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ITEM



Minutes of the meeting of the COMMUNITY AND HOUSING SCRUTINY COMMITTEE held on TUESDAY 20 JULY 2021

Present: Councillors Bowyer (substituting for Nazir), De Villiers, Ferrans (Chair), Fuller, Hume, Marlow, Reilly, and Wallis

Officers: S Proffitt (Director, Environment and Property), S Young (Head of Asset Management and Investment), N Hannon (Head of Environment and Waste), E Richardson (Overview and Scrutiny Officer)

Also Present: P Baldwin (Managing Director, Mears Group), A Fanning (Mears Group), Councillor Darlington (Cabinet Member, Adults, Housing and Health), S Hallett (Chair, Lakes Estate Renewal Forum), G Meadows (Chair, Fullers Slade Estate Renewal Forum), B Bendig-Ceesay (Chair, Fullers Slade Residents Association) and D Lee (Tinkers Bridge Residents Association)

Apologies: Councillors Balazs and Nazir (Councillor Bowyer substituting)

CH03 DECLARATIONS OF INTEREST

Councillors Fuller and Wallis advised that they were tenants of Milton Keynes Council.

CH04 MINUTES

RESOLVED -

That the Minutes of the meeting of the Community and Housing Scrutiny Committee held on 23 February 2021 and the special meeting held on 19 May 2021 be signed by the Chair as a correct record.

MILTON KEYNES COUNCIL HOUSING MAINTENANCE PROGRAMME

**Witnesses: S Young (Head of Asset Management and Investment),
P Baldwin (Managing Director, Mears Group)**

The Committee received presentations from the Council's Head of Asset Management and Investment and the Managing Director of the Mears Group, updating it on the progress the Council's Housing Maintenance Programme. The presentations covered a number of important themes including investment objectives, the challenge to Mears, further service improvements, the impact of Covid-19, Quarter 1 performance by Mears, dealing with damp and mould, communications with residents, planned works, Decent Homes Standard, energy upgrades and local apprenticeship opportunities.

The Committee then discussed the presentations with the witnesses and representatives of residents' groups, noting that:

- a) Energy Performance Certification (EPC) was now carried out as a standard item of work when a council property became void;
- b) During the pandemic local authority interpretation of the Government's regulations/guidance had varied due to the multitude of decisions which had to be made;
- c) Mears praised Milton Keynes Council for its regular dialogue with them, the speed of decision making, and its sensible, pragmatic and safe interpretation of the regulations. This allowed Mears to continue to deliver a repairs service to council tenants in Milton Keynes during the pandemic;
- d) There had been a number of issues with the supply of some materials due to the pandemic, the effects of Brexit, and even the blocking of the Suez Canal earlier in the year. Mears were working with key national suppliers to negotiate priority access to their stock and build-up its own stock levels;
- e) No repairs were affected at the moment and good communication between Mears, the Council and tenants was key to managing any problems;
- f) So far, the Mears workforce had not been affected by the "pingdemic" and the "hands, face, space" safety measures were still being adhered to. They were adept and flexible enough to respond to any changes which might affect service delivery.

The Committee then heard of a number of specific issues from the Chair of the Fullers Slade Residents' Association, including the varying sensitivity of smoke/fire alarms between properties, the lack of clarity about who was responsible for replacing fences between

properties - particularly between council and privately owned properties, defective window locks, leaks, damp and mould, the time taken to respond and the number calls needed to get repairs done.

In response, the Managing Director of Mears confirmed that:

- a) All smoke/fire alarms in council properties conformed to British Standards for smoke/fire alarms and that they were checked regularly as part of the annual gas safety checks. If tenants had any issues with smoke/fire alarms not working properly, they should contact the repairs call centre to log the problem;
- b) As a safety and security issue, any defective or broken window locks should also be reported to the repairs call centre and an operative would attend to make good;
- c) The standard response time for non-emergency repairs should be within 28 days of call-out. The current average was 14 days, which Mears was trying to get down to 10 days;
- d) Leaks, damp and mould often created complex situations which could take a significant amount of time to resolve. The repairs team should continue to work and communicate with the resident until the issue was resolved. If progress was not being made, residents should ask for escalation via the repairs call centre, their local housing officer or the Council;
- e) There was an issue with a lack of, or unclear T-marks indicating who owned which fences on some plans and property deeds and the Council was working to cleanse and update the data so that responsibility for the maintenance and repair of fences and boundaries was clear. Updated information was being passed to Mears as it became available.

Councillor Darlington, as Cabinet member for Adults, Housing and Healthy Communities confirmed that details were being drawn up for Option 3 for Fullers Slade as voted for by the residents in November 2019. These would be presented to the Fullers Slade Estate Renewal Forum (ERF) for approval in the next couple of months.

Councillor Darlington also explained that any planned maintenance programmes were modelled before the new financial began. She acknowledged that better information needed to be provided for residents and the possibility of a one-stop shop for information sharing with residents was being looked at.

The Chair of the Fullers Slade Estate Renewal Forum (ERF) advised that in some of the older properties on the estate the intumescent

strip was missing from fire doors and that residents had often modified the frames or hung the doors the other way round, which meant that they were unlikely to be effective in the event of a fire.

He also explained that many of the terraced blocks had continuous roof voids, with no dividing walls between properties, which again could be devastating in the case of a fire. He added that the fabric of the rooves themselves had received very little maintenance over the years. Many were covered in moss which was lifting tiles and causing leaks in the houses. Moss was also blocking gutters and down pipes, causing them to overflow in heavy rain.

The Committee then noted that:

- a) Any issues with internal fire doors needed to be notified to the Repairs Service as a matter of urgency so that defects could be rectified;
- b) Any tenants making changes to fire doors or their surrounds were in breach of their tenancy agreement and the Council needed to be informed if this was happening.
Councillor Darlington suggested this was an item which should be discussed at the next meeting of the Fullers Slade ERF;
- c) That the Asset Management and investment Team would take the issue of roof voids on board and investigate ways of retrospectively compartmentalising them;
- d) The average life of a tiled roof was 50 years, and tenants should report any leaks, missing tiles, blocked guttering etc to the Repairs Service so that any such problems can be rectified;
- e) The quality of the existing rooves was being looked as part of both the Planned Maintenance Programme and the energy efficiency proposals in the Regeneration Programme, as many had the potential of being suitable for energy generating photo-voltaic panels.

Councillor Fuller advised that tenants in Woughton were very positive about the repairs service. However, she felt that more management of the expectations of residents was needed. Everyone needed to know how it worked and what was covered by the reactive repairs service and what was planned maintenance.

Concerns were raised about how the Council would maintain the pace of both reactive repairs and planned maintenance through a possible contract change in 2023.

Councillor Darlington confirmed that plans were being worked on to ensure there were no delays the repairs programmes when the

contract was renewed / changed in 2023. The Council was still trying to catch up with where it should be in relation to the Planned Maintenance Programme and could not afford to go back to not having a programme in place. As part of the new contract planning the Council was also looking at how it could be used to deliver training to increase the number of skilled construction workers in the Milton Keynes area. There was a shortage of such skilled labour and it made sense to train local people to fill the gaps. She also confirmed that whatever form the new contract took in 2023, existing staff would be TUPE'd to the new contractor.

Councillor Darlington also advised the Committee that the Council was taking an estate by estate approach to bringing properties up to EPC standard. This went beyond looking at doors, windows and rooves and included insulation and the general fabric of the building as the Council wanted to take the lead in local carbon reduction in its houses. She thought the cost would exceed the Planned Maintenance budget and so the Council was exploring what support and grants were available from the Government for this work.

Currently, repairs surgeries were regular, ward councillor surgeries which were attended by representatives from the Mears Group. The Lakes Estate surgeries would resume on 22 July and a programme of surgeries for Woughton had been agreed. A suitable venue was being sought in which to hold surgeries on the Fullers Slade estate and these would commence once this had been resolved. As these were currently ward councillor surgeries, they weren't limited to the particular estate on which they were being held, anyone resident in the relevant ward could attend.

The Committee welcomed the plans to tackle fuel poverty for tenants but the Chair of the Fullers Slade ERF asked that the Council considered all possible options, not just heat pumps or other carbon neutral solutions, so that tenants did not end up paying more for less heat. The Head of Asset Management and Investment explained that heat pump technology was improving all the time and the Council was exploring the right heating solutions to retrofit into existing properties. The Council needed to invest in a product that was fit for purpose.

The Committee then discussed issues of damp and mould with the Chair of the Lakes Estate ERF noting that:

- a) There was concern from tenants about the time it was taking to deal with issue of damp and mould, particularly those subject to task orders;

- b) More education and communication with tenants on how to look after their properties better themselves was needed. Such advice from either the Council or its contractors was sometimes unwelcome, but seemed to more acceptable if it came from the resident led Repairs Action Group;
- c) Task orders were a form of purchase order to give oversight of funds and expenditure on the work. Delays to task orders were due to the current shortfall in the number of building surveyors on the team. The Council was looking to improve the task order process so that work was carried out in a timely manner
- d) There was no specific service level agreement in place for task orders but there was a general one on the length of time it should take to respond to and carry out repairs;
- e) The Lakes Estate Responsive Repairs Group provided tenants with a voice to respond to Mears. It was empowering tenants, giving them knowledge and communication skills on what it was and was not possible to do. It was starting to break cycles so that deadlocked situations could be moved on;
- f) There was also an issue of poor building maintenance by private landlords having a detrimental, knock-on effect on neighbouring council properties and how the Council dealt with such landlords needed to be addressed;
- g) The new tenancy agreements and Tenants Handbook would set out set out the rights and responsibilities of both tenants and the Council as landlord.

RESOLVED –

1. That the Council's Head of Asset Management and Investment and the Managing Director of the Mears Group be thanked for their presentations and contributions to the ensuing discussions with the Committee.
2. That both officer colleagues and the Mears Group be congratulated on the way they managed and maintained the council housing repairs service over the past year despite all the challenges posed by the pandemic.
3. That the Committee welcomes the successful collaboration between officer colleagues and the Mears Group, particularly in areas of concentrated council housing, to deliver an effective repairs service which was generating a high level of tenant satisfaction.

4. That the Committee welcomes the marked improvements to the number of properties meeting the Decent Homes Standard and noted that the delivery plan for this work should continue to deliver these improvements.
5. That the Committee welcomes the Council's future plans to improve the energy efficiency of council homes, making them easier to heat in a cost-effective manner.
6. That the Committee welcomes the Council's undertaking to address the issue of roof voids by installing partitions where necessary in order to reduce the risk of a fire spreading to other properties in the block.
7. That the Committee welcomes the commitment to complete the mapping of boundary ownership to assist tenants in getting repairs done.
8. That the information as to how to best control and treat damp and mould, be placed on the Council website so that all residents, not just HRA tenants, can access it.
9. That the Chair of the Lakes Estate Renewal Forum and the Forum's Repairs Sub-Group be congratulated for the work they are doing to improve tenant/council/repairs service communication.
10. That consideration be given to rolling out a similar model of operation to other estates in Milton Keynes.

CH06

ESTATE MANAGEMENT

Witness: N Hannon (Head of Environment and Waste)

The Committee received a presentation from the Council's Head of Environment and Waste, which set out the background as to how HRA land had been financed and managed in the past, plans for a more joined up approach to the management of council owned landscape areas, block management, innovations in pest control and proposals to manage the problem of fly-tipping on HRA estates.

The Committee then discussed the presentation with the Head of Environment and Waste and representatives of residents' groups, noting that:

- a) Of all the land in the Council's portfolio, only 50% was currently in a landscape maintenance contract, and even that was mainly grass cutting;

- b) The 50% which did not have a landscape maintenance contract was being dealt with reactively, rather than proactively as part of a planned maintenance programme;
- c) Some of the Council's landscape maps were very out of date and contractors had, on occasion been given the wrong instructions based on these maps;
- d) Work was being done with more parishes to devolve local landscape maintenance responsibilities to them. However, it remained the Council's responsibility to maintain Housing Revenue Account (HRA) land and it would therefore be necessary to finance parishes properly to enable them to carry this out on the Council's behalf;
- e) Devolution of landscape maintenance to the parishes was one of the most forward thinking and co-operative schemes in the country, with Milton Keynes being leaders in this field;
- f) Residents wanted clarity and advance notice of what was being cut and when and what was being left and the reasons for this
- g) The Council was working with the Parks Trust to devise a joined-up maintenance plan for the grid roads, increase the biodiversity of flora and fauna of verges whilst keeping critical sightlines clear in order to keep road users safe;
- h) The Council was taking a more relaxed approach to residents wanting to look after unloved open spaces and using them in a positive manner.

The representative of the Tinkers Bridge Residents' Association raised a number of issues, including who was responsible for footpaths which sometimes ran between a private property and its carport as these had sometimes been sold with the property and sometimes not; maintenance of trees and the issues caused by tree roots and leaves, space for extra wheelie bins if the proposed new scheme is adopted.

The Chair of the Fullers Slade Residents' Association also raise the issue of tree roots lifting drives and footpaths and growing through water and sewer pipes, causing flooding. She felt that it was not fair to make tenants responsible for trees on their land if they had not planted them.

The Committee further noted that:

- a) Tenants were responsible for the maintenance of any trees growing within the boundaries of their property, regardless of whether they had planted them;

- b) The Council and the Parks Trust were sharing mapping information and the information would be publicly available once complete;
- c) The Council was in partnership with Luton Council to deliver short, sharp interventions to control rat infestations on the “doughnut” estates around Central Milton Keynes;
- d) It was tenants’ responsibility to keep their properties in good order and to report any repairs which might be necessary to prevent ingress by vermin;
- e) The new wheelie bins would have to be stored within the curtilage of a property – there were no plans for new bin stores for individual properties.

Finally, on the subject of fly-tipping, the Committee noted that:

- a) Residents found it difficult to dispose of large items if they didn’t have transport or afford the Council’s charges for bulky waste collections;
- b) Working with the Council’s Environmental Crime Unit, the Eaglestone Residents’ Association had been able to reduce the number of fly-tipping incidents from 30 to 3 per week. The Council was considering similar schemes with other residents’ associations
- c) Another successful initiative was a “rubbish amnesty” recently piloted in the New Bradville area, which was also of interest to other residents’ associations, including the Lakes Estate ERF.
- d) The New Bradville pilot had been funded by the HRA, and therefore value for money had to be proven. It would not be appropriate to spend HRA funds on schemes for non-HRA residents, although other schemes to tackle fly-tipping across the Borough were being worked on by the Cabinet member for Public Realm.

RESOLVED –

1. That the Head of Environment and Waste be thanked for his presentation and contribution to the ensuing discussions with the Committee.
2. That the Committee endorses the work being done by the Cabinet Member for Public Realm and officer colleagues from Environmental Services to tackle the issue of fly-tipping across the Borough.

3. That information on how the various estate management operations are carried out effectively, eg reduction of fly-tipping, education about waste presentation, rat reduction, etc be provided via the MKC environment website so that other residents and parish and ward councillors can access it.
4. That the Committee welcomes the commitment to complete and publish the mapping of landscaping responsibility and to ensure a common standard across all Council land.

CH07 2021/22 Work Programme

RESOLVED –

That the proposed 2021/22 Work Programme for the remainder of the year be noted.

CH08 INFORMATION ITEM

RESOLVED –

That the information item on the Housing Service Key Performance Indicators for Q4 of 2020/21 be noted.

THE CHAIR CLOSED THE MEETING AT 10:12 PM

All the presentations referred to in this document can be found on the Council's Committee Management Information System (CMIS) at: [CMIS: Community & Housing Scrutiny Committee - 20-07-21](#)

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