

## **Community Voice (CV) Meeting Minutes**

**16<sup>th</sup> October 2023**



CV Members: Tim Mills (Chair), Jill Milner (Vice-Chair), Dawn Johnson (Treasurer), Jim Newcombe, Anita James, Tracey Bain, Stewart Pearson, Judith Tomlinson, Ian Bullyment.

Ongo Staff: Karen Cowan, Steve Hepworth, Bev Miller, Wendy Wolfe, Kevin Hornsby, Matt Kelly, Andrea Morley, Neil Keay

**Apologies:** Ron Weller, Harry Jackson, John Parsons, Keith Riley, Tony Sanderson, Tracey Borrill, Alexander Buckley, Tami Reeve, Jeanette Ellis, Keith Lumbers, Ryan North

### **1. Welcome, Apologies & Housekeeping**

Tim welcomed everyone to the meeting and explained that there was no planned fire drill, and the fire exits were pointed out. He also reminded members to not raise personal issues and to use the general enquiry log if a personal issue had been raised before but no update had been received.

### **2. Minutes & Actions of Previous Meeting**

The minutes were approved as a true record; proposed and seconded by Jill and Anita. Wendy provided an update on the actions.

### **3. Treasurers Report – Dawn Johnson**

Dawn explained there are some ongoing queries with the taxi company invoices, this is being looked into. Wendy is working with the finance team on arrangements for online banking, emails will be sent out to members asking who wants to use online banking for future payments for expenses. **ACTION:** email sent to members to ask who wants to do online banking.

### **4. Board Observers – Tim Mills**

The next Board meeting is taking place on 29<sup>th</sup> November at 2.00pm, Ongo House in person or via Microsoft Teams. Three CV members can attend; names were taken at the previous meeting.

### **Discussion Items**

#### **5. Potential Merger Discussion (verbal) Steve Hepworth**

Steve provided an update to members and explained that things are progressing as expected with lots of work going on in the background with due diligence and there will be a joint working group of the boards at the end of this month. There are three parts that are being scrutinised for due diligence - Legal, Finance and Property.

The work that is going on now is mostly for documentation for both parties. For example, checking that rent increases have all been handled correctly, checking that both parties have records on their property stock, improvement programmes in place, surveys etc. Some of the work on the finance side is completed by the regulator.

If the merger goes ahead work will be carried out on producing a detailed business plan for a new organisation, managing risks etc.

The board will decide mid-December then the boards will make a decision on whether to go forward or not. Jan/Feb will be time for appointing new board and new chief executive.

There is no date yet for the involved tenants to meet from both organisations but when this is arranged there will be opportunities to discuss what needs to happen going forward.

It was asked because LHP currently have a bond rather than bank loans, will there be a vote? Steve explained that no, the bond does not have shareholding representation, it works in the same way as a bank loan but is on the stock exchange.

A member asked if there are community centres such as the Arc/Viking Centre that groups can use for meetings in the future? It was confirmed that there will be several places to meet as all the offices will remain open at Scunthorpe, Boston, Grimsby, plus the Arc and Viking Centre. A member suggested that maybe in the future a new build at a halfway point could be considered.

It would be unlikely that there would be one “Head Office” but staff and tenants could meet/work at any of the offices. Karen reminded members that the Microsoft Teams facility will continue to be offered for most meetings so logistically it won’t make a difference.

A conversation was held around the “human element”, as changes can cause lots of upset and stress to staff and people can feel very unsettled, Steve confirmed that he is trying to do all he can to avoid unnecessary anxiety by holding regular question and answer (Q&A) sessions with both staff and tenants. He will make himself available to anyone that needs a chat, or will attend team meetings etc. No member of staff will suddenly find themselves having to work at a different office although the option is there if they would like to.

The question has been asked of LHP, as they have recently been through a merger, of what they might do differently this time. They responded that it would be around “people”, they would like the process to be as painless as possible.

In the bigger picture around staff, there may be tradespeople closer to emergency jobs that can attend quicker with more people working operationally.

It was asked if the April deadline would be met. Steve stated that it was hopefully going to be April (if not then as soon as possible afterwards). This would work well as it is the

end of the financial year and would save having to open and close a new set of finances for an interim period. If it does go ahead on April 1<sup>st</sup> there would still be two separate companies running until such time that systems can be amalgamated. This would be planned in carefully for a smooth transition.

Regarding Tenant Involvement there was concern from members of the group that it would change in how it would work etc. Karen said that community voice members can influence this, but they need to make their notes in advance of the joint tenant meeting, jotting down

what matters to them, what their priorities are etc. It was noted that plain language is important, changing team names, e.g., customer services to customer experience, complaints to resolution. It was asked if, with the merger, TPAS could be approached to offer help and advice as Ongo has the TPAS exemplar award. Steve advised that it would probably be better to meet with LHPs involved tenants first before any decisions are taken on bringing in outside advice.

A member asked if the group would remain the same as Community Voice doesn't have a counterpart group. Steve explained that it's not known yet, it may be there is just one group, or it may be that there is such a group in each region and then an overarching group. The process is a merger rather than a takeover on one company's part and so this is the perfect time for both organisations to identify best practice from each other and create one great new organisation going forward.

## **6. Performance Report – Karen Cowan**

Karen noted that this report is now produced every three months and went through the figures. It was asked if the group were happy with what was being reported on, or if they wanted to see anything different such as a deep dive on a particular topic. The group were happy with the report as it stands, and changes were suggested.

## **7. Executive Update (verbal) – Kevin Hornsby**

Kevin updated the group that Ongo have been found to have had a severe maladministration from a complaints case. This is to do with a historic case of damp and mould; procedures have since been changed due to the rising cases and publicity around this topic.

However, there is still learning to be taken from the report and Ongo has been ordered to pay compensation to the tenant in question. This will potentially hit the press. Ongo are being proactive in their approach to show how this has been dealt with and to promote the learning that has already taken place.

**ACTION:** Kevin agreed to share the report with CV members. Bev to send out with the minutes.

On a positive note, Winter Community Grants funding is available for groups that can offer something for the local area during the winter period. This has a figure of £15,000 in total and groups will apply for a maximum amount to help with a specific project. It

doesn't have to be an Ongo based group, just a good cause that is doing something for the community to benefit tenants, e.g., warm spaces, food banks, winter hardships and youth clubs. A question was asked if the group had to have a constitution to be considered. Kevin agreed to share the criteria details so that CV members can promote this.

**ACTION:** Kevin to share criteria for community grants. Bev to send with minutes.

## **8. Biodiversity and open space projects – Andrea Morley**

Andrea explained this is a brand-new project so all ideas, feedback and discussion is welcome, the next few projects are going to be a learning experience for all involved and learning will be taken from each project.

Andrea is trying to build relationships with useful organisations that have more experience in this field. Ongo wants to involve CV members to gain feedback and have open communication with tenants to share what we are thinking of doing.

Everyone is aware of environmental issues, but some aren't on board with the ideas in practicality. For example, bird boxes in people's gardens may make a mess of their washing which is an inconvenience. Andrea wants to try and involve many different people in these projects from staff and colleagues to tenants and resident groups.

A member noted that it's sometimes hard for Ongo's ground control to keep up with basic services, how will Ongo cope with maintaining such spaces? Part of the initial proposal covers how Ongo would manage the upkeep of these projects. Ongo are looking into extending the current ground control contract due to the potential merger but when the tender is due for renewal it will have stipulations about the ability to maintain these spaces.

There will be a lot of work in the first 12 months for the ground to be pollinated correctly. It was asked if Ongo can involve local schools in these initiatives? Small changes i.e., bat boxes, bird boxes are still steps in the right direction.

Andrea asked members to read through the information which has been sent out and provide comments by 30<sup>th</sup> October.

**ACTION:** Bev to send an e mail reminder to ask for feedback on these before 30<sup>th</sup> October.

## **9. Customer Engagement Activity Update (verbal) Tenant reps**

RSP Evaluation Meeting – This group will be investigating damp and mould, there is a meeting on Thursday to discuss more in depth. Judith asked that names of groups are written in full as members don't always know what the group is when abbreviations are used. Tim suggested having the jargon buster available on the CV Facebook page.

**ACTION:** CE to include the jargon buster on the Facebook group.

Noise Complaints Focus Group – This group involved tenants who'd experienced issues with noise nuisance. At the meeting they felt that the process was too long and could impact and affect individuals' mental health. Also, different staff dealing with the case was unsettling. It was felt that a single person contact was necessary. There is another

focus group on this topic for those who couldn't attend and there will be a follow up meeting again after information has been collated.

New Regulator of Social Housing Consumer Standards Focus Group – Judith explained this had been a very interesting and informative session. It covered all the points in the new consumer standards which strengthens the regulators powers for sanctioning social housing landlords that compliant with the standards. In general members felt that Ongo are already working in line with the majority of the standards and in some areas are further forward than other organisations. This area of work is very important and will continue whilst the potential merger talks are ongoing.

Retirement Living Schemes Focus Groups – Ongo are now holding the follow up meetings at all 16 schemes and it has been agreed that Ongo will return annually, or if some schemes have more issues, it will be 6 months' time. Karen explained these meetings have resulted in some good outcomes and more joint working across the business, e.g., working with the neighbourhood services operatives and supervisors to find out what is important to the residents. There has been some great “you said we are doing” examples from this work, e.g., Planning specific days for tidying up larger area's and getting other departments involved, finding out what is expected of Ongo and what is in our remit.

## **10. CE Update – Wendy Wolfe**

Wendy provided an update from the report and explained some future training/awareness sessions which are due to take place.

Dawn referred to the names of some teams and the confusion this can cause for tenants, e.g., Customer Resolution team used to be complaints, and asked why change things that don't need changing and risk people not understanding. Tim referred to the changes being made to names of teams without consulting Community Voice. Karen advised that when involved tenants meet with the LHP tenants that plain English is raised as a priority.

## **11. Any Other Business**

Reflection on meeting – It was noticed that there were a few members missing at the meeting due to ill health which means there may not have been as many questions asked. In general, it was felt that the membership is good, and the group has a wide range of knowledge and take part in debates and discussions.

Tracey nominated herself to for the role as Acting Secretary and members were happy to agree this. Tracey will be invited to the next CV Officers meeting where the role and responsibilities will be explained in detail. **ACTION:** CE to send invite for next officer meeting.

A member asked about the size and location of window openers in some properties and the fact that vulnerable people sometimes don't feel safe opening them to let air into the property, (which can contribute towards damp and mould issues) due to fear of someone being able to get into their home. Are these still being fitted on new properties? **ACTION:** Neil to speak to Martin regarding windows and locking devices fitted on properties.

A member asked what happens to tenants when they have been evicted. Does Ongo still have a duty of care towards them? Matt replied saying that an eviction is always a last resort, and other measures will have been tried first. If these have failed and the eviction has to go ahead Ongo need to provide evidence to the court. Ongo have a moral duty and in some cases an officer will delay an eviction if a particularly vulnerable person was in need. However, it is the local authority's statutory duty to house people when they present themselves as homeless.

Andrea mentioned that the net zero competition is still running and for CV members to please share this and get people entering for a chance of winning. Also, that this week marks recycling week.

## 12. Action Plan

|    | Action   | Who                     | Update   |
|----|--|-------------------------|--|
| 1. | Information on recent Housing Ombudsman case to be sent out.   | Bev/Customer Engagement | Copies to be sent out with the minutes.  |
| 2. | The criteria for the winter grants to be shared. Further information is also available on the website about what funding can be used for and how to apply. | Bev/Customer Engagement | The group must be a registered charity or constituted group with their own bank account. |
| 3. | CV members to provide feedback on the biodiversity report by 30 <sup>th</sup> October.   | Bev/Customer Engagement | Email reminder to be sent.   |
| 4. | Check type of windows and locking systems for new builds and influence future specification  | Neil Key                | Update to be given at the next meeting in November.                                      |
| 5. | Invite Tracey to the next CV Officers meeting.   | Bev/Customer Engagement | Completed  |
| 6. | December Christmas Lunch, names for attending to be recorded on the attendance list.   | Bev/Customer Engagement | To be completed by the next meeting in November.   |
| 7. | Jargon Buster to be added to the CV Facebook group.  | Bev/Customer Engagement | Completed  |

**Date of Next meeting** - The next meeting will be on Tuesday 14<sup>th</sup> November at 9.30am at the Arc in person or via Teams.