

## **EAST DEVON DISTRICT COUNCIL**

### **Minutes of a meeting of the Housing Review Board held at Knowle, Sidmouth on 1 May 2008**

**Present:**

Councillors:	Co-opted tenant members:
Mrs A E Liverton (Chairman)	Mr T Brown (Vice Chairman)
Miss V Ash	Mrs A Bickham
J Humphreys	Mr V Kemp
J Knight	Mrs C Morrison
	Mrs S Saunders
EDDC Officers:	Co-opted independent community representatives:
Sue Bewes, Housing Strategy Manager	Mrs H Williamson
Dennis Boobier, Housing Needs Manager	
John Golding, Head of Housing & Social Inclusion	
Jill Johnson, Housing Business Manager	
Giles Salter, Solicitor	
Rachel Perram, Democratic Services Officer	

**Also Present:**

Councillors:  
Mrs P A Stott

**Apologies:**

Councillor Miss J Elson

Co-opted Ind. Community representative, Mr R Finch

The meeting started at 6.30pm and ended at 9.47pm

\*85 **Minutes**

The minutes of the meeting of the Housing Review Board held on 6 March 2008, were confirmed and signed as a true record.

\*86 **Welcome and News**

The Chairman welcomed Councillor Mrs Stott to the meeting and was pleased to welcome back Dennis Boobier.

The Chairman was delighted to report another very successful community coffee morning – this time held at St. Pauls, in Honiton. Although several Members had been unable to attend, due to a diary clash with a civic day, the Chairman was pleased to have been involved – and thanked Sue Saunders, Heather Williamson, Ted Brown and Ann Bickham. The morning had been facilitated well by Sue Bewes.

Unlike other events there were no general complaints to feedback to the Housing Service, only tenancy difficulties. One homeless person had come in and had been assisted in finding somewhere to stay for the night.

More coffee mornings were being scheduled during the year to carry on the good work achieved so far.

\*87 **Question and Answer Session**

**Housing Allocations**

The Board had received a set of questions in advance of the meeting from Cllr Douglas Hull regarding the allocation of housing stock in East Devon. The Housing Needs Manager was able to respond back with replies as follows:

Q. How many people from outside East Devon have been allocated housing in the past year?

A. 5 to 6. Of these, most would have fallen into bronze band Choice Based Lettings category, and most were housed in sheltered accommodation. These people tended to be elderly and wanted to move into the area to be closer to family.

Q. Of those, how many were from other ethnic groups and the reasons for their allocation?

A. None. For information, less than 1% of EDDC's tenants are from other ethnic groups – migration from outside the UK is not a significant issue in East Devon.

Q. How many people in total are there on the housing list now, and has this figure come down over the past year?

A. There are more than 4,500 people on the Housing Register at present and this number is growing steadily.

**Contractor Appointment Cancellations**

A question was raised as to whether the Council had a procedure in hand for 'no shows' in respect of contractors, when there was a scheduled date that had not been kept. The Chairman advised that the officers would look into this.

**RESOLVED** that the Housing Services Team would investigate Council procedure with regard to contractor householder visit cancellations and would advise the Board as to the outcome.

**Weycroft Community Centre Working Party**

In response to a question on the progress on forming this group, the Board was advised that this was well in hand. Emma Charlton, Housing Projects Officer was involved in progressing the initiative and a first meeting had been scheduled for the working party on 29 May at the hall.

**Hire of EDDC Land for Community Events**

The Head of Housing and Social Inclusion reminded the Board of a question raised at the last meeting of the Board in March. Street Scene had been consulted on this matter which had been debated by the Council's Scrutiny Committee last year. That Committee had agreed that charges for use of Council land would only be levied in the case of commercial activities, such as sales or fairs. Any charitable and bona fide community events would be free of charges for land hire.

Sue Saunders gave her thanks to John Golding for looking into this matter and was delighted that her forthcoming community event at Exmouth would be charge-free.

\*88 **Welcome the new tenant and leaseholder representative**

The Chairman was delighted to welcome Ann Bickham, who had recently been selected by the Tenant and Leaseholder Customer Panel to represent them on the Board. Mrs Bickham would officially be co-opted onto the Board at the forthcoming Annual Council meeting in May.

## **Housing Review Board Annual Report 2007/08 and Forward Plan**

The Head of Housing and Social Inclusion presented the Annual Review Report on the work of the Housing Review Board, which had been prepared by Democratic Services for inclusion at the Annual Meeting of the Council. This report served as a useful reminder of the work carried out by the Board over the past year, and was felt to be a helpful document.

Also included was the Forward Plan. The Head of Housing and Social Inclusion advised the Board that Government's Boundary Committee was currently reviewing arrangements for local government throughout Devon. Initial feedback was due from the Committee in July. In light of this, it was suggested that the review of the Housing Stock Options be delayed until the Boundary Committee's intentions were reported as this could have a significant impact on the current arrangements.

Concerns were voiced from members of the Board about the delay and the possible effect that it would have upon the ability to delivery the appraisal on time, however it was felt that conducting this appraisal for a second time would be an easier process (due to lessons learned). The Board was reminded that there was no specified date for completion of the Housing Stock Options Appraisal process and that it was a date chosen by the Board.

**RECOMMENDED** that the Housing Stock Options Review be delayed until the Council hears back from the Boundary Committee in July.

In response to a question over the River Otter Flood Prevention works at Tipton Vale, the Head of Housing and Social Inclusion advised that as a landlord there was concern and responsibility for housing stock which was close to the problem area. EDDC officers were looking into the risk and making an assessment. The area of the river bank had suffered from considerable erosion over recent years, with the River Otter re-routing itself towards the playing field and surrounding fields. Although this had seemed to be the responsibility of the Rivers Authority or the Environment Agency, there had been strong debate over where ownership lay.

\*90

### **Audit Commission recommendations – monitoring report**

The Head of Housing and Social Inclusion presented the latest version of this report for information. A to-do list had been added to ensure that the Council was doing everything possible to meet the Audit Commission's recommendations. It was important to be able to justify fully all Council actions and also to surpass their recommendations.

#### **Appointments System**

The Board was advised that the best practice was that a tenant be given a date for responsive repairs on their first contact with the Council. EDDC did not currently operate this system, instead calling the tenant back with a date, once contact had been made with the contractor for the works to be carried out. The possibilities of an appointment on first contact were being explored.

#### **Rechargeable Repairs**

A request was made for a report back to the Board on the progress of this recently adopted policy.

**RESOLVED** that the Housing Services Manager report back on the progress of rechargeable works to the Board in 6 months and thereafter yearly. This would be added as a requirement in the Forward Plan.

A query was raised by a tenant member regarding satisfaction forms which did not appear to be being issued by the council upon completion of works to tenants' homes. The Head of Housing and Social Inclusion said that this would be investigated, and rectified.

## **Audit Commission recommendations – monitoring report cont'd...**

### **Void Property Turnaround**

A tenant member stated that there had been news in the press that one council, with a housing stock of 3,000 properties, achieved a turnaround of just 15 days. The Board felt that it would be interesting to find out how this had been possible.

The Housing Needs Manager advised that most councils provide core statistics on their performance with such matters. The average void turnaround was 36 days in the South West. The 15 day claim would be investigated and the council identified.

### **Ambition**

A co-opted independent community representative was concerned to read about a 'lack of ambition' among officers that had been identified in the report.

The Head of Housing and Social Inclusion had detected that there had been a lack of enthusiasm from some officers in embracing the comments from the Audit Commission. Measures were in place to turn this around and to have a more ambitious and 'can do' team. The Housing Review Board was also encouraged to help drive the improvement agenda forward and to help keep officers under pressure to perform. Staff Development and mentoring were also seen as important and the continued hard work of the team was valued and noted.

### **Christmas Rent Break**

The Tenant members requested that the Council consider offering a rent-free period over Christmas – by paying larger amounts over say a 50 week period – in a similar way to Council Tax collections and will be applying Systems Thinking to this area of service.

The Head of Housing and Social Inclusion confirmed that the council was already looking at how rent should be collected in the future.

## **91 Business Case for Additional Staff**

The Head of Housing and Social Inclusion presented this report to the Board. It was apparent that in some areas the Service was under resourced when compared with other authorities and that the officers had reached capacity at current staffing levels. The report was a summary of proposals put forward by the managers in the Service.

Four new posts had been proposed and costed. The rental staff would help pay for their staffing needs by improvements in rent collection rates. This will actually generate a surplus in funds, which would contribute to the cost of a generic housing officer to support the several teams.

In response to a query over the effect that Vanguard work might have upon the way that the Housing Service operated, the Head of Housing and Social Inclusion responded that flexibility in working would be key in the new system with a focus that is important to customers. It was hoped that officers could be re-deployed if the need arose to dramatically reconfigure service areas.

The Head of Housing and Social Inclusion advised the Board that any savings made would remain in the Housing Revenue Account. It was noted that the Council was very lean in Estate Management compared with other authorities – it would be good to be in a position to undertake more pro-active work.

**RECOMMENDED** that the two temporary Rental Officer and Rental Assistant posts both be made permanent posts and that a generic Housing Officer post be established.

## **Business Case for Additional Staff cont'd...**

### **Housing Review Board – Training Needs and Development**

Tenants raised concerns that their strengths were not coming through at Board meetings. Training was identified as being the vehicle for development so that tenants would have the skills to better present their views at meetings.

Cllr Humphreys advised the Board that a working party had been set up to look at Councillor development and that the tenants needs could be discussed at their next meeting.

A member advised that the Vice Chairman had produced a good paper on training and this could be presented at the next meeting of the Housing Review Board. It was recognised as important to respect and address the tenants' needs but equally important to deliver focused, relevant training.

The Chairman thought that the tenants underestimated their knowledge and experience. It was also noted that the Housing Review Board relied upon the particular specialist professional knowledge and skills of the officers in the Housing Service.

- RESOLVED**
- 1 that the training paper produced by the Vice Chairman be presented at the next meeting of the Housing Review Board, and
  - 2 that a list of past training be produced for the next meeting.

## **92 Estate Management Procedures**

The Board noted the contents of this report and it was hoped that by setting down guidance in the form of procedures there would be an improvement in the handling of complex cases. The Board were reminded that estate management was one of the strengths identified by the Audit Commission.

Concerns were raised regarding the usage of council-owned and rented garages. It was felt that many were used for storage (both domestic and commercial) and other uses and not for garaging vehicles.

A tenant member raised the issue of social inclusion with regard to partially sighted tenants. There was concern that these tenants may not be able to read important correspondence from the Council. The Head of Housing and Social Inclusion advised that the Council was aware of this issue. The Tenant Profiling exercise would be designed to identify such issues.

- RESOLVED**
- 1 that an update be provided for the next meeting on Council-owned garage usage and occupancy, and
  - 2 that the word 'Christian' name be replaced with the word 'first' on Page 60 for 'letters sent'.

- RECOMMENDED** that the draft estate management procedures set out in the report be adopted (with the above change to wording in the Letters Sent section).

## 93 **Non Secure Tenancy Agreement**

The Solicitor presented this report to the Board and advised that the non-secure tenancy agreement had been updated due to a legal challenge to the last version. The Board noted the contents and made several observations.

### **Non-secure Tenancies**

In response to a query over the length of time that a tenant could potentially remain 'non-secure', the Board was assured that the Housing Needs Manager made sure that all tenants were converted to a secure tenancy as soon as was practical to do so. Non-secure tenancies were reviewed quarterly.

The Housing Needs Manager clarified that:

Secure Tenants – had been housed under Part 6 of the 1996 Housing Act

Non-secure Tenants – were placed temporarily in the Council's housing stock and there is no legal time limit on these arrangements.

A question was raised as to why non-secure tenants needed to advise the Council of holidays or periods when their temporary accommodation would be unoccupied. The Council's Solicitor advised the Board that there had been several instances where tenants had been allocated temporary housing, left their possessions and then gone travelling for long periods of time. Other tenants had sub-let their accommodation for financial gain or other reasons. As this type of housing was allocated on a 'need' basis, it was reasonable to expect a tenant to use the accommodation as their first and only residence and to hand it back if not required.

This clause enables the Council to serve notice if a property was unoccupied for 28 days. These tenants differ significantly from Secure tenants. The Board was assured that legal action would only be taken where necessary, and with advice from officers of the Council.

### **Demoted Tenancies**

This came about from the Anti-Social Behaviour Act 32003 and states that if there was behaviour at a property which would allow an injunction for anti-social behaviour or illegal behaviour, the Council had certain demotion powers at its disposal.

There was a two-part legal process:

Stage One – Following a breach of tenancy, court proceedings can be initiated which served a notice to demote the tenancy by court order for a 12 month period. After this period, if the tenant was still behaving in an unacceptable manner, they were given the opportunity to cease their bad behaviour and usually had a period to comply.

Stage Two – after twelve months of demoted status the tenant had a face to face review (for which they could seek legal advice or help from a Citizens Advice Bureau). If the decision was that the tenant had improved, tenancy could revert back to being secure.

- RECOMMENDED**
- 1 that the Non Secure Tenancy Agreement be approved and adopted and that
  - 2 that the use of Demoted Tenancies, in appropriate circumstances be authorised.

## 94 **Decommissioning (review) of sheltered housing**

The Head of Housing and Social Inclusion advised the Board that this was an initial scoping report and contained various proposals for the future of the Council's sheltered housing stock. It was anticipated that the Council would probably have to de-commission 25% of stock.

### **Decommissioning (review) of sheltered housing cont'd...**

Supporting People were major financial contributors to the cost of support in the Council's sheltered housing stock services. It was important for the Board to note that, with changes in funding allocations, this organisation would probably look to justify and possibly re-allocate their support – which could be towards a private sector focus.

It was noted that 18 months ago the Council made the decision to move from resident wardens to mobile support officers for the provision of housing related support to sheltered tenants.

Decommissioning was a big issue and would involve a consultation process at several points, and this would involve the Tenant and Leaseholder Customer Panel.

The Council was aware that there were a number of tenants who did not necessarily need the level of support that sheltered housing offered.

It was suggested that the Board might like to establish a Task and Finish Forum (TaFF) to steer, support and oversee the project.

It was clear that tenants had a great number of concerns, including such issues as:

- Elderly people being forced to move to private sector housing due to lack of available housing stock
- More young homeless people being placed into sheltered housing estates with no systems in place to monitor
- Ageing population in East Devon & how the Council is planning to accommodate tenants with more complex needs

On the subject of mixed tenant groups, the Board was reminded of the experiences at Custance House in Honiton, where homeless households and older people occupied the same block of flats.

The Head of Housing and Social Inclusion advised the Board that the Council had a model for sheltered housing that had worked very well and this should not be lost, however due to current pressures and higher tenant expectations, 'no change' was not an option.

The Council was currently unable to cater for tenants who had a need for 'extra care' housing. The Council recognised the need to modernise the current housing stock and to invest to make properties appropriate for use.

**RECOMMENDED** that a Task and Finish Forum (TaFF) be established to progress the review and decommissioning of sheltered housing with members to include: Cllrs Miss Ash, J Knight, J Humphreys, Ann Bickham, Sue Saunders and Christine Morrison.

## 95 **Allocation of sheltered housing**

The Head of Housing and Social Inclusion advised the Board that this report followed on from the previous report and was designed to look at improving internal liaison and communication within the Council's housing teams. The aim was to improve the way in which the Council made decisions regarding the allocation of temporary accommodation within sheltered housing schemes. The policy looked to minimise disruption for the communities as well as optimising income by making good use of the stock and housing opportunities.

**Allocation of sheltered housing cont'd...**

Placing young families and homeless people into sheltered housing stock had been problematic in some cases; a revised system of allocation/consideration was needed to assess the appropriateness of tenants.

There were also issues such as concessionary TV licensing in multi-occupancy dwellings which needed to be considered for long term sheltered secure tenants.

The Board was reminded that nearly a third of the Council's housing stock was allocated to elderly tenants, and the issue of mixing younger people with sheltered tenants was a potential problem. The new Non-secure Tenancy Agreement was designed to help tackle inappropriate behaviour and would be enforced when necessary.

**RECOMMENDED** that the approach for allocating sheltered housing to general needs and homeless households as set out in the report be adopted.

96 **Election scheme for tenant and leaseholder appointments to the Housing Review Board**

The Board noted the contents of this report and was in agreement with the process of selection for tenant members.

**RECOMMENDED** that the scheme for selecting tenants to the Housing Review Board as set out in the report be adopted.

97 **Systems Thinking in housing to deliver excellent service for our customers**

The Chairman highlighted that the approach of Systems Thinking was an excellent way for the Housing Service to review and improve their services to customers. The Chairman was however concerned to note a proposal for this work be funded by the Housing Revenue Account to a sum of £10,000 would likely come forward at a future date. The Board felt strongly that any decision on funding should be referred to the Board for consideration. Accordingly the Deputy Chief Executive would be invited to attend the next meeting of the Board to discuss this project and to request the funding.

The Head of Housing and Social Inclusion advised the Board that the project was unlikely to start in full until September.

**RECOMMENDED**

1. that the plans for the application of Systems Thinking be noted and that;
2. the Deputy Chief Executive be invited to attend the next meeting of the Housing Review Board on 12 June to discuss the project and its funding.

98 **Investigation into tenant satisfaction in Honiton**

The Housing Strategy Manager advised the Board that this report had been generated in response to the results from the Tenant Satisfaction Survey 2006/07 (STATUS). Overall tenant satisfaction throughout the District had been very high, but concerns had been noted over Honiton as satisfaction was lower here than any other area.

**Investigation into tenant satisfaction in Honiton cont'd...**

The officers had looked at a recent Housing Market Assessment, which showed that Honiton had poor access to public transport and also to cultural and recreational facilities. When this information was combined with the fact that Honiton had the greatest number of young people, this could partly explain lower satisfaction levels.

The report recognised the differences with Honiton’s needs compared with other parts of the district and asked whether a greater focus could be placed upon Honiton and the possible need for more help from the Council, as it was not just a housing issue.

The Board acknowledged that the rapid growth in the town’s population has not been matched by community facilities that might have come from Section 106 payments.

The Board also proposed that this report be presented to the other Honiton Ward Member, Chris Tratt and also to the Local Strategic Partnership (LSP) for their comments to take a broader perspective on these issues.

- RECOMMENDED**
- 1 that the Housing Review Board considered the analysis of the survey results contained within the report and approve the action;
  - 2 that the report be presented to and discussed by the LSP – in conjunction with Cllr Miss Ash and Chris Tratt

99 **Empty properties (voids)**

The Housing Needs Manager presented this report and the Board noted that in the last year the Council had achieved an average void period of 32 days. The aim was to sustain this level of achievement or improve over the next year, with the target being 28 days. The report provided details of the 300 properties that had become available over the past year.

A query was raised over the effect that accompanied potential tenant viewings might have over the void periods, when a tenant is being given the opportunity to keep certain fixtures such as sheds and fittings. The Housing Needs Manager reminded the Board that the Council only had a week (after the previous tenants had vacated the property) in which to carry out such viewings. This short time frame meant the opportunity to identify and keep such fittings was often not possible.

**RECOMMENDED** that the void report be noted.

100 **Date of next meeting**

The next meeting of the Housing Review Board is scheduled for 12 June 2008 in the Council Chamber, Knowle.

Chairman .....

Date .....