

EAST DEVON DISTRICT COUNCIL

Minutes of the meeting of Housing Review Board held at Council Chamber, Blackdown House, Honiton, EX14 1EJ on 1 August 2024

Attendance list at end of document

The meeting started at 10.02 am and ended at 1.16 pm

1 Public speaking

One member of the public, Steve Beer, had registered to speak at the meeting but in the event, did not attend.

2 Appointment of Vice-Chair

The Chair welcomed all those present to the meeting. She informed them that co-opted tenant member Sue Dawson had resigned from the Housing Review Board and thanked Sue for her contribution to and time spent on the Board.

Nominations for Vice Chair were received for Cllr Simon Smith.

RESOLVED: that Cllr Simon Smith be appointed Vice Chair of the Board for the ensuing year.

3 Minutes of the previous meeting

The minutes of the meeting held on 14 March 2024 were agreed.

4 Declarations of interest

Cllr A Bailey – Minutes 7 – 16; Affects Non-Registerable Interest: Tenant of East Devon District Council.

Cllr B Bailey – Minutes 7 – 16; Affects Non-Registerable Interest: Tenant of East Devon District Council.

Cllr J Brown – Minutes 7 – 16; Affects Non-Registerable Interest: Member of Honiton Town Council.

Cllr S Gazzard – Minutes 7 – 16; Affects Non-Registerable Interest: Tenant of East Devon District Council.

Rob Robinson – Minutes 7 – 16; Affects Non-Registerable Interest: Tenant of East Devon District Council.

Advice was given by the Monitoring Officer that as Rob Robinson is now a Council tenant, he is no longer independent of the Council. Whereas there is nothing in the Terms of Reference which prevents him sitting on the Board as an Independent Community Representative, it would be appropriate for his role to transfer to Tenant Representative, following this meeting.

Cllr S Chamberlain declared that she was employed by Exeter City Council in the housing department.

5 Matters of urgency

There were none.

6 Confidential/exempt item(s)

There were none.

7 Housing Review Board forward plan

The Interim Director – Housing and Health presented the forward plan and advised members that the forward plan acted as a reminder of agenda items to come forward to future meetings. The forward plan had been derived from previous meetings and requests, as well as the housing service plan. Service managers were currently reviewing realistic timeframes against each topic. 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.

Members were informed that it was intended to call an Extraordinary Meeting of the Housing Review Board in November, for the Board to receive a second report on the Housing Revenue Account (HRA). Due to its urgency, there had not been time to bring the first HRA paper (minute 11 refers) to the Board prior to Cabinet and Full Council.

Discussion and clarification included the following points:

- Members asked that the following items are added to the Forward Plan:
 - Stock Condition Report
 - A mandatory Financial Review, as a standing item for every agenda.
- The Stock Condition Survey is a critical piece of work to gain important information which the Council needs and Members expressed disappointment at the time that it has taken for this work to be completed. In response, members were informed that there had been difficulties gaining access to some properties, and challenges around the quality of the work carried out by the organisation commissioned to conduct the surveys. However, the standard of work has now been verified by senior staff and whereas there have been some wider issues around contract management, the work is now expected to complete three months ahead of target. The Stock Condition Survey report would be brought to the Board in the autumn, as part of a wider piece of work.
- Members highlighted that a mechanism needs to be in place for more in-depth debate and scrutiny to take place outside of formal meetings of the Housing Review Board, to ensure that members have a strong understanding of complex issues on which they are asked to vote. It was noted that the Scrutiny Improvement Plan recently endorsed by Cabinet and Full Council sets out a recommendation and associated action for briefing sessions to be put in place for members, and senior officers and Cabinet are committed to supporting to this approach.
- There have been a lot of changes to the housing service over the years and it was suggested that learnings could be taken from what has worked well historically, with a view to reinstating some of those practices.

8 Housing Review Board terms of reference

The Director of Governance and Licensing introduced this item, outlining the purpose of the Housing Review Board (HRB) as part of the organisation's statutory Overview and Scrutiny function and highlighting a recommendation which came out of the scrutiny review carried out by the Centre for Governance and Scrutiny, that the HRB's Terms of Reference (ToR) should be reviewed, to provide greater clarity moving forward.

Delivery of the recommendations arising from the scrutiny review is set out in a Scrutiny Improvement Plan endorsed by Cabinet and Council in July, the improvement process being led by the Democratic Services Manager. However, Members could recommend to Council some minor revisions to the Board's ToR now, if they were minded to do so.

Discussion and clarification included the following points:

- It was proposed to recommend to Council to increase the number of Councillors on the HRB from five to seven, to better align with the membership of the other scrutiny committees; the HRB membership would then comprise seven Councillors, five Tenant Members and two Independent Community Representatives.
- Members felt the ToR needed to more clearly set out that the HRB is a scrutiny committee.
- The role of the Independent Community Representatives on the membership needs to be better defined, and appropriate training provided to enable the representatives to contribute fully.
- Members noted the recommendation from the scrutiny review that pre-briefings for Members take place outside of formal meetings and challenged why these were not yet taking place. The Director of Governance and Licensing responded that the recommendation and associated action was set out in the Scrutiny Improvement Plan and would be delivered by the Democratic Services Manager by the date set out within the Plan.

RECOMMENDED to Council:

That the number of Council Members on the Housing Review Board increase from five to seven with the quorum remaining at four, the purpose being to add additional capacity pending a full review of the Terms of Reference.

9 **Housing Performance Report - Quarter 4 2023/24**

The Housing Review Board were presented with the key performance indicator (KPI) dashboard and the compliance dashboard for quarter 4. The Interim Assistant Director (Regulatory Services) and the Responsive Repairs and Voids Service Manager introduced themselves and gave a presentation which summarised the performance and actions being taken to improve performance where targets were not being achieved. Performance targets were set annually, but during the 2023/24 year the framework began part way through the year so targets were not set for all the indicators. Figures were benchmarked against the previous financial years' performance and HouseMark was used to benchmark performance and set targets for the KPIs against performance of other social housing landlords.

Discussion and clarification included the following points:

- Members observed that a lot of the Key Performance Indicators (KPIs) appeared to evidence improvement, and voids were falling, but Year to Date figures in most cases replicate the Quarter 4 figures, and this is not correct.
- The KPIs are non-financial and the Housing Review Board needs financial indicators with which to monitor and scrutinise the Housing Revenue Account and the capital

performance within that. Members asked that the Board receives financial key performance indicators at least quarterly, based on the latest quarter's figures.

- Members were keen that tenants have the opportunity to speak with someone from the Council in person, when staffing allows. The Interim Assistant Director for Housing commented that the need to connect with tenants needs to be balanced with the tenants right to live peacefully in their home. The Council takes an intelligence and risk-based approach to tenant visits, intervening where there is evidence which suggests a tenant is vulnerable or in need of support.
- Due to the high volume of responsive repairs carried out by the contractor Ian Williams and its subcontractors, it is not possible for the Council to post-inspect every job and an audit-based approach is used whereby the Council inspects a sample of jobs completed, with the audit used to inform the Council's approach going forward.
- The contractor's internal staff and their sub-contractors are subject to a rigorous process of safeguarding measures including DBS checks and regular safeguarding training. Some members were concerned that sub-contractors use vans with no signage to indicate that they are working on behalf of Ian Williams or EDDC, and some vulnerable residents will therefore not answer the door to them. Officers will explore with Ian Williams how best to address this issue.
- Whilst the KPIs appear to evidence improvement, feedback from residents and staff is that the service is poor and Members sought to understand the apparent disconnect. The Interim Director for Housing and Health commented that the number of complaints was small relative to repairs completed. She added that there was a need to manage expectations, since customers' expectations on what they would like to be completed and what they are entitled to have completed can differ.
- The Housing service is working with the Council's Communications team to introduce a transactional customer satisfaction service whereby the Council use email, SMS or telephone to survey every tenant that has a repair completed, with a view to gathering feedback. It was suggested to seek feedback from some tenants via a letter in the post.

RESOLVED that the Housing Review Board will be presented with timely key performance information including financial and non-financial indicators on at least a quarterly basis.

10 **Housing Allocations Policy update**

The Housing Review Board were provided with and asked to approve an updated housing allocations policy. The policy had been amended to reflect relevant changes originating from legislation, the Consumer Standard, recommendations from an Ombudsman case and a previous HRB report focussing on downsizing. Amendments included data protection considerations and additional sections on management moves and downsizing. Also included was confirmation of criteria for allocating sheltered accommodation. Properties which were previously specified as 'sheltered' would only be allocated to those over 55 years of age with a housing support need. Exceptional circumstances would be considered for applicants demonstrating a housing support need but who did not meet the age criteria. These cases would be reviewed on a case-by-case basis by the relevant service managers. It was noted that this change in criteria would not affect tenants already living in sheltered housing, it would apply to new lets only.

A request was made for consideration be given to the number of dogs that could be kept in sheltered accommodation due to associated noise issues. The Housing Solutions Manager advised that this was a tenancy agreement issue rather than related specifically to the allocation of sheltered accommodation. The Interim Assistant Housing Director (Regulated Services) advised that in 2017 the age criteria for sheltered accommodation was reduced from 65 to 18 years of age. In recent benchmarking exercises it was apparent that 55 was the norm and was 'older persons housing', so therefore the age

was actually being raised back up. This also formed part of a wider review of the use of sheltered housing stock.

It was noted that downsizing was a challenge for every local authority, in meeting the needs and demands of tenants, whilst facilitating downsizing.

RECOMMENDED: that Cabinet approve the updated housing allocations policy.

11 **Housing Revenue Account and Housing Capital Finance 2023/24 year end outturn**

The accountant's report provided the Housing Review Board with current draft financial figures for the housing revenue account (HRA) and housing capital programme for the 2023/24 financial year. Producing a HRA was a statutory function for Councils who managed and owned their housing stock and was therefore a key document for the Board to influence. It was noted that the figures were still subject to external audit, although no changes were expected.

The Board noted that for 2023/24 the outturn deficit for the year was proposed to be covered from earmarked reserves and borrowing, leaving the HRA balance at the adopted level of £3.1million. A summary by cost driver was included in the report and covered:

- Supervision and management +£1.39million.
- Income + £0.047million due to lost income from voids.
- Supplies, services and other costs £5.3million, mainly due to responsive repairs.
- Interest income and charges -£0.530million from improved returns on investments.
- Expenditure on premises +0.49million.

This position of significant increase in spend with a reduction in income had previously been highlighted to members and was of concern. This position could be funded from reserves attributed to underspends in previous years set aside to fund increased expenditure on what was believed to be catch up repairs and maintenance. However, this level of spend was also required moving forwards.

It was noted that a total of six acquisitions were completed within the year (£1.6 million), with 11 right to buy sales reducing stock. During 2023/24 £4.35million was spent on capital related improvements to properties, blocks, major adaptations for disabilities and major voids works. The report highlighted the funding implications of this. The total revenue contribution to capital made from the HRA was £2.6million versus a budgeted figure of £0.88million.

The final table in the report showed the final reserve levels should the allocations proposed be approved.

Concern was expressed that savings of £2.5million was being sought and information was requested on which staffing posts would not be recruited to and where the remainder of the savings would be found. It was noted that the savings would be sought from the 2025/26 budget. The current outturn report related to the 2023/24 budget.

It was suggested that it would be more cost effective for void properties be sold off rather than being retained and invested in. The Interim Housing Director confirmed that a disposals and process policy would be part of the options appraisal which would be brought back to the Board in the autumn.

RECOMMENDED: that the Housing Revenue Account and Housing Capital Finance 2023/24 year end outturn report is noted and the reserve recommendations are approved by Cabinet.

12 **Housing Revenue Account: Financial review, revised budget and sustainability plan**

The Board were presented with the housing revenue account (HRA) finance report for awareness and information. This report had been presented to Cabinet on 10 July 2024 and Council on 17 July 2024 and the recommendations contained within it were approved at those meetings.

An options appraisal would be brought back in the autumn, which would include the viability of retaining the housing stock as a local authority. Other local authorities were stating a requirement of £50,000 per property needed to come up to standard.

It was noted that the 2025/26 budget would go to Cabinet in January 2025 for approval and recommendation on to Council.

The Interim Director for Housing and Health formally thanked the Housing Strategy and Project Enabling Manager for producing the report.

RESOLVED: that the Housing Review Board note the report.

13 **Housing Ombudsman self-assessment and complaint procedure update**

The Board were presented with the Housing Ombudsman self-assessment and complaint procedure update report for awareness and information. This report had been presented to Cabinet on 5 June 2024 and the recommendations contained within it were approved at that meeting.

The report covered two key areas:

- The housing service self-assessment against the Housing Ombudsman's complaint handling code, which became statutory on 1 April 2024.
- Updates to the corporate complaints policy and procedure to ensure compliance with the updated code produced by the Local Government and Social Care Ombudsman.

It was noted that the report would ordinarily have come to the Housing Review Board before being presented to Cabinet, but this had not been possible due to timing issues.

RESOLVED: that the Housing Review Board note the report.

14 **Results of Tenant Satisfaction Measures Survey 2023/24**

As part of the Social Housing (Regulation) Act 2023, the Regulator for Social Housing stipulated that all registered providers of social housing must undertake an annual perception survey. Within the survey 12 tenant satisfaction measure (TSM) survey questions must be asked and the results of these would need to be submitted to the Regulator so they could monitor performance across the sector. The survey results, survey report and action plan were attached for the Board's consideration.

Based on feedback from the survey, the findings were encouraging particularly when compared to the previous set of results. As a whole, satisfaction had improved across all TSM measures except one (cleanliness and maintenance of communal areas). This was

encouraging as sector wide analysis indicated a 5 year trend showing a clear decline in satisfaction. More recent analysis also showed how the current operating environment, such as the cost of living crisis was also having a significant impact on the increases in dissatisfaction with social landlords.

Although results had improved, there was clearly significant work to do to ensure that tenant satisfaction continued to improve across the housing service. To ensure that tenants' feedback was taken on board, an action plan was being developed alongside a communications plan. The action plan built on work previously outlined (following the 2022/23 results being published) and would be brought to the HRB in November. It also further developed and outlined changes that had been underway in the housing service over the past 12 months following the changes in the senior management structure. In this plan all the TSMs had been highlighted and clear objectives and desired outcomes produced which mapped across to the Service Plan. In devising the content of the action plan, officers had made sure the tenant was at the heart of decisions in an attempt to drive improvement, get better as a landlord, and it was hoped that the TSM survey results in 2024/25, would reflected this in the scores. This financial year tenants would be surveyed quarterly, rather than annually. This would reflect more 'live' data and feedback and ensure that officers were able to flex and respond appropriately.

Officers were congratulated for their improvements, but concern was expressed over the finances involved and whether the improvements were sustainable. The Assistant Director Housing (Regulated Services) responded that this would link into work being undertaken on a review of service charges.

It was noted that if Board members wanted to understand more about certain service areas they could shadow officers in order to increase awareness and understanding on how services operated.

RESOLVED: that the Housing Review Board note the TSM survey results and the action plan would be brought back to the Housing Review Board in November 2024.

15 **Tenant recruitment to the Housing Review Board**

The Interim Assistant Director Housing (Regulated Services)'s report outlined a refreshed approach to the recruitment of co-opted tenant/leaseholder representatives on to the Housing Review Board. Recruitment of tenant and leaseholder representatives had been difficult over recent years and there were currently four out of the five tenant co-optee positions on the Board vacant. It was felt essential that a refreshed approach was taken to attract additional interest and wider demographic representation to ensure future tenant involvement in the scrutiny of the Council's housing services.

Tenant feedback to officers was that some of the restrictions on membership for co-opted members had put up barriers for some tenants who would otherwise have been interested in applying. Additionally some tenant members who had been on the Board in recent years had not regularly attended meetings so the report suggested that expectations surrounding attendance should also be reviewed.

A new application form and job description for the Housing Review Board tenant representative had been created. These were included with the report and the Board were asked to approve this. The application form ensured applicants had acknowledged and self-assessed against the eligibility for standing for Board membership, and

provided the opportunity for them to put forward their desire and passion for being a tenant representative. Key alterations to the job description were:

- Attendance at meetings – to be brought in line with expectations set for district councillors.
- Requirements and exclusions – clarity provided on areas that had been considered ambiguous.
- Person specification – updated to ensure a focus on training and supporting new members, as well as setting out expectations of the role.

The Board recognised that a refreshed approach and efforts were needed to encourage the participation of tenants and leaseholders in the HRB. Officers intended to start a programme of recruitment efforts that would include social media, direct communications with tenants and approaching involved tenants to promote the role. It was suggested that interactive online ways of applying to become a member should also be investigated.

RECOMMENDED: that the Housing Review Board note the content of the report and recommend Cabinet approval of the proposed new tenant representative job description and application form.

16 **Annual Tenant Event**

The Interim Assistant Housing Director (Regulatory Services) gave the Board a verbal update on the Annual Tenant event recently rebranded as the 'Tenant Festival'.

The event will be held on Thursday 22nd August from 10.00am – 4.00pm at the Sid Vale Scout Group Hall.

Attendance List

Board members present:

Sara Clarke, Independent Community Representative
Rob Robinson, Independent Community Representative
Councillor Sarah Chamberlain (Chair)
Councillor Christopher Burhop
Councillor Aurora Bailey
Councillor Simon Smith (Vice-Chair)
Councillor Melanie Martin

Councillors also present (for some or all the meeting)

B Bailey
I Barlow
C Brown
J Brown
R Collins
S Gazzard
M Goodman
J Heath
D Ledger
J Loudoun
T Olive
D Wilson

Officers in attendance:

- Amy Gilbert-Jeans, Assistant Director Housing (Tenancy Services)
- Tracy Hendren, Chief Executive
- Andrew King, Tenancy Services Manager
- Andrew Mitchell, Housing Solutions Service Manager
- Giles Salter, Solicitor
- Sarah James, Democratic Services Officer
- Catrin Stark, Director of Housing and Health (interim)
- John Symes, Finance Manager
- Melanie Wellman, Director of Governance (Monitoring Officer)
- Susie Williams, Responsive Repairs and Voids Service Manager
- Liam Reading, Housing Strategy, Enabling and Projects Service Manager

Chair:

Date: