour had already been completed and an update was provided of three actions that were still outstanding. Progress made since the last update in February was reported.

A further updated action plan following the review of rent and income was submitted and most of these actions are now complete.

The committee also received a general update around the current membership, training/events attended and an invitation to facilitate one of the workshops to showcase its review of voids at the fourth Annual Conference which is taking place in November 2014 at York Racecourse.

RESOLVED – That the information be noted.

#### **15 CUSTOMER INVOLVEMENT ACTIVITY – UPDATE**

The committee received an update on customer involvement activity for the first quarter of 2014/15.

During the period, 66 involvement activities took place. Customers have been involved in activities on over 2,862 occasions, however some may have been involved in more than one event.

There have been a number of outcomes from customer involvement during the period and details of these were reported.

Details of Gateshead Volunteers' Month in June 2014, work in partnership with Newcastle Eagles across primary schools in Gateshead to deliver the Hoops for Health initiative, performance against service standards, involvement database, external recognition, Mears involvement activity and activities planned for the second quarter of 2014/15 were reported.

RESOLVED – That the information be noted.

## **16 ANTI-SOCIAL BEHAVIOUR PARTNERSHIP UPDATE – APRIL TO JUNE 2014**

The committee received a quarterly update on the following anti-social behaviour partnership work, areas of development and neighbourhood activity:

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- Domestic abuse/violence
- Hate incidents/crimes
- Mental health Link Worker
- Families Gateshead
- Non Attendance Panel
- Victim Support
- Safeguarding Adults/Children
- Social Landlords and Crime and Nuisance Group
- ASB, Crime and Policing Bill

RESOLVED – That the information be noted.

## **17 TENANCY MANAGEMENT ACTIVITY – 2013/14**

The committee received an update on the following tenancy management activity in 2013/14: -

- HomeViews
- New tenancies
- Home Welcome Visits
- Tenancy changes
- Mutual exchanges
- Tenancy terminations
- Temporary rehousing
- Redevelopment areas
- Abandoned properties
- Home improvement requests

The committee also received details of key service improvements planned for 2014/15.

RESOLVED – That the information be noted.

## **18 ESTATE MANAGEMENT ACTIVITY – 2013/14**

The committee received an update on the following estate management activity in 2013/14: -

- Estate tours and grading
- External Estate Tour Peer Review
- Neighbourhood Pride
- Designing Out Crime
- Grounds Maintenance
- Pest Control
- Street Action and Enforcement
- Garden management

- Garden Scheme

The committee also received details of key service improvements planned for 2014/15.

RESOLVED – That the information be noted.

## **19 SHELTERED HOUSING SERVICE – ANNUAL UPDATE 2013/14**

The committee received an update on activity, performance and customer satisfaction for the Sheltered Housing Service for 2013/14.

In particular, estate tours, drop-ins, Home welcome visits, Neighbourhood Pride, improving the quality and choice of housing, investment works, Digital Inclusion and customer involvement were reported.

RESOLVED – That the information be noted.

## **20 REPAIR REPORTING SERVICE – UPDATE**

The committee received an update on the outcome of a number of changes in relation to repair reporting that were implemented in late 2013.

The overall objective of the changes was to improve access to repair reporting and to reduce queue times. There have been some promising results since the changes were implemented, details of which were reported.

The Advice Assistants dealing with repair queries aim to resolve issues before they escalate to a formal complaint. This approach is showing positive results. Formal complaints relating to repairs have reduced significantly since the changes were implemented.

The switch to the new opening hours has been very successful with no complaints received about the changes implemented.

The lettings team were identified as the most natural team to offer additional support, as they already used the same telephony system and were able to be located next to the repair reporting team when we moved to our current office in the civic centre. Repairs training for all the Lettings Clericals is now complete and they are able to provide repair reporting cover if required.

There is still work to be done to encourage more tenants to use the online repair reporting tool.

The service receives approximately 100 texts/emails per day from customers in relation to repairs and there is scope to develop this access method further.

RESOLVED – That the information be noted.

## **21 LETTINGS REPORT 2013/14**

The committee received details of lettings activity in 2013/14.

At the start of April 2013 there were 9,671 applicants on the Tyne and Wear Housing Register that had requested assessment for housing in Gateshead (out of 32,052 applicants across the whole scheme). By the end of March 2014, this had increased to 12,778 applicants requesting Gateshead (out of 38,319 on the whole scheme).

1,746 properties were let to applicants on the Housing Register in 2013/14, compared to 1,451 in 2012/13.

Whilst numbers of new applications remains high, the increase in refusals has resulted in properties becoming more difficult to let. In general applicants are getting housed with less waiting time and lower priorities, and more properties have to be re-advertised. This trend of increased numbers of refusals has been mirrored by the other Tyne and Wear authorities.

165 mutual exchanges took place in 2013/14, which was an increase from 140 the previous year.

RESOLVED – That the information be noted and the report also be submitted to the next Board Meeting for information.

## **22 RENT ARREARS MONITORING 2013/14**

The committee received an update on rent arrears monitoring for the 2013/14 and details of the Company's approach to rent arrears prevention. In particular, information was provided around the following: -

- Current rent arrears
- Under 25's
- Former tenant arrears
- Welfare Reform
- Under occupation
- Discretionary Housing Payment
- Universal Credit
- Advice and Support Officers
- Energy Angels

RESOLVED – That the information be noted and the report also be submitted to the next Board Meeting for information.

## **23 FORWARD PLAN**

A forward plan of reports that will be presented to meetings of this committee during the next year was submitted.

RESOLVED – That the forward plan be noted.

## **24 DATE AND TIME OF NEXT MEETING**

The next meeting of the committee will be held on Thursday, 6 November 2014 at 10am in Room S21 at Gateshead Civic Centre, Regent Street, Gateshead.