



Minutes of the meeting of the CENTRAL AREA HOUSING BOARD held on THURSDAY 14 OCTOBER 1999 at 7.30pm

**Present:** Councillors Barton (for Councillor Conchie) and Fairweather

**Tenants**

**Representatives:** C Allum - Downs Barn Residents' Association  
J Blake - Central Milton Keynes Residents' Association  
G Byfield - Conniburrow Community Association  
B King - Bradwell Common Residents' Association  
J Worrell - Bradwell Common Residents' Association

**Officers:** J Bate (District Housing Manager), L Ellen (Senior Housing Officer), C Jones (Tenants' Participation Officer), B Rimmer (Benefits Manager), A Prockter (Landscape Manager) and W Marsden (Senior Committee Manager)

**Also Present:** R Aran - CMK Residents' Association  
D Chandler - Eclipse (UK) Ltd  
I Fraser - Fishermead and Oldbrook Residents' Association  
C Hopgood - Wheldons  
J Marling - Bletchley Area Housing Board  
B Moore - Netherfield/Newport Pagnell Area Housing Board  
P Prop - Netherfield/Newport Pagnell Area Housing Board  
R Nix - CMK Residents' Association  
A Richardson - Netherfield/Newport Pagnell Area Housing Board  
H Taylor - Bradwell/Greenleys Area Housing Board  
E Fursley - CMK Residents' Association  
D Williams - Eclipse (UK) Ltd

**Apologies:** R Manser, A Williams, Councillors Conchie and O'Sullivan

**11.0 PROCEDURE - MINUTES**

RESOLVED -

That the Minutes of the meeting of the Area Housing Board held on 1 July 1999 be approved as a correct record.

## **12.0 INTRODUCTION TO RESPONSIVE REPAIRS TERM CONTRACTOR**

Mr D Chandler and Mr D Williams from Eclipse (UK) Ltd attended the meeting. Mr Chandler thought that the contractor was performing well as regards the central area. He stated that Eclipse were carrying out 10% of post inspection works and in reply to Alan Richardson who asked whether this percentage was enough, Mr Chandler stated that the terms of the contract did not exceed 10%. He said that checks were carried out on sub-contractors' work.

The Chair asked that Eclipse UK Ltd in future provide figures on voids and a full range of statistics to the Chair at least 10 days prior to each Area Housing Board meeting.

## **13.0 HEATING CONTRACTOR**

The Board met with Mr C Hopgood from Wheldons, the Heating, Maintenance and Repairs Contractor for the Central Area.

Brian King queried whether Wheldons were issuing job satisfaction cards. Alan Richardson asked what was the outstanding number of properties that the contractor could not gain entrance to; the contractor could not give the figures. Alan Richardson asked whether the contractor had enough CORGI registered engineers to undertake works in the winter months; and the contractor said yes, he had sufficient CORGI engineers.

The Chair requested that Wheldons provide updated figures and statistics to him at least 10 days prior to each Area Housing Board meeting.

## **14.0 DISTRICT HOUSING MANAGER'S REPORT INCLUDING MINOR ESTATE IMPROVEMENT GRANTS**

The Board received a report from the District Housing Manager which outlined activities and performance in the Central Area office.

The report confirmed the current figures for rent arrears, empty properties, benefits and repairs with those from one year ago.

Brenda Rimmer the Benefits Manager said she would be attending the Area Housing Boards on a regular basis to deal with the benefits item, and that the Benefits Service had moved into a backlog situation due to a number of factors:

1. The implementation of new document imaging technology which had been severely hampered by prolonged IT problems.
2. The introduction of the verification framework with increased demands for verification of primary documentation and mandatory identity checks.
3. The staffing structure that had been in place.

Brenda said that by the week ending 11 July when the Benefits Services was re-centralised a backlog had increased to over 10,000 cases. This backlog had now been reduced to approximately 2,500 cases.

New claims had a statutory turnaround deadline 14 days, each assessor had a minimum target of 15 claims per day and would therefore be expected to have an outstanding workload of about 75 claims ( ie 15x5 working days) to enable this target to be achieved. The new document imaging system would eventually enable casework to be dealt with a lot quicker, enabling 20 to 25 cases to be handled each day, allowing some standard work to be done automatically, for example reminders, taking routine work away from benefit assessors.

Milton Keynes is taking part in the Single Gateway (One) Project. The Single Gateway is taking a lead towards a single point of entry where claimants could make one claim for a number of welfare benefits, and one point of contact for enquiries and changes of circumstances. Claims for people of working age will taken by telephone through the Call Centre located at Lloyds Court, and those claimants would be required to attend a work focused interview at a gateway access point located at Saxon Court, CMK Job Centre and Bletchley Job Centre.

The Single Gateway is a single element of the Government's welfare reform and is intended to provide a more coherent service to clients accessing the benefits system. The aim of the Single Gateway was to provide a more professional, personalised and flexible Benefits Service to all clients of working age seeking benefit, thereby providing a better service to clients.

A Single Gateway was designed to enable claimants to access all benefits from a number of Single Gateway points, which could be provided by a combination of Benefits Agency, Employment Services, Local Authority Benefit Departments and private and voluntary sector, all having the capability of taking the claims providing advice and passing claims on to the appropriate department.

Participation in the Single Gateway and the subsequent close working partnerships between Milton Keynes Council, the Benefit Agency and Employment Services would not only provide a gateway into work and benefits, but would also provide access points to other Council services, such as housing, social care and education and introduce links with voluntary sector training schemes.

Brenda Rimmer stated that from April 2000 onwards this scheme becomes compulsory. Alan Richardson asked whether there were any repossessions taking place because of a benefits backlog and benefits not being calculated. Brenda replied saying that a system had been put in place so that Housing Associations could fax through details of any claimants who were in any danger of eviction. Also all the local housing offices were e- mailing through to benefits details of any urgent cases and they were dealt with as a priority.

Brenda Rimmer pointed out that outstanding workload was a mixture of new claims, changes of circumstance, cancellations of income support and renewals.

Only about 20% of the outstanding workload could be attributed to new claims actually awaiting assessment of benefit.

Alan Richardson asked if the Verification Framework contributed to a reduction in fraud, and Brenda Rimmer replied that the stringent verification requirements would assist in this area, and added that all the local housing offices and Saxon Court would be obtaining special document scanners that could identify altered or forged documents

The District Housing Manager said with regard to repairs, the contractors' figures did not correspond with figures produced by Milton Keynes Council. Figures were expected within the next week and would be circulated to all Members of the Area Housing Board. The District Housing Manager stated that the possibility of repairs being centralised was being investigated and the report would be going forward to the Housing Committee on 30 November 1999.

Isabell Fraser confirmed that Derek Nickless is to undertake a walk around the Fishermead estate. John Bate said that with regard to the Minor Estate Improvement Grants there was approximately £5,000 left to spend. Isabell Fraser expressed her disappointment that the Great Linford Parish Council was not supporting the Conniburrow Community Association in its bid to convert an area adjacent to the meeting place into a multi-purpose area at an estimated cost of £14,000.

A copy of the list of Minor Estate Improvement Grants is attached as **Annex A** to the Minutes.

## 15.0

### LANDSCAPING ISSUES

The Board was introduced to Alan Prockter, the Landscaping Manager at Milton Keynes Council. The following questions were raised by Members of the Board to Alan Prockter:

1. Charles Allum said that parts of the Downs Barn area had been neglected by the contractor and quoted as an example a triangle of land behind a pub called the "The Blacksmiths Arms" that had not been cut.

Alan Prockter replied saying that this area was owned by English Partnerships and they had been asked to clear up this area.

2. Charles Allum said that flats where the entrance was away from the boulevards had drying areas behind the flats. Alan Prockter said that these drying areas had never been built into the landscaping contracts. Alan Prockter said that if the Parish Council was contacted they had plans which would show what areas Milton Keynes Council was responsible for.

3. Charles Allum said that there was a particularly bad area on the Boulevard where grass, laurels etc. grow very quickly in the summer and this hindered the sight of traffic. Alan Prockter replying said that as Landscape Manager he had an increased area to service and there had

been a reduction in his budget; there was money for one hedge cut. The principle of Best Value, now in place, was not to give MKC more money but to put money to the best effect.

4. Brian King stated that a meeting had taken place with the Landscape Contracts Officer and a walkabout had taken place on the Bradwell Common estate. The cutting down of planters had still not taken place.

The Central Area Housing Board sent their best wishes to Don Anderson the Contract Supervisor and wished him a speedy recovery as he had been ill for a period of time. Brian also drew attention to a Road Safety meeting where problems had been caused by lack of pruning which had resulted in the blocking of redways etc. Overgrowing bushes were causing a real problem and money should be found as this was causing a road safety hazard.

Isabel Fraser said that there was a problem with the landscaping contractor in the Fishermead/Oldbrook area. The hedges in Oldbrook were getting higher each year and the contractor was saying that he could only cut "new growth". Alan Prockter said that the Milton Keynes Council was pressing hard on the contractor to undertake works.

George Byfield said that the community and Residents' Associations should be involved at the local level in the management of the estates and that Council officers should give serious thought as to bringing in local organisations.

Councillor Barton said an additional problem had been contractors vehicles ripping up grass on grass verges and quoted an example by bungalows on Bradwell Common Boulevard. John Blake raised a problem regarding shrubbery close to the Point and Alan Prockter said that it was the English Partnership's responsibility.

## 16.0

### TENANTS COMPACT WORKSHOP

Clare Jones, the Tenants' Participation Officer, gave an update on the Tenants' Participation Compact and a copy is attached as **Annex B** to the Minutes. Clare drew attention to a survey to all tenants with a water letter in July 1999, when 947 replies were received, and also to a special meeting that had taken place with the Strategic Director Neighbourhood Services and senior officers on 4 October 1999 to discuss working together and how to improve current working practices, including resources. An evening seminar on the Tenants' Compact is being planned for 3 November 1999 with senior officers and tenants' representatives, to discuss the Compact in more detail and to ensure that an agreement is reached on the benefits and outcomes of the Compact. The Board noted that a benchmarking day would take place on 18 October 1999.

Attention was drawn to the September 1999 edition of Better Living in Milton Keynes, which had a number of inserts covering:

- (a) the response to the latest tenant survey which asked how people wish to be consulted;

- (b) a benchmarking section stating that MKC was working to improve the services provided and compare Milton Keynes Council to other Councils. If another Council has a different method of operation which Milton Keynes Council could learn from to improve our services; this process is called benchmarking;
- (c) the tenants' Resource Centre in Bletchley which would operate for a trial period of 12 months; and
- (d) general information.

Clare stated that by April 2000 Tenants' Participation Compacts must be introduced but we did not have to have a fully operational Tenants' Compact. From April 2000 TPCs would be part of Best Value and subject to external scrutiny and inspection.

Alan Richardson referred to a meeting that had taken place with GOSE in August 1999. Alan said that if the Local Authority did not comply with Tenants' Compact then the Authority could lose 10% of its HIP allocation. However there was a good likelihood that Milton Keynes Council would receive more money.

Reference was made to two good training courses that had taken place:

- (a) Training on Anti-Social Behaviour and the Law which was held in Leeds; and
- (b) a course on Good Teams and Effective Leadership in Durham.

## **17.0**

### **STATEMENT FROM THE CHAIR**

The Chair of the Area Housing Board gave a handout to the meeting regarding the enforcement of Tenancy Agreements. The Chair thought it a matter of great concern to himself and a number of his colleagues that the Tenancy Agreement did not appear to be enforced. The Chair had suggested some 2 years ago that the Tenancy Agreement be read out to prospective tenants and asked at the end of each page that the prospective tenant understood what had been said. The Chair said he had been reliably informed that when anyone exercises their right to buy, the solicitor reads out the Agreement page by page and the purchaser is asked after each page whether he understood what has been said. The prospective purchaser is left in no doubt about the restrictive covenants for which they are responsible and the tenant equally should be left in no doubt as to their responsibilities.

John Blake said it has often been stated that probably the most expensive item ever brought in a person's lifetime would be their home yet the Housing Office would appear to hand over these valuable properties without any thought as to how they will be cared for, without exercising their right of inspection to ascertain whether the property is being looked after and being kept clean, whether the garden is being kept tidy. It may be said that the tenant has the right to privacy in their own home, but by this same token the Council also has the right to make

sure that their property is being properly treated. A good tenant would have no objection and would be proud to show off their property, whereas the bad tenant who had received an annual notice may need the discipline of having to clean their home for an inspection.

John referred to a presentation on introductory tenancies which had taken place at the Boroughwide Housing meeting on 30 July 1999 which was well attended by police, Councillors, tenants and observers. John said nothing had been heard for a considerable period of time and he asked the Chair of the Housing Committee to bring the issue as a question on the Housing Committee agenda for 29 June 1999. At that meeting it was resolved to have three Housing Improvement Teams, one of which was to deal with Neighbour Nuisance and Introductory Tenancies. This Housing Improvement Team is yet to meet although the Housing Improvement Team on Repairs and Voids has met 4 times and the HIT on Disabled Adaptations has announced the date of its first meeting. John has asked the Chair of Housing to have the matter on the Agenda for the next Housing Committee meeting which is on 30 November 1999.

Isabel Fraser said there must be a change in attitude, and referred to the system in the Armed Forces, where people going into a property had to sign an inventory and also when they left the property. Alan Richardson felt security was not working in the blocks of flats where the Chair of the Area Housing Board lived and Isabel Fraser stated that people should be vetted before they went into property and there must be some form of selectivity. Alan Richardson stated that the Council must get together with other registered social landlords to formulate a common housing policy.

John Bate the District Housing Manager responded by saying that following the previous Board meeting when this issue was raised the Senior Housing Officer had written a letter regarding anti-social behaviour to John Blake, Brian King and Isabell Fraser. Not only were tenants evicted from property for anti-social behaviour, but many visits were made by Housing Officers and various actions taken depending upon the nuisance. Problems between neighbours are referred to the MK Mediation Service. A number of Housing Improvement Teams had been set up by the Housing Committee and one was to deal with Neighbour Nuisance. The purpose of the Improvement Team is to thoroughly review our current practice and to ensure that most effective use is made of new legislation in this area. The Chair said that 4 properties in his block of 25 flats were being used for homeless and 4 were being used in the next block of flats, and he felt that this was too high a proportion. Isabel Fraser said there were many asylum seekers of conflicting cultures in the Fishermead areas.

Barbara Moore said that there had been a problem with a tenant regarding rubbish and asked what date would go on the Notice of Possession.

John Bate said that if the problem was rent arrears then 4 weeks notice would be given, if it was a nuisance problem then proceedings could be started immediately. Alan Richardson said there were a number of avenues that could be used and he quoted suspended Repossession Orders and Injunctions as 2

examples. The Senior Housing Officer stated that breaches of the Tenancy Agreement were taken seriously and John Blake said that tenants must understand everything in the Secure Tenancy Agreement.

## **18.0**

### **ANY OTHER BUSINESS**

1. Brian King asked for the funding for a standard lighting column for the footpath at the junction of Wisley Avenue, Blackheath Crescent and the redway. It was estimated that this would cost £1000.

RESOLVED -

That the provision of a standard lighting column at the junction of Wisley Avenue, Blackheath Crescent and the redway be agreed.

2. Councillor Fairweather asked for a cycle barrier which was on the H6 which was Childs Way which led into Woolstone. Isabell Fraser said that the cost of this which was estimated to be £360 would be paid by the Parish Council.

3. Brian King said that a new traffic scheme which was in operation in Conniburrow had meant that motorists were speeding when they left Conniburrow on to the Conniburrow/Bradwell Common stretch of road they actually speeded up. This had caused problems with adjoining estates. The Conniburrow scheme had increased the problem in Bradwell Common and the Local Authority was to be approached as to the best way forward.

Councillor Barton had raised this matter as a Ward Matter at a special meeting of the Transport Committee, where he asked the Committee to consider extending Conniburrow's Safer Routes Scheme for their Boulevard to Bradwell Common Boulevard.

4. Charles Allum referred to a problem regarding the Downs Barn to Conniburrow underpass. The lighting had been changed from overhead to side lighting and the wall had been painted dark blue and brown, making the underpass very dark.

## **19.0**

### **DATE AND TIME OF NEXT MEETING**

The date and time of the next meeting was confirmed as 16 December 1999 at 7.30 pm.