

What has the Association Ever Done For Us?

In the spirit of the light hearted, good humoured nature of most of this debate we have adapted a scene from Monty Python's "The Life of Brian". We don't ask for praise or thanks. But we are sensitive wee souls sometimes. This cheered us up. We hope it makes you smile.

The Scene: A Public Meeting in a local hall of the Resident's Group, the "GPF", the "Garngad People's Front" (not to be confused with the "Garngad Popular People's Front" or the "People's Front of Garngad" — they're splitters!).

Bob: They've bled us white. They've taken everything we had, not just from us, from our fathers and from our fathers' fathers.

Stan: And from our fathers' fathers' fathers.

Bob: Yes.

Stan: And from our fathers' fathers' fathers' fathers.

Bob: All right, Stan. Don't labour the point. And what have they ever given us *in return*?

Des: Good houses?

Bob: Oh yeah, yeah they gave us that. Yeah. That's true.

Mick: And all the landscape gardening!

Stan: Oh yes... all the landscape gardening, Bob, you remember what the area used to be like.

Bob: All right, I'll grant you that the good houses and the landscape gardening are two things that the Association has done...

Tam: And the caring, personal service...

Bob: (*sharply*) Well, *yes, obviously* the caring, personal service..... the caring, personal service goes without saying. But apart from the good houses, the landscape gardening and the caring, personal service...

Sammy: The Good Neighbour Fund...

Gerry: Taking kids on trips .. Fighting against government policy on housing sex offenders ... Working with local schools Getting rid of Tarmac Building great new houses on the site Giving tenants priority when allocating houses

Bob: Yes... all right, fair enough...

Stevie: And the great repairs service

Davie: Oh yes! True!

Frank: Yeah. That's something we'd really miss if the Association left, Bob.

Willie: No graffiti in the area..... not much in the way of vandalism

Stan: And they try to deal with neighbour disputes.

Frank: Yes, they certainly know how to keep order... (*general nodding*)... let's face it, they're the only ones who could in a place like this (*more general murmurs of agreement*).

Bob: All right... all right... but apart from good houses; landscape gardening; a caring, personal service; the Good Neighbour Fund; taking kids on trips; working with local schools; fighting for us against government policy on housing sex offenders; getting rid of Tarmac; building great new houses on the site; giving tenants priority when allocating houses; having a great repairs service; no graffiti in the area; not much in the way of vandalism; trying to deal with complaints about neighbours what *has* the Association done for *us*?

Des: Brought a sense of belonging and a sense of community!

Bob: What!? Oh... (*scornfully*) brought a sense of belonging and a sense of community! yes... shut up!

Blochairn Housing Association

Trampolines

After we decided that large, permanent trampolines are not suitable for our properties we received a petition. The petition said: "We the undersigned tenants of Blochairn Housing think that we should decide what we put in our back and front garden". We were told that 118 people signed the petition. We did not count all of the signatures but there are several names we can't read and we counted at least 14 names of people who are not tenants. Rather than write to those who signed the petition we are sending this newsletter to let everyone know what our response is.

Several people contacted us to apologise for signing the petition. Some said that they had time to think about it. A few said they felt they couldn't say they didn't want to sign without it developing into an argument. A few spoke to us to tell us why they signed. We asked if they had read it first. They hadn't so we told them what it said. They said if they had known they wouldn't have signed. One tenant said that the idea of everyone just doing whatever they wanted was "ridiculous" and said: "So, does that mean someone can put a swimming pool in the garden?"

However, all of this doesn't really matter for one simple reason. The petition presents an impossible proposal. It says that people living in common, shared property can do whatever they want. That can't happen for all sorts of reasons, most of which are in legal documents, like Tenancy Agreements; Deeds of Conditions and Planning Law.

In addition, the Association is the owner of the property, acting in the interests of its membership. It is the factor of the property, acting on behalf of other owners. And it is the landlord, with a duty to protect the interests of all of its tenants. It can't ignore any of these roles.

This debate might go on for a while. Discussions so far have sometimes been heated but generally they have been light-hearted, with a lot of humour thrown in. We will try to keep things on that level. We will try to persuade those involved to accept our view. If we can't agree then maybe an independent go-between will be needed, like a Sheriff, who could decide who is being reasonable and who is being unreasonable. But we can cross that bridge if we come to it. The idea of a court having to decide this seems extreme but sometimes things can blow up out of all proportion.

The Association is responsible for looking after the property. Our view is that trampolines are not suitable for shared property. Our experience is that they cause nuisance to other residents and cause damage to the garden. The way someone described it recently was: "If I look out of my window and see my neighbour putting up a big trampoline, I don't think "Oh, that's nice, I bet the kids will enjoy that". I think, "Oh my God, what are we getting here? I hope the housing are going to deal with this".

Backcourts come in all shapes and sizes. Essentially they are drying greens. If people can sit out and enjoy the sun, or children can play in safety without causing nuisance or damage, that's a bonus. But the bottom line is that backcourts are not play grounds. Apart from saying "No Ball Games" we try to let folk decide for themselves how best to use the backcourt. But sometimes we are asked to make a decision if there is a problem.



We have tried for 20 years to create a community in Blochairn. Everything we do is with that in mind. We want an area where people consider their neighbours and their community — not just their own personal interests. In this case, it is suggested that we are not acting in the interests of the community — that we are unreasonable — that we don't care — that we are a bad landlord.

It is ironic that we are being accused of acting against the interests of children. We care about our tenants and about their living environment. And we care deeply about the children growing up in this area. They are our future and we want to make sure that, as they grow into adulthood, we have given them an area that they can be proud of, that they will want to stay in and perhaps raise their own family in. We want our area to be as good as anywhere else. We don't want a property to go downhill and we can't stand by and watch the area go back to the way it was.

It is frustrating that sometimes people look at a small issue and don't see the bigger picture. After years of receiving a caring, personal service some people might take it for granted. They might forget what the area was like 20 years ago. They might forget what kind of service they got before then. They might forget the way that they were treated, the way that they were spoken to. In many cases, people we deal with are too young to remember. But we would ask them to look around. It is not difficult to compare what happens here to what happens in other areas. At its most basic, how many housing professionals personally pick up litter and clean graffiti? How many take young people to football matches or to concerts and spend their own personal time in the interests of their community? How many housing association tenants have the Director's mobile phone number so that they can talk to someone they know in a real emergency?



It is even more frustrating that people don't think about what goes on behind the scenes. Take the issue of housing sex offenders. In 1997 our staff were at a Housing Conference. Professional people sat round a table talking about how to create a policy to house sex offenders. They were shocked when our staff said that it was the most ridiculous thing they had ever heard! After Mark Cummings was murdered in 2004 Blochairn started asking questions. Again, other professionals, Civil Servants and politicians were shocked that we questioned their policy. We get the same reaction to this day.

Blochairn is one of the smallest associations in Scotland. Yet we challenged Strathclyde Police; the Freedom of Information Commissioner; Glasgow City Council and the Scottish Federation of Housing Associations on the policy of housing sex offenders. And we resigned from the SFHA in protest.

Blochairn stood alone for a long time before being joined by other associations (in Castlemilk and Dumbarton) and getting support from the Glasgow & West of Scotland Forum of Housing Associations. We organised a fighting fund and gathered £27,000 worth of pledges from all over the west of Scotland to pay for court costs. Blochairn staff have spent their own personal time attending evening Committee meetings in other housing associations to gather support for this cause.

Why do we do this? Why do our staff not shrug their shoulders and say — there's nothing we can do about it — we need to do what we are told — it's not our problem? The answer is quite simple. How this community is treated matters to them. They are committed to this community and will do everything they can to protect and enhance the lives of its people.

For 16 years we have argued our case with government civil servants who say that tenants should not get priority when we are allocating houses. We argue that we are promoting the idea of a community that will be sustainable for generations to come. We cannot do that and say, when we look at priority for housing, that it doesn't matter if you have lived here all your life.

We spent 12 years chasing Glasgow City Council to get the Depot Site to make sure that it was not used by the likes of Tarmac again. Currently we are asking questions of Glasgow City Council about the state of the development above the shops on Royston Road and about the ground at Millburn St/ Roystonhill. We are screaming from the rooftops (in emails actually!) that the Royston community should not be treated like this.

In a newsletter a while ago we tried to explain what Blochairn Housing Association was and used a quote from John F Kennedy, former President of the United States of America. The quote was: "Don't think what your Co-operative can do for you. Think what you can do for your Co-operative". (Obviously, Kennedy said country rather than Co-operative!). We said that we are not some unknown factor, managing property on behalf of some unknown owner. The community own the Association and the property through its membership. But for Community Ownership to work everyone has to do their bit. Even if that is just being a good tenant and a good neighbour. That means keeping to the Tenancy Agreement and sometimes it means accepting what is for the good of the wider community.

We understand when people say why they want a trampoline in their back court. But we are asking them to consider what we are saying and why we are saying it. We are asking them to look at the bigger picture. We have asked them to agree to remove the trampolines. We hope they can be persuaded. If not, we will continue our discussions. And we will let you know how it goes.

If you want to discuss anything just give us a call.

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