



**Minutes of Salix Homes Customer Committee Meeting held on Tuesday
05 September 2023 at Diamond House.**

MEMBERS:	Charlotte Haines (Chair) Karen Hamilton-Hulse (KH) Cynthia (Bethel) Alloyda (CA) Keri Muldoon (KM) Jason Marland (JM) Rashidah Owoseni (RO) Vicki Gallagher (VG) Charlie Williamson (CW) Gareth Evans (GE) Ahmed Abdulmalek (AA)
OFFICERS:	Sian Grant, Executive Director of Customers and Communities (EDCC) Lorraine Butler, Customer Service & Engagement Manager (CSEM) Warren Carlon, Director of Communities (DC) Zeenet Quraishi, Governance Manager (GM) Pete Modral, Customer Communications Manager (CCM) Becky Airey, Governance and Policy Officer (GPO) (minutes)
OBSERVERS:	Jim Battle, Chair of the Board (JB)
APOLOGIES:	Marta Diaz (MD)

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 MD. There were no Declarations of Interest.
2.	Minutes of the Meeting held on Tuesday 06 June 2023
	The Committee approved the minutes from the last meeting held on Tuesday 06 June 2023.
3.	Matters Arising and Action Tracker
	The Chair provided members with a summary of the Board Meeting that took place on 28 March 2023 and informed members that the following topics had been discussed, and where a decision was required, approved: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Damp and mould closed cases; • The 2023/24 budget (incl. stress testing); • There had been an increase in voids, largely due to an increase in deaths of tenants and older residents moving into care homes; • The Governance Framework; • Salix Homes Board Terms of Reference; and

	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Succession planning. <p>The Chair confirmed that action number 2 had now been resolved and could be marked as complete.</p> <p>The Committee noted the changes to the Action Tracker.</p>
4.	<p>Chair's Update</p>
	<p>The Chair gave an update on the items that were discussed at the Board meeting that took place on 27 June 2023. She informed members that the Board had discussed and/or approved:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • The success of the E-Bike safety campaign; • The positive feedback regarding the new community gardens at Canon Hussey; • That out of 134 applications to the Customer Support Fund, 127 had been approved; • Board member attendance at Community Events; • The awarding of the Framework Contracts that had been recommended by the Customer Committee; • Cases of damp, mould and condensation had reduced, most likely as a result of the warmer weather but it was expected to rise again as we approached winter. <p>The Chair also informed members that the Board had approved the development of Peru Street at the meeting on 18 July 2023.</p> <p>The Chair thanked the members of the Committee for taking part in the appraisal process and noted that they had been very constructive.</p> <p>Members were informed that Susan Wilkinson's temporary involvement with the Customer Committee had come to an end, and Lorraine Butler was welcomed as the Customer Service & Engagement Manager who would be supporting members going forward. The Committee agreed to send Susan a token of appreciation for her support.</p> <p>In response to a query regarding whether the scrutiny piece would be made public, the EDCC confirmed that it had been published on the Salix Homes website but had not been disseminated beyond this platform. The Committee noted that it would be beneficial to show the role the customers had in the creating the scrutiny piece.</p> <p>The Committee noted the Chair's Update.</p> <p>Actions:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Governance to arrange a gift for Susan Wilkinson on behalf of the Customer Committee.
5.	<p>Salix Homes Customer Committee Governance Review</p>
	<p>The GM provided members with a proposal for updating the governance arrangements at Salix Homes following the 2022 External Governance Review. The proposal included:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Aligning the Customer Committee alongside the other committees of Salix Homes and giving SHCC delegated powers from Board relating to customer related areas of discussion. • Updated Terms of Reference to acknowledge the changes in responsibility and delegated powers.

- The SHCC Chair position to also be a full board member of Salix Homes to strengthen the governance arrangements and ensuring the customer voice is heard at Board level.

The Committee thanked the GM for presenting and agreed that it would be good to stagger out membership for the sake of continuity.

In response to a query regarding re-election to the Committee, the EDCC informed members that the rules that govern Board Members will be the same for the members of the Customer Committee.

The EDCC confirmed that members could volunteer for the subgroups and the scrutiny pools if they should wish once they had completed their term on the Customer Committee.

The Chair expressed approval that the Terms of Reference now stated that the Chair of the Customer Committee would become a member of the Board as this would ensure the next Chair is given a level of responsibility.

The Committee asked that the wording in section 1.21 of the Terms of Reference be firmer so that members are aware that appraisals are mandatory. The GM confirmed that she would amend the wording.

Members asked if there would be a more accessible version of the Terms of Reference that summarised the key points. The EDCC confirmed that they could create a plain-English summary alongside the official version for Committee members.

In response to a query about whether potential members could shadow committee meetings before taking on an official role, the EDCC confirmed that a current member could step down but still mentor the new member; or if a new member was recruited early enough, they could shadow the member stepping down.

The EDCC asked members if they would prefer to meet more frequently than four times a year to ensure their voices are heard more clearly and that the agenda items are thoroughly discussed. The EDCC suggested that the Committee could meet every month, alternating between Diamond House and Microsoft Teams.

JB informed members that the Board attended teatime sessions outside of formal Board meetings in which an expert would provide them with an overview of an agreed housing topic. He added that the Board found these sessions extremely helpful as it enabled members to stay up to date with changes in the housing sector.

The EDCC suggested that they could repurpose part of the virtual committee meeting to create a combined teatime and meeting session.

The Committee were in consensus that it would be beneficial to meet every month and would prefer if these meetings were scheduled so that they occurred at the same time each month (e.g., the first Tuesday of the month).

The EDCC informed members that Salix would create a forward plan and schedule for approval at the next Customer Committee in November where members can discuss what dates are most suited.

In response to a query about mandatory attendance, the EDCC informed members that the team would need to review the rules around attendance.

The Committee asked that information regarding observers be added to section 1.19 of the Terms of Reference. The GM confirmed that she would make this addition.

The Committee resolved to:

- **Approve the recommendations put forward in the Governance Proposal.**
- **Subject to amendments, approve the updated Customer Committee Terms of Reference which includes delegated authorities by Salix Homes Board.**

Actions:

- **GM to reword section 1.21 of the Terms of Reference to make attendance at appraisals mandatory.**
- **GM to include information regarding observers to section 1.19 of the Terms of Reference.**
- **GM to create a plain-English summary of the Terms of Reference.**
- **EDCC and GM to create a forward plan and schedule to be presented at the November Customer Committee meeting.**

p6. Approach to Neighbourhood Action Plans

The DC gave an overview of the approach to Neighbourhood Action Plans (NAPs) and informed members that they had been designed to enable Salix Homes to develop a culture of listening to, and understanding, the customers' needs and aspirations. He added that the introduction of NAPs will make Salix accountable for delivering on its promises and identifying areas where the business needs to improve.

The Committee thanked the DC for presenting and agreed that it would enable Salix to understand what was happening on the ground in residential areas.

Members suggested that the survey should consist of a maximum of five questions, allocating one question per topic.

In response to a query about how customers would be alerted to the walkabouts, the DC informed members that officers will publicise the details via social media channels, calling cards in post boxes, posters etc.

The Committee asked if the Housing Officers could attend all events to increase their awareness to which the EDCC responded that Salix may not be able to resource this for all events but will let the Committee know what the capacity is for Housing Officers to attend.

The Committee resolved to:

- **Note the approach to developing Neighbourhood Action Plans.**

7.	Communications Review – Scope and Update
	<p>The CCM gave a brief overview of the ‘Our Future Together’ restructure and corporate plan, informing members:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • The ‘Getting to Know You Survey’ was shared with customers at the end of July and around 1000 responses had been received so far; and • The data indicates a shift to more customers engaging with digital communications, but also preferring them in different languages and formats. <p>The CCM also provided members with an overview of the proposed communications review, noting:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • There would be a phased approach, focusing on insights, data and rigorous testing; • The customer welcome pack, sign-up and tenancy agreement would be reviewed and updated first; • A dedicated group/process would be established to audit accessibility and inclusivity; • Full training and onboarding with customer facing staff across Salix homes would be established for writing and producing communications; • Customer pen portraits would be established to build a picture of Salix’s diverse customer base (including demographics, needs, wants, preferred method of communicating etc.). <p>Members were informed that the communication review would benefit from Customer Committee insight and views, and that they would be involved in the following:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Insights and focus group to test ideas throughout the review; • Testbed group for creative development or new communications materials and assets; • Support the creation of a group/process to audit and development accessible and inclusive communications; and • Take part in the proposed Customer Pen Portrait Development. <p>The Committee raised some concerns regarding Salix’s ability to collect accurate data for pen portraits as there are various barriers that need to be considered, such as people perceiving the questions to be intrusive, communication preferences and language barriers etc.</p> <p>The CCM assured members that Salix would likely hire an agency to conduct the survey and would provide them with a clear brief about how to approach residents. He added that the purpose of the survey is to better understand these barriers.</p> <p>In response to a query about how the data would be used, the CCM informed members that the team would look for trends to accommodate how certain groups prefer to engage. He informed the Committee that while Salix couldn’t personalise communications for every individual, they hoped to identify certain themes and trends to better engage with the majority of customers.</p> <p>The Committee asked what the CCM intended to gain from the question ‘Who do you listen to and respect the most and why?’ The CCM informed members that the question was designed to understand if Salix could engage with customers through other channels such as a local church group but admitted that there would be less usable data if the response was an immediate family member. The CCM noted that he would review this question.</p>

	<p>Members suggested that it may be beneficial to provide tick boxes answers to some of the questions so that the data collected could be comparable.</p> <p>In response to a query about whether internal communications had also been considered, the EDCC confirmed that the team had drafted the plan for informing colleagues, but they wanted to consult with the Customer Committee before informing staff.</p> <p>The Committee noted that it would be beneficial to include a line about how the data was going to be used so that customers would be more likely to answer the questions provided.</p> <p>The EDCC suggested that updates regarding the communications review should become a standing item so that the members of the Committee are kept in the loop about its progress.</p> <p>The Committee resolved to:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Approve the role(s) of the Customer Committee members in the communications review.
8.	Consumer Standards Consultation
	<p>The EDCC informed members that the Regulator of Social Housing (RSH) had been granted additional tools and powers to enhance Consumer Regulation. The EDCC provided members with an overview of the following:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Consumer standards; • Safety and quality standard; • Transparency, influence and accountability standard; • Neighbourhood and community standard; • Tenancy standard; and • Consumer standard code of practice. <p>The EDCC also noted that deadline to provide the RSH with feedback was 17 October 2023.</p> <p>In response to a query about why people deemed vulnerable and/or most in need of housing were not given priority for housing the EDCC informed members that the person in question may not be the best fit for the property and that allocation required a delicate balance.</p> <p>The Committee asked what would happen to a resident should a property be fraudulently let to which the EDCC responded Salix would investigate the claim and if fraud was detected then the person would have to surrender the property. The EDCC added that this applied to subletting as well.</p> <p>In response to a query about whether it was easy for a tenant to inform Salix they no longer wanted a person to advocate for them, the CSEM informed members that they did not periodically check to see whether a tenant is still happy with their advocate but that the process to self-report was simple.</p> <p>The Committee responded that they would like Salix to take a more proactive approach to check with residents to prevent cases of fraud and exploitation.</p> <p>The members of the Committee expressed approval of the proposed changes to the consumer standards but noted that they would continue to monitor and scrutinise how the RSH progressed.</p>

	<p>The Committee resolved to:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Note the proposed Consumer Standards. <p>Actions:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • EDCC to draft a response to the RSH on behalf of the Customer Committee.
9.	<p>Tenancy Audit Policy</p>
	<p>The EDCC provided members with an overview of the proposed policy approach to carrying out tenancy audits. The EDCC highlighted that properties or tenancies that are identified as high risk will be visited on an annual basis, whereas general needs tenancies will be visited on a three-year rolling programme. She informed members that the purpose of the visits is to collect a variety of data, including but not limited to:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Household information; • Next of kin details; • The condition of the property; • Whether there is any damp or mould; • Whether the property still meets the needs of the tenant; • If any support is needed. <p>The Committee suggested that there should be a points system which would determine how often a property is visited, for example if a property deemed 'high-risk' is visited but passes all checks then it could be moved onto the three-year rolling programme.</p> <p>The EDCC informed members that the team would assess the data and readjust the frequency of visits in some cases but that annual property safety checks were carried out in some properties, such as high-rises, and so the tenancy audit would be incorporated into these visits.</p> <p>The Committee agreed that if an annual property safety check is already scheduled then it would be sensible to incorporate the tenancy audit to save on resource.</p> <p>In response to a query about whether tenants could self-report the data in between the three-year visits, the EDCC and CSEM noted that this could lead to tenancy fraud.</p> <p>The Committee queried whether the category of 'untidy tenancies' was a duplication of 'support needs' as it may indicate some underlying issue that requires additional support, such as mental health or drug abuse.</p> <p>The EDCC informed members that the wording needed to be changed from 'untidy' as it did not refer to the condition of the property, but to situations where the joint tenant has left the property and is not paying rent (for example when a relationship has broken down) and we are unable to remove the joint tenant from the tenancy.</p> <p>In response to a query about whether outdated IDs would be accepted due to how expensive renewing photo IDs could be, the EDCC assured members that they would not expect tenants to apply for an ID for the purpose of a tenancy audit and would accept paper-based forms of ID in some cases.</p> <p>The Committee suggested that Salix should take a photo of a tenant before they moved into the property for the purpose of tenancy audits to which the EDCC informed members they had been doing so in recent years, but they did not have any photo records of older tenants. She added that they would be taking photos of residents upon audit visits and that customers had the right to decline.</p>

In response to a query about whether a tenancy audit could be combined with other property visits, such as repair works, the EDCC confirmed that they would.

The Chair expressed concern that Salix would carry out visits unannounced as a landlord is required to give tenants 24 hours' notice before a visit by law. The EDCC informed members that they would amend this section to provide more context so that it is clear what 'unannounced' referred to combining the audit with other visits and that the tenant would have the right to refuse in these cases.

The Committee resolved to:

- **Approve the Tenancy Audit Policy subject to amends.**
- **Note the proposals for conducting the tenancy audit visit including the draft information leaflet.**
- **Note the next steps.**

Actions:

- **EDCC to reword 'untidy tenancies' in the Tenancy Audit Policy.**
- **EDCC to reword 'unannounced' in the Tenancy visits information leaflet.**

10. Review of Complaint Template Letters

The CSEM presented the revised template letters associated with the Complaints procedure and informed members that the templates had been created as per the requirements of the Housing Ombudsman but had been reviewed by the Complaints Oversight Group (COG).

The Committee asked that the de-escalation letter include a section that reads along the lines of 'if you are not satisfied with the action we have taken, you have the right to reopen your complaint ... etc'.

Members suggested it would be beneficial to inform customers that some complaints will be anonymised and reviewed by the COG to provide them with additional assurance that Salix continues to review and revise their processes in the hope of reducing further complaints.

In response to a query about whether the letters would be too information heavy for some complaints, the CSEM confirmed that it would be up to the manager's discretion and the requirements of the Housing Ombudsman what to include in the final letter.

The Committee asked if the outcome of the complaint could be moved to the top of the letter to which the CSEM confirmed it could be.

In response to a query about training managers on the tone they should use in complaint letters, the CSEM informed the Committee that she had been looking into plain-English training for managers who would write to tenants and tone would be included in this.

Members asked if the response deadline of 10 working days to progress a complaint to the review stage was from the date of the letter or from when the respondent received the letter. The CSEM confirmed that it would be from the date of the letter but that managers took a pragmatic approach and often accepted responses that had been received beyond the deadline.

The Committee approved the proposed revised complaints letter templates subject

	<p>to the amendment of the resolution letter.</p> <p>Actions:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • CSEM to include information about next steps if the customer is unhappy about the resolution in the de-escalation letter.
11.	Annual Customer Charter Performance and Review
	The Committee noted the Customer Charter Assessment 2022/23.
12.	Springboard and B4Y Update
	The Committee noted the Springboard and B4Y Update.
13.	Scrutiny Action Tracker August 23
	<p>The EDCC distributed the Scrutiny Action Tracker.</p> <p>The Committee noted the Scrutiny Action Tracker.</p>
14.	Sub-Group Minutes (Comments Only)
	The Committee noted the minutes from the COG Sub-Group.
15.	Any Other Business
	No other business was discussed.
16.	Date of Next Meeting
	<p>Meeting: Tuesday 07 November 2033</p> <p>Strategy Day: Friday 01 December 2023</p>
<p>The meeting closed at 20:07</p>	