

# **How SHG Set Our Rents Consultation Resident Involvement Report**

## **March 2021**

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## Report Purpose

The Government tells us how Southern Housing Group (SHG) can set rents and SHG are looking at how we set our rents. The Government froze rents back in 2015 and made housing associations cut the rents year on year. This year, a new Rent Standard came in and allowed us to increase our social rents by 2.7%. SHG also wanted to look into if there is a clear rationale (reason/justification) to put rents up in any area or particular estate or schemes by a bit more – it can be up to 5% for ordinary social housing and up to 10% for supported housing (homes where we provide additional support for residents, such as homeless hostels or housing for people with disabilities). This would only apply on re-let, not to existing residents staying in the same home.

The Strategy and Policy Team, working with the Finance Team, wished to consult with the residents to look at the priority spend as aligned with the corporate plan and whether residents felt that these were right or suggested other priorities and their views on services received for the rent paid

## Consultation Themes

The theme was to inform residents about how we set rents and to find out how our spending priorities, as set out in the corporate plan, aligned with residents' priorities and their experiences of the services we provide with rental income, as well as gathering residents' views on other priorities they may have.

## Consultation Methodology.

This report sets out the findings of the review undertaken by residents through face to face focus groups in 2 sheltered schemes, a focus group of residents at our Courtyard Office, Newport and via telephone calls during lockdown.

The Customer Involvement team worked with the Group Policy and Insight Manager on the design, co-ordination and delivery of the review and report findings.

In line with standard research practice, and due to the numbers of residents involved, the findings of this review group cannot be viewed as providing representative feedback on the views of all the Group's residents. These results do provide an insight into the views and opinions of the residents we engaged with.

## Respondent profile

This consultation was done in two parts due to Covid19 situation.

Focus groups were held on the Isle of Wight where 31 were invited and 17 attended the three sessions. We also conducted a face to face interview with a resident on the island at their home.

34 were invited to the London focus group which was subsequently cancelled.

Reading focus group 185 leaflets were sent out but the focus group was subsequently cancelled.

Telephone consultation took place between 22 and 25 June 2020 focusing on the residents who were previously attending the London or Reading focus groups. 8 residents took part in the telephone consultation calls.

The breakdown of tenures were 12 from sheltered schemes, 11 from general needs and 2 were shared owners.

The age profile was as follows:

Age range	35-44 x 1	45-54 x 4	55-59 x 1	60-64 x 5
	65-74 x 6	75+ x 7	unknown x 1	

13 were male, 11 were female and 1 unknown.

5 of those we spoke to indicated a disability and 2 identified themselves as having a BME background.

## Consultation findings

From the focus groups held on the Isle of Wight the feedback was as follows:

### Knights Court, Isle of Wight

Issues of concern for spend:

#### Getting maintenance and repairs right:

- Daylight round doors since door closer refit. If it is bigger than a £1-coin width, then report to Sheltered Scheme Coordinator (SSC).
- Fire Escape Routes for residents with mobility issues.
- Reporting is a 2-way process and communication between contactor and SSC including timeframes for repairs doesn't happen.
- SSC has sign off for repairs but no sign off for PO's (building / communal repairs) i.e door described above or fire safety improvements.

#### Contracting well:

- Mainland contracts – why cannot local island contractors be used.
- Island specific issues using mainland contractors i.e. bad weather equals no ferries.
- Service washing machines regularly to reduce wait when they breakdown
- Poor service from DW when completing contracts e.g. replace door, but no rails added, parts of old door still in place, can't get mobility wheeler over doorstep.
- High priority – use local based contractors or look at consolidating contracts between Housing Associations on island

#### Transparency and communication:

- Following a survey on the heating system, would like to be updated on outcomes and options
- Reporting is a 2-way process and communication between contactor and SSC including timeframes for repairs doesn't happen.

**Services:**

- Garden Grants – this is seen as a collective benefit for all residents at the scheme
- Vulnerable residents feel isolated when SSC is not in the building. Discussion took place regarding the difference between current telecare systems and local use of Wight Care
- Resident spoke to SSC about charge for TV licence on service charge – will SHG report back and explain position under new rules for over-70s.

**Overall:**

- Residents understood and supported the importance of investing in building safety and agreed that the top-level themes in the Corporate Plan are right and understood that this might require rent increases (up to Rent standard limits) for re-lets, if not for current residents.
- We need to get transparency and communication, repairs and maintenance and contracting right.

**The Courtyard, Isle of Wight**

Issues of concern for spend:

**Getting maintenance, repairs and contracting right**

- Planned Maintenance: Heating systems, Windows and doors.
- Use of DW versus internal estate care
- DW was felt to be inefficient and not effective
- Use local trades people

**Staffing**

- Request for more staff
- We should recruit from local Isle of Wight residents
- Staff / Housing Services Managers (HSMs) to be more face to face to spot issues with buildings earlier.
- Carita House has an office, but staff do not seem to use this why?

**Rents**

- A discussion took place regarding rent formula and the different rents e.g. social, affordable, intermediate. Formulas were displayed on the screen.
- Residents felt rents should be raised if SHG are behind other social housing providers

**Porter Court, Isle of Wight**

Issues of concern for spend:

- Front door and door entry system replacement – cost of this shouldn't be put on to resident
- Rent increase date is not in line with pension increase (rent increase starts before pension increase comes into effect)
- Isle of Wight council hasn't set council tax as there was a delay in setting the budget.

- Benefits do not align i.e. Universal Credit is paid a calendar month in arrears. [Checked with Community Investment Services Manager for more information about benefit payments.]
- Heaters are out of date (storage heaters) and was brought up 2 years ago. Limited control. Heating parts becoming obsolete or a 3 month wait for part. A heating survey has been undertaken but outcome hasn't been shared. This had been undertaken by SHG Fuel Poverty Advisor.
- Cheaper hot water required – system is out of date. There are electric showers that heat themselves but copper tank for kitchen and bathroom sinks.
- Window replacement – badly sealed windows
- Guttering is full of moss and needs cleaning – annually? The roofs need to be cleaned off and sprayed to keep the seagulls off as they are nesting in the moss.
- Can we have solar panels?
- Query re TV licence – is service charge for communal TV in lounge? If eligible for free TV should they pay for communal? Group Policy and Insight Manager agreed to look at this.
- No wifi in communal area. [Group Policy and Insight Manager agreed to follow this up.]

#### **What we like about living at Porter Court:**

- Social life very good – Easter bonnets, BBQs, minibus days out, Thursday there are different events happening, bowling, darts, bingo, Big Breakfast for £2.
- Christmas dinner, fish and chip nights – funded by residents
- Macmillan coffee morning
- Summer fete
- Friendliness of residents and staff
- (one resident) 16 years and nothing wrong
- Gardening – Ground maintenance do lawns and trim large bushes / trees. Residents do the flower beds
- Flat has the sun and a patio area
- Maintenance is up together as SSC is always on top of it.
- Guest room – possibly £10 single or £15 double per night.
- Residents liked the new rent and service charge booklet.

The feedback from resident telephone calls was as follows:

#### **1. What do you like about living where you are with regard to services from SHG?**

- Being in the middle of two schools as I came from another area and as a disabled adapted house we gave up a much more spacious property to move to current place. Moved to this one with the two schools in walking distance. Beach nearby and fields for dog. House feels like living in a rabbit hutch as small although it is liveable and have made it my own by adding a porch and widen kitchen with SHG's permission. Just need kitchen replacement.
- Quite happy, problems with heating and hot water and getting no straight forward answer.
- Not called on SHG for anything but called for neighbour and they came out quickly. Car parking lighting is still an issue and has been reported with DW looking at during

daylight hours and unable to see the issue of a very dark corner of car park. No communication about the outcome of visit.

- Pleased to have a permanent housing association home.
- Like my community

## 2. Do we have the right priorities?

- Yes
- Yes, I think so
- What are they? Resident was concerned that the corporate plan is a set of visions with the first line on each a purpose and the rest visions. What is the detail behind the list?
- Several people answered yes, in theory they sound right, but is that what will happen in practice?
- Agree that safety is the highest priority, both fire safety and safety in the area, eg. lighting in car park and entrances, fixing trip hazards.

## 3. What would you prioritise?

- Covered all. Previously lived in a council house and SHG have a better relationship with residents than the council did.
- Going smooth sailing everything is alright and had nothing to add.
- Good where I am but concerned that service charge this year has increased hugely but why was last year so far out in costing and double in the year before. Rent £412 and increase of £31 which £10 was rent and £21 service charge. Service Charge has been miscalculated for the last few years, why?
- Several people said getting repairs and maintenance right.
- Getting contracts right with repairs and maintenance services
- Making sure that everyone is safe, including building safety, but also anti-social behaviour.

## 4. Do we have the balance right between providing the right services and keeping rent affordable?

- Compared to private rented rates I am very happy. Services we get from SHG perfect.
- Quite affordable rent wise. Service – what is or is not important or urgent is not being made clear to residents therefore not certain of timescales when to expect the repairs to happen. SHG is better than it was from few years ago when they send a carpenter for a plumbing job!
- Terrible experiences with repairs. No complaints re rent levels, and my HSM is excellent, but the repairs service is terrible. Have had huge problems with house ever since moving in (new build). Repair contractors do the minimum in the hope that they won't have to carry out the full repair, which in the long run costs them more and my family suffer. Many contractors have caused problems which have then taken many many further visits to resolve. Long-term disrepair. At one point the whole of our row of houses sent a petition to the Chief Exec about leaks, our ceilings collapsing and so

- on. He did nothing for 2 years, then arranged a meeting on a day that none of us could attend without consultation, then promised to rearrange and didn't.
- Don't know who my HSM is. Nobody comes round to the estate to check on a regular basis and see what needs doing or make themselves available for residents to speak to.
  - HSM's have the attitude that you're being a pain – very dismissive. I've been told, 'if you're not happy, complain' rather than the HSM following up and supporting my requests.
  - Repairs rarely fully completed. Difficult to get the contractor to come out – poor communication, endless appointments where someone waits in and nobody comes, then repair not completed. Reasons for not carrying out full repair not properly explained – “if it was up to me I would do that, but my instructions are...” so no accountability to resident or proper explanation for decisions.
  - Bad experiences with repairs – impression given by HSM is that
  - As a 25% shared owner, I am paying 75% rent for very little service. Other tenants get repairs done and even new kitchens and bathrooms, whereas I pay rent but get nothing. I'm contributing to their new kitchen and it doesn't seem fair. Currently windows being replaced for whole building. I knew what I was signing up for, but it doesn't seem fair. Would prefer to have access to SHG repairs service even I had to pay for it. Concern raised in the increase in service charges but well-kept overall. Prefer to have lower rent and be liable to furnish flat with white goods and curtains, etc of their choice rather than private rent which is higher but includes these which may not be to residents' choice. Rents between HA and private LL are swings and roundabouts when looking at furnishings.
  - Concerned that SHG contract services out and don't manage the results well enough – one contractor comes to mow the grass but won't pick up an empty bottle in the way of the mower, or won't trim a hedge so that mower can get into that area. Lack of communication between them to sort out simple problems. Pleased that estate management being brought in-house, would like all repairs to be managed in-house.
  - Several people complained of:
    - i. Lack of presence of HSMs or similar on estates
    - ii. Lack of responsiveness of HSMs (notable exception was one HSM who a few people mentioned as being excellent).
    - iii. Very poor service from repairs contractors, incl poor communication, difficult to get repairs carried out, repeatedly left waiting at home for contractor who doesn't attend with no communication, repairs badly carried out or incomplete, lack of explanation about why whole repair not carried out, repeat problems, jobsworth attitudes, unclear divisions of responsibility between different services with no joined up service, e.g only repairing damage caused by tree but not taking action to stop tree from causing further damage and not following up to pass that report onto appropriate department.
    - iv. All very optimistic about potential improvement of service when brought in-house.



**5. What do you not like about living there?**

- The property is a little small as front door opens straight into lounge and stairs are in the lounge giving no privacy from bedrooms.
- The refuse collection. Those that live next to it complain of the smell, mess etc. Outsiders also dump stuff on estate. Are cameras in place? Wheelie bins are the big size but when overfilled foxes take and scatter the rubbish. It is not the caretakers fault and we are very happy with new caretaker.
- Car park lighting. I am pleased to be here as I use to live in area, daughter is nearby and I know the area well.
- Car park lighting. Broken and they don't mend it despite reports. Not safe for my teenaged daughter in winter. Trip hazards – very uneven paving – dangerous especially for elderly people living in my scheme.
- Anti-social behaviour and fly-tipping.

**6. If you could have a say in how your rent is spent is there anything in the area you live in that you think Southern should prioritise?**

- All good.
- Arrange a proper in and out of the cars on estate as cars are not following the one-way system. There are parking issues when SHG contractors are on site. There use to be a security patrol but no longer happens can this be reinstated?
- Allotments for residents as there is a huge waiting list for allotments in Brighton area.
- Making homes and buildings safe.
- Getting repairs and maintenance right the first time.
- In-house management of repairs and estate management and better communication between people to just get the job done and first time.

**7. Our top priority is to make your homes safe. We have to spend much more money on safety, especially fire safety, as a result of the Grenfell Tower Fire and the safety reviews that have resulted. Should rents go up in order to do this? If not, how should we pay for it?**

- When first moved in there was no fire alarm but we have now had one fitted. As I tenant I have bought a fire extinguisher and would it as unfair to raise rents for safety improvement when I have bought this myself. Fire safety mainly common sense but on move in, point resident in the direction of fire safety advice and is it possible to have laminated fire safety posters for properties similar to those you find in an office? I do not have an extractor fan in kitchen will this be put in as part of the refit? Mould is an issue in the all upstairs rooms of the house and SHG just repaint with mould paint and problem not resolved.
- Yes, if rents go up this should be used to improve facilities. Agreed with rents being used for fire safety improvements.
- Depends on circumstances. If making a surplus with the scheme should use surplus for possible one-off cost and should be reviewed with residents for agreement.
- We need anti social behaviour to be tackled, including providing really good spaces for children and young people to play or hang out.

- Yes, but SHG needs to make sure that it is spending money where it needs to and not where it doesn't. We need clearer information about why fire doors are being replaced, for example, where they don't seem to be broken.
- Yes, we want safety to be the top priority, but we want the money spent well, not wasted.

**8. Ask residents to think about what interaction they have with Southern and if they think if Southern spent more on 'repairs' do you think you would get a better service?**

- Service is amazing and those that come around are polite and do job and go. Perfect.
- No as it is now, it is perfect with contractors that come to the estate. Improvement required with admin and information to residents see above re heaters. If delays ring and let residents know as still waiting to hear about what is happening with heaters and hot water.
- What is the residents responsibility? This is not too clear. Prefer to be responsible for repairs in property to keep rent low as detailed above.
- Repairs should be in-house with better management of the service. Get the job done right the first time.
- One resident had many years of trying to resolve ongoing problems related to original faults in a new-build, never fully resolved.

**9. If it was spent on more housing officers would you get a more personalised service? What would you want to see?**

- One resident - Don't know properly who my HSM is. Only contact when I need them. Would be nice to have a more personalised service like I have with Jo and Sarah at SHG who I email for support with taxes, etc.
- Another resident - Our HSM is very good and comes out when we have a complaint or issue. No need for more HSMs as have enough.
- Yes, a more personal service but no as 'people' are expensive and could result in an increase in rent for no real reason. Currently residents ring up and report repairs. People come around to check building but the next day the door may not work. Either this waits until they next time they come around perhaps a month later but in general the residents would report it first so what is the point of having people checking properties as this is an additional expense.
- Want the HSM to really know the estate and keep on top of what's going on. And to care about helping us.

**10. Would you, as a resident, happily pay more if other services were improved but what would that improvement look like?**

- Depends what you are going to improve. Visible things like building a porch required approval but residents are responsible for materials and building. Neighbour would like the same. If it had been done by SHG would have been better as could then do neighbours porch in same way for consistency. Resident realised they would be required to pay for this work but would reduce 'cowboys' doing work.

- Nothing for this one.
- Don't really know. This depends on what it is. If value is seen to be better, then yes but if not no. Balconies on the building would benefit some residents to get fresh air. If extra £5 a week on rent to pay for balconies to go in, then yes but if £50 a week then no. It would be down to the persons perspective.
- More responsive repairs service, with people who can complete the whole repair the first time and, if they can't, can get clear instructions on the pathway to fully completing the repair.

## Coronavirus

During the pandemic, we have done the following:

- Hardship fund
- Redeployed staff to do welfare calls
- Arranged for shopping, visits etc

### 11. Did we do the right things?

- Most respondents said yes. Some had been contacted by SHG, others hadn't needed support, but were grateful of the offer. Nice to be told 'we are here for you' and to be asked 'are you ok'. Really nice to have a SHG voice and to know that help is there if needed
- A couple said 'no', residents should have someone to check on them, family or community workers and shouldn't need to rely on SHG to do this. Both of these residents were being supported by family members.

### 12. Did we do enough?

All respondents said yes.

### 13. Did we miss something?

- i. Several residents said 'no'.
- ii. One reported that the garden on their scheme – next to community centre used for planting and should have been refurbished. Still waiting 2 years on for this to happen.
- iii. A couple said that introducing a rent increase during Coronavirus was bad timing. It was all we needed at this time.

### 14. Should our priorities change as a result of Coronavirus? How?

- I would like just a friendly voice to ask if everything's ok and tell me anything I need to do.
- Prioritise most vulnerable residents to support with housing, health and well-being needs.
- No reason to change priorities as the pandemic is a one off. Possibly this could happen again in the future and this has been good preparation.

### 15. Is there anything else you'd like to tell us or that we should be thinking about when deciding how to set our rents?

- I get letter when rent changes and how to make appointments to get things sorted as it is a struggle to ensure I earn enough to pay all bills and need support.
- SHG Rents are reasonable compared to private lettings.

## Report summary

The key outcomes have been summarised and reflect majority opinion from the qualitative and quantitative data:

There were some themes coming out of the different focus groups.

For the sheltered schemes the themes were:

- REPAIRS
  - Concern that repairs to doors, windows and in general were often not finished or done to a poor standard.
  - Communication on when repairs are to take place and Sheltered Scheme Coordinator (SSC) signing off. Often sign off didn't happen.
  - Length of time to wait because SHG use mainland contractors. Why do we not use local contractors?
  - Repairs to communal areas for example front doors the cost is passed to residents.
- PLANNED MAINTENANCE
  - Heating replacement survey undertaken but no communication on what is happening. This is noted at both schemes.
  - Hot water system expensive, will this be replaced?
  - Guttering needs to be cleared annually due to seagulls nesting on roof.
- OTHER
  - Service washing machines regularly to reduce breakdown
  - Requested if solar panels could be fitted to scheme
  - Wi-Fi in communal areas
  - Rent increase isn't at the same time as pension increase and benefits do not align with rent payments
  - Communal TV licence paid by residents, but many get free TV licence
  - Feeling of isolation as SSC not there 24/7

For the general needs and shared owners the themes were:

- REPAIRS
  - Issues with DW and the use of island versus mainland contractors
  - Communication when repairs are reported and what is going to happen if a repair is not completed at visit by contractor.

- Concerns that our repairs service and other contracted services are not very well managed – that the different services are too distant from the centre and from the residents and don't communicate effectively with each other. Ultimately the problem is that we don't get the job done.
- One example of ongoing repairs problems over years.
- PLANNED MAINTENANCE
  - Communication on when this is going to happen.
  - For leaseholders, wanting to know further in advance what works are proposed.
- HOUSING
  - The size of property is small compared to previous property
  - Residents not knowing who their Housing Services Manager is
  - Mould issues not being resolved
  - Unclear on why service charge has increased
  - Some residents felt their HSMs were very responsive and helpful, others not.
- OTHER
  - Recruit local residents to SHG
  - Community garden hasn't been refurbished
  - Review car flow through estate
  - Access to allotments
  - Lack of feedback to residents when reviews of services or surveys (eg of heating system) carried out.

Follow up actions from residents included sending details of their HSM, information on Community Investment Team, information on service charges, request to follow up on who is responsible for a repair and investigate with Community Investment Team if there are any allotment projects in the Hove area.

## Recommendations

These recommendations have been summarised and reflect majority opinion from the qualitative and quantitative data:

### Recommendation 1

Repairs and Maintenance - Communications between contractors/SHG and residents informing them of what is happening regarding their repair. The recommendation is to review communication processes for both general needs and sheltered schemes to ensure residents are kept informed.

**Recommendation 2**

In the main residents seemed to agree that rent increases might be necessary in order to pay for the building safety and other works needed (particularly where our rents have fallen behind other social housing providers). If rent is to be increased there must be clear justification around it and residents must be included in discussions. The recommendation is for very clear information to be sent to residents about any proposed rent increases. See reference to service charge and rent increase comments.

**Recommendation 3**

Many residents were unclear about who their HSM is. The recommendation is to look at how they can be more visible to residents.

**Recommendation 4**

Good communication is required between SHG and residents as identified in above recommendations. As shown by the actions carried out after calls resident were requesting information about a number of different things that SHG do. Recommendation is to review publicity for these areas.

Most residents were in the main happy with where they live and with SHG as a landlord comparing us to what they may get from a private landlord.

## Feedback from Project Lead

- All individual questions have been followed up and responses provided to residents.
- Work is ongoing to review contracted out services and to bring some services in-house
- All feedback has been provided to the Director or Building Safety and Head of Home Repairs to include in their service planning and reviews
- The feedback has been taken into account in drawing up our new Corporate Plan for 2021
- This report has been shared with the Customer Services Improvement Team in order to take resident feedback into account in their service reviews

Residents' views on repairs and other services – we are gathering feedback more widely across our resident consultations about people's experiences of our services. Where a resident has a specific problem, we have advised them on the steps to take. But more widely, we are looking at how best to report these experiences and views to the EMT and Board. Watch this space for further actions. Feedback to residents on specific issues has been given.

## Recommendations to our Board

Following the consultation with residents, we drew up proposals for our Executive Management Team and then for our Finance Committee, before finally drawing up proposals for our Board.

In December 2020, our Board approved:

- a new Social and Affordable Rents Policy
- a proposal to set social and affordable rents in line with Government rules for social housing and to increase social rents on re-let (not for current tenancies) by 5% and for supported housing by 10% subject to rent caps.