

# **EAST DEVON DISTRICT COUNCIL**

## **Minutes of a meeting of the Housing Review Board held at Knowle, Sidmouth on 6 September 2007**

### **Present:**

#### **Councillors:**

Miss V Ash  
D R Hull  
J Humphreys  
J A Knight  
Mrs A E Liverton

#### **Co-opted Tenant Members:**

Mr T Brown  
Mr V Kemp  
Mrs S Saunders

#### **Co-opted Independent Community Representatives:**

Mr R Finch  
Mrs H Williamson

### **Also Present:**

#### **Co-opted Tenant Member:**

Mr J Mahoney

### **Apologies:**

#### **Councillors:**

Miss J Elson  
Mrs P A Stott

The meeting started at 6.30 pm and ended at 9.40 pm

### **\*17 Minutes**

The minutes of the meeting of the Housing Review Board held on 14 June 2007, were confirmed and signed as a true record.

### **\*18 Welcome**

The Chairman welcomed all those present to the Housing Review Board meeting and invited each person to briefly introduce themselves. The Chairman welcomed Doug Furlong and Sue Bignall, Audit Commission Housing Inspectors, who were attending the meeting as observers. John Mahoney, who was recently selected by the Tenant and Leaseholder Customer Panel, was welcomed to his first meeting of the Housing Review. It was noted that he would be formally co-opted onto the Housing Review Board at the next Council meeting on 17 October 2007. It was noted that Roy Bristow had resigned from the Housing Review Board as a co-opted tenant member and it was agreed that a letter would be sent to Mr Bristow on behalf of the Board thanking him for all the work that he had done since the creation of the Housing Review Board.

### **19 Question and answer session**

A request was made for information on the cost of advertising void Council accommodation (minute 6, 14.06.07 refers). Specifically, the Member wanted to know what responses and prices had been quoted from the View From newspaper and the Herald papers. The Head of Housing and Social Inclusion responded with a number of quotations for advertising space, however he did not know the dates that these had been requested by the Housing Needs Manager. A further request was then made by the Member for all the prices quoted from the papers and the dates of letters sent from the Council to the newspaper editors.

19 **Question and answer session** (cont'd)

It was noted that at a recent meeting with tenants it had become apparent that one tenant was not aware of the decent homes standard and concern was expressed that other tenants may also be in this situation. The Head of Housing and Social Inclusion explained that extensive information had been sent to all tenants and that he was surprised to hear that the tenant did not know of the decent homes standard. It was agreed that once the details of the tenant had been passed onto the Head of Housing and Social Inclusion, he would follow this up and ensure that the tenant received appropriate information.

It was requested and agreed that the question and answer session would be extended to include questions from letters and emails. It was suggested that the session could be used to give very brief updates on previous business such as the Weycroft hall (minute 68, 08.03.07 refers) and information on Exebank and Danby House (minute 58, 11.01.07 refers). However, it was felt that it would be more appropriate to have reports on these items, and these would be included on the next agenda.

**RECOMMENDED** that update reports on Weycroft hall and Exebank and Danby House be included on the agenda for the next meeting of the Housing Review Board.

20 **Annual report of the Housing Review Board and forward plan**

Members of the Housing Review Board considered a report of the Head of Housing and Social Inclusion which presented a summary of the work of the Housing Review Board undertaken during 2006/07. It covered the first year of activities and looked forward to the main reports that could be anticipated for the remaining four meetings to be held during 2007/08.

During its first year the Housing Review Board met seven times and undertook a tour of community centres. During the inaugural year the Board selected and recruited its two Independent Community Representatives. The establishment of the Board was regarded as a great success by officers and Members and it was felt that the depth and breadth of the work undertaken so far justified the Board's existence. It enabled the Council to work closer with tenants and to consider housing issues in detail. It was noted that the Government Office regarded this as an innovation in local authority context and had been supportive to the Council's approach in establishing the Board.

The forward plan was a dynamic document which the Chairman and Vice-Chairman would regularly review. Updates would be reported to the Board several times during the year. A tour of estates and housing sites would be held in the autumn. A number of key performance issues were noted and it was reported that monitoring reports would be received on these throughout the year. Other reports contained in the forward plan were also noted. The list of items in the forward plan was not exhaustive and members were asked to consider these and add to them if necessary. The forward plan would be brought back to the Board periodically for progress reports.

It was noted that the question and answer session would be revamped by inviting written and emailed questions to the Board.

**Annual report of the Housing Review Board and forward plan** (cont'd)

Consideration was given to the venues for future meetings and whether the Board should continue to take their meetings 'out and about'. It was felt that the room at Dunning Court was very cramped and not satisfactory. In future it was essential to ensure that the rooms used were of a sufficient size to be comfortable with the ability to accommodate a sound/speaker system. Refreshments should also be available and easily accessible. Visitor attendance at these meetings should be monitored as the idea behind taking the Board meetings out into the community was to encourage people to attend and ask questions. It was suggested that in the months in between the Housing Review Board meetings members could go to the community centres for relaxed, informal coffee mornings and/or question and answer sessions. All those present supported this idea and felt that they would be more likely to get people interested in this way. It was essential to find suitable venues in all areas of Council housing stock and as well as holding the meetings at convenient times of the day for both working and non-working tenants.

A request was made for a further report to the next meeting of the Board on the results of the tenant satisfaction survey for the Honiton area (minute 73, 08.03.07 refers).

Another request was made for information regarding housing for the new community at Cranbrook. It was noted that the Leader of the Council would be organising a seminar to update councillors on the progress on Cranbrook and it was felt that it would be appropriate to invite members of the Housing Review Board to this seminar too.

On behalf of the Board the Chairman congratulated all the Housing and Social Inclusion staff for their hard work and dedication in preparing for the Audit Commission housing inspection.

**RESOLVED** that the annual report for 2006/07 be noted.

- RECOMMENDED**
- 1) that the forward plan of work for 2007/08 be considered and agreed.
  - 2) that informal bi-monthly meetings of the Housing Review Board be held at appropriate venues around the district.
  - 3) that a report on the results of the tenant satisfaction survey for the Honiton area be brought to the next meeting of the Housing Review Board.
  - 4) that members of the Housing Review Board be invited to the seminar updating councillors about Cranbrook.
  - 5) that other items may be added to the forward plan in the future.

21 **Improvement plan**

Consideration was given to the report of the Head of Housing and Social Inclusion which presented a comprehensive Improvement Plan, setting out a clear direction of travel for the Housing and Social Inclusion Service. The plan had been previously circulated to members of the Board by the Head of Housing and Social Inclusion in early August 2007. The plan was a collection of actions, targets and commitments produced as part of the Council's preparations for the Audit Commission housing inspection. It was a large document with many ambitious actions. The Improvement Plan included improvement actions from the housing services' main strategy and policy documents over the past four years. The Improvement Plan was intended to be a dynamic evolving document and the Board were invited to help shape the Plan.

21 **Improvement plan** (cont'd)

It was noted that the Plan would be used as a performance monitoring tool for management and the Head of Housing and Social Inclusion suggested that the Board may wish to receive a quarterly report.

It was acknowledged that some work still needed to be done on the Plan. Some of the actions were duplicated and needed to be smarter. Following the housing inspection there would be a whole series of new recommendations which would need to be built into the Plan. Consideration also needed to be given to how this plan would be monitored. It was felt that the traffic lights system worked well. The Plan would allow the Housing Review Board to keep track of performance. Reports would be brought back to the Board on certain areas, rather than bringing the whole document back each time. Actions which had been completed should be taken out of the Plan altogether. A request was made for a report on the Play Days scheme.

The Corporate Director – Communities and his staff were thanked for putting the Bias event on last year which showed the way forward for a 2 day 'fun in the sun' event during August this year in Seaton.

- RECOMMENDED**
- 1) that the Housing and Social Inclusion Service Improvement Plan be considered, amended as necessary, and adopted.
  - 2) that performance against the actions in the Improvement Plan be monitored and progress reported to the Housing Review Board on a quarterly basis to begin with, moving to half-yearly monitoring, if appropriate.

22 **Benchmarking housing management activities**

Those present received a report from the Information and Analysis Officer who explained that a comprehensive benchmarking exercise to compare East Devon District Council's costs, resources and performance with other local authorities, ALMOs and Registered Social Landlords had recently been completed. The HouseMark benchmarking product was used and the inputs were carefully validated to ensure that comparisons could be reliably made with the Council's peers. The results of the exercise would enable an assessment of the efficiency and value for money provided by EDDC's housing management services when compared with other social landlords.

Members noted the summary of the results of the benchmarking exercise and the initial analysis. The results would be used to inform the Improvement Plan and value for money approach. It was noted that East Devon District Council was a low cost, hard working, value for money housing service provider. However, there was limited capacity within the service to provide services beyond the core housing management functions of a social landlord. The results indicated a need to improve performance in a number of areas of the Council's housing management activities. This could require the housing service to work more efficiently and effectively, redeploy existing resources to activities where it under performed, and/or provide more resources for certain functions.

The key findings demonstrated that in general EDDC's costs per property for each housing management function were lower than average. With the exception of lettings, rent collection and accountancy and empty property management, EDDC had a higher number of properties per employee. Performance was generally below average, with the exception of tenant satisfaction and the number of homes meeting the decent homes standard.

A request was made for further instruction on how to analyse and interpret the data and graphs presented in the report. It was agreed that a session on this would be useful for the Board.

22 **Benchmarking housing management activities** (cont'd)

It was noted that there was an action plan in place to move rent collection to the top quartile and that the service was steadily moving towards this. Rent arrears were monitored very closely and with the sophisticated software it was possible to obtain all sorts of detailed information.

The Head of Housing and Social Inclusion proposed to model some options for additional costs against performance enhancements to investigate whether there was a sound business case for additional resources. This would be reported back to the Housing Review Board. It was also felt that it would be interesting to compare the 2005/06 data with 2006/07 data.

**RESOLVED** that the report and the results of the benchmarking exercise be noted.

- RECOMMENDED**
- 1) that a half hour pre-meeting training session take place on how to interpret the data and graphs contained in the benchmarking results report.
  - 2) that information for 2006/07 be compared with the 2005/06 data and that a report on this be brought back to the Housing Review Board.

23 **Resident involvement strategy 2007**

The Housing Strategy Manager presented a draft resident involvement strategy which outlined the key principles and ways in which the Council sought to ensure that tenants and leaseholders had a voice in commenting on housing services, increasing choice, and in planning, improving, reviewing and monitoring housing services. The principles reflected both the national agenda and the local key corporate and housing service objectives. The strategy set out the Council's aims for resident involvement, the staffing levels available to support that work, the areas identified for improvement, and an action plan to carry the work forward.

The strategy was developed by residents and staff. A small focus group made up of members from the Tenant and Leaseholder Customer Panel worked with the Housing Strategy Manager to produce the initial draft. Comments were then sought from the Tenant and Leaseholder Customer Panel (22 May 2007) and other staff members. It had also been considered by the Housing Service Management Team and was being discussed at all Housing team meetings.

The strategy was not intended to be a long term plan and would be reviewed within a year. It set out the aims of resident involvement, the work of the tenant participation officers and it also set out the areas for improvement.

The Housing Strategy Manager thanked the Housing Review Board for its two nominated housing strategy champions and also thanked the Board in advance for the informal meetings which had been proposed earlier in the meeting.

Concern was expressed that only 50% of the tenants who responded to the status survey had heard of tenant participation compacts. A request was made for this data to be broken down into area level and sent to the concerned member. It was noted that the Council's Policy Team would be able to provide Ombudsman information.

23 **Resident involvement strategy 2007** (cont'd)

It was reported that the Tenant and Leaseholder Customer Panel (TLCP) would like individual members of the Housing Review Board to attend their meetings in order to develop a better understanding and working relationship. It was noted that the TLCP could ask for items to be placed on the Housing Review Board agenda. Concern was expressed that there was no clear definition of the co-opted tenant members' role on the Board and discussion took place over whether the tenant members should be giving their individual opinions or representing the views of the TLCP. It was agreed that a joint meeting of the TLCP and the Housing Review Board should be held to determine and define the tenant members' role, working within the Council's constitution.

On behalf of the Board, the Chairman thanked the Housing Strategy Manager for all her hard work.

- RECOMMENDED**
- 1) that the draft resident involvement strategy be adopted.
  - 2) that the dates of the Tenant and Leaseholder Customer Panel meetings be circulated to the Housing Review Board members.
  - 3) that a joint meeting of the Tenant and Leaseholder Customer Panel and the Housing Review Board be set up to determine and define the tenant members' role.

24 **Residents' conference**

Consideration was given to the report of the Tenant Participation Officer concerning the first Tenant and Leaseholder Customer Panel conference held on 2 July 2007 at Bicton College, East Budleigh. The Panel had been allocated a budget of £1,000 and given support to arrange and run their conference. Funding sponsorship was also received. The aim was to consult and find out what tenants and leaseholders wanted the Tenant and Leaseholder Customer Panel to achieve, and work towards for tenants and leaseholders. The conference was deemed a great success and as a result the Tenant and Leaseholder Customer Panel would like to run a similar event on an annual basis. The features and content of the event were noted by the Board.

It was reported that the conference committee would be visiting four venues in more central locations the following week to determine the venue for the next residents' conference. The topic for the next conference would be 'what your future holds'.

Members who had attended the conference agreed that it had been very enjoyable and educational. It was noted that the majority of the £1,000 budget had been spent on the venue and that the remaining funds had come from the tenant participation budget. It was suggested that the Panel be allocated a budget of £2,000 for the next year's residents' conference and it was agreed that provision would be made for this in the next year's Housing Revenue Account budget.

Concern was expressed that only 69 residents attended the conference. It was noted that the venue restricted the number of people that could attend (only 100) and was not in a central location. 17 people who had said they would be attending did not turn up. The location for the next conference would be larger and more central. Holding the conference on a working day restricted the people that were able to attend. Also, many sheltered accommodation tenants were not able to manage a day-long conference. It was noted that the conference was supplemented with area forum meetings throughout the year.

- RECOMMENDED** that the proposals set out in the report aimed at holding a resident conference on an annual basis be approved, with a budget of £2,000.

## 25 **Housing services for older people**

The Head of Housing and Social Inclusion outlined a report which considered a series of housing and related issues for older people, who comprised a high percentage of East Devon's population. The report was intended to promote discussion and develop into a section of the updated Housing Strategy to ensure that the housing and support needs of older people were highlighted and addressed. The over-arching aim was to ensure that older people were well housed, enjoyed a good quality of life and were seen as an important part of achieving thriving, balanced communities. This was consistent with the Council's corporate priorities and Housing Strategy aims.

Consideration was given to some of the main issues which affected older people in our communities and in respect of their housing. This included older people's access to services, the protection of vulnerable tenants, fitting accommodation to older people's needs, community centres, and developing, using and recognising older people's skills, knowledge and experience.

It was noted that there had been a change in Council owned sheltered housing from scheme managers to mobile support officers. Communities would be consulted, but the presumption was that as scheme managers left they would be replaced with mobile support officers. This was a different form of support, tailored to residents' needs. There was a need to ensure that the level of support provided was appropriate and monitoring should be maintained. Loneliness was a real issue for older people and it was important to be mindful of this

It was felt that it would be useful to obtain population statistics and demographic trends for East Devon's towns from Devon County Council.

Concern was expressed that one bedroom properties were not adequate for older people's needs and that a lot could be learnt from the private sector. People's aspirations were rising and properties must be 'fit for purpose'. This left the choice of decommissioning inappropriate properties, or investing more money into the properties. It was suggested that the Portfolio Holder for Communities be invited to attend a future meeting of the Board to discuss the idea of 'homes for life' and decommissioning. It was noted that developers at Cranbrook would be providing 10% 'lifetime homes'. These homes tended to be 10% larger than standard new build properties, but Government grants were available to help provide these. It was suggested that this issue could be encouraged through Local Development Framework debates.

- RECOMMENDED**
- 1) that the comments of the Housing Review Board be noted and that appropriate elements be included in the updated Housing Strategy Statement.
  - 2) that the effect on communities of replacing individual scheme managers with mobile support officers continues to be monitored.
  - 3) that consideration be given to 'lifetime homes' through the Local Development Framework.
  - 4) that the Portfolio Holder Communities be invited to attend a future meeting of the Housing Review Board to discuss the decommissioning of Council properties.
  - 5) that consideration be given to population statistics and forecasts for the district.

## 26 **Installation of key safes in sheltered dwellings**

Members of the Housing Review Board considered the report of the Housing Services Manager which detailed the actions to be considered in order to provide key safes to all sheltered dwellings.

It was noted that with the need to reduce void times scheme managers/mobile support officers were now undertaking accompanied viewings with potential new tenants and in order to facilitate this procedure the installation of key safes to void sheltered dwellings had been introduced. It was felt that it would be advantageous to provide key safes to all sheltered accommodation as through the Supporting People requirements and the changing role of the scheme managers/mobile support officers fewer staff were on site for large parts of the day. Care workers visiting tenants' homes would also have ready access to their clients' homes. Key safes would also be useful for community centres.

If key safes were provided there would not be a need for Home Safeguard to keep a spare key for the tenants. The combination numbers to each individual key safe would be recorded through the Home Safeguard system and would be available in the case of an emergency. Key safes were a tried and tested device and it was noted that Home Safeguard officers were convinced of the merits of key safes.

Concern was expressed over the security and potential misuse of the key safes however, in general the key safes detailed in the report were considered to be a cost effective approach for tenants who wanted them.

- RECOMMENDED**
- 1) that a pilot programme of installing key safes be approved, and if successful, be extended to all sheltered housing, and
  - 2) that £50,000 of the Capital Plan provision be allocated to fund the installation of key safes to sheltered dwellings.

## 27 **Digital television switchover**

Consideration was given to the report of the Housing Technical Projects Officer which outlined the outcome of the comprehensive digital television switchover consultation exercise undertaken with the 830 tenants and leaseholders of dwellings covered by the communal aerial reception, provided and maintained by East Devon District Council. The options and implications for the Council's tenants were reported to the September 2006 meeting of the Board (minute 25, 28.09.06 refers). It was noted that digital switchover would affect the Westcountry in 2009. Of the 51 different locations identified in the survey, 34 had already had a digital communal aerial installed.

Those present noted the results of the survey, which showed the schemes with communal aerials, number of dwellings, questionnaires returned, option chosen etc. The questionnaire contained information which would enable the householder to choose the option which most suited them. It was noted that in all locations where the majority verdict opted for option 2 (digital satellite) the number actually prepared to pay for option 2 was 33% or less, when considered as a proportion of the total number of dwellings within the block. As a result of the survey, it would be exceedingly difficult to justify the installation of option 2 when those residents who returned the questionnaire were in the minority. Therefore communal aerials would be provided to the standard in option 1 (digital TV through an aerial).

27 **Digital television switchover** (cont'd)

- RECOMMENDED**
- 1) that the Council's specialist aerial contractor be instructed to check all communal aerials and install digital aerials to ensure that all dwellings receive digital reception prior to switchover (option1), and
  - 2) that on any future major refurbishment schemes to the communal aerial systems, consideration is given to upgrading the systems to an Integrated Reception System (IRS) through both satellite and aerial receivers, following consultation with residents (option 2).

(Mr T Brown declared a personal interest in the above item as a resident covered by communal aerial reception. However, he stated that he had not owned a television set for the past twenty years).

28 **Choice Based Lettings Scheme – open advertising proposals**

Members of the Housing Review Board considered a report of the Head of Housing and Social Inclusion which set out the proposals to advertise empty properties openly in local newspapers and other locations to raise awareness of the availability of housing in East Devon and to maximize access to housing for applicants on the Council's housing register. The report also identified changes to the Allocation Policy and Choice Based Lettings Scheme. The cost, methods and locations of advertising were outlined in the report, as well as an example of an empty property advertisement.

The Chairman felt that the Choice Based Lettings Scheme was a complicated issue which required a lot of discussion. It was felt that a Task and Finish Forum (TaFF) should be established to consider the changes to the Allocation Policy and the Choice Based Lettings Scheme in detail. The TaFF would then bring a report back to the next meeting of the Housing Review Board. All proposed changes would be delayed until they had been explored by the TaFF.

- RECOMMENDED**
- 1) that a Task and Finish Forum be established to consider proposed changes to the Allocation Policy and Choice Based Lettings Scheme .
  - 2) that the composition of the Task and Finish Forum be Councillor J Humphreys, Councillor D Hull, Mr R Finch, Mr V Kemp and Mr J Mahoney, with other members of the Board being invited to attend as observers.

\*29 **Empty properties (voids)**

Consideration was given to the report of the Head of Housing and Social Inclusion which set out the quarterly report on void performance required by the Housing Review Board for the period April to June 2007. The report showed the lettings for the first quarter of 2007/08 showing the average length of time taken to relet properties. Performance was improving and the relet target of 30 days was achievable in the current year.

The Housing Review Board offered its congratulations those contributing towards the improvements.

**RESOLVED** that the report be noted.

**\*30 Repairs performance monitoring report**

Consideration was given to the report of the Head of Housing and Social Inclusion which set out details of the Council's performance in relation to routine or responsive repairs undertaken to Council homes, together with evidence of the Council's contractors' performance against targets. Detailed information was provided for the period April 2007 – June 2007.

Maintaining and improving tenants' homes was a core landlord activity and an area in which the Council and contractors' performance had a direct impact on tenants' quality of life and enjoyment of their homes.

The report provided information on the number of repairs reported and undertaken, the speed, cost and quality of service, tenant satisfaction levels, and gave data on performance in previous years.

The information on urgent orders issued contained in Annex 1 to the report was broken down by the four building and electrical contractors and each individual performance was noted. Performance was unacceptable in June which was due to an increase in the number of jobs, and the contractors had been informed of these concerns.

**RESOLVED** that the performance on repairs to Council homes be noted.

**\*31 Housing Revenue Account**

Members of the Housing Review Board noted the report of the Head of Housing and Social Inclusion which was a budget monitoring report covering the income and expenditure items contained in the Housing Revenue Account for the period to the end of July (four months of the financial year 2007/08).

It was noted that not all expenditure was evenly spread throughout the year. Some expenditure was seasonal and some project based work was completed and paid at a particular point in the year. Expenditure on responsive repairs was above the profile for the period and was being closely monitored. Members noted from the budget report that the Housing Revenue Account was generally on budget.

On behalf of the Housing Review Board the Chairman congratulated the officers on all their hard work, regardless of the outcome of the Audit Commission's housing inspection.

**RESOLVED** that the income and expenditure within the Housing Revenue Account for 2007/08 be noted.

Chairman .....

Date .....