



Community Voice (CV) Meeting Minutes 15th January 2024

Present:

CV Members: Tim Mills (Chair), Jill Milner (Vice-Chair), Anita James, (via teams), Stewart Pearson, Judith Tomlinson, Ian Bullyment, Kevin Yearnshire, Paul Pearson, Tami Reeve, Keith Lumbers, Tima Obo Omari (via teams) Rachel Cook (board member - via teams)
Ongo Staff: Steve Hepworth, Bev Miller, Wendy Wolfe, Jo Sugden, Hayley Sleight, Mark Perrin, Dawn Hill, Neil Keay, Hayley Fiteni.

1. Welcome, Apologies & Housekeeping

Apologies: Dawn Johnson, Tracey Bain, Matt Waddingham, Tony Sanderson, Mary Garland, Paul Smith, Sue Whitelock, Jason Ladley, Jeanette Ellis, Dawne Reed, and Ryan North.

The chair welcomed everyone to the meeting and explained that there was no planned fire drill, but 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. Brief introductions were made around the table for the benefit of Rachel Cook, Ongo's new board member.

2. Minutes & Actions of Previous Meeting

Judith noted that in the minutes of the last meeting her name was on the attendance list, and she had put her apologies in, also Ian's name was down twice. **ACTION:** Bev to amend the minutes from December. After this they were approved and seconded by Jill and Stewart. Wendy provided an update on the actions completed.

3. Treasurers Report – Wendy Wolfe

A copy of the report was provided in the paperwork and in the absence of the treasurer Wendy asked if there were any questions, none were asked.

4. Board Observers – Tim Mills

The next Board meeting is taking place on 23rd January, 2pm at Ongo House in person or via Microsoft Teams. Three CV members can attend as observers and names put forward included: Judith and Dawn.

Consultation Items

5. Rent and Service Charge Report – Mark/Dawn

Mark opened the discussion by advising that the report goes to Community Voice annually and all the details had been included with the paperwork for the meeting. The report will also be going to Board at their next meeting on 23rd January, he then asked for questions from the group.

Mark explained that the increases are in line with the rent standard set by the government and that other organisations are applying the increase.

Discussions took place on the benefit increase and rents.

A member referred to not all tenants been pensioner's and noted that a 7.7% increase seems high, which would have a massive impact on people that pay full rent as they may not have a wage increase to help cover the increase and the current cost of living/energy prices, will this result in the income collection suffering adversely?

A member asked as a responsible landlord is this percentage too high. Mark explained that Ongo's expenditure has been under real pressure over the last few years, there is an overspend by approximately two million pounds in repairs, Ongo's costs had increased by 14% and only passed on 7%. If board don't apply the full amount, then it is likely that the organisation will be asked to make cost savings elsewhere across the business, with a potential impact on services.

Steve explained that he feels the business does need an increase in the long term.

Dawn said that she totally understands the tenants' difficulties who do pay the full rent amount and that is why Ongo have invested in paying someone full time within the citizens advice bureau to help support Ongo's tenants with their income and any additional help they can get. Also, there is ongoing tenancy support that is available to Ongo's tenants.

A member asked about the purchase of the Guinness properties and the impact that would have on the rents, will those houses be facing the same increases. Steve said they will fall under the same regime, the impact on Ongo is positive long term. There is an initial short-term outlay for the purchase of the properties and staff who will TUPE over, but ultimately this project will be funded by the Guinness tenant's rental income.

It was asked for clarity on affordable rent and what this means – this is for the new build properties; this is calculated at 80% of the market rental price and is reviewed regularly. Housing Associations do have to keep these properties at relevant affordable rents otherwise the regulators would get involved.

It was asked if the changes will be made from 1st April or change as the tenancy changes, Mark advised that for existing tenants, this goes ahead in April, tenants will receive their rent notice at the end of February. Individual tenants could then challenge Ongo.

It was asked about garage rents, they have been £8 per week (for tenants) for some time now, non-tenants pay £8 plus VAT which means they are still affordable. Could Ongo market these rather than garages as storage facilities? Priorities have been letting homes and potentially garages could be looked at as storage however they are a very standard

building with no electricity, water, and no security measures in place. **ACTION:** It was agreed to look at the garage void numbers after April increase.

Members, after this discussion, were happy for the rent information to go forward to the board.

6. Communal Electricity Service Charge Report – Mark/Dawn

Mark provided some background from the report and explained that previously Ongo's electricity prices have been locked into an affordable contract compared to the rest of the market, however a new contract has recently been signed following a tender exercise led by a third-party energy consultant. Prices have now increased and are significantly higher, up to three times higher in some cases. Mark confirmed that Ongo have secured a contract to get a 2-year lock on the best rate possible running from 1 September 2023 to 31 August 2025, this has still resulted in an increase by 125% more than double but considering the current energy climate we secured the best rate possible. This does mean that people will be seeing a large increase in their bills.

Ongo are asking for CV feedback on charges for electricity in communal areas (such as hallway lights), it is proposed that Ong increase charges to fully recover the cost of electricity at the new rates but include a £2.00 cap per week on just the communal electricity. Steve explained by putting a cap at £2.00 would be better for tenants. The cap would mean that no one's increase would be more than £2.00.

A member asked if there were four flats in a block and only three were tenants and one was a leaseholder if the charge would be shared fairly and equally between them all – this is so under their service charge. Mark advised that tenants are charged their share on the assumption that the block is fully occupied, and that leaseholders would be charged the relevant share. It was noted that service users do not have control over the communal area's e.g., the tenant can choose not to have heating or lights on, but this is not the case for the communal areas. Mark noted that with no increase at all Ongo would suffer a £250k loss per year, if Ongo cap the increase then the loss is approx. £60k per year which is manageable.

Capping at £2 is very reasonable as individual increases could be as much as £6 which would then probably start to affect the tenant in a much bigger way with the rent increase as well. Hopefully after the 2-year contract, energy prices will have stabilised before we look at negotiating a new contract. Mark explained this £2 increase would not affect all, but this is the maximum amount it would increase by.

It was asked about non communal charges like grounds maintenance and estate caretaking; Mark explained that the charge is broken down across individual estates etc. which balances the cost out and in fact some of these charges will decrease this year. Ongo are committed to these services being provided on a no-profit basis.

The majority agreed to option four for the electricity charges.

Discussion Items

7. Organisational Growth – Steve

Steve provided an update about the potential merger with LHP, explaining that it wasn't voted on by both boards and members had been made aware of this, he then asked if anyone had any questions.

The chair stated that he was surprised it didn't go ahead, and another member felt it may have been LHP who saw what Ongo can do and may have been concerned about their jobs etc. which could have contributed towards the decision.

A member asked if this was likely to be looked at again in the future? Steve advised no this wouldn't be looked at as plans are being made to focus more on what Ongo does best and what improvements can be made in the future.

Steve explained about the Guinness project consultation which is now in place with their tenants and 5 members of staff who are transferring across to Ongo, this project also includes a sheltered housing scheme. Steve provided details on the location of the properties and said it is likely that for those properties further away some contractors would still be used to carry out their repairs for the foreseeable future. Ongo are looking at ways on how to get all their information onto the internal systems and making plans to welcome the tenants to Ongo.

8. Service Level Agreement – Hayley Fiteni

Hayley provided some background information to the report and draft service level agreement, explaining that Ongo wants to ensure they deliver the same level of service when using both Ongo staff or contractors.

Members felt it was a comprehensive report with some points for amendment noted:

- page 2 it was stated that a job needs to be undertaken in a reasonable amount of time and this may be out of hours and asked is this acceptable to demand this of tenants i.e. late at night/weekends. This may be to do with the new Awaab's law and Ongo needs to be covered against any issues that could lead to a potential prosecution, could this be reworded saying out of normal working hours?
ACTION: Hayley to look at this.
- To include contractors **MUST** carry ID and show this on arrival to a tenant's property. **ACTION:** Hayley to check and include this.
- Query on what KPI's are.

9. Executive Update – Steve

Steve provided the update in the absence of Kevin and explained that the operational performance continues to be good around reducing the number of empty homes and income collection levels continue to be ahead of target for this time of year.

Ongo are also looking at two potential projects in the future around the type of floor coverings used and decoration.

Testing is continuing for the new system on the Contact Centre platform upgrade, there has been a slight delay in implementation due to ensuring that over the telephone payment processes are set up with our contractor. This is important to ensure we can take tenant payments over the phone securely. Once this has been completed, we will

be testing this service to ensure it works seamlessly for our tenants and colleagues. Once we are happy with this system operating correctly, we will ask the customer engagement team to set up a small testing session with volunteers.

The Complaint handling code self-assessment that the tenant complaint panel were consulted on and helped to influence is going to Board for final sign off on January 23rd. We are also still awaiting the housing Ombudsman response on the new proposed code and the consultation. This will be shared with the tenant complaint panel and CV members when received.

A brief update was given on the Housing Ombudsman determinations and to advise that Ongo have had another determination recently and continue to get Housing Ombudsman contact. Two cases are at the review stage and awaiting decisions on another two. There are another two new potential cases that are being looked at. It is important to keep in mind that these are not recent cases as the Housing Ombudsman can take some time in reaching decisions.

It was asked if the onus could ever be put back on to the tenant's lifestyle choices for damp and mould issues if Ongo can prove they have done all they can to rectify the problems. As it stands now it would just be done to Ongo to revisit a property and keep cleaning the mould and trying to educate the tenants in their habits. The new Awaab's law states that housing associations need to prove that they make 3 attempts at gaining access in instances of damp and mould queries.

Wendy confirmed that a meeting is taking place with members to discuss the consultation on the Awaabs law.

As per the update at the last meeting we hope to launch the app Housing Perks in the coming weeks and just work through the logistics of loading tenancy references into the new system. This app will allow discounts ranging from 5-15% on everyday items.

10. Community Voice digital Group – Wendy/Hayley

Wendy ran through the new idea for introducing a digital group that would link to CV, explaining this was a new idea which Hayley had worked on with the aim to engage with tenants from different geographical locations.

Hayley explained that tenants who may have other commitments may not be able to attend day meetings but still want to have an input. Hayley has produced information in relation to overcoming some barriers and solutions for these which was provided with the meeting paperwork (appendix 1). This will be put in place as a trial with a small group of six people that will be asked to provide feedback from the same consultation agenda items that are brought to community voice. Their feedback would be included in reports and fed back into CV at the meetings.

To help new members who join this group understand what they need to consider when providing feedback from policies and other consultation documents they will be provided with a "crib sheet" as they will not naturally learn and evolve through attending the meetings face to face to help them in their decision making.

Hayley pointed out that the regulators often talk about “finding our silence” and this will go part way towards giving this group a voice to be heard.

A member asked if this group would get a vote on items, Wendy explained this wouldn't happen during the trial period and the group are to function as a link to the existing membership of CV. This could be looked at again in the future, these new opinions from a different demographic could potentially change CV members views around the table.

Members felt this was a positive way forward.

Information Items

11. Customer Engagement Activity Update Verbal – tenant reps

Publications panel – the latest Key New edition went out in December, sent out digitally to 7453 tenants. There has been no feedback yet from this edition and the panel are looking forward to working with the new printing suppliers for some fresh and innovative ideas and designs.

Scrutiny Panel – held a meeting and discussed the draft recommendations on the damp and mould project. Their next meeting will focus on agreeing the final recommendations and their first draft report.

Tenant Inspectors – at their last meeting, the group went through the new schedule for inspections for 2024 and discussed the inspections conducted during November/December.

12. Customer Engagement Update – Wendy

Wendy discussed the main points from the information provided in the report which was sent out prior to the meeting.

Wendy advised that annual impact assessments are currently taking place for all the customer engagement groups to help us monitor how effective groups are running and what improvements are required. From each meeting action plans will be produced to help work with the groups during 2024 and influence improvements. The impact assessment for CV group will take place at their away day and included on the agenda at that session.

The Customer Engagement officers are planning Tech support session which will be held at the Arc and Ongo house, to help people use their own devices and sign up to MyHome.

13. Any Other Business

Reflection on meeting: It was agreed that members at the meeting had been kept well informed with some useful debates and able to challenge staff if needed.

The chair explained that in August it will be the AGM for CV and he reminded members who may be interested in nominating themselves for one of the officer positions to please let them know, they can then share information on the roles and training can be given.

Wendy said that the Community Voice have two away days per year, usually in April and November held at a different venue with a more informal structure for the day. If there is a particular agenda item that needs more time to be spent on, the away days can cover that. We could look at attending the role of the officers at the next away day, along with completing the Impact Assessment.

Also, if people are interested in attending seminars or training there is information on the TPAS website that may be of interest, there is a link to Tpas on the CV Facebook page.

14. Action Plan

	Action	Who	Update
1.	Amend December minutes to include the correct attendance information	Bev/Customer Engagement	Completed
2.	Check Garage void figures after April	Kevin Hornsby / Jane Crookes	Information to be provided at a future meeting.
3.	Check and amend the wording in the service level agreement for: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Repairs that must be completed within a certain timescale. • Contractors must carry and show ID 	Hayley Fiteni	

15. Date of Next meeting - The next meeting will be on Tuesday 13th February at 1.30am at the Arc in person or via Teams.