

## Take part in our six-week consultation

## Talk to us and tell us what YOU think

We want to hear YOUR thoughts on our proposed merger – so we're launching a six-week consultation period that will run from 20 December 2023 to 7 February 2024.

You may have comments on what you've read in this Merger Special edition of your newsletter. Or you may have questions about the proposal that you'd like us to answer.

Whatever your reaction to the proposal, we want to hear from you. So we've set up a range of alternative ways for you to ask questions or give us your feedback. See below for details of when, where and how this consultation process will work. You can also talk to any SDR staff you meet.



### Drop in for a FACE-TO-FACE chat with us

You can meet SDR's Management Team in person at any one of the 3 drop-in sessions listed below:

- Tuesday 16 January 10.00 – 15.00 at South Devon House, Totnes, TQ9 5JA.
- Wednesday 24 January 17.00 – 19.00 at South Devon House, Totnes, TQ9 5JA.
- Wednesday 31 January 10.00 – 15.00 at South Devon House, Totnes, TQ9 5JA.



If you can't make any of the drop-in sessions, please contact the SDR Consultation Team to arrange to join a Zoom face-to-face session. You can phone us on 01803 863550. Or you can email us at: [info@southdevonrural.com](mailto:info@southdevonrural.com)

Please mark your email with the heading Consultation Team

Click the link on our website and type in your questions or comments in the spaces provided.

We look forward to hearing from you at: [www.southdevonrural.co.uk](http://www.southdevonrural.co.uk)

### You can also email us or send a letter

Send us your comments by email, headed CONSULTATION TEAM to:

[info@southdevonrural.com](mailto:info@southdevonrural.com)

Post a letter to:

**South Devon House, Babbage Road, Totnes, TQ9 5JA**

USE FEEDBACK  
FORM ON THE  
SDR WEBSITE

# Tenants' Newsletter

EXCITING PROPOSALS FOR PARTNERSHIP WORKING

Have your say on giving SDR a sustainable future

December 2023

**SPECIAL  
MERGER  
ISSUE**



Large print  
copies available  
on request.  
Please call 01803  
863550





## Introduction from Peter Symons, SDR Chairman

In SDR's latest Annual Report, we reflected on 65 years of remarkable growth and success. Our journey has been characterised by an agile response to ever evolving economic landscapes – most recently navigating the complexities of a rent cap alongside rising interest rates and high levels of inflation.

Our ambition to build more affordable housing in Devon and the wider South West remains paramount, as does a commitment to upgrading our property portfolio and meeting new Green targets.

To realise these visions, the Board has recently been proactively exploring new operational models, ensuring we stay ahead of the curve in a dynamic environment. This has helped identify potential Housing Association partners who align with our ethos and vision, offering a promising future for both existing and future affordable and social housing projects.

Emphasising our strength in collaboration, we are now pleased to propose a merger with Places for People Group. This partnership symbolises a strategic move towards enhancing our capabilities, broadening our impact whilst continuing to serve our community with even greater efficiency and effectiveness. We invite you to join us in embracing this positive and transformative step into a future filled with possibilities and advancements for all.



## Chief Executive Christine Candlish sets the scene...

I'd like to echo the sentiments shared by our Chairman about SDR's journey. We have consistently adapted to changing economic climates, yet our dedication to expanding affordable housing in Devon and the South West, whilst upgrading our property portfolio, remains unwavering.

Under the Board's proactive approach to exploring different operational models, we have sought Housing Association partners who share our ethos and vision. This is a crucial step in ensuring we continue to lead in a dynamic environment and provide the best possible service to our communities.

After months of searching I'm really excited that we're proposing a merger with Places for People Group. This partnership represents a significant milestone, offering an enhanced capability for SDR to make a broader impact. This strategic alliance promises to continue our legacy of service AND introduce new efficiencies and effectiveness in our work.

We understand that change brings questions, and we're committed to transparent communication. This publication should address many of your queries but we're also launching a six-week consultation to hear your valuable feedback. I encourage you to engage with us as we embrace this transformative journey into a future brimming with potential and progress for our community.

# What do we know about SDR's proposed new merger partner?



## FACTS AND FIGURES

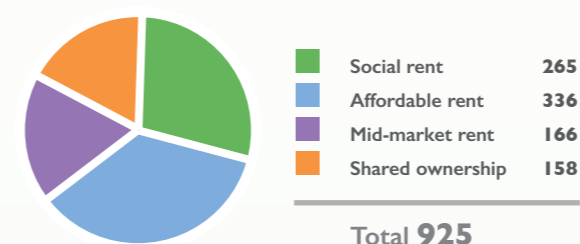
Formed in 1965, they are a social enterprise made up of complementary companies in placemaking, regeneration and development, investment management, property management and leisure.

Using the power of partnership and working collaboratively, almost 10,500 colleagues in more than 20 specialist companies create Communities and provide people with opportunities and choice in a way that few organisations can match.

### Places for People:

- Own or manage over **240,000** homes, with over **11,000** colleagues
- Built **1,775** new homes in 22/23, with **925** of these Affordable Homes
- Have plans to build more homes in the South West
- Have invested **£151 million** in capital improvements and repairs
- Operate **100** leisure facilities that support the health and wellbeing of customers; more in the pipeline.

### New Affordable Homes built 2022/23



## COMMUNITY IMPACT HEADLINES 2022/23

**Places for People's vision is to create supportive and inclusive Communities for everyone.**

In the past year they created a Cost-of-Living task force to support their customers and communities through the economic crisis and:

Established a **£1 million** Cost-of-Living Fund, providing rent relief & vouchers for essentials like food & fuel

Provided financial inclusion support to **6,654** customers, offering essential money advice & hardship assistance

Supported network of **114** charities in their communities to provide essentials, including food & baby banks

Their Places Leisure Centres and Community Partners have opened up over **30** warm spaces

Their National Wellbeing, Digital Inclusion, & Employment projects offer practical help to any customer, in any location, across the UK

A furniture initiative helps new & existing customers provide essentials including beds, carpets & white goods to more than **330** people

Formed partnership with National Energy Action, a charity working to end fuel poverty; specialist energy advisers assist customers in reducing energy debt

Supported colleagues with introduction of Real Living Wage; gave highest pay increases to lowest paid people; established hardship fund that has supported thousands of colleagues in their everyday lives.

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How you can tell us what you think



## Pulling together to deliver more homes for more people

Places for People dates back to 1965, when North British Housing was formed in Preston, Lancashire, with the motto: “to be a force for good in the housing sector”.

A part of PFP’s estate can actually be traced back to 1536, when Marlow Manor was built on land once owned by William the Conqueror. The manor was rebuilt in 1758 and now houses Places Leisure’s Court Garden Leisure Centre.

You can find out more about the historical background on PFP’s website at:

<https://placesforpeople.co.uk/about-us/who-we-are/our-history-and-heritage/>

The principle of collaboration also chimes with one of PFP’s five corporate values:

“Driving to improve and make things easier; doing something new and something better every day”.

South Devon Rural, founded 65 years ago, has been on a similar journey. We can point to similar successes through working with partners like Homes England, local councils, Cornwall Community Land Trust and – more recently – joining forces with rent-to-buy champions Rentplus UK.

With that kind of track record behind us, both these potential partners are confident that a merger can deliver results faster, more effectively and more efficiently, for the good of people and communities.

Among our aims are creating a step change in SDR’s affordable housing provision in the South West whilst giving Places for People a stronger presence in the region.

The financial challenges that SDR faces now and into the future will stifle and frustrate our plans for growth – just at a time when we know the work we do is more worthwhile and life-changing than ever.

### POWER OF PARTNERSHIP

Places for People is a social enterprise made up of complementary companies in placemaking, regeneration and development, investment management, property management and leisure.

Using the power of partnership and working collaboratively, we create Communities and provide people with opportunities and choice in a way few organisations can match.

Together, these partners:

- Invest in the future
  - Create opportunities
  - Build communities
  - Provide homes
  - Change lives
- ...and people are at the centre of everything they do.

Discover more about Places for People by going online at: [www.placesforpeople.co.uk/about-us/](http://www.placesforpeople.co.uk/about-us/)



## What would this merger mean for SDR’s tenants?

### Could I lose my home as a result of this merger?

No. You have legal rights and protection as a social housing tenant, as set out by the Social Housing Regulator. These rights remain unaffected by this merger, so please be assured that you will not lose your home.

### Would this merger affect my Tenancy Agreement?

Your tenancy agreement with SDR would remain the same. The services you currently receive would not be affected by the merger.

Most of our residents are Assured Tenants. Under these tenancy agreements, you have a lifetime legal right to stay in your home – providing you continue to meet the conditions of your tenancy.

Some exemptions will continue to apply as they do now i.e. if your landlord needs to carry out refurbishments and these refurbishments cannot proceed with the resident in place. In such instances, the landlord must pay reasonable costs and ensure security of tenancy on return to settled accommodation.

Some tenancy agreements are usually for a fixed period of time e.g. 12 months, or other periods stated on the Tenancy Agreement. Changes to fixed-term tenancies cannot legally be made as a result of any merger.

### Would my Rent or Service Charge be affected?

Your Rent / Service Charge is charged in line with your Tenancy Agreement. Service charges are calculated based on the cost of services provided to residents.

### Would the merger affect my Benefits or Entitlements?

Your Benefits and Entitlements and terms of your Tenancy Agreement would remain the same as they were before the merger.

### What is SDRHA committing to me and my tenancy if this merger goes ahead?

We will continue to provide housing services and repairs services to SDR residents. These services should improve as a result of increased resourcing that would result from the merger.

We will continue to invest in the safety, warmth and security of our buildings.

We will continue making provision for residents to engage with us and we will take action on day-to-day issues.

### What would happen to SDR’s main offices in Totnes?

We would continue to maintain a Regional Office presence. Tenants would benefit from a continuing local base, backed by a central team.



# Explanations and clarifications...

## What is a merger?

A merger happens when two or more organisations join together to create one new organisation, or when one smaller organisation joins a larger one as a subsidiary company within a Group. If an organisation joins as a subsidiary (as is the case for SDR) it continues to operate as a company, and can also access resources provided by the group (e.g. finance, people, technology etc.).

## Why is SDR proposing to merge with a larger housing provider?

Since 1958, SDR's single purpose has been to provide safe, affordable homes and quality services to our residents. Community is at the heart of everything.

We have managed to move with the times and to grow our organisation and expand our property portfolio steadily, despite the many challenges we have met along the way.

We have invested significantly in the safety of our existing homes, built new ones, and provided places that people over 55 and those with learning or mobility difficulties can call home.

We have long since recognised how partnership working can make it easier for us to provide the affordable homes and living space that people in this region desperately need – now more than ever.

A number of recent changes in wider society, along with new Government policies, are challenging us to develop and invest even more in our future.

The Grenfell disaster (2017) has brought much-needed focus for reform in building safety and a new code of governance for housing associations. A new Government framework and Tenancy Standard will set out and reinforce how landlords must listen and be equipped to take action as a result of feedback from residents.

The population is ageing rapidly, and by 2038 1 in 4 people in the UK will be over 65. It's vital that housing associations such as SDR are ready to respond with homes, services and technology to support a wide range of resident needs.



While we remain financially stable, we face funding challenges like so many individuals, families and organisations in the UK. We're also living through a global climate crisis where all homes need to be net carbon neutral by 2050. Meeting these challenges will have considerable financial impacts on smaller housing associations such as SDR.

Against this background, we believe we will become stronger by joining with a larger organisation and so will be more able to meet these new challenges.

## Why have you chosen Places for People as a potential merger partner?

Once SDR's Board decided to look into the idea of a merger, a number of potential partners were considered and a short list prepared. We engaged with each of these and sought which one offered the best match in terms of sharing our business ethos and enabling SDR to continue its work in the region.

As this exercise progressed, it became clear that Places for People (PfP) ticked each of our boxes on a corporate level and that their management team were people we could happily work with.



## THE WHY, WHAT, WHEN, WHERE & HOW OF SDR'S PROPOSED MERGER

### What do PfP offer that makes them a good partnership choice?

First, PfP puts Community at the heart of everything – just like we do. As a much larger organisation with far greater resources at its disposal, PfP offers all the advantages brought by economies of scale, but especially access to funding streams that would support vital expansion in the South West.

This partner would also offer both immediate and longer-term enhancements to the service that SDR's customers receive – for example a contact centre with 24/7 accessibility. Benefits would also include access to all services PfP customers receive and, more importantly, new customer service initiatives coming on-stream.

Recent examples are the inclusion of Home MOTs with the annual gas service, to check for issues relating to damp and mould, overcrowding, and safeguarding.

### Name some of the enhancements that PfP brings to the table?

- Dedicated complaints management with the Customer Focus team
- Effortless Lettings Process
- Responsive Property Management and Maintenance
- Local, knowledgeable, trusted Housing Officers
- Dedicated ASB services, including mediation
- Regional and National Customer Group framework
- Access to a wide range of support services
- Energy-efficient home improvements, recycling programs, green spaces
- Promoting inclusivity and diversity within our communities.

### How would Places for People make a difference to SDR's prospects?

PfP has an impressive new homes development programme in the pipeline, with a good number located in the South West of England, the region where SDR is keen to increase the number of homes for customers.

The current Devon list includes:

**IKEA Way, Exeter, Devon**  
Number of new homes = 184  
Start on site = March 2023

**Exmouth Junction, Exeter, Devon**  
Number of new homes = 165  
Start on site = March 2023

**Winkleigh, Devon**  
Section 106 Agreement with Allison Homes  
Number of new homes = 17  
Start on site = December 2022

**North Tawton, Devon**  
Section 106 Agreement with Allison Homes  
Number of new homes = 26  
Start on site = January 2023

Elsewhere in the South West, Places for People currently has an interest in three other sites where affordable homes are in the pipeline: Bridgwater (51); Truro (121) and Yate, Gloucestershire (40).

A key objective of the partnership would be to further grow the number of affordable properties in our area through development. SDR would provide the presence and regional capability to support this growth for the benefit of the community we serve.