

WOODBERRY DOWN COMMUNITY ORGANISATION

Board Meeting

MINUTES

Thursday 21st November 2024
7:15 pm Redmond Community Centre

Attendance : Hilary Britton, Adrian Essex, Mina Faragalla, Phil Cooke, Ann Hunt, Geoff Baron, Livis- Jeanne Lupumba, Dulce Laluces, Gloria Obiliana, Omar Villalba, Gita Sootarsing, Jackie Myers, Oonagh Gormley, Barbara Panuzzo, Kristina Zagar, Shifra Appich, Tina Parrott, Willian Martinez, Donna Fakes

Visitors: Tom Anthony (BH), Hermione Brightwell (LBH), Julian Rodriguez (NHG), Sarah Fabes (BH), Cllr Sarah Young, Jada Guess (NHG)

ITLA: Roda Hassan, Simon Slater, Amber Hassan

Apologies : Kalu Amogu, Geoff Bell, Ann Kelly, Anwar Idris, William Sheehy, Necdet Ozturk, Leonora Williams, Nicolas Attalides, Francis McDonagh, Andrea Anderson, Andreea Stoica

Section 0 - Introduction

0.1. Acceptance of minutes of 17th October 2024: Minutes were check for accuracy and accepted.

0.2 Matters Arising / Action Tracker

- 0.21 Roda reported that Trevor mentioned at the Liaison meeting that he would check if the report would be ready in time for the November Board. Tom provided an update, stating he has been following up on this for the past three days. Roda clarified there are two components concerning the window action: one is a summary of the report explaining why the windows fell out, and the other outlines the proposed remedial works.
- 0.22 Hermione provided an update that the split household policy is currently under review, and Hackney will provide WDCO with more details. Roda requested that Hackney share the scope of the review, as previously requested by WDCO at the October Board meeting. Hackney has been asked to provide this by next Friday.

ACTION: Hackney will provide WDCO with a scope of the policy review by 29th November.

- 0.23 Julian provided an update that NHG has held three separate meetings with representatives from WDCO and Hackney since the October Board to reach a resolution on the Phase 3 service charge. NHG has made some reductions to the service charge, which have been reviewed, and several actions are

scheduled to be completed by early next week, including the providing of further information on the service charges.

- 0.24 Hackney has provided the comparable charges for their other new-build estates to the Service Charge Working Group. Board confirmed that the action can now be closed.
- 0.25 Tom relayed feedback on the wind issues by Sainsbury's and the surrounding areas to the Berkeley Estates team. Roda stated that WDCO requested a separate meeting with Berkeley to address further wind issues across the estates. Tom updated that he needs to follow this up with the Berkeley Estates team and Operations team.

ACTION: Tom will follow up on the wind issue feedback and the request for a separate meeting with the Berkeley Estates team and Operations team.

- 0.26 Julian has relayed the pest control concerns back to Jada and her team.
- 0.27 Julian updated that Sarah Connelly or Grace in the regeneration team will respond by next week to Friends of Woodberry Down regarding the initiatives NHG have put in place for the elderly.
- 0.28 Roda forwarded the email outlining the service charge issues in Phase 2 (NHG shared ownership blocks) to Julian and will provide an update to the chair of Willowbrook and other WDCO representatives once she receives a response from NHG.
- 0.29 Simon sent an email to Julian regarding a resident living in Hornbeam with inadequate heating but did not have a response. - Cllr Sarah Young raised that a number of cases have been raised regarding inadequate heating in Hornbeam which has been escalated.
- 0.30 Julian confirmed that the solar panels are operational and are subsidising the communal lighting bills. Roda raised that this may not be accurate for all NHG blocks, as NHG is contracting a third party to assess the solar panels. From her understanding, NHG has not yet confirmed whether the solar panels in all NHG blocks have been fully commissioned. Jada responded that the M&E team has requested contractors to inspect the solar panels and determine the cost of their maintenance.

ACTION: NHG will provide an update on the solar panels in the NHG blocks at the Operational meeting.

- 0.31 Cllr Sarah Young updated that the Transport Team at the council, along with Berkeley, have been pushing Transport for London (TfL) to finalise their proposals for the designs and begin work on it. While the design that went through the planning process for the last Masterplan still stands, discussions are ongoing to finalise the latest updated version. This includes decisions on narrowing Seven Sisters Road, adding cycle tracks and crossings, and determining the future of the Manor House junction.
- 0.32 William circulated the minutes to Friends of Woodberry Down on Tuesday.

Section 1 - Introduction

1. **Phase 3 Rents and Service Charge:** Update from Omar Villalba and Shifra Appich

- 1.1 Omar and Shifra presented a recap on the Phase 3 rents and service charge which focus on the rent levels for Phase 3, timing, feedback from the resident surveys, and how WDCO has responded to residents' concerns.
- 1.2 Shifra, who is a resident from Phase 5, is moving into Phase 3 and has been aware of the regeneration project since primary school. After viewing the flats, Shifra and other residents were informed about the new rent and service charges which was significantly higher than what residents are paying for their current homes: resident moving to one-bedroom would be looking at a 74% increase, 91% increase for two-bed units, and 110% increase for three-bed units. In comparison, Phase 2 had only a 33% increase. Shifra and other Phase 3 residents feel that they are being priced out of the community, and were only informed of the new rent levels in mid-September, just two weeks before their moving date was scheduled for.
- 1.3 Shifra and Omar highlighted that WDCO conducted a survey a few weeks ago to gather residents' opinions on the rent increases. Some of the feedback included concerns that the combined rent and service charge are too high for residents who will struggle with the increase. Residents were only informed 1-2 weeks before the viewing or during the viewing about the increase. The prospective Phase 3 residents do not understand why they are paying more than other social rented tenants in Woodberry Down. Many feel they have no choice but to accept the offer and figure out how to afford it. Most importantly, residents feel that Phase 3 is designed for private tenants or those who can afford higher rents, not for them.
- 1.4 Some resident quotes reflect common themes: "We were asked to attend meetings about carpets and kitchens," "they avoided talking about rents in these meetings," "this is social cleansing — they want the poor people out," "I am on benefits and will just about be able to afford this, but when I go back to work, I won't be able to afford it," "I can't afford this place. This is £7,000 more a year or I'll miss my chance for housing," and "We are stressed because we feel that when we move, the prices will continue to rise until we can't afford it and are forced to leave." The survey results reflect the sentiments of the social housing residents.
- 1.5 Omar highlighted that the rent increases, ranging from 75% to 110%, represent a significant challenge for the community, particularly for residents moving from the old blocks to the new ones. To address this, WDCO independently conducted a survey by engaging directly with residents in Phases 4 and 5 to gather and reflect their concerns. In addition, WDCO has actively reached out to key stakeholders, including politicians, ward members and the Hackney Mayor, all of whom have expressed their support. WDCO continues to engage with NHG and Hackney Council to explore actionable solutions for reducing the rent and service charges.
- 1.6 Resident feedback has underscored WDCO's core demands: a reduction in rent and service charges to more manageable levels; enhanced respect for residents; improved communication and accountability; timely resolutions, with a target to address these issues by the end of 2024; and assurances regarding future costs and their impact on other social housing residents at Woodberry Down.
- 1.7 WDCO has been in active discussions with Hackney and NHG about these concerns and has requested an independent review to identify ways to lower housing costs. Initial conversations have also emphasized the need for significant reductions in service charges. Following WDCO questions regarding the rent, an error was identified in the rent for the one-bedroom rent units,

which was £25 per week higher than the figure that the government rent formula produced—amounting to £1,200 annually for affected residents. While indicative service charges have been provided, WDCO stressed the importance of resolving these quickly to ensure residents can benefit before moving in.

- 1.8 WDCO also discussed with partners about dropping session for residents, additional comms and support for residents who have affordability concerns. They requested an extension of the timeline to January 2025, allowing residents more time to make decisions regarding the pre-allocated property. WDCO emphasised the need for swift action, as residents are eager to resolve the issue by the end of 2024 in order to move in before Christmas and understand the associated costs. They also requested clearer and more effective communication, stressing that NHG and Hackney must ensure accurate information is shared with residents. Furthermore, WDCO asked for future assurances regarding potential cost increases, requesting R&R, responsible for Phase 3, to provide clarity on the caps for service charges, the implications for future charges, and the projected profiles for the next five years, so residents can better plan and budget.
- 1.9 The presentation was followed by questions from the Board and residents.
- 1.10 An observer requested clarification on council tax and its associated bands. Roda explained that prospective residents have been given a guideline for the council tax band based on the bands assigned to similar newly built properties at Woodberry Down. However, the final council tax cost has not yet been confirmed.
- 1.11 The Board asked NHG when they would return with the rent formula calculations. Julian responded that the figures are expected to be finalised by Friday or Monday, as discussed in Monday's meeting.
- 1.12 Adrian asked Omar if a plan for 'Next Steps' or further meetings to discuss actions had been set out. Omar explained that fortnightly meetings have been held with directors and assistant directors, but there is also a need for residents to see the ongoing efforts to reduce rents. He emphasised that the survey highlighted residents' desire to have their say on the increases.
- 1.13 Adrian raised the question of whether the rents, calculated based on a legal formula, could realistically be changed. Omar responded that some changes have already occurred, including correcting an error for one-bedroom units, which reduced rents by roughly £25 per week. Service charge reductions have also been discussed in principle, though no formal confirmation has been provided. Roda clarified that NHG and Hackney have stated that, aside from the one-bedroom adjustment, the rents are unlikely to change as they are determined by a set formula. However, WDCO has requested an independent review of the calculations and is awaiting the necessary information from NHG. Roda also noted NHG and Hackney are exploring ways to reduce services, which could result in lower service charges.
- 1.14 A Board member asked why the rent and service charge increases in Phase 3 differ from those in Phases 1 and 2. Roda explained that Phase 1 (the KSS) rents were based on a "conversion rent" model, where residents paid the same rent as in their Hackney blocks. In contrast, Phase 3 rents follow a formula, which takes property value into account. As Phase 3 properties are more expensive, the rents are higher. The Board noted that this distinction was not clearly communicated to residents and questioned why NHG and Hackney had not provided this information earlier.
- 1.15 An observer asked what happens if a resident cannot afford the rent. Hermione responded that Hackney has asked NHG to review the service charges. Under

Hackney policy, if a resident refuses an allocation, they will be offered alternative accommodation. Roda clarified that Phase 4 decant residents expected to move by spring 2025 would be offered an alternative property outside Woodberry Down in Hackney if they do not accept their pre-allocated unit. Hermione added that no residents assessed so far have been deemed unable to afford their new homes, as affordability assessments are ongoing.

- 1.16 An observer asked how affordability criteria ensure residents can afford the properties. Shifra also questioned how Hackney and NHG expect social housing residents to handle rent increases of up to 110%, even with an affordability check. Cllr Sarah Young suggested NHG provide WDCO with a detailed explanation of the affordability test, including the formula and how income is considered.
- 1.17 Omar emphasised to Hackney that while Phase 3 residents understand there will be cost increases when moving from older Hackney homes to new homes, the scale of the increases—ranging from 75% to 110%—is unacceptable. He called for significant reductions in both rent and service charges and better communication to residents, noting that it should not fall on WDCO to explain the Phase 3 rents. Julian assured the Board that NHG is working on improving Phase 3 service charge cost and building residents' confidence in the numbers provided. He also noted that the service charges are estimates and will be adjusted once the building is occupied, with accounts available for audit to ensure NHG charges reflect actual costs.
- 1.18 Roda informed residents that if they have questions regarding their offer or their options, they can also visit the WDCO office, where she and Simon can provide independent advice and are available to assist on Tuesdays and Thursdays.
- 1.19 Shifra suggested holding another meeting between residents, NHG, and Hackney to discuss a concrete plan of action. She expressed concerns about the uncertainty residents are facing regarding their move before and after Christmas. Residents have requested that Hackney and NHG arrange this meeting, emphasising the need for fully briefed representatives from both organisations to address these questions.

2. Partner Updates: The partner updates were provided in writing, and no further updates or questions were addressed during the Board meeting.

The remainder of the November Board meeting was held as a confidential session. Please refer to the separate minutes for details.