

EAST DEVON DISTRICT COUNCIL

Minutes of the meeting of Housing Review Board held at online via the Zoom app. on 21 January 2021

Attendance list at end of document

The meeting started at 2.30 pm and ended at 5.00 pm

85 Public speaking

There were no matters raised by the public.

The Chair advised the Board that it was proposed that the start time of the HRB meetings would change to 10am from the start of the new civic year.

The Housing Solutions Manager informed the Board that one of the tenants many would have known, Marcus Masterson, had sadly passed away recently. Marcus had been a key member of the Homelessness Strategy Review group over the last few years, passing on his views and opinions in respect of plans for tackling homelessness. His contributions, from a former service user perspective, had been greatly appreciated and helped to shape the strategy. Along with Cllr Megan Armstrong, who had known Marcus for several years, officers wished for their appreciation of the contribution that Marcus had made to the service over the years to be acknowledged.

86 Minutes of the previous meeting

The minutes of the Housing Review Board meeting held on 17 September 2020 were confirmed as a true record.

87 Declarations of interest

Cat Summers, Personal, housing tenant.

Cindy Collier, Personal, housing tenant.

Councillor Ian Hall, Personal, mother is a tenant and a Homesafeguard customer and he is a Devon County Councillor.

Councillor Steve Gazzard, Personal, housing tenant.

Peter Sullivan, Personal, housing tenant and vice chair trustees of Sidmouth Consolidated Charities.

88 Matters of urgency

There were no matters of urgency.

89 Confidential/exempt item(s)

There was one confidential/exempt item.

90 Housing Review Board forward plan

The Acting Housing Service Lead 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 herself or the Democratic Services Officer. During the meeting the following items were added to the forward plan:

- Green Homes Grant update
- Housing strategy
- Stock condition survey
- Compliance

RESOLVED: that the forward plan be noted and updated.

91 **Housing Service Plan 2021/22**

The Strategic Lead – Housing, Health and Environment presented the draft Service Plan for the Housing Service covering the period 2021-2022, for consideration by the Board.

The Service Plan was a working document produced annually by all EDDC services and set out the key achievements over the past year and the forthcoming issues to be faced by the service. It linked closely with the Council Plan and the aim of the process was to produce a work plan for the coming year with a realistic view of the challenges and risks ahead. Producing a Service Plan presented a good opportunity to look back and reflect and also the ability to forward plan. Performance should be monitored constantly against the 'live' document. The Service Plan was coordinated annually with budget planning.

This year the plan reflected some of the service interruptions due to the pandemic and the move of the Private Sector Housing team to the Environmental Health and Car Parks Service. The plan also considered service challenges and pressures over the next three years, including climate change implications, tenant safety measures, the implications of the Social Housing White Paper, and the ambitions to increase the supply of social housing.

A range of service improvements were identified through a number of SMART objectives (specific, measurable, achievable, relevant, time bound). The plan linked closely with the Housing Strategy and was designed to complement a number of other housing plans and policies as part of how the Council managed its own housing stock, managed homelessness, and the services it delivered. There was also a strong link with the Council's Public Health Strategic Plan to ensure more people were helped to be and stay healthy, ensure self-care and community resilience and integrate and improve support for people in their own homes.

Headlines from the Housing Service Plan were:

- A focus on delivering our housing purpose(s).
- A commitment to tackle homelessness.
- Recognition of poverty as a significant factor in people's lives.
- Revision of the HRA Business plan with updated stock condition data.
- A focus on new development opportunities with the need to review the current acquisition programme.
- Emphasis on the importance of compliance and keeping tenants safe in their homes.
- A focus on mental health and how we are addressing the challenges this is presenting us as a landlord.

- Embedding the Integrated Asset Management Contract.
- Mapping the future of Home Safeguard with a realistic view of risks ahead including digital switchover, refresh of the marketing strategy, relocating the service, review of the staffing rota.
- An emphasis on evidencing value for money with the need to scrutinise some areas to satisfy ourselves that we are achieving what matters most to the customer, in line with our systems thinking purpose.
- Acting on the climate change agenda and building towards a carbon neutral council.

The service planning day was a virtual event and involved input from senior managers, the Portfolio Holder and Chair of the Board, on the day to day challenges of the job, ideas for service improvement, and the needs of the customers. The Strategic Lead – Housing, Health and Environment acknowledged that ordinarily there would be greater tenant involvement in the service planning process, but due to service pressures and focussing on the pandemic the process had been curtailed. The Service Plan would be presented to the tenant groups over the next few months and cascade to housing staff through team meetings and service briefings. The Board's input into the Service Plan was welcomed and gave tenants an additional opportunity to comment, before it was finalised and reported to Cabinet.

The Strategic Lead – Housing, Health and Environment commented that despite the pressures over the previous year the housing teams and contractors had responded incredibly well and were doing a fantastic job.

RECOMMENDED: that Cabinet approve the Housing Service Plan for 2021/22.

92 **Housing Revenue Account budget**

Consideration was given to the Housing Accountant's report which presented the draft Housing Revenue Account (HRA) revenue and capital budgets for 2021/22. At the same time as preparing the draft budget, draft Service Plans had been prepared and aligned, and linked back to the Council Plan.

Recommendations from the Board would be presented to Cabinet on 3 February 2021, when members would finalise budget proposals to be recommended to Council.

The Housing Revenue Account (HRA) was underpinned and influenced by the business plan. The Strategic Lead – Finance explained that this plan needed to be refreshed, but this had been delayed by other work commitments. The updated plan needed to:

- Undertake a full conditions survey to inform future programme costs.
- Consider the implication of the new maintenance contract.
- Reflect additional work on asset management planning and compliance requirements.
- Consider the end of rent reductions.
- Consider the implication of Universal Credit.
- Reconsider the debt level and use of Right to Buy Receipts linked to future development ambitions, and
- Consider the implications of the climate change action plan.

This work was progressing for inclusion in the 2022/23 budget. The draft 2021/22 budget continued to invest in and maintain existing properties at a similar level. It also

provided an acceptable surplus which would need to be prioritised between competing demands:

- the purchase programme to counteract the impact of continuing Right to Buy (RTB) sales and the development ambitions to significantly add to the Council's stock/social housing. This was a key priority in the statement of intent.
- to ensure new compliance requirements were met.
- to implement the carbon reduction actions.

The Strategic Lead – Finance explained that the budget assumed a rental income of £17.8 million. The budget had been prepared to maintain council homes to a high standard with a comprehensive planned programme of expenditure, adaptations and routine repairs and an overview of expenditure items was contained in the report. The draft HRA budget currently showed a surplus of £0.985 million. It was proposed that this be held for the purpose of additional housing and climate change measures. Reports on priority and proposed actions to be considered would be reported to the HRB through 2021/22.

The HRA balance was maintained within the adopted range of £2.1m and £3.1m, being projected to be retained £3.1m level at the end of 2021/22. There was an additional £1.6m being held in the HRA debt volatility fund which remained unchanged.

RECOMMENDED: that Cabinet recommend the draft revenue capital estimates in the draft Housing Revenue Account to Council.

93 **Right to Buy spending 20/21**

The Acting Housing Service Lead's report provided the Housing Review Board with an update on right to buy spending for 2020/21 and raised awareness of the challenges faced due to Covid-19. The report contained information on the amount of receipts spent or committed to spend in the financial year and the amount that could be returned to Government. In response to concerns raised by local authorities on spend and the impact of Covid-19 on the housing and building market the Ministry of Housing, Communities and Local Government granted a temporary relaxation on the deadlines for spending right to buy receipts, however it would not be long enough for all the receipts to be spent. Officers would continue to look for suitable properties to buy on the open market, but given resourcing issues and the demands put on the housing market industry with the stamp duty holiday ending, it was unlikely that the end of March deadline would be met. This would be the first time the Council would have to pay back any receipts since entering into the agreement with the Secretary of State in 2012.

During 2020/21 19 properties would be purchased at a spend of around £3.06m. This however resulted in a shortfall of spending and EDDC would be required to pay back approximately £844,000 in receipts and £121,000 in interest on the returned amount.

The Board acknowledged that whilst it was disappointing that receipts would have to be returned, the year's spend requirements was always going to be a challenge and that was before Covid-19. Investment in staffing and a different strategy for spending receipts was needed to ensure the Council was best placed to spend the receipts and provide the much needed replacement affordable housing for its stock.

This would also ensure that EDDC was getting the right type of properties that would meet its climate change agenda.

Members expressed concern at Government policy which allowed tenants greater discounts when purchasing Council properties, whilst imposing constraints on local

authorities around spending the Right to Buy receipts. The Portfolio Holder for Sustainable Homes and Communities reassured the Board that she would continue lobbying the Government about the Right to Buy scheme and had requested a meeting with the MPs.

RESOLVED: that the Housing Review Board note the contents of the report and the spend information.

94 **Review of the furniture project**

The Housing Solutions Manager's report summarised progress made to date on the review of the furniture and household item recycling service known as the 'furniture project' or the 'magic garages'. The report gave a brief history of the inception of the service and highlighted that it was currently unsustainable to continue delivering the service in its current format. Four options for the service had been developed and these were presented in the report and outlined in the meeting:

1. Keep the service in-house, funded through HRA budgets.
2. End the service and utilise existing alternatives.
3. End the service and replace it with a voucher scheme.
4. Limit the service to furniture/items acquired through void clearance of Council stock.

The report also highlighted the benefits of the current service in relation to the Council's broader strategic aims. The importance of PAT testing for electrical goods and ensuring current furniture fire regulations were being met was raised during discussion.

RESOLVED:

1. that option one, to keep the service in-house, funded through HRA budgets should be further evaluated.
2. that a further report on option one be brought back to the Board to review progress in six months time.

95 **Integrated Asset Management Contract update and analysis of housing complaints**

The Housing Review Board considered a detailed report of the Property and Asset Manager which updated members on progress made over the last year, during the Covid-19 pandemic, and gave an annual review of the Council's partnership with Ian Williams Ltd.

The contract with Ian Williams commenced in July 2019 and there had been many challenges along the way. Consultants Echlon had recently carried out the first detailed review of the contract and their report was currently being reviewed in detail. Generally the review looked at how the contract was progressing, areas that needed attention and areas that were working well. Officers were currently reviewing the recommendations in the report and working with Ian Williams to agree and implement the recommended changes and improvements. Overall the contract was going well.

The Covid-19 pandemic had impacted the contract, with co-location of staff being put on hold, whilst staff worked from home. Ian Williams were fully staffed at management level but the operative's numbers fluctuated. The recruitment of multi-skilled operatives in East Devon had proved difficult, which had impacted on their ability to complete a range

of jobs on one visit. There were a number of vacancies in the Property and Asset team and recruitment was underway to fill the roles and address the understaffing issue.

Following challenges incurred due to Covid-19, the contract had now returned to a relative state of normality, with compliance across all areas. The Property & Asset Manager answered details questions in relation to compliance and it was suggested that compliance be added to the forward plan with future compliance reports being brought to the Board.

It was noted that void costs could vary significantly from month to month depending on the condition of the properties returned.

The report explained in detail complaints and how these were being reviewed and addressed. A complaint management programme had been developed. All complaints were actively monitored and to date all had been remedied at or before stage one of the Council's complaint process.

Customer satisfaction surveys had fallen off the radar during Covid-19, but efforts were now re-focused on gathering information in this area, with the questionnaire being revised. The Property and Asset Manager outlined the steps being taken to improve on gaining customer satisfaction.

RESOLVED: that the Housing Review Board note the update report on the integrated asset management contract.

96 **Social Housing White Paper**

The Strategic Lead – Housing, Health and Environment's report summarised the recently published White Paper on Social Housing. The contents of the White Paper were likely to be translated into legislation and would signal a significant change in the governance of social housing. The proposals recognised the importance of social housing and the need to prioritise tenant safety, involvement, satisfaction, complaint handling and good housing management. Much of the detail contained in the White Paper was centred on customer regulation, in effect a social housing charter, and would recreate a stronger regulatory regime providing the Regulator of Social Housing with more powers.

There were seven chapters in the White Paper:

1. Addressed the catalyst behind the need for change – the Grenfell Tower fire.
2. To know how your landlord is performing.
3. To have complaints dealt with promptly.
4. To be treated with respect backed by a strong regulator.
5. To have your voice heard by your landlord.
6. To have a good quality home and neighbourhood to live in.
7. To be supported to take your first step to ownership.

The Housing Service Lead explained the White Paper to the Board in greater detail and advised that the Board would continue to receive reports on progress.

RECOMMENDED: that Cabinet approve:

1. that the Housing Service start to make preparations for the forthcoming legislation and ensure that its policies and procedures were up to date in respect of tenant safety and tenant involvement.

2. that the Housing Service improve its complaints handling processes to improve tenant satisfaction.
3. that the Housing Service revisit its systems thinking purposes to ensure it focuses on what matters to tenants and reduce failure demand.
4. that the Housing Service work with tenant representatives to embrace the sentiments and contents of the White Paper.

97 **Your Home Your Wellbeing research report**

The Information and Analysis Officer's report presented the results and conclusions of a three year research partnership between East Devon District Council's (EDDC) housing department, the University of Birmingham's Research Centre on Household Assets and Saving Management (CHASM), and LiveWest.

The objective of the partnership was to build a richer understanding of people's experience of their home and the relationship between their home, landlord and wellbeing. Over 3,500 social tenants, private renters (those on the Devon Home Choice housing register) and those in shared ownership responded to the survey. 58 respondents were also interviewed, some of whom were contacted over all three years of the study.

The key findings were that:

- Having a good home mattered to overall life satisfaction and happiness.
- Social housing had a positive impact on all aspects of wellbeing. It helped to reduce levels of anxiety, particularly for those facing mental health challenges.
- Respondents who did not feel safe or who felt they had no control in their home were more likely to report lower levels of life-satisfaction and were more likely to be anxious. Respondents who felt that they had privacy and control in their homes were more likely to report being happy.
- Satisfaction with the local area in which a home was situated was associated with higher levels of happiness and life satisfaction, and with lower levels of anxiety.
- Half of all of those who were surveyed reported that they are struggling to make ends meet. Those struggling to make ends meet were more likely to be anxious and less likely to be happy or satisfied with their life.
- Respondents were likely to report that they experienced poor mental health if they were less than 65 years old, living alone, living with non-dependent children or felt like their home affected their wellbeing in a negative way.
- Universal Credit was not working well for everyone and, in particular, it had a negative impact on the wellbeing of claimants with mental health challenges.

The report emphasised that what the Council did as a social landlord really made a difference to the lives of its tenants from ensuring stock was maintained to a high level, to the additional support services provided to tenants as a social landlord.

The report also supported the growing national consensus that something needed to be 'done' about housing for many people living in East Devon. It was well documented that there was not just a shortage of housing across all tenures but for many people they were living in unsuitable and unaffordable homes and with few options for how to improve their housing situation. The result for many people was housing insecurity and financial struggle, with resultant negative impacts on wellbeing.

The Information and Analysis Officer was thanked for her involvement in the fantastic piece of work. She advised the Board that she could provide members with ward level information if the requested it.

RECOMMENDED: that Cabinet approve that:

1. Where appropriate evidence is used from the research to support housing's decision making and service planning.
2. All teams within housing have access to the advice and expertise of the mental health specialist for supporting East Devon tenants.
3. There is better understanding of the housing needs of those on the Devon Home Choice register and they are supported on their housing journey.
4. The Council continues to invest in our homes and neighbourhoods and ensure repairs and the programme works done to our properties are of a high standard.
5. The Housing Service supports universal credit claimants by helping them to maintain their tenancies and offer budgetary and financial advice where necessary.
6. The Council continue to work with others to provide more housing opportunities and choices for people living in East Devon.
7. The study be used on a wider scale to promote the research with the Council's partners nationally to promote the value of social housing.

98 **Covid-19 performance monitoring report**

The Housing Review Board was presented with the December week 2 Covid-19 report, which had been monitoring different areas of the service since March 2020, and had been included for the Board's information. The Acting Housing Service Lead explained that this information was used weekly by the housing management team to monitor performance.

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

99 **Quarter 2 Housing performance indicator report**

The Housing Review Board was presented with the Housing Service performance indicator report for quarter 2 2020/21, with details of selected indicators measuring performance across the Housing Service.

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

100 **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 on the agenda, is likely to be disclosed and on balance the public interest is in discussing this item in private session (Part B).

101 **Purchase of 51 St Andrews Road, Exmouth**

The Acting Housing Service Lead's report sought authority to proceed with the purchase of 51 St Andrews Road, Exmouth subject to approval of the Certificate of Lawfulness, using Right to Buy receipts. The report recommended that the purchase of the seven units of accommodation would be a beneficial addition to the current Council property portfolio and that flexibility should be exercised with rent level to help with affordability for tenants if required.

RECOMMENDED: that Cabinet note that pursuant to the delegated authority approved by the Board, Cabinet and Council in January/February 2020 as set out in the body of the report to purchase properties from Right to Buy receipts, the Strategic Lead has approved the purchase of the freehold interest of 51 St Andrews Road (subject to certificate of lawfulness) in conjunction with the Portfolio Holder and the HRB Chair.

Attendance List

Board members present:

Councillor Tony McCollum (Chair)
Peter Sullivan, Tenant (Vice-Chair)
Cat Summers, Tenant
Councillor Ian Hall
Councillor Helen Parr
Cindy Collier, Tenant
Councillor Brenda Taylor
Councillor Sarah Chamberlain

Councillors also present (for some or all the meeting)

M Armstrong
P Faithfull
S Gazzard
G Jung
D Ledger
P Millar

Officers in attendance:

Debbie Meakin, Democratic Services Officer
Alethea Thompson, Democratic Services Officer
Jo Garfoot, Acting Housing Service Lead
John Golding, Strategic Lead Housing, Health and Environment
Graham Baker, Senior Technical Officer Asset Management
Sue Bewes, Housing Services Manager
Natalie Brown, Information and Analysis Officer (Housing)
Simon Davey, Strategic Lead Finance
Amy Gilbert-Jeans, Service Lead Housing
Rebecca Heal, Solicitor
Andi Loosemoore, Rental Manager
Giles Salter, Solicitor

Councillor apologies:

Christine Drew, Independent Community Representative
Christine Morrison, Tenant

Chairman

Date: