

EAST DEVON DISTRICT COUNCIL

Minutes of a meeting of the Housing Review Board held at Knowle, Sidmouth on 25 June 2009

Present:

Councillors:	Co-opted tenant members:
Vivienne Ash	Ann Bickham
Douglas Hull	Ted Brown
John Humphreys	Victor Kemp
Jim Knight	Christine Morrison
Pauline Stott	Sue Saunders
EDDC Officers:	Co-opted independent community representatives:
Sue Bewes, Housing Strategy Manager	Rob Finch
Amy Gilbert, Support Services Manager	
John Golding, Head of Housing & Social Inclusion	
Alethea Thompson, Democratic Services Officer	

Also Present:

Councillors:

Jill Elson, Portfolio Holder, Communities

Stephanie Jones

The meeting started at 6.30pm and ended at 9.00pm

***1 Election of Chairman**

RESOLVED that Ted Brown be elected Chairman of the Housing Review Board for the ensuing year.

The Chairman thanked the Board for their support and would endeavor to serve them well for the forthcoming year. He thanked them for having confidence in him and noted the very high caliber of the previous two Chairmen. He felt that he had had an excellent mentor in Councillor Ann Liverton for the past two years whilst he was Vice Chairman of the Board.

The Chairman went on to welcome Councillor Pauline Stott as a new member on the Housing Review Board. Councillor Stott replaced Councillor Ann Liverton.

***2 Appointment of Vice Chairman**

RESOLVED that Councillor Douglas Hull be appointed Vice Chairman of the Board for the ensuing year.

The Chairman welcomed the Vice Chairman and offered his congratulations.

***3 Public Question time**

There were no questions raised by members of the public.

***3 Public Question time (continued)**

Councillor Pauline Stott raised the issue of the Sustainable Communities Act 2007. She requested that the Housing Review Board raise the issue of the £5.8million Housing Revenue Account subsidy to be put forward to the July meeting of the Executive Board for consideration alongside the other schemes coming forward.

The Head of Housing and Social Inclusion agreed that this was an excellent idea and was a furtherance of the Westminster campaign for an improved housing finance system allowing housing authorities to retain their rental income.

RESOLVED that the Housing Review Board ask the Executive Board to consider the retention of the housing subsidy to be put forward to the panel under the Sustainable Communities Act.

***4 Minutes**

The minutes of the meeting of the Housing Review Board held on 30 April 2009, were confirmed and signed as a true record.

The Head of Housing and Social Inclusion assured the Board that 'complaints' raised under minute *83 of the previous meeting had been looked into. Some had been resolved and others remained outstanding but were being actioned. He hoped that all of the issues would be resolved as quickly as possible.

***5 Housing Review Board Forward Plan**

The Head of Housing and Social Inclusion presented the Forward Plan to the Board and the contents were noted. It was reported that he tried to manage the size of the agenda and would be sending out the regular monitoring report of the Audit Commission Delivery Plan separately.

Concern was expressed that the agendas were too big and the meetings too long. Members discussed whether more frequent meetings should be held with smaller agendas but the Board agreed that more meetings would be difficult for the officers to service and members to attend. It was suggested that meetings could start at the earlier time of 6.00pm. It was noted that a single meeting dedicated to the review of the Housing Revenue Account budget would be required in the future.

No new coffee morning dates were detailed on the plan, however the Housing Strategy Manager updated the Board on suggested dates and venues for the forthcoming year. It was suggested that the coffee morning and drop in sessions could be combined with the ones already arranged for officers. It was agreed that this would be arranged and trialed for a year. It was noted that the drop in morning arranged on 14 July 2009 from 10.00am until 12.00 noon at the Mackarness Hall, Honiton would remain as the venue had already been booked.

RESOLVED

- 1 that the Housing Review Board drop in/coffee morning sessions be combined with the ones already arranged for officers, with the arrangement being reviewed in a year,
- 2 that the Housing Strategy Manager invite and circulate the timetable of the officer bookings to the members of the Housing Review Board.

6 **HomeSwapper**

The report of the Housing Needs Manager set out a proposal to join HomeSwapper – a national mutual exchange system to replace the current mutual exchange register administered by the Council. All Devon District Councils, except for EDDC belonged to HomeSwapper. To enable EDDC tenants to benefit from a Devon wide mutual exchange register the report recommended that the Council should enroll with HomeSwapper. The annual cost was £2,150 which could be funded through the Housing Revenue Account (HRA).

HomeSwapper was the largest mutual exchange service for council and housing association tenants wanting to swap homes. It was easy to register on-line. The service was free to tenants of landlords who were registered with HomeSwapper; otherwise there was a small application fee. At present tenants outside the East Devon area were unable to swap with the Council's tenants through the existing mutual exchange arrangements. The report outlined how the HomeSwapper service operated. It was noted that once a 'match' had been found then the Council's normal mutual exchange arrangements/rules applied and tenants would need to contact the Housing Needs team to progress the exchange.

- RECOMMENDED**
- 1 that the Council enroll with HomeSwapper to administer mutual exchanges for Council tenants.
 - 2 that an annual budget of £2,150 to register as a landlord with HomeSwapper be agreed.

*7 **Review of Sheltered Housing – interim report**

Consideration was given to the report of the Housing Business Manager which provided the Board with details of the review of sheltered housing being progressed by a Task and Finish Forum (TaFF) and summarised the progress to date

The TaFF had undertaken a review of sheltered housing and established the attributes of each sheltered housing scheme. A weighted scoring system was applied when assessing each scheme, having regard to location, popularity and size of property criteria. The process had identified where the Council could make some significant improvements to its housing stock by applying the de-commissioning criteria to ensure that its sheltered housing would meet the requirements of the Supporting People regime and residents' expectations. Under Supporting People requirements, by April 2010 the Council's support services should offer 100% floating support for sheltered housing residents. From April 2010 anyone moving into supported accommodation would have a contract offered to them which would allow them the choice to subscribe to the support services at different levels.

By considering accommodation suitable for decommissioning EDDC was able to demonstrate that it recognised the need to optimise the use of its housing stock to cater for all client groups in housing need, and acknowledged the financial pressures of continuing to provide support services for those tenants occupying sheltered housing who did not need to subscribe to the housing related support options on offer.

The Supporting People standards needed to be measured against the Council's sheltered properties to identify whether they met all the criteria, or which homes needed to be improved to bring them up to standard, or be decommissioned from being used for sheltered housing for older people.

*7 **Review of Sheltered Housing – interim report (cont'd)**

The TaFF had vital input and additional information from the staff responsible for providing the support services for each scheme being assessed. This frontline staff involvement had been very useful to all those involved. The views and opinions of the residents and stakeholders who would be affected by any decommissioning decisions would also be taken into account via a questionnaire and accompanying leaflet.

So far 439 properties had been identified for possible decommissioning and the TaFF had recommended whether a 1, 3 or 5 year programme would be preferable with each identified scheme given a decommissioning timeframe.

The final task of the TaFF would be to agree all the outcome information to be reported back to the Housing Review Board in September 2009 to enable the next stage of the decommissioning project to proceed. The next stage of the decommissioning project would be to consider a proposed 1, 3 or 5 year programme approach for the properties identified for reuse. This would require another group of staff, tenant representatives, and members to be established to oversee how this would be implemented and progressed. Also at that stage the Devon Supporting People team would need to be informed of the Council's intention to decommission the agreed properties, and the timeframe, in order for the contract due to be agreed for the period April 2010 – 2013, to reflect the changes.

Once the identified decommissioned schemes had been agreed, there would be a range of consultation approaches for all sheltered housing residents who would be living on the proposed decommissioned schemes. All residents would be able to have the process of decommissioning explained to them in full and with an opportunity to have their say on the process, and to receive support and advice on how it would affect them in the future.

The Communities Portfolio thanked Councillor Knight, Chairman of the TaFF, and all its members for the work undertaken to date. It was noted that the most difficult part of the process was yet to come and that all tenants and district councillors would be asked for their views.

The Board sent their thanks to all the officers involved in the TaFF for their open and honest feedback.

RESOLVED that the final TaFF recommendations regarding the points scoring exercise for the proposed de-commissioning of sheltered housing schemes be presented to a future meeting of the Housing Review Board, with recommendations including any schemes which were deemed to have redevelopment potential..

*8 **Research into housing related support in the private sector**

The report of the Head of Housing and Social Inclusion presented the findings of research, funded by the Supporting People programme, into the need for housing related support services in the private sector and other tenures that did not currently have access to the type of service provided for sheltered housing tenants. A significant need for mobile support services in the private sector had been identified and the report proposed some ideas in relation to how this need for housing related support might be met.

There was an opportunity to develop the Mobile Support Officer and Scheme Manager service to provide floating housing support to new markets in the private sector. Such a project was all about supporting people to live independently in their own homes. However, this would require a full business analysis, service development proposals and market testing, and a review of the investment profile required to capture any market.

*8 **Research into housing related support in the private sector** (cont'd)

If the research proposals were supported it would extend a successful service already provided for public sector clients, to vulnerable clients living in the private sector, enabling them to live independently in their own homes. This would fill a significant gap in local Supporting People services. A full business appraisal would ensure that income was generated to meet future revenue costs.

The Home Safeguard service had enormous potential if it was permitted a more businesslike approach. At present there was no incentive to market the service as the number of alarms which were currently provided in the community had a huge impact on the housing service's budget. Approximately 1,400 of the 5,000 Home Safeguard customers were Council tenants, the remainder being in the private sector.

A formal response from Supporting People was currently awaited, as well as an indication of how they might want the proposals taken forward. If these proposals were supported by Supporting People a detailed report would be brought back to the Housing Review Board for its consideration. There was also a significant decision for the Council to make on the future of Home Safeguard which was being progressed through the Leader's Service Transformation Group.

RESOLVED

- 1 that the report on the research into the need for mobile housing related support to the private sector be noted.
- 2 that further proposals be invited on how the recommendations in the report might be taken forward once the views of the Supporting People team were known.

(Councillor Pauline Stott declared a personal interest in the above item as a Social Services care assistant in the community.)

*9 **Draft commissioning strategy for extra care housing**

The Board was invited to consider and comment on the draft strategy produced by Devon County Council (DCC) for the commissioning and provision of extra care sheltered housing. Extra care housing would be provided in partnership with the local housing authority and would bridge the gap between sheltered housing and residential care. It needed to be provided in partnership because it crossed the housing, support, care division of services and was complex to finance. Extra care housing was one of a number of options for older people who needed some personal care or other types of support, but who wished to retain independence and were able to live safely on their own.

Extra Care housing was designed with the needs of frailer older people in mind and with varying levels of care and support available on site. People who lived in Extra Care housing had their own self-contained homes, their own front doors and legal right to occupy the property. Extra Care housing was also sometimes known as very sheltered housing, assisted living, or simply housing with care. It came in many built forms, including blocks of flats, bungalow estates and retirement villages. In addition to the communal facilities often found in sheltered housing, Extra Care schemes often included a restaurant or dining room, health and fitness facilities and hobby rooms. Properties could be rented, owned, leasehold, or shared ownership. Domestic support and personal care was available, usually from on-site staff.

There was no Extra Care housing in East Devon and it was felt that it would meet the needs of vulnerable tenants in the Council's existing sheltered housing who needed to move and/or older people with higher level support needs in private housing. It was anticipated that there would be increasing demand for this form of housing with an ageing population.

*9 **Draft commissioning strategy for extra care housing** (cont'd)

The Head of Housing and Social Inclusion reported that DCC was proposing a strong link with district authorities and that he was pleased with the partnership approach suggested. However, he had indicated to the County Council that EDDC would not be able to share the capital costs.

Members felt that Extra Care housing was in excellent idea, and there was a potential to provide this form of housing in the redevelopment areas identified by the Sheltered Housing TaFF. The substantial capital funding required for the provision of Extra Care homes was noted.

The Head of Housing and Social Inclusion would put the Board's comments forward to DCC's Adult and Community Services.

RESOLVED that the draft extra care strategy produced by Devon County Council be noted.

*10 **Review of communal cleaning and caretaking**

Consideration was given to the report of the Housing Business Manager which presented the findings of the review of communal cleaning which had been undertaken following concerns raised during the preparations for the housing inspection. Some residents who received the communal cleaning service had indicated that they would welcome an improved service. It was noted that the detailed cost implications of the options contained in the report had yet to be established.

The current cleaning contract in place had not been revisited for approximately 20 years. A Communal Cleaning Review Group had been formed and included all interested parties involved in the cleaning service. The Communal Cleaning Review Group looked at options for longer term changes to the cleaning service by comparables with other social housing providers.

The main reasons for reviewing the current communal cleaning arrangements were noted to be:

- Poor performance and increasing customer complaints about the Communal Cleaning Service.
- Breakdown in communication between Housing & Streetscene in dealing with complaints.
- Community centre cleaning standards were not acceptable.
- Audit Commission Inspection 2007 outcome & recommendations for improved communal cleaning.
- Out of date specification and increased cost implications regarding fulfilling a future reasonable service.
- Tenants increased expectations of cleaning service & clarity in Tenancy Agreement of responsibilities of communal cleaning.
- To inform the Housing Review Board of the issues to be addressed and provide a future steer on tenant expectations to address the above (29 November 2007 Housing Review Board report).

*10 **Review of communal cleaning and caretaking** (cont'd)

- Contract monitoring, performance indicators and Service Level Agreement processes to be identified and implemented.

The options that were considered as possible enhancements or changes to the Council's existing service were:

Option 1

To retain the current contract and specification as it was currently – this was not a favoured option as Streetscene had already expressed a wish not to continue being the service provider for this contract, and wished to pass this service over to staff to manage in the Housing & Social Inclusion Service as soon as possible.

Option 2

To revise the current specification (with assistance from Streetscene) and then put the contract out for tender with an enhanced specification section to include additional cleaning requirements for all community centres, guest rooms on sheltered housing schemes, and the new district offices at Burnside Exmouth, Home Safeguard Lymebourne Community Alarm Office, Honiton district office at Dunning Court, Palmer House district offices Exmouth, and the Lymebourne annex staff offices and toilets. The costs would be based on the current hourly rate paid to the staff and Streetscene would be asked to give estimated cost forecasts for the materials, transport costs and management costs for the amendments required to identify these additional areas to be included for cleaning in the contract.

Option 3

To develop and improve the current specification to clearly re-define the areas to receive increased frequency of cleaning, and to develop a caretaking element to cover basic scheme and communal area caretaking functions to include path and moss clearing, litter picking, small repairs and maintenance (yet to be agreed). The enhanced service specification would include the community centres, guest rooms on sheltered housing schemes, and basic maintenance duties for which a 'caretaking & additional cleaning element' would be identified through a service charge which would be passed onto the residents who would receive these services at an additional cost, separate from their rent. This model could be based on the Teign Housing model and be implemented using their support and guidance towards full migration towards an integrated cleaning and caretaking service.

Option 4

Any of the above options, but with the current specification and contract not being put out to tender but being brought back in-house, managed and run by the Housing Services Team (Estate Management Section). Thereafter an additional caretaking and enhanced cleaning regime of the indicated areas could be developed and a service charge applied for this additional service once the de-pooling of the service charges had been completed from April 2010.

An important part of the review was a communal cleaning survey. The results showed a clear indication from the participants that such residents were willing to consider paying a small contribution by way of a service charge for a caretaking service and an improved cleaning service. A summary of the survey results was noted.

*10 **Review of communal cleaning and caretaking** (cont'd)

The report noted how EDDC's current cleaning services compared with the service Teign Housing had in place. Teign Housing had successfully improved their communal cleaning services over the past few years. The Audit Commission's guidelines on housing cleaning and caretaking services had been researched and these were also noted in the report.

The Head of Housing reported that he had been very impressed with the speed, customer care and friendliness shown by the current cleaners during a 'back to the floor day' with the service. He felt that the cost of an enhanced cleaning service should be paid for by the users of that service as part of a service charge, in order to cover the additional costs of that service. It was noted that Arms Length Management Organisations (ALMOs) and Housing Associations routinely applied service charges. The Housing Review Board would have control over this service charge when budget setting.

Members agreed that the current cleaning ethos should be changed by introducing a new service with a caretaking service. It was agreed that a holistic approach of looking after an estate as a whole worked well, as demonstrated by Teign Housing. Some members felt that it was the management of the current cleaning service which required attention.

A summary of the debate of the Tenant and Leaseholder Customer Panel on communal cleaning, at its meeting on 24 April 2009 was circulated and noted.

The Board was asked to indicate which option it preferred so that this could be worked on in more detail, with full cost implications, and reported back to a future Housing Review Board meeting with a full appraisal.

RESOLVED that the Board's preference of developing option 3, detailed in the report, to improve the communal cleaning service, be noted.

*11 **Business overview benchmarking**

The Housing Strategy Manager reported that the Council had recently completed a comprehensive benchmarking exercise to compare its costs, resources and performance with other stock holding local authorities. The HouseMark benchmarking product was used. This was widely used in the housing sector, and through which inputs were carefully validated to ensure comparisons with peers could be relied upon. The results of this exercise enabled all assessment of the efficiency and value for money provided by EDDC's housing management services when compared with other social landlords. The initial assessment indicated that, in most areas measured, EDDC's activities were comparing well with its peers. The Council benchmarked with 28 other stock holding local authorities, including Arms Length Management Organisations (ALMOs). Many of these authorities were city or urban authorities and it was felt that it would be useful to make comparisons with similar authorities to EDDC within the South West.

It was noted that the report would be useful in terms of service planning, budget setting and efficiency reviews, as well as further performance reporting to the Housing Review Board. The Housing Strategy Manager reported that she would send the full report and presentation to those members who requested it.

RESOLVED that the results of the benchmarking exercise be noted.

(Victor Kemp declared a personal interest in the above item as a panel member of Housemark.)

12 Diversity update

The report provided an update for the Housing Review Board on the improvements that had been made in terms of implementing good practice in relation to equality and diversity issues. The report set out the diversity statement devised by service managers and cascaded to staff through further diversity training.

Diversity was the acknowledgement and respect of differences within and between groups of people. Equality was the framework that enabled opportunity, access, participation and contribution that was fair and inclusive. It was important that as a housing organisation EDDC demanded respect for differences in people and championed fair and equal access to its services for all.

Good practice in the housing sector had been studied and the Housing Service had produced an action plan as part of its preparations for the housing inspection. The Audit Commission made recommendations following its inspection and these were contained in the Delivery Plan. A set of actions had also been agreed, to be embedded in the service.

The Racial Equality Policy was also being updated and would be reported to a future meeting of the Housing Review Board. The tenant profiling exercise would enable the service to make the improvements needed in terms of awareness of tenants' needs and by having a database of information on tenants, so that services could be tailored to meet tenants' specific needs and requirements.

RECOMMENDED that the Diversity Statement be adopted and implemented within the Housing and Social Inclusion Service.

***13 Housing Revenue Account outturn**

Consideration was given to the report of the Head of Housing and Social Inclusion which presented the outturn income and expenditure for housing landlord activities undertaken during the financial year 2008/09. The report considered the actual income and expenditure against the original budget and explained any major or significant variances.

The report also referred to a piece of work undertaken at the end of the financial year where consultants Tribal were invited to undertake a 'health check' on the Housing Revenue Account (HRA) subsidy claim and identify how the Council could optimise its financial position, within the strict subsidy system, for the benefit of its tenants. Tribal identified a number of ways in which the housing service could increase its management and maintenance allowance claim and reduce the negative subsidy.

It was noted that there had been a deliberate overspend on major repairs to compensate for an under spend the previous year, and to maintain the HRA surplus close to the advisory minimum level.

RESOLVED that the Housing Review Board approve the 2008/09 outturn statement for the Housing Revenue Account.

***14 Repairs performance monitoring report**

The Board noted the quarterly monitoring report of the Head of Housing and Social Inclusion which set out details of performance in relation to routine and responsive repairs undertaken to Council homes, together with evidence of the contractors' performance against targets. The report provided detailed repairs' information for the period April 2008 – March 2009.

***14 Repairs performance monitoring report (cont'd)**

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, quality of service and tenant satisfaction levels. A consistently high level of good performance and high tenant satisfaction had been achieved. However, some contractor performance did not achieve the Council's target. The Head of Housing and Social Inclusion informed the Board that he was seeking improved performance through better contract management, tenant involvement and higher ambitions for the service area.

RESOLVED that the performance on repairs to Council homes, as set out in the report, be noted.

15 Millwey Rise Community Centre

At its meeting on 30 April 2009 the Housing Review Board received a report on the outline proposal for joint working with the community group/football club, including the goal of building a community centre on the land currently leased from EDDC to the football club. The Board agreed that the Weycroft Senior Citizens Centre would be kept running until the feasibility of this proposal was fully investigated and, if possible, the new community centre was up and running.

The working group spearheading this project had requested that the name of the Weycroft Senior Citizens Centre be changed to Millwey Community Centre. The reasons for this were outlined in the report and included the encouragement of an inclusive feel across the estate and to avoid confusion with another building in the area called 'Weycroft Hall'.

The Board thanked all those involved with the work on the community centre.

RECOMMENDED that the proposed change of name from Weycroft Senior Citizens Centre to the Millwey Community Centre be agreed, subject to confirmation by Royal Mail.

***16 Tenants' Conference**

It was reported that the recently held annual Tenants' Conference had been a huge success with a general level of satisfaction expressed by the tenants and officers.

***17 Independent Community Representative**

Consideration was given to the vacant position of independent community representative on the Board, since the resignation of Mrs Heather Williamson. It was agreed that in order to show openness and transparency this position should be publicly advertised.

RESOLVED that the Head of Housing and Social Inclusion arrange for the vacant position of independent community representative on the Board to be advertised.

Chairman

Date