



Minutes of the meeting of the COMMUNITY AND HOUSING SCRUTINY COMMITTEE held on TUESDAY 19 JULY 2022 AT 19:00 HRS

Present: Councillors Balazs, Bowyer, K Bradburn, Ferrans (Chair), Fuller, Hume, Long, Montague, Verma and Wallis

Apologies: Councillor Hearnshaw
Councillor M Khan (Councillor Fuller substituting)
Councillor Nazir (Councillor Verma substituting)

Also Present: V Collins (Director Adult Services), T Ricketts (Neighbourhood Services Manager), Z Awan (Community Engagement Manager) and E Richardson (Overview & Scrutiny Officer)

CH03 DECLARATIONS OF INTEREST

In the interests of transparency:

- i. Councillors Fuller and Wallis advised that they were tenants of Milton Keynes Council.
- ii. Councillor Long advised that he sometimes undertook consultancy work on behalf of TPAS (Tenants' Participation Advisory Service) and the LGIU (Local Government Information Unit).
- iii. Councillor Hume advised that as Ward Councillor for Bletchley East, he was a member of the Lakes Estate Renewal Forum.

CH04 MINUTES

RESOLVED –

That the minutes of the meetings held on 2 March and 18 May 2022 be signed by the Chair as a correct record.

CH05 COUNCIL AND TENANT/NEIGHBOURHOOD ENGAGEMENT ACTIVITY & DRAFT *TENANTS' HANDBOOK*

Witnesses: T Ricketts (Neighbourhood Services Manager) and Z Awan (Community Engagement Manager)

The Council's Neighbourhood Services Manager introduced his reports on Engagement Activity with Tenants and the new *Tenants'*

Handbook. He also referred to the Council's Annual Report to Tenants 2021/22 which had been included as an Information Item on the agenda (Item 8b).

During consideration of these reports the Committee noted that:

- a) The *Tenants' Handbook* would include an additional leaflet from the Public Health team to encourage tenants to connect with the services on offer which would reach approximately 12,000 tenants;
- b) A series of estate roadshows were being organised during the summer to allow staff from the Housing Team to get out and about and connect with tenants on a local level and retrieve the ground lost during Covid;
- c) Increased use was being made of social media, such as Facebook and Twitter, to engage with tenants;
- d) The Tenant Engagement function had recently moved into the Neighbourhood Services section and the team was now working on getting a joined-up service established. This was a big piece of work and any ideas on how staff could engage more fully with residents would be welcome;
- e) Staff often needed to be very proactive to get tenants to engage with the Council;
- f) A voucher incentive scheme had been used to encourage tenants to get involved with the drafting of the *Handbook*. This had worked well as tenants felt that their time was being valued by the Council;
- g) However, the Team would like to see a wider cross-section across the Council's tenant base for future collaborative work. There was a silent majority of tenants who had no repairs, no arrears and never complained and it would be good to get more of them involved with the work the Council does to manage their properties;
- h) More repair surgeries were being held on council estates across Milton Keynes and were attended by staff from Neighbourhood services, as well as staff from Mears and sometimes a local councillor. Often tenants would have more than one issue and it was helpful to have a range of staff in one place;
- i) The Environment and Property Engagement Team, who worked closely with colleagues in Housing, currently had two permanent officers, 1 vacancy and 1 person seconded from TPAS (Tenants' Participation Advisory Service);

- j) The use of a team of “Community Connectors” was being trialled on the Lakes Estate to pass on information on from the Council to tenants and from tenants to the Council. They were seen as a source of reliable information by other tenants as they lived on the same estate, and it was hoped that this could be replicated on other estates in the future.

The Committee welcomed the draft of the *Tenants’ Handbook*, making a number of suggestions as to what else they would like to see included, namely:

- a) Something which could be attached to a fridge / cupboard / somewhere handy, with a QR code, which when scanned, would take residents to an online copy of the Handbook;
- b) Key telephone numbers as well for those who were unable to use QR codes;
- c) More information about independent living and disabled adaptations;
- d) Re home swaps – it needed to be clear that sheltered or disabled adapted properties were not eligible for straightforward home swaps and that these had to be handled through the Council;
- e) Information about the annual independent gas assessment and safety check of each property and tenants’ responsibility to allow the assessor access to the property;
- f) Review list of useful telephone numbers and:
 - Add a “how to contact your councillor” section;
 - Add contact details for the Centre for Integrated Living (CIL).

Members of the Committee also raised a number of other issues of concern to council tenants, but acknowledged some of these were outside the Council’s control or influence:

- a) Getting an appointment with a doctor or dentist was an issue in some parts of the city. The Council should not under-estimate the cost of poverty on its tenants, with the potential fallout from the current crisis lasting for several years;
- b) The elderly and people with disabilities were more likely to suffer from the effects of poverty than the general population;
- c) Recently released statistics indicated that only 7% of “affordable” housing was for social rent. Of new builds 29% were designated as affordable for purchase;

- d) Parish Councils were key organisations in understanding what was happening in their local areas and could be tapped into when the Neighbourhood Services and Community Engagement Teams were organising engagement events;
- e) There were currently 100 households in temporary accommodation as commercial “affordable” rents were not affordable to most people in temporary accommodation;
- f) The Council was trying to increase its homelessness prevention work, but households were often workless due to a range of vulnerabilities and often lacked the ability to self-resolve difficulties in what could be complex situations;
- g) The new Housing Allocations Policy had been agreed at Cabinet and should enable the Council to prioritise and target those most in need. The Housing Allocations Team was currently reviewing all the cases on the register to make sure they got the right help and accommodation;
- h) The Council would be maximising its use of available nominations to other registered providers (housing associations), balancing availability with affordability;
- i) The Allocations Team had been working hard to catch up with the backlog of applications. Its performance was now much better and should continue to improve once the new Housing Allocations Scheme became operational;
- j) The Repairs Team was working hard to reduce void times and speed up the availability of newly vacant properties;
- k) A lack of the right type of housing in Milton Keynes was a fundamental problem with the current planning framework as officers were not able to insist on any particular quotas for housing types.

RESOLVED –

1. That the Council’s Neighbourhood Services Manager and his colleagues be thanked for their reports on Neighbourhood Engagement Activity and the draft *Tenants’ Handbook* and their contributions to the Committee’s scrutiny of these items.
2. That the Committee welcomes the marked improvement in the level and variety of neighbourhood engagement activities now being undertaken by the Housing Service.

3. That the Committee endorses the new *Tenants' Handbook* and welcomes its imminent publication after such a long gap since the previous edition of the *Handbook*.
4. That the Committee recommends the following additions and amendments be included in the final version of the new *Tenants' Handbook*:
 - a) Produce a sticker which could be attached to fridge / cupboard / somewhere handy, with a QR code, which when scanned, would take residents to an online copy of the Handbook. To also include key telephone numbers for those who are unable to use QR codes;
 - b) Page 4 – more information about independent living and disabled adaptations be included;
 - c) Home swaps – make it clear that sheltered or disabled adapted properties are not eligible for straightforward home swaps and that these have to be handled through the Council;
 - d) Page 8 – provide information about the annual independent gas assessment (safety check) of each property and residents' responsibility to allow the assessor access to the property;
 - e) Review list of useful telephone numbers and:
 - Add a "how to contact your councillor" section;
 - Add contact details for the Centre for Integrated Living (CIL).
5. That the Neighbourhood Services Manager circulates *The Charter for Social Housing Residents*, a Government White Paper to the Committee for information.
6. That the Council (Director of Adult Services in consultation with the Director of Finance and Resources) explores whether it can assist those residents in properties which have been subject to flooding incidents in the past and who are having difficulty accessing contents insurance to obtain said insurance.
7. That the Neighbourhood Services Manager checks with colleagues in Environment and Waste Services as to whether the anecdotal evidence reported to the Committee that the contract for the discounted Pest Control Service for residents on benefits has expired and not been renewed so that they have to pay full price for services is true, and if so, take the necessary steps to renew the contract.

8. That councillors be advised of any future Neighbourhood Services roadshows / engagement activities and details of future Repairs Surgeries being held on estates via *Councillors' News*.
9. That the Neighbourhood Services Team liaise with Parish and Town Council about possibly attending their carnivals / summer fun days / fetes etc to increase local awareness of the work being done by Neighbourhood Services.

CH06

2022/23 WORK PROGRAMME

Councillor Long suggested that the Committee's Planning Group considered including in the work programme a study of the Housing Partnership model which was starting to deliver results in Manchester and London, although in both those areas the directly elected Mayors controlled the relevant budgets.

He was also concerned about how often the HRA (Housing Revenue Account) Business Plan was being refreshed and whether there would be enough money available to cover the Council's new build programme. He was advised that this would be a major item on the agenda of the Budget and Resources Scrutiny Committee meeting which was scheduled for 13 September 2022. Members of the Community and Housing Scrutiny Committee would be very welcome to attend the meeting of the Budget and Resources Scrutiny Committee to listen to the discussion.

Concerns were raised about the increase in the exploitation of vulnerable residents by scammers and other unscrupulous persons. Councillor Fuller asked that the Planning Group consider including an item on this as part of the Community Safety meeting on 8 September.

RESOLVED –

1. That the Committee receives and notes the 2022/23 Work Programme.
2. That the Committee's Planning Group considers including an item on the exploitation of vulnerable residents by criminals on the agenda for the Community Safety meeting scheduled for 8 September 2022.
3. That the Committee's Planning Group considers adding a study of Housing Partnerships to the Work Programme for consideration at a future meeting.

CH07 **INFORMATION ITEMS**

RESOLVED –

That the Committee receives and notes the various information items presented as Item 8 of the agenda.

THE CHAIR CLOSED THE MEETING AT 20:20

The documents referred to in these minutes can be found on the Council's Committee Management Information System (CMIS) at: [CMIS: Community & Housing Scrutiny Committee - 19 July 2022](#)

The recording of this meeting is available to view on the Council's YouTube Channel at: [Milton Keynes Council YouTube Channel: Community and Housing Scrutiny Committee - 19 July 2022](#) and will be available to view for 6 months.