

## **EAST DEVON DISTRICT COUNCIL**

### **Minutes of the meeting of Housing Review Board held at Council Chamber, Blackdown House, Honiton on 25 January 2024**

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

The meeting started at 10.00 am and ended at 12.30 pm

#### **37 Minutes of the previous meeting**

The minutes of the previous meeting held on 9 November 2023 were agreed.

In response to a query relating to minute 29, review of housing compliance policies, the Assistant Director – Housing (Tenancy Services) confirmed that she would find out whether tenants had been contacted regarding on-going asbestos care and report back to the Housing Review Board.

#### **38 Declarations of interest**

There were no declarations of interest under the Code of Conduct. Councillor Sarah Chamberlain declared that she was employed by Exeter City Council in the housing department. Sue Dawson declared that she was a council housing tenant. In relation to agenda item 8 Councillor Chris Burhop declared that he was a director and co-owner of Alarmtec Ltd, and a shareholder in Firemark Ltd and Extinguish Ltd but none of these companies were tendering for works under the fire safety policy. Non committee member Councillor Steve Gazzard declared that he was a council housing tenant.

#### **39 Public speaking**

There were no members of the public registered to speak.

#### **40 Matters of urgency**

There were none.

#### **41 Confidential/exempt item(s)**

There was one confidential/exempt item.

#### **42 Housing Review Board forward plan**

The Assistant Director of Housing (Tenancy Services) presented the forward plan and explained the revised format of the plan and the reasoning behind these changes in that it aligned with the Scrutiny Committee's forward plan format. Members were advised that the forward plan acted as a reminder of agenda items to come forward to future meetings. Dates for the future items would be populated once dates for 2024/25 Housing Review Board meetings had been agreed. Members were reminded that they could add further reports and topics for discussion to the next forward plan by either informing herself or the Democratic Services Officer.

#### **43 Gas and fire safety policies**

The Housing Review Board were asked to consider and agree the amended reviews of the gas safety policy and the fire safety policy for housing, to ensure compliance with current legislation and regulations relating to those statutory areas of compliance.

The gas safety policy set out East Devon District Council's approach to managing gas safety within properties owned and/or managed by East Devon District Council, including community centres, communal areas and district offices. The policy detailed how East Devon District Council met the requirements for gas safety under the Gas Safety (Installation and Use) Regulations 1998, including all amendments. In addition to this, the policy provided assurance that measures were in place to ensure compliance with these regulations and to identify, manage and/or mitigate risks associated with gas installations and gas appliances owned by the Council.

The fire safety policy set out East Devon District Council's approach to managing fire safety within properties owned and/or managed by East Devon District Council, including community centres, communal areas, district offices and houses of multiple occupation (HMOs). The fire safety policy detailed how East Devon District Council met the responsibilities under the Housing Act 2004, The Regulatory Reform (Fire Safety) Order 2005, the Fire Safety Act 2021 and the Fire Safety (England) Regulations 2022. The overall aim of the policy was to manage and reduce, as far as reasonably practicable, the risk of fire to occupiers of Council properties, visitors, staff, contractors and the general public.

It was noted that the policy and procedures for accessing properties were in line with best practice and should be followed. With regards to gas inspections every attempt was made before certification expired, with the process commencing in month ten, before the twelve months was up. It was important to ensure the procedures under the policies worked for the Council and allowed it to raise awareness at every opportunity for tenants.

Both the gas policy and the fire policy, along with the procedures, would be consulted with through the Resident Involvement Monitoring Group.

**RECOMMENDED:** that Cabinet recommend to Council approval of the amendments to the gas safety policy and the fire safety policy for housing service properties.

#### 44 **Resident Involvement Strategy**

The Tenancy Services Manager's introduced himself to the Housing Review Board and gave a brief description of his background. His report outlined EDDC's consultation and redesign of its Resident Involvement Strategy 2024-2027, which replaced the previous 2019 strategy. The report detailed the background of the Resident Involvement Strategy, the consultation undertaken over the past year and a summary of the key points of the new strategy and the legislation governing it.

A tenant focussed approach was needed to all aspects of work within the housing service. It was vital that tenants were included from the start of policy formation, that tenants were given the training they needed to be fully involved and that tenants were kept up to date with clear, concise and relevant information about service performance.

An in depth, and detailed approach to reviewing and updating the Residents Involvement Strategy (RIS) was adopted. Extensive consultation was undertaken and adherence to best practice and legislative requirements was ensured. Self-assessments of current performance against the Consumer Regulatory Standards, and the current RIS were

completed, and measured performance against the strategies of other social housing providers.

The five main objectives of the new Resident Involvement Strategy were:

- To understand more about the people who live in council homes.
- To improve the value of tenant engagement.
- To increase diversity within involved tenants.
- To improve communication and consultation with tenants.
- To value the involved tenants, volunteers and communities.

The Resident Involvement Strategy would be taken to full public consultation.

**RECOMMENDED:**

1. that Cabinet note the report and agree that the Resident Involvement Strategy can now go to open public consultation.
2. that Cabinet approve the Resident Involvement Strategy for the next three years in the event that no significant changes are made as a result of the public consultation. (Housing commit to bring the strategy back to the Housing Review Board should significant changes be made as a result of said consultation).

45 **Housing Review Board annual budget report**

The Director - Finance presented the draft revenue and capital budgets for 2024/25 for consideration by the Board.

At the same time as preparing the draft budget, draft service plans had been prepared for members consideration. Service plans and budgets were aligned and linked back to the Council Plan.

The Housing Revenue Account (HRA) was underpinned and influenced by a business plan. This plan needed to be updated with revised financial modelling once the housing condition survey work was complete.

The draft 2024/25 budget approach had been similar to the current year with variations as noted in the report. The budget was balanced in that income raised by rents covered current expenditure. The budget was seen as an interim solution whilst restructured teams bedded in, which could also result in the re-organisation of budgets but within the same financial envelope. All planned expenditure was met from available income.

The Director – Finance highlighted to the Board that the budget did not reflect the stock condition survey results. It could be necessary to undertake a reallocation of budgets or the use of additional reserves to meet priorities in the financial year to reflect the findings of the housing stock condition survey but at this stage it was considered there were sufficient resources available. The Housing Review Board would be updated on any reallocations. Other pressures on the HRA budget were decarbonisation of the housing stock as well as expanding the housing stock.

The increase in any individual tenants rent was normally limited to inflation + 1% for the forthcoming financial year. Inflation was taken as the Consumer Price Index (CPI) rate at the prevailing rate for September 2023, which was officially registered at 6.7%. The draft budget assumed an increase in Council house rents to this level with a factor included for a reduction in stock numbers and voids giving £21.48m, an increase of £1.47m. An

increase of 3.5% had been assumed on garage rents giving an additional £8k in income, but members might consider this not to be appropriate.

The proposed Housing Revenue Account draft budget presented was a balanced budget, with any surplus to be included within an increased contribution to capital of £1.2m to invest in stock and fund capital projects. The HRA Balance was currently predicted to meet the £3.1m level at the end of 2023/24 once contributions to and from reserves were taken into account. There was an additional £1.6m being held in the HRA debt Volatility Fund, which remained unchanged.

A summary of the capital funding position was also provided for the Board. The HRA proposed expenditure in 2024/25 was £4.906m, funded from the HRA. This represented the same level of investment as currently provided and seen by the service as suitable to meet the requirements at present, until a full stock condition survey was completed and maintenance and improvement plans were fully developed. It was likely that further funding would be needed and a report would be brought back to the Board detailing any significant capital investments required.

Explanations were provided for the staffing and contractor spends and pay awards in the budget and a request was made for an update on the cyclo boiler project.

**RECOMMENDED:** that Cabinet approve and recommend to Council the draft Housing Revenue Account revenue and capital estimates, including the proposed rent increases for 2024/25.

#### 46 **Repairs and voids performance**

The Responsive Repairs and Voids Service Manager introduced herself and gave a brief description of her background. She went on to give the Housing Review Board a presentation which outlined the Council's approach to improving performance across its housing repairs contracts and in the management of empty Council homes. The report outlined the progress made to date and the actions being taken to further improve performance in these areas.

Since the last HRB meeting, the number of empty homes continued to reduce month on month and void turnaround times were also decreasing. In December 2023 127 empty homes were recorded, which was down from 168 in July 2023. A number of steps were being taken to ensure void performance and these were noted in the report and explained during the presentation.

The target for routine repairs to be completed within target by the two main contractors, Ian Williams and Liberty Gas, was 90% (100% for emergency repairs). Officers acknowledged there was further work to be done, but progress was now being made with 83% of repairs being completed within time in December 2023, against 75% of repairs in July 2023. A number of steps were being taken to improve performance across the repairs contracts and these were noted in the report and explained during the presentation.

To ensure the service was in a position to meet upcoming challenges and invest wisely in the housing stock portfolio some additional measures were being taken to future proof the service. A review of the service had been undertaken to ensure the right people were in the right places. Resources would continue to be reviewed in line with the demands on the service and the contractors would be supported to do the same. There was an upcoming skills review to inform a training plan for the teams for all staff to

develop and be further equipped to deal with the challenges of the large contracts. Data from the stock condition survey would inform the Asset Management Strategy and the Investment Plan for the next five years, which would improve the overall decency of the Council's homes and therefore impact the Council's position on responsive repairs.

The Responsive Repairs and Voids Service Manager was thanked for her presentation and a number of issues were raised and discussed, including:

- The efficiency and effectiveness of contractors' staffing.
- Challenging resource issues.
- Improvements and commitments made by Ian Williams
- Voids broken down into areas to identify trends and inform ward members.
- Importance of paper customer feedback forms.
- Carpets in good condition would be cleaned and left for incoming tenants.
- Use of tenant inspectors and the desire to introduce this in the future.
- Tenant involvement and the resident repairs forum.
- Breakdown of void costs.
- Reasons why properties were becoming void.

**RESOLVED:** that the Housing Review Board notes the report and the actions taken.

#### 47 **Asset Management Strategy**

The Housing Review Board considered the report of the Interim Compliance and Planned Works Manager which recommended the development of an asset management strategy (AMS) for EDDC's housing stock. The report covered how the AMS would ensure the service met legislation, regulation and be able to forecast budgetary requirements in maintaining Council homes. The AMS would assist in guiding future strategic property decisions to ensure EDDC managed the housing portfolio efficiently. The AMS would include fully costed five, ten, fifteen and thirty year plan of works based on the outcome of the stock condition survey programme. The report also recommended that a project board be formed to deliver the AMS.

At present EDDC did not have sufficient detailed information to enable it to accurately forecast and budget for the financial implications of managing its repair and maintenance obligations. It was important to take a knowledge-based approach. The outcome from the AMS would include detailed information on each property in the housing portfolio, including components, age, condition, life expectancy, energy efficiency, together with fully costed plans of works.

The purpose of an AMS was to set out and demonstrate:

- An understanding of the property assets owned and managed by EDDC, including their attributes and characteristics.
- An understanding of EDDC's liabilities, in particular the investment needs of the stock in the short- medium and longer term as identified through stock condition surveys and EDDC's database.
- Adopt an approach to the strategic management and maintenance of the assets to maintain them in good and tenantable repair.
- An understanding of when disposal, purchase, and development would be recommended.

The Housing Review Board noted the profile of its housing portfolio. It was a mixed portfolio spanning several different property types. They were held on a mixture of tenures; general needs tenancy, freehold, licence and leasehold. The portfolio also included 15 community centres, which were part of the AMS.

It was noted that as part of the stock condition programme there were still about 100 properties remaining to be surveyed. About 80% of the portfolio had been inspected, with this reaching 90% by the end of January when the project would be completed. The surveyors, Currie and Brown, would provide a detailed report once the programme was completed. The report would set out the key findings of the programme and include comprehensive five, ten, fifteen and thirty year works programmes, which would form an element of any future AMS.

The Interim Compliance and Planned Works Manager described:

- the development of the specification/scope and approach to the AMS,
- how it linked to other EDDC strategies and plans,
- climate change and EDDC's commitment to be a Carbon Neutral Council by 2030,
- consultation/resident engagement, and
- mobilisation/timescales.

Those present agreed the need for the housing service to be ambitious and well informed by data and policy.

**RECOMMENDED:**

1. that Cabinet approve the appointment of a consultant, if required, to develop the Asset Management Strategy.
2. that Cabinet recommends to Council the approval of an additional budget in the sum of £50,000 to fund this appointment.
3. that delegated authority be given to the Assistant Director of Housing (Housing Tenancy Services) to agree a fee with this consultant, not exceeding £50,000.

48 **Housing Service Plan**

The Assistant Housing Directors' report presented the draft service plan for the Housing Service covering the period 2024/25. Each service area across EDDC produced a service plan that outlined key projects for the year ahead with information that related to the detail and timescales of how they would be achieved. The plans gave a summary and overview of the service delivered and the service plan also summarised key performance indicators that would be monitored.

The housing service plan presented to the Board captured a plan for the whole housing service, including the strategic homelessness function and other roles that would not be monitored by the HRB. The housing service plan had also been reviewed by the Council's joint Overview and Scrutiny Committee on 11 January 2024 and comments from this meeting and the HRB would be incorporated into the final service plan.

Section one of the service plan gave a brief description of the day-to-day services and provided a staffing structure. A request was made for this useful staffing structure to be published in the Housing Matters magazine. Section two covered project management and additional workstreams for 2024-25. Section three of the service plan related to performance targets.

The Assistant Director of Housing (Tenancy Services) explained that the service 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 the services it delivered. The service plan was intended as a working document and service managers would cascade the contents at their team meetings and reflect priorities in officer objectives. The plan would also be presented to the appropriate

resident involvement panel in order to ensure awareness and understanding of the content of the plan.

**RECOMMENDED:** that Cabinet approve the Housing Service Plan 2024/25.

49 **Exclusion of the 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 in the agenda is likely to be disclosed and on balance the public interest is in discussing these items in private session (Part B).

50 **Housing Task Force update**

The Interim Housing Strategy, Enabling and Project Manager introduced himself and gave a brief explanation of his background. His report updated members on the progress of the Housing Task Force. It outlined the new team structure and provided an overview of the objectives and direction of the new team, included an update on current sites, delivery options and the proposed development of a five-year investment and delivery plan.

**RECOMMENDED:**

1. that Cabinet note the revised Housing Strategy, Enabling and Projects team structure.
2. that Cabinet note the progress to date and future direction of the new Housing Strategy, Enabling and Projects team.
3. that Cabinet note the development of a new Housing Strategy and Housing Investment and Delivery Plan.
4. that Cabinet approve the creation of the Senior Surveyor post within the Housing Task Force on a permanent basis as set out in the report.
5. that Cabinet recommends to Council, the approval of additional budget in the sum of £74,000 to fund the Senior Surveyor post within the Housing Task Force.

**Attendance List**

**Board members present:**

Sue Dawson, Tenants

Sara Clarke, Independent Community Representative

Rob Robinson, Independent Community Representative

Councillor Sarah Chamberlain (Chair)

Councillor Peter Faithfull

Councillor Tony McCollum

Councillor Helen Parr (Vice-Chair)

Councillor Christopher Burhop

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

B Bailey

S Gazzard

R Jefferies

D Ledger

J Loudoun

S Smith

**Officers in attendance:**

- Simon Davey, Director of Finance
- Amy Gilbert-Jeans, Assistant Director Housing (Tenancy Services)
- Rebecca Heal, Solicitor
- Tracy Hendren, Director of Housing, Health and Environment
- Andrew King, Interim Tenancy Services Manager
- Yusef Masih, Interim Housing Services Manager
- Andrew Mitchell, Housing Solutions Manager
- Liam Reading, Housing Strategy Enabling and Project Manager
- Alethea Thompson, Democratic Services Officer
- Susie Williams, Interim Responsive Repairs and Voids Manager

**Councillor apologies:**

Chair .....

Date: .....