

Annual Report of the Housing Review Board 2009/10

May 2009 brought a change of Chairman to the Board, with Ted Brown as Chairman and Councillor Douglas Hull as Vice-Chairman.

Words from the Chairman

"The year has been a busy time for the Housing Review Board, we have considered some 42 reports. The uncertainties, due to the General Election, the appointment of a new Regulator for Social Housing, and the Review of Council Housing Finance, have all played their part. We look forward to the possibility of being able, once again, to build homes for those who cannot afford to buy on the open market, or rent at commercial rates. A home to live in, and if desired, in which to raise a family is a basic requirement within any civilised society. I say homes, not houses or dwellings, because they need to be 'fit for purpose' to be designed and appropriate, for living in the 21st century, in communities that are safe to live in and have the amenities that a well regulated community should provide. The HRB is committed to raising standards, increasing Tenant choice, ensuring 'value for money' and continually improving the services that Housing and Social Inclusion should provide.

My thanks go to the Officers, Councillors and Tenants who co-operate with the Board making it possible to achieve its objectives."

The Board

The remit of the Board covers:

- Advising the Executive Board 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 make recommendations;
- Promoting good practice and oversee Service improvements;
- Monitor performance on core housing management activities and report to the Executive Board;
- Preparation of the Housing Revenue Account budget and business plan;
- Promoting tenant and leaseholder involvement and implementation of the Tenant Compact;
- Consulting with the Tenant and Leaseholder Customer Panel;
- Encouraging good practice in relation to equality and diversity issues, and ensure that the needs of vulnerable tenants are satisfied.

The Board has continued in its role of monitoring throughout the year, liaising with the Tenant and Leaseholder Customer Panel (TaLCP) as appropriate, with particular focus on the following key areas:

Sheltered Housing Review

An extensive review of each sheltered housing scheme was undertaken by a Task and Finish Forum, establishing an effective scoring system with regard to location, popularity and size. Each scheme was visited and valuable input from support staff helped the TaFF score each one. This led to a proposed schedule of properties deemed suitable for decommissioning over a 1, 3 or 5 year programme. In the coming civic year, work will continue to establish cost and legal implications of the decommissioning process.

Devon Home Choice

The regional choice based lettings scheme went online for most Devon authorities in December 2009. The Board have been regularly updated on the progress in implementing the scheme and debated methods for individuals to make their applications. The flexibility of the system in providing information and reporting has been demonstrated to the Board, along with the "front end" of the system that an applicant would view once registered. Issues raised on registering by the Board have been fully considered, and options and assistance available to applicants made clear. Concerns raised by members of the TaLCP on the preferred method to join the register have been addressed and measures are being implemented, including to offer a paper application as an alternative to the online application, and publishing information on how to register and what information is needed to complete the application.

Bid for Social Housing Grant

The Board gave their support to bids for Social Housing Grants from the Homes and Communities Agency. Four bids for building properties at Normandy Close in Exmouth, Churchill Court in Lypmstone, and Heals Field and Waggs Plot in Axminster would collectively provide 17 homes, but required a significant level of borrowing from the Council's Housing Revenue Account. The bids were successful and work begins from the end of April, with completion within a year.

Millwey Rise Community Centre

A working party had originally been set up to look at future options for the community centre at Millwey Rise. The Board have been kept informed of the progress of the working party, which had now extended its remit to also look at the proposals of the local Football Club and moving a play area to a more suitable location. The Board is keen for the running costs of the centre to continue to be met by the Council and continues to support the work of the working party in reaching solutions to the needs of the community.

Reform of Council Housing Finance

July 2009 brought a consultation paper on the reform of council housing finance, to move away from the ring fenced Housing Revenue Account system and subsidy regime. In response to lobbying, the government had indicated a willingness to reform and issued the paper covering the freedoms and flexibilities from the current HRA accounting rules; but with both options presented, involving local housing authorities taking on part of the national housing debt. The Board were disappointed with the proposals set out in the consultation paper, preferring to respond that the debt should be written off rather than redistributed to other authorities. A prospectus, entitled "Council Housing: a real future" was published in March 2010 and considered by the Board in April. The Board held concern about the proposals and will consider robust financial advice before making a recommendation on a response to the prospectus, which will be put to the Executive Board and Council.

New regulatory framework for social housing by the Tenant Services Authority

The Tenant Services Authority (TSA) was set up in December 2008 as a result of the Housing and Regeneration Act 2009. The TSA consulted nationally back in November 2009 on how they proposed to regulate social housing, by developing a set of standards with a goal of raising the standards of services for social housing tenants. The Board considered the proposed ten principles of regulation offered by the TSA and agreed a response to the consultation, including their concern about negative housing subsidy. The Board were also keen to start preparation for the new regulations that came into force from April 2010. The regulatory framework has now been published, and the Board will work closely with the Housing Strategy Unit and tenants in establishing how the framework will be implemented locally.

Introductory Tenancies

The Board considered the use of Introductory Tenancies under Section 124 of the Housing Act 1996. Introductory Tenancies operate for the first 12 months of a tenancy and at the expiry of this period the tenancy 'matures' to a secure tenancy. At the time of 'signing up' a new secure tenancy, a limited amount of information is available to housing staff about the tenant and their household. In many instances it is not until after the new tenant has moved in and a subsequent breach of tenancy is reported that the Council becomes aware of behaviour that is unacceptable. Experience shows that most new tenants who are likely to breach their tenancy agreement in some way will do so within a short period of time. Introductory tenancies give the landlord the opportunity to deal effectively with breaches of tenancy conditions within the first 12 months of the tenancy without recourse to a protracted legal process.

Equality and Diversity

The Board has closely monitored improvements in the Housing service in relation to equality and diversity issues. The Audit Commission's recommendations included improving the sensitivity of the service to the diversity of tenants, which has been achieved by updating the existing Racial Equality policy to comply with current standards, and undertaking a tenant profiling exercise. A Managers statement on diversity has also been adopted.

Tenant Scrutiny

The Board considered two reports on the concept of tenant scrutiny, an independent function from the Housing Review Board to scrutinise both the Housing Service and the Board itself. Good practice from the Chartered Institute of Housing has been considered and the Board has agreed for a Scrutiny Panel to be initiated, comprising of tenant members. A review of tenant participation will be undertaken alongside preparing and recruiting that panel.

Systems Thinking Review

Regular updates on progress of the systems thinking review of the Housing Service have been made to the Board throughout the year. The Board has been impressed with the work undertaken by the Service in redesigning, experimentation and evaluation of the service.

Benchmarking

Using the HouseMark benching product, the Housing Service could now regularly report to the Board on comparison data relating to cost, resource and performance against 41 other authorities. The process allows easy identification of issues and points to authorities which perform better, who may have examples of good practice to learn from.

Review of the Housing Review Board

A self assessment evening of the Board was held on 27 April 2010, looking at the Board's strengths, weaknesses, opportunities and threats and how to develop positive elements to improve effectiveness.

Other issues reviewed by the Board during the year included:

- Review of communal cleaning and caretaking following increased complaints and Audit Commission recommendations;
- Monitoring of the Housing Revenue Account, with a review planned in the next civic term;
- Review of improvement works for St. Pauls, Heathpark;
- Regular monitoring of letting void properties;
- Adopting new proposals for dealing with tenancy fraud;
- Considering erosion risk to council properties in Tipton Vale;
- Acknowledgement of the continued good service from the Estates Management Team.