

Minutes of a Meeting of the Housing Review Board held at Knowle, Sidmouth on 15 January 2015

Attendance list at end of document

The meeting started at 6.00pm and ended at 8.20pm

***57 Public Speaking**

2 members of the public wished to speak at the appropriate agenda item.

***58 Minutes**

The minutes of the Housing Review Board meeting held on 6 November 2014 were confirmed and signed as a true record.

Kevin Johnson from Robert Heath Heating presented the Board with a cheque for £1000 won by Mike Glover at a recent gas safety event. The money is to be spent on an EDDC housing activity project.

***59 Declarations of Interest**

Mike Berridge: Personal Interest - Family member lives in a Council owned property; Housing tenant.

Joyce Ebborn: Personal Interest - Housing tenant

Harry Roberts: Personal Interest - Housing tenant

Pat Rous: Personal Interest - Housing tenant

Cllr Susie Bond: Personal Interest - Mother uses Homesafeguard

Cllr Jim Knight: Personal Interest – Daughter lives in a Council owned property. He is also a Devon County Council Councillor.

***60 Exclusion of the Public**

RESOLVED:

To agree any items to be dealt with after the public (including press) have been excluded. There were no items that officers recommended should be dealt with in Part B.

61 Men's Shed Exmouth proposal

Public speaking on this matter highlighted that this initiative was being managed by the Open Door project part of the Churches Together programme. The scheme met the social needs of unemployed men where they can be active and do things as a group to improve their general health and wellbeing. It was highlighted that this provided a service for tenants that could be easily accessed in terms of location, which was very important especially for more vulnerable tenants. The venue was crucial in order to meet and enjoy each other's company as well as providing tools, computers, darts and a pool table. It was open 3 days a week for 15 – 20 men to meet up. Its three main objectives were;

1. Socialise,
2. Social Action – community type projects
3. Production of woodwork e.g. benches

The present venue was now too small, dusty and not ideal so the organisers were looking for temporary accommodation at Clayton House, Exmouth.

The Chairman and Cllr Drew supported this valued service as it gave purpose to men's lives. The Portfolio Holder – Sustainable Homes and Communities agreed it filled a gap in lives and hoped the Board would support the initiative. Jane Reading, Tenant & Communities Section Leader answered questions and agreed there would be a formal consultation with neighbours once the proposal was agreed by the Board. Through general discussion Option B was the preferred site as it was not so close to the flats. Talks with Environmental Health over noise and dust issues were taking place. Planning permission would also be required.

RECOMMENDED: that the proposal be agreed.

***62 Standardised Tenants and Residents (STAR) Survey Results**

James Ayland from BMG Research showed a presentation to the Board with results from this survey of tenants and leaseholders. 1500 postal surveys were sent out with 1100 responses. Repairs, maintenance, and quality of homes received the highest scores in this satisfaction survey with overall satisfaction very high. The anti-social behaviour score was slightly higher than the last survey's results in 2012. 50% of general needs tenants, 36% of sheltered housing tenants and 73% leaseholders had access to the internet. The results showed EDDC was performing well against national benchmarks and were in the top quartile of all results compiled nationally. Dennis Boobier, Housing Needs & Strategy Manager explained the need to target areas that are not doing so well from the survey results to improve overall satisfaction.

RESOLVED: that the survey results be noted.

***63 Housing Review Board forward plan**

The Strategic Lead – Housing, Health and Environment presented the forward plan and advised Members that the forward plan would help act as a reminder of agenda items to come forward to future meetings.

RESOLVED: that the forward plan be noted.

64 Housing Revenue Account draft budget 2015/16

Strategic Lead – Housing, Health and Environment stated the report provided the Housing Review Board with details of the draft Housing Revenue Account for 2015/16; which followed closely the Council's 30-year plan. This account showed the main areas of anticipated income and expenditure on landlord activities for the year ahead. Producing a Housing Revenue Account was a statutory requirement for Councils who manage and own their housing stock, and therefore a key document for the Board to influence. 2012/13 saw major reform to social housing finance and a move to self-financing, which involved the Council taking on debt rather than paying a subsidy to government from tenants' rents. As a result of this and prudent management the budget showed a healthy HRA balance going into the new financial year. There had been 10 additional staff taken on and additional investment into tenants' homes.

Income from rents and other charges showed an estimated £18m turnover. Council home rents were to be increased by 2.44% making an average rent £81.93 per week in 2015/16. There had been a provision for bad debts especially in anticipation of the new Welfare Reforms. Damp penetration was an unforeseen expenditure after last year's bad weather.

The question of new housing was raised with acquisitions and new builds part funded by receipts from Right to Buy sales. The Board was reminded that the £9m spent on repairs was £9m into East Devon's economy.

RECOMMENDED: that the draft budget be approved and recommend to Cabinet.

***65 Financial Monitoring report**

The Board was presented with a summary of the overall financial position on the Housing Revenue Account, HRA Capital Programme and the Business Plan for 2014/15 at the end of month eight (November 2014).

Regular monitoring was intended to highlight any areas of concern or unforeseen expenditure in the HRA and associated capital programme, enabling corrective action to be taken as required. Any variances would be reflected in the Business Plan.

Current monitoring indicated that:

- The Housing Revenue Account Balance would be maintained at or above the adopted level.
- The position on the HRA Business Plan remained healthy.

RESOLVED: that the variances identified as part of the HRA revenue and capital monitoring process up to month eight be acknowledged.

66 Housing Service Plan

All Council services had organised an annual Service Planning exercise and produced a Service Plan, which set out details of past performance and achievements, future challenges and targets while striving for continuous improvement throughout the service.

The Service Plan identified the key service objectives, challenges ahead, and outlined areas of performance that should be measured. It also considered efficiencies, key risks, training needs, equalities, opportunities to do things differently, and workforce planning. For housing, the Service Plan linked with and complemented the Homes and Sustainable Communities Plan and Housing Revenue Account Business Plan, Homelessness Strategy, Private Sector Renewal Plan, Empty Homes Strategy, Energy Conservation Act Plan and other service specific policies, the Council Plan and various housing budgets.

The Service Plan was intended as a working document and service managers would cascade the contents of the Plan at team meetings. It was a good discipline to complete an annual statement of what the Service expects to achieve, set out in a structured way, using a template, involving staff, service users, and members in the process. The Plan reproduced the ten key aims in the Homes and Communities Plan. It also set out a series of Systems Thinking purposes to capture 'what matters' to our customers.

RECOMMENDED: that the Housing Service Plan for 2015 – 2016 be accepted.

67 The future of support services at East Devon District Council

Public speaking on this matter raised the question - would tenants in receipt of housing benefit have to pay the extra cost of the housing management fee? Amy Gilbert, Support Services Manager responded that the housing benefit team had stated that the fee would be covered. She reported on the high numbers of attendees on the consultations days; the report showed all their feedback. She emphasised that attendees had been asked for their preferences and not a vote on each change option to the service.

The biggest concern for tenants was financial. Option 1 could be made more favourable by claiming back the housing management element through housing benefits. A hardship fund was to be set up for tenants in need. Option 2 involved running a service when there was no certainty of user numbers and was a high risk. Option 1b was suggested to the Board as it was a fairer system and considered any changes in tenants needs.

The vice-chairman asked why a consultant had been used to carry out the surveys when in-house staff could have been used. It was explained that expertise in this area on VAT was not available in-house.

The Portfolio Holder – Sustainable Homes and Communities thanked the staff for their hard work emphasising that tenants wanted to feel safe and not having the support service was not an option. Tenants in sheltered housing would pay towards an alarm and support charges, therefore, costs were being paid by those who used the service rather than all tenants. The charges were being phased in over 3 years.

RECOMMENDED: that the Housing Review Board agree option 1b to take the support service forward from April 2015.

- Option 1b Charging for support by way of a flat rate of support to all sheltered tenants, and with housing benefit (HB) covering the current housing management element of the service (subject to meeting HB eligibility criteria);
- And that the Board sanctions the additional cost of £1400-£3000 to pay for VAT consultant advice in relation to these service models.

68 **Community Development update**

Jane Reading, Tenant & Communities Section Leader updated the Board on Community Development Worker staffing numbers. There were presently five Community Development Workers working in the team. An additional part time officer working 0.6 days was proposed to the Board. Each Community Development Worker updated the Board with the range of projects they currently deliver, including:

- SWITCH; structured clubs for young people in Axminster and the Littleham area of Exmouth, arranged and delivered community festivals and fun days across the district. In addition, the team recruited and trained volunteers, supported youth groups and other groups by providing advice and guidance. Running trips and activities for young people some of which have been in partnership with the Countryside team.
- worked with the targeted families support project, were the key players in the development of the Honiton Together initiative and in securing significant funds for this to be developed.
- worked to facilitate community groups in securing the future of youth centres in Axminster, Honiton and Sidmouth.
- worked with the Support Services team to promote and encourage the use of community centres .
- established the very successful Men's Shed project in Littleham.
- Run projects such as 'digital inclusion' for the whole community to improve communication.

The Portfolio Holder – Sustainable Homes and Communities thanked the staff for their hard work in helping families across the generations.

RESOLVED: that the work carried out by the Community Development Team be noted

RECOMMENDED:

1. that the capacity of the team be increased by 0.6 (FTE), in addition to taking on an apprentice
2. that the budget be increased £10,000 per annum.

***69 Devon Home Choice policy update**

The Devon Home Choice Partnership Agreement stated that an annual policy review would be undertaken from 1 September each year. The Devon Home Choice (DHC) Board had completed the annual review for 2014 and had set out proposals for change to the DHC Policy that would be introduced in early 2015. The key proposals set out in the paper were:

1. Allocation policies should make clear that social tenants who needed to move to take up a job or live closer to employment or training were included in the 'hardship' reasonable preference category.
2. Any residency (or local connection) requirement introduced as a result of the Localism Act provisions should not apply to social tenants who needed to move for work.
3. That local authorities set aside a proportion of lets to enable existing social tenants to move across local authority boundaries within England for work related reasons, and published this quota (and the rationale behind it) as part of their allocation policy. The government suggested a minimum of 1% of lettings.
4. That area-based schemes, like Devon Home Choice, provided for cross boundary movement between local authorities for tenants moving for work related reasons.

RESOLVED: that the Devon Home Choice policy update be noted and recommendations be agreed.

70 Gas Safety checks – access procedure

The Housing Needs & Strategy Manager discussed the report that set out proposals to change the existing process for gaining access to properties, where the tenant was not cooperating with the Council to undertake the annual gas safety checks and servicing required by law. Each year around 3,200 annual gas safety checks were undertaken in council homes. In most cases tenants allowed the service engineer to complete the service at the appointed time. The procedure allowed for appointments that had been changed by mutual agreement however, there were tenants who did not allow access. Properties must be safe due to the devastating effects of a potential gas explosion – putting neighbours at risk especially in flats.

Kevin Johnson from Robert Heath Heating informed the Board that service engineers worked a shift system 7 days a week so there was no excuse for tenants not to find time for the safety checks. A service interval timer could be installed in cases where access was repeatedly denied. This acted as a good deterrent as it interrupted heating and hot water supplies – the tenant then had no option but to contact an engineer.

The Housing Needs & Strategy Manager emphasised that only a small percentage of tenants were not cooperating but the Council's legal obligations had to be covered.

John Golding wanted it noted his appreciation to the contractors Robert Heath Heating and especially Kevin Johnson for their professionalism.

RECOMMENDED: that the report proposals be agreed.

***71 Fire Risk Assessments**

The Housing Needs & Strategy Manager provided an update relating to the Council meeting the Fire Regulations in terms of Fire Risk Assessments (FRA) in blocks of flats. FRA on blocks of flats over the last two years had been undertaken. The Council owned 225 'blocks' of flats, including sheltered schemes and community centres. FRA had been completed at each block of flats. The FRA recommended the work that needed to be done to bring the fire safety within each block up to the required standard.

RESOLVED: that the report be noted.

***72 Dampness eradication programme**

The Housing Needs & Strategy Manager provided an update relating to the work undertaken on the 400+ Council properties that were affected by damp/water penetration following last winter's bad weather. A lot of work had been completed and all the affected properties had the cavity wall insulation removed; assistance to help dry the property out and where necessary minor repairs carried out. In some properties that work resolved the problem of damp getting into the property. However, around 250 properties required much more extensive work. It had been hoped that this would be completed in October/November 2014 but this was not the case.

RESOLVED: that the report be noted.

***73 Annual Report to Tenants**

Strategic Lead - Housing, Health and Environment presented with the latest version of this report. Each year an annual report to tenants was produced outlining performance during the year, key achievements, challenges faced and how the local standards and information on what would be done over the next 12 months are met.

RESOLVED: that the report be noted.

Attendance list

Present:

Cllr Pauline Stott (Chairman)
Cllr Susie Bond
Cllr Christine Drew
Cllr Jim Knight

Co-opted tenant members:

Mike Berridge (Vice Chairman)
Pat Rous
Joyce Ebborn
John Powley
Harry Roberts

Also present:

Cllr Jill Elson, Portfolio Holder – Sustainable Homes and Communities

Tenant Scrutiny Panel:

Jose Ireland

Eric Howard
Ted Payne

Officers:

John Golding, Strategic Lead - Housing, Health and Environment
Dennis Boobier, Housing Needs & Strategy Manager
Jane Reading, Tenant & Communities Section Leader
Amy Gilbert, Support Services Manager
Giles Salter, Solicitor
Mandy White, Accountant
Natalie Brown, Information & Analysis Officer
Emma Charlton, Housing Projects Officer
James Ayland, BMG Research Group
Polly Anderson, Community Development Worker
Victoria Robinson, Community Development Worker
Alex Gibson, Community Development Worker
Deirdre Ryan, Community Development Worker
Mark Gerry, Community Development Worker
Kevin Johnson – Robert Heath Heating
Amanda Coombes, Democratic Services Officer

Apologies:

Cllr Steph Jones
Cllr Douglas Hull
John Powley

Chairman Date.....