



**Minutes of the Customer Committee Meeting held on
Tuesday 02 July 2024 at Diamond House**

MEMBERS:	Charlotte Haines (Chair) Karen Hamilton-Hulse (KH) Marta Diaz (MD) Keri Muldoon (KM) Rashidah Owoseni (RO) Gareth Evans (GE) Ahmed Abdulmalek (AA)
OFFICERS:	Sue Sutton, Chief Executive Officer (CEO) Warren Carlon, Director of Communities (DC) Lorraine Butler, Customer Service and Engagement Manager (CSEM) Laura Flint, Customer Engagement Manchester (CEM) Claire Taylor, Community Safety Manager (CSM) Campbell McCulloch, Director of Finance (DF) Pete Modral, Customer Communications Manager (CCM) Becky Airey, Governance and Policy Officer (GPO) (minutes)
ATTENDEES:	
APOLOGIES:	Sian Grant, Executive Director of Customers and Communities (EDCC) Jason Marland (JM) Cynthia (Bethel) Alloyda (CA)
The meeting commenced at 18:02	
ITEM	
1.	Apologies for Absence and Declarations of Interest
	The Chair welcomed everyone to the meeting. Apologies were received from the EDCC, JM and CA There were no Declarations of Interest.
2.	Minutes of the Meeting held on Tuesday 11 June 2024
	The Committee approved the minutes from the last meeting held on Tuesday 11 June 2024.
3.	Matters Arising and Action Tracker
	The Chair presented the action tracker and noted that item one had been rescheduled for the next meeting in September as the High-Rise specific Getting to Know You (GTKY) data is still being merged with existing customer data. The Committee noted the changes to the Action Tracker.
4.	Chair's Update

	<p>Members were informed that there had not been a Board meeting since the last Customer Committee meeting in June.</p> <p>The Chair noted that the recruitment campaign for the Chair of the Board was progressing well and that interviews for potential candidates had been scheduled for 18 July 2024.</p> <p>The Chair added that the recruitment of two new Customer Committee members had been successful, and that both Jack Buckley and John Beattie have now accepted the positions. Members were informed that John worked at Pendleton Gateway and that Jack had a background in sustainability.</p> <p>The Committee noted the Chair’s update.</p>
<p>5.</p>	<p>Customer Communications Scrutiny Report</p>
	<p>The CSEM informed the Committee that five people were selected from Salix Homes’ wider scrutiny pool with the purpose to:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Understand and scrutinise the different methods of communication used between customers and Salix Homes; • Understand the barriers to communication faced by customers and what Salix Homes is doing to overcome these; • Scrutinise the tone of voice used in written communications with customers; • Understand where poor communication leads to complaints and whether lessons have been learned; and • Understand how and if Salix Homes proactively communicates with customers and follow through on promised communications. <p>Members were also provided with an overview of the ten recommendations that were identified by the scrutiny panel and noted that these had been circulated and accepted by service directors/managers. The CSEM added that the scrutiny panel felt that Salix Homes continuously strived to be as inclusive as possible.</p> <p>The CEO noted that part of the regulatory inspection focused on stock condition surveys and assurance around gaining access to properties. Following a review of the various methods of accessing properties (i.e. gas safety checks, stock condition surveys and repairs etc.), it was revealed that officers had been unable to access just 140 out of 8000+ homes in the last 3 years. The CEO noted that this provided members with assurance that there are various ways of gaining access to customers’ properties.</p> <p>In response to a query from AA about how many of the 140 properties had been accessed since the review, the CEO informed members that some of these properties did not have gas so did not require a gas safety check and others were not due electrical checks so Salix Homes have prioritised stock condition surveys at the outstanding properties. The CEO added that these are currently underway.</p> <p>In response to a query from KH about whether customers can contact Salix Homes if they are concerned about not having seen a neighbour, the CEM confirmed that they should always report any unusual activity.</p> <p>MD asked whether customers can check in on their neighbours themselves to which the CEO responded that they can, and that Salix Homes will typically ask customers if they have seen their neighbour recently if they receive an alert, as part of any welfare checks.</p>

The Chair noted that anyone can alert the police and ask them to perform a welfare check if they have concerns. The CEO added that the police would inform Salix Homes if they had to force entry to a property.

MD queried whether rearranged repairs appointments will be deleted from the system as it can be confusing when a text reminder is sent for an appointment that has been cancelled. The CEM informed members that when the repairs recommendations are implemented, customers will no longer receive automatically generated texts and will instead receive a phone call from an operative to confirm the appointment.

In response to a query from MD about whether customers have to agree to the new appointment date, the CEM noted that they will assume the new date is okay unless the customer says otherwise.

In relation to high-rise notice boards, RO queried their effectiveness and whether they need to be reformatted to gain customers' attention. The CCM informed members that Salix Homes are looking to replace the current paper notice boards with digital screens so that customers have access to accurate live information.

AA noted that it would benefit the customer if all numbers on file are contacted in relation to repairs and not just the main tenant as this way everyone within the property will be aware of any changes to the date or time.

KM expressed that customers still do not know who their Housing Officer or Community Connector is. The DC noted that this information will be included in the Neighbourhood Action Plans (NAPs) and that Salix Homes will ensure the information is kept up to date. The CEO added that Housing Officers now have smaller patches so it will be easier for customers to identify who their Housing Officer is. In relation to Community Connectors, the CEM informed members that Salix Homes have struggled to reintroduce the role across neighbourhoods.

KM queried whether Salix Homes will consider reintroducing in-person satisfaction surveys that used to be undertaken by repairs operatives on their Personal Digital Assistant (PDA) after completing a repair. The CEO informed the Committee that customers had stated they did not feel they could be honest in these surveys as operatives would fill out the answers they gave them using a Personal Digital Assistant (PDA). The CSEM added that customers are now contacted following an interaction with Salix Homes regarding their satisfaction of the service provided (i.e. repairs, customer service centre).

The CEO also noted that the GTKY surveys would be too long to be taken using a PDA but that all colleagues will be out in the neighbourhoods on Wednesday 04 September between 1pm and 3pm asking customers to complete the survey.

In response to a query from GE about the timescales for implementing the recommendations, the CEM informed the Committee that the actions will be incorporated into the scrutiny action tracker with agreed dates and that this will be presented at the meeting in September.

The Committee approved the customer communications scrutiny recommendations.

6. Environmental Services Scrutiny Scope

The Committee approved the proposed environmental services scrutiny scope.

7. Anti-Social Behaviour (ASB) Policy and Procedure – Consultation Outcomes

The CSM informed members that Salix Homes had sent a survey to all customers who had reported a noise complaint to inform them of proposal to introduce a separate noise policy. Members were provided with an overview of the results:

- A significant number of respondents felt that installing noise reduction measures would be a more effective way of addressing noise issues;
- Just over half of respondents felt mediation would not be a beneficial way of dealing with general noise cases; and
- Most respondents felt Salix Homes' approach should be more focused around fostering good neighbourhood relationships.

Members were also provided with an overview of the key themes identified by customers in relation to noise:

- Keeping music/TV at a reasonable level/wear headphones
- Addressing the issue at tenancy sign-up
- A polite letter or phone call to customers
- Reminders to customers regarding Salix Homes' rules
- Listen to customers and don't ignore the issue

The CSM added that the same consultation exercise had been carried out with the members of the Apartment Living Forum and a suggestion was made around discussing noise issues with customers at sign-up.

In response to a query from AA about whether there had been an increase in noise complaints post-COVID, the CSM confirmed that there had, and it was primarily due to a clash in lifestyles and tolerance around general living noise – e.g. some customers living in high-rises were now working from home during the day. The DC added that 'noise' makes up the highest proportion of complaints across both high-rise blocks and housing estates.

The DC informed members that noise complaints are currently processed as ASB cases, with customers being invited for a meeting and issued with a warning letter. The DC added that Salix Homes cannot take action unless there is sufficient evidence, but the new proposals will change this approach so that it is more supportive of customers.

The CSM noted that the Housing Ombudsman spotlight report focused on managing customer expectations from the start, and that this does not happen if a noise complaint is categorised as an ASB case.

In response to a query from GE about whether Salix Homes will look to retrofit properties to make them more soundproof, the CSM informed the Committee that they will install anti-vibration mats in cases where a washing machine is an issue. The CSM noted that if Salix Homes receive a high number of noise complaints from properties of a similar archetype, they will look to see if it is an issue with the properties or the neighbourhood etc.

In response to a query from MD about how many customers would be willing to undertake mediation, the CSM noted that it would depend on the individual and that it essential to engage with customers as early as possible before the situation escalates. The CSM added that customers are likely to feel that a noise complaint that is categorised as ASB is malicious, when in reality they may not be aware that there was an issue.

RO noted that mental health had not been identified as a key theme and queried whether there was

a dedicated team who were able to support these customers in relation to noise complaints. The CSM informed the Committee that a light-touch risk assessment is carried out for every complaint that is made and that the team would look to refer the individual to a partner agency that specialised in mental health wellbeing.

KM asked whether there is an assigned individual at Salix Homes who is able to effectively communicate with customers with mental health issues as they can sometimes come across as aggressive. The CSM noted that reasonable adjustments will have been put in place for customers who have made their mental health known to Salix Homes and that colleagues receive regular training so that they are equipped to deal with situations where mental health is a barrier to the customer. The CEO added that where appropriate, vulnerable customers have a dedicated single point of contact to protect both the customer and Salix Homes' colleagues.

The DC informed members that Salix Homes are currently recruiting a new Customer Support Team which will ensure there is sufficient resource to refer customers to the right services.

The Committee resolved to:

- **Note the findings of the consultation.**
- **Approve the proposal to develop a new approach to how Salix Homes' deals with noise complaints.**

8. Tenancy Management Consultation Plan

The DC provided the Committee with an overview of Salix Homes' current policies and procedures that relate to the management of tenancies and the proposals to develop a single overarching Tenancy Management policy and procedure. Members were also provided with an overview of the revised approach to pet management and car parking and were asked for their views on how Salix Homes' can best consult with customers around the new changes.

In response to a query from KM about whether Salix Homes has the authority to issue parking fines or clamp vehicles that are not registered, the DC informed members that it would be a breach of tenancy, but that Salix Homes does not have the enforcement powers to financially penalise customers in terms of parking.

GE suggested that Salix Homes could hire a company to install and monitor cameras in the car park, with notices letting customers know that they will automatically get a fine if their vehicle is not registered.

In response to a query about how customers registered their vehicles with Salix Homes, the DC informed members that they would be asked to provide a V5C form and, once approved, provided with a fob to access the car park. The CEO added that there have been instances where customers make copies of the fob for others.

KM queried whether increasing the price of the fob would deter customers from buying more than they needed. The DC noted that customers would be unlikely to pay the higher price and would instead overwhelm the concierge service which would slow people from entering.

In response to a query from the Chair about how high-rise parking bays are allocated, the DC informed members that it operated on a first come first serve basis.

In relation to customers using bicycles and mobility scooters, GE queried whether they should use the car park or the pedestrian agate. The DC confirmed that these customers should use the

pedestrian gate.

The DC informed the Committee that the High-Rise Manager has agreed the design of a pilot scheme with the Apartment Living Forum (ALF) to help manage the limited car parking space in ways that tries to be fair to everyone.

Members provided their feedback on how best to consult with customers around the new changes to tenancy management:

- Amend the wording at 3.5 so that it reads “permission to keep the pets *may* be withdrawn” instead of ‘*will*’.
- Engage with animal welfare charities so that their advice can be used as evidence.
- Signpost customers to PDSA – a charity that provides veterinary care to pets whose owners cannot afford the full cost of treatments.
- Consult with other housing associations to understand and compare their approach to tenancy management.
- Conduct background checks on customers to see if they have been banned from owning a pet before permission is granted.

GE queried the effectiveness of the new approach to pet management if it cannot be enforced by Salix Homes. The DC informed members that any pet that is a nuisance or is being neglected will be managed as an ASB case and action will be taken where possible. The DC added that most customers will adhere to the new approach if it means that they have permission to keep their pet and that it will act as a tool to manage pets in Salix Homes properties.

The DC asked members to send him any additional comments following the meeting.

The Committee noted the Tenancy Management Consultation Plan.

9. Customer Charter Performance 2023/24 and Action Plan

The CSEM presented a summary of Salix Homes’ performance against both the published performance measures and the Customer Charter Service Assessments. Key highlights included:

- The majority of actions have been implemented – outstanding actions will be carried into the 2024/25 action plan;
- ‘Resolution’ remains the weakest area of performance, though this has improved on last year – this is due to low levels of customer satisfaction regarding complaints handling;
- Salix Homes’ customer satisfaction with complaints handling is 46% - the average score of other Greater Manchester landlords is 39%;
- There are two areas of poor performance in relation to Our Services including responding to enquiries right first time and within 24 hours;
- ‘Safety’ fully meets the principles outlines in the customer charter;
- A number of actions have been identified by service managers to improve performance against the Customer Charter;
- Actions from individual service assessments have been incorporated in an action plan (appendix 3); and
- Salix Homes will continue to carry out service assessments against the charter to ensure services continue to improve.

RO queried whether the introduction of Complaints Investigators meant that existing roles would be redefined. The CSEM informed members that Salix Homes are looking to review the role of the Complaints Team so that there is a more consistent response to complaints across the business –

with the Complaints Investigator replacing the current Support Officer role. The CSEM added that managers will retain responsibilities for 'lessons learned' and that this is Housing Ombudsman best practice.

The Committee noted the performance against the customer charter.

10. Communications Review Update

The CCM provided members with an update on Salix Homes' Communications Review and presented the Customer Care Programme for Housing Officers which consisted of a number of checklists including:

- Pre-sign up – e.g. sending an email to the customer to confirm their interest;
- Tenancy signing/move in – e.g. meeting the customer at the property;
- Weeks one to four – e.g. calling the customer to see how they are setting in;
- Month four – e.g. checking NorthGate to see if there are any rent arrears; and
- Month eight – e.g. if any issues are recorded, extend the tenancy by six months.

Members were also presented with the new Customer Welcome Pack which included:

- A welcome guide;
- Tenancy agreement cover letter;
- GTKY form;
- Meet your Housing Officer postcard and business card; and
- Fridge magnet and Salix Homes trolley coin.

The CCM presented a brief overview the actions that are in progress and the next areas Salix Homes' will focus on, such as environmental services and caretaking.

The CCM also provided members with an overview of the Customer Segmentation and Persona project. Key highlights included:

- Salix Homes will engage with a wide range of customers, staff and stakeholders to create attitudinal segmentations – starting with an online community with a smaller sample of customers;
- Customers will be invited to register their interest in taking part in the online community in the upcoming customer newsletter;
- Two members of the Customer Committee will take part – KM and JM have been nominated; and
- The findings from the online community will be analysed and used to develop the quantitative questionnaire and segmentation.

The Committee noted that it was extremely helpful to have all of the information in one place (Customer Welcome Pack) and agreed that KM and JM will continue to take part in the project. The CCM noted that the next phase of the project will be much larger so more members of the Committee can become involved.

In response to a query from KM about whether Community Connectors will be involved, the CCM agreed that this can be incorporated into discussions.

The Committee noted the communications review update.

Actions:

- **CCM to circulate the Customer Voice Report templates to members for comment**

	after the meeting.
11.	Understanding Value for Money (VfM) - (Learning Session)
	<p>The DF informed the members of the Committee that value can be highly subjective, with some people placing value in investing in local communities while others place value on the most cost-effective option.</p> <p>Members were provided with an overview of value for money as defined by the Regulator of Social Housing (RSH) and it was noted that Registered Providers (RPs) are assessed on how they make best use of their resources to meet their objectives. The DF added that RPs are required to report on their performance against seven measures as defined by the RSH.</p> <p>The DF explained that an operating margin is a measure of how much profit a company makes after paying all standard costs such as salaries, utilities and general maintenance of properties. Members were informed that the money left over can be used for paying interest, to invest in new properties or can act as a buffer for to mitigate against any unexpected costs. The DF informed members that the operating margin at Salix Homes gets reinvested back into the business.</p> <p>The DF noted that financial viability is assessed by the regulator over both the short and long-term trajectory of the operating margin.</p> <p>Members were informed that an increase in cost per unit could either be positive or negative, as frequently investing in properties can lead to savings in the long-term as any underlying issues can be addressed early. The DF added that it can be useful to benchmark costs against peer organisations, but situations and corporate plans can differ between RPs.</p> <p>The DF explained that VfM links in with the discussions and decisions made by the Customer Committee as it has an impact on Salix Homes' ability to fund activities and programmes.</p> <p>RO noted that Salix Homes needs to balance financial viability against investment in its properties and customers to maintain the organisations' reputation. RO added that it is not always useful to benchmark expenditure against other organisations as reducing cost per unit to match that of other organisations will likely result in higher repair costs further down the line.</p> <p>The DF informed members that an example of Salix Homes investing in properties is the installation of the Switchee devices, as these will monitor the environment within a property and will alert the team if there is an increased risk of damp, mould and condensation. The DF added that this investment is a move towards a more proactive approach.</p> <p>In response to a query about the increase in cost per unit, the DF informed the Committee that the figure reflects how much Salix Homes is spending on an individual property and does not relate to rental income as this is set by the regulator.</p> <p>The CEO noted that other organisations' cost per unit is rapidly increasing as they did not invest in their properties earlier whereas Salix Homes' is experiencing a steadier increase. The CEO added that the Regulator makes it clear that RPs should be spending money on core services, but that it has also made clear what is not the responsibility of the landlord.</p> <p>The DF informed members that the data on cost per unit represents Salix Homes' core stock and does not take into account new developments or grant funding etc. so it is somewhat limited.</p>

	The Committee noted the Value for Money learning session.
12.	Apartment Living Forum (ALF) Minutes
	The Committee agreed to review the ALF minutes and send any comments and/or queries to the CEM.
13.	Any Other Business
	The Chair informed members that the Customer Committee Appraisals would be taking place in September.
14.	Date of Next Meeting
	Tuesday 02 September 2024 (Virtual)
The meeting closed at 20:10	