



Minutes of the meeting of the BRADVILLE/GREENLEYS AREA HOUSING BOARD held on 9 MARCH 2000 at 7.30 pm

Present: Councillors Irons, Kilkenny and Saunders

Tenant

Representatives: H Taylor (Greenleys Residents' Association)
M Simm (Fullers Slade Residents' Association)
J Page (Fullers Slade Residents' Association)
A Ward-Challoner (Friends of Gibbwin)
A Martin (Friends of Gibbwin)
F Smith (Greenleys Residents' Association)

Officers: S Aslett (District Housing Manager), M Harvey (Development and Maintenance Manager) S Hoppie (Senior Surveyor) C Jones (Tenants' Participation Officer), L Reid (Operations Manager Central Area), B Bootle (Senior Benefits Officer (Overpayments and Payments)) and S Stares (Committee Manager)

Apologies: Councillors Day, Monk and Pendry
I Flatt (Mears Building Services Ltd), B Rimmer (Benefits Manager)

Also Present: J Blake (Central Area Housing Board), R Reid (Mears Building Services Ltd), P Martin (Mears Building Services Ltd), M Harding (Mears Building Services Ltd), D Donovan (Wheldons)

28.0 MINUTES

It was noted in relation to the Minutes of the meeting of the Board held on 9 December 1999, that Councillor Kilkenny had sent his apologies for non-attendance of the meeting, and that John Page had attended this meeting. It was also noted that "Calverts" referred to "Calvards".

RESOLVED -

That the Minutes of the last meeting be approved as a correct record, subject to the corrections listed above.

29.0**MATTERS ARISING FROM THE MINUTES**

The Board received an update on the properties which the District Housing Officer had agreed to investigate at the last meeting (Minute 22.0 refers).

It was noted that work was still in process at 27 Calvards. Work had been completed at 29 Calvards. Members of the Board reported that the fencing at this property required attention.

30.0**INTRODUCTION TO RESPONSIVE REPAIRS TERM CONTRACTOR**

Three representatives from the Responsive Repairs Term Contractor (Mears Building Services Ltd) were present at the meeting. It was noted that copies of the Contract Report had been circulated to members of the Board during the week preceding the meeting.

On a point of clarification, it was noted that "carded" properties (referred to in the report) were those to which Mears Ltd. workers had not been able to gain access when they had attended them to carry out inspections or work. In these cases, a card was put through the door of the property in question to let the occupier know that a representative from Mears Ltd. had called.

Councillor Saunders asked why so many variation orders for works undertaken were necessary, and how this system could be streamlined. Representatives from Mears Ltd reported that this was often due to requests for works being made by tenants before properties were inspected by professionals and correct specifications for works needed were made. It was suggested that variation orders figures would be reduced by raising their lower level from £20 to £50. It was reported by the District Housing Manager that this had been agreed at the meeting of the Housing Committee held on 30 November 1999. Councillor Kilkenny requested clarification of this decision in writing after the meeting.

In response to a query from M Simm regarding the installation of extractor fans in his own and other properties in Fullers Slade, officers clarified that "air vac"s had been installed in these properties, rather than electric fans, to alleviate the problems of dampness. It was noted that officers were aware of the problems with windows throughout Fullers Slade. M Simm requested that a structural engineer inspect the windows (which had been replaced two years ago) in this area.

Councillor Kilkenny expressed his thanks to Mears Ltd for their good service.

With regard to specific properties listed in the Contract Report, members of the Board raised the following queries:

- (a) M Simm asked why 11 Woolmans did not appear on the list. It was reported that this property would only be reported if the need for work on the property had been communicated to Mears Ltd through contracts.
- (b) M Simm reported that the private flat – 29 or 30 Belweather – had been vandalised by children who had caused fires and damaged the door, and needed to be secured. Officers reported that this property had now been leased, which prevented action being taken by the Council, unless the matter was a health and safety risk.
- (c) M Simm asked why 7 Woolmans had not been let, as work on it had been completed. The District Housing Manager replied that it was likely that this property had been offered to potential tenants but turned down.
- (d) A Ward-Challoner reported that 34 Gibbwin had been left with metal grills on the windows and with a solid door, and asked whether it could be finished. The District Housing Manager replied that it was necessary for properties to be left secured until they were let, and that this property had been offered to a family.
- (e) H Taylor asked whether 23 Calvards would be let soon. Work on this property had been completed in January. S Hoppe reported that efforts were being made to find an occupier soon, but that problems with the central heating had been identified, and needed to be repaired first.
- (f) It was noted that works on 18 Drovers Croft and 97 Woolmans (reported in the Minutes of the last meeting of the Board) had been completed.

31.0 HEATING CONTRACTORS

D Donovan, representing Wheldons, the heating, maintenance and repairs contractor for the Bradville/Greenleys area, was present at the meeting.

Councillor Kilkenny reported that he had received complaints from tenants about poor service during evenings and weekends. D Donovan reported that Wheldons was contracted to respond to emergencies outside office hours, and that telephone calls made during those times were always answered. In its contract, the Council defined emergencies as water leaks and gas leaks, or cases arising in extreme conditions, such as extreme cold, putting children or older people in danger.

In those cases where requests for work were non-emergency and made outside office hours, clients would be requested to call Wheldons again the next morning (after 8am). Usually a response to this call would be made the next day. It was reported that there had been few emergency night call-outs, partly due to the mild

weather this winter, and partly because heating systems were often not turned on at night, so that problems were usually discovered during the daytime.

Officers reported that it was unlikely that a 24-hour service (covering non-emergencies as well as emergencies) would be viable. Emergencies would be responded to immediately, though, and portable heaters were available for use in extreme weather conditions if necessary.

31.0

DISTRICT HOUSING MANAGER'S REPORT – INCLUDING MINOR ESTATE IMPROVEMENT GRANTS

The Board received reports from the District Housing Manager on empty properties, rent arrears, housing benefit (figures and service), repairs, and minor estate improvement grants.

Benefits

In response to the question why the number of benefit cases outstanding was so great, it was reported that this was simply due to the quantity of enquiries made. It was noted that the number of outstanding cases had increased since applications had been collected at local offices (where they were previously collected at area offices). It was noted that the benefit services at Saxon Court were still arranged in terms of areas. Members of the Board requested area breakdowns of benefit figures, which were presented as figures for the Borough at this meeting.

A Ward-Challoner reported that Friends of Gibbwin had a high proportion of elderly members, who were concerned about rent increases. Officers clarified that when rent levels were increased, their housing benefits would automatically be raised to cover the extra cost. It was reported that private benefit should also rise in April 2000. Housing Benefit officers would automatically update their records with regard to changes in state pensions and rent increases, but needed to be informed by individuals if there was any change to their private pension levels.

M Simm asked if there had been good response to the pilot "ONE" service. B Bootle reported that Milton Keynes had been selected to test call centre technology, as part of the pilot scheme which involved twelve centres across the country. Instead of having to contact various agencies individually when making benefit claims, the "ONE" scheme operated through a single telephone call made to claimants by workers at the centre which covered employment, housing benefit needs, etc. It was clarified that the pilot in operation in Milton Keynes was not funded by the Council.

Voids

The Board noted that the target average void period was three weeks. Mears' involvement with properties usually lasted one to two weeks, with the remainder of the void period being accountable to

the Council. The District Housing Manager reported that the average time for the Bradville Housing Office area of twelve weeks was partly due to these properties requiring long term repairs (which entailed a lengthier tendering process) and partly because these properties were in low demand, so harder to let. It was noted that the 20 week void period in Heelands was attributable to one property only, a sheltered housing scheme. Pennylands (26 weeks void period) was also a sheltered housing scheme.

Rent Arrears

The Board noted that the situation with regard to rent arrears levels had stabilised. A proportion of arrears would be due to delays in processing benefit claims.

The District Housing Manager reported that with the new IT system for monitoring housing, it would be possible to analyse arrears levels by estates and by amounts owing, which would make it easier to target action effectively.

In response to a question about action taken after eviction, the District Housing Manager replied that in some cases, evicted tenants would become eligible for housing through Homelessness legislation. In most cases, though, a late appeal would be made by the tenant, and the eviction may be suspended. A number of letters are sent to tenants to warn them that rent arrears are due, with a Notice of Seeking Possession being sent when the debt totals approximately four weeks' rent.

M Simm reported that he had heard of one case of a tenant being in arrears for 52 weeks, and asked how this situation would have been allowed to continue for so long. The District Housing Manager stated that this case would probably have involved several notices of eviction, suspensions of eviction, etc. incorporating the time taken for processes to go through court.

A Ward-Challoner asked whether the Council was able to recoup arrears in the case of an eviction taking place. The District Housing Manager replied that every effort is made to recover former tenant debt but overall success rates were not high.

Minor Estate Improvement Grants

The Board received a report on works which were in progress and works which had been completed. It was noted that all those projects set up in the last year had been paid for, and that £6,684.16 remained in the budget for this year. The Board considered whether to transfer consideration of this sum to the Borough Wide Board, or whether to order some new works immediately. The following proposals were considered:

- (a) The Board considered a request from Councillor Monk for funds to improve the environment around Neath Hill local centre.

RESOLVED –

That no funds be allocated by Bradville and Greenleys Area Housing Board to the proposed environmental improvements around Neath Hill local centre.

- (b) The Board considered ordering works to convert the drying areas at Greenleys to play areas. It was noted that drying areas in the past had often been the targets of vandalism, and it was agreed to take this project forward to a future meeting of the Residents' Council.

RESOLVED –

That the proposal to convert drying areas at Greenleys to play areas be taken forward to a future meeting of the Residents' Council.

- (c) A Ward-Challoner requested on behalf of the Friends of Gibbwin that consideration be given to improving visibility in the alleyways in Gibbwin. Lighting was needed, and posts at the ends of the alleyways needed to be painted in order to make the alleys safe. The District Housing Manager suggested that funding these works may be obtained through bodies other than the Area Housing Board, if they were Health and Safety, or Environment matters. Traffic-calming measures were also requested near the school.

RESOLVED –

That the District Housing Manager undertake a site visit to Gibbwin to ascertain the works needed there, and report these requests to the Residents' Council for future funding.

- (d) The Board considered a proposal made at the previous meeting to improve lighting in the underpass near Greenleys Health Centre.

RESOLVED –

That work on lighting in the underpass near Greenleys Health Centre, at a cost of £500, be approved.

- (e) The Board considered a proposal made by the District Housing Manager and residents to improve lighting in the garage area in Bradwell Road, Bradville.

RESOLVED –

That the installation of three additional lighting columns, at a cost of £3300, in the garage area in Bradwell Road, Bradville, be approved.

- (f) M Simm reported that bollards had been successfully installed in Weavers Hill on Fullers Slade. He requested that bollards also be installed on the green at Woolmans.

RESOLVED –

That the proposal to install bollards around the green at Woolmans, be approved.

33.0 ELIGIBILITY TO REGISTER ON THE HOUSING WAITING LIST

The Board expressed its concern that no officers were present at the meeting to advise Members of the report submitted to the Board.

RESOLVED –

1. That consideration of this matter be deferred to the next meeting of the Borough Wide Housing Board.
2. That an officer be requested to attend the meeting of the Borough Wide Housing Board to speak on this item.

34.0 TENANTS' COMPACT

The Board received an update from C Jones (Tenants' Participation Officer) on progress made to date on the new Tenants' Compact. It was noted that by April 2000 it was necessary to have completed an assessment of the progress of the review of Tenant Participation Policy, a jointly-agreed expectations statement on the final outcome of the Tenant Participation Compact, and a jointly-agreed action plan.

The Board noted that the review of progress had begun in January 1999, and had included regular meetings with officers and the Strategic Director Neighbourhood Services. C Jones had attended a course on Tenant Participation with colleagues recently, and reported that Milton Keynes seemed to have made good progress with the Compact, compared with other authorities.

The draft Joint Expectations Statement and draft Joint Action Plan were circulated at the meeting. Amendments suggested by tenant representatives at the four Area Housing Boards would be included in the final version of the statement and action plan, with the DETR said must be finalised by 1 April. The draft Tenants' Compact will be taken to the Borough Wide Housing Board for approval.

F Smith asked at what time of day the monthly Borough Wide meetings would take place. C Jones replied that times of meetings would be varied, in the ratio of two evening meetings to one daytime meeting.

It was noted with regard to the Joint Action Plan that it would be discussed at a meeting to be held on 14 March 2000 at the Queensway Tenant Resource Centre, to which all tenants were welcome.

M Simm asked whether it could be ensured that all residents' associations were represented at the new monthly Borough Wide meetings. C Jones replied that all residents' associations would be invited to attend these meetings, where there were Council tenants on the residents' associations.

J Blake asked whether the rent consultation could be brought forward, since the proposed date for the Annual Tenants' Conference was June, and rents would be set to change in April. C Jones suggested that an extra conference addressing rents specifically could be held in December or January. It was agreed to retain June as the date for the first Annual Conference, in order to launch the Compact.

35.0

NOTIFICATION OF ANY OTHER BUSINESS

M Simm asked for clarification on policy regarding taking into account past offences or prison when offering tenancies. The District Housing Manager replied that this was a complicated matter: it would not be appropriate, for example, to take offences into account if the particular offence committed would not have a bearing on occupancy of a property.

THE CHAIR CLOSED THE MEETING AT 9.37 PM