



## **Community Voice (CV) Meeting Minutes 13<sup>th</sup> February 2024**

### **Present:**

**CV Members:** Tim Mills (Chair), Jill Milner (Vice-Chair), Dawn Johnson (Treasurer), Jim Newcombe, Tony Sanderson, Jeanette Ellis, Anita James, Judith Tomlinson, Keith Lumbers, Kevin Yearnshire, Tami Reeve, Ron Weller, Paul Smith, Sue Whitelock, Tracey Bain (Teams), Eddie Stringer (observer)

**Ongo Staff:** Steve Hepworth (Teams), Kevin Hornsby (Teams), Jo Sugden (Teams), Neil Keay, Wendy Wolfe, Becky Johns, Ollie Mortimer

**Apologies:** Matthew Waddingham, Paul Pearson, Ryan North, Harry Jackson, Ian Bullement, Dawne Reed, Christine Osimbo, Stewart Pearson, Tima Omari, David Chapman (observer), Karen Cowan, Bev Miller, Rachel Cook

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

The chair welcomed everyone to the meeting and brief introductions were given. It was explained that there was no planned fire drill, but the fire exits were pointed out. He also reminded members to not bring up personal issues and to raise their hand if they have a point or question to raise during the meeting.

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

These were approved by Keith and seconded by Jim. Wendy then provided an update on the actions:

- The December minutes had been amended to include the correct attendance information
- Garage void figures after April will be provided at a future meeting
- The wording in the service level agreement (SLA) relating to repairs that must be completed within a certain timescale has been amended, with reference included to the Maintenance Policy. Contractors showing ID cards had been included within the Contractors Code of Conduct which is referred to in the SLA

### **3. Treasurers report - Dawn**

A copy of the report was provided in the paperwork, no questions were raised.

From April, members will be able to get their CV mileage expenses paid through bank transfer if they wish. Wendy explained that Dawn would need those members' bank details which would be stored privately.

Wendy added that, due to issues with the taxi company One to One, another company Fast Cabs will now be used for future taxi bookings. Members were encouraged to follow the same process of contacting Dawn if they require transport to future meetings. By law the taxi should take the shortest route to the venue so, if members experience that is not the case, then contact Customer Engagement who can investigate it further.

#### **4. Board Observers - Tim**

The next Board meeting is taking place on 26<sup>th</sup> March, 2pm at Ongo House in person or via Microsoft Teams. Three CV members can attend as observers, contact Customer Engagement if interested.

### **Decision Items**

#### **5. Reasonable Adjustments for Customers Policy – Becky Johns**

The proposed policy and a covering report had been included in the paperwork. Becky explained that the new Housing Ombudsman Complaint Handling Code takes effect from 1 April. It includes a requirement for a registered provider to have a Reasonable Adjustment Policy.

The policy details how Ongo will make reasonable adjustments to services and improve accessibility for those with specific requirements and protected characteristics. It is not a 'one size fits all' approach and each request will be assessed. Tenants will be able to request reasonable adjustments, and all Ongo customer-facing staff will be provided with bespoke training and will be asked to identify when adjustments are needed for individuals.

All reasonable adjustments will be recorded on Ongo's internal system and will be kept up to date. This will help to improve colleagues' knowledge of tenants, their requirements, and any vulnerabilities. Disabilities can be temporary or permanent, which means all tenants will continue to be encouraged to update their details with Ongo, so they have up to date information recorded.

One member felt that the policy was inclusive and allows flexibility depending on the circumstance.

Another member asked for clarification on section 4.7 in the policy and what is defined as 'reasonable.' Becky explained that the word is not definitive and may mean different things to different people. The policy is not saying, for example, that Ongo will not make a reasonable adjustment if it is short-staffed. If an adjustment is required, then every effort will be made to accommodate it.

All members in attendance approved the policy.

### **Discussion Items**

#### **6. Guinness update – Steve Hepworth**

There are around 845 properties that are due to transfer from Guinness Partnership to Ongo, though the amount is changing due to the fact Guinness may sell any empty property

on the open market if they wish. The date of transfer has been confirmed as Monday 11 March and everything is progressing well so far.

Steve explained that one of the main challenges is repairs. There are vacancies being advertised for extra tradespeople to make sure Ongo have enough resources to deal with the additional properties and increase in the demand for repairs. Some of the positions are being specifically targeted for in and around the Grimsby area to save travelling and, for the properties in the East Midlands area, local contractors will be sourced for efficiency.

A welcome pack for the new tenants is currently being worked on so they know more about Ongo, its services and opportunities available to them. Four Guinness staff will also transfer across and two are Housing Management colleagues, one who works at a retirement scheme and one who is a tradesperson.

A member asked if Ongo will be responsible for repairs to the properties before the transfer date. Steve explained there will be a cut-off time of a week before where Guinness will stop taking repairs unless they are an emergency.

A question was also raised about promoting customer engagement opportunities to the new tenants. Wendy answered that planning meetings are being held with the Tenancy Services Manager and PR Manager about the follow-up work after the welcome packs have gone out. Around two months afterwards, there will be various forms of engagement which will include door-knocks, drop-in sessions and written communication depending on how many properties are in each area.

Another member enquired if the qualifications of tradespeople are checked. Neil said that it is one part of the interview process to ensure that they have the relevant qualifications.

## **7. Repairs group meetings – Steve**

A strategic level repairs action group has been set up which includes Ongo senior managers, manager of repairs and other services. It was set up due to several external factors (Housing Ombudsman orders and audit reports with recommendations) plus internal reasons stemming from action plans for repairs.

Ongo were in a situation leading up to Christmas where repair appointment slots and repair resources were stretched, e.g. they only had two electricians at one point rather than four. The general demand for repairs has increased, especially work on damp & mould. It had been hoped that the increased demand last year was temporary and that it would return to previous levels, but this isn't proving to be the case.

The group is looking at the whole repairs process, from a repair first being reported to the work being completed, and how improvements can be made so tenants are receiving as good a service as they should expect in a suitable timeframe. There are system issues, including contractors using different systems to Ongo and Ongo's systems needing to be up to date and able to handle all the data. There are also several action plans, both internal and external, that mention similar issues for repairs, so they are being streamlined to avoid any confusion as to priorities.

Performance targets are being reviewed and, at the group's previous meeting, they looked at emergency repairs. 84% of emergency repairs were completed within 24 hours but, when exploring why, it became evident that changes need to be made. If an emergency repair is reported such as a broken door or window making the property insecure, then the job needs to be split so that making the property safe (e.g. boarding up the window) is prioritised within 24 hours and then to carry out the remaining work (e.g. replacing the window) as quickly as possible. Targets need to be set that can be realistically achieved.

Ongo has employed additional colleagues in repairs and contractors. Other factors are also being investigated. These include if some repairs should be rechargeable, if some should be sent to a different trade, how many jobs each tradesperson is doing each day and efficiency, e.g. travel time to jobs, if the right parts are being taken in the vans and if the supplier isn't replenishing stock quickly enough.

The group meets every fortnight, any changes to policies will be discussed with the Property Services Panel (PSP) and brought for decision to CV.

A member asked if we have the relevant information on how many colleagues and contractors, we have available for out-of-hour (OOH) appointments. Steve said that there are a certain number, and if there are a lot of OOH calls then it would still fall under the 24-hour priority the next morning when more colleagues are working. This is being investigated.

A discussion took place around strip lighting and tenants' own responsibility to replace lightbulbs. Strip lights are efficient and give a lot of light across the kitchen. Currently, if a tenant is vulnerable and unable to change the light themselves or if they don't have anybody else who can do it, then a tradesperson would be sent out. This is also being investigated for if Ongo needs a handyman service, if there needs to be a small charge and if the light fittings should be changed.

Further updates will be provided at future meetings.

## **8. Key Performance and Satisfaction results – Kevin Hornsby**

A detailed report and the performance information covering April – December 2023 had been sent to members. The figures are from a mixture of transactional surveys and the new tenant satisfaction measures that Ongo is required to report against.

Wendy explained there had been a change in reporting performance information to CV members. A full performance report will continue to be delivered to meetings every three months, but in between on a monthly basis a snapshot of the key areas of performance will be presented by Karen.

In the absence of Karen, Kevin went through the performance information. 176 complaints were received in the period, which was less than at the same time the previous year. There were fewer stage 1 complaints but more at stage 2.

A healthy representation of younger voices continues to be engaged – just over 9%. 53% of tenants were satisfied that Ongo listens to tenants' views and acts upon them, a figure that is leading to improvement work being put in place.

Call volumes remain high, but the new contact center system goes live on Thursday 15 February, which is hoped will reduce the volume.

Improvements continue in terms of the number of empty homes and the time it takes to relet properties. Finally, income management is also progressing well and continues to be sector-leading in terms of sustainability and arrears.

Following a query, Kevin added that a lot of work continues around the sustainment fund and supporting tenants. Ongo are trying to adopt a proactive and tailored approach based on individual's circumstances.

The Housing Perks app, which tenants can use to save money at certain stores, is due to be promoted once it has gone through the relevant checks.

A member explained about a household support fund which can be applied for directly through Citizens Advice. This will be shared and promoted.

**ACTION:** Link to be sent and promoted to tenants.

A member mentioned discounts available for utility bills. Kevin said that the team and colleagues are skilled in understanding where funding is available and what additional income tenants may be entitled to. It is important to promote this regularly and through every communication method possible.

A query was raised on section 4.8.4 in the report about the increase in former tenant arrears, and why this had increased. Kevin will find out and report back.

**ACTION:** Find out information about the reasons for the increase in former tenant arrears.

It was noted that the key hadn't been included at the bottom of the document which provides an explanation as to what the symbols mean. This is included in the full performance information and will be added to the shorter reports in the future.

**ACTION:** Explanatory key to be added to performance information.

## **9. Executive Update – Kevin**

Ongo has been reassessed by the regulator as Governance level 1 and Viability level 1 (G1 and V1) which shows the strong approach to governance and financial strength.

Kevin explained what this means, and that the governance rating is independently assessed against the governance standard, and there are different levels with G1 being the highest rating. It demonstrates the way that Ongo governs, and report various things is really good.

V1 relates to financial viability and looks at Ongo's business plan, finances, assets, how they spend money and Value for Money (VfM) amongst other matters. Many organisations are rated V2 due to stretched business plans and other reasons such as interest rates, cost of material and rent increases. A V1 rating shows that Ongo are in a healthy position, and it also helps with funding and borrowing.

Following CV's recommendations at the last meeting regarding rent increase, garage rents and service charge increases, Ongo's Board agreed to apply the government decision of Consumer Price Index (CPI) value (as of September at 6.7%) + 1% to rents in line with the regulators.

The board also agreed to increase garage rents and apply a cap to the communal heating charges (£2 per week), which was discussed at the last meeting and following wider feedback. Rent notification letters will be going out later in February.

Pete Stones (Property Director) is retiring in March 2024, and Ongo is currently recruiting for the role through a fully independent process. Recruitment is also ongoing for two Board members (replacing Helen Lennon, Chair of Communities Board, and Melvin Kenyon who attended CV meetings before) and for two trainee Board members. Tenants (lived experience) with the appropriate skills will be encouraged to apply if they are interested. Rachel Cook will become the new complaints champion for the Board and be an attendee at future CV meetings.

Changes are due to be made to Ongo House, with the staff at Cole Street due to move across so all services are in one building. A member asked if disability access would be looked further into. Kevin said that it would as part of the Disability Discrimination Act (DDA) list of recommendations.

In April Ongo will be launching two new projects around floor coverings (e.g. carpets) and assisted decorating (e.g. volunteers to help) within homes. This will be further supported by some Glasspool funding that has been accessed to support. Kevin asked for members' views and how the offer could be focused.

Two members shared their views that it might be difficult to prioritise and would need to be assessed on a case-by-case basis.

Another member shared that, through their previous experience of a private landlord, would sometimes do a full emulsion of a property when it was being re-let. In local authority she also had experience of employed painters and decorators for such work. Steve explained the difference is that a private landlord charges a bond, whilst Ongo do not. Private landlords could keep hold of the bond when a tenant leaves which would pay for any re-decorating. A long-term aim is to educate tenants on how to decorate.

A member explained a case from when they had decorated their home but were forced to re-decorate again soon afterwards due to improvement work being carried out to their home and they hadn't been made aware this was due to happen. Kevin said he will take

the feedback away in terms of how Ongo can better explain and communicate what work is due to take place in a tenant's home so that they can then decide when to decorate.

A member suggested that tenant's who have been affected by works in such a way could be offered decorating packs. Another member asked for communication about major works and what a current tenant could be helped with during that time.

Kevin thanked all members for their feedback. More information will be presented at the next CV meeting.

## **Information Items**

### **10. Customer Engagement (CE) Activity update – tenant reps**

**Complaints Panel** – Judith gave an update. It had been a positive meeting where updates were given on a Board member (Rachel) now being responsible for complaints at Board level, and complaints information was discussed. There had been a 47% decrease in the amount of stage 1 complaints over the year, and the majority (120) were about repairs and maintenance. Work on complaints is moving in the right direction.

**Focus group (Awaab's Law)** – this formed part of the government consultation process on the timescales for repairs and featured members from CV and PSP. A good discussion and debate was held, and a range of feedback provided against each question asked by the government. This will be combined with colleague feedback and sent as a collective response. Notes from the session will be shared with members in due course.

**Impact Assessment meetings (PSP and Publications Panel)** – details had been included in the CE activity report. All CE groups are having their impact assessments which includes a SWOT (Strengths, Weaknesses, Opportunities and Threats) analysis from over the past year. Feedback from tenant members and staff involved with the groups are collated into an action plan for the year ahead.

### **11. CE update – Wendy Wolfe**

The full report was included in the meeting paperwork. Eddie was observing the meeting, and another observer David had planned to attend but was unwell so he will be invited to the March meeting.

A treasurer's training session had been held in February and positive feedback received from attendees.

At the last meeting, there had been an update about an upcoming CV away day. Wendy explained that the group have an away day twice a year, normally in April and October, which is an informal meeting. Various subjects are discussed, and members get the opportunity to learn more. Tracey (Acting Secretary) is looking into venues and dates, The role of Officers will be covered at the next away day, as the current Officers would like to encourage more members to nominate themselves for election ahead of the group's AGM. The CV impact assessment will also take place.

Hayley Sleight (CE Officer) will be leaving on 1 March. All at CV sent their best wishes and expressed their gratitude. CE will be picking up meetings and other work to do with the groups that Hayley was responsible for until somebody is recruited.

## 12. Any Other Business

**Reflection on meeting** – all agreed that the meeting had flowed well, and that everybody had been fair and respectful.

A member recently had an OOH boiler repair attended by a contractor, but they had not been up to standard e.g. no ID card. A reminder will be given to all contractors.

Another member enquired about blocking air bricks up and why this is done. This will be investigated further.

**ACTION:** Explanation to be provided as to why air bricks are blocked up.

A member referred to another housing association article, and windows not having restrictors on which led to the death of a child, the mother had been asking her landlord to put chains on for safety, but that never happened. The members wanted Ongo to be mindful of this for the properties that have similar style windows.

**ACTION:** to be investigated.

A fellow member asked about workshops for new volunteers. Wendy explained that regular awareness sessions are held along with different training and courses to all volunteers, whether they are new or experienced.

## 13. Date and time of next meeting

The next meeting will be on Monday 18 March, 9.30am – 12.30pm, at the Arc in-person or via Teams.

## 14. Action Plan

	Action	Who	Update
1.	Link to household support fund to be shared and promoted.	Customer Engagement/ PR	This will be included in the next Key News (printed) and added to the financial support information on the Ongo website.
2.	Check reasons for increase in former tenant arrears.	Kevin Hornsby	Information to be provided at the next meeting.
3.	A key to be added to all performance information reports.	Natalie Davies	Completed.
4.	Information to be shared as to why air bricks are blocked up.	Neil Key	Update to be provided at the next meeting.
5.	Safety catches / chains for windows.	Health & Safety	Update to be provided at the next meeting.