



Minutes of the meeting of the BOROUGH WIDE HOUSING BOARD held on THURSDAY 29 JULY 1999 at 7.30 pm

Present: Councillors Pendry (substitute for Councillor Kilkenny), Saunders and Woodcock

- C Allum - Downs Barn Residents Association
(Central Area Housing Board)
- J Blake - Central Milton Keynes Residents Association
(Central Area Housing Board)
- R Gibbard - Beanhill Residents Association
(Netherfield/Newport Pagnell Area Housing Board)
- B King - Bradwell Common Residents Association
(Central Area Housing Board)
- A Laing - Saints/Racecourse Residents Association
(Bletchley Area Housing Board)
- J Marling - Lakes Estate Residents Association
(Bletchley Area Housing Board)
- B Moore - Hanslope Residents Association
(Netherfield/Newport Pagnell Area Housing Board)
- P Prop - Tinkers Bridge Residents Association
(Netherfield/Newport Pagnell Area Housing Board)
- A Richardson - Beanhill Residents Association
(Netherfield/Newport Pagnell Area Housing Board)
- M Simms - Fullers Slade Residents Association
(Bradville/Greenleys Area Housing Board)
- H Taylor - Greenleys Residents Association
(Bradville/Greenleys Area Housing Board)

Officers: S Aslett (District Housing Manager), L Ellen (Senior Housing Officer), C Jones (Tenants Participation Officer), D Nickless (Head of Neighbourhood Services), J Reed (Policy Manager) and W Marsden (Senior Committee Manager)

Also Present: Councillors Burke and Long
M Moore (Hanslope Residents Association)

Apologies: Councillors Kilkenny and I Wilson
G Byfield (Central Area Housing Board)
J Cade-Westcombe (Netherfield/Newport Pagnell Area Housing Board)

1.0 ELECTION OF CHAIR

RESOLVED -

That Mr A Richardson (Netherfield/Newport Pagnell Area Housing Board) be elected Chair for the Council year 1999/2000.

2.0 APPOINTMENT OF VICE-CHAIR

RESOLVED -

That Ms H Taylor (Bradville/Greenleys Area Housing Board) be appointed Vice-Chair for the Council year 1999/2000.

3.0 MINUTES

RESOLVED -

That the Minutes of the Borough Wide Housing Board held on 15 April 1999, be approved as a correct record.

4.0 DIRECTORATE REPORT

The Board received a Directorate report from the Head of Neighbourhood Services.

The Head of Neighbourhood Services explained that a composite report, which would provide the Borough Wide figures for comparisons on rent arrears, empty properties, benefits and repairs, was not available.

Managers reports covering the four individual areas were handed out to the meeting.

The Head of Neighbourhood Services explained that there had been problems relating to:

- (a) a real benefits backlog, due to IT problems; and

- (b) identifying payments to the Council that were in the bank, i.e. suspense accounts which had made it difficult to realise the true position of payments owed to the Council.

A Richardson expressed concern that some people could find themselves in debt, due to no fault of their own.

D Nickless said that the benefits service was moving into a backlog situation, due to a number of factors:

1. The implementation of new document imaging technology, which was severely hampered by prolonged IT problems.
2. The introduction of the verification framework, within increased demand for the verification of primary documentation and mandatory identity cheques.
3. The staffing structure that was in place.

These factors continue to adversely impact the benefits service and by the week ending 11 July 1999, when the benefits service was re-centralised, the backlog had increased to 10,000 cases.

The re-centralisation had allowed procedures to be put in place, to allow the benefit officers to concentrate their efforts in to clearing the outstanding work. It was envisaged that the clearance figure will increase between 1,000-1,200 cases per week, with the backlog being cleared by the end of September 1999.

J Blake asked why staff were reduced before the new system was in place, and D Nickless replied saying that a number of staff had been successful in obtaining employment elsewhere or had been promoted.

A Richardson asked how much does benefit owe to the Housing Revenue Account (HRA), and D Nickless replied saying that he did not know and the rough approximation was ½% of rent arrears, i.e. around £200,000.

Empty Properties

The Head of Neighbourhood Services said he was aware of a number of empty properties; and quoted four properties owned by Milton Keynes Council, one property owned by Brent Council and a private property in Merlin Walk.

He said that properties are taking longer to let, the Government target is 2% or less of empty stock and Milton Keynes Council had less than 1.5% of empty stock.

A copy of an update on empty Council properties following a report in “The Citizen” newspaper, is attached as **Annex A** to the Minutes.

A Richardson stated that properties should be turned round as quickly as possible, and mentioned a property in Beanhill that had been vacant for over five months.

B King mentioned a property in Bradwell Common that had been empty for five years; and B Moore said she had brought a problem to Bruce Pratt at an Area Housing Board meeting, regarding Sheltered Accommodation at Hanslope. D Nickless to collect the address from B Moore.

R Gibbard mentioned a problem regarding moonlighting at Beanhill and H Taylor asked what happened regarding rent when this occurred. D Nickless said rent arrears kept building up and the number of empty properties must be kept to a minimum.

M Simms stated there were 26 empty properties on Fullers Slade. D Nickless said that this was an issue that needed to be taken up with the local Housing Officer, regarding concerns about the property.

J Marling stated that she knew of an empty property for over three months, and the contractor would not enter it because of a flea infestation problem. D Nickless to collect the address from J Marling.

P Prop asked whether Housing Officers check on empty properties and D Nickless said that they should do estate walkabouts and inspections.

B King to give an address to L Ellen regarding a tenant who was keeping two dogs and a crow in his house.

Repairs

D Nickless stated that the contractors performance was high in two contract areas and low in the other two contract areas. A meeting with the Managing Director of Mears was to take place.

H Taylor raised a concern that Mears were telling their staff that Milton Keynes Council were not paying Mears, and, therefore, staff were leaving. M Simms mentioned a problem regarding re-visits that seem to be taking place from Mears.

J Marling asked when reports would be standardised and J Reed replied saying that Performance Indicators were being produced in the Neighbourhood Services Directorate, and hopefully by the next BWHB meeting the information would be standardised.

A Richardson stated that the Chairs of the Area Housing Boards should meet with tenants and the Tenants Participation Officer, to decide what information they needed.

J Blake was concerned regarding tenancy agreement and a 16 year old boy who was keeping a dog in a flat. D Nickless said that a 16 year old could have a tenancy, and the tenancy issue would be handled by the Housing Improvement Team, established by the Housing Committee. L Ellen to meet J Blake on 30 July 1999 to discuss the issue.

5.0

REFURBISHMENT WORK AT NETHERFIELD LOCAL OFFICE

D Nickless gave an update on the Netherfield Housing Office that had been fire damaged, and the office had been relocated to Saxon Court.

An information office had opened at the Woughton Action Centre, between 9.00 am and noon everyday, and it was hoped that the office would re-open in November 1999.

Netherfield benefits staff had moved to the benefit core unit, where they had been located following re-centralisation of benefits.

Councillor Long mentioned that when Netherfield Housing Office was first built, tenants had stated that their views were not taken into account. The recent fire had given an opportunity to consider matters relating to the office, i.e. could the service be improved, especially the reception area; and to consult with Chairs of the Residents' Associations. The matter of consulting as an organisation was an important cultural principle.

D Nickless stated that the community's view would be considered and the Council would receive an insurance payment for reinstatement.

A Richardson viewed a visit by Netherfield/Newport Pagnell Area Housing Board members as being useful, to generate ideas.

P Prop stressed the difficulties for disabled people to gain access and H Taylor asked whether the redesign would be covered by insurance payment, or whether an extra budget was required?

D Nickless replied by saying that the Council had a responsibility under Disability and a Discriminatory Legislation, and insurance money would only cover reinstatement works.

Councillor Long thought the reception area could be more welcoming and open, and this could help to reduce aggravation levels.

D Nickless stated that the new opening date was now November 1999 and that staff would be moving out of Saxon Court, and be based at Porchester Close, West Bletchley, to provide a service for Netherfield/Newport Pagnell.

A Richardson stated that two houses were empty on Beanhill and there was the possibility use of SRB Shop on Netherfield, and he felt that these should be put to use.

Councillor Long raised the possibility of something being set up at Cripps Lodge. D Nickless stated that there was very little available space at Cripps Lodge and there were also difficult logistical problems.

D Nickless to contact the insurance officer to check whether the telephone system and IT were covered by insurance.

A Richardson raised the possibility of a spare classroom being used at Moorlands Centre, and Councillor Long stated that computer lines already existed at Moorlands Centre.

D Nickless stated that there is no network to Sheltered Housing schemes and Councillor Long would continue to explore options with officers.

6.0

TENANTS COMPACT WORKSHOP

C Jones provided an update on tenants participation compact. A copy of the handout is attached as **Annex B** to the Minutes.

C Jones said that a group was being formed to review the present structures and H Taylor volunteered to be part of this Working Group.

A Richardson mentioned the compact for estates and the opportunity to apply to Government for a Section 16 grant.

B King raised the issue of placements on Housing Improvement Teams and D Nickless replied saying that it was for tenants or shared owners.

A Richardson said that the relationship between Milton Keynes Council and registered social landlords have been discussed at great length.

Reference was made to the Neighbourhood Services Committee meeting held on 7 July 1999, which considered water charging developments in the Council's housing stock.

The Committee had resolved:

1. That pressure for the switchback option be continued, whilst adhering to the requirements arising from new legislation.
2. That Anglian Water's invitation for the Council to share an initial trial of "Assessed Measured Supply" concept of Milton Keynes and the forthcoming review of sheltered housing issues, be accepted.
3. That tenants in three or more bedroomed properties be allowed to have water meters installed, as soon officers are able to put this into effect.

7.0

FEEDBACK FROM THE AREA HOUSING BOARDS

1. B King said that the provision of cycle barriers was urgent and that pavements through his estates needed urgent attention. Each Residents' Association to compile a list and approach A Prockter regarding landscaping.
2. A Richardson said that the Housing Committee on 29 June 1999 had resolved that 62 Queensway, Bletchley, be used as a tenants resource centre on a trial basis, for a period of twelve months. However, the Strategic Director Neighbourhood Services stated that the twelve month period could be from the day the resource centre opens.

H Taylor asked if there was a further update on the tenants resource centre, and D Nickless stated that a budget had been identified but not to provide furniture.

A Richardson requested that Chairs of the AHBs be informed as to the position as soon as possible.

3. M Simms stated that the number of grass cuttings per year appeared to have decreased, and A Richardson said that these had been reduced from four or five times a year to three times a year in the contract.

8.0 ANY OTHER BUSINESS

1. The Board noted that there was a recommendation from the Netherfield/Newport Pagnell Area Housing Board meeting on 15 July 1999, that the proposal by Peartree Bridge Residents Association to provide five further life preservers to the canal side, at an estimated cost of £1,210, be approved.

The Netherfield/Newport Pagnell Area Housing Board meeting was in quorate, and was, therefore, not in any position to resolve any matters.

RESOLVED -

That the proposal by Peartree Bridge Residents Association to provide five further life preservers to the canal side, at an estimated cost of £1,210, be approved.

2. C Jones mentioned that there was a course being run in Oxford for a certificate in Tenants Participation, at a cost £800 each, for two tenants.

H Taylor said that TEPAS may be able to help with the travelling costs and J Reed said that education funds could be attractive after identifying education needs.

C Jones to explore the issue.

3. B Moore asked that she be included in future Housing Improvement Team meetings, regarding disabled adaptations.

9.0 DATE AND TIME OF NEXT MEETING

The date of the next Borough Wide Housing Board was confirmed as 11 November 1999.

THE CHAIR CLOSED THE MEETING AT 10.00 PM