

EAST DEVON DISTRICT COUNCIL

Minutes of the meeting of Housing Review Board held at Council Chamber, Blackdown House, Honiton on 18 January 2023

Attendance list at end of document

The meeting started at 10.20 am and ended at 1.00 pm

33 Public speaking

Co-opted tenant member of the Board Sue Dawson spoke in relation to the downsizing grant report. She felt that tenants had not been given enough time consider the policy in full and allow adequate consultation. She questioned how 'need' would be defined and suggested that it could infer that tenants were not capable of articulating their case for changes to the existing policy. Sue stated that mutual exchange and downsizing were two different things. She felt that the new policy and revised figures were not clear and that the entire review highlighted the lack of commitment on the part of the council to involve tenants fully.

34 Minutes of the previous meeting

The minutes of the previous meeting held on 11 October 2022 were agreed, subject to Councillor Ian Hall being added to the list of apologies.

35 Declarations of interest

There were none.

36 Matters of urgency

There were none.

37 Confidential/exempt item(s)

There were none.

38 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 informing either herself or the Democratic Services Officer.

It was agreed that a report on learning points from Housing Ombudsman complaints would be added to the forward plan.

39 Housing Service Plan

The Assistant Director – Housing presented the draft service plan for the Housing Service covering the period 2023-2024, 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. The service plan was produced using a corporate template which had been modified this year to focus on issues integral to the Council Plan. 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.

A range of service improvements and carbon reduction aspirations were identified through a number of SMART objectives (specific, measurable, achievable, relevant, time bound). This year's service plan had also been produced alongside a comprehensive workforce development plan document to compliment it and ensure that the correct resources and staffing requirements were considered and in place to ensure Plan delivery is realistic.

The plan also considered service challenges and pressures strategically, including climate change implications, the implications of the Social Housing White Act, the new Building Safety Act and the ambitions to increase the supply of social housing with the role of the newly formed Housing Task Force team.

The big issues for the service and the Council were:

- Quality of life.
- Decent home for all.
- Safety first.
- Protecting the environment.
- Climate change.
- Health and wellbeing.
- Health and safety.
- Tenant safety.
- Environmental protection.
- Safeguarding.
- Poverty.

There were many challenges ahead nationally, which included:

- Social Housing Act.
- Cost of living crisis.
- Decarbonisation of stock.
- Building Safety Act.
- Reprioritising the tenant voice.

The Assistant Director – Housing detailed the challenges ahead for the housing service and summarised them for 2023/24 as follows:

- Delivering core services well.
- Not considered ambitious but realistic.
- Increasing demand in every area.
- 'Back to basics' approach.
- Prioritising and maintaining staff morale.
- Ongoing recruitment & retention.
- High levels of staff absence.
- Meeting customer expectations.
- Delivering Council Plan and Service Plan priorities.

The overarching priorities for the housing service were more affordable homes – a decent home for all, homelessness and rough sleeping, and council homes fit for purpose with satisfied tenants. The Assistant Director - Housing outlined these and what this meant for the housing service. Headlines from the service plan were:

- Stock Condition Survey
- Robust management of the Integrated Asset Management Contract
- Future proofing Home Safeguard
- Launch of new resident involvement strategy
- Review of Housing Revenue Account Business Plan
- Strategic Asset Management Plan
- Compliance with the Social Housing Act
- Retrofit- Grant Funding
- Upgrade to One Housing
- Reference to new Housing dashboard/management information

A tenant consultation session on the service plan had been carried out on 21 December 2022 and there had been no direct requests to change or amend anything in the plan. There were a number of questions that linked to operational areas of delivery. The Assistant Director - Housing highlighted to the Board issues raised during the consultation.

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. During discussion a number of operational, service delivery 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 Assistant Director - Housing. Many of the concerns related to tenant involvement and the Resident Involvement Strategy 2023-27, which the Interim Housing Services Manager advised would be reported to future meetings of the Housing Review Board.

RECOMMENDED: that Cabinet approve the Housing Service Plan for 2023-24.

40 **Finance report**

Consideration was given to the Finance Director's report which presented the draft Housing Revenue Account (HRA) revenue and capital budgets for 2023/24. Draft Service Plans had been prepared and aligned at the same time as preparing the draft budget. Recommendations from the Housing Review Board would be presented back to Cabinet on 1 February 2023 when councillors would finalise budget proposals to recommend to Council.

The Housing Revenue Account (HRA) was underpinned and influenced by the HRA Business Plan. The Finance Director explained that this plan needed to be updated with revised financial modelling once the stock condition survey work was complete. At present it was anticipated that there were sufficient resources available but it was likely that there would need to be movement between budget heads in 2023/24 to reflect the findings of the survey. The Board would be updated on any necessary in year reallocation of budgets or use of additional reserves to meet priorities.

The draft 2023/24 budget was similar to the current year with variations noted in the report. The budget had been prepared to maintain council homes to a high standard with

a comprehensive planned programme of expenditure, adaptations and routine repairs. All planned expenditure was met from available income.

The draft HRA budget currently showed a surplus of £268,000. The additional £1.6m held in the HRB debt volatility fund remained unchanged. Reserves were kept at adopted levels.

The Finance Director explained that the draft budget assumed an increase in council house and garage rents of 7% in order to meet rising costs. There would be an increase of 3% for other charges across the budget but with 10% increase included for main contractor maintenance costs in line with contracts. The Finance Director outlined measures that were in place to protect low income council tenants. These included increases in housing benefits and Universal Credit and a revised council tax reduction scheme. It was noted that the rental team were taking a much more proactive approach to support tenants through the cost of living crisis and this will be continuing.

RECOMMENDED: that Cabinet approve the draft Housing Revenue Account revenue and capital estimates, including the proposed rent increases for 2023/24.

41 **Damp and mould policy**

Over recent months the prevalence of damp and mould in social housing, including the failings to address these had become national headlines in the press and on television. As a result the Government/Regulator had asked every Housing provider to answer some probing questions that sought to establish their current position. The Council's response was submitted on 16 December 2022. The issues surrounding damp and mould highlighted the need to have a specific policy and process in place for the management of damp and mould. The Property and Asset Manager's report recognised the serious health impacts that damp and mould can have on the occupants and the need to take meaningful action as a social housing landlord that aimed to provide a decent home for tenants.

The damp and mould policy was written to ensure that wherever possible tenants were not adversely affected by the causes of damp and mould. It would drive forward an agenda of proactive action to manage and eradicate cases of damp and mould and avoid a culture of attributing the problem to tenant lifestyle. Basic training would be provided to all officers and repairs advisers to help identify and detect signs of major damp and mould, along with general guidance for tenants on how this could be managed. In addition, the external consultants undertaking the stock condition surveys had been asked to report on any issues observed in advance of submitting the survey.

As a landlord EDDC was responsible for:

- Maintaining the fabric of the property to prevent penetrating and rising damp.
- Carrying out all remedial action to address damp and mould occurrences as and when they were identified/reported.
- Maintaining the property in accordance with current statutory regulations and legislation.
- Ensuring that wherever possible tenants were not adversely affected by the causes of damp and mould.

An article on damp and mould to be published in the Housing Matters magazine and information and advice would be provided to all new tenants in the welcome pack. The Board were reassured that all tenants would be made aware of the damp and mould policy and associated advisory leaflets.

The policy had been reported to residents and included their valuable feedback. In response to a question about 'decanting' tenants, the Board were reassured that there was already an established procedure to deal with this and that works would be dealt with on a case by case basis. There was some clarification of exactly what was meant by the term 'decant'.

RECOMMENDED: that Cabinet adopt the damp and mould policy.

42 **Learning from complaints in housing**

The Assistant Housing Director's report set out learning and improvements identified from the complaints the housing service had received during the year. The report made recommendations in the handling and processing of complaints by the housing service in line with the EDDC corporate complaints procedure, the Housing Ombudsman code and the consumer standards.

The Assistant Director – Housing summarised the formal complaint process at stage 1 and stage 2 for the benefit of Board Members. The corporate complaints team processed complaints in line with EDDC policy ensuring the separation between a complaint and a service request. If the complainant was still dissatisfied with the Council's final response they were able to request the Housing Ombudsman look into their complaint. Previously complainants were required to contact a designated person – MP, local councillor or tenant panel – or wait eight weeks before referring their complaint to the Ombudsman. This 'democratic filter' was removed following a change in the law.

The Housing Ombudsman published its annual complaints report in December 2022 with a table of providers with high maladministration rates. The Ombudsman has written to EDDC and highlighted its high maladministration rate, which was a higher percentage of adverse findings than average for the sector. In 2021/2022 EDDC's housing service had 5 cases referred to the Ombudsman with maladministration found in relation to four of them.

- Maladministration – 3 (1 x antisocial behaviour (ASB), 2 x property condition).
- Service failure – 5 (3 x complaints handling, 2 x ASB)
- Orders – 7 x compensation (total £1450), 2 x policy review, 5 x specific actions.

There were 15 recommendations for learning listed in the report and the Housing Review Board agreed to endorse them. Officers reminded members of the purpose of the complaints system and the role of the corporate complaints team. The corporate complaints team would be willing to talk to any tenant group if it would be helpful.

RECOMMENDED: that Cabinet note and approves the recommendations highlighted within the report.

43 **Integrated Asset Management Contract**

The Property and Asset Manager's report provided the Board with an update on the delivery of the integrated asset management contract as part of a regular update on this area of service, but also as a direct response to ongoing concerns raised regarding delivery of some key functions of the contract. The contract was well into its fourth year of a ten year contract. There were relatively high complaints levels, with elements of tenant dissatisfaction, concerns around resource levels, material supplies, communications with tenants and the complex and extensive nature of some repairs and voids.

The purpose underpinning the contract was right repair, right time, fix and stay fixed. EDDC developed an action plan with its main contractor Ian Williams to improve the repairs and maintenance service to a level that client, contractor and customers were expecting from the contract. This action plan was being rigorously implemented and has resulted in service improvements.

Key performance indicators (KPIs) for quarters 1 and 2 of the current financial year were showing numerous fluctuations in performance across all areas of the contract, although indicated a level of improvement in performance, but there remained room for further improvement. There was greater service demand for reactive repairs as the winter period began, which would also increase the work in progress figures for reactive repairs. There was also additional focus on damp and mould.

Resourcing continued to be a problem with recruitment an ongoing process and challenge. Larger repair jobs were becoming larger in nature and created challenge around delivery and resource. A 'minor works team' was being developed to deliver these larger type repairs.

Void costs continued to be higher than expected when letting the contract. Void turnover had increased resulting in a backlog of void orders which was proving difficult to clear. There was an increasing number of properties being returned in poor condition. EDDC had signed up with an organisation called Tenants Save Money to help with the problem of debt left on meters by outgoing tenants. As part of the high level action plan there was a commitment to carry out a detailed review of the void process and the void standard in an effort to improve performance and the general standard of properties for re-letting.

Throughout quarters 1 and 2 customer satisfaction remained an emotive subject. The Property and Asset Manager assured the Board that the team were doing as much as possible to ensure that Ian Williams were carrying out the customer service satisfaction surveys.

Despite struggling to find tenant inspectors the role was being revisited – whereby a resident would visit a property once Ian Williams had finished to do a 'post inspection'. This was to ensure that resident engagement was being utilised as much as possible. However, this was dependent upon input from residents. The Housing Assistant Director invited any HRB members who were interest to do 'a day in the life of' and shadow an operative.

RECOMMENDED: that Cabinet notes the report on the delivery of the integrated asset management contract and endorses the action plan designed to bring about a sustained improvement in service delivery.

44 **Review of downsizing grant**

The Housing Solutions Manager's report set out a review of the downsizing grant available to EDDC tenants seeking to reduce the size of their home, along with recommendations for the levels of incentive grants. It was noted that there was no stand-alone downsizing policy. Downsizing was covered within the allocations policy (this was consistent with other councils and EDDC was one of the only authorities that currently offered any financial incentive to downsize). The downsizing process was covered within the Devon Home Choice policy and also done through mutual exchange.

Instances of downsizing were considered on a case-by-case basis. Encouraging tenants to downsize would lead to an increase in the number of larger family homes available and also help tenants who were struggling in larger properties.

A tenant consultation exercise was held on 8 November 2022 with representatives of tenant groups. Discussions covered a range of options with the aim of increasing the numbers of downsizing cases, ultimately assisting tenants with their accommodation needs and leading towards the Council's objective to make the best use of housing stock within the district. It was agreed that there were factors over and above the financial incentives made available to tenants when downsizing, in cases where it was acknowledged that assistance was required. The key area was that of additional support for tenants when downsizing. It was agreed that the council would give consideration towards helping tenants, when help was needed, with some of the tasks which came with the process of moving homes. Through the tenant consultation exercise increases to the current financial were suggested of increasing the standard compensation payment from £1,500 to £2,000, and an additional £750 payment per bedroom released from properties with three or more bedrooms. It was recommended that the financial incentives proposed in the report be trialled for a period of 12 months and kept under review.

RECOMMENDED: that the Housing Review Board recommend that Cabinet agree to the suggested financial payments for a trial period of 12 months, for tenants who were downsizing.

45 **Performance dashboard overview**

The Assistant Director- Housing presented the Information and Analysis Officer's report to the Board. This presented a newly developed performance tabular summary. Her report outlined some different options for how and what performance information the Board would like to see presented in future meetings. This would help to ensure that the HRB had better assurance around performance of the housing service, which would support it to scrutinise, challenge and be accountable for the performance of the housing service.

56 key performance indicators (KPIs) and 25 compliance performance indicators were chosen to monitor and reflect the different areas of housing. These showed at a glance areas for improvement and where focus was needed, in addition to where the service was doing well. Officers could access a live dashboard to see detailed information on any performance measure.

An advantage of the dashboard was that it could be set in different ways depending on the audience, and the Board were asked the level of refinement of the KPIs and the format it would like the information presented in. It was noted that some of the data presented in the report was not verified, but the first verified data report to the Board in March would be accompanied by a presentation. Performance measures could be added in or taken out easily, provided the data was available.

The Board were asked whether it would be beneficial to develop a more refined set of key performance indicators to support the Board's role of scrutinising housing performance, with feedback, comments and questions given at each meeting. The Board were also asked what format they would like the information presented, with options included in the report. Preference was shown for options table 2 contained in the report. It was suggested that the number of decants and the number of estate visits be added to the performance measures.

RESOLVED: that the Housing Review Board note the report and agrees to use the new performance tabular summary to monitor the performance of the housing service.

46 **Update on stock condition survey**

The Property and Asset Manager's report updated the Board on the current position with the delivery of the housing stock condition survey. A formal contractual arrangement was in place for this work between EDDC and Currie & Brown. The mobilisation period had taken a little longer than anticipated but had now been completed. Initial test surveys identified some IT issues that needed to be addressed before the stock condition survey commenced in full and work was being done with the Housing Systems team to integrate the data.

The stock condition survey commenced in September 2022, and although currently running behind schedule, Currie & Brown have assured that they will quickly bring the project back on programme and remain on target to complete on time. Data from the surveys would be used to inform work programmes for repairs and future planned works. It was noted that the survey data would be corporately available and a dashboard summary would be provided. A copy of each individual survey would also be held in a database.

RESOLVED: that the Housing Review Board note the update on the current position with the delivery of the housing stock condition survey.

Attendance List

Board members present:

Sue Dawson, Tenants
Sara Clarke, Independent Community Representative
Sue Saunders, Tenants (Vice-Chair)
Councillor Helen Parr
Councillor Sarah Chamberlain (Chair)

Councillors also present (for some or all the meeting)

D Ledger
T McCollum

Officers in attendance:

Sophie Davies, Housing Business and Customer Improvement Manager
Michelle Williams
Natalie Brown, Information and Analysis Officer (Housing)
Steve Gammon, Housing Systems Manager
Graham Baker, Property and Asset Manager
Simon Davey, Director of Finance
Amy Gilbert-Jeans, Assistant Director Housing
John Golding, Director of Housing, Health and Environment
Darren Hicks, Housing Allocations Manager
Yusef Masih, Interim Housing Services Manager
Andrew Mitchell, Housing Solutions Manager
Alethea Thompson, Democratic Services Officer
Anita Williams, Interim Director of Governance and Licensing and Monitoring Officer

Victoria Skinner, Compliance and Cyclical Servicing Manager

Councillor apologies:

- Rob Robinson, Independent Community Representative
- Stephen Beer, Tenants
- Cat Summers, Tenant
- Councillor Ian Hall
- Cindy Collier, Tenant
- Councillor Geoff Pook
- Councillor Brenda Taylor

Chairman

Date: