

Annual report of the Housing Review Board 2020/21

The Chair and Vice Chair of the Housing Review Board were Councillor Tony McCullom and Peter Sullivan, respectively.

The Board welcomed new board member Councillor Sarah Chamberlain. It also said goodbye to tenant representative Pat Gore during the year.

Words from the Chair

As Chair of the Housing Review Board, I'd like to reflect on what must be the most challenging year for our officers and staff.

This Covid pandemic has affected our tenants in many ways, from isolation to losing income and unfortunately even losing relatives. There has never been a more devastating year since World War 2.

But, we as a people carry on and do our best to pull through by helping and supporting each other and I hope this council see what assets they have in our officers and staff.

Well done everyone and we can reassure our tenants that we will do our best to look after them.

The Board

The remit of the Board covers:

- Advising the Cabinet on the Council's landlord activities and functions affecting tenants and leaseholders;
- Maintaining an active involvement in the on-going review of the options for the future ownership and management of Council owned homes, and to make recommendations;
- Promoting good practice and overseeing service improvements;
- Monitoring performance on core housing management activities and reporting to the Cabinet;
- Preparation of the Housing Revenue Account budget and Business Plan;
- Promoting tenant and leaseholder involvement and implementation of the Tenant and Council Partnership Statement;
- Consulting with the Tenant Involvement Forum, who liaise with tenant groups and representatives;
- Encouraging good practice in relation to equality and diversity issues, and ensuring that the needs of vulnerable tenants are satisfied;
- Advise on any other matters affecting the Council's landlord duties and responsibilities.

Despite service disruptions experienced due to the Covid-19 pandemic, the Board has continued in its role of introducing service improvements and monitoring throughout the year, liaising with the Tenant Involvement Forum (TIF) as appropriate. Some examples from the HRB work programme are summarised below:

Draft Housing Service Plan 2021/22

The Service Plan is 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 and budget information provided to the Board. 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 in the private sector. 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. The Plan this year 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 service planning day had been a virtual event. Ordinarily there would have been greater tenant involvement in the process, but the Board's input into the Service Plan was welcomed.

Draft Housing Revenue Account and Capital Budgets 2021/22

The draft Housing Revenue Account for 2021/22 a key document for the Board to influence. The annual HRA was underpinned and influenced by the 30 year HRA Business Plan. This business plan needed to be refreshed to consider a number of issues which had evolved over the years, including a full stock condition survey to inform future programme costs, the implications of the climate change action plan, the implications of Universal Credit and the end of rent reductions. This future financial modelling and evaluation work was progressing for inclusion in the 2022/23 budget.

The draft 2021/22 budget continued to invest in and maintain existing properties to a high standard with a comprehensive planned programme of expenditure, adaptations and routine repairs. It also provided an acceptable surplus (£.0985m) which would need to be held for the purpose of additional housing and climate change measures.

HRA financial monitoring reports and Right to Buy spending

A summary of the overall financial position on the Housing Revenue Account (HRA), HRA Capital Programme and the Business Plan for 2020/21 has been regularly provided at meetings. Careful monitoring throughout the year indicated that the HRA was being maintained at the adopted levels and still included the volatility reserve. At the end of the 2019/20 financial year, due to the the onset of Covid-19 the decision was made to utilise all capital reserves ahead of the more flexible revenue reserves where possible.

Rent collection rates and income levels were consistent with the previous year, with the impact of Covid-19 being largely mitigated.

The Board was warned in September 2020 of the risk of having to return right to buy receipts and the challenges faced with spending these due to Covid-19.

In January 2021 the Board was informed that the council would be required to pay back to Government 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.

Integrated asset management contract updates

The Board noted progress with the contract and reviewed the partnership with Ian Williams Ltd over the past year. All elements of the contract were focussed on to continually seek improvements with both the day to day management and performance of the contract. Operations during 2020/21 had not been business as usual due to the Covid-19 pandemic. Some operational works had been scaled back but the contract still endeavoured to offer as

much of a service as possible, with compliance across all areas. An independent cost review of voids was being carried out and consultants Echlon had carried out the first detailed review of the contract. A complaint management programme had been developed. Steps were being taken to improve on gaining customer satisfaction.

Covid-19 housing recovery

The Board were informed of actions EDDC would take to respond to the Covid-19 pandemic. As part of recovery planning the housing leadership team met on a weekly basis to co-ordinate recovery across the service ensuring consistency and the adoption of central government guidance. The four key priority areas for the housing service were keeping residents safe, protecting residents and livelihoods, sustaining critical services, and supporting communities and recovery. There had been a huge amount of focus on communication with tenants and well-being calls had been made to every single resident across all of the housing stock, and officers had been able to assist tenants with a huge range of problems.

Climate change action plan

The Board considered the work being undertaken by the Housing Service in response to the Council's commitment to carbon reduction and increased energy efficiency. The Council had committed to achieve carbon neutrality by 2040 and had endorsed a Climate Change Strategy and plan to facilitate this. The Board recommended that an additional Programmed Works Officer be recruited to focus on energy efficiency measures and drive forward an improvement programme for the housing stock.

Disrepair

The Board received a detailed presentation from the Council's solicitor on disrepair and the potential legal challenges to the condition of housing stock by tenants through a number of litigious lawyer firms. Disrepair was an important area of work for the Housing Service and ongoing work was required to reduce and manage future cases.

Advantage South West

The Board recommended that the Council should continue paying the annual subscription to maintain the membership and continue the benefits of procurement, significant financial savings and the opportunity to work with other housing providers. In another report, the Board considered the benefits of participating in an ASW collaborative project to work with other members to pro-actively encourage and retain highly skilled staff within the housing sector through shared initiatives and training and development programmes. The Board approved participation in the project.

Regulator's review: Neighbourhood & Community Standard

This involved a self-assessment of current service delivery against the Social Housing Regulators Home Standard, which set out the minimum requirements for what must be achieved to in terms of neighbourhood management, local area co-operation and how the service dealt with anti-social behaviour, so that safe and clean areas where tenants lived could be provided. The Board felt that a review of current requirements and processes was needed as well as an improvement in communication with tenants.

Other issues reviewed by the Board during the year have included:

- Stock condition survey – the Board recommended the delivery of the stock condition survey by an external consultant through an approved procurement framework.
- Formal complaints – annual report to the Board with information on formal complaints received in relation to the housing service from April 2019-March 2020.
- Sailor’s Rest, Exmouth – the Board approved an allocations and management policy for the properties known as 18A and 18B St. Andrews Road, Exmouth, which were to be used as move on accommodation.
- Furniture project – the Board recommended that the furniture and household recycling service be kept in house and funded through HRA budgets.
- Structure of the Housing Service – the Board noted changes to the housing service and how these had been implemented. The structure would be kept under constant review. The Board recommended that a specialist mental health support officer be recruited to work within the housing services team.
- Social Housing White Paper – the contents of this were likely to be translated into legislation and would signal a significant change to the governance of social housing. The Board recommended that the Housing Service start to prepare for this forthcoming legislation, focussing on complaints handling, tenant safety, satisfaction and involvement.
- Performance management reports – measuring performance across the housing service.
- Covid-19 performance monitoring report – monitoring different areas of the housing service since March 2020.
- Purchase of 51 St. Andrews Road, Exmouth – the Board’s authority was sought to proceed with the purchase of this property, subject to approval of the certificate of lawfulness, using right to buy receipts.
- Housing research study: Your wellbeing, your home – the Board were presented with the results and conclusions of a joint three year research partnership with the University of Birmingham and LiveWest, exploring the relationship between housing, wellbeing and landlord satisfaction.
- Air source heat pumps – the Board recommended the continued use and installation of air source heat pumps as a viable carbon efficient alternative to conventional boilers.