

## **EAST DEVON DISTRICT COUNCIL**

### **Minutes of the meeting of Housing Review Board held at online via the Zoom app on 13 January 2022**

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

The meeting started at 10.05 am and ended at 12.50 pm

#### **16 Public speaking**

Co-opted tenant member of the Board, Sue Saunders brought some concerns to the attention of the Board:

- The 'Involved Tenant' report had not been included in the 2020 Annual Report.
- The HRB application form was perceived to be ambiguous, with the use of statements rather than questions.
- Assurance was sought that the 'tenant tick symbol' would be clearly marked on all documents requiring tenant consultation.
- Concerns were raised that related to the repairs contractor Ian Williams. These were based around ongoing tenant dis-satisfaction and communication failures that tenants had experienced when reporting repairs.

In response the Strategic Lead – Housing, Health and Environment thanked Sue Saunders for her questions and constructive challenge. He would investigate why the Involved Tenant report had been omitted from the 2020 Annual Report to Tenants. He stated that key policy and procedure documents impacting on tenants should have tenant input and consideration and that the 'tenant tick' should be used wherever possible.

#### **17 Welcome to two newly appointed tenant co-optees on to the Housing Review Board**

Since the last meeting of the Housing Review Board interviews were held for two vacant tenant representative positions on the Board. These positions were filled and the tenants co-opted by Council in October 2021. The Chair welcomed Steve Beer and Sue Saunders on to the Board and invited them to introduce themselves. She also advised the Board that tenant member and Vice Chair of the HRB, Peter Sullivan had regrettably resigned from the Board due to ill health. On behalf of the Board she expressed her appreciation to Peter for his long service on the HRB and to tenant participation in general.

Nominations for Vice Chair were requested and received for co-opted tenant members Steve Beer and Sue Saunders.

**RECOMMENDED:** that the recommendation that tenant representative Sue Saunders be appointed Vice Chair of the Board for the ensuing year be passed for approval.

#### **18 Minutes of the previous meeting**

The minutes of the previous meeting held on 16 September 2021 were received and accepted.

#### **19 Declarations of interest**

Declarations of interest.

Councillor Sarah Chamberlain, Personal, employee of Exeter City Council within the housing service.

Declarations of interest.

Sue Saunders, Personal, housing tenant.

20 **Matters of urgency**

There were no matters of urgency.

21 **Confidential/exempt item(s)**

There were no confidential/exempt items.

22 **Housing Review Board forward plan**

The 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 which was endorsed by the Board:

- A review of the integrated asset management contract.
- An update on the housing stock condition survey.
- A report on the emerging Housing Task Force – the Council looking into developing its own stock and increasing the supply of affordable/social housing.
- A review of the complaints system – to be considered by both tenants and officers together.

23 **Draft Housing Service Plan and draft budget 2022-23**

The Service Lead – Housing presented the draft Service Plan for the Housing Service covering the period 2022-2023, 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 continuing service interruptions due to the pandemic. 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, the new Building Safety Act 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 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, enhance self-care and community resilience and integrate and improve support for people in their own homes. There was also a strong link to both the Poverty Strategy and the Council's climate change aspirations.

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.
- Delivering the stock condition survey.
- A focus on new development opportunities with the need to review the current acquisition programme.
- The recruitment and implementation of the new social housing task force.
- 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.
- Robustly managing the Integrated Asset Management Contract.
- Continuing with the future proofing of Home Safeguard with a realistic view of risks ahead including the next phase of digital switchover, refresh of the marketing strategy and growth plans.
- 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.
- Delivering the next phase of the carbon reduction programme for the housing stock.

The Housing Service Lead outlined the over-arching priorities:

- More affordable homes – A decent home for all.
- Homelessness and rough sleeping.
- Council homes fit for purpose and satisfied tenants.

A key objective was the stock condition survey. Other key objectives which had been carried over from the 2021/22 housing service plan included dealing with recruitment challenges, establishing a compliance team, dealing with the risk of service failure (need the right people in the team for operational service delivery), dealing with the risk of increasing poverty and ensuring the asset management contract was delivering what it was set out to achieve.

Opportunities within the 2022-23 service plan included:

- Housing Task Force – looking creatively at opportunities for new housing.
- Data from stock condition survey would start to feed into the ability to update planned programmes/investment in the stock.
- Emphasis on climate change.

- Review of the Home Safeguard Service.
- Meeting the demands of the recently launched Social Housing White Paper.
- Mental Health Strategy – prioritising the wellbeing agenda.

Concern was expressed over the general lack of tenant participation and that satisfaction surveys and contractor feedback forms no longer seemed to be being used. A plea was made not to disband the Designated Complaints Panel. The Strategic Lead – Housing, Health and Environment responded that the housing service used the corporate complaints procedure and that this had been carefully considered. The Designated Complaints Panel was used to compliment this as well as attempting to resolve complaints prior to referral to the Housing Ombudsmen. A number of other issues were raised by a tenant representative and it was agreed that officers would look into these and that the written responses would be circulated to HRB members by the Housing Service Lead.

The draft 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.

Consideration was then given to the Housing Accountant's report which presented the draft Housing Revenue Account (HRA) revenue and capital budgets for 2022/23. Draft Service Plans had been prepared and aligned at the same time as preparing the draft budget.

The Housing Revenue Account (HRA) was underpinned and influenced by the HRA Business Plan. The Housing Accountant explained that this plan needed to be refreshed, but this had been delayed by other work commitments. The revised plan needed to:

- Take into consideration a full stock conditions survey findings to inform future programme and works to stock costs.
- Consider the implications of the integrated asset 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.

It was noted that the budget was in effect a 'stand still' budget based on existing stock data, whilst the updated stock condition survey data was awaited. The budget continued to invest into existing properties at a similar level, although it did set aside £880,000 for climate reduction investment.

The Housing Accountant highlighted:

- Income – annual regulated rent increase assumed at being 4.1%, giving an increase of £0.778million.
- Expenditure – supervision and management: increase in staffing costs and premises costs.
- Financing – contribution to capital funding: £880,000 towards decarbonisation projects.

The HRA budget currently showed a healthy surplus of £0.208million.

In response to a question about the number of empty homes within the council housing stock, the Acting Housing Service Lead explained that there was a myriad of reasons why there were a number of vacant properties and outlined the main reasons with properties awaiting letting and undergoing work the main reason. There were also a number of 'hard to let' properties and a few with structural issues where extensive works were required. It was noted that a future garage review would be undertaken in an attempt to identify sites suitable for redevelopment.

**RECOMMENDED:**

1. that the Housing Review Board recommends to Cabinet that the Housing Service Plan 2022-23 is approved.
2. that the Housing Review Board recommends to Cabinet that the draft revenue and capital budgets for 2022/23 are approved.

24 **Housing Management System software upgrade**

The Council's housing service had investigated options for upgrading and modernising its Housing Management IT System in order to ensure its systems remained fit for purpose and able to meet the flexible and agile working needs of the service in the years ahead, and to enable and support the Council's obligations under the Social Housing White Paper 2021 and the Building Safety Bill 2021. The Housing Systems Manager's report set out the proposed upgrade route, the implementation, method and anticipated timescales, the high level benefits and risks, other options considered, and the costs of the proposal.

Since the last meeting of the HRB detailed demonstrations had been held and a full evaluation of the project. The proposed upgrade would provide the housing service with a good and effective value for money system, allowing improved flexible and mobile working environments.

Those present welcomed the report and timescales for adoption. It was noted that the tenant portal would give tenants another form of engagement and access to the service, and that traditional modes of communication would be retained so that digitally excluded tenants would not be isolated. The intention was that it would broaden people's ability to engage with the housing service.

**RECOMMENDED:** that the Housing Review Board recommends that Cabinet recommends to Council the proposed upgrade and budget requests of £134,927 and £6,060 respectively to implement the IT system upgrade to Capita's One Housing and One Assets solutions.

25 **Updated Housing Policies**

The Rental Manager informed the Board that the Income Management including Debt Collection Policy/Strategy had been reviewed to ensure that it continued to reflect current practice and legislation. Minor changes had been made following tenant consultation and additionally to reflect Breathing Space legislation. The Data Protection Statement had also been added.

**RECOMMENDED:**

1. that members agree the updated policy detailed in the report.
2. that members recommend to Cabinet that the policy is formally adopted by the Council.

26 **Mental Health Strategy for Housing 2021-2025**

The Housing Service Lead outlined the mental health strategy for housing, which had been developed over the past two years. The strategy was designed to deal with the increasing demand upon housing services which were mental health related. The strategy had been previously reviewed and agreed by a tenant panel.

An increasing number of tenants had been presenting with a range of mental health issues over the last few years. Mental health services and the county's supported housing has been unable to meet demand, leaving EDDC as landlord to manage the tensions this created. Many agencies were inundated and under resourced. A partial solution had been identified in the form of a specialist worker, experienced in the field of mental health, to carry out a small caseload and act as liaison between housing and mental health teams, as well as providing a source of assistance and guidance for staff across all housing teams.

This post would commence towards the end of January 2022. It was noted that the mental health officer was not a mental health professional, but would assist and work alongside mobile support officers to help signpost tenants to existing services, rather than make mental health interventions. Members agreed that it was important that the wording in the strategy was clear that the housing mental health officer was not a clinician offering a professional practitioner role.

It was suggested that a progress report on the five year strategy be brought back to the Board in a year's time.

Those present welcomed the strategy and introduction of a mental health officer for housing, to work alongside and support the mobile support officers and focus on tenants. It was noted that a mental health officer had also been agreed by Council, who would have a more corporate and member focus. It was suggested that a press release be issued to make the public aware and promote these two roles.

**RECOMMENDED:**

1. that members agree the Mental Health Strategy for Housing 2021-2025 detailed in the report.
2. that members recommend to Cabinet that the strategy is formally adopted by the Council.

27 **Housing Covid-19 Performance Monitoring report**

Due to time constraints this item would be carried forward to the next meeting of the Housing Review Board.

28 **Quarterly PI report Quarter 2 2021-22**

Due to time constraints this item would be carried forward to the next meeting of the Housing Review Board.

**Attendance List**

**Board members present:**

Stephen Beer, Tenant  
Sue Saunders, Tenant  
Councillor Helen Parr  
Councillor Brenda Taylor  
Councillor Sarah Chamberlain (Chair)

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

M Armstrong  
S Gazzard  
P Arnott  
P Faithfull  
D Ledger  
P Millar

**Officers in attendance:**

Sophie Davies, Housing Business and Customer Improvement Manager  
Jo Garfoot, Acting Housing Service Lead  
Steve Gammon, Housing Systems Manager  
Amy Gilbert-Jeans, Service Lead Housing  
John Golding, Strategic Lead Housing, Health and Environment  
Rebecca Heal, Solicitor  
Debbie Meakin, Democratic Services Officer  
Alethea Thompson, Democratic Services Officer  
Anita Williams, Principal Solicitor (and Deputy Monitoring Officer)  
Graham Baker, Senior Technical Officer Asset Management  
Andi Loosemoore, Rental Manager  
Andrew Mitchell, Housing Solutions Manager  
Rob Ward, Accountant

**Councillor apologies:**

Cat Summers, Tenant  
Councillor Ian Hall  
Cindy Collier, Tenant

Chair .....

Date: .....