Milton Keynes Council has celebrated the start of construction at a ground breaking ceremony of the first council homes to be built in Milton Keynes for 18 years.

Housing Association Orbit Group Limited won the competitive tender to build 13 new wheelchair accessible bungalows.

Once completed the one and two bedroom bungalows in Briar Hill, Stacey Bushes, will be owned and managed directly by the council. They are in addition to the 13 bungalows to be built on 3 empty garage sites in Bletchley.

Cllr Edith Bald, cabinet member for Housing, said: “I am delighted to say that between July and August this year, 13 new bungalows will be added to the council’s stock. Built to a high specification in terms of energy efficiency, they will be suitable for individuals, couples and small families who need specially adapted accommodation.

“This is just one of a number of initiatives to increase the supply of social housing in Milton Keynes. Recently we announced our intention to purchase about 40 houses from the open market to ease the housing shortage for the most vulnerable people in Milton Keynes whilst we work on a longer term house building programme called RegenerationMK.”

George Obeng-Manu, head of construction at Orbit, said: “We’re delighted to be working in partnership with Milton Keynes Council to deliver much needed homes to the borough.

“The new development contributes to Orbit’s target of delivering 12,000 homes by the year 2020 and providing a range of housing choice for customers and communities.”

David Gough, regional director of Lovell, which will build the homes for Orbit, added: “We’re delighted to be playing our part in the construction of the first council homes for 18 years. We look forward to working closely with Milton Keynes Council and Orbit to produce these comfortable, accessible energy efficient new homes.”
Milton Keynes Council is planning to use modern technology to help reduce fuel bills for elderly residents. It is doing this by installing low-carbon technology and using renewable fuels in sheltered housing schemes within Milton Keynes.

The council owns 27 sheltered housing schemes across Milton Keynes that have communal boilers to provide heating and hot-water for the elderly residents. Many of these boilers will need replacing in the next few years so the council is looking at installing low-carbon and renewable fuel boilers.

This includes combined heat and power (CHP), bio-fuels and zero-carbon opportunities such as solar power and air-and ground-source heat pumps.

As a first step, in early 2013, a CHP plant was installed in Putman House, Shenley Lodge. This is an engine that runs on conventional fuel such as gas or diesel and acts as a mini-generator to produce electricity and heat.

This power is used in the building and the heat that is generated is used to provide heat and hot-water at no extra cost.

The unit in Putman House is producing around £25-30 worth of electricity a day. Although more expensive to install than a standard gas-fired boiler, the costs should repay themselves within 10 years.

This year the council is planning to install another CHP plant in Sudgrove House, Downhead Park and a bio-mass fuelled boiler in Shelton Court in Woburn Sands.

Bio-mass boilers burn wood pellets that come from sustainable sources and are eligible for financial support from central government’s Renewable Heat Incentive.
Milton Keynes Council is to buy homes to help ease the problems of a shortage of houses to rent for those most in need.

This is part of the budget proposal for the council’s housing stock which was agreed by full Council last month.

The plan is to buy around 35 - 40 homes, mainly one and two bedroom properties, for households in need.

This option is preferred to designing and building new homes as this can typically take up to three years, while buying existing homes on the open market will take less than six months.

Cllr Edith Bald, cabinet member for Housing, announced the project, explaining that the cash from the council’s capital programme and from the sale of right to buy properties would fund the £4m scheme.

She said: “In Milton Keynes we have a shortage of homes to rent for families who are homeless and the problem is most acute when it comes to finding two bedroom properties.

“We are taking a number of actions to alleviate the problem and as a result B&B and temporary accommodation stats are falling. This additional radical step will make a real difference to some families and it can’t happen soon enough for me.

“Other actions the Council is taking include building new Council houses, the first time this has happened in over 18 years, working with landlords to increase the supply of good quality private sector affordable homes and ramping up support to prevent homelessness happening in the first place.”
The plight of people facing homelessness continues to be one of the biggest challenges facing staff working for Milton Keynes Council.

To find out more about the day to day difficulties facing housing officers help residents in the city we decided to feature a day in the life of one of our staff.

Della is a Housing Options Officer who has worked for Milton Keynes Council for many years, helping people with their housing problems.

Della explains about the problems they face: “Often when people come to see us, housing isn’t the only issue.

“We have people who have fallen out with their families, people with addictions, people who’ve lost their jobs – there are loads of reasons people can lose their homes.

“You hear people talking about homeless families like they are different – as if homelessness is something that happens to other people, but I’ve done this job a long time and it can happen to anyone.

“We have to deal with the reasons people become homeless otherwise they will just keep losing properties and keep coming back in.”

Della is on the front desk this morning, and there are already a couple of people waiting to see her.

The first is 26 year old Ryan who has been staying with friends but has been asked to leave.

Della talks to him about finding a room in a shared house and explains where to look and what he will need to take with him when he goes to see a potential landlord. Ryan isn’t working, so Della explains how he can claim housing benefit. He is struggling to find work as he left school with no qualifications, so Della talks to him about the Neighbourhood Employment Project – a scheme the Council run in conjunction with MK College to help people get back into employment.
The next customer is Anya, a woman in her twenties with two children. Della tells me before she calls them to the desk that she is concerned because the children should be in school and the Anya looks like she has been crying.

After talking quietly to Anya for a while, Della calls one of her colleagues down to interview the family in a private interview room. She won’t give any details because it is a really sensitive case, but says that the council will be providing somewhere safe for the family to stay whilst their case is investigated.

Della seems a bit quiet when she has finished, and she explained that it can be hard to deal with some cases; “I have kids of a similar age and you can’t help being affected by some of the things you see.”

Della explains that a typical day will see around 50 people coming through the door, and of those, only 3 or 4 will actually be put through for a full interview in this way. The rest will be people who either can make their own arrangements with some help and advice, or people who for one reason or another do not qualify for housing with the council.

After lunch, Della rings one of her customers, Angela, to tell her that she is finding the family ‘intentionally homeless’. They got into rent arrears on their private rental and the landlord evicted them.

Angela tells Della the property was too expensive, but Della has spoken with her colleagues in the housing benefit team and the family were on full housing benefit. Instead of paying that benefit to the landlord, they used the money for other things. Angela is clearly very surprised when Della tells her that the Council will not be housing her

Della explains what happens in such cases: “If people can pay their rent but don’t, then we don’t have the same duty to house them. It is to make sure that people don’t deliberately make themselves homeless to get a council house. We can help Angela look for another private rent but it’ll be tricky because she has a bed credit rating now.”

As she is shutting her PC down for the night, Della reflects on things. “We tend to see people when they are at their lowest point and we can’t always give them what they want, but it’s great when we can help someone get back on their feet.”

If you have housing problems that you need help with then you can contact the Housing Access Team on (01908) 253481, e-mail Homeless.Enquiries@Milton-keynes.gov.uk, visit the website on http://www.milton-keynes.gov.uk/housing or come in to the housing advice desk at the Civic Offices during normal office hours.
RegenerationMK is the name given to Milton Keynes Council’s Regeneration Programme that focuses on neighbourhoods to help provide better housing and local public space, and communities to help people gain skills and find work, and to get more involved in the way their neighbourhood is run.

RegenerationMK is to arrange meetings over the coming months with a number of residents’ associations and local groups across the borough to explain the work they do.

The programme is all about looking for solutions rather than focusing on the problems and as part of that initiative it is delivering a successful Neighbourhood Employment Programme. This plays an important role in helping residents find employment and access training to improve work skills.

**Other key areas covered by RegenerationMK include:**

- Improving local environments with local people
- Helping residents to lead active and healthy lives
- Making changes to improve standards of living
- Building strong and active communities

Kathryn Eames, Head of Service for the RegenerationMK programme, said: “We are committed to engaging and involving our residents to deliver regeneration, aiming to rejuvenate communities and build safe, sustainable and successful neighbourhoods.

“Working closely with our community mobilisers, local associations and groups will enable a strong partnership to enable the delivery of sustainable solutions to local problems.”

For further information about RegenerationMK and view our Frequently Asked Questions please visit our website, [www.milton-keynes.gov.uk/regeneration](http://www.milton-keynes.gov.uk/regeneration)
Have you ever wondered how much we spend on repairs, how many nuisance cases we deal with every year or how many tenants we evict for rent arrears?

These facts and many other ‘local standards’ are available from the council and we would like to share this performance information with you.

We already publish a Housing Annual Report with lots of facts and figures.

In the future we will also publish quarterly performance information on the Council’s website, we will use ‘MK@Home’ to highlight ‘key facts’ and we will ask our resident associations to discuss performance at their regular local meetings.

We think it is vital that tenants can easily find out how we are performing.

If tenants do have concerns about a particular service the Tenants Housing Scrutiny Panel can be asked to investigate.

If you would like to know more please contact the Resident Involvement team on 01908 253264.

Meetings for everyone in 2014

If you have an interest in housing in MK you will want to come along to our meetings in 2014.

The MKC Tenants Group is for all council tenants, shared owners and leaseholders. It meets 4 times a year in the evening at the Civic Offices and talks about hot topics like anti-social behaviour, repairs and rent. The dates for 2014 are:

- 30 April
- 16 July
- 22 October

The Housing Services Forum is open to any resident or anyone with an interest in the future of housing in MK. It meets 4 times a year in the evening at the Civic Offices. It discusses topics like building new homes, keeping estates in good condition and how to regulate the private rented sector. The dates for 2014 are:

- 5 June
- 4 September
- 4 December

If you are interested in coming along and getting involved call the Resident Involvement team on 01908 253264 or e-mail get.involved@milton-keynes.gov.uk
Residents’ Associations play a vibrant and important part in the local community, working on behalf of residents. They often carry out important work across Milton Keynes without any form of reward or recognition. The Resident Involvement Service has brought in a new system of accreditation, which recognises well organised and hard-working groups.

Your local Association can now work towards receiving a bronze, silver or gold stamp which recognises their achievements and their commitment to the community. The four themes they need to demonstrate are:

- Being well-organised and open
- Be governed well, representative and encourages involvement of residents
- Being active and supporting the community
- Working with the Council

Groups will be assessed using the criteria above.

Newly formed Associations won’t miss out either, they will be able to use the green stamp for their first year of running and receive full support from the Resident Involvement Service.

The Residents Association will not only be able to use the stamp to show what they have achieved they will also be able to access additional grant to help them with their plans for the next year.

If you would like to find out more contact Paula Mason, on 01908 253756 or email paula.mason@milton-keynes.gov.uk

Achievements of Residents Associations 2014

Last year Residents’ Associations in Milton Keynes had some great achievements. Hard work and dedication by a small number of willing volunteers enabled people living in some of the most deprived areas to take part in:

- Day trips for all ages to museums, the sea and other attractions more local
- Fun Days, Easter egg hunts, birthday parties
- Waste and recycling events
- Community clean up days
- Children’s parties
- Turkey and tinsel events for older residents

Many of the same Residents’ Associations are planning events for the coming year. You can join your local association and help them organise these events and at the same time learn new skills, such as planning, consulting and finding funding, all skills which can be used when looking for work as well as helping to make where you live a brighter and better place.

To find out more about how you can get involved in your local Residents Association contact Paula Mason, on 01908 253756 or email paula.mason@milton-keynes.gov.uk

Tenant satisfaction survey

Over the last couple of months council tenants have been filling in survey forms telling us what they think of the service. The survey is now almost complete and the results should be published soon – look out for details in the next edition of MK@Home.

Many thanks to everyone who completed a form – we really appreciate that you took the time to give us your views. Two lucky respondents will receive £50 of shopping vouchers and we will be touch with them directly very soon.
A new loan scheme has been launched by Milton Keynes Council in partnership with the Swan Credit Union.

Officers working for the council’s Local Welfare Provision team will refer residents in financial need to the Swan Credit Union - formerly Milton Keynes Credit Union.

Provide they meet the eligibility criteria they will be eligible for a loan amount as determined by the Local Welfare Provision team, and will bypass the normal credit union rule requiring new members to save for three months before being granted a loan.

Loans will be granted at the discounted rate of 1.5% per month on the declining balance (19.6% APR).

In January the credit union re-launched under its new name at an event supported by Milton Keynes Mayor Cllr Brian White and both MPs for Milton Keynes: Iain Stewart and Mark Lancaster as well as by councillors, Town and Parish councils, churches and other community organisations.

For further information please phone Swan Credit Union on 030303 00147 or MK Council on 01908 253040 lwp@milton-keynes.gov.uk

Extra financial help for Milton Keynes residents

New rent levels from April 2014

On 7 April rent changes for Council tenants, shared owners and garage rentals will start.

Average council tenant rents will increase by 3.5% which equates to an average increase of approximately £2.97 per week.

The average rent for a council home is now £87.70 per week although these are averages and some tenants may pay more or less than this.

Shared owners will have a 4% increase. This is a contractual increase based on last year’s council house rent increase.

Every tenant and shared owner received a letter in February with details of their own rent, along with details about how to get help and advice if they are experiencing payment problems.

Here are the simplest ways of paying your rent:

- Direct Debit (weekly, fortnightly, four weekly or monthly).
- Standing Order.
- 24hr automated telephone payment line – 01908 253940.
- Internet payment site www.milton-keynes.gov.uk/payments
- Cheque.
- Pay Point outlets with cash or your debit or credit card.

If you have any questions please call the housing team on 01908 252937.
Want to give up smoking? Tried unsuccessfully to quit before? The MK Stop Smoking team are running brand new support sessions in your area to give you a helping hand. With our help you’re four times more likely to go smoke free for good!

Our specialist advisors can offer you an individually tailored, 12 week quit programme, with one-to-one guidance and advice, completely free of charge! We also provide nicotine replacement products to give you all the help you need in going smoke free!

The support sessions are open to anyone who wants to quit, and will be running in the following locations:

- MK General Hospital - Mondays
- Hanslope Village Hall - Monday afternoons
- Downs Barn Pavillion - Tuesday mornings
- Broughton Pavillion - Tuesday mornings
- Great Linford Pavillion - Tuesday afternoon
- New Bradwell Common - Wednesday mornings
- Bletchley Therapy Unit - Wednesday afternoons
- Centrecom Centre - Thursdays
- The Olney Centre - Thursday Mornings
- Newport Pagnell Youth Centre - Thursday afternoon/ evenings

Is it time you quit? For more information, or to book your place today: 0845 200 23 23
Residents are being warned to be aware that opportunist thieves may be targeting mobile phones and computer tablets when they are out and about this spring.

Safer MK, a partnership between Milton Keynes Council, Thames Valley Police, Buckinghamshire Fire and Rescue, NHS Milton Keynes Clinical Commissioning Group and Thames Valley Probation Service, is advising residents to be aware of mobile phone and computer tablet safety.

Almost half (46%) of theft from the person and robbery incidents involved theft of a mobile phone in 2011/12, compared with just under a third (31%) in a Crime Survey for England and Wales (CSEW).

And around 2% of mobile phone owners experienced a phone theft in the previous 12 months.

Parents are also advised to make their children aware of the risks as the survey found that mobile phone theft victims were most likely to be children aged 14 to 17 or young adults aged 18 to 24 years.

Here are some handy tips from SaferMK about using your mobile device safely.

- Keep your phone or ipad etc out of sight when in public places.
- If someone asks for the time use your watch not the phone.
- Don’t walk and talk. Using your mobile phone distracts you. It also makes you a target for a thief.
- Be aware of who and what is around you so that you can react to potential danger.
- Use any security features that are built in to the device, such as additional security codes.
- Consider using tracking apps to locate the device if it is lost or stolen.
- Only give your number to family, and to friends that you trust.
- If alone, set your phone to vibrate so that it doesn’t attract attention.
- Most phones allow 999 calls even if you have no credit left or have the keypad locked.

Please register your mobile phone, ipad and other technology on the UK National Property Register at www.immobilise.com free of charge.

- Record your phone’s IMEI number, which is unique to each phone.
- If the phone is stolen, this number is used by police to prove that the phone is stolen and to return it to the rightful owner. Display the IMEI by pressing * # 0 6 # (‘star’, ‘hash’, ‘zero’, ‘six’, ‘hash’).
- If your phone is lost or stolen, report it as soon as possible to ‘Immobilise’ on 08701 123 123. You will hear a recorded message which lets you know which number you need to phone to ask your phone network to block your phone.
- This can be done even if you don’t know the phone’s IMEI number. Your phone will be blocked immediately on your operator’s network, and within 24 hours on all other networks.
Your questions answered

Myth: The Council will move me as I do not get on with my neighbours
Busted: Everyone requesting a move is assessed against the Council’s allocation scheme. If you have fallen out with your neighbour we will try and work with you both to resolve the issues.

Myth: The council has a mutual exchange list.
Busted: The council has signed up for tenants to use http://www.homeswapper.co.uk/ free of charge. This website is now used as the main method for tenants who are looking to exchange.

Myth: There is a waiting list.
Busted: The council no longer has a waiting list. Residents who want to move are assessed against the allocation scheme and given a banding or advice how to solve their housing situation.

Our Telephone Numbers - your cut-out and keep reminder

Repairs Service Centre 0800 035 4466 or 01908 254466
mkcrepairs@milton-keynes.gov.uk
Out of hours emergency repairs 01908 692882
Wheldon (Gas Repairs) 0800 294 6262 or 01908 211559
MK Housing Service 01908 252937
mkhousingservice@milton-keynes.gov.uk
Resident Involvement Team 01908 253756
get.involved@milton-keynes.gov.uk
Home Ownership Team 01908 253067
home.ownership@milton-keynes.gov.uk
Milton Keynes Council web site
www.milton-keynes.gov.uk/housing
Comments, Compliments & Complaints 01908 253817
housing.complaints@milton-keynes.gov.uk

Other useful telephone numbers

MK Act (domestic violence) 0844 375 4307
Milton Keynes Mediation Service 01908 200828
(community problems e.g. noise, neighbour disputes)
Citizens Advice Bureau 01908 604475
Shelter (Housing Advice) 0344 515 1876
NHS Direct 0845 46 47
Thames Valley Police 101
Childline 0800 1111
Housing Benefit 01908 253100
Milton Keynes Centre for Integrated Living (MKCIL) -
Disability Information Service 01908 231344