

EAST DEVON DISTRICT COUNCIL

Minutes of the meeting of Housing Review Board held at Council Chamber, Blackdown House, Honiton on 16 March 2023

Attendance list at end of document

The meeting started at 10.00 am and ended at 12.38 pm

47 Public speaking

There were no members of the public registered to speak.

48 Minutes of the previous meeting

The minutes of the previous meeting held on 18 January 2023 were agreed.

49 Declarations of interest

There were none.

50 Matters of urgency

There were none.

51 Confidential/exempt item(s)

There were none.

52 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.

The Assistant Director of Housing added to the forward plan a review of the Housing Revenue Account Business Plan, which would be needed as a result of the stock condition survey, which was still on track to complete in September 2023. The results of the tenant satisfaction survey were being collated and would be reported to the June meeting of the Housing Review Board. In response to tenants' concerns the Assistant Director reassured the Board that the survey, which had been approved by the Board in 2022, did not break any GDPR regulations and that the Council's data protection officer had been involved in the whole process. It was also agreed that the Assistant Director of Housing would provide further reassurance to the Board via a short bulletin via email.

A HouseMark performance report was also added to the forward plan.

53 Changes to the housing leadership team

The Housing Review Board considered the proposal for increasing capacity and resilience in the housing leadership team and providing more resource for the housing

service. The proposal was in response to increasing demands on the service, rising expectations from external bodies and its own customers, and to ensure that there were sufficient resources, capacity and capability to meet the purpose and priority of a decent home for all, whilst operating a high performing housing service. Housing service managers were operating in an environment where they needed to be agile and flexible, with many factors leading to additional burdens on staff.

The creation of a new post of Head of Housing Operations would ensure that there was a structure that was 'fit for purpose' to meet the demands placed on a social housing provider with housing responsibilities, including homelessness, housing register, community development, community alarm service, housing repairs and housing development. It would also ensure that the housing service could meet the requirements of the Social Housing Bill.

The Head of Housing Operations would line manage the senior Housing Options and Allocations, Property and Asset, Housing Services and Housing Systems team managers. The new post holder would oversee and manage day to day housing management ensuring that the specialist areas of the service were co-ordinated and worked effectively towards the housing vision and aims. The post holder would also deputise for the Assistant Director, providing greater resilience and accountability in the service, strengthening the leadership team and increasing capacity.

The Board commented on the size and diverse, frontline nature of the housing service within the Council and recognised the need for the additional senior post.

RECOMMENDED: that Cabinet recommend to Council the creation of a new post of Head of Housing Operations to be funded through the Housing Revenue Account.

54 **Finance report**

The accountant's report provided the Housing Review Board with current draft financial outturn figures for the housing revenue account and housing capital program for the 2022/23 financial year. The report also considered the implications of any forthcoming regulatory changes.

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.

It was noted that the Housing Revenue Account (HRA) was in a healthy position. The surplus forecast for the year was on budget and it was predicted that the HRA balance would remain at the £3.1m adopted level for 2022/23. There was a variation in the outturn for forecasted rents due to the impact of rent losses on void properties.

There had been 29 Right to Buy sales to date which had resulted in a gross capital receipt of £3.7m. Although this meant a lack of housing stock it also created a large amount to fund capital expenditure.

RECOMMENDED: that Cabinet note and approve the Housing Revenue Account and Housing Capital finance 2022/23 forecast outturn report.

55 **Remit Zero Cylo - Innovate UK application**

The Director – Housing, Health and Environment explained that officers had been working with local business Remit Zero on a proposal to install their Cylo product in ten council homes as a way of decarbonising council homes and providing tenants with affordable warmth. Cylo was an alternative technology to provide heating and hot water. Remit Zero described their technology as using the principals of natural science to develop a portfolio of zero emission high performance products. The Cylo product could change the way many families and businesses heat their homes and premises. It was a simple, innovative, affordable and rapidly deployable heating solution which would help reduce CO₂ emissions rapidly, while maintaining the user's comfort and convenience. Relying solely on water and electricity, the Cylo vessel could replace a fossil fuel boiler, without compromise, providing the same familiar functional performance, convenience and low cost operation, but with absolutely zero emissions. The proposed project would have a duration of 24 months and could commence during the summer 2023.

The total project costs were circa. £687,392. If the funding bid was successful Innovate UK would cover up to 70% of the costs and would therefore fund £481,174. The remaining 30%, £206,218 was the match funding required. Remit Zero could contribute to some of the match funding with reduced labour costs. This would require approximately £125,000 match contribution from EDDC to cover the costs of solar installation on the roofs and the associated works. It was proposed that the programme be funded from the existing HRA budgets for heating upgrades.

The deadline to submit the expression of interest was Wednesday 18 January and a further bid application needed to be submitted by 26 April 2023. If successful the Council would be asked to sign a funding agreement (after the initial application was successful and then subsequently passing Innovate UK's due diligence procedure). This provided time to clarify the minutiae such as the selection process of the properties that would take part in the trial. EDDC had been requested to be a collaboration partner as part of the application process.

The Director – Housing, Health, Environment explained that if the funding application was unsuccessful he would like to continue discussions with Remit Zero to find a way of installing their product in a sample of the Council's properties because it appeared to offer a serious alternative to gas boilers and ground/air source heat pumps, and did not necessitate extensive building fabric upgrades.

The Director's report explained in detail how the Cylo vessel worked and it was noted that officers had seen Cylo installed in a facility at the Exeter Science Park. Remit Zero had installations in MOD properties where testing had been completed. The aim of the project was to demonstrate Cylo's benefits, including its ability to reduce costs for those within fuel poverty, in a way that enabled low-income households to play a meaningful role in tackling climate change.

The intention was that the trials would couple the installation of Cylo with solar on the roofs of selected properties. The project would aggregate and compare data on the charging and discharging of the Cylo vessel, this coupled with user interaction surveys would provide feedback on user behaviour and acceptance criteria. The following would be monitored with data sent and stored securely:

- Electricity used to charge Cylo, both quantity and timing.
- Thermal output to the house from Cylo.
- All room temperatures for 24 hours per day.
- Outside air temperature for 24 hours per day.
- Application of a Remit Zero designed external heat flux sensor, this would identify effective heat loss from the building as it was affected by both temperature and wind speed variation. This would be monitored for 24 hours per day. This

measurement would also inform regarding the condition and performance of any cavity or wall insulation.

It was suggested that a Remit Zero representative be invited to a future meeting to explain to the Board how the Cylo worked and update them on the trial.

RECOMMENDED:

1. that Cabinet support the Innovate UK funding bid and EDDC's role as a collaboration partner.
2. that Cabinet approve the funding of the Council's contribution to the bid of £125,000.
3. that should the funding bid not be successful, that Cabinet authorise the Director of Housing, Health and Environment in liaison with the Portfolio Holder for Homes and Communities to identify an alternative project that could be implemented to install Cylo as an initial pilot of ten council homes.

56 **Integrated asset management contract - minor works**

The Property and Asset Manager's report provided the Housing Review Board with an update on a minor change to improve the service delivery of repairs carried out under the integrated asset management contract (IAMC) as part of a response to ongoing concerns raised regarding the delivery of some key functions of the contract. The introduction of a minor works programme was not intended to replace the planned works contracts, but work alongside it to provide an avenue for larger works which were not planned works and were causing blockages within the day to day delivery of repairs.

RECOMMENDED: that Cabinet approve, in accordance with the conditions of the integrated asset management contract the change by the core group and approve that it is implemented/recorded under a formal contract amendment.

57 **Void performance**

The Housing Solutions Manager's report provided the Board with an update on the performance of the key to key voids process and details of the plans for improved performance, recognising that current performance remained a concern. The 'key to key' time covered the period from when a property became void until a new tenant moved in. The report to the Board had been produced alongside an independent review into the voids process conducted by the consultants Echelon, which addressed findings through recommendations for improvements in the overall process. The report also recommended changes to the void lettable standard to ensure it was modernised, fit for purpose and aligned to EDDC's poverty agenda.

A number of contributing factors towards performance levels had been identified in the delivery of the overall void process:

- Lack of resources, in particular staff shortages.
- Effect of the Covid-19 pandemic – an increase in void turnover.
- Brexit – impact around sourcing and delivery times for certain materials and components, compounded by the impact of the current economic climate which had led to significant increase in material and labour costs in the construction industry.
- Issues in clearing debt meters.
- Poor condition of voids on return.
- More significant upgrades of properties being required due to the poor condition of some of the housing stock.
- Additional factors creating additional time at the end of the process, such as notice periods and affordability issues.

The Echelon review identified areas where additional staff resources were required for two specific parts of the process:

1. Pre-termination visits to be re-introduced and to be more rigid.
2. Joint handovers of properties between the contractors, Property and Assets team and the Housing Allocations team.

It was noted that there was limited scope within the Housing Allocations team and it was recommended that an additional Housing Allocations Officer post was required. The Echelon report also recommended that EDDC consider where overall responsibility of the keys to keys process sits and how we ensure the complete void process is managed. Further work is required to analyse the potential need for an additional post or whether this could be incorporated within the current resources available.

The current lettable standard was also reviewed and changes were made to ensure that it was modernised and remained fit for purpose. Key changes were around issues of damp and mould and ensuring that work was undertaken alongside the poverty agenda. Officers proposed that through a dedicated hardship fund, vouchers be provided towards decorations and carpets for those incoming residents in real hardship to enable them to bring their property up to a decent habitable standard.

During discussions the Board raised concerns over the current voids performance and agreed the need for an additional post, which would increase resources and the capacity of the team. The Assistant Director outlined the current performance in this area as unacceptable and that this area remains an urgent priority for the service in order to see improved performance.

RECOMMENDED:

1. that Cabinet note the contents of the report including contributing factors towards performance levels and details of the plan for improving performance.
2. that Cabinet recommend the additional staff resource required to implement the suggested improvements, namely an additional Housing Allocations Officer.
3. that Cabinet approve the changes to the voids lettable standard.

58 Learning from complaints

The Assistant Director – Housing gave the Board a follow up report on complaints, following her previous one in January 2023. The report set out a more in-depth analysis of the complaints with an overview of the failures that led to the Ombudsman determining maladministration in all four cases. Areas for improvement were also identified as a direct result of the four cases, which were outlined in the report.

As part of reviewing the cases, poor recording keeping and poor communication were identified as two major areas for improvement. This was centred around:

- Poor communication with a failure to ensure that tenants were kept up to date with progress on matters that related to them.
- Failure to reassure tenants around matters that were impacting on them.
- Lack of thorough case notes that evidenced progress and actions taken.
- Lack of thorough case notes that detailed how tenants had been communicated with.
- Progressing matters too slowly or not responding to complaints quickly enough.

The Assistant Director – Housing's report outlined a number of actions being implemented to address the areas of improvement, which included:

- A review of all procedures that related to the Anti-Social Behaviour policy.
- A review of all procedures that related to how property and asset/responsive repairs cases were handled.

- Refresher training for all officers in record keeping.
- A review of how contract information was held.
- Recruitment of the Housing Repairs Customer Service Manager role.
- Spot checks on managers.
- Spot checks on repairs calls.
- Customer service training for all housing officers.
- Learning from case studies approach.

The Assistant Director – Housing suggested that she attend a future Tenant Involvement meeting to explain the issues raised in the report and improvements being taken. A briefing would also be undertaken for the Tenant Complaints Panel.

The Board endorsed the appointment of an additional Complaints Officer in the Corporate Complaints team for a 12 month period in order to help the Housing Service improve its response times and resolve complaints.

RECOMMENDED:

1. that Cabinet note the learning points from the report and the areas of improvement identified.
2. that Cabinet recommends to Council the appointment of an additional Complaints Officer (Housing) for a fixed 12 month period who will work within the Corporate Complaints team.
3. that Cabinet recommends to Council that additional funding in the sum of £25,409 plus on costs is approved to fund an additional Complaints Officer (Housing) for a fixed 12 month period.

59 **Tenancy visits**

The Interim Housing Services Manager's report provided the HRB with a proposal on the planned implementation of a rolling programme of tenancy visits across all Council tenancies in East Devon. The report sought approval to implement a tenancy visit programme and policy based on proposed staffing levels within the estate management team.

The Council needed to ensure that its tenants were supported in a variety of ways, that its systems were up to date with correct household information, and that its properties were being looked after and used for intended purposes. Tenancy visits would also identify residents at risk of tenancy failure at an early stage and enable the Council to respond positively.

It was expected that this proactive approach of visiting tenants in their homes would identify previously unreported repairs and issues within households. As well as identifying and resolving any maintenance issues, early intervention could also be instigated when a tenancy was showing signs of failing and a tenant needing support.

The Interim Housing Service Manager's report outlined options for frequency of tenancy visits based on permanent staffing arrangements:

1. Annual tenancy visits – this would require an additional two Housing Officers.
2. Tenancy visits every two years – this was more realistic based on current staffing levels, but would still place additional burden on workloads and stretch resources.
3. Tenancy visits every three years – this was more achievable based on current workloads and resources, but would take longer to accomplish tenancy visits across the housing stock.
4. All tenancy visits to be completed in year one, then reverting to a two year cycle – this would require an additional two housing officers in year one.

The report recommended option 1 – annual tenancy visits – in order to provide the maximum support to residents in maintaining their tenancy and ensure the Council’s properties were looked after. Annual tenancy visits would ensure that tenants were supported, their personal needs and preferences identified, properties were maintained, reducing void costs, the ability to evidence disrepair claims and improve the empty property turnaround times. It was acknowledged that an additional budget of £62,040 per annum was required for two additional housing officers. The Board noted that sheltered accommodation visits would be managed by the Mobile Support Officers, who already had contact with those residents.

The Board discussed the issue of non-entry and it was suggested that this be included as a key performance indicator. It was noted that there was a process for non-entry in the policy. Tenants stressed the need to clearly communicate the compulsory tenancy visits with residents.

RECOMMENDED:

1. that Cabinet note and agree the tenant visits policy and procedure.
2. that Cabinet agree that all properties be visited annually.
3. that Cabinet recommend to Council two additional housing officer posts and the additional budget requirement.

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Performance dashboard

The Interim Housing Services Manager’s report and presentation outlined the key performance indicators (KPIs) for quarter three and the actions being taken to ensure targets were achieved. The Interim Housing Services Manager presented on behalf of the Senior Management team. The presentation focused on 12 high level key performance indicators that had been taken from the tabular summary included in the report. It provided detail on areas of concern and actions that were being put into place to address the issues. The presentation also detailed work underway ready for the start of the new financial year and how the performance indicators would be reported moving forward.

The purpose of the housing services performance indicator framework was to recognise achievements and good performance, as well as identify areas requiring improvement. There was a collective responsibility, which included the Board, to ensure good performance. Plans for 2023/24 KPIs included:

- Continuing to cleanse and improve the data.
- Introducing new indicators (tenancy visits, tenant satisfaction measures, community development).
- Improving reporting on complaints, to include complaints upheld, partially and not upheld, and the learning from the complaints.
- Setting targets for 2023/24 – consulting with staff and residents to ensure that appropriate targets were set, and ensuring continual enhancement of services for residents.
- Developing and monitoring team targets which measured and tracked performance of teams.
- Finalise the compliance dashboard and commence reporting to the HRB.

RESOLVED: that the Housing Review Board note the quarter three performance and actions.

61 **HouseMark 2023/24 membership renewal**

The Housing Review Board were asked to agree to the membership renewal of HouseMark. HouseMark was a data analysis service which gathered performance and cost information from 350 social housing providers across the UK providing them with the data and insights needed to make evidence based decisions to drive efficient and performance business improvement. EDDC had been members of HouseMark for a number of years and the Board were asked to consider whether to continue to use HouseMark as a tool to monitor and evaluate the housing service.

RECOMMENDED:

1. that Cabinet approve that the HouseMark membership is renewed for 2023/24 at an annual cost of £8225 plus VAT.
2. that Cabinet approve that the subscription is carried forward on an annual basis unless the Housing Review Board are otherwise informed.

62 **Self-assessment of Consumer Standards**

As part of preparations for the introduction of the Social Housing Act, the Social Housing Regulator had encouraged stock holding local authority landlords to self-assess themselves in detail against the current consumer standards as a way of highlighting areas that were not currently compliant. The results of the self-assessment were included with the report for the Board's information. The Assistant Director's report provided an overview of:

- The role of the Regulator of Social Housing and how the sector was currently regulated.
- Changes to regulations being proposed as part of the Social Housing Act.
- An overview of the consumer standards.
- A summary of the Housing Service's self-assessment.
- Areas identified that needed to be focussed on to strengthen compliance.

The Vice- Chair requested that this item be deferred until the next Board meeting as some tenants felt they had not had sufficient time to input into this. The Interim Housing Services Manager advised that he had reported the consumer standards to the Resident Involvement Management Group, which had agreed to feed comments back prior to the Housing Review Board meeting. He explained that failure to deliver services to tenants in line with consumer standards (which were set by the regulator), best practice and regulation could bring scrutiny from the regulator and action taken against EDDC, as well as expose tenants to the risk of failures in service delivery.

RESOLVED: that the Housing Review Board note and agree the self-assessment against the Regulator of Social Housing consumer standards and the actions identified, with tenants being given the opportunity to provide further feedback to officers within the next 6 weeks, and these comments being built into the self-assessment.

63 **Annual Housing Review Board report**

The Assistant Director – Housing presented the annual report of the Housing Review Board which summarised and highlighted the diverse range of issues covered by the Board over the year. The report gave an overview of the achievements of the Board and celebrated the progress that had been made. The Democratic Services Officer was thanked for producing the report which the Board endorsed and noted.

Attendance List

Board members present:

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

Councillors also present (for some or all the meeting)

T McCollum
D Ledger

Officers in attendance:

Alethea Thompson, Democratic Services Officer
Graham Baker, Property and Asset Manager
Amy Gilbert-Jeans, Assistant Director Housing
John Golding, Director of Housing, Health and Environment
Yusef Masih, Interim Housing Services Manager
Andrew Mitchell, Housing Solutions Manager
Rob Ward, Accountant
Giles Salter, Solicitor

Councillor apologies:

Stephen Beer, Tenants
Councillor Ian Hall
Cindy Collier, Tenant

Chair

Date: