

Report to: Housing Review Board



Date of Meeting 14th March 2024

Document classification: Part A Public Document

Exemption applied: None

Review date for release N/A

Review of Housing Review Board as a Scrutiny function.

Report summary:

This report has come forward following a direct request for the function of the Housing Review Board Committee to be reviewed and refreshed. The report aligns with the recent scrutiny review carried out by the Centre for Governance and Scrutiny as presented to the Joint meeting of the Scrutiny Committee, Overview Committee and the Housing Review Board on the 15th February 2024.

Members of the Housing Review Board will receive further detail in relation to this once the recommended Action Plan, based on findings of the review is presented back, this will be done by the 30th April 2024.

The report sets out a proposed change to the frequency of Housing Review Board meetings and that this change is made formally within the Councils Constitution.

Is the proposed decision in accordance with:

Budget Yes No

Policy Framework Yes No

Recommendation:

That the Housing Review Board recommends to Council that the Terms of Reference for the Housing Review Board be amended so that the number of meetings is decreased from 5 to 4 to read as follows:-

Meetings: 4 times per year (or more frequently as required).

Reason for recommendation:

To ensure the correct frequency of meetings moving forward.

Officer: Amy Gilbert-Jeans. Assistant Director- Housing (Tenancy Services)

Portfolio(s) (check which apply):

- Climate Action and Emergency Response
- Coast, Country and Environment
- Council and Corporate Co-ordination
- Communications and Democracy
- Economy
- Finance and Assets
- Strategic Planning

- Sustainable Homes and Communities
- Culture, Leisure, Sport and Tourism

Equalities impact Low Impact

Climate change Low Impact

Risk: Low Risk; .

Links to background information .

Link to [Council Plan](#)

Priorities (check which apply)

- Better homes and communities for all
- A greener East Devon
- A resilient economy

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1. At the meeting of the Housing Review on the 15th June 2023, a request was put forward by the Chair for a review of the function of the Housing Review Board to be undertaken. This was done on the basis of ensuring the ongoing effectiveness of the Committee and to ensure the Committee were meeting their responsibilities in relation to the important role the Committee have in scrutinising functions that come under the remit of the Housing Revenue Account. This review was therefore added to the Forward Plan for an up and coming topic that would be presented back to Members.
 2. In July 2023, following a motion at full Council, the Centre for Governance and Scrutiny (CfGS) were commissioned to conduct a scrutiny improvement review and this took place during October and November 2023. The wider objectives of this review were to ensure that all EDDC overview and scrutiny functions (of which the Housing Review Board is one) are working effectively to ensure and maintain ongoing improvement at East Devon District Council.
 3. This review presented an excellent opportunity for the function of the Housing Review Board to be reviewed independently and it has therefore been deemed appropriate that the recommendations and findings from the review are directly used to undertake the request for a review that was put forward by the Committee in June 2023.
 4. On the 15th of February 2024 at a joint meeting of the Scrutiny Committee, Overview Committee and the Housing Review Board the findings and results of the review were received with a recommendation centred around an Action Plan that will produced that is centred around the eight recommendations that the review highlighted.

The eight recommendations are set out below

Organisational commitment and clarity of purpose

Recommendation 1

That the current structure of three committees is maintained but that work takes place to ensure that they operate in a complementary manner. This recommendation should include a rework of the terms of reference for the three committees.

Recommendation 2

That consideration is given to providing a short term investment to the scrutiny function to ensure that the actions and recommendations arising from this report can be implemented and that 'added value' scrutiny can take place. This recommendation might include backfilling some of the secretariat functions to allow democratic services officers to utilise their skills to providing additional support to the scrutiny function with a view to making this change permanent if the additional investment realises impact and a clear business case can be made.

Members leading and fostering good relationships

Recommendation 3

That the three scrutiny committees are assigned a senior officer to provide expertise and advice to guide and support each of the respective Chairs and to retain oversight of the function, work programmes and help ensure that they work within their terms of reference and within the scrutiny protocol.

Recommendation 4

That the Council provides learning and development opportunities for all Elected Members to include (but not limited to) the following areas: •

- Questioning skills
- Scoping and Managing In-depth scrutiny
- Making recommendations
- Access and use of information and work programming
- An indepth look at the scrutiny protocol and terms of reference for the committees, focusing on expectations, behaviours, and garnering ongoing support for participation.
- Prioritising work and using evidence well.

Recommendation 5

That the approach to work programming for scrutiny is redesigned so that the work programme is anchored by long term strategic issues for East Devon. This should include (but not limited to)

- Capacity to conduct in-depth scrutiny outside of the formal meetings
- Regular collaboration with scrutiny Chairs which might involve routine sharing of work programmes for committees or possibly the consideration of the development of a single work programme for the entire function which is agreed annually. (with scope to flex throughout the year)
- Chairs to collectively decide on member suggestions on proposal forms for what goes on the work programme – based on clear criteria that members themselves agree – process should look and feel challenging. Forward Plan could also go to this meeting for discussion (Portfolio Holder reports could go here too) •
- Planned space on the work programme for detailed scrutiny of forthcoming decisions in a way that is planned in advance – for most complex / contentious issues – allowing for managed and proportionate political debate.
- Use insight from the public (ward work, corporate complaints) to inform work programming – in a proportionate way.
- Proactively share Forward Plan with members outside of committee; signpost members to background reports where necessary.
- Organise separate All- member briefings for members on forthcoming / high profile things which are for information rather than taking up space on the formal agenda.
- Continue with production of regular Portfolio Holder reports but integrate this better into work programming.

Recommendation 6

Consideration of cross-party pre-meetings being held (ideally) before the meeting and led in a way that helps committee members prepare for scrutiny sessions by reviewing the key lines of enquiry and coordinating their questioning approaches.

Recommendation 7

Provide development support and training for Officers across the Council to build, refresh and enhance their knowledge and understanding of the role, purpose, and powers of scrutiny. This should also include the approach to report writing and presenting and answering questions at committee meetings.

Having an impact

Recommendation 8

We recommend that a process is designed and implemented that tracks recommendations made and impact arising and that this is communicated back to all Elected Members. An action plan, including a timetable for completing actions, will need to be developed to support the recommendations, including identifying any resources required to deliver the recommendations from CfGS.

5. As outlined at the meeting on the 15th February, Officers are now working to produce the detail that will be fed into the Action Plan and this will be presented back to a further joint meeting of the Scrutiny Committee, Overview Committee and the Housing Review Board by the 30th April 2024.
6. It is important to note the uniqueness of the Housing Review Board with regards to the Co-opted roles of independent and tenant Members. These roles are deemed critical in the additional level of scrutiny that can be applied in this area and there is a direct link to the Councils Resident Involvement Strategy that highlights the necessity of customer involvement and engagement in all areas of work within the housing service. Ensuring customer involvement at this level is also a key expectation from the Social Housing Regulator and there are a number of references to this in the Social Housing (Regulation) Act 2023.
7. Alignment of the Forward Plan of the Housing Review Board to the Cabinet Forward Plan (as well as consideration of other Committee work plans) will be considered as part of bringing forward the action plan (recommendation 5) but in order to plan for the forthcoming year 2024/2025 it is proposed that the Housing Review Board will change the frequency of meetings to better align with quarterly performance information. The day to day performance of the functions within the Housing Revenue Account are a key consideration of the Housing Revenue Board in terms of how they set out and derive their work plans moving forward, in order to ensure this can be achieved the Committee therefore need to receive this information in a timely manner at the end of each quarter. It is therefore proposed that the Committee meet 4 times a year instead of the current 5 times a year. Committee Members are reminded that an extraordinary meeting can be proposed at any other time throughout the year as and when required.
8. The detail of the review highlights concerns that have been raised previously in relation to the effectiveness of the Housing Review Board, as an example there has been concern that reports are often being received for information only as opposed to the opportunity for deeper scrutiny into areas that can then result in meaningful recommendations. The action plan will pick up on such observations as well as others and will set out plans to ensure we

are addressing these issues moving forward in order to ensure the most effective scrutiny processes are in place across all of our scrutiny committees.

9. At the same meeting of the joint Committees, a recommendation to adopt a draft scrutiny protocol was carried and this will now be put forward for Council to approve. The protocol highlights the important relationship between the Scrutiny Committees and Cabinet and sets how we will ensure the relationship is clear, effective and consistent with best practice. The Portfolio Holder for Homes and Communities has an important relationship with the Housing Review Board and plays a key role in the link to Cabinet. The Portfolio Holder has been consulted in the drafting of this report and is in agreement that the findings of the CfGS provide an excellent opportunity for us to take a wider look at the functioning of the Committee.

Financial implications:

There are no direct financial implications resulting from the report.

Legal implications:

Changes to the Constitution require the approval of Full Council.