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ONBOARD #50



“Southern Housing Group Ltd, South Wight and James Butcher Housing Associations will join forces to create a single charitable association.”

Governance

Peter Phillips joins the Development Committee

Peter Phillips, who is a business leader, finance director and restructuring specialist, has joined Southern Housing Group's Development Committee.



A chartered accountant by training, for the past 15 years

Peter has been an independent executive specialising in change management and turnaround.

Peter began his career in middle management, before taking main board roles in customer-facing businesses from Laura Ashley to British Nuclear Fuels. He has also worked for several property management and construction companies.

Outside his working life, Peter is Chairman of the Birmingham Opera Company, which he supports as a lover of music and because he is committed to their strong community focus. He is also a member of Arts Council England and their West Midlands Chair.

Peter says: “I was attracted to Southern Housing Group partly because a lot of my work has been with property management and construction companies, but also because of my passion for what the Group does in the community.”

Governance

Amalgamation update

Plans to amalgamate the three landlords in Southern Housing Group are progressing well, with the change due to be introduced from 1 October.

Under the new arrangements, Southern Housing Group Ltd, South Wight and James Butcher Housing Associations will join forces to create a single charitable housing association under the Southern Housing Group Ltd name, simplifying the structure and management of the Group.

During April and May, we consulted staff and wrote to residents as part of a six-week consultation. More than 500 residents responded, with 72 per cent in favour of the proposals and only 9 per cent against. We also phoned, visited or wrote to 136 residents who requested more information.

The boards of the three Group landlords considered the comments raised and went on to agree to amalgamation. At meetings held in June and July, our shareholders also agreed the change.

Our regulator, the Tenant Services Authority, approved the change on 6 August.

As well as improving the way the Group is governed and managed, amalgamation is expected to lead to efficiency savings as we move to more joint procurement.

Residents will also benefit from further opportunities to influence our work and, in future, all residents will have access to specialist services that are currently only available to some parts of the Group.

Governance

Lewis Doyle joins the Audit Committee

Lewis Doyle has joined the Group's Audit Committee.

A qualified CIPFA accountant, Lewis has a broad business background in the defence, support and financial services industries, as well as in the Civil Service.

He was most recently Managing Director, Shared Services and Chief Information Officer at QinetiQ, a leading defence and technology company. The role gave him responsibility for IT, estates and purchasing, health, safety and the environment. Lewis was also a pension trustee and led the company's marketing team, sat on its Investment Board and was a director of one of its subsidiaries.

Lewis says: “I am very pleased to join the Audit Committee and, although it's early days, I have quickly recognised how committed the Group is to its residents. I believe that through my financial knowledge and skills, I can make a telling contribution to the Group.”



“Southern Housing Group, like many in the sector, actively promotes complaints as a way of gaining feedback.”

Opinion

Complaints as feedback: Why they are rising

The Independent Housing Ombudsman saw complaints rise by 43 per cent last year. Since 2007, they have risen by 72 per cent. But what does this really say about the work of England’s housing associations?

At first sight, a large rise in complaints to the Housing Ombudsman Service – responsible for fielding complaints from residents who have exhausted their landlords’ complaints procedures – might suggest the sector is doing an increasingly poor job at providing services and handling complaints. Or does it?

In the housing press, Housing Ombudsman Dr Mike Biles has been keen to downplay any such suggestion. In its annual report, the Service attributes a large part of the rise to better self-promotion and the efforts of the Tenant Services Authority.

But, critically, the report also acknowledges that it has encouraged landlords to “welcome complaints, comments and compliments in the spirit of positive learning that contributes to better service delivery and customer care”.

Southern Housing Group, like many in the sector, actively promotes complaints as a way of gaining feedback. We also routinely provide contact details for the Housing Ombudsman Service. Put simply, residents are more likely to complain because they know that their complaints are valued.

It is worth recalling that of the more than 5,500 complaints fielded by the Housing Ombudsman last year, 20 per cent had actually been sent to the wrong agency and 63 per cent involved residents who had not exhausted their landlord’s complaints procedure. In making its judgements, the Service found in favour of the landlord in 81 per cent of cases.

The report also suggests that “anecdotal feedback from ombudsmen and other complaint services indicates that many people are reacting to the economic downturn by ‘kicking the cat’ and often the nearest and easiest ‘cat’ for residents to kick is their housing provider”. With tough choices on spending now affecting the sector, it is reasonable to expect a further hike in complaints over the coming year.

Nevertheless, residents’ complaints are important. They can highlight one-off incidences of poor service that need to be acknowledged and put right. And they can also show areas where our approach to service delivery needs to change – especially if we are to meet the needs of our diverse resident communities. They provide an important ‘reality check’ around our equality and diversity work, and a learning tool prompting the review of services.

We recruited our first Complaints Service Manager three years ago, appointing Noel Khine, who brought with him extensive experience of complaints management at the NHS and Royal Mail. We went on to upgrade our complaints handling software and overhaul our procedures.

But, more importantly, we made it much easier for residents to complain. We invited them to pass on their concerns by talking to a member of staff, phoning or emailing us. They no longer have to write to us or complete a complaints form, unless they want to. Not surprisingly, from the first year our new systems operated, complaint levels rose significantly.

So, far from indicating that the sector is becoming careless about residents’ needs, the rise in complaints may actually indicate the opposite. As Deputy Ombudsman Rafael Runco wrote in *Inside Housing* (‘Rise in complaints shows people care’, 23 July 2010): “More complaints is not necessarily a sign of a failing sector; it can also show that tenants care and landlords listen.”

Photo – Repairs accounted for 38 per cent of complaints received by the Independent Housing Ombudsman last year – by far the largest category.



“Southern Quarter is... a prime example of a development brought into being by a high degree of co-operation.” Dinos Horattides, PCKO Architects

Development

Southern Quarter commended for building excellence

Southern Quarter in Ryde on the Isle of Wight, was commended in the Best Social Housing Development category, at the Local Authority Building Control's (LABC) South East Building Excellence Awards in June.

LABC exists to promote the design and construction of safe, accessible and environmentally efficient buildings and uses its annual awards to celebrate excellence in building.

Southern Quarter is a development of 149 homes, with two-thirds for social rent, intermediate rent and shared ownership. The remaining third were developed by our development company Southern Space Ltd for private sale.

The overall scheme was designed by PCKO Architects and built by Stoneham Construction Ltd. Together, we have successfully achieved an ‘urban village’ feel that complements the surroundings and meets modern environmental standards.



Development

Focus on: St Leonard's Close, Horsham

Site On the former site of St Leonard's School, a mile from the centre of Horsham. Planning conditions included relocating the old coat of arms from the school entrance to Horsham Museum.

Partners Croudace Homes Ltd, Southern Housing Group Ltd, Homes and Communities Agency.

Funding The overall cost of the affordable housing was £1.175 million, with £600,000 in grant funding.

Output The overall scheme has 20 homes, of which 12 are for sale by Croudace Homes. Our part of the scheme comprises eight flats and houses for social rent, which were completed and handed over in December 2009 and January 2010.

Design Traditional designs in red brick.

Special features The flats feature photovoltaic panels, which generate electricity for communal lighting and hot water. Surplus energy is being sold back to the national grid.

Photos – After and before. New homes take shape at St Leonard's Close.



Development

Nick Raynsford MP to chair Triathlon Homes

Triathlon Homes, the joint venture company established by Southern Housing Group, East Thames Group and First Base, to own and manage the affordable homes at the Athlete's Village, has appointed Nick Raynsford MP as Chairman.

Currently MP for Greenwich and Woolwich, Nick is a former Minister who has held responsibility for London and for housing, planning and construction. He is a past Director of the Shelter Housing Aid Centre and has run a housing consultancy.

Tom Dacey, Director of Triathlon Homes and Chief Executive of Southern Housing Group, said: “Nick's extensive experience in housing and construction issues, nationally and in key areas of London, is widely respected across the private and public sectors. As Chairman he will help guide the team in leaving a lasting legacy in affordable housing for Stratford and the wider community, after the Olympic Games.”



News

Plaque unveiled for community campaigner

On 5 July, we unveiled a plaque in memory of Jim Veal, who was formerly the Chair of the Market Estate Tenants' and Residents' Association (METRA).

Jim was a tireless campaigner for his community and played a major role in the regeneration of his Islington estate – now known as Parkside Place. Sadly, he died in 2006, before he could move in to his newly developed home.

At the unveiling, we paid tribute to Jim in front of an invited audience including his wife Maggie, Councillors Paul Smith and Barry Edwards, and former Councillor, Margot Dunn, who supported residents' calls for redevelopment of the estate.

Maggie Veal said: "I am so pleased that Jim's work for the redevelopment has been recognised. Before he became too ill, he spent a great deal of time attending meetings with the other committee members, to put forward their case for redevelopment. Right up until he died people would visit to seek his advice on how to deal with their troubles.

"I love my new flat. It's a shame that Jim's not able to enjoy it with me, but knowing that he was involved in the design gives me some comfort."

Group Reinvestment Director, Stephen Ross, said: "I first met Jim when the Group was selected in 2003 to work with residents and Islington Council on the transfer and redevelopment of the estate. Jim had strong views on the design of the new homes. 'We don't want to live on an estate, we just want to live in streets – and we don't want to live in an architect's experiment,' he said.

"Although he did not live to move in to his new home, Phase One was well underway and Jim felt they would be good homes."

The plaque has been mounted on one of the development's new roads, which has been named Jim Veal Drive in honour of Jim's extraordinary commitment.

Photo above – Reinvestment Director Stephen Ross, Jim's wife Maggie Veal and former Holloway Ward Councillor Margot Dunn, at the unveiling.

News

Annual Review and Financial Accounts

Southern Housing Group's Annual Review and Financial Accounts for 2009-2010 will shortly be available in hard copy and online.

The first year of our new three-year corporate plan was one of the most challenging to date. The Group:

- improved service standards and increased resident involvement
- progressed plans to amalgamate the Group's three landlords
- consolidated property services across the Group
- reviewed our mainland sheltered housing service, deciding to hand over the care and support element of our work to outside providers
- raised bond finance of £100 million at very competitive rates as part of a club initiative run by the Housing Finance Corporation.

For copies of these publications, email communications@shgroup.org.uk or go to the Southern Housing Group website at www.shgroup.org.uk

Governance

Board members step down

John Castelberg has retired from Southern Housing Group's Board, after nine years of service. John formerly spent 10 years on the board of the Women's Housing Trust, until its merger with Southern Housing Group Limited.

Also stepping down are Peter Goodacre, who also chaired the board of James Butcher HA, and resident David Kelly.

Operations

'Pay your rent' campaign

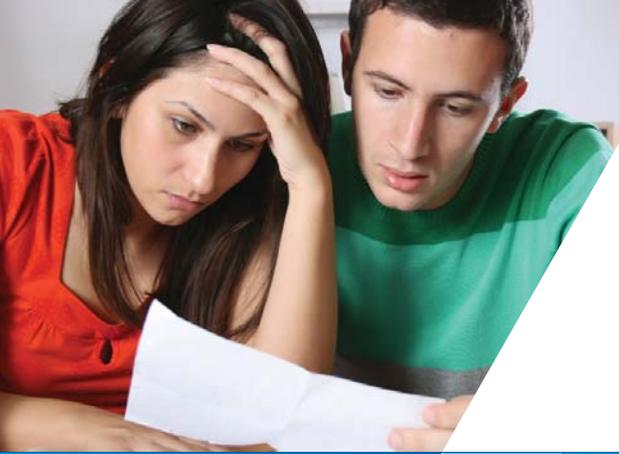
Residents are being encouraged to pay their rent with the incentive of twice-yearly prize draws.

The £200 prize draws are for residents who pay by direct debit, or who have clear rent and charge accounts. The draws were introduced as part of a recent campaign to get residents to pay in full and on time.

Calls to the 'pay your rent' hotline more than doubled after our campaign last autumn and had quadrupled by this spring.

The campaigns back the work of our office-based Income Collection team and our income recovery officers, who work with residents face to face.





News

Mortgage rescue

Southern Housing Group is working with HomeBuy agents London & Quadrant Group and Metropolitan Home Ownership to provide a mortgage rescue service for home owners.

Our part of the scheme will focus on Hackney, Islington and Greenwich, where we have more than 1,000 home owners of our own. We are also responsible for helping other landlords' leaseholders in these boroughs.

The scheme will allow us to help home owners by buying back their properties. They then become our tenants, paying an intermediate rent set at around 80 per cent of the going market rate for similar properties locally.

Rescued residents will have the option of buying back their home at a later date if their situation improves.

Operations

Tenant survey shows rising satisfaction

Our latest three-year survey of residents, carried out by the Kwest Research market research company, received more than 2,000 responses.

Residents of all three Southern Housing Group landlords were surveyed by phone or postal questionnaires. One in four respondents were home owners.

Photo – Satisfaction with our repairs service has risen by 6 per cent.

The survey showed that compared to our last major survey in 2006, satisfaction with us as a landlord had risen 6 per cent – to 78 per cent, while satisfaction with repairs had risen 8 per cent to 76 per cent. Around 65 per cent of respondents said they were satisfied that we take resident views into account – a new survey question.

In future, we will track changes in residents' views more closely by holding annual instead of three-yearly surveys.



Community regeneration

Group launches family intervention project

Southern Housing Group has set up a family intervention project, after securing funding from the government and the Tenant Services Authority as part of a joint bid with six other housing associations.

Project worker Carly Jones is providing intensive support to a caseload of families who have been reported for anti-social behaviour, whose children are truanting or who are struggling to resolve domestic or tenancy problems.

Carly will also run two 13-week courses – one in Tower Hamlets and the other in Woolwich – on the theme of 'Strengthening families, strengthening communities'.

The courses will aim to help a larger group of parents who are experiencing problems with their children. Participants will be encouraged to share their parenting skills so that they can learn from one another.

In addition to strengthening families, the new service offers a powerful new approach to tackling anti-social behaviour and nuisance in our local communities.

Anti-Social Behaviour Manager Sharon Nandoo says: "Most residents who experience anti-social behaviour tell me that they just want the behaviour to stop, rather than to see the perpetrator lose their home."

"We're committed to helping develop communities where people want to live, and we know that family intervention projects have proved successful in other areas. We're confident that this will make a big difference to the lives of those affected by anti-social behaviour."



“Easy Read uses only everyday words, printed in large font sizes, alongside relevant pictures.”

News

Green Doctor saves energy

Residents in West Sussex can ask for a house call from the Green Doctor, as part of a Groundwork initiative supported by us and two other landlords.

The project aims to help people cut their bills and carbon emissions, by offering advice on how to save energy, install basic energy-saving devices, and apply for funding and grants.

Corporate services

Easy Read options

We now produce key resident publications in an Easy Read format, after identifying a need as part of our equality and diversity work.

The format, originally developed for people with learning disabilities, is increasingly being used for residents who read poorly. Easy Read uses only everyday words, printed in large font sizes, alongside relevant pictures.

News

Lower carbon emissions

Southern Housing Group has been highly commended by Islington Climate Change Partnership for reducing the CO2 emissions generated by our Clerkenwell head office by 15% compared with 2008.

Total emissions remain higher than the baseline figure taken in 2007 because, at the time this was measured, one floor of our building was vacant.

Operations

Better gardening contracts for JBHA schemes

Changes to the gardening arrangements at 76 James Butcher HA schemes are expected to provide more efficient services and greater choice for residents.

Following a review, we are inviting tenders for four-year contracts covering six areas, instead of running annual contracts for individual schemes. Our plan is to have all the new contracts in place by April 2012. The new system is expected to lead to cost savings.

An innovative aspect of the scheme is that we will ask companies to provide three pricing levels – bronze, silver and gold – for three levels of service. We can then ask residents whether they are willing to pay higher service charges for a more comprehensive service.

We will include annual break clauses so that we can respond to any resident dissatisfaction with the service.

Community regeneration

Young Hackney residents grill the experts

Young residents from our Stamford Hill and Myddleton Grange estates in Hackney took part in a unique question time on 24 June.

The session at our head office gave the young people the chance to ask a panel of experts for their views on attitudes to young people, knife and gang crime, making communities stronger and helping young black people tackle obstacles to education.

On the panel were youth crime expert Suzella Palmer, from the University of Bedfordshire, consultant and author Kerry Young and Professor Gus John, who is a fellow of the Institute of Education.

After the event, Suzella Palmer said: “I’ve been very impressed with today’s session. It is so forward thinking to hold this kind of forum where young people, housing association staff and panel members can come together and speak honestly about issues affecting them.”

Tolu Atewogboye (16) said: “It was good to have people actually listening to what we have to say and explaining what we can do to change things and make life better where we live.”

Photo – Left to right: Hackney residents Tolu Atewogboye, Edward Ehikhamhen and Daniel Owusu quizzed the experts.





Community regeneration

Mural art brightens two schemes

Young residents from Atkinson House on the Isle of Wight and Warner Road Estate in Camberwell worked with artists recently to produce their own impressive murals.

At Atkinson House, residents worked with Hannah Ray to produce a mural for their garden on the theme of 'It's not what you've been in the past, but what you could be in the future'.

At Warner Road, Groundwork London brought in Signal Arts to work with our young people on the design and painting of their nature-themed mural.

Photos – The murals at Atkinson House (above) and Warner Road (below).



Operations

News

Young residents say YEP to youth website

Young people from across Hackney joined the Rising Tide education, together with local social housing landlords, to launch a Youth Engagement Project (YEP) website in May.

The YEP website has created an online community where young people can post their news and views. Their social housing landlords have also taken pages, so that they can promote community projects.

The website has been developed with close involvement from five youth committees that are being supported by Rising Tide.

The launch at the Ocean in Hackney, gave youngsters the chance to try the website, network with other youth committees and meet their landlord partners. Lisa Smith (18) from Chatvic youth committee, said: "I'm really excited about YEP. It was great to meet people from the different committees and I'm looking forward to working together with them in future."

The YEP project is supported by Hackney Homes, Southern Housing Group, London and Quadrant, Sanctuary Housing and Circle 33.

Photo – Young people at the launch of the YEP website.



Small jobs service that comes in handy

We are currently piloting a handy-person service for residents living in our Kent sheltered schemes.

For just £5 an hour, residents can call on skilled tradespeople employed by MHS, our contractor in the area, to help them with a wide range of small jobs from putting up curtain rails to assembling flatpack furniture.

Resident feedback suggests that some people struggle with small domestic jobs. The scheme may be extended to other areas if it proves successful.

We already offer a chargeable repairs service that allows residents to use our contractors, for fair fixed prices, to complete small jobs that are their responsibility.



"I thoroughly enjoyed myself. It was action packed with activities for children and adults."

Mum of four, Afia Khatun, who took part in the sports contest

Community regeneration

Sports activate London estates



Families from across the capital took part in the final heat of our inter-estate sports contest at Newham Leisure Centre on 17 July.

Residents participated in a host of activities, including javelin throwing, 50m and 100m sprints, egg-and-spoon and sack races, high and long jump contests, slide resistance and a basketball competition.

In the run up to the finals, we also held a sports day at Sutcliffe Park in Kidbrooke, Greenwich, for people who will become our residents as the council's Ferrier Estate is regenerated. Taking part gave Kidbrooke residents the opportunity to get to know our staff in a fun and informal environment.

We ran the inter-estate sporting challenge as part of the Activate London campaign to promote healthy and active communities. Activate London is funded by the Big Lottery Fund and led by Peabody Trust.

Photos – Above left: The Kidbrooke event. Below: Competing in the inter-estate final.



Community regeneration

Hackney Hub opens its doors

The official opening of the Group's new employment and training centre at Stamford Hill Estate in Hackney took place at the end of May.

The launch event for 'The Hub' took the form of an informal drop-in, with workshops, staff on hand and plenty of information about services. The Solid Steel band helped to attract passers-by and gave the day an upbeat tone.

Resident Haroon Khan said: "My son and I really enjoyed the event. I think the Hub is going to be really beneficial to the estate.



"I look after my two year-old son for most of the day, so searching for work can be difficult. Now I can pop in to the Hub to search for jobs, take Izaan to the park and come back again later in the day. It's ideal."

Photo – Haroon Khan and son Izaan check out the Hub with staff member Tim Lovett.

News

Ask Coach opens the door to Olympic opportunities

Southern Housing Group is hosting four roadshows in London as part of the London Development Agency's (LDA) Ask Coach initiative.

The Ask Coach project is a partnership between some of London's largest housing associations and the LDA, aimed at promoting employment, volunteering and training opportunities linked to the Olympics in 2012.

In total, 17 roadshows are being held around the capital, based in specially designed interactive 'pods', where local people can assess their skills, find out about jobs and volunteering around the Olympics, and learn about other opportunities in their areas.

At the heart of these events, local residents are being invited to 'Ask Coach' – signing up to make post-event use of the personal support offered by employment guidance specialists.

So far, we have taken Ask Coach pods to an event in Caledonian Road in Islington, partnered by Hyde Housing Association, to an event organised by the London Borough of Barking & Dagenham and to a community event in Islington run by One Canonbury. In September, we will also hold an event at our Stamford Hill Estate in Hackney.

Ensuring that our residents make the most of opportunities from the 2012 Games is one of our social and regeneration work priorities.

“Community gardening enables families to grow healthy fruit and vegetables, and helps to promote a sense of community”

Community regeneration

Fun with flora and fauna

On 12 June, we invited Timber Wharves residents on the Isle of Dogs to join us for a flora and fauna fun day.

We ran the green-themed event to encourage residents to get involved in a new gardening project at the estate, which we will be supporting.

Southern Housing Group has been awarded funding from Tower Hamlets Council’s Change 4 Life programme, which means we can start a community food growing scheme at the scheme.

As Project Manager Dirk Lampe explains: “Community gardening enables families to grow healthy fruit and vegetables, and helps to promote a sense of community with neighbours.”

On the day, as well as gardening, and health and well-being stalls to promote our theme, we also provided a children’s entertainer and face painting for the estate’s youngsters.



Photo – Anisa Khatum (left) and Tanzila Alom (right) at the flora and fauna fun day held at their east London estate.

Community regeneration

Taking the hunger out of Hungerford



Parents and pupils at Hungerford Primary School and Children’s Centre in Islington took part in a four-week healthy eating and cooking project in July, thanks to Southern Housing Group.

The sessions saw mums and dads learning how to make healthy, balanced meals, while their children were introduced to new foods, taught about the importance of a vegetable-rich diet and encouraged to eat healthily with their parents.

Headteacher Brian Bench, said: “Learning about nutrition at an early age helps to give children the right attitude towards healthy eating and the knowledge needed to make the right food choices. The parent sessions have meant that mums and dads can join in their children’s enthusiasm for the topic and continue to make healthy meals at home.”

The project formed part of our Activate London work. Activate London is funded by the Big Lottery Fund and led by Peabody Trust.



News

Congratulating our community heroes

Former Olympic athlete Sally Gunnell congratulated some of Southern Housing Group's community heroes at our annual residents' conference in central London on 22 May.

The awards ceremony was part of an event that saw more than 100 residents from London and the south east come together to share their news and promote involvement in their communities.

Four of our most active residents, Reg Burbidge from Islington, Granville Cosier from Aylesham, Emily Shepherd from Bethnal Green and Roy Mitchell from Ashford all received awards for their contribution. Roy, who won the overall award, has sat on Group committees for the past 10 years.

Guest speaker Sally Gunnell went on to give a motivational speech about overcoming challenges to achieve success.

"These events give us the opportunity to talk to residents about improvements to services and get them involved in shaping the way services are delivered."

Thames Gateway Regional Director, Tony Hughes



Photos above left and above – Residents take part in the annual residents' conference.

Photo below – Sally Gunnell (in red) is pictured left to right with award winners Roy Mitchell, Emily Shepherd, Reg Burbidge and Granville Cosier.



Front cover: Delegates discuss the issues at our annual residents' conference.

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