

## **EAST DEVON DISTRICT COUNCIL**

### **Minutes of a Meeting of the Housing Review Board held at Knowle, Sidmouth on 5 November 2015**

#### **Attendance list at end of document**

The meeting started at 2.30pm and ended at 4.30pm.

#### **\*34 Public Speaking**

Councillor Pauline Stott, Chairman of the Board welcomed all those present and invited everyone to introduce themselves.

Mike Berridge reported that the Annual Tenants Conference had gone very well. He thought that it had been the best one so far and that the 'speed dating' was brilliant. He thanked all those involved with the organisation of the Annual Tenants Conference.

Harry Roberts raised the timings of the Housing Review Board meetings. He felt that there had been inadequate consultation prior to changing the start time of the meetings. The Strategic Lead, Housing, Health and Environment advised that the start time of 2:30pm would be trialled until the end of the civic year, when it would be reviewed and all members consulted.

Eric Howard questioned the apparent change of policy with regard to tenants responsibility for repairs/replacing items such as side gates. The Property and Asset Manager advised him that she would look into the particular case outside of the meeting.

Councillor Pauline Stott remarked on the excellent housing tour which had taken place in September. Those who attended had found it very interesting and informative.

#### **\*35 Minutes**

The minutes of the Housing Review Board meeting held on 10 September 2015 were confirmed and signed as a true record, subject to Julie Bingham and Christine Drew being added to the list of those present.

#### **\*36 Declarations of Interest**

Angela Bea: Personal Interest - Housing tenant

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

Joyce Ebborn: Personal Interest - Housing tenant

Cllr Ian Hall: Personal Interest – Family member lives in a Council owned property and uses Home Safeguard

Cllr Knight: Personal interest – Family member lives in a Council owned property. He is also a Devon County Council Councillor and a member of the Fire Authority.

Harry Roberts – Housing tenant.

#### **\*37 Matters of urgency**

There were no matters of urgency identified.

#### **\*38 Forward Plan**

The Strategic Lead, Housing, Health and Environment presented the forward plan and advised Members that the forward plan would act as a reminder of agenda items to come forward to future meetings. Members were reminded that they could add further issues to the next forward plan by informing him or the Democratic Services Officer. The Strategic Lead, Housing, Health and Environment advised the Board that the budget and service plan

for 2016/17 would be presented to them at the January meeting. There would also be an update on the progress of the recommendations of the Garage Management and the Car Parking Task and Finish Forums at a future meeting.

**RESOLVED:** that the forward plan be noted.

**39 Tenant Scrutiny Panel report – customer recruitment and involvement**

The Chairman welcomed Roger Pell and Sylvia Martin, from the Tenant Scrutiny Panel (TSP), to the meeting. Roger Pell, Chairman of the TSP presented the TSP report on customer recruitment and involvement, undertaken to promote new thinking in order to re-energise tenant/customer involvement. The presentation included who the TSP were, what they did and why they chose to scrutinise East Devon's approach to tenant involvement. It also included considerations on what worked well and what did not work so well.

Although the TSP were independent of the council, they liaised with officers and tenants to gain information. The main findings were that:

- a small number of the same tenants were involved in 17 different groups (many getting involved because of a grievance). This reduced the pool of information and ideas available and the apparent lack of formal links or feedback between the groups resulting in stagnation, producing little in the way of results (with a few exceptions).
- there was a disappointing response to the anonymous housing staff survey. The TSP felt that staff attitude could appear as 'you're just a tenant, you're lucky to have a home'. By considering and referring to tenants as customers, the culture should change to one of increased mutual respect.

The TSP made five main recommendations, each with a number of sub recommendations. These were:

1. Make sure that effective tenant involvement (with a customer-centric approach) is an expected part of everyone's job.
2. Make sure tenant involvement priorities are linked to the organisation's vision and objectives.
3. Make customers central to decision making processes.
4. Review the existing structure to ensure groups' effectiveness, including no duplication of members/activities.
5. Develop an annual programme of ongoing activities to promote positive recruitment.

The main conclusion of the TSP was that they were pleased to find there were positive practices to balance their recommendations. They found the tenant involvement process to be stagnant in places, with a poor attitude and approach whilst growing in others, with a much improved customer-centric attitude and approach. The TSP hoped that the recommendations would ensure that the positive examples the TSP found could be spread to the rest of the organisation.

The Tenant & Communities Section Leader thanked the TSP for the report and recommendations. She felt that it would be useful for officers to analyse the report and bring a response to the report back to a future Board meeting. The Strategic Lead – Housing, Health & Environment thanked the TSP for a helpful, thought provoking report and suggested that a review of current practices prompted by the TSP report could be built into the service plan. On behalf of the Board the Chairman thanked the TSP for all of their work.

**RECOMMENDED:** that officers review the Tenant Scrutiny Panel report and recommendations on customer recruitment and involvement and respond in a report at a future Housing Review Board meeting.

**40 Rent reduction policy**

The Strategic Lead – Housing, Health & Environment’s report updated the Board on the government rent reduction and the ministerial response to the Council’s concerns about the impact of the policy on its finances. The Strategic Lead – Housing, Health & Environment explained the damaging effect of a 1% rent reduction on the Housing Revenue Account (HRA) Business Plan. The effect was particularly dramatic as the HRA Business Plan had presumed rent increases, so in real terms the reduction of rental income was far greater than 1%.

The Strategic Lead – Housing, Health & Environment, the Portfolio Holder – Sustainable Homes and Communities, a representative from Mid Devon District Council and the two local MPs had met with the Housing and Planning Minister at Westminster on 15 October 2015. Despite lobbying hard for change it was apparent from this meeting that the Housing and Planning Minister would not reconsider the proposed 1% rent reduction.

The report concluded that the Council’s lobbying would not affect the implementation of the policy and advised that it needed to concentrate on reviewing the HRA Business Plan and ensuring future expenditure was aligned with reduced income expectations. Options of how to plan future income against expenditure would be brought to a future Board meeting.

The Portfolio Holder – Sustainable Homes and Communities outlined her extensive efforts to lobby against the changes. She went on to thank tenants for the excellent rent collection record, which allowed the Council a degree of flexibility when reviewing the HRA Business Plan.

The Chairman thanked the Strategic Lead – Housing, Health & Environment for his report.

**RECOMMENDED:** that the position with regard to the rent reduction proposals be considered and a review of the Housing Revenue Account Business Plan be initiated.

**41 Moving rents to target rents**

The Strategic Lead – Housing, Health & Environment presented the Rental Manager’s report which proposed moving rent levels to the formula/target rent, for new tenants, at change of tenancy. By moving rents at tenancy changes to formula/target levels for new tenants it would lessen the severity of the 1%, four year rent reduction, without affecting current tenants.

**RECOMMENDED:** that rents be moved at a tenancy change to formula/target rent level for new tenants commencing 30 November 2015.

**42 ‘Pay to stay’ consultation for social housing tenants**

The Landlord Services Manager explained the Government’s pay to stay consultation and asked for the Board’s response on the proposals. It was the Government’s view that tenants in social housing should not always benefit automatically from subsidised rents. The principle was that higher earners, earning over £30,000 per annum (per household) should pay market rents and that the extra income generated by local authorities should be returned to the Exchequer. Housing Associations, under the proposals, would keep the extra income generated to fund their development programmes.

Concern was raised over how this would work in practice, and that it would be complex and expensive for social landlords to administer. At present the income of tenants was not generally known. The report suggested that if housing associations could keep the money generated, then local authorities should be able to do the same. The extra income raised should be retained locally so that it can be reinvested for the benefit of local tenants.

The Portfolio Holder – Sustainable Homes and Communities advised that she would be making the two local MPs aware of this consultation and they would be included in the response.

**RECOMMENDED:** that the Board's comments and concerns be included in the Council's response to the Government's consultation on pay to stay.

**\*43 Consultation update on changes to variation of tenancy agreement**

The Strategic Lead – Housing, Health & Environment reported on the outcome of the consultation and that in conjunction with the Portfolio Holder – Sustainable Homes and Communities he had approved proposed changes to the revised draft tenancy agreement. The two changes made to the draft tenancy agreement were:

1. An additional clause is added to Section 4.4 Living in your home which reads:  
4.4.5 If you live in sheltered housing where a personal alarm has been installed, you must not remove, disconnect or interfere with the equipment in any way. We will recharge you for any costs involved in repairing or replacing damaged equipment. Removing, disconnecting or interfering with the equipment will mean that the alarm cannot be used in an emergency and so may put your life, or the life of others, in danger.
2. In Clause 7.1.5 we change the abandonment time from 28 days to three months so the clause now reads:  
We will remove and store any items left in the premises after the termination date for three months. We will notify you of this at your last known address. If the items are not collected within three months we will dispose of them. You will be liable for our reasonable costs of storage and disposal.

During November all tenants would be sent the final notice of variation letter which would draw attention to the two changes and a copy of the final tenancy agreement. The new tenancy agreement would become effective from 1 January 2016.

**RESOLVED:** that the outcome of the consultation and further changes made to the tenancy agreement be noted.

**44 Provision of free and independent financial advice service for tenants**

The Rental Manager's report set out why the Council should continue to provide a free, independent, confidential, and impartial debt advice service that delivered a fair outcome for both debtors and creditors. The Landlord Services Manager explained the history with the current contract and the need to procure a new financial advice service. The Board agreed in principle to providing a free and independent financial advice service to its tenants and that the Council should look at the best way of doing this.

**RECOMMENDED:** that the Council enter into a new contract for the provision of a free and independent financial advice service for tenants.

**45 Completion of asbestos management surveys in housing stock**

The Property and Asset Manager's report outlined the progress that had been made in relation to the management of asbestos within the housing stock.

Since November 2014 the Council had had a designated Asbestos Maintenance Surveyor and an asbestos control procedure and management plan for housing. This policy was currently being reviewed and the Property and Asset Manager hoped to report this to the next Board meeting.

Asbestos management surveys provided up to date information on the housing stock. These were carried out as early as possible when properties became void. However there was a large amount of management surveys outstanding (because only a proportion of the stock becomes vacant) and contractors were increasingly requesting more coverage from management surveys. It was intended to place all of the remaining properties that did not have an asbestos management survey in a two-year programme of works.

**RECOMMENDED:**

1. that the progress in relation to the management of asbestos in council properties be noted
2. that a two year programme of works to ensure asbestos management surveys are carried out across the council housing stock be approved
3. that £100,000 be set aside in the 2016/17 and 2017/18 budgets for the completion of asbestos management surveys, with the Strategic Lead – Housing, Health & Environment and the Portfolio Holder – Sustainable Homes and Communities being given delegated authority to approve additional funding if required to ensure this work is completed.

**46 Handy person trial review**

The Board received a report from the Property and Asset Manager on the success of the first two months of the trial handy person scheme. The report also set out reasons for potentially extending the trial. The trial scheme was currently open to all tenants in sheltered accommodation, all tenants over 70 years of age or with a disability, and all tenants on the individual garden maintenance scheme. The trial was being run in two areas, with a contractor employed in each area. The east area of the district currently had further capacity and the Property and Asset Manager suggested opening up the service to a wider area.

The pilot scheme was being carefully monitored with tenant feedback and how it was helping people to stay in their homes, as well as being evaluated for financial viability.

**RECOMMENDED:** that the handy person scheme's success be noted and that the trial be extended to a wider area, at the discretion of the Property and Asset Manager.

**47 The tenant's journey – a longitudinal study proposal**

Consideration was given to the report of the Information and Analysis Officer. This outlined a new and improved research approach for collecting information on tenant experiences and expectations of their homes and the services the housing service provided. The Council had the opportunity to work in partnership with the University of Birmingham on an innovative research project exploring the impact its housing had on the lives of its tenants. The longitudinal study would provide the housing service with practical insights into the services it provided. It would also be an original and important contribution to the current policy and national research debate.

**RECOMMENDED:** that the STAR survey be replaced with a longitudinal study to enable better collection of tenant satisfaction and performance data.

**48 Housing and Planning Bill briefing**

The Strategic Lead - Housing, Health and Environment's report alerted the HRB to the publication of the Housing and Planning Bill, and provided reference to initial briefings on the content of the Bill. He would be keeping the Board updated in the future.

**RECOMMENDED:** that the Strategic Lead – Housing, Health & Environment and the Portfolio Holder – Sustainable Homes and Communities meet with Planning to discuss the Bill and its implications and report back to the next meeting of the Housing Review Board.

**RESOLVED:** that the main contents of the Housing and Planning Bill be noted.

**Attendance list**

**Present:**

Cllr Pauline Stott (Chairman)  
Cllr Megan Armstrong  
Cllr Ian Hall  
Cllr Jim Knight

Co-opted tenant members:

Pat Rous (Vice Chairman)  
Angela Bea  
Mike Berridge  
Joyce Ebborn  
Harry Roberts

Independent community representatives:

Julie Bingham  
Christine Drew

Officers:

Sue Bewes, Landlord Services Manager  
Natalie Brown, Information & Analysis Officer  
Amy Gilbert, Property and Asset Manager  
John Golding, Strategic Lead - Housing, Health and Environment  
Andrew Mitchell, Housing Needs & Strategy Manager  
Jane Reading, Tenant & Communities Section Leader  
Kerry Spittle – Right to Buy Officer  
Alethea Thompson, Democratic Services Officer  
Mandy White, Accountant

Also present:

Cllr Jill Elson, Portfolio Holder – Sustainable Homes and Communities  
Cllr David Barratt  
Cllr Helen Parr  
Eric Howard - tenant  
Victor Kemp – tenant

Sylvia Martin - Tenant Scrutiny Panel  
Roger Pell – Tenant Scrutiny Panel  
John Powley - tenant  
Annette Wheeden - tenant  
Jenny Vernon - consultant

**Apologies:**

Cllr Douglas Hull  
Cllr Steve Gazzard  
Giles Salter - Solicitor

Chairman .....

Date.....