

EAST DEVON DISTRICT COUNCIL

Minutes of a meeting of the Housing Review Board held at Dunning Court, Honiton on 14 June 2007

Present:

Councillors:

Miss V Ash
D R Hull
J Humphreys
J A Knight
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
G K Liverton
Mrs P A Stott
C Tratt

Apology:

Co-opted Tenant Member:

Mrs C Morrison

The meeting started at 6.30 pm and ended at 9.55 pm

***1 Election of Chairman**

A request was made for a formal vote of thanks to be made to Councillor D J Cox from the Housing Review Board for his chairmanship during the inaugural year of the Board.

RESOLVED that Councillor Mrs A E Liverton be elected Chairman for the ensuing year.

Following her election, Councillor Mrs Liverton praised the former Chairman Councillor Cox for his excellent work and felt that he would be a hard act to follow.

(Mrs H Williamson formally abstained from the vote.)

***2 Appointment of Vice-Chairman**

On behalf of the Board the Chairman thanked Councillor Miss Ash for all her work as Vice-Chairman of the Housing Review Board during the previous year.

A request was made for further training to enable tenant members to become Chairman of the Board.

RESOLVED that Mr T Brown be appointed Vice-Chairman for the ensuing year.

(Mrs H Williamson formally abstained from the vote.)

***3 Welcome**

The Chairman welcomed all those present to the Housing Review Board meeting and invited each person to briefly introduce themselves.

It was noted that Mrs C Morrison was recovering from a heart attack and the Chairman requested that a 'get well soon' card be sent to Mrs Morrison on behalf of the Housing Review Board.

***4 Minutes**

The minutes of the meeting of the Housing Review Board held on 8 March 2007, were confirmed and signed as a true record.

***5 Question and answer session**

At the previous meeting a request had been made for additional training for members before the next scheduled meeting of the Housing Review Board (minute 64, 08.03.07 refers). Those requiring training were encouraged to liaise with the Head of Housing and Social Inclusion to arrange suitable topics and dates. The Head of Housing and Social Inclusion reported that his staff had been encouraged to engage with champions on the Board for training, although some areas had been more successful than others. However no specific training requests had been received.

It was agreed that regular training sessions held prior to the Housing Review Board meetings were not appropriate due to the size of the agendas and length of meetings. The Board would prefer training to be held on a separate occasion to allow time to question the officers providing the training. It was suggested that members provide the Head of Housing and Social Inclusion with a list of specific training topics so that a structured training plan could be devised

One of the tenant members requested an update on the progress of the sale of the freehold of the flats at Brinkburn Court, Sidmouth (minute 29, 28.09.06 refers). The Head of Housing and Social Inclusion reported that the residents had been consulted regarding the option to purchase the freehold, but as no response had been received it would be put on the open market when the new Housing Business Manager was in post

A request was made for a tour of specific problem areas or issues on the Council's housing estates. It was agreed that this would be a good idea. The tour of the community centres undertaken by the Board in February 2007 had been successful.

A request was made for all the members of the Housing Review Board to be provided with a list of contact details of other members of the Board, as well as contact numbers for the officers.

The Vice-Chairman requested an update on the Government Office South West (GOSW) option appraisal 'sign off' report. The Head of Housing and Social Inclusion reported that he had written to the GOSW in April 2007 expressing the Board's issues of concern, but, as yet, had not heard anything in response. It was noted that officers would be meeting with the Plymouth office in July.

6 **Choice based lettings scheme – policy change**

Members of the Housing Review Board considered the report of the Housing Needs Manager which set out the results of a review of the Council's current Allocation Policy and Choice Based Lettings (CBL) Scheme. The Board was asked to approve a number of proposed changes to the Allocation Policy and the way the CBL Scheme was operated. The CBL Scheme had been fully implemented from October 2006, with a revised void procedure in operation since January 2007. Void turnaround timescales were reducing and the Council was aiming to meet the target of 30 days on average in the future. It was recognised that the CBL Scheme would need to be reviewed and modified after a period of implementing the new scheme and the report proposed a number of amendments to make the scheme more open and transparent.

It was noted that lettings were a core function of the Housing Service. The majority of local authorities operated CBL Schemes and most of these were similar. At present the main difference with East Devon District Council's (EDDC) CBL Scheme was that they did not openly advertise available properties, but instead relied on the housing system to provide a list of the top twenty applicants. However, the system was not always as accurate as it could be and open advertisements were one of the main proposals for change.

The Housing Needs Manager reported that Government advice was that housing should not be allocated on single criteria or solely on an applicant's place on a list. The CBL scheme lacked an open process with advertising. He also reported that the criteria in the banding system should be 'tidied up' and that the criteria would be more transparent.

There was a need to consider how the Housing Service could help vulnerable applicants and tenants bid for properties. Vulnerable people would be identified through the housing register. The housing application pack allowed people to inform the Council about issues specific to themselves. There was also a need to engage and get better at liaising with other partner organisations to identify vulnerable people and for these partners to take on the role of proxy bidder.

A request was made to allow officers to label properties in order to prevent homelessness and reduce large groupings of homeless tenants. The Housing Needs Manager also wanted to be able to allocate percentages to allow a balance of meeting homelessness targets as well as meeting general housing needs.

It was noted anyone could be on the Council's housing register. However the Council could not offer property to certain applicants. A threshold of capital would be identified and this would be reviewed annually. It was felt that it should be made clearer that property would only be available to those registered on the housing register.

Members questioned whether at present members of the public could come into the Council's reception area to use computers to view the Council's website and in particular, vacant properties. It was noted that local advertising and assistance was needed in all town halls, rather than just in Exmouth and Sidmouth. The Head of Housing and Social Inclusion agreed that it would be excellent to take services out locally, but there were insufficient resources available for this at present. However, it could be possible to work with other organisations in the towns across East Devon, such as the town councils and Social Services. It was suggested that more use be made of the town councils to advertise the lists of properties available and that the clerks could register potential applicants' names and pass these onto EDDC. It was agreed that there was a need to review the advertising element of the CBL Scheme and a method statement would be presented to a future meeting of the Board on appropriate advertising methods

6 Choice based lettings scheme – policy change (cont'd)

The Board felt that it was an excellent report and supported the policy change, which was in line with Government guidance. On behalf of the Board the Chairman thanked the Housing Needs Manager for his report.

- RECOMMENDED**
- 1) that the proposed changes to the Allocation Policy and Choice Based Lettings Scheme, detailed in the report, be approved.
 - 2) that a budget provision of £35,000 in 2007/08 from the Housing Revenue Account be approved in principle to cover the cost of advertising empty properties as detailed in paragraph 3.8 of the report, subject to a further report on the methodologies being brought back to the Board in September 2007.
 - 3) that delegated authority be given to the Housing Needs Manager to exclude suitable empty properties to help reduce the use of temporary accommodation and meet the Government target by 2010, with a further update report being brought back to the Board in twelve months time .
 - 4) that the inclusion or deletion of criteria in the Silver or Gold bands included in paragraphs 4.4, 4.5 and 4.6 of the report be approved.
 - 5) that facts relating to housing demand and supply be publicised to raise awareness among applicants so they understand their relative priority on the housing register and the timescale/likelihood of when they might be housed.

7 Empty properties (voids) and allocations (lettings)

Consideration was given to the report of the Housing Needs Manager which set out the quarterly and end of year position on void performance for the period January to March 2007 and 2006/07. The report showed the lettings for the fourth quarter of 2006/07 and during the year, showing the average length of time taken to relet properties during these periods.

Performance during 2006/07 was unacceptable and had not improved when compared with 2005/06. A series of proposals were put forward which were designed to improve performance in order to meet the target for returning void properties to use as quickly as possible. Performance had improved during April and May 2007 and the Housing Needs Manager was optimistic that the Council was moving in the right direction, with measures in place to improve.

It was noted that the Choice Based Lettings Scheme used effectively could help minimize void periods by ensuring that the allocation process was complete within the notice period given by tenants who terminated their tenancy. This would be more certain once the 'open' advertising process was introduced. If this process was successful then the focus for ongoing reductions in void timescales should be with the repair/modernisation process and the time taken to inspect and specify works to bring the property up to a lettable/Decent Homes Standard.

7 Empty properties (voids) and allocations (lettings) (cont'd)

The letting process had been condensed and now began at the start of the four week notice period rather than when the keys were finally handed in. There was a need to review the policy regarding modernising properties before they were allocated as this added time to the letting/void process. Properties would be inspected during the notice period, where possible. It was suggested that incentives could be offered to applicants to enable repairs and modernisation works to be carried out whilst they were in situ. Positive action would be taken to reduce the time spent waiting for keys to be returned.

It was noted that there was no incentive for tenants to vacate their properties before the four week period once notice had been given. If a tenant could not/did not want to leave their property at the end of the notice period the termination of tenancy could be withdrawn and the tenant could remain. However, the majority of tenants were very reasonable and co-operative

On behalf of the Board the Chairman thanked the Housing Needs Manager for his open and honest report and requested that a progress report be brought back for consideration in November 2007.

RECOMMENDED that the report be noted and that immediate action be taken to improve performance on letting void properties, as set out in the report, with a progress report being brought to the Board in November 2007.

***8 Preparing for the Audit Commission housing inspection**

The Head of Housing and Social Inclusion gave his third update report on preparations for the housing inspection scheduled to take place later in the year. Part of the work necessary in preparing for inspection involved the completion of a self assessment pro-forma. This had to be submitted fourteen weeks prior to the on-site phase of the inspection. A draft of this document was presented to the Board for its consideration and input. It was noted that some of the reports later in the agenda were linked with the housing inspection.

The Audit Commission Housing Inspectors would be visiting EDDC on 29 August 2007 for one and a half weeks. The self-assessment pro-forma and document requested had to be submitted by 2 July at the latest (fourteen weeks prior to the visit). The project team were working on a whole series of actions, and the key messages in the report were to be open and honest, to be self-aware and to have customer focus.

Members of the Board felt that they needed time to digest such an important document and agreed to feed back their comments to the Head of Housing and Social Inclusion within the next week.

RESOLVED that members of the Housing Review Board feed back any comments on the Audit Commission self-assessment pro-forma directly to the Head of Housing and Social Inclusion within the next week, prior to submission of the East Devon data to the Housing Inspectorate.

9 Achieving value for money in housing services

The Head of Housing and Social Inclusion presented a report to the Board which outlined the principles of achieving value for money in the delivery of housing services. The report considered good practice and presented some principles and proposals in a Value for Money Statement, for consideration, adoption and implementation. The Value for Money Statement would be implemented at both a service and Board level.

9 **Achieving value for money in housing services (cont'd)**

Value for money considerations were a theme and central element of the Key Lines of Enquiry produced by the Audit Commission, and would be a feature of the forthcoming inspection of housing management services.

The Council should ensure that it delivered services that represented good value for money and that tenants' rental income was spent in an efficient, effective and economical way.

RECOMMENDED that the approach to value for money in housing services be agreed and that the Value for Money Statement be adopted for implementation.

10 **Tenant profiling**

Members of the Housing Review Board considered the report of the Information and Analysis Officer which set out the proposed contents of the tenant profiling questionnaire. The questions included within the draft questionnaire would provide information on the different characteristics of the Council's tenants and would help to tailor the housing service to meet individual needs. It would enable proper profiling of the people that lived in East Devon. Also included with the questionnaire would be a set of frequently asked questions.

The Tenant and Leaseholder Customer Panel had been involved in the preparation of the questionnaire and the feedback from their involvement was included in the report and noted by the Board.

Some of the questions in the questionnaire were controversial. However, it was noted that the first option for each question in the questionnaire was 'prefer not to say', giving participants the choice of whether to answer or not. A lot of useful information could be gained from the questionnaire and table one of the report outlined the reasons behind asking each question.

Concern was expressed over storage of the documents and who would have access to the data. The Information and Analysis Officer explained that the security of the information was protected by the Data Protection Act and that it would also be password protected on software for the storage of such data.

It was suggested that a question be added asking whether tenants used public transport on a regular basis. The Information and Analysis Officer and the Corporate Director Communities agreed to devise an appropriate question relating to this.

RECOMMENDED that the content of the tenant profiling questionnaire be approved subject to the addition of an appropriate question regarding the use of public transport.

(Mrs S Saunders asked for her vote to be recorded against the question relating to sexuality being included in the questionnaire.)

(Councillor D R Hull asked for his vote to be recorded against the inclusion of any questions relating to sexuality, ethnicity or religion in the questionnaire.)

11 **Leaseholder services and leaseholder handbook**

Consideration was given to the report of the Head of Housing and Social Inclusion which outlined the housing management services that were provided to the Council's leaseholders, and presented a draft Leaseholder Home Owners Handbook for consideration. The report also proposed arrangements for improving services to leaseholders within the resources available, and following consultation with those concerned.

The draft Leaseholders Handbook explained the rights and responsibilities of the parties; service charges and how to pay them; repairs and maintenance; insurance; resident involvement etc. Improvements to the service could be made through communicating better and more frequently, keeping leaseholders informed about the housing service's activities and the service itself and how administrative charges levied were spent. The handbook would be an improvement on the Council's current information to leaseholders and could be put into place quickly and cheaply. If approved a copy would be sent to existing and new leasehold purchasers.

RECOMMENDED that the draft Leaseholder Home Owner's Handbook be adopted for distribution to new and existing leaseholders.

12 **Gas servicing and safety check procedures**

Members of the Housing Review Board considered a report of the Head of Housing and Social Inclusion which outlined updated procedures in response to the Council's legal responsibilities relating to safety checks on gas appliances, pipe work and flues in Council homes. This was a high priority of the Audit Commission.

There was a statutory duty prescribed in the Gas Safety (Installation and Use) Regulations 1998 placed on the Council, as a landlord to carry out gas safety checks at least once every twelve months of the gas appliances, flues and the associated pipe work that it was responsible for. In order to fulfil the duties there was a need to demonstrate that the Council had taken all reasonable steps to comply with the duty. Every year a small number of tenants (usually the same tenants) refused access for the contractors to carry out the work. It was essential to achieve one hundred per cent compliance with the duty and the Council had a system of visiting and tracking the progress. Ultimately if tenants continued to refuse access this would result in legal action such as notice of seeking possession or injunction.

In 2006/07 99.77% of the gas safety checks required were achieved and action was being taken in the 6 cases that remained unchecked. It was noted that although the Council's figures were good it had not always been good in the past at writing down what was done and that there were now procedures in writing for staff, contractors and tenants.

The Board queried the number of steps involved before any legal action was taken and asked whether this could be reduced at all. The Head of Housing and Social Inclusion reported that the steps were there to show that the Council had been reasonable if in seeking access for the gas safety check the case came before the court.

RECOMMENDED that subject to discussion taking place between the Head of Housing and Social Inclusion and the Solicitor regarding reducing timescales when taking legal action, the updated gas servicing and safety check procedures be adopted and implemented.

13 **Responsive repairs – updated procedures**

Consideration was given to the report of the Head of Housing and Social Inclusion which outlined the procedures adopted for the reporting and undertaking of responsive repairs to Council homes. This was an important area of housing management and a key service for tenants. Procedures had been updated to meet tenant expectations and current good practice. The Council performed well in this area and the procedures were designed to capture in writing what was being done and to inform tenants of how the Council operated.

The Board was invited to consider the revised procedures and endorse them for implementation by the Housing Services Team. The updated procedures had been set out in three sections, which, if approved would be placed on the Council website and in the new tenant welcome pack:

- ten key principles for responsive repairs,
- a policy and procedure note for responsive repairs, and
- categorisation of responsive repairs.

The principles set out the Council's commitment to tenants and linked with how the housing service planned, organised and managed responsive repairs to provide an effective and efficient service to tenants. The timescales for completing repairs was important to tenants and the Council would be publishing a clearer and more extensive list of repairs with target completion dates. The aim was to be more open and transparent about the repair standards and timescales tenants could reasonably expect.

The Board endorsed the responsive repairs procedures but felt that 6.4 'appointments' could be amended to read 'Where a tenant fails to keep an appointment, we will offer a second appointment. If the second appointment is not kept the repair request will be left pending until a tenant makes further contact'.

RECOMMENDED that subject to amendment of 6.4, the updated responsive repairs procedures be approved.

*14 **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 2006 – March 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.

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

***15 Housing Revenue Account 2006/07 – outturn statement**

Members of the Housing Review Board noted the report of the Head of Housing and Social Inclusion which presented the draft outturn statement in respect of income and expenditure on the Housing Revenue Account (HRA) during 2006/07.

The Head of Housing and Social Inclusion reported that a healthy surplus of approximately £1.7 million had been maintained on the HRA. Anticipated rental income had been exceeded and the budget on responsive repairs had been overspent. In most cases spending was close to the HRA Business Plan assumptions. It was noted that the 2006/07 budget had been prepared before the Business Plan was finalised in June 2006. The 2007/08 HRA budget was produced having closely aligned income and expenditure assumptions with the Business Plan.

Performance on the collection of rent had improved to 97.78%. 6.02% of tenants were in arrears of more than seven weeks rent and at the beginning of April the total amount of arrears was £301,561. Notice of seeking possession had been served on 20.19% of tenants in rent arrears and 0.26% of tenants were evicted as a result of rent arrears, representing 11 households. A request was made for rent arrears to be broken down into what they were and why they had occurred. It was noted that a general profiling and break-down of rent arrears would be presented to the Board in January 2008.

RESOLVED that the report be noted.

***16 Future dates**

Those present noted the dates and venues of the Housing Review Board meetings for the forthcoming year. All meetings would commence at 6:30pm, unless otherwise stated.

Thursday 6 September 2007 at Broadview, Broadclyst.

Thursday 29 November 2007 at Trumps Court, Sidmouth.

Thursday 31 January 2008 at Lymebourne, Sidmouth.

Thursday 6 March 2008 at the Knowle, Sidmouth.

Thursday 1 May 2008 at Clayton House, Exmouth.

It was noted that the next meeting would be held on Thursday 6 September 2007, not Thursday 13 September, as previously agreed as the Audit Commission Housing Inspectors would be visiting the Council on 6 September and it was anticipated that they would like to attend a meeting of the Housing Review Board.

Chairman

Date