LEASEHOLD FORUM – Wednesday 17th June 2015

Venue: Merry Hill Housing Office

Present:

Leaseholders: Mr M. Cartwright (Chair), Mr T. Steer (TS), Mr L. Whitehouse (LW), Mrs B. Jones (BJ), Mrs B. Weaver (BW), Mr B. McCormack (BM), Mrs S. Mayou (SM), Mrs G. Grimstead (GG), Miss J. Weaver (JW)

Wolverhampton Homes Board Members: Sue Roberts (SR)

Wolverhampton Homes: Helen Bellingham (HB), Ben Howley (BH), Darren Baggs (DB), Lesley Roberts (LR), Jon Page (JP)

Chair introduced Jon Page who was shadowing the Home Sales and Leases Team.

1. Apologies

Mrs A. Guest, Mrs A. Whitehouse, Mark Henderson

2/3. Minutes of last Meeting and Matters arising

The minutes were agreed as being a true record.

HB advised the Forum that the Merridale Court First Tier Tribunal had come to an end and that Wolverhampton Homes (WH) was just awaiting their decision.

TS added that he felt that it was a very fair hearing. After having heard the testimony of all relevant parties, he felt that WH’s officers made some valid points and the decision to upgrade the roofs was the right one, with a view to saving money in the long run. TS said he had concerns about landlords being expected to pay in full for such works as not all landlords are wealthy.

Chair said that there is a lesson to be learnt – communication needs to be better in terms of consultation, which would potentially alleviate the need for taking cases to the tribunal.

HB suggested that the tribunal was necessary in this instance in order to bring all the relevant issues to the surface.
LR raised the point that perhaps the trust wasn’t there at the time. WH’s aim is ultimately to save money and reduce cost to leaseholders.

BM said that leaseholders don’t trust WH because it’s as if there is a hidden agenda.

BJ said that a lot of leaseholders feel that they can get works done a lot cheaper.

BW added that many leaseholders however, do not understand the full extent of the works; i.e. health and safety requirements, guarantees, materials, etc.

LR reassured the Forum that if leaseholders make WH aware of reoccurring issues, we will investigate and take steps to put things right where applicable.

Chair added that the Forum has a role to play – the Forum needs to be proactive in reporting issues back.

SM suggested WH should do its own scaffolding, as scaffolding is often what bumps the cost of repairs up.

LR thanked SM for her suggestion; however, having thoroughly investigated the matter, confirmed that it would in fact be more expensive to purchase our own scaffolding. Reassured the Forum that leaseholders aren’t charged more if scaffolding is left up longer than anticipated.

BJ commented that the operatives that most recently cleaned out her gutters also cleaned her windows, which was nice.

LW asked whether it would be possible for Black Country authorities to pool their resources in order to acquire their own scaffolding which the individual authorities could use as and when required.

LR thanked LW for his suggestion. Advised the Forum that WH is always looking at ways to save money. Given the size of WH and of Wolverhampton, our contracts are value for money.

4. Gas Safety Week

BH advised the Forum that on the week commencing 27th April 2015 WH dedicated the entire week to gas safety – termed Gas Week. In preparation for the week, the Home Sales & Leases team in conjunction with the
Communications Team devised a communications strategy for raising awareness.

During and immediately following Gas Week WH issued 1667 letters, 341 emails and 702 text messages. Facebook was also updated daily with posts specific to gas safety and the Communications Team set up two separate webpages on the website. An article is also due to be included in the next edition of Leaseholder News.

WH also took the opportunity to re-launch its gas servicing scheme for leaseholders. The scheme is now called HomeSafe Gas and there are new service plan options available, plus costs.

In the days following Gas Week, 32 leaseholders contacted the Leasehold Management Team to discuss gas safety, 65 leaseholders declared their interest in the HomeSafe Gas scheme and as of 17th June, 9 people had applied to join the scheme.

BH advised the Forum that the possibility of holding an annual Gas Week has been discussed and the Leasehold Management Team intend to continue raising awareness during routine customer communications; i.e. during phone conversations, etc.

5. Draft Edition of Leaseholder News

BH issued copies of the draft edition to the Forum.

The Forum identified a typing error on the front page which will need to be changed.

HB confirmed that landlord's tenants can apply for the Home Contents Insurance Scheme.

TS asked whether it would insure carpets and curtains in the case of furnished properties.

HB agreed to look into it and send TS a form in the post.

Chair suggested it may be necessary to move the Open Forums back in order to accommodate changes to the draft edition.

DB informed the Forum that with this latest edition of Leaseholder News, there was a real push to get leaseholders involved.

TS highlighted page 6 and suggested it would be nice if there was mention of the Forum.
JW commented that the website is really good. It’s really easy to find what you’re looking for.

HB advised the Forum that the Home Sales & Leases doesn’t have access to the same I.T. as wider housing management; however, we are looking to develop it. We do encourage leaseholders to do more online and we highly recommend email.

Chair thanked the Editorial Team for their efforts thus far and commented that Leaseholder News is already a better product.

6. Chief Executive Update - LR

6.1 New legislation – plans to extend Right To Buy to housing associations. The bill will require councils to sell high value empty council homes to help fund the plans and build more affordable housing. This is likely to affect Wolverhampton although we won’t know to what extent until the details are published.

Further developments with regard to welfare reform will mean that the current cap on benefits for families will reduce from £26,000 to £23,000 and removing automatic entitlement to housing benefit for 18-21 year olds and freezing working age benefits from 2016/17. This will have a huge impact on WH. We may see a drop in income for the Housing Revenue Account which funds various housing services.

6.2 WH performance 2014/15 – end of year figures have been reported to the council and to Board. Rent collected has slightly exceeded the annual target. There were 56 evictions for arrears. Overall performance on repairs was good. All targets were achieved in relation to empty homes turnaround, anti-social behaviour responses, adaptations for disabled people, customer care and estate services. The Home Sales & Leases team collected 104% of ground rent, meaning that some historic debts were cleared as a result of properties being sold or arrears resolved. WH was off target with regard to rechargeable repairs – collected only 13% against target of 20%.

6.3 WH is due celebrate its 10th birthday. Still looking forward and striving for excellence.

6.4 Safeguarding adults and children – WH is preparing itself to respond to new responsibilities to refer any potential abuse to the council’s safeguarding team.

6.5 Need for WH to identify which of our tenants are vulnerable. Currently compiling a database of vulnerable tenants in preparation for a new regime for making regular contact based on the degree of need.

6.6 Merridale Court Tribunal - Still awaiting decision on Merridale Court.
6.7 Digital by default – WH is working hard to reduce the volume of letters and telephone communications, with emphasis being put on digital communication; i.e. website, email.

6.8 Decent Homes – We have officially completed the Decent Homes programme. A small number of properties have not undergone improvements because we were unable to gain access for various reasons to carry out the work. These cases will be picked up as part of the voids process.

JW asked whether as part of Decent Homes, WH were looking at the externals of leasehold properties.

LR confirmed that we are now looking at externals. WH will only undertake works that are deemed necessary following assessment.

Chair suggested that what works are planned for the future might serve as a good topic for a future Forum agenda item.

LW asked whether safeguarding training was available to landlords and asked how landlords would gain access to that training.

LR took note of interested parties’ names and agreed to send them information.

TS asked whether WH is concerned about Universal Credit.

LR confirmed that there are concerns. Government may yet make amendments to welfare reform, but for now we must prepare for what has been communicated to us. LR emphasised the ethos of Universal Credit, which is to bring benefits in line with being paid a wage, thereby easing the transition into working life.

SR suggested that it had been rumoured that they might further reduce to the benefit cap to £20,000.

LW advised that the DWP can establish alternative payment arrangements, whereby the rent is paid directly to the landlord etc.

LR commented that any shortfall has to come from somewhere, i.e. other Universal Credit components, and that it’s likely that some tenants may be pushed into financial hardship.

DB talked about training on Universal Credit which be shared with the Forum.
7. Leaseholder Own-Fit Doors

HB stated that since 2010/2011 WH has carried out three fire risk assessments. These assessments identified action that was needed to 320 leasehold flats to ensure compliance to the fire safety legislation. Leaseholders were advised that they could either fit their own door and provide certification, or they could ask WH to fit them a door, for which we offered generous payment terms.

Of the 320 cases identified, only 51 cases remain opened. Of the 51, most are engaging with us to resolve the situation. There are 11 cases where the leaseholders are not engaging; we’ve been left with no alternative therefore but to refer the matter to the city council’s Legal Department to commence legal proceedings. The legal team sent the leaseholders a 21 day pre-court letter. 3 leaseholders responded to the letter and are now cooperating. One of the properties has been repossessed and so the door issue will be dealt with as part of the sale proceedings.

The fire risk assessments will now be carried out in-house, which should save WH in the region of £17,000 per annum. It is likely that more doors will be identified in the coming weeks and months as part of future fire risk assessments. These cases will be acted upon appropriately by the Leasehold Management Team.

8. You Said We Did – BH

Vauxhalls balconies – WCC have visited site. Currently checking records to see who completed work and what guarantees are in place.

Warstones Gardens – Parking and lighting issue. This is going to be looked at as part of minor works.

9. Any Other Business

None

Date and venue of next meeting:

23rd September 2015 @ Merry Hill Housing Office.