

EAST DEVON DISTRICT COUNCIL

Minutes of a meeting of the Housing Review Board held at Knowle, Sidmouth on 28 September 2006

Present:

Councillors:

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

D R H Hull
J A Knight
Mrs A E Liverton

Co-opted Tenant Members:

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

Also Present:

Councillors:

B Nicholson
Mrs P A Stott

Mrs H Williamson

Apologies

Councillors:

J Jeffery
Ms S M Merritt

The meeting started at 6.30 pm and ended at 9.00 pm

The Chairman welcomed Mrs Heather Williamson to the meeting. Mrs Williamson had been appointed to the Housing Review Board as an Independent Community Representative at the last meeting, although this appointment was subject to formal approval by the Council at its next meeting on 11 October 2006. The Chairman also introduced and welcomed to the meeting the Corporate Director – Communities, the Housing Business Manager, the Housing Strategy Manager, the solicitor and trainee solicitor.

***20 Minutes**

The minutes of the meeting of the Housing Review Board held on 10 August 2006, were confirmed and signed as a true record.

***21 Matters arising**

November meeting

It was noted that there would be an additional meeting held in early November, although no date had yet been set.

21 Matters arising (Cont'd)*Independent Community Representative**

Following the last Board meeting there remained one vacancy for the position of Independent Community Representative. The Chairman reported that he had met with the Vice Chairman and the Head of Housing and Social Inclusion and it had been decided not to re-advertise in the press, but to contact directly people who they thought would be appropriate for the position. It was noted that there was one interested candidate and another potential candidate, and it was hoped that their details would be considered at the next meeting. If members of the Board knew of any other appropriate people they were urged to get them to submit an application within the next three to four weeks.

Housing Stock Options Appraisal

The Housing Strategy Manager reported that a letter had been received from the Office of the Deputy Prime Minister (ODPM) stating that the Housing Stock Options Appraisal had been signed off which was excellent news. There would a report to follow requiring additional information but the Housing Strategy Manager was not certain how much the ODPM would require. On behalf of the Board the Chairman congratulated and praised all those involved. It was noted that the final ODPM would be on the Council's website and members of the Board would also be sent a copy.

Question and answer session

The Chairman suggested holding an informal question and answer session for tenants towards the end of each Housing Review Board meeting. Tenants would be requested to ask questions of no more than three minutes and it was hoped that this would encourage members of the public to attend the meetings. This would appear as a regular informal agenda item.

RESOLVED

- 1) that members of the Board be sent a copy of the final report from the ODPM on the Housing Stock Options Appraisal,
- 2) that an informal question and answer session for tenants be included as a regular item on the Housing Review Board agenda.

22 Exclusion of the Public*RESOLVED**

that the classification given to the documents to be submitted to the Board be confirmed and that the reports relating to exempt information be dealt with under Part B of the agenda.

23 Review of community centres

Detailed consideration was given to a report of the Head of Housing and Social Inclusion and the Tenant Participation Officer. The report reviewed the use of the Council's thirteen community centres that were located throughout the district and considered ways in which the facilities could be better used to meet existing residents and wider community needs. The report also considered the current arrangements for bookings, charges, handling income and expenditure, insurance, cleaning, opening and closing premises, providing and replacing equipment. A number of proposals were advanced in the report for ways in which the Council could operate the community centres more effectively and ensure greater consistency of use across the district.

Review of community centres (Cont'd)

The community centres/rooms referred to in the report were the communal meeting areas sited on the Council's sheltered housing schemes for use primarily by the residents of the scheme. The centres were intended for social activities and provided an important community resource. The community rooms were large lounge type rooms, typically located in centres with kitchen facilities, and some with guest bedrooms and bathroom/toilet facilities. Some were free standing buildings, but others were an integral part of a block of flats, or had one or two flats above them.

The Tenant Participation Officers had carried out a review of the usage and procedures around booking and managing community centres/rooms, as well as exploring alternative uses. The review was necessary because there was no clear, consistent policy or procedure for the use of the centres/rooms. The wider aim would be to encourage use of the rooms by other social, welfare or educational groups for the mutual benefit of both those groups and the residents of the scheme and surrounding area, and encourage community cohesion. An independent audit of all of the community centres was being undertaken to ensure they met the requirements of the Disability Discrimination Act.

The objectives of the review were:

- To consider the current use of community rooms, 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.

The review also considered the removal of the burden of replacing equipment and furnishings from the social clubs, and covering the use of the rooms with the Council's insurance policy. At present, the residents' social clubs were responsible for replacing carpets, curtains, furniture, and kitchen equipment as they saw fit. These may or may not be in accordance with current (fire) safety legislation.

The importance of constantly reviewing the centres was noted. Those present agreed that the current system was tired and needed revitalising. Some felt that the focus should be on developing the centres for those for whom they were originally intended, although it was important to maintain flexibility of usage. It was suggested that the centres could be divided between scheme managers, with the appointment of key holders. Alternatively there could be key pad locks with codes to the doors of each centre, or a card door locking system, similar to that used by some hotels. The scheme managers would support the community centres and would be allowed the freedom to make their own decisions. A centralised booking and payment system needed to be established. Insurance should be provided free for tenants and should form part of the hire charge for third party bookings. The Council would only be expected to maintain equipment for which it was responsible. 'Private' equipment could be kept inside locked cupboards whilst not in use. Ultimately it was felt that the community centres were Council facilities, to be provided and maintained by East Devon District Council.

An advantage of having structured arrangements and procedures in place was that it would be possible to maintain the good service already provided on an ad hoc basis by a minority of volunteers. The current booking systems were haphazard. There was no clear structured system. However, some current users of the centres could resent the introduction of a centralised booking system.

Members questioned the cost of employing a sheltered premises Administration Assistant and whether this would be provided for in the budget. It was noted that the East Devon Business Centre used a booking system which seemed to work well.

23 **Review of community centres (Cont'd)**

Concern was expressed over the management of Weycroft Hall in Axminster. It was reported that there were issues to be raised arising from the lease document and the way the hall was currently run, however it was a very sensitive issue.

It was noted that a common theme for all the centres was that Fridays seemed to be 'empty' days, with very few bookings. It was suggested that the centres could be used on Fridays for a common theme such as health related issues. The community centres were there for all the tenants to use, and the cost of the buildings and maintenance was borne by the tenants as a whole through their rent. The annual income received was very low and there was a need to raise it. Under-usage of the centres resulted in a cost to all tenants.

Although the Board thought that it was a very good report they felt that the recommendations contained in the review were not specific enough, there was a need to follow some of them up, and that the review required further consideration. It was noted that full consultation had not yet been carried out and the review would also be considered by the Tenant Leaseholder Customer Panel.

It was agreed that further consideration would be given to the report in the light of the comments made by the Board and a further report, along with a more refined approach in terms of a business/action plan and timetable would be brought back to the Board.

Members also felt that it would be useful for them to visit the various community centres and their users to gain a better understanding and knowledge. A half day tour of selected premises was suggested and supported.

- RECOMMENDED**
- 1) that officers arrange a tour of some of the community centres in the district for members of the Housing Review Board;
 - 2) that within three months a further report be presented to the Board for their consideration, incorporating the views expressed during the meeting, with an action plan and timetable.

24 **Review of warden services for sheltered housing**

Members were presented with a report written by the Head of Housing and Social Inclusion reviewing warden services for sheltered housing. The Board was asked to consider the changes necessary to modernise the warden service to ensure that suitable and appropriate housing services would be available to support older people in their own homes.

The requirements and customers of the warden service had changed over the years. The Supporting People Reviews and Best Value inspection and monitoring regimes had acted as catalysts for change. These have set new standards and produced examples of good practice. However introducing changes to the warden service could be controversial with existing tenants. Careful preparation and consultation on any proposed changes was essential as it was such a sensitive area.

There were extensive pressures to modernise the warden service. The pressures on staff living on site and the working time directive had been highlighted through a stress audit, as well as the other disadvantages of tied accommodation.

The Council's ability to claim the Supporting People grant was directly related to the number of clients needing its warden support. Therefore, with fewer tenants in sheltered housing using the warden services, income was potentially reduced. At present there was a 'mis-match' of supply and demand.

Review of warden services for sheltered housing (Cont'd)

It was noted that following the Devon Supporting People's review and revalidation of services the Council now met the minimum standard, however Supporting People required continuous improvement. The interim contract review, one year contract and action plan were contained in annex 1 to the report and were noted by the Board.

As part of the housing stock options appraisal exercise the Council had undertaken an audit of older person's accommodation. This work considered location, facilities, and investment needs. The audit identified schemes which did not currently meet the Supporting People standards and projected a cost of £3.7 million to bring some of these up to the standard. This estimated cost was being included in our emerging Housing Revenue Account Business Plan. The audit also identified the need to decommission some older person's schemes due to falling demand, inappropriate location, and/or high investment needs. Although no decisions were made to decommission specific schemes, it was clear that some schemes were proving 'harder to let' and could be de-designated and used for general needs, others would need remodeling, and some possibly demolished for redevelopment as general needs housing.

This assessment of the 'bricks and mortar' aspect of the service linked closely with the future of the Warden Service as there was likely to be a reduction in the number of schemes over the next few years. The Council would need to integrate this support and people based service review with the physical building and facilities review of the accommodation designated for older people. No decisions had yet been made over which sheltered housing would be de-designated.

The vision for future service provision was considered. There was a gradual shift in warden services in a move from accommodation based support to floating support for older residents. It was envisaged that over two years there would be an equal number of resident and travelling wardens. Travelling wardens offered a more flexible service whereby existing clients could receive more or fewer home visits as their circumstances and needs changed over time and new clients could then be taken where possible. The ability to be flexible was needed in order to cover for absenteeism and any increase in demand for the service. Resident wardens were only able to deliver support on their schemes. It was felt that wardens should be free to provide support to those who needed it and should not be tied to areas of accommodation.

It was noted that there were other Council tenants who required warden assistance other than those in sheltered accommodation. There was potential for the service to expand and provide support to a wider group of people.

Concern was expressed over the shift from resident to travelling wardens. Sheltered housing warden schemes gave residents the feeling of security, stability and were part of the community. Although crime was low in East Devon there was a huge fear of crime, especially amongst the elderly. It was felt that travelling wardens would act more like social workers and would focus where there were known problems. Resident wardens, however, were more likely to detect issues quicker and easier as they were on the spot. There could be a delay with travelling wardens when a need suddenly arose. Using different travelling wardens could also take away the rapport and continuity of resident wardens.

It was reported that travelling wardens already existed and that it was not a new concept. The Housing Strategy Manager explained that despite many similar concerns, residents in Taunton Deane had been through a similar process and felt that they now received a better service. These residents had indicated that they were willing to discuss their experiences with East Devon tenants.

24 **Review of warden services for sheltered housing (Cont'd)**

- RECOMMENDED**
- 1) that the necessary changes be made to modernise the warden service to ensure that suitable and appropriate housing services were available to support older people in their own homes;
 - 2) that the Housing Review Board review the situation within twelve months.

(Councillor Mrs P A Stott declared a personal interest in the above item as a Care in the Community assistant).

25 **Digital television switchover**

Consideration was given to the report of the Head of Housing and Social Inclusion concerning digital television switchover. Digital switchover described the process of switching all TV programmes and services delivered through an aerial from the existing analogue format to a new digital format. This would involve a phased process of switching off the current analogue terrestrial transmissions at present received through existing aerials. The Government, broadcasters, manufacturers and retailers were working together to make this happen, and this process would be affecting the Westcountry in 2009.

Digital switchover would mean that all UK households would have to go over to digital in order to continue to receive the broadcast programmes and TV services already enjoyed. The report explained the process and the options available to the Council as landlord, where they were responsible for communal TV aerials. Two options were presented with cost estimates for consideration.

It was noted that it was the responsibility of most individual houses to switch to digital. Communal aerial systems provided by the Council numbered 84 systems and involved 822 dwellings out of around 4,307 Council owned dwellings. In effect through rental income, all Council tenants would be paying for a service received by only a small group of tenants. Members felt that this wasn't fair as all Council tenants would be subsidising a few and there were some very low income tenants who would have to pay for their own digital switchover. However, others felt that there were many disadvantages to living in flats and that the provision of communal digital aerials would be an advantage.

The Council had been upgrading communal systems on a reactive basis in recent years, for example at Lymebourne Park, Sidmouth; Custance House, Honiton; Morgan Court, Exmouth. These schemes had been provided with the minimum option to receive digital TV signals. There was a need to decide how the Council was going to upgrade the systems to the remaining homes affected, in a programmed manner to meet the switchover deadline.

Option 1 was digital terrestrial television (DTT) – to upgrade existing communal systems to provide digital 'free to view' terrestrial television. This had lower costs and needed no access to individual's homes. It had a quick installation time and used the existing cable system (which could be ageing). However, there would be no capability for Sky satellite reception and multiple receiver installations tended to take place on blocks of flats because each resident would require their own dish for Sky 'pay per view'.

Option 2 was integrated reception signal (IRS) – to install an IRS system to provide both satellite and terrestrial digital television. This system would provide greater reliability and reduced satellite dish proliferation, with lower maintenance costs. There would be only one aerial and one receiver dish per site (block) and householders would be able to choose the system they preferred – either 'Freeview' or Sky Digital 'pay per view'. This option was more expensive and would require access to all homes to allow for the new cabling and outlet box. There was a significant cost difference between the two options.

25 **Digital television switchover (Cont'd)**

As there were so many issues involved it was considered prudent to go out to tender in order to receive an accurate view of the costs involved, the exact differences between the two options and to obtain some expert advice on specific technical aspects of the work.

- RECOMMENDED**
- 1) that a specification and tender be prepared for the upgrading of communal aerial systems, to enable tenants to receive digital television signals;
 - 2) that consultation be undertaken on the preferred option;
 - 3) that provision be made in the 2007/08 Housing Revenue Account budget to meet the cost of the work; and
 - 4) that a further report be submitted to the Board on the outcome of the tendering and consultation processes.

(Ted Brown declared a personal interest in the above item as the tenant of a council flat)

26 **Right to Buy scheme – policy on the discretionary repayment of discount**

Members considered the report of the Head of Housing and Social Inclusion in respect of the policy on the discretionary repayment of discount under the Right to Buy scheme. Many Council tenants had exercised the Right to Buy of their home under the national scheme which allowed them a discounted open market price of the property. If the purchaser sold the property soon after purchase the discount would normally be repayable to the Council. Prior to January 2005 the Council had no discretionary powers not to demand the repayment of the discount.

The report set out a suggested policy and a procedure for the circumstances where the Council might waive the repayment of the Right to Buy discount, in accordance with guidance received from the Office of the Deputy Prime Minister. It was anticipated that this discretion would only be used in exceptional circumstances, for example where considerable hardship would be caused to the applicant if the discount were to be repaid.

It was noted 75 per cent of the amount repaid went to central Government so the Council got to keep very little. No discretionary repayment discounts had actually been received in the last two years.

Members questioned whether the Council had the right to have first refusal on the purchase of a property being sold within the discount repayment period. The Council's solicitor confirmed that he would clarify this matter. Some concern was expressed over the situation concerning relationships involving actual or threatened domestic violence and how the policy would be conveyed as there were fears that both could result in an increase of applications for discretion not to repay the discount. There was a request for Council Ward Members to be involved in the consideration of requests for the exercise of discretion as it was felt that they would often have local knowledge of the background of cases. It was felt that this could be incorporated into 5.3 of the policy contained in Annex 2 of the report.

- RECOMMENDED**
- that the policy for waiving the repayment of Right to Buy discount in specific exceptional circumstances, as set out in Annex 2 to the report be adopted, with the addition to 5.3 of the Annex that officers should consult with ward members to clarify and confirm the background of each individual case.

*27 **Defend Council Housing**

Members noted the papers from the Defend Council Housing website (www.defendcouncilhousing.org.uk). This had been circulated with the agenda in response to the Board's request for information on the Association of Retained Council Housing, which did not appear to have its own website.

*28 **Exclusion of the Public**

RESOLVED that under Section 100(A) (4) of the Local Government Act 1972 the public (including the press) be excluded from the meeting as exempt information, of the descriptions set out in the agenda is likely to be disclosed.

29 **Consideration of the Council's freehold interest in Brinkburn Court, Manor Road, Sidmouth**

Consideration was given to the report of the Housing Business Manager which set out the background to the ownership of Brinkburn Court, the current situation, and outlined why the future ownership and management of Brinkburn Court by the Council should be reviewed. Since 2002 the Council had been in dialogue with all the leaseholders on the possible disposal of the freehold, and more recently had actively sought leaseholders' views on them collectively purchasing the freehold to Brinkburn Court. Members felt that if the freehold was sold the Council should recover any money owed during the current financial year.

RECOMMENDED that a valuation of the freehold of Brinkburn Court be obtained, with the freehold being offered to the leaseholders of Brinkburn Court; if a majority of existing residents did not want to purchase the freehold, it would be offered on the open market.

Chairman

Date