

EAST DEVON DISTRICT COUNCIL

Minutes of a Meeting of the Housing Review Board held at Knowle, Sidmouth on 14 January 2016

Attendance list at end of document

The meeting started at 2.30pm and ended at 4.52pm.

***49 Public Speaking**

Councillor Pauline Stott, Chairman of the Board welcomed all those present and invited everyone to introduce themselves. Councillor Douglas Hull asked whether there would be any effect on East Devon District Council resulting from the Government's recent announcement that they would be demolishing some council estates and rebuilding them. The Strategic Lead – Housing, Health and Environment replied that he thought it was unlikely that EDDC would have any involvement in this.

***50 Minutes**

The minutes of the Housing Review Board meeting held on 5 November 2015 were confirmed and signed as a true record.

***51 Declarations of Interest**

Mike Berridge: Personal interest - family member lives in a Council owned property; housing tenant.

Julie Bingham: Personal interest – employee of Devon and Cornwall Housing.

Joyce Ebborn: Personal interest - housing tenant

Cllr Steve Gazzard: Personal interest – housing tenant

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

Sylvia Martin: Personal interest – housing tenant.

Harry Roberts: Personal interest – housing tenant.

Pat Rous: Personal interest - housing tenant.

***52 Matters of urgency**

There were no matters of urgency identified.

53 Energy South West initiative

The Board received a presentation from Neil Biddicombe and Thomas Storey from Advantage South West (ASW) on the Energy South West scheme, how the project had been developed and what the advantages would be for tenants and the organisation.

ASW have recognised that fuel poverty is a major issue for social housing tenants and have been keen to work with members to look at this and wider issues. As a result ASW teamed up with the energy supplier OVO and have formed the initiative Energy South West. The presentation outlined the benefits to tenants of switching to Energy South West as their main supplier. The main benefits of the scheme included:

- A 'local' tariff that would be consistently low and available to non internet users,
- Excellent customer service,
- No tie-ins,
- Access to Warm Homes Discount
- Smart Meters as an option

The Board were asked to support the project so that the Council could promote the benefits of the scheme to tenants.

The project also included the switching of energy supplies in void properties to OVO (this was currently undertaken by British Gas). The Property and Asset Manager reported that this would be considered at a future point following the initial launch of the void service, reflecting on the experiences of other housing providers. The current arrangement with British Gas worked well, but it was important to consider reputational factors of setting tenants up on a tariff that showed lower levels of customer service and having a more expensive option than rival energy suppliers.

RECOMMENDED:

1. that the project be supported and encouraged and the benefits of the scheme be advertised to tenants.
2. that consideration of the transfer of the management of void properties to Energy South West be deferred until after the pilot has taken place and the results are available for the Board.

54 Start time of Housing Review Board meetings

The start time of HRB meetings was changed from 6pm to 2:30pm in May 2015 for a trial period. Board members were asked to decide whether they wished the meetings to commence at 2:30pm, 4pm, or 6pm. A ballot of Board members was undertaken to determine the most popular option.

RECOMMENDED: that the Housing Review Board meetings start at 2:30pm for the 2016/17 civic year.

***55 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 either himself or the Democratic Services Officer.

RESOLVED:

1. that the forward plan be noted
2. that a Task and Finish Forum be established to consider the 30 year Housing Revenue Account Business Plan. Membership of the TaFF would include Councillor Stott, Pat Rous, Christine Drew, Councillor Douglas Hull, Harry Roberts and Mike Berridge.

56 Draft Housing Revenue Account budget 2016/17

The Strategic Lead – Housing, Health and Environment's report provided the Housing Review Board with details of the draft Housing Revenue Account for 2016/17. 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 managed and owned their housing stock, and therefore a key document for the Board to influence.

2012/13 saw the 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, a healthy HRA balance was showing going into the new financial year. The budget had been produced in accordance with Housing Revenue Account Business Plan assumptions.

The Council had a timetable for the production of its budgets for 2016/17, which involved the development of draft estimates and scrutiny by various member and officer groups. This report presented an opportunity for the Housing Review Board to input into this process.

Members raised various issues including:

- the door replacement programme,
- estate inspections and tenant involvement,
- garage rents,
- retention of Right to Buy receipts and the struggle to match fund receipts,
- tenant participation grant,
- potential housing development at Axminster,
- legionella testing,
- road repairs and off street parking,
- damp proofing and damp penetration to properties.

RECOMMENDED: that the 2016/17 Housing Revenue Account be approved.

57 Draft Housing Service Plan 2016/17

The Strategic Lead – Housing, Health & Environment’s report presented the draft Service Plan for the Housing Service covering the period 2016-2017. The Service Plan was produced annually and sets out the key achievements over the past year and the forthcoming issues to be faced by the Service. A range of Service improvements were identified, performance data reported, consultation proposals outlined, budget information provided, and so on.

The Service Plan was presented in draft form for the Board’s consideration.

RECOMMENDED: that the Housing Service Plan for 2016-17 be approved.

58 Asbestos policy update

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.

In November 2014 members agreed the revised asbestos policy and procedures. This document would be reviewed on an annual basis in order to reflect good practice and consider any changes in legislation. In November 2015 members agreed to a 2 year programme to capture all remaining management surveys across the Council’s housing stock. This information would then update the Asbestos Register, which the Council was required to hold to ensure it had up to date information in relation to where asbestos was present across the housing stock.

RECOMMENDED: that the revised Asbestos Management Plan and procedures applicable to Council homes be approved.

59 Repair timescales

The Property and Asset Manager’s report asked the Board to consider the success of a pilot project which introduced changes to the housing repairs priority timescales and appointment system. The changes were made in line with the Systems Thinking approach to service delivery with the following purpose ‘to do the right repair at the right time, get it right first time, and stay fixed’.

Previously, when a tenant reported a repair, a works order was issued with a timescale for completion and then the contractor contacted the tenant to arrange an appointment within that deadline. Five timescales were used.

Following approval to trial a new way of operating (doing what matters for the customers) the timescales had been changed to offer just two repair timescale options;

a. Emergency priority (E) – contractor on site within 2 hours and work complete or made safe within 4 hours.

b. Routine priority – all repairs other than (E) priority. The day/time to be agreed between the tenant and the contractor. The repair should be completed within 30 days. This offered tenants more flexibility and control around appointment times, simplified the process and reduced costs.

The Property and Asset Manager reported that although satisfaction levels were high there were a couple of areas to improve upon. Further efficiencies could be found, but overall tenants and contractors were happy with the arrangements.

Councillor Hall thanked the Property and Asset Manager for her report and gave an example of excellent repairs service, which had been received on Boxing Day.

RECOMMENDED: that following the completion of the pilot project changes be implemented to priority repairs timescales to improve the system further.

60 Extension to handy person scheme

The Board received a report from the Property and Asset Manager in November 2015 on the success of the first two months of the trial handy person scheme and agreed to extend the trial across the whole district. 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 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. A further £50,000 was requested for a six month extension to the scheme, which would allow the housing service to fully assess the uptake of the scheme by tenants.

A further report would be brought to the Board with proposals on how to progress the handy person scheme, following a careful review of the trial.

RECOMMENDED: that the handy person scheme be extended for a further six months until the end of August 2016.

61 Garage review

The Housing Project Officer's report provided the Board with an update on progress on the agreed actions following the Garage Task and Finish Forum, and recommendations for further action to be taken.

Progress, albeit slowly, had been made on the sites identified with development potential following the last report to the Board in September 2013. Officers would continue to work up schemes on sites with development potential. However, there was a need to be mindful following the announcement of rent reductions of the cost of doing this, where funding would come from to build these schemes, and the level of housing need in the areas concerned.

The report recommended that a number of rural garage sites be sold. In areas where little or no income was being generated by the garages and repairs were not being carried out, if they continued to be left the garages would deteriorate further and lose value. The Council would be taking a more pro-active approach to trying to let some of the vacant garages. However, in some cases the poor state of repair to the garages prevented the garages being let at the current rent levels.

Councillor Douglas Hull made a specific request for the garage site at Prestor, Axminster to be evaluated and suggested alternative uses for the land.

RECOMMENDED: that the disposal of three rural garage sites at Bakers Mead, Shute, Plymtree and Luppitt be agreed.

RESOLVED: that the progress made to date be noted.

62 Pets policy and leaflet

The report of the Tenant and Communities Manager sought approval for the new pet policy and pet leaflet, which was in accordance with the Council's new tenancy agreement. The policy:

- defined the meaning of a 'pet',
- set out what was expected from tenants,
- gave details about running a pet related business from a council property,
- covered the burying of pets,
- explained how the Council would deal with complaints about pets,
- explained that there were a few properties that were deemed unsuitable for pets,
- gave the addresses of other helpful agencies.

RECOMMENDED: that the pet policy and draft pet leaflet be agreed.

63 Budget 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 2015/16 at the end of month eight (November 2015).

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.

The Housing Accountant reported that a few over and under spends had been identified but it was looking likely that the HRA would come in on budget. She warned that although previously the Council had been ahead of schedule spending Right to Buy receipts, time was now getting tighter and members needed to be aware of this. The Housing Enabling Officer explained that the Council had to more than match fund Right to Buy receipts by 70%. He would be reporting to Senior Management (SMT) on options to avoid handing back the 30% Right to Buy receipts (with interest) to Government.

The Strategic Lead – Housing, Health and Environment added that it was the Council's ambition to provide more housing but highlighted the issue of its ability to fund the 70% required. He added that it was important to build properties in areas where they would then be easily rented out. Any future developments must be self-financing and must not add to the HRA financing problem.

It was suggested that Overview Committee should review these strategic planning issues.

RECOMMENDED: that Overview Committee consider the strategic planning issues relating to how and where the Council should build future affordable housing.

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

Attendance list

Present:

Cllr Pauline Stott (Chairman)
Cllr Megan Armstrong
Cllr Ian Hall
Cllr Douglas Hull

Co-opted tenant members:

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

Independent community representatives:

Julie Bingham
Christine Drew

Officers:

Sue Bewes, Landlord Services Manager
Emma Charlton, Housing Projects Officer
Mark Dale, Senior Technical Officer - Day to Day Repairs
Amy Gilbert, Property and Asset Manager
Mike Glendenning, Asbestos Surveyor
John Golding, Strategic Lead - Housing, Health and Environment
Paul Lowe, Housing Enabling Officer
Andrew Mitchell, Housing Needs & Strategy Manager
Giles Salter - Solicitor
Alethea Thompson, Democratic Services Officer
Melissa Wall, Housing Projects Officer
Mandy White, Accountant

Also present:

Cllr Jill Elson, Portfolio Holder – Sustainable Homes and Communities
Cllr David Barratt
Cllr Steve Gazzard
Sylvia Martin - Tenant Scrutiny Panel

Neil Biddiscombe – Procurement Manager, Advantage South West
Thomas Storey – Resident Cost Manager, Advantage South West

Apologies:

Angela Bea - tenant
Cllr Tom Wright

Chairman Date.....