

Minutes of the meeting of the HOUSING AND COMMUNITY COMMITTEE held on WEDNESDAY 30 NOVEMBER 2016

**Present:** Councillor C Williams (Chair)  
Councillors Burke, Ferrans, Ganatra, Geaney, Khan, D McCall, Wallis and Webb

**Apologies:** Councillors Hosking and Jenkins

**Officer:** E Richardson (Overview and Scrutiny Officer)

**Also Present:** L Ellen (Acting Service Director [Housing and Community]), J Nokes (Housing Options Manager), M Smith (Housing Finance Manager), J Beake (Corporate Equality and Diversity Officer)

K Chana (British Red Cross MK), Rev B Stocker (Refugees Welcome MK) and 7 members of the public

**Disclosure**

**of Interests:** Councillor McCall declared a interest as an employee of the Milton Keynes Winter Night Shelter and as a Patron of the Refugees Welcome MK Group

The Council's Corporate Equality and Diversity Officer asked that it be noted that the Council had recently gone out to tender in respect of support services for Syrian Refugees and that the tender period had now closed and the submissions were being considered.

**HAC23 MINUTES**

RESOLVED -

That the Minutes of the meeting held on 10 October 2016 be agreed as a correct record and signed by the Chair.

**HAC24 QUESTIONS FROM THE PUBLIC**

A Mr J Pinkerton, on behalf of residents in Council Sheltered Housing schemes, raised a question concerning a proposed increase in the service charge for residents living in sheltered accommodation. This was in response to a letter sent by the Council to such residents, advising them of this proposal. He was of the view that this was an additional form of taxation on some of the most vulnerable residents in the local community.

The Committee heard from the Housing officers present that the letter was advisory as the proposal was out for consultation until 31 December 2016 and they urged residents to respond to the consultation with their views. They also explained that, due to the way the Service Charge was calculated, under the new proposal, no-one would be paying more than they were now, and that some

pensioners who were in receipt of Housing Benefit may be marginally better off.

RESOLVED -

That Mr Pinkerton be requested to put his question in writing and submit it to the Council via the Overview and Scrutiny Officer, who would arrange to pass it on to the relevant Cabinet Member for a response.

**HAC25**

### **COMMUNITY ISSUES: SYRIAN REFUGEES IN MILTON KEYNES**

**Witnesses: J Beake (Corporate Equality and Diversity Officer), K Chana (British Red Cross MK) and Rev B Stocker (Refugees Welcome MK)**

The Committee received a short presentation from the Council's Corporate Equality and Diversity Officer explaining that the Council was working in partnership with a range of organisations, including the local branch of the British Red Cross and the Refugees Welcome MK group (RWMK).

The Council was participating in the Government's Syrian Vulnerable Person Resettlement Programme to provide accommodation for refugee families from Syria. The Council's "quota" amounted to 80 people, 30 of whom had arrived so far. It was anticipated that another 6-8 families would arrive in Milton Keynes during 2017. The project was guaranteed for the lifetime of the current Parliament and funding had been promised for a further 4-5 years after that.

The Committee was advised that this resettlement programme had added considerable pressure to the workload of the British Red Cross in Milton Keynes, as they already provided practical support to vulnerable asylum seekers, other refugees and immigrants from their centre at Crownhill. Ms Chana explained that her work covered other local areas, not just Milton Keynes, but that the way the work was being tackled in Milton Keynes, with the partnership working collaboratively to achieve a shared goal, was delivering results.

It was explained that all refugees suffered a huge sense of loss of everything familiar and that there were many barriers which needed to be overcome. The Corporate Equality and Diversity Officer reported that all the Syrian families who were being resettled in Milton Keynes were glad to be here and were grateful for the efforts being made to welcome them and help them integrate locally. They did not want to be a burden on the local community and were very keen to be in a position to work and support their families themselves.

Rev Stocker explained that the RWMK was a group of volunteers and its establishment had elicited a huge response from the people of Milton Keynes; more and more people wanted to be part of the project. The group was working towards achieving charitable status

and was glad to be involved in such a strategic approach to the resettlement programme.

The Committee heard that the Council also accepted a proportion of unaccompanied asylum seeking children. The level set by the Government for Milton Keynes was 46 children per year; under the protocol Milton Keynes received children from arrival hotspots such as Kent, but also took in unaccompanied children arriving in Milton Keynes by other routes (such as Newport Pagnell Services) and those entitled to come to the UK as they already had other relatives here ('Dubs' children)<sup>1</sup>.

However, once these children left local authority care, they were no longer entitled to the same level of support as other care leavers. Support transferred from the local authority to the Home Office, although there were some exceptions and these were being looked at. Ms Chana agreed that such young people were in danger of being radicalised or exploited in other ways and although there was help and support whilst they were in care, there were no established post-care services in Milton Keynes, although there were in other areas, and work needed to be done to develop these. The Corporate Equality and Diversity Officer reported that he had already done some work on the post-care support for asylum seeking children for the Children and Young People Committee which he was happy to circulate to the Housing and Community Committee. RWMK, unlike the Council, was not limited as to who, or how, it could help and was working to assist all those who came to Milton Keynes in need.

The Committee agreed that the work being done to resettle Syrian refugees in Milton Keynes was a real example of the "can do" attitude of the Council, its partners and local residents. The Council had only passed the motion agreeing to accept Syrian Refugees 14 months ago and those involved should be commended for achieving so much in so short a time.

Of the 30 refugees who had come to Milton Keynes so far, 21 were children, of which, only 5 (1 of whom was born in Milton Keynes shortly after the arrival of his family) were under school age. The partnership had made use of the School Access Service to find suitable places for the children, whose progress was being monitored regularly by the Minority Achievement Network. Other initiatives to aid the integration of the families were being developed from this project. RWMK had developed an education programme where members of the group visited local schools to talk about the work they were doing, and were receiving very positive responses.

The Committee queried with Ms Chana whether female genital mutilation (FGM) was an issue. She explained that the Red Cross was working with a Jennifer Hill, who had worked with the Brook

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<sup>1</sup> Unaccompanied Refugee children allowed into the UK as they already have relatives here as a result of Lord Dubs' amendment to the Immigration Bill

Pregnancy Advisory Service and the Milton Keynes Safeguarding Boards, on orientation sessions delivered through female interpreters. Ms Chana also agreed to circulate to the Committee information clarifying the terminology associated with refugees, asylum seekers and immigrants which the Red Cross used to remove the stigma from refugees. The Corporate Equality and Diversity Officer agreed to include the information on the Council's Equality and Diversity webpages.

Residents had raised concerns with members of the Committee as to how the refugees were being housed when there was such a problem with homelessness in Milton Keynes. The Committee was advised that, under normal rules, the refugees did not qualify for housing assistance from the Council and therefore council housing was not being used to house them. The project was being funded by central Government, and the grant guaranteed 1-2 years housing security, enabling the partnership to use a housing service to lease properties in the private sector. It was hoped that, if this approach was successful, a good working relationship could be built up with private landlords, which might be of benefit to the Council in the future. RWMK reported that they had received several offers of housing from individuals who were not commercial landlords, but who wanted to help, and these were being looked into.

Concerns were also raised as to whether the resettlement programme was a front for terrorist activity. Ms Chana explained that everyone on the Government's resettlement programme was assessed by the United Nations for 8-9 months about their background in order to ensure suitability. They were then further screened by the Home Office before being accepted onto the scheme. The Committee was also reminded that, to date, all acts of terrorism associated with the situation in the Middle East had been perpetrated by British citizens who had been born here.

Finally, Ms Chana confirmed that many who came to the Red Cross for help had reached rock bottom and were not able to access mainstream services, often because their status meant that legally they had "no recourse to public funds". The Red Cross never turned anyone away and did all it could to assist and direct people to agencies which could provide the necessary services.

#### RESOLVED -

1. That the Council's Corporate Equality and Diversity Officer, together the representatives from the British Red Cross MK and Refugees Welcome MK be thanked for their attendance at the meeting and for their contribution to the Committee's discussions..
2. That the Council's Corporate Equality and Diversity Officer prepares a short briefing paper on Unaccompanied Asylum Seeking Children and the support they need to help them integrate into the local community..

3. That the Red Cross information on the correct definitions of such terms as “refugee”, “asylum seeker”, “migrant” etc be circulated to the Committee and the link included in the Minutes:

<http://www.redcross.org.uk/en/What-we-do/Refugee-support/Refugee-facts-and-figures>

4. That this information also be included on the Council’s Equality and Diversity webpage.

## HAC26

### **DRAFT 2017/18 HOUSING BUDGET PROPOSALS**

The Committee received two presentations, one on the pressures and savings identified in the Housing Revenue Account (HRA) and one on the pressures and savings for Housing and Community Service Group General Fund.

During the presentations and ensuing discussions the Committee noted that:

- That the Budget Scrutiny Committee had already considered and commented on the pressures in the Housing and Community Service Group General Fund;
- Room only hotel accommodation was the most expensive and least fit for purpose form of temporary accommodation;
- Of the £3.13m identified pressure for temporary accommodation, 75% related to room only hotel accommodation with the other 25% covering other forms of temporary accommodation;
- Savings of £2.04m had been identified in relation to temporary accommodation and, when offset against the pressures, reduced the total costs to £1.90m;
- As of week ending 25 November 2016, the number of families in temporary room only hotel accommodation was down to 99. This was an indication that the initiatives the Council was putting in place to deal with homelessness were starting to work and the Council was working to reduce this even further;
- The use of modular structures, which could be erected relatively quickly, to provide short term temporary accommodation was being explored by the Council and would be subject of a future report;
- A five year lease had been taken on Orchard House to provide temporary accommodation for families, with the Council as a registered social landlord;
- At its meeting on 14 December, the Budget Scrutiny Committee would be considering both the pressures and savings in the HRA and the savings in the Housing and Community General Fund.

RESOLVED -

1. That the Council's Housing Finance Manager be thanked for his presentation on the Draft Budget (Housing) Proposals 2017/18 and for his explanations of some of the detailed complexities in the proposals.
2. That members of the Committee submit any additional questions for the Housing Finance Manager on the Draft Budget (Housing) Proposals 2017/18 or any comments on the proposals that they wish the Budget Scrutiny Committee to consider at its next meeting, to the Overview and Scrutiny Officer by Friday 9 December, who will organise a co-ordinated response.

**HAC27**

### **HOUSING MIX IN MILTON KEYNES**

The Committee received and noted a briefing paper which summarised the main findings of the Council's new Strategic Housing Market assessment in respect of the mix of housing required in the borough over the next twenty years.

RESOLVED -

1. That the Committee receives and notes the briefing paper on Housing Mix in Milton Keynes and that the Committee's thanks be passed on to the Planning Team for producing the paper.
2. That any comments or queries relating to the paper should be sent to the Overview and Scrutiny Officer who will arrange a co-ordinated response.

**HAC28**

### **AN INTRODUCTION TO CHOICE BASED LETTINGS**

The Council's Acting Service Director (Housing and Community) had prepared a briefing paper as an introduction for the Committee to proposals for creating a Choice Based Lettings Scheme in Milton Keynes. The proposals had cross-party support and a fuller paper on the scheme would be going to Cabinet in the new year.

It was explained that although some other local authority Choice Based Lettings schemes included properties in the private rental sector as well as council stock and that available from registered providers, it had been agreed that initially this would be too complicated for a new scheme but that the aim was to move towards this position in the future.

Full details of how the bidding process would work, including how many properties for which an applicant could bid, had not yet been worked out and more detailed plans would follow. However the aim was to encourage people to move out of temporary accommodation into suitable, permanent homes.

The Committee expressed its concern about how accessible the scheme would be to those who either did not have regular access to

the internet or had difficulties in handling applications via modern technology. The Acting Service Director (Housing and Community) shared the Committee's concerns, agreeing that this needed to be managed carefully with a number of different ways of accessing the system being available.

Criteria needed to be agreed so that if more than one person accepted the same bid, an offer could be made appropriately. Conversely, if an applicant refused to accept an offer following a successful bid, the Council would be deemed to have discharged its housing provision duty to that applicant.

The Committee agreed that the way forward would be for the Planning Group (Chair and Vice-Chairs) to meet with the Portfolio holder for Adult Care and Housing together with Housing officers, to look at the design of the system in detail and negotiate cross-party agreement to the final version of the scheme.

RESOLVED -

1. That the Committee was pleased to note that the Council was making progress on the possible introduction of a Choice Based Lettings Scheme and thanked the Acting Service Director (Housing and Community) for her update.
2. That a meeting of the Committee's Planning Group, the Cabinet Portfolio Holder for Adult Care Housing, together with relevant Housing officers, be arranged to discuss the design of the system in more detail and with a view to obtaining cross-party agreement for the scheme.

**HAC29**

**UPDATE ON THE MILTON KEYNES HOMELESSNESS PARTNERSHIP / WINTER NIGHT SHELTER**

The report on the Milton Keynes Homelessness Partnership which was included in the agenda pack for this meeting had been presented to Cabinet on 8 November 2016. The Partnership had met again today (30 November 2016) and a further report would be presented to Cabinet on 6 December. Since its inception in September, the Committee had already covered a lot of ground, including submitting, to a very tight timescale, 3 bids, in association with other local authorities in the area, to central Government for £14m worth of funding to support various projects to relieve the local homelessness problem. It was anticipated that results of the bids would be notified in mid-December.

Concern was expressed that there was a perception that some groups represented on the Partnership had a more political agenda than others and whether this would have a negative effect on the long term effectiveness of the Partnership. The Acting Service Director (Housing and Community) understood these concerns, reassuring the Committee that these groups were far outweighed by those who wanted to move forward and ensure that the current progress was sustained. She thought that having an independent

Chair militated against any politicisation of the group. The Partnership had also co-opted several groups which had not been part of the initial set-up and this also served to diversify the range of people involved. A couple of sub-groups had been established to work on more detailed proposals and the feedback from these was good. A lot of work had been done in a very short space of time and she was positive about the continued success of the Partnership

Councillor D McCall commented that the Homelessness Partnership was a direct result of the work done last winter by the Homelessness Task and Finish Group and was a good example of the effectiveness of a proper scrutiny function.

Councillor McCall also updated the Committee on the progress of the 2016/17 Winter Night Shelter (WNS), which had been officially opened on the 28 November, with its doors opening to the Homeless on 1 December. Operating from the old Bus Station in Central Milton Keynes, the WNS operated a reception centre for the homeless, with a welfare team on site during the day. An average of 15 beds per night, in a range of locations across Milton Keynes, was being provided through the WNS. However, it was not necessarily the same people who were helped each evening and he anticipated that over the course its operation, the WNS would assist as many as 80 separate individuals. Councillor McCall further explained that non-one could force homeless individuals to engage with the WNS and join its programme and, as most people involved in the Shelter's support work were volunteers, not professionals, it was not possible for them to deal with people who had severe or complex needs, such as alcohol addiction or substance misuse.

He confirmed that the WNS had submitted a bid to the Milton Keynes Development Partnership (MKDP) for a longer term lease on the Bus Station as it was ideally suited for the work being done by the WNS. However, Councillor McCall did express his concern that the MKDP were also looking at the possibility of co-locating other, albeit complementary, organisations in the same premises. Whilst this could be a positive way to maximise the use of the building, there was a danger that the building could then become too crowded with none of the co-located organisations being able to operate as effectively as they should be.

It was agreed that arrangements would be made for members of the Committee to visit the Winter Night Shelter in order to see first-hand the work being done to support the homeless through the worst of the winter months.

Following concerns raised by the Street Warden for Central Milton Keynes about the need to separate and discourage professional beggars from the genuine homeless, possibly by the use of Public Space Protection Orders, the Committee noted that this issue would be covered in a report being presented to Cabinet on 6 December.

RESOLVED -



1. That the Committee is pleased to note the positive progress being made by the Milton Keynes Homelessness Partnership after such a short length of time and thanked the Acting Service Director (Housing and Community) for her update.
2. That it be further noted that an updated report on the work of the Partnership, which included details of the 3 separate bids for Government funding (Homelessness Prevention Programme, the Rough Sleepers Grant and the Social Impact Bond) to support its proposals, would be presented to Cabinet on 6 December. The Committee requested that it be circulated with a copy of the report.
3. That the Committee was also pleased to note that the Winter Night Shelter was now established in the former Central Milton Keynes Bus Station for the 2016/17 winter season and that its doors would open to the homeless on 1 December.
4. That arrangements be made for members of the Committee to visit the Winter Night Shelter in order see for themselves the work being done to assist rough sleepers during the winter.

### **HAC30**

#### **2016/17 WORK PROGRAMME**

The Committee received and noted the current Work Programme and requested that an item on the Homelessness Reduction Bill and its implications for the Council be added.

RESOLVED -

That an item on the implications for the Council of the Homelessness Reduction Bill be added to the Committee's Work Programme.

THE CHAIR CLOSED THE MEETING AT 9.50 PM