

## **EAST DEVON DISTRICT COUNCIL**

### **Minutes of the meeting of Housing Review Board held at Council Chamber, Blackdown House, Honiton on 9 November 2023**

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

The meeting started at 10.25 am and ended at 12.00 pm

#### **21 Appointment of Vice Chair**

The Chair welcomed all those present to the meeting, in particular Councillor Chris Burhop who had recently joined the Housing Review Board.

Nominations for Vice Chair were received for Councillor Helen Parr.

**RESOLVED:** that Councillor Helen Parr be appointed Vice Chair of the Board for the ensuing year

#### **22 Minutes of the previous meeting**

The minutes of the previous meeting held on 15 June 2023 were agreed.

#### **23 Declarations of interest**

There were no declarations of interest under the Code of Conduct. Councillor Sarah Chamberlain declared that she was employed by Exeter City Council in the housing department.

#### **24 Public speaking**

There were no members of the public registered to speak.

#### **25 Matters of urgency**

There were none.

#### **26 Confidential/exempt item(s)**

There were three confidential/exempt items.

#### **27 Housing Review Board forward plan**

The Assistant Director of Housing 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 reports and topics for discussion to the next forward plan by either informing herself or the Democratic Services Officer.

The Assistant Director of Housing advised the Board that the format and structure of the forward plan would be amended for future meetings to better align with the Cabinet forward plan. The quarterly performance information was now included in the regular housing performance dashboard report and presentation. Once complete the outcome

of the stock condition survey and the development of an asset management strategy would be included on the plan and reported to the Board. An update would be presented to the Housing Review Board at the next meeting.

**RESOLVED:** that with the addition of a stock condition survey update report the forward plan be agreed.

## 28 **Future of Warm Hubs**

The Interim Housing Operations Manager presented to the Board a review of the Warm Hubs, which were agreed by the HRB for winter 2022 as a response to the cost of living crisis. It also detailed the ongoing support provided through the Community Hubs project during the summer and considered how this could be extended with further Warm Hubs provision through winter 2023/24. The Warm Hubs project had been successful in tackling social isolation, food poverty, housing warmth, personal development, community cohesion and in relaunching tenant involvement and engagement. It had clearly made a difference to tenants' lives and there was overwhelming demand for the service to continue. The main focus of the Warm Hubs was to meet the needs of tenants by establishing 'warm banks'. These were the equivalent of food banks where people who couldn't afford heating were invited to spend their days, at no cost, in the warm spaces.

Since opening there had been nearly 2500 visits to the Warm Hubs, made by 362 different residents of East Devon, from all types of housing (not just EDDC tenants). The busiest hub was Broadview in Broadclyst. Over 1600 hot meals had been provided, including 118 Christmas dinners. Workshops had been run on budgeting, seated exercise classes, cooking on a budget and craft sessions, alongside games and jigsaws. Hats, gloves, over 200 blankets and 500 pairs of socks had all been provided.

It was hoped to expand the Warm Hub offering and look into the possibility of a baby bank. A mapping exercise had been undertaken at the start to identify gaps in existing provision across the district before opening up the Warm Hubs. These could be altered depending on demand and provision, as well as the possibly providing 'roaming' in some of the small isolated communities.

External organisations, as well as a researcher from Exeter University had attended the Broadclyst Warm Hub to understand what made the Warm Hubs work. The feedback from this was positive. The most beneficial aspect of the Warm Hubs was the social aspect. It was suggested that other community groups/village hall committees be invited to see the Warm Hubs in action as best practice. Seeing the model could be invaluable to other groups looking to set up something similar.

A Housing Emergency Financial Support Fund had been established, with £2018.96 being paid out to date, with most referrals coming from housing officers, for energy payments for sheltered housing tenants. This indicated that general needs tenants were unaware of the fund and the plan going forward into winter 2023/24 was to alert tenants of potential support available to them.

The Board supported the fabulous initiative and suggested that councillors attend these hubs which offered a great way of engaging with residents.

The Housing Review Board noted and agreed the contents of the report and supported the additional fund of £50,000 to continue the popular project. The fund would cover the

running costs of 10 Warm Hubs, transforming into Community Hubs in the spring, along with financing the Housing Winter Pressures Hardship Fund that would be used to continue financial support to tenants.

**RECOMMENDED:** that Cabinet recommend to Council the approval of £50,000 to allocate towards delivering and designating the Warm Hubs project.

## 29 **Review of housing compliance policies**

The Housing Review Board were asked to consider and agree the amended reviews of the electrical safety policy, legionella plan and policy and the asbestos management plan and policy for housing, to ensure compliance with current legislation and regulations relating to those statutory areas of compliance.

It was suggested that tenants should be reminded to be aware of possible asbestos in their homes when undertaking any DIY work as the asbestos management plan was focussed on workers' safety.

**RECOMMENDED:** that Cabinet approve the proposed amendments to the electrical safety policy, legionella plan and policy and asbestos management plan and policy for housing.

## 30 **Housing performance dashboard**

The Housing Review Board received a report and presentation from the Interim Housing Services Manager on the key performance indicator (KPI) dashboard and compliance dashboard at quarter 2. The presentation also outlined actions being taken to improve performance where targets were not being achieved in relation to:

- Ensuring void property targets were met.
- Ensuring repairs targets were met.
- Improving complaints handling performance.

KPIs in the presentation included:

- Percentage of self-contained dwellings vacant and not available to let.
- Average days to re-let a social housing dwelling (standard).
- Percentage of rent lost through properties becoming vacant.

These three indicators were all linked.

The Interim Housing Services Manager responded to concerns from those present over performance. He acknowledged that although continuous improvement was required, steady progress was being made in some key areas and improvement plans developed. Managerial focus and sufficient management capacity were important in this.

**RESOLVED:** that the Housing Review Board receive and note the performance report at quarter 2.

## 31 **Finance report**

The Housing Accountant's report provided the Housing Review Board with current draft financial outturn figures for the Housing Revenue Account (HRA) and housing capital program for the 2023/24 financial year. Work was ongoing regarding staffing structures,

once these were completed and approved the results would be reflected in the next finance report to Housing Review Board.

Producing a Housing Revenue Account had been a statutory requirement for Councils who managed and owned their housing stock for some time, and therefore a key document for the Board to influence.

The HRA reserves, original budgeted surplus and revised budget deficit figures were contained in the report and noted by the Board.

Income was increased on rents by 7% and all other service charges by 3% in 2023/24. Lost rent due to voids continued to be above the budgeted levels and would add an additional £0.5m to the in-year deficit if it continued at the current level. The knock-on effect of voids/significant planned works was the requirement for emergency accommodation/decants for tenants. The current figures were shown in the report and discussed by the Board. It was suggested that void properties not yet relet could be used for decants. The Housing Solutions Manager advised that this had been considered but the issue was that often the set aside properties were not the right size and/or in the right location for the decants. There were also currently more 'decants' than there was available housing stock. Officers recognised the need to make the best use of available housing stock and this was being reviewed as part of the review of the homelessness and rough sleeping policy and temporary accommodation strategy. A request was made for the decant figures in terms of the number of people and the length of days spent in temporary accommodation.

**RECOMMENDED:** that Cabinet note the Housing Revenue Account update.

## 32 **Electrical compliance update**

The Board received an update in relation to electrical compliance. On 15 June 2023 the Board were alerted to non-compliance regarding electrical safety and were presented with the performance indicator dashboard and summary on findings and actions in place to address non-compliance. There was a five-year periodic testing regime, but as at 15 June 2023 531 Electrical Periodic Inspections were overdue from the 2022/23 testing year. Due to this and following external legal advice and self-assessment of the risk the service self-referred itself to the Social Housing Regulator. Following this referral officers were asked to provide a comprehensive amount of information in relation to compliance, not just covering electrical but all areas of compliance across the housing stock. There had also been a series of virtual meetings with the Regulator to talk through the measures being taken and the progress being made to ensure compliance would be regained.

The Assistant Director for Housing was overseeing the numbers of properties out of compliance on a weekly basis with officers in the team reporting directly to her, ensuring oversight at senior leadership level. This was also being more widely monitored by the Senior Leadership Team and regular updates had been provided to the Portfolio Holder. Overall, the increased monitoring of compliance would ensure that the contractors were adhering to statutory testing/servicing regimes.

There were currently 46 EICRs outstanding (down from 531 in June). 22 of the properties had a failed access visit which meant that the appointment was pre-booked with the tenant, but they were not home when the operative arrived to undertake the work. They were now at the start of the no-access process which ultimately would result

in a legal process as this had been aligned in terms of needing to access properties for EICRs, along with how gas safety visits were managed.

The Compliance Surveyor was monitoring the contract closely with the contractor through weekly meetings and information sharing and formal operation meetings were held regularly. There was a delivery plan in place for all properties that had been agreed with the contractor and this was generally adjusted in line with success rates of entering properties. Repairs that had arisen from the testing were now being managed by two separate contractors in order to bring them down rapidly and compliance was being monitored weekly, the same way the ECIR checks were monitored.

Various changes had taken place around monitoring and officers were confident that they had the correct performance indicators in place to ensure closer monitoring of this area of compliance, which would prevent a similar situation occurring in the future.

Officers were congratulated on the remarkable amount of progress that had been made in a relatively short amount of time.

**RECOMMENDED:**

1. that Cabinet note the revision of the Electrical Safety Policy.
2. that Cabinet agree that the Housing Review Board have oversight of the Housing Service's Compliance and Electrical Safety Policy.

**33 Exclusion of press and public**

**RESOLVED:** that under Section 100(A) (4) of the Local Government Act 1972 the public (including the press) be excluded from the meeting as exempt information, of the description set out in the agenda is likely to be disclosed and on balance the public interest is in discussing these items in private session (Part B).

**34 Interim staffing position**

The Interim Chief Executive & Director for Housing Health and Environment, and Assistant Director for Housing's report set out a brief overview of the current staffing challenges within the housing service and plans for how this was being taken forward. Following the appointment of the Director for Housing, Health and Environment, a full review had been undertaken to clarify and establish the best route forward in relation to ensuring that the service was fully resourced and able to meet the needs of frontline service delivery including the necessary management resource. The Interim Chief Executive & Director for Housing Health and Environment wanted to give the Board reassurance and confidence that the challenges of the service had been recognised and that a robust management team was being put in place to address the issues. It was essential to have the right senior management team in place, with resilience across the structure. A copy of the revised staffing structure, with roles and responsibilities would be provided at the next meeting of the Housing Review Board.

**RESOLVED:** that the Housing Review Board note the actions being taken to ensure the housing service was able to function and meet the required level of service delivery for tenants and wider residents.

**35 Home Safeguard service update**

The Board received the report along with a series of recommendations which were considered and approved by Cabinet on 10 October 2023. The recommendations were based around monitoring of the Home Safeguard service, the procurement of a new call handling system, a review of the out of hours service, plans for a growth strategy within the service and the implementation of a new staffing structure. It was important for the HRB to aware due to strong link of the service with the Housing Revenue Account.

**RESOLVED:** that the Housing Review Board note the recommendations within the report.

## 36 **Housing Ombudsman determination**

The Interim Housing Operations Manager's report outlined the Ombudsman investigation and determination of a complaint from an EDDC tenant regarding anti-social behaviour, EDDC's response to a request for re-housing and how EDDC handled the complaint. The Ombudsman determination was that there was severe maladministration by EDDC in respect of its response to the reports of anti-social behaviour and maladministration in respect of the way it handled the complaint. The report also outlined EDDC's response to the findings. Officers reassured members that the service had and would continue take the learning from the case in order to ensure the failures could not be repeated.

**RESOLVED:** that the Housing Review Board note the report and the actions taken in response to the Ombudsman's findings.

### **Attendance List**

#### **Board members present:**

Councillor Sarah Chamberlain (Chair)  
Councillor Peter Faithfull  
Councillor Helen Parr  
Councillor Christopher Burhop

#### **Councillors also present (for some or all the meeting)**

I Barlow  
J Loudoun  
M Martin

#### **Officers in attendance:**

Amy Gilbert-Jeans, Assistant Director Housing  
Tracy Hendren, Director of Housing, Health and Environment  
Yusef Masih, Interim Housing Services Manager  
Andrew Mitchell, Housing Solutions Manager  
Alethea Thompson, Democratic Services Officer  
Rob Ward, Accountant  
Giles Salter, Solicitor  
Andrew King, Interim Tenancy Services Manager

#### **Councillor apologies:**

Sue Dawson, Tenants  
Sara Clarke, Independent Community Representative  
Rob Robinson, Independent Community Representative  
Cindy Collier, Tenant

Councillor Tony McCollum

Chair .....

Date: .....