

Minutes of the meeting of the HOUSING AND COMMUNITY COMMITTEE held on THURSDAY 08 MARCH 2017 at 7:00 PM in ROOM 2, Civic Offices

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

Officer: E Richardson (Overview and Scrutiny Officer)

Apologies: Councillor Burke, P Geary and Khan

Also Present: L Ellen (Acting Service Director [Housing and Community]), J Cheston (Development Plans Team Leader), D Gleeson (Managing Director – YourMK), P Baldwin (Deputy Director – Mears plc) and Councillor Long (Cabinet for Member Adult Social Care and Housing)

Disclosure of Interests: Councillor D McCall declared an interest in Item 7 as an employee of the Milton Keynes Winter Night Shelter.

HAC36 **MINUTES**

RESOLVED -

That once the Minutes of the meeting held on 17 January 2017 were amended to show attendance by Councillors P Geary and Hosking as “until 7.50 pm” and not “from 7.50 pm” they be agreed as a correct record and signed by the Chair.

HAC37 **YOURMK – MANAGING THE COUNCIL’S RESPONSIVE REPAIRS SERVICE AND PLANNED WORKS PROGRAMME**

Witnesses: D Gleeson (Managing Director – YourMK), P Baldwin (Deputy Director – Mears plc)

Mr Gleeson and Mr Baldwin gave a presentation to the Committee which covered the establishment and purpose of YourMK, what had been achieved so far, handling void (empty) properties and its plans for the future based on a strategic asset management approach to looking after the Council’s housing stock.

The Committee then discussed how YourMK operated in detail with the witnesses and noted that:

- YourMK had a local, dedicated call-centre for reporting and triaging calls, with 5 full-time and 2 part-time staff;
- The call-centre telephone number was immediately responsive, providing personal interaction with the caller;
- YourMK was also investing in new technology for booking jobs, including SMS messaging to residents’ mobiles so that they could be kept up to date more quickly on when repair teams were likely to arrive etc. Working smarter and quicker meant the workforce was engaged

with what it was doing and consequently productivity and staff commitment had increased;

- They were also looking at other means of communication with the call-centre such as a dedicated app residents could use to request repairs and which would be particularly beneficial to those with hearing problems;
- Each defect report received an average of 1.8 calls to resolve;
- The call-centre received a large number of calls about works for which YourMK was not responsible and endeavoured to refer callers on to appropriate agencies;
- From 1 April 2017 YourMK would also be taking on the gas maintenance contract for the Council's housing stock and calls would be handled by the same call-centre;
- YourMK would also be responsible for issuing a Landlord's Gas Safety Certificate for each property every 12 months;
- The partnership with Mears plc meant that YourMK was able to benefit from economies of scale when buying materials;
- They had reduced the turn around on voids from 15 to 8.7 days;
- However, the number of voids had halved over the past year as people were more reluctant to move on, particularly into the private rental sector;
- Although YourMK was dealing with fewer voids per year, those that they were handling were much more challenging and YourMK was working hard to understand why some voids were in such a bad condition;
- Some were down to straightforward abuse, but there was a range of other factors as well. All the YourMK operatives had been trained in safeguarding and were able to identify and report possible problems before they escalated;
- The average cost of bringing a void back into a habitable condition was £4k, but this was still more than expected;
- When benchmarked against other local authorities the turnaround on void properties in Milton Keynes was below the national average. The local turnaround was 18 days, including 8.7 days of works by the contractors, as opposed to the national average of 20 days. The Council and YourMK were working together to try and reduce this even further;
- YourMK thought a 60 year cycle for planned maintenance for the Council's housing stock was more realistic than the usual 30 year plan as the shorter timescale did not allow time to pick up the need for repairs to roofing or the general fabric of a building;
- YourMK confirmed that the current stock condition survey would be completed by the end of April 2017;

- Both the Council and YourMK were committed to avoiding a policy of just “patching things up”; they were working to find the causes of defects in the housing stock and then resolving the issues so as to provide proper, long-term solutions.

The Committee then heard from the Council’s Acting Service Director (Housing and Community) who explained that some residents were reluctant to move to more appropriate accommodation for their needs. There was work to be done in persuading people that when moving to another council property a secure tenancy would be maintained.

She also reported that the Council was working to try and understand the social factors that caused some tenants to abuse their properties and was liaising with other appropriate agencies to provide help as soon as possible.

Financial management of public areas which were part of the Council’s housing stock had been transferred from the Housing Revenue Account to the Housing and Community General Fund.

RESOLVED -

1. That the representatives from YourMK be thanked for their attendance at the meeting, their very thorough and informative presentation and their contribution to the Committee’s discussions.
2. That all councillors be reminded of the repairs service helpline so that they can pass it on to residents who contact them about council house repairs and who may be unsure of the correct number to call.
3. That the presentation slides, amended to include individual slides of the before and after void property photographs, together with contact details for YourMK, be circulated to all councillors.
4. That all councillors, not just members of the Committee, be offered the opportunity to visit YourMK Repairs Call Centre and possibly a site visit with a repairs team.
5. That YourMK circulates to the Committee its proposals for a future modular housing scheme for Milton Keynes.

HAC38

GOVERNMENT WHITE PAPER: *FIXING OUR BROKEN HOUSING MARKET*

Witness: J Cheston (Development Plans Team Leader)

The Council’s Development Plans Team Leader highlighted the main points in the White Paper and the implications for Milton Keynes. The Paper was currently out for public consultation and the Council was working on submitting a co-ordinated response before the consultation period closed on 2 May 2017.

He explained that currently there was no legal requirement for local authorities to have a Local Plan in place, although Milton Keynes did have one. If the proposals in the White Paper became law the requirement for a Local Plan would become mandatory.

The White Paper was based on the premise that the Government considered the UK planning system to be broken. However one of the main factors limiting the supply of housing was that even where planning permissions had been granted, developers were not building and releasing houses into the market fast enough.

There were currently at least 11,000 approved planning permissions across the country outstanding and awaiting construction; developers claimed that one of the reasons for this lack of progress was a shortage of qualified labour.

The Committee also learnt that 80% of rental properties were owned by private landlords, whereas if developers constructed "build for rent" properties for institutional landlords such as pension funds, a fairer, long-term rental structure, giving tenant security, could be guaranteed.

Milton Keynes has had a Local Plan for some years and the latest version, Plan:MK, was currently out for public consultation. Once approved Plan:MK would be reviewed regularly and updated more frequently than the 5 year cycle proposed in the White Paper.

The Committee noted that although there were a lot of ideas in the White Paper, there was very little detail on how these could be achieved or how any of the proposals would be funded.

Neighbourhood Plans would also be important in the future delivery of an increased supply of housing and local parish councils were being encouraged to develop such plans. However, Neighbourhood Plans had to conform to the local authority's main plan and could include plans for more housing than identified in the local plan but not less. They had to be approved by the local authority and could not be used as a tool to halt or limit development in a particular area.

Concern was expressed that local authorities were good at granting planning permissions for the development of houses, but not necessarily the development of real communities. Major developments should include bungalows for older people, hostels for young people, adapted housing for the disabled and whole life housing.

The Council's Development Plans Team Leader brought the Committee's attention to the requirement in the White Paper for Objectively Assessed Needs for Housing which he thought would be significant for Milton Keynes. Currently, there was no standardised method for local authorities to calculate housing need, but the Government was planning to devise and implement a standardised approach from April 2018. Once developed, the standardised method would be consulted upon and if agreed would result in changes to the National Planning Policy Framework. The recent Strategic Housing Market Assessment for Milton Keynes had undertaken a robust assessment of the objectively assessed needs for the area in order to provide evidence for Plan:MK. If the national guidance changed through further legislation in April 2018 the Council would have to respond through the work on Plan:MK.

Once granted planning permission, developers had three years in which to start work. However, 'starting work' could be as little as just digging an

initial trench on a site, after which there was no time limit for completion. The Committee was concerned that there were no sanctions local authorities could impose on builders in these circumstances and would have liked to have seen this addressed in the White Paper as a major cause of the delay in building more houses.

RESOLVED -

1. That the Council's Development Plans Team Leader be thanked for his attendance at the meeting, his explanation of the major points in the White Paper and his contributions to the Committee's discussions.
2. That any further questions members of the Committee might have on the contents of the White Paper, be sent to the Overview and Scrutiny Officer who will forward them on to the Development Plans Team Leader for a response which will be circulated to all members of the Committee.

HAC39

IMPLICATIONS OF THE HOMELESSNESS REDUCTION BILL

The Council's Acting Service Director (Housing and Community) introduced the briefing paper on the implications of the Homelessness Reduction Bill for Milton Keynes. The briefing paper set the context of the bill, outlined the key provisions and listed the possible impacts the legislation, if passed, might have on Milton Keynes.

She further explained that Welsh authorities already had a duty to prevent homelessness and that lessons were being learnt from the Welsh experience. Shelter Cymru had produced a report explaining the experience so far which she would forward to the Overview and Scrutiny Officer for circulation to the Committee.

RESOLVED -

That the article from Shelter Cymru on the Welsh experience, where a duty to prevent homelessness already exists, be circulated to the Committee for information.

HAC40

UPDATE ON THE WORK OF THE MILTON KEYNES HOMELESSNESS PARTNERSHIP

The Council's Acting Service Director (Housing and Community) updated the Committee on the work done by the Homelessness Partnership since the last meeting.

The Partnership had been successful in a bid for Department for Communities and Local Government Rough Sleeper Grant Funding, in partnership with Bedford, Central Bedfordshire and Luton Councils. This funding would help those who were new to the streets, or at imminent risk of sleeping rough, get rapid support and would include:

- A dedicated rough sleeper outreach service;
- Specialist mental health professionals;
- Crisis intervention workers to focus on working with those with complex mental health issues; and
- Rough sleeper assessment hubs.

Development of the Outreach Service was being led by Bedford Council and various appropriate organisations had been approached and asked to submit bids for a consortium to deliver the service by the end of March.

RESOLVED -

That the update on the work of the Milton Keynes Homelessness Partnership be received and noted.

HAC41

UPDATE ON THE USE OF TEMPORARY ACCOMMODATION

The Committee received a written update on the use of temporary accommodation by the Council to house homeless families and was advised that, as of Friday 3 March 2017, there were 647 households, which included 1,113 children, in temporary accommodation.

The Committee was also advised that the table presented in the written update did not include council owned hostels or refugees, who were housed under different schemes.

The Committee also noted that although the level of families in temporary accommodation was still high, much of this was now proper housing, albeit out of area, as the Council had achieved a 75% reduction in the use of room-only hotel accommodation in the last year.

RESOLVED -

That the update on the use of temporary accommodation, particularly the 75% reduction in the use of room-only hotel accommodation, be received and noted.

HAC42

SCRUTINY OF HOUSING ITEMS IN PLAN:MK

The Chair explained that at its meeting on 21 February 2017, Cabinet had agreed that the proposals in Plan:MK should be submitted for public consultation. The consultation would close on 9 June and he therefore proposed that the Housing and Community Committee should use its 'spare' meeting, currently scheduled for 26 April, to scrutinise the proposals in Plan:MK relating to housing. This would be a single item agenda and would be no more than 2 hours. However, as this was an extra meeting beyond the scope of the published Work Programme, members of the Committee were free to decide whether they wished to attend or not.

The Committee agreed to this proposal.

RESOLVED -

That the necessary arrangements be made for a further meeting of the Committee in April to consider the items relating to housing in Plan:MK.

HAC43

MENTAL HEALTH PROVISION FOR THE HOMELESS / ROUGH SLEEPERS TASK AND FINISH GROUP

Following a round-table discussion of the provision of health services for the homeless / rough sleepers at its meeting on 13 February 2017, the Health and Adult Social Care Committee agreed it would like to carry out a

more detailed scrutiny of the provision of Mental Health services for the homeless and rough sleepers.

The Chair of the Housing and Community Committee had also attended the meeting and suggested that a joint Task and Finish Group between the two committees be established. The request had been referred to the Scrutiny Management Committee on 8 March and was approved with a membership of 1:1:1 from each committee plus 2 representatives from the Milton Keynes Homelessness Partnership.

The Committee then considered which of its members should serve on the Task and Finish Group, nominating Councillors Ferrans, Geaney and Webb.

RESOLVED -

That the following be agreed as the Committee's representatives on the above Task and Finish Group:

Councillor Ferrans (LD)

Councillor Geaney (C)

Councillor Webb (L).

HAC44

ANNUAL SCRUTINY REPORT 2016/17

The Committee received the Housing and Community contribution to be included in the 2016/17 Scrutiny Report to be presented to Council on 22 March and thanked the Planning Group for their work in producing the report.

RESOLVED -

That the Committee's Planning Group be thanked for their work in producing a comprehensive contribution to the 2016/17 Annual Scrutiny Report on behalf of the Committee.

THE CHAIR CLOSED THE MEETING AT 9.40 PM