

EAST DEVON DISTRICT COUNCIL

Minutes of a meeting of the Housing Review Board held at Knowle, Sidmouth on 8 March 2007

Present:

Councillors:

D J Cox (Chairman)
Miss V Ash (Vice Chairman)

Mrs A E Liverton

Co-opted Tenant Members:

Mr R Bristow
Mr T Brown
Mr V Kemp
Mrs C Morrison
Mrs S Saunders

Co-opted Independent
Community Representatives:

Mr R Finch
Mrs H Williamson

Also Present:

Councillors:

Miss J Elson
Mrs P A Stott

Apologies:

Councillor:

D R H Hull
J A Knight

The meeting started at 6.30 pm and ended at 10.05 pm

*61 **Minutes**

The minutes of the meeting of the Housing Review Board held on 11 January 2007, were confirmed and signed as a true record.

*62 **Matters arising**

The Chairman welcomed Mr Robert Finch, newly appointed Independent Community Representative, to the meeting.

Mr Finch reported that the Devon and Cornwall Housing Association were looking to implement tenant profiling during the next year (minute 57 refers).

*63 **Training session – tenant participation**

The Board received a presentation on tenant participation at East Devon District Council (EDDC) from the Housing Strategy Manager. The presentation outlined activities that had been organised with tenants, demonstrated the EDDC tenant participation structure and outlined that main areas of tenant participation work.

The Board noted the staffing arrangements for tenant participation, and the roles of the officers involved. The Housing Strategy Manager explained the Tenant and Leaseholder Customer Panel, tenant and resident associations, the district tenant participation compact and the Community Initiative Fund.

***63 Training session – tenant participation (cont'd)**

It was reported that tenant participation was in a state of review at present. Future aims were to imbed tenant participation within EDDC's culture, to work with tenants, leaseholders and councilors to produce a new District Tenant Compact, to revise the tenant participation strategy, to continue to seek out and support community development initiatives and to prepare for the Audit Commission's inspection of housing services in 2007. It was also hoped to widen the opportunities for the involvement of residents in housing management. This would include seeking to contact currently 'hard to reach groups', encouraging other sections to involve residents at all stages and seeking innovative ways for residents to be involved.

On behalf of the Board, the Chairman thanked the Housing Needs Manager for her report.

***64 Question and answer session**

There were no questions raised under this item. It was noted that this session would be broadened to give Board members the opportunity to raise items for consideration at future meetings.

A request was made for additional training for members before the next scheduled meeting of the Housing Review Board. Those requiring training were asked to liaise with the Head of Housing and Social Inclusion to arrange suitable dates and topics.

65 Government Office South West option appraisal 'sign off' report

Consideration was given to the report of the Head of Housing and Social Inclusion which provided the Board with details of the 'sign off' report from the Government Office South West (GOSW). This report presented the final piece of information produced as part of the housing stock options appraisal, which looked in detail at the most appropriate arrangements for the ownership and management of Council homes in East Devon.

The report from GOSW was their assessment of the housing stock options appraisal project and followed on from the project 'sign-off' letter received in September 2006. The assessment was structured around thirteen themes. The report made a series of recommendations, some of which had been actioned. The Head of Housing and Social Inclusion suggested that the Housing Review Board ensure all of the recommendations were clarified, where necessary, and taken forward.

The GOSW report made the following recommendations:

- Whilst the council had made considerable efforts to engage with tenants GOSW felt that greater thought and planning needed to go into the process and sadly those tenants who were most directly involved had very little weight given to their views. Although tenants' views were sought in a variety of ways this led to a lack of clarity as to which route carried more weight. The survey of tenants' preferences inevitably became a referendum on stock transfer. A full communications programme should be available to those who were expected to give an opinion.
- If this matter was revisited in the future GOSW would urge the Council to take greater care in constructing a test of opinion and developing and operating consultation and project structures that engaged significantly with key tenant representatives.
- Tenants agreed an aspirational standard but this had not been agreed.

Government Office South West option appraisal 'sign off' report (cont'd)

- The Council would need to keep all their stakeholders fully informed as it reviewed the retention situation. It must have an inclusive Communication and Consultation Strategy and provide accurate and timely information in an easily understood format. The Council should have made better use of the independent advice available, particularly with regard to the Business Plan.
- There was a need to produce a Change Management Strategy. Having opted for stock retention the change would not be so dramatic. However, the Council would need to change to adapt to the new Board that led on housing matters and also to adopt new and improved housing services.
- The authority must produce a Business Plan to support its retention option.
- The Council had agreed to commission a warranted stock condition survey.
- The Council needed to undertake a Housing Market Assessment including Housing Needs Survey.
- The Council needed to do more to integrate its Business Plan with corporate strategic objectives such as those identified in the Community Plan.
- The Council's decision to review the decision to retain the stock should be supported by clear objectives and evaluation criteria at the start of the next phase.
- The Housing Review Board should be given real authority.
- Housing should be inspected by the Audit Commission.

Members felt that the report was weighted and contained a degree of bias. Concern was expressed that parts of the report were unfair and did not read well in terms of tenant participation and consideration of the views of tenants. Discussion took place over whether the Council should respond to the GOSW report to record its position and defend its decision.

The Head of Housing and Social Inclusion felt that the report was predictable and that the Council should respond in a positive way. It was noted that he would be seeking clarification from GOSW on a number of their comments. Following the meeting the Head of Housing and Social Inclusion would write to GOSW and would include the Board's comments in his response. Once he was clear on all of the recommendations it was suggested that these be built into updates of the Service Plan and Housing Strategy Statement.

- RECOMMENDED**
- 1) that the recommendations contained in the Government Office South West option appraisal 'sign off' report be incorporated into the Service Plan and updated Housing Strategy Statement, where not already included, and
 - 2) that the Housing Review Board seek some further clarification on parts of the GOSW analysis of the stock options appraisal.

Audit Commission housing inspection

The Head of Housing and Social Inclusion gave an update report on preparations for the scheduled housing inspection. This would be undertaken in September 2007 by the Housing Inspectorate arm of the Audit Commission. A project team had been established and had met for the first time in February 2007. Self-assessment work on the relevant Key Lines of Enquiry (KLOE) was being progressed by four task groups who were working on specific areas of the service. The Tenant and Leaseholder Customer Panel had put forward four tenants to work as part of the project team and each tenant had elected to work on a task group. The self assessment work against the excellent standard in the KLOE had revealed areas where Housing needed to improve its services to be regarded as an excellent authority. These areas for improvement would form an action plan which identified the items that could be improved in the short term (quick wins) as well as longer term improvements (which would not be in place before the inspection).

The project plan outlined the key stages in the preparations and the main tasks required over the next six months. Collecting and organising the documents and evidence to be submitted to the Housing Inspectorate would be a significant task and had already begun. The project team would be benchmarking services by speaking to and/or visiting other housing organisations (including Beacon status authorities) that had undergone inspection. Mystery shopper exercises would also be undertaken. It was noted that the project team had agreed to appoint a part time project manager. £30,000 had been allocated in the Housing Revenue Account to finance the project, some of which could fund the project manager post.

The Head of Housing and Social Inclusion informed the Board that a meeting would take place later in March with the lead inspector regarding how the inspection process would be run. Focus would be on stock condition, asset management and tenancy and estate management. It was felt that both the service and tenants would benefit from the inspection process by, for example, the adoption of clear policies. It was noted that following the district council elections in May, all councillors would need to be made fully aware of the Audit Commission's housing inspection.

It was agreed that the preparations being made for the housing inspection represented good practice and a request was made for any information received (e.g. from benchmarking and mystery shopper exercises) to come before the Board on a regular basis.

RECOMMENDED that the preparations being undertaken for the Audit Commission housing inspection be noted.

Back to basics approach to service delivery

Consideration was given to a report of the Head of Housing and Social Inclusion which outlined an approach to ensure that basic or core housing management activities were performed to an excellent standard and met service users' reasonable expectations as a housing service provider. The report proposed a self-assessment process against recognised good practice, improvements in areas where the service did not achieve acceptable standards, expanding Tenant/Officer working groups, and establishing Board Member Champions.

Back to basics approach to service delivery (cont'd)

The four Housing and Social Inclusion Service teams all had a number of core areas of service delivery and these were summarised in the report. The Audit Commission Key Lines of Enquiry (KLOE) provided a useful guide to good practice in core areas of service delivery. These were being used as a self-assessment tool in the areas where it was expected that the housing inspection would focus. In many core areas it was noted that a good service was being provided. Some of the customer satisfaction survey work supported this view. However, there were areas which needed improvement. Customer care practices needed to be improved in some areas, as well as communication with customers.

It was noted that claims that a good service was being provided in core areas would need to be backed up by robust evidence. An audit trail of evidence was required for the Audit Commission housing inspection. Such evidence existed for procedures, performance and satisfaction levels.

The Head of Housing and Social Inclusion reported that he would like to be more proactive in managing tenancy disputes, complaints and estate management problems, but resources dedicated to this work were limited. It was important not to lose focus on the core areas with all the other challenges imposed upon the service.

Work was also being undertaken to improve the new tenant welcome process and reduce void times. A welcome pack/process for new tenants was being put together and this would be brought to a future meeting of the Board. In the meantime the Head of Housing and Social Inclusion would circulate the packs to Housing Review Board members for their information.

To ensure the right basics of service delivery the Head of Housing reported that he would like to develop the concept of tenant/officer working groups (some groups already existed, for example housing repairs) either aligned to service activities or linked with the four teams. These working groups could assist in the review of core services and help identify where improvements were needed. Establishing these groups would also take tenant participation forward. It was suggested that there should be Tenant and Leaseholder Customer Panel involvement and it was agreed that this would be put to the Panel at its next meeting.

It was requested that the Board consider the idea of having Board Member Champions for specific areas of service delivery, or again linked with the teams. The Board Member Champion would work closely with housing staff and service users to promote improvements. The Board Member Champion would develop expertise and knowledge in their chosen specialism by becoming more involved in specific areas of service delivery, and could advise the Board. The Chairman urged members of the Board to put their names forward and all the tenant members and independent community representatives expressed an interest.

A request was made for the Housing Needs Manager to attend a future meeting of the Housing Review Board to expand on how work in his area was progressing.

RECOMMENDED that it be noted that the Housing Review Board:

- 1) adopts and supports the back to basics work approach,
- 2) encourages and supports tenant/officer working groups, and
- 3) promotes the concept of Board Member Champions.

68 Review of community centres – update report

The Head of Housing and Social Inclusion gave an update report on the management and operation of community centres, as requested by the Housing Review Board in September 2006. This report included an action plan and timetable for implementation of changes to the use and management of community centres.

A tour of the community centres had taken place by members of the Board on 12 February 2007. On behalf of the Board, the Chairman thanked the Head of Housing and Social Inclusion and his team for arranging the trip which had been very interesting and informative. Members agreed that the trip had been very useful and had provided good networking opportunities.

The objectives of the review of the community centres were:

- to consider the current use of the community centres, determine charging and booking arrangements,
- to identify and remove any existing barriers to usage,
- to make recommendations to improve the system of bookings and charging.

At its September meeting the Board considered the report on the review of the community centres and made a number of comments and recommendations. Many of these had been addressed in the draft action plan which was appended to the updated report. The action plan also included the tasks (with completion dates) that would need to be undertaken before the community centres could be used as recommended. Members were very happy with the updated report and felt that original concerns had been met.

It was hoped that better use could be made of the existing community centre facilities and the range of activities for residents and the wider community improved. The community centres were well located and maintained and provided spacious, comfortable facilities for a range of activities. The action plan illustrated what needed to be done in the short term. Careful promotion of the facilities could increase usage and income to cover the Council's costs.

The Board agreed that the community centres were designed for use by tenants of sheltered housing and that they were primarily used for this purpose. A list of suitable community centre users and centre usage should be agreed between the residents, Scheme Manager/Mobile Support Officer and initially the Tenant Participation Officer, and that this list should be updated on a regular basis. It was suggested that a pilot using several community centres or all of the community centres in the Exmouth area be carried out. A further report would be presented to the Board towards the end of the pilot. This would identify any problem areas and make recommendations regarding the longer term use and management of the community centres. It was felt that it was very important to appoint a person to manage/administer the community centres. The Scheme Managers/Mobile Support Officers should also be able to directly access the booking system. It was noted that the terms for letting the rooms at the community centres should be standardised to ensure consistency.

The Board felt that funds raised by the residents' groups should be retained by the group and that tenants of sheltered housing schemes should retain free use of the community centres for group activities involving tenants. Consideration was given to the ability to grant concessions in exceptional circumstances to vulnerable groups. The Board agreed that if a group applied for a concession, that they be asked to provide account details etc to the Housing Review Board for its consideration. The Board also requested that no price increases be made or relief given without prior consideration by the Board.

68 **Review of community centres – update report (cont'd)**

The Board discussed the Pastoral Care Service's twelve month lease arrangement at the Clayton House Community Centre. The Head of Housing and Social Inclusion reported that this could be extended subject to the agreement of the Housing Review Board. The Board agreed that it would like to positively indicate to the Pastoral Care Service that it wished the Service to continue.

It was noted that a further report about the future of the Weycroft Senior Citizens Centre would be brought to the Housing Review Board. Members requested that the Executive Board ask the Council to initiate discussions between Housing and Health and Social Services regarding the future of Weycroft Hall and its ongoing community use.

- RECOMMENDED**
- 1) that the recommendations contained in the action plan, appended to the report, aimed at improving the management and use of community centres be approved;
 - 2) that the Pastoral Care Service lease at Clayton House Community Centre be renewed;
 - 3) that the Council be asked to open discussions with Health and Social Care for an improved community facility at Weycroft Hall;
 - 4) that in cases of hardship the Board consider applications for concessions and be given the discretion to waive charges.

69 **Proposals for updating the Cash Incentive Scheme to reduce the under occupation of Council homes**

Members considered the report of the Head of Housing and Social Inclusion which set out proposals for a revision to the Council's current policy on providing cash incentives to tackle under occupation by encouraging tenants to downsize to a smaller property. In preparing his report the Head of Housing and Social Inclusion had looked at good practice and considered Government advice.

The current financial and other incentives available were not considered to be at a level that necessarily optimised the opportunity for tenants to move to a smaller property. There was the potential to increase the number of family homes available for letting through the scheme if the financial package was increased to make it more attractive. However, there was the need to balance the aspiration of encouraging tenants to move to a smaller property with the appropriate use of Housing Revenue Account funds. There was a need to more flexible.

In addition, the report proposed a change to the Council's current approach of limiting the downsizing to a 1-bedroom property which discouraged some tenants from considering this opportunity. The changes to the scheme set out in the report would address these issues and make the scheme more attractive, but it was suggested that the proposals be market tested with tenant participation officers prior to implementation to ensure that genuine incentives were being offered.

The Board recognised that a financial incentive was not the only factor motivating tenants to downsize. For many people moving was a psychological issue and the thought of moving was a significant barrier. These tenants needed positive support and assistance and should be approached with the offer of downsizing before they became too old.

69

Proposals for updating the Cash Incentive Scheme to reduce the under occupation of Council homes (cont'd)

Many tenants wanted to retain a spare room for relatives to stay. It was suggested in this case that a sofa bed/put up bed could be put in place as an incentive. It was noted that with the larger population of elderly people and the Government incentive for care in the community, 1-bedroom properties were no longer appropriate as some people had overnight carers. There was a need to re-think when building new homes and provide 2-bedroom homes. It was noted that Devon and Cornwall Housing Association did not down size to properties smaller than 2-bedrooms. The Housing Association also did not pay any financial incentives, but they made plans for potential reallocations and rehousing in advance.

Disabled people and those with ill-health often required extra space so down-sizing might not be an option. It was noted that any necessary alterations and adaptations should be made to a new property before the move took place. Also, when properties were being upgraded in the future the Council should look at making these more disabled friendly.

Concern was expressed regarding released properties being used to accommodate homeless households as there were many people on the housing register who had been waiting for years for property. It was noted that released properties under the scheme would be allocated to high priority applicants on the housing register.

Members felt that there was more scope for further investigation. Health and advice packs should be put together and a more flexible approach was required. The issue could be incorporated into the tenant profiling exercise and tenants' input sought. It was noted that the report had already been considered by the Tenant and Leaseholder Customer Panel. More work would be done with a wider range of tenants in order to market test the scheme. It was suggested that the restriction of the choice of size to a maximum of a 2-bedroom property should be removed. It was also suggested that a less prescriptive approach should be taken regarding how the money allocated for removal expenses should be spent.

Following consideration of the report, Members agreed that there should be a more flexible approach to whom properties were allocated and a less prescriptive approach as to how the money given for moving expenses was spent.

The Head of Housing and Social Inclusion would bring a further report to the Board on incentives to reduce the under occupation of Council homes in the future.

- RECOMMENDED**
- 1) that the options for a revision to the Cash Incentive Scheme be approved subject to a more flexible approach being taken regarding which properties were allocated and a less prescriptive approach to how relocation expenses were spent;
 - 2) that the Housing Strategy Unit market the proposals with potential users of the scheme, prior to implementation.

70

Improvement and modernisation programmes

Consideration was given to the report of the Head of Housing and Social Inclusion which outlined proposals for advancing improvement and modernisation programmes for replacing kitchens, bathrooms and external doors. The size of these programmes in 2007/08 had been increased in accordance with the Housing Revenue Account Business Plan, which included comprehensive investment plans to maintain Decent Homes compliance.

70 **Improvement and modernisation programmes (cont'd)**

The Housing Review Board were invited to consider details of the improvement and modernisation programmes that were summarised in the Business Plan. The programmes had been prioritised following an assessment of stock condition and having regard to tenant aspirations.

The Head of Housing and Social Inclusion reported that window replacement and central heating programmes were coming to an end and that the Council had started a door replacement programme. The oldest doors in the worst condition would be replaced first, based on stock condition information and Decent Homes standards. All external doors would be replaced by 2023/24, giving a maximum age of 40 years. The programme would not need to be restarted within the scope of the plan.

The current kitchen replacement programme was scheduled for completion by 2017/18, at which point no kitchen would be over 23 years old. The bathroom replacement programme would be accelerated from 2020/21 so that no bathroom would be over 30 years old. Both programmes would be maintained at this level. The stock condition database would be used to target homes, which would be maintained to and meet the Decent Homes Standard criteria for reasonably modern facilities and services.

It was noted that if the actual cost of the programmes was significantly higher than those projected in the Housing Revenue Account Business Plan it could throw out the programme of works. At present the commitments were in monetary terms, not in units. Discussion also took place on the minimum standards for modern building regulations and the Head of Housing and Social Inclusion agreed to clarify these with the Building Control Manager.

RECOMMENDED that the improvement and modernisation programmes set out in the report be approved, taking into consideration the potential variation between the units projected in the Housing Revenue Account Business Plan and what could be achieved in view of current and future pricing.

71 **Tenant improvement voucher scheme**

Members of the Housing Review Board considered a report of the Head of Housing and Social Inclusion which outlined a new scheme for payment towards home improvements undertaken by tenants. This idea had come from the Housing Stock Options Appraisal project as a suggested service improvement. Financial provision had been made in the 2007/08 Housing Revenue Account for a modest programme of payments towards specific improvements that tenants desired. The report suggested criteria for the eligible works, tenant contribution and a cost ceiling.

The tenant improvement voucher scheme would allow tenants to bring forward improvements in advance of planned improvement and modernisation programmes. Tenants would be given advance notice of these programmes. Money would be allocated towards lasting improvements to the fabric of the buildings and/or improvements to fixtures and fittings. The scheme would be available to secure tenants with clear rent accounts. The report suggested that the Council pay up to 33% of the cost of works, but restricted to a maximum of £1,500 per application. Tenants would be required to obtain a reasonably priced estimate for the work, which would be checked for value for money by the Council's technical assistants prior to approval. Members noted the types of eligible improvements included in the scheme, which were aligned to the Right to Compensation Regulations. It was also noted that the Council would exercise control over the standard of work undertaken and would inspect the works prior to approval. Invoices would be required to support requests for payment and product guarantees should be produced where appropriate.

71 **Tenant improvement voucher scheme (cont'd)**

Members agreed that tenants should be encouraged to undertake innovative energy efficiency improvements.

RECOMMENDED that the improvement voucher scheme proposals outlined in the report be agreed.

72 **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 first three quarters of 2006/07 (April – December).

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 tenant's quality of life and enjoyment of their homes.

The report provided information on the number of repairs reported and undertaken, the speed 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 contractual engineers and each individual performance was noted. One engineer was consistently failing to meet targets and the Head of Housing and Social Inclusion reported that this was being taken up during regular service meetings. The Chairman felt that it would be useful to have all sections of the report broken down on a contractor basis, rather than just overall figures.

RECOMMENDED that the performance on repairs to Council homes be noted, subject to future reports containing all performance broken down on a contractor basis.

73 **Tenant satisfaction survey 2006/07**

Members of the Housing Review Board noted the report of the Information and Analysis Officer on the results of the tenant satisfaction survey 2006/07. The Council was required to collect tenant satisfaction data in a prescribed form every three years. The latest survey (known as the STATUS survey or the Standardised Tenant Satisfaction Survey carried out by BMG research) commenced in September 2006 and the main findings, including new scores for Best Value Performance Indicators 74 and 75 were presented in the report. The results from the 2006/07 survey were compared against the previous survey carried out in 2003/04 and the national averages.

It was noted that there had been a slight decrease in the level of satisfaction since 2003/04 however this was consistent with the national decline in overall satisfaction. Despite this East Devon District Council still appeared in the top quartile of district councils.

73 **Tenant satisfaction survey 2006/07 (cont'd)**

Those present agreed that the report presented fascinating information. The profile of tenants was interesting and showed a continuity of tenants. Concern was expressed over the low satisfaction levels in Honiton. Members requested that a study be carried out to investigate the dissatisfaction levels in Honiton, with a report being brought back to a future meeting of the Housing Review Board. The study should also include consultation with the Honiton benefits surgery, the Citizens' Advice Bureau and Gerry Moore, Community Safety Officer.

A request was made for traffic light colours to be included on performance monitoring data relating specifically to the Housing services to highlight any areas of concern

- RECOMMENDED**
- 1) that the satisfaction levels in the report be noted;
 - 2) that a study be carried out to investigate the low levels of satisfaction in Honiton, with a report being brought back to a future meeting of the Housing Review Board.

Chairman

Date