

**Feedback from Our Residents on the Proposed Places for People Merger Consultation**

1. **Introduction**

1.1 We are grateful for the active participation of our residents, stakeholders, and community members in the seven-week resident consultation period which concluded on 7th February 2024, concerning the proposed merger between South Devon Rural Housing Association (SDR) and Places for People Group (PfP). The consultation sought to understand the views and concerns of residents, staff, local councillors, MPs, and our suppliers and partners. Various consultation methods were employed, including online and in-person meetings, as well as options to feedback via phone, email, and our website.

**2. How we consulted with you**

2.1 The consultation featured 3 drop in sessions for residents (one in the evening) and a Q & A Session specifically for shareholders. Residents were also encouraged to communicate their views via phone and email and to return a consultation survey form via post or via our website. Residents had multiple platforms and opportunities to voice their opinions.

2.2 The Survey form sent to residents posed 5 key questions about the merger:

* Have you read SDR’s ‘Merger Special’ newsletter and how well informed do you feel about the proposal?
* Do you feel you understand the basic reasons why SDR wants to merge with another, larger, housing provider?
* Do you feel you have a good understanding of how mergers work and what benefits can result from two or more organisations joining forces?
* Do you feel you have a good understanding of what impact a merger could have on SDR’s tenants?
* Do you feel that the merger could have a positive or negative impact on your home and the service you receive?

It also gave residents an opportunity to make comment on the merger plans or pose additional questions.

2.2 Feedback in response to the consultation documentation was as follows:

* 29 completed survey forms received in the post from customers
* 5 completed survey forms received via the website from customers
* 1 non- board Shareholder attended a shareholder Q & A session - 8th January 2024
* CEO attended meeting of a Parish Council – 17th January 2024
* CEO attended meeting with Dartington residents – 1st February 2024
* 1 email received from a non-board shareholder – 5th February 2024

The resident responses received represent just under 10% of our tenant base.

1. **Feedback Summary**
   1. The table below sets out a numerical summary of residents response to the survey questions:



* 1. The survey data indicates an overall positive reception to the merger newsletter, with a majority of the residents feeling either "Very Well" or "Fairly Well" informed about the merger. This suggests that the initial communication efforts were effective in disseminating information about the merger. However, a smaller segment of survey respondents expressed a need for more information, highlighting an opportunity for further engagement and clarification on merger details.
  2. A significant number of respondents demonstrated a good or some understanding of mergers, with 15 indicating a "Good Understanding" and 10 expressing "Some Understanding." This foundational knowledge base among residents could facilitate more nuanced discussions and engagements around the specifics of the SDR-PfP merger.
  3. The survey sought to assess residents' perceptions of the merger's potential impact and 41% of residents who responded to this question were *‘not sure’* whether the merger will have a positive or negative impact. Whilst this result may be understandable at this point in the process it's critical for future communications to address the impact aspects more directly, offering clear examples of potential benefits or concerns to manage expectations and foster informed consensus.
  4. At the Parish Council meeting, Councillors expressed a strong interest in understanding the merger process in detail, specifically questioning the rationale behind choosing PfP as a merger partner and the implications of this strategic decision. Their inquiries focused on how the merger would influence SDR's capacity to invest in its existing housing stock and the potential to resume and expand our development programme aimed at increasing social housing provision in small rural communities. This engagement underscores the importance of transparent communication and collaboration with local stakeholders. It also reflects the community's vested interest in ensuring that the merger not only preserves but enhances our ability to meet the housing needs of rural areas. Addressing these concerns effectively is crucial for gaining support and fostering partnerships that will enable us to achieve our shared goal of enhancing social housing availability and quality.
  5. The meeting with seven residents from properties in Dartington showcased the proactive and thoughtful approach of our tenants towards the proposed merger. These tenants had thoroughly reviewed all the merger documentation we had sent them, conducted independent research on PfP—including examining Trustpilot reviews—and came prepared with insightful, well-considered questions. Their engagement level reflected a genuine interest and concern for the future, and the impact the merger would have on all residents. Notably, some tenants voiced apprehensions regarding the stability of their tenancies and the future of rent increases, seeking assurances that their existing agreements would remain unchanged and that any future rent adjustments would continue to be bound by legislation and regulation.
  6. The one Shareholder who attended the board Q & A session had a good level of understanding of mergers and merger processes but needed more information about the precise reasons for this merger. He did not think the documentation sent out made it clear enough that a key reason for considering merger was a financial one.
  7. One Shareholder expressed their views and objections to the merger at the same time as submitting their completed proxy form for the Shareholder meeting.

**4. Key Questions and concerns raised**

4.1 Residents raised several key issues, including:

* Wanting more information about the rationale behind the merger.
* The potential impacts on SDR tenants and whether these will be positive and beneficial.
* Whether local staff and accountability will remain.
* What the benefits of the merger are for both SDR and Places for People.

A list of the comments made by residents is set out on the last two pages of this document. Some of these comments actually raise issues that need to be answered, so these have been copied into a separate list of questions posed by survey respondents.



That list will now be reviewed and further communications made with tenants to provide answers to their questions and concerns. Watch this space for an updated list of ***Questions & Answers***, which will be uploaded to our website as soon as possible.

**5. Conclusions & Next Steps**

5.1 The survey results highlight a generally positive reception to the merger, with a good level of understanding among residents about mergers. However, the survey also highlights areas for improvement in communication and engagement strategies to ensure all residents feel well-informed and their concerns are adequately addressed.

5.2 Going forward it will be imperative to build upon the insights gained from this survey, which provided valuable feedback on residents' understanding and perceptions of what is a significant change in the management of their homes. The survey highlighted areas of strong communication as well as opportunities for further engagement to address concerns and questions. In light of these findings, our next steps are designed to not only enhance our communication strategy but also deepen our engagement with residents to ensure that everyone feels informed, supported, and involved. Communication with residents over the coming months will therefore focus on 3 key areas:

* Enhanced communication efforts: Focus on areas where residents have expressed a need for more information or have questions. Tailoring future communications to address these gaps will improve understanding and support for the merger.
* Engaging in direct face to face conversations: Organising neighbourhood specific forums or Q&A sessions to directly address resident concerns and questions, providing a platform for more in-depth discussions on the merger's rationale and expected outcomes.
* Highlighting benefits and addressing concerns: More clearly articulating the benefits of the merger to residents, including increased investment in existing stock, new developments and enhanced community support.

By focusing on clear, transparent, and responsive dialogue, we aim to cultivate a positive outlook towards the merger, ensuring that it is viewed as a beneficial move for all involved.

**Resident Comments from Merger Proposal Survey**

**Comments:**

* Concerned the merger will negatively impact services
* Hoping for improvements with repairs
* My working experience tells me that organisations don’t improve when they get bigger
* I can understand if SDR is having a hard time, the whole country is
* I was not impressed by what I found out about PfP online
* More difficulties in getting a response to tenants problems
* It was very well informed
* I think it is great why SDR want to merge with another
* Many negative comments about PfP on Trustpilot
* Concerns about rent increases
* Concerns about length of time to get repairs sorted
* Very much doubt that SDR residents will benefit
* Assurance of tenancy safe unconditionally (except by law) in our SDR homes
* Not confident SDR is really and truly customer focused, especially with regards to the recent rat invasion
* Terrified of rent increases if merger goes ahead, please reassure 100% of legal increase
* Will give a stronger association together
* Hopefully will benefit us as tenants
* The reasons and plans for the merger were clearly set out in the newsletter
* This certainly didn’t come as a surprise, given the current economic, political and social climate in the UK
* On a basic level this is fairly straightforward, as far as anything may be planned and predicted.
* What actually will happen in the months and years to come is something we, as tenants need to be made aware of through the housing association
* If tenants are kept fully informed, included and heard, this merger should be acceptable and positive
* As a tenant I see areas in and around my home that do need attention and updating, if more services are available for this from the merger that would be great.
* I work 6 days a week to make my rent and it’s a struggle as the cost of living continues to rise. Because of my old style tenancy agreement, my rent is a good deal higher than that of my neighbours. I need to know that the merger company will discuss rent increases with me and be reasonable in their decisions.
* We can only know the outcome through time.
* I assume it’s for financial/business reasons, joining a bigger organisation.
* The merger should make more money available for upgrading etc.
* Hopefully it will mean that some delayed upkeep can be implemented on our properties, i.e. new kitchens and exterior painting.
* Hopefully all positive, but I hope it won’t lose that personal touch.
* Time will tell if it is good for us
* How can anyone object to a merger with a company dealing with 240,000 homes
* The financial clout and expertise the company have must surely benefit SDR
* I can’t see how a merger with such a huge company would have a negative impact
* My mind is completely at rest, if rents, maintenance and service improve what’s not to like? As an ex gym user knowing that PfP operate leisure facilities, they have sold it to me.
* Don’t really see what benefits we will get
* Maybe someone will do the jobs a bit quicker
* Just hope they do better in dealing with the mould and damp in the houses. Our last landlord were better and they told us SDR would be better; the jury is out.
* Dealing with repairs promptly
* It is very informed for tenants to read
* Its lovely to be together with the other tenants
* Very positive outcome
* I love seeing Paula, Robert and other staff meeting us
* Could tell our support workers and families
* Worked for organisations which have worked in partnership and also ones who have merged
* Bigger is not always better in my view and very concerned that PFP is not a HA
* Looking at PfP reports on website seems to show delays in repairs
* Look at merging with a local experienced HA
* I ran a farm, a charity and have a community interest company
* Hopefully be more capable, efficient and accountable
* Hope it will be positive but we will see
* Think it would have been more respectful to let tenants know you were thinking of it before you did it, or at least tenant support group
* The reasons for the merger are still slightly unclear, however I feel assured that my tenancy will not be adversely affected
* I understand from the newsletter that services would improve as a result of the merger, but don’t fully understand why or how this would happen
* The newsletter has put a positive view forward, but my concern is that when the association expands we will not have the direct contact we enjoy at present
* The newsletter has explained most of the important issues already
* At tenant level, one can never fully understand the back story and the dynamics of such a merger, partnership and takeover.
* This is not just a matter of smaller HA’s being taken over by bigger ones, it is happening [*sic*] in just the West Country. It is an indicator of so much more.
* There is the factor of the current economic environment that does not recognise the contribution of the social economy, or the third sector and thus the subsequent failure of the social economic sector.
* My transparent concerns are that in my experience mergers, partnerships and takeovers have not always meant an improvement in service. However this is not always the case.

