

Annual report of the Housing Review Board 2018/19

The Chairman and Vice Chairman of the Housing Review Board were Councillor Pauline Stott and Peter Sullivan, respectively.

The Board welcomed new Board members Councillors Helen Parr and John O'Leary in June 2018 and new tenant representative members Alek Williams, Pat Gore and Cat Summers during the year. It also said goodbye to tenant representatives Pat Rous, Joyce Ebborn and Sue Saunders during the year.

Words from the outgoing Chairman

It's been a great privilege begin your Chairman for the last 10 years. I have really enjoy all the work that has gone on in housing over my last year. There are still lots of challenges ahead with the Universal Credit where we are trying to help people in lots of ways with all our tenants that have been affected by the changes. They have been visited and advice given, we also have two people at Exeter and Honiton job centres to advise them as well.

The homelessness is also a big challenge, with more people requiring accommodation. We have just purchased an 8 bedroom house for people needing this urgent accommodation. My thanks to all the people in that department for the fantastic work they do to try and help people. Now we have a great strategy on Homelessness, it's worth a read.

Exciting times for the tenants with the new repairs contact starting in July with Ian Williams. This I think will improve the services for repairs that we give our tenants.

My last duty as your chairman was to have a modular house workshop in which staff and councillors were invited. It was good to hear the pro and cons for these homes though it seems that they were no cheaper than a brick built home, but the advantage was they were cheaper to heat. I was hoping to run one on Mod boxes for single people as something like that is desperately needed.

I would like to thank all the tenants for all the work they contributed to the Housing Review Board, it's good to have all your input. Thanks. To all the staff you all do great work in housing. I am sure you are not appreciated enough, it's sometimes a very difficult job. Many thanks to John Golding and Amy Gilbert and her team, Sue Bewes, Andrew Mitchell and Paul Lowe to name just a few of the fantastic staff that keep this service going. I will miss you all thanks.

The Board

The remit of the Board covers:

- Advising the Cabinet on the Council's landlord activities and functions affecting tenants and leaseholders;
- Maintaining an active involvement in the on-going review of the options for the future ownership and management of Council owned homes, and to make recommendations;
- Promoting good practice and overseeing service improvements;
- Monitoring performance on core housing management activities and reporting to the Cabinet;
- Preparation of the Housing Revenue Account budget and Business Plan;
- Promoting tenant and leaseholder involvement and implementation of the Tenant and Council Partnership Statement;

- Consulting with the Tenant Involvement Forum, who liaise with tenant groups and representatives;
- Encouraging good practice in relation to equality and diversity issues, and ensuring that the needs of vulnerable tenants are satisfied;
- Advise on any other matters affecting the Council's landlord duties and responsibilities.

The Board has continued in its role of introducing service improvements and monitoring throughout the year, liaising with the Tenant Involvement Forum (TIF) as appropriate. Some examples from the HRB work programme are summarised below:

Draft Housing Revenue Account and Capital Budgets 2019/20

The draft Housing Revenue Account for 2018/19 was a key document for the Board to influence. The annual HRA was underpinned and influenced by the 30 year HRA Business Plan. 2012/13 saw the major reform to social housing finance and a move to self-financing, which involved the Council taking on debt rather than paying a subsidy to government from tenants' rents. As a result this showed a healthy HRA balance going into the 2018/19 financial year. The budget was produced in accordance with Housing Revenue Account Business Plan assumptions. The main sources of anticipated income for 2019/20 were rents, garage rents and support charges. It was the final year of the Government's four-year rent reduction policy. The greatest risk to income was the transfer of tenants to Universal Credit. The Board's attention was drawn the properties purchased during 2018/19.

Future rent policy

Following a period of rent reduction and a consultation exercise Government had confirmed a future rent increase of CPI + 1% for a period of five years. There would also be a rent standard published by the Social Housing Regulator that would be applicable to all local authorities. The Business Plan would be updated to reflect this and rent set with regard to national rent setting policy.

Draft Housing Service Plan 2019/20

The Service Plan is produced annually and sets out the key achievements over the past year and the forthcoming issues to be faced by the service. A range of service improvements were identified, performance data reported, consultation proposals outlined and budget information provided to the Board. Headlines from the service plan included a revision of the Housing Revenue Account Business Plan, integrated asset management contract, a focus on mental health and Home Safeguard expansion.

HRA financial monitoring reports

A summary of the overall financial position on the Housing Revenue Account (HRA), HRA Capital Programme and the Business Plan for 2018/19 has been regularly provided at meetings. Careful monitoring throughout the year indicated that the HRA was being maintained at/above the adopted level and the Business Plan position remained healthy. There was a surplus over the adopted range for the HRA balance and this was transferred to a Future Housing Development Fund.

Integrated asset management procurement and contract

A major piece of work throughout the year was the procurement and preparations for mobilisation of the integrated asset management contract. The Board were kept updated throughout the year on progress to renew the contract for day to day repairs and void work to council housing stock and the mobilisation process for the new contractor. Tenants were heavily involved in the process and officers attended Tenant Involvement Forum meetings to ensure that tenants were kept informed of progress.

The contract was awarded to Ian Williams Ltd and the new contract would commence on 1 July 2019. Representatives from Ian Williams Ltd attended a meeting in March 2019 to meet the Board and explain who they were and how the contract would work.

Homelessness in East Devon and Homelessness Reduction Act

Preparations were made throughout the year for changes as a result of the Homelessness Reduction Act, with more onerous homelessness duties being enacted. There were greater resource implications for the Council. Although the Homelessness Reduction Act fell outside of Housing Review Board's remit, the HRB were kept up to date with the new legislation to tackle homelessness, which required a complete review of current systems. EDDC were faced with challenges of rising levels of homelessness and securing temporary accommodation and long term affordable housing for homeless households. There was an extended set of statutory duties to tackle homelessness and an increase in homeless approaches, more complex cases and a reduction in available accommodation. This had implications on the Housing Revenue Account.

Homelessness Strategy

In March 2019 the Homelessness and Rough Sleeping Strategy 2019-2023 was presented to the Board. This was a statutory requirement, as directed by the Homelessness Act 2002 and a general fund had been adopted by Cabinet.

House of multiple occupation purchase, Exmouth

In September 2018 the Board considered the purchase of a property to use as a house of multiple occupation (HMO). Securing a suitable property to use as an HMO would save on B&B costs and was expected to generate savings for the Council. It also provided reliable and quickly accessible accommodation for those in greatest need without the disruption of moving between establishments on a regular basis. The Board agreed that this type of accommodation would be a beneficial addition to the Council's property portfolio.

Modular homes in social housing

The Board received a report in June 2018 on the potential for using modular homes as part of the Council's response to housing need. A further report was presented to the Board in March 2019 on the use of shipping containers as temporary accommodation.

Revision to the tenancy agreement

The Board were kept up to date with progress on the development of a revised tenancy agreement. There had been a project group to revise the tenancy agreement and ensure that it reflected changes in policy and legislation. Tenants were updated through the Tenant Involvement Panel and suggested amendments were received through the Tenant's Reader Panel. There was also statutory consultation with tenants. Housing policies were revised and updated to ensure they were consistent with the revised tenancy agreement. The new tenancy agreement would come into effect on 17 June 2019.

Universal Credit update

The Board were given latest information on the roll out of Universal Credit (UC) and the actions being taken to mitigate, as far as possible, the potential loss to Housing Revenue Account income. UC represented one of the biggest risks in the Business Plan. UC was introduced in the eastern area of East Devon in July 2018, followed by the western area in September 2018.

Poverty, housing and safeguarding

The Board considered a report which explained the links between social policy, increasing levels of poverty, homelessness and safeguarding. This was to better understand how poverty was impacting on people and communities and to ensure that the Council's tenants and other housing customers were safeguarded through the adoption of up to date safeguarding practices.

Fire safety

Fire safety was a regular theme in Housing Review Board meetings. A number of fire safety actions were being undertaken by EDDC to keep tenants safe as a housing authority and responsible landlord. EDDC's responsibility for fire safety in its buildings were outlined. In June 2018 Dame Judith Hackett's report on her review of Building Regulations and Fire Safety, following the Grenfell Tower tragedy was brought to the Board's attention. It acted as a reminder to EDDC as a housing authority and responsible landlord of its responsibility for fire safety in its buildings. In September 2018 the Board were shown a brief video which demonstrated working involving the commissioning an external specialist to inspect the installation of fire doors within the Council's housing stock – it was then published as part of fire door safety awareness week (24-30 September). In November 2018 the Board were asked to decide a programme of fire safety works.

Lift replacement at Poplar Mount, Axminster

In September 2018 the Board were asked to consider the urgent replacement of lifts to ensure tenants' homes were accessible at all times. Three options for the lift replacement were considered and the Board recommended that delegated authority be given to the appropriate officer to specify the most suitable option for lift replacement in accordance with an in-depth feasibility study of the site, cost implications, as well as the opportunity for tenant consultation to achieve an outcome favoured by the majority of tenants.

Roof replacement across various sites

The Board requested that additional funding be provided from the Housing Revenue Account to complete roof replacement works to a number of Council properties. Roof replacement was considered the best solution economically, rather than maintaining the roofs on a reactive basis.

Tenant Scrutiny Panel report – scrutinising community centres

The Tenant Scrutiny Panel presented their report to the HRB in June, which reviewed the recommendations of scrutinising community centres. There had been a vast improvement with evidence of efficient management and good organization in the running of the community centres.

Void performance

Improving the speed of turning void properties around for re-occupation was a priority and plans for improvement were identified. Key performance indicators would be embedded from the start of the new integrated asset management contract in terms of void turnaround times. Tenant inspectors would be empowered to continue their inspection visits in order to provide officers with reassurance that from a tenant's perspective the high standards tenants had come to expect were still being met.

Other issues reviewed by the Board during the year have included:

- Review of housing policies – which would be monitored for compliance, variations and application.
- Housing and safeguarding report to Devon Safeguarding Adults Board – the Board were presented with a report that had been produced for the Devon Safeguarding Adults Board on housing and safeguarding. Safeguarding was the core responsibility

and business for a housing provider. EDDC wanted to be seen as an exemplar in terms of good practice.

- Rent payment cards – this had been raised by a district councillor and council housing tenant and an explanation was given on of the change from the use of rent books to rent cards.
- Void property: 4 Camperdown Terrace, Exmouth - a decision was sought on how to deal with the void process of a council property when taking into consideration possible Exmouth regeneration aspirations.
- Extension to Homemaker contract – the primary purpose of Homemaker was to prevent homelessness and promote independence. They offered specialist advice and support to individuals and families who may be at risk of losing their home. They also offered support to people who may be moving into new accommodation and living independently for the first time.
- Community Development update – a presentation was received by the HRB informing them of the activities and projects that Community Development Workers had undertaken. Many of the events and opportunities were for the whole community, not just housing tenants. The team helped to make families 'better families'.
- Installation of defibrillators across East Devon – an opportunity was presented to the Board to install defibrillators across in community centres across the district.
- Housing Green Paper – a new deal for social housing. A report summarising the detail of the green paper and outlining suggestions to form the basis of EDDC's response was considered by the Board in September 2019.
- Consultation on the use of receipts from Right to Buy sales and EDDC's proposed response strongly advocating greater control over the use of Right to Buy receipts for local authorities.
- Legionella policy – approved a revised policy in relation the Council's responsibilities of legionella management within its housing stock.
- Adaptations to council properties – the Board received a report detailing progress being made in relation to ensuring the Landlord Disabled Adaptation Policy was being applied consistently and that tenants were being supported to live independently in their homes. A further report set out a further report recommending that the policy was reviewed every two years or sooner if there was a significant legislative need to review the position.
- Renewal of Advantage South West subscription – the Board noted the benefits of the membership of Advantage South West and recommended continuing membership to the organisation.
- Annual report to tenants 2017/18 – widely distributed to tenants, staff and councillors during autumn 2018.
- Compliance monitoring – the Board received a report raising awareness of compliance matters that related to management of the Council's housing stock.
- Quarterly monitoring reports – measuring performance across the housing service.
- HouseMark benchmarking report – housing costs and performance among peers was considered.
- Housing research study: Your wellbeing, your home – the Board were updated on the first stage of a joint three year project with the University of Birmingham and LiveWest, exploring the relationship between housing, wellbeing and landlord satisfaction.
- Policy housing note on the Mental Health Capacity Act 2015 – this would be used to facilitate the necessary decisions to be made in relation to council housing services,

including homelessness, ensure the best interests of individuals whose mental capacity may be in doubt, minimise recourse to litigation.

- Brexit preparations – the Housing Revenue Account Business Plan would be ‘stress tested’ using a number of different scenarios to understand the potential impact of Brexit on tenants and customers of the housing service.
- Together with Tenants National Housing Federation – this document had been produced in response to the Housing Green Paper and the aftermath of the Grenfell tragedy.
- Devon Home Choice update