



Minutes of the meeting of the MILTON KEYNES COUNCIL HOUSING FORUM held on THURSDAY 18 JANUARY 2007 at 7.30PM

Members

Present: Eamonn Bobey(Chair) - Netherfield Residents Association
Mike Healey - Castles Residents Association
George Byfield - Conniburrow Community Association
Janette Bobey - Netherfield Residents Association
Margaret Burke - Bradville North End Residents Association
Charles Allum - Great Linford Parish Council (Downs Barn)
Hazel Taylor - Greenleys Residents Association
Geoff Woolmore - Woughton Parish Council (Beanhill)
Tony Mercer - Eaglestone Residents Association
Jim Blore - Castles Residents Association
Pat Warner - Bradwell Common Residents Association
Brian King - Bradwell Common Residents Association

Others: Councillor I Henderson - Milton Keynes Council

Also Present: Councillor A Latham - Milton Keynes Council

MKC Officers: Pam Wharfe - Director of Housing Services.
Simon Aslett - Tenant Participation Manager
Caroline Chandler - Finance Manager
Michael Toze - Committee Manger
Anthony Hodson-Curran - Assistant Director of Housing
Derek Beaumont - Partnering Manager
Clementine Smith - Housing Research & Strategy Officer
Jon Bilson - Strategy & Performance Manager
Ceri Davies - Finance & Business Manager

Apologies: Paula Bonarius - Bradville North End Residents Association
Jeanette Marling - Lakes Residents Association
George Farran - Fishermead Residents Action Group
Pauline Prop - Tinkers Bridge Residents Association
Paula Mason - Milton Keynes Council
Rita Venn - Fenny Stratford Residents Association
Lynn White - Lakes Residents Association

1.0 MINUTES

ACTION

RESOLVED -

- (a) That the Minutes of the meeting of the Milton Keynes Council Housing Forum, held on 16 November 2006 at 6 p.m. to discuss rent increases be approved as a correct record, subject

to a change of wording. Minute 1.0, Paragraph 14 would now read: "Milton Keynes Council submitted figures for 5 rent increase options for the Forum to consider, the lowest being a housing rent increase of 2.86%. Following this, Housing Forum Members made three proposals:"

- (b) That the Minutes of the meeting of the Milton Keynes Council Housing Forum, held on 16 November 2006 at 7.30 p.m., be approved

2.0 MATTERS ARISING

ACTION

In relation to minute 2.0, E Bobey noted that he had still not received a response on the issue of the Granby Court allocations. The Director of Housing Services noted that the whole allocations policy was under review. This would take some time and require wide consultation.

In relation to minute 8.0, E Bobey noted that although it had been stated that the sheltered housing strategy had been widely consulted, the Housing Forum minutes of 20 September 2005 showed that the Forum had expressed concern about lack of consultation, and had refused to comment on the report.

G Byfield expressed concern that the review of the sheltered housing strategy should be taken into account when deciding how to proceed with the strategy. The Director of Housing Services noted that sheltered housing largely fell under the remit of Adult Social Care. In addition the retirement village would have an impact on sheltered housing.

C Allum expressed concern about the practice of taking deposits for the retirement village. Cllr I Henderson noted that there was a long gap, typically some months, between people expressing interest and being asked to pay a deposit, giving applicants plenty of time to re-consider. As was customary, a deposit was a sign of commitment and once paid the deposit would be lost if the applicant backed out. She further noted that all residents of the retirement village were required to either be residents of Milton Keynes or to have a strong local connection.

In relation to minute 2.0, M Burke noted that there were no minutes of the voids workshop available. However, tenant representatives were invited to visit housing offices and look at the void boards.

The Partnering Manager noted that he was currently receiving advice on the legal issues around providing heating costs from the HRA budget. He would provide an update at a future Forum meeting. E Bobey suggested that in some situations tenants might be entitled to claim compensation for costs from delayed repairs.

**D
Beaumont**

G Woolmore noted that he was still waiting for information on government rent guidelines. The Assistant Director of Housing noted that there was a lot of information available and he was attempting to select what was relevant. The Finance and Business Manager noted that he had some background papers which might also be useful.

**A Hodson-
Curran**

3.0 NOTICE OF ANY OTHER BUSINESS

ACTION

- Walkabouts (H Taylor)
- Fencing (H Taylor)

- Future Housing Inspection (P Wharfe)
- Role of Forum (E Bobey)

4.0 TENANT & LEASEHOLDER SATISFACTION SURVEY 2006 RESULTS ACTION

RESOLVED –

That this item be deferred to a future meeting of the Housing Forum

5.0 DRAFT BLACK AND MINORITY ETHNIC HOUSING AND SOCIAL CARE STRATEGY ACTION

The Forum received a presentation from the Housing Research and Strategy Officer. She noted that the purpose of the strategy was to identify the housing and social care needs of the Black and Minority Ethnic (BME) communities, and to propose measures to address those needs. The study had used both statistical and qualitative data. A representative sample of 2400 households had been surveyed as part of the 2006 housing needs survey. 17% of those were from BME households, which suggested that the proportion of the population coming from BME backgrounds had risen since 2001. Black African was now the largest BME group. The BME population was currently younger than average, but in the future there would be a growing need for social care sensitive to the needs of the BME community. There was a general shortage of affordable housing across Milton Keynes.

The significant shortfalls in BME housing and social care provision identified by the strategy were overcrowding, homelessness and lack of awareness and poor take up of the services that were available. Under the Local Plan there was sufficient provision of traveller sites.

Forum Members noted that affordable housing was a problem for everyone in Milton Keynes, especially the young. The Housing Research and Strategy Officer noted that the provision of more affordable housing was intended to benefit all communities.

Forum Members expressed concern that having a BME strategy could be seen as divisive. The focus should be on individual needs, not on groups. The Director of Housing noted that there had been an overall survey of all housing needs, out of which some groups had been looked at separately. There was a statutory responsibility to look at BME housing and social care needs, and in addition groups such as young people and older people had been identified as having particular needs. The work had been partially paid for by English Partnership. As a result of all the research, Milton Keynes Council's housing data was extremely good. However, it might be beneficial for the Forum to see the results of the complete Housing Needs Survey as well.

The Director of Housing noted that all requests for housing extended families would be treated equally, regardless of ethnic origin. However where members of the family had made themselves overcrowded or intentionally homeless, for example by giving up a house to move in with relatives and causing overcrowding, the Council would not be obliged to help. Some members of the Forum noted that they felt this was unfair, as it disadvantaged families already living in the UK who wanted to move in together.

Housing Forum members noted that although the statistics showed

BME households were likely to be offered social rented housing in the 10 most deprived areas, this was simply because most larger Council properties were in those areas. It was unlikely that this would change.

Housing Forum members expressed concern about the provision of different social care services to BME groups. Cllr I Henderson noted that the Council aimed to meet the needs of those who used its services, for example by providing food that met dietary requirements or providing female carers where required. It was not about providing preferential treatment. The Council would try to meet any genuine needs of service-users, regardless of ethnic origin.

The Housing Research and Strategy Officer noted that the reason for a higher proportion of BME households receiving housing benefit was probably due to the fact that there was a higher proportion of BME households with low incomes and therefore entitled to housing benefit.

The Housing Research and Strategy Officer noted that there was little information available on BME communities and Houses in Multiple Occupation (HIMOs). However, Forum members felt that HIMOs were a significant problem and contributed to overcrowding and homelessness.

Forum members noted that in their experience members of BME communities felt that they did not know where to go for help, and that when they did seek help they were rebuffed. In addition, planning needed to be more proactive in preventing overcrowding and eviction.

The Director of Housing noted that a private sector housing strategy was being developed, and there would possibly be an accreditation scheme for recognising good landlords. Those who were evicted unfairly could always come to the housing service for advice. However, in any tenancy, tenants had to meet obligations such as rent payment.

The Housing Research and Strategy Officer noted that there were a number of reasons for the growth in the BME population. Children were born to the existing BME population, immigrants from other countries settled in Milton Keynes and people who were priced out of housing in London and the South East moved to Milton Keynes.

Housing Forum members noted that they would like some diversity training to be provided, as their tenant representative roles required them to work with many different sectors of society.

S Aslett

Forum members noted that a high proportion of homeless applications from the BME community were due to eviction by friends. There was concern that this system was open to abuse. There was also a growing perception that immigrants were “queue-jumping” waiting lists in services such as housing and education, causing resentment and potentially leading to political extremism. The Director of Housing noted that she would investigate the details of any possible fraudulent housing application. In addition, housing officers generally paid house visits in cases of eviction, reducing the possibility of fraudulence. Familial eviction seemed to be more common in the White British population than in the BME population.

P Wharfe

The Housing Research and Strategy Officer noted that travellers paid both Council Tax and rent.

Cllr I Henderson noted that the proportion of council housing allocations made to BME households was similar to the proportion of BME households overall. This indicated that the allocation policy was operating fairly. She noted that there was a balance to be struck between forming integrated communities and the fact that many BME households wanted to live with others from the same cultural background.

Forum members noted that termination of assured shorthold tenancies were one of the big causes of BME homelessness. Concern was expressed that therefore the promotion of private renting by the Council might be inappropriate. The Director of Housing Services noted that affordability was always taken into account, and that tenants were not put into housing they could not afford. Forum members suggested that the construction of more Council houses would address this and other issues.

RESOLVED –
That the report be noted.

6.0 BUDGET 2007/8 AND HRA BUDGET MONITORING REPORT ACTION

The Forum received a report from the Finance Manager. Overall there was expected to be a £300,000 underspend this year, and a reserve of £4.8 million would carry forward to the next year. Key variations were lower dwelling rent income due to high void levels, an underspend on repairs due to release of contingency funds which would not be required and an underspend on general management due to a release of budgets not expected to be used this year. There were additional costs to the Capital Programme due to disabled adaptation work.

J Bobey asked how many more adaptations were being carried out with the additional money. The Finance Manager noted that much of it was a backlog of work. The Director of Housing would provide more detailed figures when she had them.

P Wharfe

Forum members expressed concern that there was a forecasted overspend of £500,000 on the MITIE contract, and that contractors should be obliged to stick to the value of the contract. The Director of Housing noted that 4246 additional jobs had been carried out, and this was why more had been spent. The Partnering Manager would look into the exact details to ensure that all the additional work was necessary, and that it was not repeat work on inadequate repairs. It was possible that improvements to the call centre meant that it was easier to report repairs, and more tenants were doing so. Contractors might also be reporting additional jobs they noticed. Alternatively, it could be that as the housing stock aged, more repairs were required.

The level of profit MITIE made was set regardless of how many jobs they did. Therefore, the additional costs related purely to the raw costs of the additional jobs, such as staffing and materials, which the Council kept a close eye on. The Director of Housing and Partnering Manager would bring a report on this back to the Forum. At the moment it seemed estates currently on the Decent Homes programme were requiring fewer repairs. The Finance Manager noted that the MITIE overspend would be balanced by underspends elsewhere.

**P Wharfe/
D
Beaumont**

Forum members noted that systems thinking probably led to a higher level of repairs spending, which would be difficult to plan for, as contractors would report any other necessary repairs they saw.

Forum members noted the importance of maintaining a healthy reserve level. The Finance Manager noted that the reserves were currently above the minimum healthy level. However, from 2011 onwards, it was predicted that reserves would drop if current trends continued. The sustainability of resources and the future of the Decent Homes programme needed to be carefully considered. There was not yet any clear government guidance on Decent Homes after 2011.

Concerns were expressed that tenants were not always informed when a subcontractor would be doing a job instead of the main contractor. This could be confusing for tenants, especially if ID was not offered.

Forum Members asked if Milton Keynes Council was within the rent limit. The Finance & Business Manager noted that the limits were set for 2011 convergence. Milton Keynes was currently higher than most, but it would even out by 2011. The fact that Milton Keynes rent levels were high meant that it did not benefit fully from rent increases, as part of the money was retained by the government. However, rent levels had no relevance to subsidy.

RESOLVED –
That the report be noted

7.0 PERFORMANCE REPORT

ACTION

The Forum received a report from the Strategy and Performance Manager.

Forum members expressed concern at the increasing void times. The Director of Housing noted that a lot of work was being done on voids, and a new system was being implemented, which was simpler and provided a pool of properties for people to pick from. The system was still being worked on, but it was moving in the right direction. Area managers and estate management officers were also prioritising voids. Cllr I Henderson noted that the figures under 5.1 were limited, as they only showed repairs issues causing delays to voids, not the end-to-end process. The Strategy and Performance Manager noted that this was due to the deadlines for getting items onto the agenda. The process as a whole was being considered, and action was being taken where there were delays.

The Director of Housing noted that she was going to inspect some voids the next morning. She noted that the void review group no longer met, and at some stage there would be a wider consideration of tenant groups in general. In the meantime anyone who wished to could visit voids with her the next day.

Forum members asked about the use of the 4 DAT recorders. The Assistant Director of Housing noted that housing offices would loan DAT recorders between themselves. Only four had been purchased initially, but if they proved beneficial, more might be bought. DAT recorders could be issued to homeowners who complained about tenant noise. If a tenant complained about homeowner noise it was the responsibility of Environmental Health. However, if Environmental

Health did not have the resources, the housing offices might loan DAT recorders to assist with data collection. Enforcement against homeowners would still be the responsibility of Environmental Health.

Forum members noted that they had not been aware of antisocial behaviour focus groups in the Netherfield area, and asked what estates had been covered. This would be clarified.

J Bilson

The Strategy and Performance Manager noted that he would discuss with the Forum Executive how best to involve tenants in the review of the complaints process.

J Bilson

RESOLVED –
That the report be noted.

8.0 ELECTION OF THE COMMUNICATIONS OFFICER

ACTION

No nominations were received. It was suggested that it would be best to leave the position vacant until the AGM. The Constitution might also be updated to clarify what was expected of executive members.

RESOLVED – That the Communications Officer post be held vacant for the remainder of the Housing Forum year.

9.0 WINDOW REPLACEMENT PROGRAMME 07/08 – LEASEHOLDER CONSULTATION

ACTION

The Partnering Manager noted that replacement windows for Fishermead, Conniburrow and the remainder of Springfield had been planned for this year. However, the leaseholder survey for 2004 had not been properly carried out, and therefore Milton Keynes Council could only reclaim up to £250 per property, which would be well below cost. Action was being taken to remedy this, but in the meantime windows would only be replaced in blocks that contained no leaseholders. To ensure there was sufficient work for the contractors, blocks with no leaseholders in Bradwell, Bradville and Great Linford would also have replacement windows this year. Blocks with leaseholders would have their windows replaced once the problem was corrected. He further noted that the contracting of gas maintenance from April onwards was still under consultation, but it was expected that the existing supplier would remain, on a new and competitive contract.

Several Members of the Forum expressed concern that such a mistake had been made, and that it had not been detected and addressed earlier. Those who made the mistake should be held responsible. The survey had been expensive, and the contractors should pay any costs incurred by the Council in replacing windows below cost.

The Partnering Manager noted that the aim of rearranging the schedule was to avoid costing the Council money. Launching an investigation would take up a lot of time and money without helping to solve the problem. The delay in the window installation would not involve increased costs for the leaseholders. If the Council was unable to resolve the issue and additional costs were incurred, at that stage an investigation would be launched, and costs recovered if possible.

The Forum expressed its thanks to Pottons for their flexibility in re-programming the window installation.

RESOLVED –

- 1) That the report be noted
- 2) That the Partnering Manager provide an update on the window installation programme as appropriate

D
Beaumont

10.0 OFFICERS REPORTS

ACTION

RESOLVED – That the minutes of the Officers meetings held on 30 October, 13 November and 27 November be received.

11.0 NOTES FROM OTHER MEETINGS

ACTION

RESOLVED – That the notes from the meeting between the Forum Executive and Cllr I Henderson on 23 November 2006, and from the meeting between the Forum Executive and the Director of Housing on 14 December 2006 be received.

12.0 ANY OTHER BUSINESS

ACTION

Walkabouts

The Assistant Director of Housing noted that a meeting to discuss the issue was scheduled for Tuesday 23 January at 6.30pm. Forum members noted that it had already been announced that walkabouts on Netherfield had resumed, and dates had been set. The Assistant Director of Housing noted that this was likely to be a local decision, but he would look into it.

**Anthony
Hodson-
Curran**

Fencing

H Taylor noted that there did not appear to be a clear policy on fencing, and that this was a problem given the recent weather. The Partnering Manager agreed that there was no definite policy. The Council could not afford to do all the fencing work that might be possible. Instead, it would probably be limited to making sure that fences were safe.

H Taylor noted that under the tenancy agreements, the Council had a responsibility to ensure that the property was secure. It was not acceptable to simply say that it was a grey area and leave tenants without a definite answer. Cllr I Henderson agreed that a clear policy was needed, even if it had to be quite strict. She suggested that one should be formulated shortly.

**D
Beaumont**

Future Housing Inspection

The Director of Housing noted that she had recently met with the Audit Commission. A housing landlord inspection would be carried out in February 2008 as a follow-up to the previous one.

Role of the Housing Forum

The Chair noted that there had recently been some criticism of the Forum, and comments that it was going beyond its remit. He suggested that the role of the Housing Forum should be placed on a future agenda.

RESOLVED –

That the role of the Housing Forum be discussed at a future meeting of the Forum.

THE CHAIR CLOSED THE MEETING AT 10:55 PM