

EAST DEVON DISTRICT COUNCIL

Minutes of the meeting of Housing Review Board held at Council Chamber, Exmouth Town Hall, Exmouth EX8 1AW on 11 January 2018

Attendance list at end of document

The meeting started at 2.30 pm and ended at 4.50 pm

1 Public speaking

There were no questions raised by members of the public. Tenant Mike Berridge complimented the recycling crews on their excellent work over the festive period and congratulated the Waste and Recycling Team for the high recycling rates.

The Chairman welcomed everyone to the meeting and invited those present to introduce themselves. She gave particular welcome to two new tenant representatives onto the Board, Sue Saunders and Peter Sullivan.

2 Minutes of the previous meeting

3 Apologies

4 Declarations of interest

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

Joyce Ebborn: Personal interest – housing tenant.

Pat Rous: Personal interest - housing tenant.

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

Sue Saunders: Personal interest - family member lives in a Council owned property and a housing tenant.

Peter Sullivan: Personal interest – housing tenant.

5 Housing Review Board forward plan

The Strategic Lead, Housing, Health and Environment presented the forward plan and advised Members that the forward plan acted 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: that the forward plan be noted.

6 Draft Housing Revenue Account budget 2018/19

The Strategic Lead – Housing, Health and Environment's report provided the Board with details of the year end forecast of the draft Housing Revenue Account (HRA) for 2017/18 and proposed budget for 2018/19. This account showed the main areas of anticipated income and expenditure on landlord activities for the year ahead. Producing a Housing Revenue Account has been a statutory requirement for Councils who manage and own their housing stock for some time, and therefore was a key document for the Board to influence.

The report aimed to provide a rationale for the budget process undertaken in 2018/19 whilst also providing analysis and commentary on the year end forecast position of the HRA against 2017/18 budgets.

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

The Strategic Lead – Housing, Health and Environment explained that there was a reduction in the anticipated level of income due to the Government's rent reduction scheme. High rent collection performance was business critical. It was noted that the HRA was predicted to have a surplus of £415,000 by the end of 2018/19.

Areas of expenditure highlighted included:

- Programmed maintenance.
- Responsive maintenance.
- Cyclical maintenance programmes – including two additional programmes for internal and external decoration.
- Asbestos surveys and other areas of compliance.
- Increased staffing levels, including a Housing Service Lead.

RECOMMENDED: that Cabinet approve the Housing Revenue Account year-end forecast 2017/18 and draft budget for 2018/19.

7 **Draft Housing Service plan 2018/19**

The Board was presented with the draft Service Plan for the Housing Service covering the period 2018-2019, for its consideration.

The Service Plan was a document produced annually and set 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 etc.

The Strategic Lead – Housing, Health and Environment highlighted the Homelessness Reduction Act as being a challenge. Preparations were advanced for this. Homelessness was well managed at East Devon, with a very proactive approach. Other challenges included maintaining the supply of local affordable housing, and the impacts of Universal Credit.

The Strategic Lead – Housing, Health and Environment was thanked for producing a thorough Service Plan, with a proactive approach to the challenges ahead.

RECOMMENDED: that Cabinet approve the Housing Service Plan for 2018/19.

8 **Responsive repairs and works to void properties extension and procurement process**

The Property and Asset Manager's report recommended to the Board that a further six month extension be awarded to the current responsive day to day repairs and void works to council housing stock contract, with a revised end date of January 2019. This would

allow for the completion of the drafting of a new specification and the procurement process to take place, to secure future contracting arrangements for responsive repairs and void work to properties.

RECOMMENDED: that Cabinet approve the extension of the current responsive day to day repairs and void work to council housing stock contract for a further six months, with a revised end date of 31 January 2019.

9 **Appointment of procurement consultants**

The Property and Asset Manager's report updated the Board with regard to progress on the appointment of the procurement consultants to assist with drafting the specification for the day to day repairs and work to voids contract, and the tendering process. Time was being spent studying in depth the proposal of a 'price per property/price per void model'.

Tenant involvement opportunities were outlined in the report and the Property and Asset Manager explained the composition of the project team. The intention was to provide an update report to the Board at every meeting in 2018 in order to ensure members were being kept up to date with progress being made.

RESOLVED:

1. that the Housing Review Board note the appointment of Echelon Consultancy Limited as procurement consultants for the day to day repairs and work to voids contract.
2. that the Housing Review Board note the early stage progress that had been made on the procurement of the day to day to repairs and void work to council housing stock contract.

10 **Universal Credit update**

The Landlord Services Manager's report set out the latest information on the roll out of Universal Credit (UC) and described the actions being taken to mitigate, as far as possible, the potential loss to Housing Revenue Account (HRA) income.

Universal Credit was an entirely new benefit and the key features were outlined in the report. It would only affect working age people (18 years to 60.5 years). UC would be paid as a monthly payment per household, direct into a bank account. This amount would include the housing element. There was provision for housing providers to apply for the housing element of UC to be paid to them direct at the start of the claim if it could be proved that the tenant fell into one or more of a number of vulnerability categories.

There was a programme for UC rollout across the region. UC would go live for tenants with new claims with a Honiton postcode on 4 July 2018, and for those with Exeter postcodes on 26 September 2018.

Concerns about UC as a social landlord included:

- tenants would have to arrange with the landlord to start paying their own rent.
- some individuals may not be good at prioritising their bills or managing a budget and could easily get into debt.
- it could have a serious effect on rental income.

- potentially more people could be evicted for rent arrears, with the social landlord receiving more homeless applications, and finding themselves in a position where as a social landlord they have to do more with less income.

The Landlord Services Manager explained that careful preparations were underway, with a proactive approach being taken. With the help of the Benefits team tenants who may need help should they claim UC were being identified. Staff training had also been arranged. A series of 12 customer drop-ins had been set up across the district to explain to tenants what was happening and how the Council could help.

It was clear that staff needed to work much more closely and proactively with their customers if they were to help them manage their income effectively. The vulnerable in particular would require intensive support and close working across teams to achieve this. This greater demand for support was larger than the current resources available. It was estimated that an extra two members of staff would be required initially. Housing Benefits colleagues with expertise in this area would be facing a reduced workload and some free capacity. It was proposed that the equivalent of two full time members of staff from Housing Benefits support the Housing Service. This would be reviewed after a period when it was possible to assess the impact of UC on tenants.

RECOMMENDED:

1. that Cabinet note the report on the preparations for the further roll out of Universal Credit during 2018/19.
2. that Cabinet agree that the council should invest in supporting tenants in order to mitigate the effects of Universal Credit on their own wellbeing as well as the impact on the Housing Revenue Account.
3. that Cabinet agree that two members of staff from Housing Benefits support the Housing Service through the rollout, with staff capacity required to manage the change being reassessed later in the financial year.

11 **Rent exchange scheme**

The Board considered the report of the Rental Manager, which set out why the Council should consider joining the Rental Exchange. It was a free, independent service provided by Experian, whereby social housing tenants were able to build a positive credit history to gain equal access to financial services.

The Rental Exchange was set up in 2010 by Big Issue Invest and Experian. Together they were working with social housing providers to incorporate tenants' rent payment history into their credit files, with no cost to the housing provider or the tenant. This allowed tenants with little or no credit history to build a credit score in the same way that mortgage holders do. It also allowed them to create an on-line proof of identity, which was increasingly important when applying for good and services.

Concern was expressed that the Council could view the credit scores of their tenants. The Rental Manager explained that there were two parts to the scheme. The first part was free, but if the Council wanted to receive credit score information it would have to pay for the service. It was also noted that tenants could opt out of the scheme entirely and Experian would provide letters explaining to tenants how the scheme worked and how tenants could opt out of the service.

RECOMMENDED: that Cabinet approve entering into a new contract for the provision of free, independent credit checks for tenants.

12 **Tenancy fraud prevention**

The Strategic Lead – Housing, Health and Environment outlined the tenancy fraud prevention scheme. There was an amnesty to hand back keys throughout January 2018. There was an anonymous 24 hour service to report tenancy fraud. Housing staff were working closely with Housing Benefit colleagues on a whole programme of tenancy fraud measures.

RESOLVED: that the Housing Review Board note the tenancy fraud prevention scheme.

13 **Rent deposit and bond scheme**

The Board were made aware of planned revisions to the rent deposit and bond scheme. Amendments were needed to ensure that the scheme was up to date and fit for purpose.

The Council's rent deposit and bond scheme had been in operation since 2006 and had been a key tool in tackling homelessness. It had assisted several hundred households who had either been homeless or threatened with homelessness by providing resources and support to move into accommodation in the private sector. The scheme had evolved from a solely loan based system to a combination of loans and bonds. The main change now proposed was using lifetime bonds (the length of the tenancy) as opposed to fixed term bonds.

RECOMMENDED: that Cabinet note and approve amendments to the rent deposit and bond scheme and allows bonds to become lifetime bonds rather than fixed term.

14 **Hillcrest, Exmouth bungalow purchase**

The report of the Housing Enabling and Allocations Manager sought authority to enter into negotiations to purchase a surplus Devon County Council property using Right to Buy receipts and Housing Revenue Account funding. Purchasing the site would allow the Council to develop purpose built housing to meet specific needs. If the purchase was successful a further report would be brought to the Board to seek support on the type of accommodation that should be provided.

RECOMMENDED:

1. that Cabinet support the proposal to enter negotiations with Devon County Council to agree a value and purchase price for Hillcrest Bungalow, Exmouth, with a view to redeveloping the site in the future.
2. that Cabinet approve the use of Right to Buy Receipts and Housing Revenue Account housing development fund to purchase the property.

15 **Safeguarding adults**

The Strategic Lead – Housing, Health and Environment's report set out some good practice advice and a procedure to ensure that Housing had safeguarding embedded into its service delivery. It was noted that East Devon District Council had a safeguarding policy and procedure for its staff to follow. Board members and elected councilors also had safeguarding obligations.

RECOMMENDED: that Cabinet approve the safeguarding procedure set out in the report.

16 **What you need to know about the Autumn Budget**

Consideration was given to the Chartered Institute of Housing's publication 'What you need to know about the Budget 2017', which helpfully identified the content of the budget. It was noted that the Government was working on its housing agenda.

RESOLVED: that the Housing Review Board note the Chartered Institute of Housing's publication 'What you need to know about the Budget 2017'.

17 **HouseMark benchmarking 2016-17**

The Information and Analysis Officer's report presented the results of HouseMark's 2016/17 cost and performance benchmarking exercise. The report compared the Council's costs and performance across the housing service areas with its peers and 2015/16 data. It was noted that EDDC remained in the first quartile compared to its peers for the total rent arrears as a percentage of rent due. The report also included a section on actions required in response to the benchmarking report findings.

RESOLVED: that the Housing Review Board note the HouseMark 2016/17 benchmarking report.

18 **Performance digest**

The Board was presented with the Housing Service performance indicator report for quarter 2 2017/18, with details of selected indicators measuring performance across the Housing Service.

The Board discussed various issues including rough sleepers, anti-social behaviour surveys, Devon Home Choice band A criteria and property re-let times. The work being undertaken to increase affordable housing was noted.

RESOLVED: that the Housing Review Board note the performance of the Housing Service.

19 **Date of the next Housing Review Board meeting**

The Board noted the date of the next HRB meeting:
Thursday 8 March 2018 – 2:30pm, Council Chamber, Exmouth Town Hall.

Attendance List

Board members present:

Councillor Pauline Stott (Chairman)
Peter Sullivan, Tenant (Vice-Chairman)
Mike Berridge, Tenant
Julie Bingham, Independent Community Representative
Councillor Megan Armstrong
Councillor John O'Leary
Councillor Brenda Taylor
Councillor Ian Hall

Joyce Ebborn, Tenant
Sue Saunders, Tenant

Councillors also present (for some or all the meeting)

B Bailey
D Barratt
J Elson
S Gazzard
S Grundy
B d Saram

Officers in attendance:

Sue Bewes, Landlord Services Manager
Natalie Brown, Information and Analysis Officer (Housing)
Charles Derry, tenant and Communities Section Leader
Emma Charlton, Housing Projects Officer
Amy Gilbert-Jeans, Service Lead Housing
John Golding, Strategic Lead Housing, Health and Environment
Henry Gordon Lennox, Strategic Lead Governance and Licensing
Jane Hayward, Benefits, Corporate Fraud and Compliance Team Leader
Tim Laurence-Othen, Housing Projects Officer
Andi Loosemoore, Rental Manager
Paul Lowe, Housing Enabling and Allocations Manager
Andrew Mitchell, Housing Needs and Strategy Manager
Giles Salter, Solicitor
Alethea Thompson, Democratic Services Officer
Rob Ward, Accountant

Councillor apologies:

Chairman

Date: