



**West Lothian Housing Partnership (SC188968)**

**MEETING OF BOARD OF DIRECTORS**

**held by videoconference**

**on Wednesday 17 February 2021 at 14.00**

Directors present: John Hill (Chair), Lesley Bloomer, Gregor Dunlay, Judith McGlashan and Mairi Martin

In attendance: Olga Clayton (Group Director of Housing and Care), Stephen Wright (Deputy Group Company Secretary), Lynsey Fotheringham (Head of Housing), Morgan Kingston (Finance Manager), in part David Fletcher (Director of Development – Programme) and Elspeth Lang (Development Manager)

**1. Apologies for Absence**

There were no apologies.

It was noted that we continued to operate with a reduced Board due to the ongoing Coronavirus pandemic. Board members who were not attending the meeting members had considered the reports and provided feedback to the Chair during at a separate meeting.

**2. Declarations of Interest**

The Board noted the standing declarations of interest. There were no new declarations

**3. Minutes of Board Meeting held on 18 November 2020 and matters arising**

**Decided: The Board approved the minute of the meeting held on 18 November 2020.**

**4. Business update**

The Board considered a report on our ongoing response to the impact of the current pandemic on our service, customers and communities. The Board also considered our proposed approach to remobilising services, which was dependent on the extent of government restrictions.

The Board welcomed our approach and our performance to date, particularly in relation to rental income and success of the recent rent campaign. The Board also noted the update in relation to eviction cases and notices of proceedings.

The Board considered the revised escalation process we had in place to manage arrears cases where we are satisfied that customers refuse to pay rent, rather than cannot pay category.

**Decided: The Board noted the update provided.**

## **5. Rent and other charges 2021/22**

The Board considered a report on the recent tenant consultation process and discussed the response rate which was lower than in previous years. It was noted that this was reflected across other RSLs and had been impacted by the pandemic and lockdown measures which meant that we had been unable to carry out face to face engagement. It was noted that our engagement framework had been reviewed and was on the agenda for consideration. It was explained that we would expect the new engagement framework to help improve our response rates in future.

**Decided: The Board**

- 1) Considered the feedback received through the consultation process with tenants on our 2021/22 RSL rent and service charge increase;**
- 2) Approved a 2% increase for all ex Barony tenants;**
- 3) Approved a 1.7% rent and service charge increase for 2021/22 for all other tenants; and**
- 4) Agreed that we formally write to tenants to confirm this subject to Group Board approval.**

## **6. Stronger Voices, Stronger Communities – our new engagement framework**

The Board considered a report on the new engagement framework which had been designed to support the ambition in the new strategy to transform our engagement approach and shift the balance of power towards our customers.

The Board welcomed the approach to engagement and in particular the move towards ensuring that 25% of our customer facing budgets were controlled by customers by 2026. It was noted that this would not include mandatory compliance activity which would continue to be delivered via central budgets to ensure that we meet our statutory and regulatory duties.

The Board was informed about a recent YouChoose pilot project through which customers had had the opportunity to vote on three shortlisted projects.

**Decided: The Board:**

- 1) Noted the new Group engagement framework; and**
- 2) Noted the WLHP draft engagement programme.**

## **7. Transforming our rent payment methods**

The Board received a report on our approach to modernising the approach to rent payment methods to ensure we fully harness the opportunities presented by technology for the benefit of our customers and our business.

The Board considered the proposals and the impact on customers, noting protections we have in place to identify recurring trends that may indicate a customer is struggling such as repeated credit card payments. The Board discussed impact on those with no bank accounts and asked that we investigate whether there is an opportunity to reduce the transaction fee for recurring direct debit.

**Decided: The Board:**

- 1) **approved the approach to modernising rent payment methods as we fully harness the opportunities presented by technology for the benefit of both customers and our business, including the exploration and introduction of recurring card payments**
- 2) **noted the wider review of the Group's approach to rent and income collection, with a progress report to be provided in 2021;**
- 3) **noted that our current WSS offering requires to be reviewed in the longer term and in the context of delivering a customer App to facilitate easier access to services, deliver exceptional customer convenience and capture just in time feedback.**

**8. Operating model update: approach to service delivery**

The Board received a report on our approach to developing service delivery during the 2021-26 strategy period. The Board considered the report and discussed the proposed move to develop our web self-service and web-chat services. It was noted that web-chat was currently available on MyHousing but that maturity of the platform elsewhere in the business was low. It was noted that we would require to ensure the web-chat service was resourced to ensure that it meets customer expectations around response times. The Board also discussed the proposed approach to repairs and our ambition to allow customers to book 2-hour appointment slots online.

The Board also discussed the role of Lowther Homes in the group, including its role in managing mid-market rent properties for WLHP.

**Decided: The Board**

- 1) **noted the approach to service delivery for the 2021-26 strategy period; and**
- 2) **noted that the approach to service delivery would form part of our operating model along with more flexible working by staff and development of corporate hubs that the Board considered at its previous meetings.**

**9. Group Homelessness Policy 2021-26**

The Board received a report on our new homelessness policy, which supported the ambition in the new strategy to lead in the national agenda around rapid rehousing and Housing First. The Board welcomed the approach and the Group ambition to: house 10,000 homeless households during the strategy period; strengthen pathways of service and support for homeless households through working with those who have lived experience; creating an integrated value proposition through our expertise and resources across care, support, housing, advice, training, volunteering and employment.

The Board discussed the target to let 50% of our homes to homeless applicants and noted that this responded to the requirements of West Lothian Council. The Board discussed the importance of providing intensive support to homeless households which helps to improve sustainability and maintain balanced communities.

**Decided: The Board noted the Group Homelessness Policy and its designation as a Group Policy.**

## **10. Five-year development programme**

The Board received a report on our proposed development programme which would see us develop 613 new affordable homes in West Lothian over the five years to 2025/26.

The Board considered the programme and discussed the potential impact of Covid on development in terms of construction costs and access to materials. It was noted that we will continue to monitor these risks and that we have an agreed rate of return which requires to be achieved for any development to proceed. The Board was also informed about the ongoing diligence and engagement with our contractors to ensure we are satisfied about their ability to deliver for us.

**Decided: The Board:**

- 1) Approved the five-year development programme as summarised in the report; and**
- 2) Noted that the five-year development programme would be reviewed annually and presented for approval to the Board in conjunction with the business plan.**

## **11. 2021/22 financial projections**

The Board considered the financial projections including:

The Board scrutinised the projections and noted that efficiencies in procurement and reduction in long term interest rates have increased our planned savings from the earlier introduction of our operating model and allowed us to reduce long term rent assumptions from 3.5% to 2.9%. It was agreed that we should keep our rent assumptions under regular review.

The Board considered our headroom in relation to interest cover and noted that this was calculated on a Group-wide RSL level.

The Board also discussed the impact of the mid-market rent development programme managed through Lowther Homes and proposal that this would generate c.£500k of annual income by 2025/26.

**Decided: The Board:**

- 1) Approved the updated financial projections for investment in assets and service over the five-year period to 2026; and**
- 2) Agreed that the projected 2021/22 figures form the basis of next year's annual budget which will be presented to the Board for final approval in March.**

## **12. Finance report for the period to 31 December 2020**

The Board considered financial performance for the period to 31 December 2020, including the statutory surplus of £168k which was £1,077k favourable to budget. The Board scrutinised financial performance and the reasons for any variances. The Board discussed financial performance in relation to repairs including the provisions we were making to meet any spike in demand once lockdown eases and we are permitted to carry out non-urgent work. It was explained that we continue to monitor this closely and that we currently had an estimated backlog of 24 repairs.

**Decided: The Board noted the management accounts for the period to 31 December 2020 and the full year forecast out-turn to 31 March 2021.**

## **13. Delivery Plan 2020/21: Quarter 3**

The Board received a report outlining progress on the delivery plan measures and projects to 31 December 2020.

The Board welcomed the strong performance in relation to the key indicators: gross rent arrears, sustainment, average days to let (excluding lockdown) and average emergency repairs times. The Board reviewed the performance and progress in relation to the full list of strategic measures and strategic projects noting the status of each.

**Decided: The Board noted the content of the report and the actions highlighted within it to maintain and improve performance.**

## **14. Scottish Child Payment**

The Board received a report on the Scottish Government's new Scottish Child Payment and an outline of our approach to supporting customers take up this new benefit.

**Decided: The Board noted the report and the take up campaign for the new Scottish Child Payment.**

## **15. AOCB**

There were no other items of business.

**I certify that the above minute has been approved as a true and accurate reflection of the proceedings.**

**Signed \_\_\_\_\_ (Chair)**