

EAST DEVON DISTRICT COUNCIL

Minutes of a meeting of the Housing Review Board held at Knowle, Sidmouth on 10 January 2008

Present:	Councillors:	Co-opted tenant members:
	Mrs A E Liverton (Chairman)	Mr T Brown (Vice Chairman)
	Miss V Ash	Mr V Kemp
	J Humphreys	Mrs C Morrison
	EDDC Officers:	Mrs S Saunders
	John Golding, Head of Housing & Social Inclusion	Co-opted independent community representatives:
	Rachel Pocock Head of Legal, Licensing & Democratic Services	Mr R Finch
	Simon Davey, Head of Finance	Mrs H Williamson
	Rachel Perram, Democratic Services Officer	
	Diana Vernon, Democratic Services Manager	
Also Present:	Councillors:	
	T Cope	
	Miss J Elson	
	Mrs P A Stott	
Apologies:	Councillor:	Nominated tenant member:
	J Knight	Mr C Rowe

The meeting started at 6.35 pm and ended at 9.10 pm

*50 **Minutes**

The minutes of the meeting of the Housing Review Board held on 29 November 2007, were confirmed and signed as a true record.

The minutes of the liaison meeting of the Housing Review Board and the Tenant and Leaseholder Customer Panel held on 17 December 2007, were noted.

*51 **Welcome**

The Chairman welcomed Councillor Mrs Stott, Councillor Miss Elson, Portfolio Holder – Communities and Councillor Cope to the meeting.

52 **Question and answer session**

The Chairman advised that no questions had been submitted but requested a response from the Head of Housing and Social Inclusion on the following issues:

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

1. The recent public inquest into the sad death of a baby in Somerset

The Head of Housing and Social Inclusion advised the Board that the incident in Taunton, Somerset, had happened in a newly let council owned property. It appears that a faulty thermostat in the hot water system had forced scalding hot water to overflow into a plastic cold water header in the roof space in the property. The tank, which was not designed for hot water or properly supported, had melted under the intense heat and flooded down to a room below, where a young baby was sleeping. Although efforts were made by the child's parents, the baby had later died as a result of her injuries.

As a result of the findings of the inquest, technical staff at EDDC, responsible for property inspections, had been briefed and advice sought from the Health and Safety Executive (HSE) to prevent a similar tragedy happening here. Housing officers are due to meet with their main contractors to brief them on how to detect the potentially faulty thermostats, and cold water storage tanks should any exist within the district's housing stock.

Housing officers were preparing an article for the tenants' newsletter giving the advice issued by the HSE.

The Local Government Association (LGA) has issued a press release template for local authorities to alert people what to look for and tell-tale signs of a problem system. The government had been criticised in the media for not alerting councils to this problem sooner.

EDDC contractors will be checking the housing stock on their routine inspection visits. Most thermostatic systems that exist within this council's housing stock feature automatic cut off valves, but properties built between 1945 and 1975 could possibly have alternative systems.

The Chairman questioned whether the Head of Housing and Social Inclusion felt satisfied that 'routine inspections' were sufficient, or whether there should be more urgency in this matter.

The Head of Housing and Social Inclusion stated that from the advice issued properties constructed 1945 and 1975 were considered to be the most 'at risk' properties. It was noted that it would be time consuming and expensive to inspect every property. Tenants could also help by being vigilant of excessive heat in their water systems and following the advice being issued.

The Portfolio Holder for Communities reminded the Board that many people in the district had purchased their council property under the 'Right to Buy' scheme. These properties could have older and more 'at-risk' heating systems. It was important to communicate with these homeowners through the press.

2. The explosion in Plymouth and subsequent death of a child passer-by

The property involved in this incident is owned by Plymouth City Council. It is understood that the explosion was due to a gas leak in the house. The Council has stated that they have carried out annual checks of appliances. An inquest will follow to investigate further and to examine how the force of the blast caused the sad death of a passer by, a young schoolgirl. This council will monitor the outcome of the investigation to see if lessons can be learned to promote the safety of tenants.

Councillor Miss Ash asked for further information on two issues:

1. A recent tour of the Millwey Rise Community Centre in Axminster found it to be in extremely poor condition. What action was the council planning to take on this matter?
2. The tenant satisfaction survey has shown dissatisfaction in Honiton. Again, what is happening about this?

52 Question and answer session (cont'd)

The Chairman assured Councillor Miss Ash that these matters would be covered in a future meeting of the Board and were included on the Forward Plan of agenda items.

RECOMMENDED that the Housing and Social Inclusion Service communicate with all current housing tenants plus the owners of council properties purchased under Right-to-Buy legislation, with regard to potential problems that may exist within the hot water systems particularly of houses constructed between 1945 and 1975.

***53 Welcome newly nominated tenant and leaseholder representative**

Mr Rowe had given his apologies for the meeting. The Board looked forward to meeting Mr Rowe at its next meeting on 31 January 2008.

54 Audit Commission inspection of housing management services

The Chairman introduced Members of the Board to this report (and accompanying documentation). It was noted that many of the findings were fair, but the Chairman expressed her disappointment at the Audit Commission's (AC) opinion that EDDC had 'uncertain prospects for improvement'.

The Head of Housing and Social Inclusion ran through the report's various sections including the tenant surveys and explained to Members that for the purposes of the meeting, the section 'Turning recommendations into service improvements' (P.90 – 95 of the agenda) should be the focus of discussion.

The Head of Housing and Social Inclusion reported that the process had been challenging, demanding and ultimately rewarding. The hard work of the tenants, officers and Members was recognised and thanks were extended to all involved.

The Council received a one star rating by the AC. Whilst disappointing, it was not necessarily surprising as many councils only receive one or no star on their first inspection. The Audit Commission used a tough style of reporting and scoring regime, which tended to highlight negatives and perhaps did not give enough credit to strengths within the service. To be clear, a list of strengths and weaknesses identified by the Audit Commission was circulated at the meeting. The Council was fortunate in being able to have had an input in to the final wording. The report acknowledged that the Council was 'getting the day job done'. The Head of Housing and Social Inclusion and others had carefully considered whether it was appropriate to submit a request for a formal review of our scoring, but felt that time would be better spent on proceeding with improvements and implementing all the worthy recommendations that were set out in the report. The Audit Commission suggested that success with implementation of the recommendations could help the Council achieving two stars in the future. The Council accepted the areas identified for improvement.

The Head of Housing and Social Inclusion felt that the process had been challenging but in a positive way with the service now being more aware of its strengths and weaknesses. The services would now work on the weaknesses to convert them to strengths.

Reference to the work of the Housing Review Board was made in the report. It was felt that the AC might not have gained a full picture from only attending part of one meeting. Inspectors seemed to have confused the Board's function with those of a Housing

Association Board. The structure was not the same and had different protocols with a high proportion of tenants being represented on the Housing Review Board.

54 **Audit Commission inspection of housing management services (cont'd)**

However, the Board acknowledged the need to improve and progress with confidence. It was felt that additional training and use of a mentor or mentors from a 'good' authority that had already been through this auditing process would be useful. It was felt that this would help the Board to be more challenging and to focus on what mattered most to tenants.

It was recognised that most of the recommendations could be implemented without additional significant costs, but by changing procedures and by making sure that the needs of the tenant were put first. This reflected the way the Service was progressing anyway. Care would be taken to ensure that in implementing the recommendations, the Service retained what it already does well.

There were references in the report to the long term future of the ownership and management of the housing stock. The Head of Housing and Social Inclusion felt that the Council had made a rational decision in keeping the housing stock in-house following the stock options process, because the Council was not ready at that point to outsource the stock. By implementing the recommendations of the inspection, the Council would be in a better position when it undertook its next Housing Stock Options Appraisal to seriously explore more radical options.

There then followed a round-table discussion where comparisons with other councils' performance were drawn, as well as accepting a generous offer from Councillor Cope to 'Plain English' our Housing Customer Charter document.

In response to an update on the Decent Homes Standard, the Head of Housing and Social Inclusion advised that there were 168 properties that were awaiting upgrades to their insulation. However, these would all be completed by 31 March 2008.

The Board then moved on to discuss Annex 6 of the agenda, entitled 'Audit Commission Inspection of Housing Management Services – Turning Recommendations into Service improvements.' The Head of Housing and Social Inclusion felt that all of the recommendations were achievable, although some of the timescales were very tight. The Board would be kept up to date on the progress of the recommendations and a new column would be included in the appendix headed "progress to date". Members made comments on each point, these are summarised below:

Recommendations	Comments/Recommendations from the Board
<p>1. Increase the customer focus of the service by:</p> <p>1.1 Refining, publicising and monitoring service standards in consultation with customers, where these are currently weak or absent, including:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • telephone call handling; • target times for each stage of the adaptations process; • the response to anti-social behaviour; and • the decorative condition when homes are re-let. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ➤ There are some resource implications here; however it is not felt that this would cause the Council difficulties on either cost or the resources available. ➤ There is a need for the council to provide evidence of actions and to be clearer as to when we will achieve tasks. Measurement and proof shows that evidence is being collected.

Audit Commission inspection of housing management services (cont'd)

Recommendations	Comments/Recommendations from the Board
1.2 Better training and application of the complaints system.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ➤ The council needs to separate the complaints/service request system so that it can clearly distinguish between a day to day service request/complaint and a formal complaint, for example against a neighbour when a call is logged. Officers will be trained to be aware of the differences. ➤ The council should be aware that making a formal complaint (that may be used in Court in the case of contentious issues) may be less preferable to a tenant, than to making a service request – even if that tenant would be protected by an expert witness that hides their identity in Court. This will be clarified in a future edition of the tenants' newsletter.
1.3 Improving the sensitivity of the service to the diversity of tenants by: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • meeting the CRE /CHR standard for housing • adopting a more systematic approach to assessing and meeting diverse needs • ensuring that all staff, councillors and active tenants receive more sophisticated training on diversity. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ➤ Officers throughout the council have recently received training in diversity. ➤ The council needs to make sure that disability awareness training is included. ➤ The council's ICT systems should be sophisticated enough to enable a comprehensive database to be created to ensure that officers are aware of any problems/challenges faced by a tenant when/if they telephone the offices. Tenants would need to be advised why the Council was collecting this information. ➤ The tenant profiling exercise will partly satisfy this requirement.
1.4 Improving the choices that tenants have in improvements	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ➤ It was felt that choices to tenants should be increased within a realistic scope, for example colour and style choices. This was agreed at the November 2007 meeting.
1.5 Exploring with tenants the costs and benefits of the introduction of an appointments system for responsive repairs, taking account of its impact in other Councils.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ➤ The council need to improve the performance of our Contractors in making and keeping tenant appointments. Performance of Contractors is reported regularly to the Board. ➤ The council already keeps a record of how, when and how long it takes to carry out repairs.
2. Improve the performance management of the service by: <p>2.1. Reviewing the quality of targets and implementing the overall changes that are contained within the improvement plan.</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ➤ The Housing Service already try to work to SMART targets (specific, measurable, achievable, realistic, timely/timebound). Discipline is required to ensure that these are employed in all plans and measured. ➤ A more robust approach is to be taken to ensure plans are outcome-focused and customer centred.

Audit Commission inspection of housing management services (cont'd)

Recommendations	Comments/Recommendations from the Board
2.2 Improving the capacity and focusing the attention of the Housing Review Board on the key outcome targets.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ➤ The agendas must include items that are relevant to the tenants, as well as items that are generated by the Council. ➤ Diligence is needed to make sure that the Forward Plan is monitored and not just updated. ➤ There is a need for training for Board members, with suggested topics such as understanding accounts and budgets. Members will advise as to specific training requirements and it is hoped that the Council's Human Resources section can turn these into appropriate courses. The Board could look at sharing ideas with other authorities and housing associations as a way of learning and reducing training costs. ➤ The input that could be gained from a mentor would aid EDDC's learning from other organisations on their practices and experiences. ➤ The Tenant Members reminded the Board that communications need to be clear and to take into account the audience of readers. ➤ The Board recognised that all Members had done extremely well and experienced a steep learning curve of understanding in the 18 months that the HRB had been operating. ➤ Length and readability of agendas is a concern. Greater use of bullet points might ease understanding and making reports more concise.
2.3 Monitoring and managing communal areas and community rooms more effectively.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ➤ This item is receiving urgent attention and progress is underway. An officer (Christine McDonald, Home Safeguard Manager) is now responsible for community centres cleaning and is also conversant on issues such as fire retardency of furnishings. ➤ Vigilance is needed to ensure that disabled facilities are not blocked by items such as stored furniture. WC facilities are also used for storing cleaning materials – also unacceptable.
2.4 Introducing expert sample checks of gas safety work.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ➤ This proposes that we use the 'best practice' approach of checking the checkers.
3. Address weaknesses in specific services by:	
3.1 Seeking out a high performing organisation to act as a mentor.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ➤ We are talking to Local Authorities and Arms' length' business organisations with a view to selecting a suitable mentor. ➤ Teignbridge and South Somerset were both proposed, as well as looking at Beacon Authorities, and those outside the South West area.
3.2 Improving contract management arrangements, with greater involvement of tenants.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ➤ The Head of Housing and Social Inclusion confirmed that tenants will be involved in this process, working with the Housing Services team.
3.3 Adopting clearer policies and practices for rechargeable repairs.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ➤ In place, agreed at the November 2007 meeting.

Audit Commission inspection of housing management services (cont'd)

Recommendations	Comments from the Board
3.4 Investing sufficient time on sign-up arrangements and/or new tenant visits to reinforce the importance of tenancy conditions and the opportunities for involvement.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ➤ A welcome process is now in place for new tenants. More time is spent with them and a Tenant Handbook helps with the process. ➤ Further improvements are planned to make this a more comprehensive process.
3.5 Improving the quality of preventive work on rent arrears.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ➤ We need to provide further information to the Audit Commission as to how EDDC is resolving this issue. ➤ There are improvements being made to the benefits process which will also have a knock-on effect on rent arrears. ➤ The council intends to discuss the issues with tenants to improve the system with the Tenant and Leaseholder customer panel being consulted on how to improve the service. Tenants to be made aware that they can obtain advice from the Citizens Advice Bureau, with which the Council has a Service Level Agreement. ➤ A Direct Debit (DD) system is being introduced which aims to improve payment flows. It is noted that whilst some very low income tenants may have bank account facilities, DD is not available to all.
3.6 Reviewing the use of non-secure tenancies for more than a year.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ➤ It was noted that non-secure tenancies should not ideally occur for temporary tenants for over a year and the use of temporary accommodation has much reduced.
3.7 Improving the appearance of communal walkways to flats and better managing the cleaning and grounds maintenance contracts.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ➤ Could the Tenants' Panel help to monitor these areas? ➤ Improvements have been initiated under the current contract. ➤ Option was reported to the Board in November 2007.
4. Improve the value for money of the service by:	
4.1 Setting clear improvement targets for each service and manager, based upon the findings of the benchmarking report.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ➤ Targets for managers will be set through the Council's performance appraisal system.
4.2 Meeting and improving upon the efficiency targets contained within the partnering contract.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ➤ This will be achieved through better and smarter contract management.
4.3 Maintaining the progress on the average time it takes to re-let each home as it becomes vacant.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ➤ Progress is being maintained. ➤ The knock-on effect of quick re-letting is that the council no longer has any spare housing stock for emergency lettings or urgent needs. ➤ Tenants requested that we add details to the letting statistics where properties were empty, for example, if properties have been hard to let. ➤ Properties undergoing major refurbishment are not included in the figures in accordance with the Audit Commission definition.

53 **Audit Commission inspection of housing management services (cont'd)**

Recommendations	Comments from the Board
4.4 Implementing plans to improve the IT systems, including the introduction of direct debit.	➤ Work is underway on this project, which should be completed by the deadline set by the Audit Commission.
4.5 Reviewing the degree to which tenants may receive a 'one-stop' service from housing officers, thereby reducing traveling time.	➤ A one-stop service is difficult for EDDC as officers currently work in specialist teams. ➤ Officers are being encouraged to take note of other issues that may exist around them – such as abandoned cars on an estate and operate more generically.

RECOMMENDED that a letter be sent to the Audit Commission (AC) thanking the Inspectors for their input and confirming that the Council will be progressing the Action Plan and would provide the AC with evidence of its implementation (the Council aimed to prove the AC wrong in their view that we did not have certain prospects for improvement)

55 **Draft Housing Review Account 2008/09**

The Head of Finance presented the draft accounts for 2008/09, running through each item and explaining clearly to the Board how the budget was created and presented. The accounts highlighted the need to plan ahead. The Board was delighted with the clarity of the explanations given and thanked the Head of Finance.

RECOMMENDED that the Housing Review Account budget for 2008/09 be agreed, and tenants give early consideration to the budget for years 2009/2010 and 2010/11, including expenditure on extra items such as decommissioning some sheltered housing stock.

*56 **Best Wishes**

The Board asked for their best wishes to be sent to Dennis Boobier, Housing Needs Manager, who was recovering from an operation. The Board acknowledged that as a result of his absence, there could be some additional pressure on the Housing Needs Service.

Chairman

Date