



Swindon Tenants Voice

Notes of Meeting held on
Tuesday 20th January 2009, 6 pm
Committee Room 6, Civic Offices

Chair – Nat Lannin
Notes – Wendy Welch

Present:

Swindon Tenants Voice (STV):

Peter Armstrong, William Dickens, Frank Gething, Margaret Hudson, Shirley Jones, Ruth Kiddle, Phil Lango, Nat Lannin, Jason Lee, Peggy May, Gene Nygaard, Percy Ruck, Vasanti Thakrar, Wendy Welch, Sue Wood

Councillors:

Cllr Mavis Childs, Cllr Bill Morton

Housing:

Paul Wilkins, Ian Burbidge, Mike Ash, Chris Franks, Gerry O'Connor

Observers:

Gillian Butterill, Pat Fisher, Sue McCabe, Martin Wicks

Apologies:

Bernie Brannan, Cllr David Renard, Pete Holohan, Georgina Rapson, Carolanne Bond, Paul Burgess, Norris Kiddle, Shelley Slater, Derek Fry, Sandys Powell, Florance Tindall, Thelma Rees, Jimmy Day, Sue Harrington, Derek Dowdeswell

1. **Welcome and Apologies – Nat Lannin**

Nat welcomed everyone to the meeting and thanked all the new members and observers for attending. Everyone introduced themselves. Apologies were given and Wendy advised members that Paul Burgess was in hospital - everyone sent their best wishes to him.

2. **Minutes & Matters Arising from meeting on 15th November 2008 – Wendy Welch**

Wendy asked if anyone had any matters to discuss regarding the previous minutes. Cllr Mavis Childs asked how many tenants attended the 'STEAM' event – Paul Wilkins advised that this would be discussed later in the meeting. Members requested that the minutes were printed on a lighter coloured paper, as they were difficult to read. Amendment to the last minutes - Cllr Bill Morton's apologies to be added.

3. **Feedback from Rent Setting Consultation – Ian Burbidge**

Ian distributed a handout along with his presentation and went on to explain the rent setting process, which is calculated using a Government formula. The average rent increase will be 6.24%, and average increase in service charges will be 5.5%.

Ian also explained that Council and Housing Association rents are being brought together in line with Government policy - by 2019 most properties will be in line with Housing Association rents. (the Government's target date for convergence may, however, change)

Ian discussed the service charges with members. He explained that service charges differ not only between tenants and leaseholders but also amongst tenants according to properties and the amenities the service charge covers (*i.e. the service charges are higher in supported and sheltered housing as these can include utilities charges*).

Members were asked if anyone would be interested in joining a working group to look at service charges. Members interested were Gene Nygaard, Peter Armstrong, Vasanti Thakrar, Jason Lee, Sue Wood, Peggy May and William Dickens - **ACTION – Paul Wilkins/Ian Burbidge.**

Ian discussed the amendment to the assisted garden charge. This is a service to cut the grass and hedges within the gardens of vulnerable tenants with disabilities or elderly tenants needing help to maintain their gardens to a reasonable standard as indicated in their tenancy. This had been a free service but this will now carry a nominal charge of £1 per week. This is not a mandatory service and tenants choose for this to be carried out – approximately 900 tenants currently use this service.

A question was raised by a member asking why the charge was the same for everyone using the service when there are different sized gardens and hedges. Ian explained that the charge is calculated on an average, as it would not be viable to measure individual gardens and set personal rates. He also pointed out that the £1 charge per week for each service was only towards the cost of the service and not to cover the whole cost. Ian informed members that this charge was not benefitable and would be paid by the tenant regardless of how their rent is paid.

Cllr Mavis Childs clarified to members that the Housing Revenue Account, from rental income, is ring fenced and cannot be used for anything else. The General Fund is income from Council Tax and is used for police, ambulance services, highways etc.

Several members then brought up the cost for Neighbourhood Wardens and that the tenants of low level flats pay more than tenants in houses, and tenants of multi storey flats pay even more. New members asked for an evaluation of the role of the Neighbourhood Warden. Pete Holohan – to be invited to attend the next meeting to explain – **ACTION - STV Officers**

Ian concluded his presentation by inviting anyone who had any further queries regarding rent setting to please contact him on 01793 464384.

4. STV Officers Report – Nat Lannin

Cllr Mavis Childs reiterated that she felt there was still a need to make more tenants and leaseholders aware of the implications and options in the Options Appraisal. She explained that during the last Options Appraisal local meetings were held to discuss with residents what the purpose and proposed options were. Paul Wilkins explained that this would be happening and that, once the programme had been agreed, tenants and leaseholders would be informed.

5. Feedback from Housing Property Forum – Peter Armstrong

Peter gave an overview of the Housing Property Forum. He explained that the group consisted of Housing officers along with members of TASH and STV. Contractors were also invited to attend meetings.

The purpose of the forum is to discuss and agree repair and maintenance budgets and prioritise work required with the funds available, and to consider ways of improving service delivery. Bids from tenants for the Environment Improvement Programme are also assessed by the forum - this programme allows tenants to request improvements to their local environment, that would make the area they live in a nicer and more environmentally friendly place to be. All bids are discussed and decided by members of the forum. The budget for 2009/2010 will be £60,000.

As well as the above there are also working groups of members from the forum who also deal with the roofing contract (2008/2012) and the ongoing kitchen replacement programme. These groups work on many things such as training and evaluation, tender interviews and any other issues from contractors.

6. Housing Improvement Programme – Gerry O'Connor

Gerry O'Connor went through details of the proposed Capital Programme of Work for 2009 - 2010, a copy of which had previously been sent out with the agenda. An explanation was given on 'Decent Homes' and the 'Swindon Standard'.

Major investment is planned on the top 5 improvements that tenants most want. These include kitchens, bathrooms, doors, heating and roof replacements.

Officers try to ensure maximum spend, year on year, by being flexible and bringing forward programmes of work, where needed.

The programme includes encapsulation works, improvements to 3-storey blocks and feasibility and survey works for major improvements to multi-storey blocks.

No decisions in regard to these major works are likely to be decided in the next 12 months. Obviously there is also a need for leaseholders as well as tenants to be involved in the decision making process.

Gene asked if lifts, cars and mechanisms were being replaced in the high rise blocks at Seagry Court – **ACTION - Gerry to follow up and feedback to Housing Property Forum.**

Cllr Mavis Childs asked if priority was given to void properties on the Replacement Kitchen Programme? Gerry advised that this was not the case and each void is assessed individually and if there is a viable repair on the kitchen then this will be done and a new kitchen will not be put in when the property is void. Cllr Childs also asked as to the progress on the Central Heating Replacement Programme, taking any mould or condensation into account. Gerry stated that any properties needing central heating are included on the annual programme.

A member suggested that if a kitchen was replaced in a void property then would it not be cost effective to replace the kitchens due to be replaced in the local vicinity to the void whilst tradesmen are in the area? **ACTION - Gerry to raise at Housing Property Forum and feedback.**

7. Housing Participation Budget – Paul Wilkins

Paul advised that the budget for next year had not yet been set but may be reduced by approximately £15,000.

Paul said that he had received a disappointing number of replies concerning the proposed training by Alison Cross-Jones, this included meeting skills, positive involvement and team building.

ACTION – Paul Wilkins to report back with proposed dates to interested members.

The annual membership of TPAS (*Tenant Participation Advisory Service*) is due for renewal. Paul explained to new members and observers what TPAS offered, such as help, advice and training opportunities, as well as the benefits of having the membership and the costs involved. A vote to renew membership was proposed and seconded and the vote of agreement to renew membership was carried.

8. Christmas Meal – Wendy Welch

Wendy thanked everyone who was able to attend the Christmas event. Generally members expressed they had enjoyed the evening although there were a few reservations with the chosen venue, including restricted room around the table and some of the cooking quality. Wendy explained that these comments had been noted and that hopefully the arrangements for the Christmas Meal in 2009 can be made earlier so more choice of venue and menus will be available.

9. Housing Options Appraisal Update – Mike Ash

Mike gave a brief overview of the Options Appraisal. He explained that reports had been carried out forecasting the changing costs of maintaining the Decent Homes Standard over the next 30 years. The previous Options Appraisal was carried out 5 years ago and we were able at that time to reach the Decent Homes Standard two years early.

With the current Options Appraisal, using the independent reports that Rand and Tribal provided, DWA (our independent tenant advisor) have confirmed that there are specific concerns regarding the future management of the housing stock. Due to withdrawal of 'gap funding' by the Government, the option of an ALMO (Arms Length Management Organisation) was not deemed viable.

Tribal had concluded that the only way we can deliver the investment needed to keep all our homes at the required standard is to transfer all Council housing to a Housing Association.

To retain the stock as it is now, £9 million per annum negative subsidy has to be paid back from the Council to the Government from rents received (a Housing Association would not be required to pay this), with the projected amount in 10 years time being £16 million per year.

The Housing finance system is currently under review by the government and the all-important decision of whether this sum will continue to be paid is a huge factor in determining the best option. We will have to await these results from the Government. (expected in June 2009)

The recent Options Appraisal awareness and information event held at 'STEAM' was attended by 89 people, the results of feedback forms from the event showed:

59% had some concerns about transfer of stock

30% were against transfer of stock

11% had no concerns about transfer of stock

These findings show that more information needs to be given to tenants and leaseholders about the options, and the project team are looking at holding events in local communities. The importance of tenants and leaseholders being able to give an informed view was recognised.

If the Council subsequently decided to consider stock transfer, no change could happen without a decision in favour of this by tenants. This would require a secret ballot to be carried out and Government permission.

The question was asked that if a transfer of stock did eventually happen then what would happen to people who were homeless who currently have to be helped into accommodation by Swindon Borough Council? Swindon Borough Council have a duty to provide accommodation to homeless people, this is not funded through the Housing Revenue Account but is separate, so even if a transfer of stock did happen, Swindon Borough Council would still be responsible for homeless people as they are now.

10. Any Other Business & Close – Nat Lannin

AOB – none discussed as meeting ended later than expected (8.45 pm).

Date of next meeting: Saturday, March 14th 2009

Time: 9.30 am

Venue: Committee Room 6, Civic Offices

*(with refreshments available ½ hour before the meeting
for those who have requested them)*