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## The bamboozled must keep a clear head

THE SOCIAL housing tenants and owner-occupiers in the Milton Keynes estates targeted by the council and its agent Mears Group in the strangely titled 50-50 joint venture Your MK are not stupid. But I have rarely seen such a bamboozling campaign as they are being subjected to.

The words YMK uses to explain what it is doing such as “the importance of involving the community at every stage” outweasel the weaseliest of weasel words in Weaselville.

Their unstated aim is as follows; to demolish all the spacious yet poorly maintained homes in Fullers Slade, Tinkers Bridge, Netherfield, Bean Hill, Coffee Hall, Lakes Estate and North Bradville and infill every scrap of those plots and all surrounding green spaces with up to five storeys of intensive urban densification - probably flats not houses - with minimal parking, minimal play areas and no gardens front or back.

Their survey shows that only one per cent of the council houses on these estates are in good condition, 45pc are average and 54pc are in poor condition. Their consultative arrangements currently include anyone, whether in council or private accommodation, although at present they have no remit for any work to private housing and apparently little contact with the private landlords.

YMK is wholly responsible for the repair and maintenance of all the council’s housing stock as well as for regeneration. Mears was appointed for its supposed expertise in this area and yet it has all become a mess.

Fullers Slade is a perfect case in point. Here, the first thing YMK did was to reject any input from the estate’s officially recognised and democratically elected residents association, ostensibly because some on its committee lived outside its planned-for-development ‘red line’ but probably because it was run by residents who know what they are doing and care about Fullers Slade. And we can’t have that, can we?

Instead it engineered a self-selected posse of residents called The Residents Steering Group that it could heavily influence with no formal constitution and from whose ranks and meetings members of the Fullers Slade Residents Association were specifically barred. I suspect that members of the RSG are unwitting puppets in a larger game between YMK and the FSRA.

And the bamboozling continues. The YMK website claimed that “houses... built to last 20 to 30 years are still in use.” But the houses built by Milton Keynes Development Corporation were built to the then-current Building Regulations and were financed by 60-year loans from the Treasury.

Indeed, YMK published documents in August which refer to maintenance expenditure over the next 60 years of £86.94 million while, in September, it was seeking householders willing to allow their homes to be used for surveys that “will determine the condition of the building fabric, which will

help us to understand the cost of the refurbishment work”.

You’d think that building surveys would come before publication of remedial costs.

Surveys have now been carried out on a group of houses and - surprise, surprise - have revealed that there are no “systemic” problems with the constructions. No damp, no fire safety problems, no faulty structures, nothing. The houses are not insulated to current high standards but that is true of most homes.

So, YMK, there is no need to demolish the houses. None, zip, zilch, nada. And yet the endless promises of ‘shiny new homes’ to replace those that YMK should be restoring is clearly designed to further bamboozle.

Add to that heady mix the offer of up to £6,000 per tenant ‘compensation’ upon demolition and some residents may succumb when it comes to the now delayed local vote on the matter. And for those in right-to-buy private accommodation, a potential above market value offer - and failing that a Compulsory Purchase Order - will deal with them.

What the surveys mean is that the budget figure of £86.94 million does not properly represent the day-to-day management costs of these houses over a 60-year period. Sure, improvements are necessary for instance to improve insulation but they cannot possibly cost almost £90 million.

And why would the need to improve insulation trigger demolition? Could this be all about profit and nothing about residents’ needs?

Let’s look at the figures.

There are 278 council homes out of 453 in the red-lined area in Fullers Slade. The others are privately owned, some of them en masse by private landlords. The options likely to be put to bamboozled residents are as follows:

**Option 1** A basic refurbishment of the 278. Surely something that should be done now. After all, the council is sitting on a nest egg of circa £70 million plus 667 additional new homes on every scrap of green space. That’d make 1,120 homes in the target zone.

**Option 2** An enhanced refurbishment of the 278. This option has been rejected by YMK out of hand as not viable. Why? I have no idea. But this might be a clue: YMK is constrained financially by the Housing Revenue Account and the caps both on rents and the council HRA. They hope that the cap on rents will be removed soon otherwise the council’s HRA may become unviable.

**Option 3** A partial refurbishment and a partial demolition and rebuild. There would be 87 homes refurbished and a further build of 1,008. That’d make 1,095 homes in the target zone.

**Option 4** The nuclear option. No building

out of the 453 left standing. They’d build 1,250 homes in the target zone.

**Option 5** The suggestion from the Fullers Slade Residents Association as a ‘best of the worst options’; to build 278 new infill homes for any existing council tenant to move into and then put the empty homes on the market for £120,000 each ‘as seen’. This would regenerate £33.3 million of income at a stroke.

**Option 6** The council, under intense pressure from the residents association and others, has agreed in principle to a ‘none of the above’ option. We shall see whether the bamboozled can withstand enough of the bamboozlement to come to their senses. As I said, the residents are not stupid.

It has become clear that none of this is about regeneration. It is about harvesting the green spaces for development including the front and rear gardens of every existing home, every playground, every green verge, every tree and every pond to provide income to cover future YMK management costs. And when we reach the end of the 60-year cycle, must we go again?

The Fullers Slade figures applied across all of the council’s rental estate means, according to figures from MK Forum, losing enough green spaces for 27,600 homes. This is simply wrong and flies in the face of what makes MK MK.

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