

Notes from meeting with the Housing Forum Executive & Councillor Irene Henderson held on 23rd November 2006 at the Tenants Resource Centre.

Present: Irene Henderson, Eamonn Bobey, Margaret Burke, Rita Venn, Pauline Prop, Jeanette Marling, Simon Aslett.

Irene opened the discussion – she had a number of points she wanted to raise:

1. Trust

The debate at last weeks Forum on a number of issues showed a lack of trust between tenant reps & the council e.g. rent equalisation & sheltered housing. How do we improve this situation?

Response of the exec members - Tenants do not feel informed & feel there must be a hidden agenda. If there were more openness trust would develop. It can be embarrassing for reps if they don't know what is going on. E-mail is used too much so reps can feel 'on the outside'. Recognition that systems thinking is fast-moving so not possible to have lengthy consultations on some issues.

2. Accountability

How much do reps represent the views of their residents or their own personal views? Can 2 reps from the same RA have opposing views? For example, rent levels. From the council's viewpoint there will need to be broader consultation on rent levels next year, not limited exclusively to the Forum. Information will need to go out earlier, even though Government guidance could change figures later.

Reps are in touch with their tenants. Tenant reps locally need more time and information to gather local views, & there are wide ranges of views on estates.

3. Responsibility

Isn't the role of the Forum to be a 'critical friend', helping the council to improve services? Opposition to proposals is OK but reps have a responsibility to be constructive & offer alternatives. For example, on rent levels, if lower increase is proposed, how will the shortfall in income be made up?

Reps will need more time to consider proposals if they are to formulate alternatives. If there was more openness about plans there could be a more constructive dialogue.

4. Relationship with staff

Currently the Forum is adversarial & does not acknowledge where progress has been made e.g. with Decent Homes work. The council's position has improved over the years e.g. the capital allocation is fully spent, but reps do not acknowledge this & continue to criticise which can be demoralising for staff.

The service to tenants is poor & many complaints are received by reps, also the attitude of some staff is not positive or helpful to reps.

5. Housing Options

The Housing Options policy went through Policy Development Committee on (date to be supplied – Simon) and was approved as well as gaining the

Council Government recognition and making MK a regional champion. If tenants want to review this policy the appropriate way to do it is to request the Policy Development Committee to look at it again. This is on the advice of the Head of Democratic Services. The PDC have the discretion to decide whether or not they wish to add it to their work programme. Also, if reps had any suspicions that members of staff had acted inappropriately with private companies or contractors these must be reported in the usual way by contacting Duncan Wilkinson the Internal Auditor. The Housing Options team are paid through the General Fund. It is likely that the involvement of properly approved lettings agents will increase. The council recognises that council housing is the preferred option for applicants but also recognises that we cannot meet the huge demand with our existing resources.

Staff paid through the HRA are working for GPR Housing because they are interviewing and 'vetting' applicants for them.

6. Stock transfer

Locally Lib Dems have always been open and left decisions to the tenants and has always honoured the outcome – there has never been an expressed desire to transfer the stock. The decision of the tenants was to stay with the council even though only the minimum decent homes work could be delivered. Continuance of the right to buy undermines any house building initiatives.

The national Lib Dem policy is stock transfer. There is a suspicion that private landlords are being used to reduce the demand for housing so that it appears MK does not have a housing problem, & therefore transfer would be easier.

7. Systems thinking sessions

Need to move forward with outcomes, which are positive & useful for improving TP.

There was confusion about the purpose of the sessions & reps want to avoid any conflict between TP Compact & the outcomes of the sessions. Reps will hold a special meeting & invite those involved with TP Compact, & finally agree outcomes. This meeting to be held in January.

8. Informal involvement

There needs to be a range of ways people can have their say. The council will be looking to develop these informal consultation systems, which will complement the formal consultation it has with the Forum.

Not all agreed – all local involvement should take place through the RA's.

9. Team building

There was general agreement that the session had helped by airing some difficult issues. There was also general agreement that informal sessions help to improve relationships. A suggestion was made that a team building session might be useful in exploring some of these issues further. This to be discussed by the Forum Exec at their next meeting with Pam.

10. Next meeting

To be late January or February. Simon to co-ordinate.