

Lewisham Homes

Lewisham Homes Leaseholder Forum

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Report Author:

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Introduction

TPAS was approached to carry out an observation of the Lewisham Homes Leaseholder Forum.

There were concerns about the current Chair's ability to effectively manage the sessions whilst performing his other role as an expert advisor to the forum. There were wider concerns about the behaviours of participants and so an independent eye was likely to provide some suggestions for improvement.

Tpas Associate

Tpas engaged with one of their highly respected Associates, Lynda Hance who, with a wealth and knowledge of leasehold and service charge issues as well as a history of working with such groups, could offer the right kind of critical observation.

Scope of work

There would be an initial short pre-meet between the current independent Chair Alan Wake and Lynda Hance, followed by Lynda observing the Leaseholder Forum on Tuesday 5th October and providing a short feedback note identifying the key points of that session.

Tpas could, post feedback be interested in providing an independent role if this was to be explored by Lewisham Homes.

Pre-meet gathering of issues

Alan Wake is currently chairing the Forum free of charge but increasingly finding a conflict between the role of Chair and his role as advocate/advisor.

The Forum has experienced some leaseholders 'hogging', wasting time with 'moans', discussing more personal 'issues' as well as some administrative errors in invitations, etc.

The Forum is not in dialogue with Lewisham Council, just Lewisham Homes as their managing agent.

There have been three meetings so far, which could be managed better with clearer understanding of responsibilities.

There is no particular catalyst for the Forum; Lewisham Homes is pro-actively engaging.

All leaseholders who had registered via the website and the newsletter have been invited to attend.

There is a separate Lewisham Cladding Action Group.

Lewisham Homes is planning a service charge review project and trying to put a group together.

A system of scrutinising/witnessing repairs has been introduced.



Observation Feedback

	Observation	Issue	Recommendation
1	No agenda or other papers were sent to me in advance. Some leaseholders said they didn't have them.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Hard to follow meeting/discussion. Seemed others didn't have papers either. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Establish a clear system of where the papers will be – e.g. web site and refer to that in the invitation. Have the agenda and all other papers prepared on slides for clarity, to help participants follow discussion more easily and as a tool for the Chair to use to move things on. The Chair should be co-host and share/control the slides.
2	Staff on the Zoom call did not indicate their job role on their Zoom label.	Unclear who was who or why they were attending.	Ensure all staff label themselves clearly on Zoom for the benefit of all.
3	Some staff were introduced, but not all, but unsure as not 'labelled'. Some people I believed to be staff did not speak, so unsure why they were present.	Unclear who was who or why they were attending.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Perhaps have a list of staff attending as an opening / closing slide for clarity Lewisham Homes to give consideration to who attends – it seemed staff-heavy.
4	Chair commented he didn't have a list of staff attending in advance and staff seemed vague about who would be present.	Lack of clarity was apparent and detracts from professionalism of all involved.	Chair should have a pre-meeting to agree agenda, guest speakers and timings.
5	<p>Operation/control of the Zoom meeting was not practiced or polished:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> The waiting room was opened at 18:24 after some leaseholders had already joined the meeting, so no opportunity for a pre-meeting of staff if that was needed. Staff did discuss 'leaseholders' while they may have been present – i.e. one attendee was labelled as 'iPhone'. Attendees were not automatically muted as they joined. By 18:45 there were still people not muted manually. The person (Glenda?) apparently in charge of technical Zoom matters also 	<p>The technical issues at the start gave a poor impression.</p> <p>Zoom has been well used over the last 18 months and it's surprising that Lewisham Homes is not more 'polished' in operating it.</p>	<p>Have separate responsibilities:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Technical: admitting, muting, etc. Managing the chat function. Taking minutes. Engaging in discussion. Agree roles and process with Chair.



	joined in the discussion <u>and</u> seemed to be managing the chat function.		
6	No PowerPoint/slides used: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> No cover slide to state title of meeting, time, duration, etc. No agenda on a slide – several leaseholders said they had not been sent an agenda Presenters/speakers did not use slides 	Meeting was disjointed and hard to follow for me as a housing professional; it's fair to assume it must have been the same for leaseholders.	Improve the structure of the meetings, use PowerPoint as a guide, focus and to enable all leaseholders to more easily follow discussion.
7	No introductory item re Zoom etiquette: raising hands to speak, not introducing personal issues, being brief, etc.	This is standard practice and although leaseholders were very polite there could be improvement.	Ensure 'housekeeping' is the first agenda item.
8	Issues of people not receiving invitations were raised. Some leaseholders said they had registered but still not received notifications. Staff said it was necessary to register in order to be invited.	I understand this is a recurring issue.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> As this was the 3rd meeting, I am surprised this hasn't been resolved. It might help curtail complaints to explain at the start of the meeting how leaseholders are invited. Lewisham Homes to consider how issues are continuing to arise, particularly if leaseholders are registered but not receiving invitations.
9	Minutes/notes of previous meetings were referred to but not put up as slides.	Made it difficult to follow/comment.	Have key points or action points arising as a slide.
10	"Agenda item 4" was announced, but not stated what it was and then "no further comments".	Ditto	Ditto
11	The Chair was participating rather than chairing. At 19:07, Glenda took over chairing by asking people to hold comments and let Martin speak.	AW has a conflict in roles.	If this Forum is to have an independent Chair and AW has some conflicts, Lewisham Homes should consider appointing an independent Chair, thus enabling AW to advise/advocate/mediate.
12	Unclear who was taking minutes.	Minutes haven't been sent to me.	Minutes should be emailed to all attendees within 2 weeks and posted on the web site.
13	At start of meeting there was no confirmation of how many leaseholders present, nor what the topics for the meeting would be.	Meeting focus unclear.	If the Forum has a terms of reference it would be useful for the Chair to clarify that at the start.
14	Issue of breakdown of service charges was discussed:	There was no acknowledgement of Hedley's suggestion or even an undertaking to consider it.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> I understand that a new computer system is to be implemented that might resolve this issue, but until



	<p>Leaseholders told if they wanted a breakdown of costs they should ask for it. Hedley Stow suggested that automatic breakdowns of charges could be provided where a variance is greater than, say, +/- 5%.</p>	<p>I was surprised at the response and that the leaseholders took it so calmly. Who would pay any bill without knowing what it's for?</p>	<p>then, the approach of not providing information is unusual, to say the least.</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • I felt the leaseholders could easily have been more vocal about the attitude of pushing the onus back on the customer to request information in order to understand their bills. • If Lewisham wants to build a dialogue with leaseholders it needs to consider how it provides its services and information about them.
15	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Martin Ryan – when Alan Wake introduced him, Alan said he wanted to push the meeting forward, but Martin appeared defensive about his previous presentation. • Martin seemed out of touch with, and oblivious to, leaseholder opinions and feelings about caretaking issues. He insisted that cleaning is done, when leaseholders gave examples of how they knew it wasn't done in every block. • Martin stated that the website statement of intent doesn't reflect what actually happens. • Staff tried to look/talk about high level/strategic issues/consultation/etc, but did not reply to or engage in discussion on the lack of day to day basic service that leaseholders claimed. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • This part of the meeting was the most difficult. • Leaseholders were remarkably restrained in their criticism of the cleaning and caretaking service. • Staff were defensive and deflective and simply denied the leaseholders' views. • The issue wasn't resolved, there was no suggestion how it might be other than that it is included in an action plan that wasn't presented to the meeting. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Honesty and transparency is crucial to building customer confidence. • The organisations that get the most respect are those that hold their hands up and admit there is room for improvement and enter into dialogue. • I think this aspect needs a rethink by Lewisham Homes as it will surely come up time after time with the possibility of becoming more adversarial if it isn't addressed. • If the web site is out of date, resolve that as a matter of urgency – either take the item down or update it.
16	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Generally, discussion seemed to ramble and be directionless. Leaseholders were making their points but there was no response from Lewisham Homes. • An action plan was mentioned but not put up as a slide for focus. 	<p>As an observer I left the meeting feeling that nothing had been resolved. If leaseholders feel the same they will either stop engaging or become more robust.</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Using slides to focus and direct discussion and for the presentations would help enormously. • This was a large meeting and it's not productive to treat it as a round table chat – it needs structure.



17	Staff referred to staff by first name as though everyone knows who they are. Some 'regular' leaseholder attendees did know, but many others were quiet.	I felt the idea was to be 'jolly' and friendly, but it came across to me as cliquey.	The meeting can be friendly whilst being professionally run – a new Chair could reset the tone.
18	Some jargon was used: "tech pilot".	Hard for some leaseholders to follow, particularly if English isn't their first language.	Make an effort to be jargon free or explain it.
19	Some of the Lewisham language was surprising: "hopefully will bring a culture shift" (Sarah W-J) "little wins" (Emma)	Came across as lacking in positivity and firm control of business by Lewisham Homes.	Consider use of language.
20	Staff member Brian appears to have better dialogue and rapport with leaseholders. He was honest, clear, and didn't use jargon.	This was the most positive part of the meeting.	If the meeting's been recorded, use Brian's approach and language as an exemplar.
21	As the meeting progressed AW increasingly answered leaseholders' questions and conversed as an advocate/advisor rather than as Chair.	Refer to comments in 11 above.	Refer to comments in 11 above.
22	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Towards the end of the meeting Julie Winfield (leaseholder) suggested setting up an alternative group for leaseholders to discuss their issues without staff present and prepare for the Forum. There was no response from Lewisham Homes. • AW queried how "we" could support that. Staff didn't respond. • Another leaseholder flagged up that Lewisham Council Leaseholder Alliance already exists and that leaseholders should join that group. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • There appears to be a real risk that the Forum could collapse if leaseholders don't feel it's working for them. • From the leaseholder point of view, joint preparation might bring them better prepared but could result in only the loudest voices being heard. 	Lewisham Homes needs to reset the Forum to prevent fracturing, collapse, or it becoming adversarial.
23	Date of next meeting – not set; indication it would be early December via Zoom.	I was surprised the meetings for the year aren't set in an advance schedule to enable maximum attendance.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • List all meetings for the year on the website and state them at each meeting. • Operating on an ad-hoc basis gives the impression that arrangements are for the ease of staff, when leaseholders' time should be equally valued.



24	Staff mentioned the possibility of an annual conference in 2022.	The meeting had been in progress some time at this point and hadn't gone particularly well, so I wondered if/why this was a good thing to introduce.	Get the Forum established successfully before moving on to larger meetings/events.
25	<p>Post meeting – staff were asked to stay on the Zoom after leaseholders logged off.</p> <p>I felt there was some justifying of staff position and criticism of leaseholders' attitude.</p>	<p>I felt it was awkward to say this in front of leaseholders and implied an 'us & them' attitude.</p> <p>The first comment in the staff-only debrief was to criticise leaseholders for calling staff liars (relating to the caretaking/cleaning discussion).</p>	<p>If a debrief is necessary, have it pre-agreed and maybe do it the next day.</p> <p>To criticise leaseholders wasn't in the spirit of engagement that I was expecting and could be interpreted as setting a culture of believing that Lewisham Homes is 'right' and leaseholders are 'wrong'.</p> <p>I think a clear ethos should be set by Lewisham Homes and complaints/criticism of a service should be taken as valuable feedback that can be used to improve the service or the perception of the service.</p>

General observations

- a. To demonstrate transparency, the Forum meetings could be recorded and uploaded to the web site for other leaseholders to see. If recording is stated at the beginning of the meeting, that complies with privacy/GDPR.
- b. Lewisham Homes could have a pre-meeting/surgery with Leaseholders for half an hour before the start of the Forum to discuss individual complaints and issues. That would leave it clear for the Chair to cut those discussions during the Forum.
- c. I felt the leaseholders who spoke were articulate, patient, and polite, compared to every other leasehold meeting I've ever attended. I believe Lewisham homes has the opportunity to build a productive Forum and work with leaseholders to improve services, but what I observed isn't really getting to that point.

Possible next steps

We believe that Lynda could support Lewisham Homes and the Leaseholder Forum as an effective independent Chair. Part of that role would help the Forum be a positive place in which to bring leaseholders and staff together.

For that to happen we believe the role should include:

- Chairing the actual meetings
- Having a pre-meeting with staff and independent advocate to agree agenda, etc.
- Have perhaps 2 interim meetings with staff and independent advocate between Forum meetings to ensure progression of action points. Interim meeting frequency could reduce as things begin to run more smoothly; issues are resolved & leaseholder confidence with Lewisham Homes improves.