

EAST DEVON DISTRICT COUNCIL

Minutes of the meeting of Housing Review Board held at Council Chamber, Blackdown House, Honiton, EX14 1EJ on 7 November 2024

Attendance list at end of document

The meeting started at 10.15 am and ended at 12.55 pm

17 Minutes of the previous meeting

The minutes of the meeting held on 1 August 2024 were agreed.

At the start of the meeting the Chair welcomed new tenant representative members Rachel Browne and Rosie Dale to the meeting. Subject to formal co-option by Full Council on 4 December 2024 they would become new tenant members on the Housing Review Board. She also welcomed newly appointed district councillor Jenny Brown onto the Board. There remained another district councillor vacancy which would be filled shortly.

Members questioned when pre-briefings for Board members (minute 8, 1 August 2024 refers) would take place. The Director for Health and Housing responded that the earlier presentation from Currie and Brown was an example of this and that the Scrutiny Improvement Plan was in the process of being delivered. All member briefings across the Council were also about to commence, which were likely to cover housing related matters at times.

A request was made for 'matters arising' to be added to future Housing Review Board agendas.

18 Declarations of interest

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Councillor Aurora Bailey, Affects Non-registerable Interest, Tenant of East Devon District Council.

Declarations of interest.

Councillor Brian Bailey, Affects Non-registerable Interest, Tenant of East Devon District Council.

Declarations of interest.

Councillor Jenny Brown, Affects Non-registerable Interest, Member of Honiton Town Council.

Declarations of interest.

Councillor Sarah Chamberlain, Affects Non-registerable Interest, Employed by Exeter City Council in the housing department.

Declarations of interest.

Councillor Steve Gazzard, Affects Non-registerable Interest, Tenant of East Devon District Council.

Declarations of interest.

Rob Robinson, Affects Non-registerable Interest, Tenant of East Devon District Council.

19 **Public speaking**

There were no members of the public registered to speak.

20 **Matters of urgency**

There were none.

21 **Confidential/exempt item(s)**

There were none.

22 **Housing Review Board forward plan**

The 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.

The Director for Health and Housing asked the Board if the forward plan was demonstrating the type of work plan that they would like to see. She also asked for suggestions from the Board about how additional briefing sessions could be phased into the forward plan and asked for guidance from Members on how they would like officers to do this. It was suggested that an online session be arranged for the Board within the next few weeks to discuss the Housing Review Board forward plan and programming of briefings.

Other items discussed and added to the forward plan:

- An update on the stock condition survey – it was noted that the initial data that had just been received required scrutiny and cross referencing before it was brought back to the Board, but that this would be added to the forward plan. The information would be used to inform the Housing Asset Management Strategy which was on the forward plan to be reported to the Board in April 2025.
- An updated timetable for the output from the stock condition survey to give a forward view of what was happening with the report and what the next dates would be to be presented at the January HRB meeting.
- Housing Revenue Account financial monitoring reports to be included on every HRB agenda.

It was noted that extraordinary meetings could be called if necessary.

23 **Staffing update**

The Interim Assistant Director for Housing (Regulated Services) gave a brief update on staffing changes in the Housing Service. He reported that Susie Williams, Responsive Repairs and Voids Service Manager, had left the organisation at the end of August and he wished her the best of luck in her new role. Recruitment for the role was currently underway. The Interim Assistant Director for Housing (Regulated Services) announced

that his old role of Interim Tenancy Services Manager (Regulated Services) had successfully been backfilled by Darren Hicks. Liam Reading had been appointed as Assistant Director for Housing Programmes, Investment and Development. He also introduced Les Joint, Housing Maintenance Surveyor to the Board. The Interim Assistant Director for Housing (Regulated Services) advised that a formal housing staff structure would be produced with a brief description of the housing roles.

A request was made for an organisational structure chart detailing 'who's who'. In response to a question about staffing levels the Director for Housing and Health replied that she was confident that the right people were in the right posts and that the service was adequately staffed. A reduction in staffing costs had been seen due to a number of agency staff becoming permanent. The number of staff across the teams had remained similar, with the changes in staffing being at higher level. It was noted that the property and asset team was currently understaffed at management level.

24 **Financial monitoring report**

The Finance Manager's report gave a summary of the Council's Housing Revenue Account (HRA) and associated capital programme's overall financial position for 2024/25 at the end of month six (30 September 2024).

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.

Current monitoring indicated that:

- The revised HRA budget approved by Council (July 2024) agreed the use of the HRA balance up to £1.750m in year, with the acceptance that this would take the HRA balance below its minimum adopted level of £2.1m to £1.350m, to be replenished in future years.
- Expenditure was being maintained within this perimeter but further analysis on future spending projections was ongoing to maintain full assurance on this position to year end.

The Finance Manager's report summarised increased flexibilities for financial years 2024/25 and 2025/26 on Right to Buy Receipts, which were announced by the Ministry of Housing, Communities and Local Government on 30 July 2024. By deciding to fund all Right to Buy acquisitions with 100% capital receipts would enable the Council to utilise this limited window of opportunity and also provide the funding required to immediately address an area of significant risk to both the Council and tenants (electrical compliance) without impacting the previously agreed and budgeted borrowing needs.

It was noted that both garage income and lost rent due to voids were greater than expected and this would need to be addressed during the forthcoming budget setting process. The Board also noted the revenue expenditure by categories and the notable variations in expenditure in disrepair and complaints and within supervision and management. Officers explained that there was now greater oversight and scrutiny of the budget and careful monitoring ensured that there was more control on the level of spend due to better knowledge of what was coming forward. The stock condition survey would inform the budget setting process.

The Finance Manager's report also detailed the funding and predicted borrowing requirement. He explained that the potential forecasting available was £7.4m versus a forecast capital expenditure of £13.3m. This left a residual borrowing requirement of £8m rather than the £9.2m originally budgeted for.

RECOMMENDED:

1. that Cabinet acknowledge the variances identified as part of the Revenue and Capital monitoring process up to month six.
2. that Cabinet approve the recommendation contained within the report to fund all Right to Buy acquisitions with 100% Right to Buy capital receipts and the £0.975m of budgeted borrowing released by this be utilised to fund the urgently required electrical compliance work.

25 Performance update

The Housing Review Board were presented with the key performance indicator (KPI) dashboard and the compliance dashboard for quarters one and two 2024/25. The performance report encapsulated complaints data as well as tenant satisfaction measures. The Interim Assistant Director (Regulatory Services) gave a presentation which summarised the performance and actions being taken to improve performance where targets were not being achieved. Targets were set annually and 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:

- Income collection – rent arrears as a percentage of the annual rent that the Council should be receiving. Performance in this area was strong, with the Council above its own target and within the top quartile of landlords nationally.
- Income lost through void properties – although void loss was significantly higher than the top quartile of landlords nationally the housing service was improving its performance, with void loss figures continuing in the right direction.
- Properties vacant and not available to let – the management of the turnover of vacant stock to ensure a reduced number of vacant properties were held at any one time. Performance was below target but continuing to improve in this area.
- Average days to relet homes – there had been an improvement of 55.71 days in this area since the end of 2023/24. Over the last 12 months officers had worked through a backlog of vacant properties whilst balancing this with the void budgets and projected rent loss. There continued to be a positive downward trend.
- Routine repairs completed in target and emergency repairs completed in target – work was being undertaken with the contractors to reconcile outstanding jobs and completion dates, and ensure robust and accurate reporting. Data validation was needed as the systems were recording different target completions. Performance so far was around 5% higher than the previous year. 8,736 routine and emergency repair jobs had been completed across both contractors so far this year.
- Compliance – this area had presented the biggest challenge so far this year, particularly in relation to electrical checks. There had been a huge improvement in performance following a change of contractor.

The Housing Performance Lead reported that good progress had been made on reducing complaints, mainly due to staffing changes and implementing dedicated resources. Communication was a key driver in the complaints system and measures were in place to improve this. There had been an excellent improvement in the response times for stage one complaints from quarter one to quarter two. However, there was a significant backlog of stage two complaint investigations and responses during quarter two. This was largely due to the departure of the Property and Assets Service Manager at the end of August. A task force of senior managers had now been put in place to clear outstanding complaint responses over the next couple of weeks. Officers recognised the need to continuously improve in complaints handling and meet the requirements of the Housing Ombudsman Complaint Handling Code.

Tenant satisfaction had been moved from annual to quarterly surveying in order to review and analyse tenants' satisfaction levels on a more regular basis and be more responsive to any trends. Although it was acknowledged that there was still much room for improvement in the tenant satisfaction measures, improvement had already been achieved since the survey at the end of 2023/24. It was noted that more negative feedback tended to be received during the winter months.

Officers were thanked for the comprehensive report which demonstrated the positive efforts being made to improve performance across all areas. Restaffing of the housing service with the right people in the right posts would continue to support the service to make good progress.

A request was made for a breakdown of void properties into ward areas to be made available for councillors.

RESOLVED: that the Housing Review Board note performance at the end of quarter two, 2024/25.

26 **Housing Revenue Account position statement**

The Housing Strategy, Enabling and Project Manager's report provided the Board with an update on the key plans, strategies and work streams relating to the Housing Revenue Account (HRA). It covered the current financial position, the stock condition survey, the Chartered Institute of Public Finance and Accountability (CIPFA) healthcheck, the HRA sustainability plan, the business plan and options appraisal work, the asset management strategy and the housing investment and delivery plan. These elements collectively formed the strategic plan and framework to establish the financial and operational sustainability of the HRA and this was explained within the report.

The Housing Strategy, Enabling and Project Manager highlighted that the issues facing EDDC's HRA were reflective of national issues and pressures, which included:

- Funding.
- Rent restrictions.
- Ageing housing stock.
- Rising costs.
- Borrowing limits.
- Employment market.

There was an increasing call from local authorities and other interested organisations to review the financial relationship between stock holding authorities and central

government. Despite this EDDC was planning and undertaking significant work to respond to the challenges outlined in the report, with the overall objective of ensuring that EDDC provided the best possible services to its existing tenants and future residents.

The Housing Strategy, Enabling and Project Manager's report provided an update on a series of interlinked plans, workstreams and strategies which aimed to answer 'can the current business model and financial position of the HRA effectively respond to the challenges arising from the stock condition survey and deliver safe, warm, affordable and regulatory compliant homes for our tenants; and does the HRA have capacity to go further and improve our communities and meet the increasing demand for additional affordable homes for residents in East Devon?'. Included as an appendix to the report was a HRA roadmap outlining a projected timeline.

The Board acknowledged that the Council needed to provide good, safe, decent homes, but this needed to be balanced against income.

RECOMMENDED: that Cabinet note the Housing Revenue Account update report.

27 **Acquisitions and disposals policy**

The Housing Strategy, Enabling and Project Manager's report sought approval for the adoption of a Strategic Acquisitions and Disposals Policy for the Council's Housing Revenue Account (HRA) property portfolio. The introduction of the policy would enable the efficient and effective management of the Council's housing stock and other assets. The policy would form part of a comprehensive asset management strategy for the HRA and was being introduced at this stage to provide a framework for any acquisitions or disposals that might be required in advance of the adoption of a comprehensive asset management strategy, to assist in the effective management of the Council's housing stock in the interim period. The strategic acquisitions and disposals policy aimed to align with the broader housing strategy and Council's priorities of addressing the housing needs of residents whilst ensuring sustainable financial management of the HRA. The report outlined the rationale, key objectives and principles behind the acquisitions and disposals policy framework.

The proposed strategic acquisitions and disposals policy offered a proactive approach to managing EDDC's housing stock. By setting clear criteria and objectives for acquisitions and disposals, the Council could ensure it continued to meet the needs of its residents, optimise the use of resources and contribute to wider strategic goals such as reducing homelessness and providing warm, safe and well maintained homes for its tenants.

Concern was expressed over the disposal of properties and officers responded by explaining that disposal of stock might be necessary where properties no longer met strategic or operational objectives. Disposals would be progressed in order to support the efficient and effective financial management of the HRA and to ensure that the Council provided affordable, safe, warm and well maintained homes for its existing tenants. Disposals would be subject to a thorough evaluation process, including independent valuations, stakeholder consultation and assessment of alternative options. Where possible the Council would aim to retain properties for affordable housing.

RECOMMENDED: that Cabinet approve:

1. that the Strategic Acquisitions & Disposals Policy be adopted subject to 2(i) of the policy objectives being amended to 'Enhance Housing Stock; acquire properties

meet the needs of our community, including **good quality**, affordable and accessible housing needs’.

2. that delegated authority be granted to the Director of Housing, in agreement with the S.151 Officer and the Director of Governance & Licensing (the Monitoring Officer), to authorise the disposal of individual non contiguous HRA assets up to a maximum value of **£500,000**, in accordance with the adopted ‘Acquisitions and Disposals Policy’ and in consultation with the Portfolio Holder for Sustainable Homes and Communities.
3. that all acquisitions and disposals within the HRA be reported to the Housing Review Board and Cabinet.

28 **Review and replacement of Home Safeguard equipment**

The Director for Health and Housing updated the Board on the review and replacement of Home Safeguard equipment within housing stock. This was included on the forward plan for April 2025. It was noted that work was progressing towards purchasing a platform and that the Interim Assistant Director for Housing (Regulated Services) would be presenting a report explaining this, along with a timeline.

Attendance List

Board members present:

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

Councillors also present (for some or all the meeting)

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

Officers in attendance:

Sarah James, Democratic Services Officer
Alethea Thompson, Democratic Services Officer
Tracy Hendren, Chief Executive
Andrew King, Interim Assistant Director for Housing (Regulated Services)
Andrew Mitchell, Housing Solutions Service Manager
Giles Salter, Solicitor
Catrin Stark, Director of Housing and Health
John Symes, Finance Manager
Darren Hicks, Interim Tenancy Services Manager (Regulated Services)

Les Joint, Housing Maintenance Surveyor
Liam Reading, Assistant Director - Housing Programmes, Investment and Development

Rosie Dale, Tenant
Rachel Browne, Tenant

Chair

Date: