



Minutes of the meeting of the HOUSING AND COMMUNITY COMMITTEE held at 7.00 PM on WEDNESDAY 31 JANUARY 2018

Present: Councillor C Williams (Chair), Councillors Coventry, Ferrans, P Geary, Hosking, Khan, D McCall and Wallis

Officers: E Nickless (Head of Homelessness Prevention and Housing Access), J Nokes (Homelessness Prevention Manager), M Smith (Strategic Finance Business Partner (Housing)), E Richardson (Overview and Scrutiny Officer)

Also Present: B Thomas (Director, MK CAB), J Brighton (Chair of Trustees, MK CAB), G Woolmore (Beanhill Action Group), S Taylor (Tinkers Bridge Residents' Association) and one member of the public

Apologies: Councillors Geaney and Ganatra

Disclosures: None

HAC27 MINUTES

RESOLVED -

That the Minutes of the meeting held on 19 December 2017 be agreed and signed by the Chair as a correct record.

HAC28 CITIZENS' ADVICE BUREAU (CAB) PRESENTATION

Witnesses: B Thomas (Director, MK CAB) and J Brighton (Chair of Trustees, MK CAB)

The Committee received a short presentation from the representatives of the CAB, during which it was noted that:

- The CAB was based in Acorn House in Central Milton Keynes, with 14 other community locations across the borough, including sharing space with town and parish councils and at the Hospital;
- The organisation was funded by charitable grants and some paid pieces of work; 60% of staff were volunteers;
- Two thirds of cases dealt with social welfare issues, such as type of accommodation, security of tenure, problems with landlords, rent levels, end of tenancy issues and a range of benefits issues.
- The Local Housing Allowance policy was complex and staff at the CAB spent a lot of time explaining to clients how it worked and to what they were entitled;

- Most possession actions in the County Court involved tenants in the private rented sector;
- Very few clients were street homeless/rough sleepers as there was a range of other agencies involved in assisting them;
- Those who came to the CAB for help were increasing number of the hidden homeless, such as sofa surfers, people living in their vehicles, or spending time in 24 hour cafés. They were often young, in poorly paid, insecure or zero hours contracts and generally had to rely on public transport;
- Tenants in the private rented sector often had problems with housing debt or issues about the disrepair of properties, some of which were caused by a rise in the number of absentee or accidental landlords operating via lettings agencies. There was no support network for those in the private rented sector who had problems;
- The service was constantly under pressure and the extent of the help provided varied from information to help clients resolve issues themselves to full advice about how to take a problem forward;
- On average the CAB saw 30-35 clients a day. However on 30 January 2018 year 51 people attended the drop-in session, with 17 having to be turned away as there was not the capacity to deal with them;
- The CAB had recently improved its Dispute Resolution Service and this was helping more people resolve problems, particularly where a chaotic lifestyle could be a barrier to effective communication.

Mr Thomas went on to say that he thought the introduction of Universal Credit would be a big issue in the future for both the CAB and the Council. The evidence from CAB services in areas where Universal Credit had already been implemented showed a 25-30% increase in cases. Mr Thomas thought it was important to learn from the experience of colleagues in other areas before the local implementation in September 2018. There was concern about some lettings agencies adopting dubious practices and the CAB would like to work with the Council to investigate these. Fees charged by letting agents to both landlords and tenants were also a problem. Mr Thomas added that he thought the new Homelessness Reduction Act could help to reduce the problem of illegally withheld deposits. He also explained that sometimes landlords themselves were in financial difficulties, such as being behind with the mortgage on a rental property and facing repossession; they either wanted tenants out or an increase in rent.

Mr Thomas explained that there was only one law firm in Milton Keynes with a contract to provide legal aid for housing cases and

although the CAB did refer clients to them for assistance, only 40% of those were having their needs met.

Both CAB representatives thanked the Council for supporting the work of the CAB; they thought that the two organisations had a good working relationship with a professional approach.

However, as the CAB was having to operate on a 12 month financing cycle it meant that any strategic development was difficult to plan for and manage. Local authority funding only provided 25% of the CAB's total funding and the CAB had had to source more varied income streams. Mr Thomas thought that this made it healthier as an organisation although shaping future policy was harder. He welcomed the news that there was funding of £100k for the CAB in the Council's 2018/19 budget, but earlier notification would have been helpful.

RESOLVED -

1. That Ben Thomas and Jennifer Brighton from the Milton Keynes Citizen's Advice Bureau be thanked for their attendance at the meeting, their presentation on the work of the Citizen's Advice Bureau and their contribution to the Committee's subsequent discussion.
2. That, on behalf of the Committee, the Chair and Vice-Chairs write to the Leader of the Council requesting confirmation that the Council is working in partnership with the Milton Keynes Citizen's Advice Service to ensure that there is no doubling up of the services / advice provided by both organisations, but also that there are no gaps in such provision.
3. That the Cabinet be asked to ensure that council officers meet with representatives from the Citizens' Advice Bureau in order to learn the lessons from other local authorities' full roll-out of Universal Credit and ensure that Milton Keynes takes whatever steps it can to minimise the adverse effects.
4. That on behalf of the Committee the Chair and Vice-Chairs write to the relevant Government Minister expressing its concern at the poor provision of legal aid support for housing cases in Milton Keynes and requesting a review of the current position with a view to increasing capacity in this area.
5. That the letter to the Government Minister be further backed-up by a letter to the MPs for Milton Keynes, requesting their support for the Committee's request.
6. That the Chair and Vice-Chairs write to the Milton Keynes Law Society (or other such body as recommended by Legal Services) to draw the shortage of Legal Aid support experienced in housing issues in Milton Keynes to their attention and request that their members consider providing such a service.
7. That, on behalf of the Committee, the Chair and Vice-Chairs write to the Communities and Local Government Committee's

Inquiry into the Private Rented Sector, expressing its concerns about fees paid to letting agents by tenants and the abuse of this system by some letting agents and landlords.

HAC29

HOMELESSNESS REDUCTION ACT

Witnesses: E Nickless (Head of Homelessness Prevention and Housing Access), J Nokes (Housing Options Manager)

Ms Nickless gave an overview of the Council's main obligations under the new Homelessness Reduction Act which would come into force on 3 April 2018. The new obligations included:

- (a) Increasing the timescale in which to help those threatened with homelessness from 28 to 56 days;
- (b) Providing free information and advice to any person in Milton Keynes on preventing and relieving homelessness;
- (c) Carrying out assessments of all cases where an eligible applicant was homeless, or at risk of becoming homeless;
- (d) Developing personal housing plans for individuals seeking assistance;
- (e) Taking reasonable steps to help prevent any eligible person who was at risk of homelessness from becoming homeless;
- (f) Taking reasonable steps to help secure accommodation for any eligible person who was homeless.

The new Act also gave applicants the right to challenge decisions relating to the new stages of the homelessness process and, from October 2018, placed a requirement on other public bodies to notify their local authority of any service users they thought might be homeless or at risk of becoming homeless.

The new Act would mean a significant increase in the workload of the Housing Department, which was being restructured to meet this demand. This included a 150% increase in staff, although the department was having to rely on temporary staff whilst the process of recruiting and appointing new, permanent staff was taking place.

Preparations to meet the conditions of the new Act were well underway, including 3 work-streams to look at the most common reasons for homelessness, ie the end of a private sector tenancy, eviction by family or friends and problems faced by non-statutory single people in accessing local authority assistance.

One of the aims of the new procedures was to streamline the process for service users, cutting down the number of times they needed to attend the Civic Offices to one appointment. The appointment system itself was being revised so that the large number of people seeking housing advice/assistance (average 830 per month) could be effectively managed and relevant support provided.

A communications plan was being prepared setting out the Council's obligations under the new Act and how these would be delivered. The communications plan included a stakeholder event on 12 March, to which all councillors would be invited. This event would also be attended by representatives of the Department for Communities and Local Government.

RESOLVED -

1. That Eleanor Nickless and Julie Nokes be thanked for their attendance at the meeting and for updating the Committee with details of the work being done by the Council in preparation for the introduction of the Homelessness Reduction Act on 3 April 2018.
2. That Homelessness Prevention officer colleagues be requested prepare a briefing note setting out the details of the Council's preparations for introduction of the Homelessness Reduction Act, including definitions of "take reasonable steps" and "eligibility" for circulation to all councillors.

HAC30

TENANT PARTICIPATION

Witnesses: G Woolmore (Beanhill Action Group) and S Taylor (Tinkers Bridge Residents' Association)

Mr Woolmore raised concerns about the Council's current level of interaction with tenants' and residents' groups. Over the past 12 months there had been a marked deterioration in the Council's engagement with its tenants on all levels. This included not responding to communications from tenants' groups, a cut in the number of residents' meetings, changing dates and venues of meetings without sufficient notice, lack of support for the Tenant Scrutiny Panel, out of date information on the Tenant Participation website, cuts to grants and expenses, no longer providing a regular tenants'/ residents' newsletter and the recent high turnover of staff at the Council. He was concerned that the Council was not fulfilling its obligations to tenants under the Localism Act and that, the Beanhill Action Group, was considering writing to the Homes and Communities Agency to log a complaint.

Ms Taylor, the Tinkers Bridge Residents' Association representative, added that proper liaison with tenants' and residents' groups was important as the groups were expected to pass an annual "health check" in order to be able to apply for grant funding to support their activities. As part of the health check groups were expected to provide evidence of a good working relationship with the Council and she was afraid that the current position would mean groups failing their annual health check.

The Head of Homelessness Prevention and Housing Access advised the Committee that, as part of the planned restructure of the Housing Service a specialist team would be put in place to manage future community engagement between the Council and its tenants

and residents. This would be a team of five, to ensure there was always cover in the section, consisting of a manager, a senior officer, 2 officers and an assistant. Eighteen Neighbourhood Officers would also be appointed to champion community engagement in local areas.

Mr Woolmore added that he thought the Localism Act was not being acted on properly and ideally, he would like to see a Tenant Representative on the appointment panel for the above posts to ensure that appointees had the right level of expert knowledge to meet the needs of tenants.

Ms Taylor, on behalf of the Tinkers Bridge Residents' Association, raised the issue of a lack of planned maintenance of council owned residential properties on the Tinkers Bridge estate. She explained that there were 148 council properties, with an approximate value of £150,000 each, rotting away on the outside for the want of a £1,000 coat of paint, a bit of patching up and a gutter clean. She went on to say that this type of work had last been done 15 years ago, whereas, in the days of the Development Corporation which originally built the houses, it was carried out every 5 years and that tenants would like to see this regime of regular maintenance reinstated.

As one of the last estates to be considered for regeneration, the residents of Tinkers Bridge were deeply worried that there was now a deliberate policy of allowing their homes to rot in order to justify their demolition. Ms Taylor also commented that the lack of any accessible information about the stock condition survey undertaken by YourMK only served to increase those suspicions. Tenants could not understand how badly the communications on regeneration from both the Council and YourMK were being handled.

The Chair advised the tenant representatives that similar concerns about planned maintenance on other estates had already been raised with the Committee and that the issue was scheduled to be considered at the meeting on 27 March 2018.

RESOLVED -

1. That the residents' representatives who attended the meeting be thanked for their interest, for raising their concerns with the Committee and their contribution to the discussion of these issues.
2. That it be noted that the Committee is saddened by what appears to be a lack of partnership working with its tenants and their recognised representative organisations by a Council which sees itself as a "co-operative council".
3. That arrangements be made for the Chair and Vice-Chairs to meet with the Leader of the Council, the Cabinet Member for Housing and the Service Director (Housing and Regeneration) to discuss the Committee's concerns on this matter.

4. That a request for a Task and Finish Group to consider the issues in relation to tenant participation raised at the meeting, involving both tenant representatives and officer colleagues be submitted to the Scrutiny Management Committee for approval.
5. That any proposals recommended by the Task and Finish Group for improving the 2-way communication between the Council and its tenants be presented to a future meeting of full Council.

HAC31

NATIONAL HOMELESS PROPERTY FUND (REAL LETTINGS SCHEME)

RESOLVED -

1. That the Briefing Note updating the Committee on the Council's participation in the Real Lettings Scheme be received and noted.
2. That having read the Briefing Note, members of the Committee send any questions to the Overview and Scrutiny Officer by Friday 9 February 2018, who will pass any questions on to the authors for a response and subsequent circulation back to the Committee.

THE CHAIR CLOSED THE MEETING AT 8.40 PM