

EAST DEVON DISTRICT COUNCIL

Minutes of a meeting of the Housing Review Board held at Knowle, Sidmouth on 29 November 2007

Present:

Councillors:

D R Hull
J Humphreys
J A Knight
Mrs A E Liverton (Chairman)

Co-opted tenant members:

Mr T Brown (Vice Chairman)
Mrs C Morrison
Mrs S Saunders

Co-opted independent
community representatives:

Mr R Finch
Mrs H Williamson

Also Present:

Councillors:

Miss J Elson
Mrs P A Stott

Apologies:

Councillor:
Miss V Ash

Co-opted tenant member:
Mr V Kemp

Nominated tenant member:
Mr C Rowe

The meeting started at 6.30 pm and ended at 9.10 pm

*32 **Minutes**

The minutes of the meeting of the Housing Review Board held on 6 September 2007, were confirmed and signed as a true record.

*33 **Welcome**

On behalf of the Board the Chairman welcomed Mrs Christine Morrison to the meeting following her recent ill health. Councillor Mrs Stott and Councillor Miss Elson, Portfolio Holder – Communities were also welcomed to the meeting.

It was noted that Mr John Mahoney had resigned from the Housing Review Board as a new tenant member.

34 **Question and answer session**

A request was made for a report to be brought to a future meeting of the Board on the feasibility and costs involved in converting existing 2 bedroom Council properties into 3 bedroom properties, through loft conversions. It was noted that this was already being investigated and had been undertaken on occasion, along with other options in order to increase the number of larger Council properties available. The Portfolio Holder – Communities gave an example of two 1 bedroom flats in Exmouth which had been merged to create a 4 bedroom house.

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

A question was raised as to whether the Council was intending to sign up to the Respect Agenda. It was noted that this had been agreed at a previous meeting of the Board and the Head of Housing and Social Inclusion reported that this had not yet been progressed due to the work demands involved in preparing for the Audit Commission Housing Inspection. The Head of Housing and Social Inclusion agreed to follow up progress on the Respect Agenda with the housing manager concerned.

Concern was expressed over the subletting of Council properties. Members were encouraged to report any concerns to the Housing and Social Inclusion Service as soon as possible so that officers could act quickly and follow up any allegations. It was noted that a clause on the distribution and possession of drugs was contained in the tenancy agreement.

RECOMMENDED that a report be brought to a future meeting of the Housing Review Board on the feasibility and costs involved in converting existing 2 bedroom Council properties into 3 bedroom properties through loft conversions.

*35 **Newly nominated tenant member**

It was noted that the Tenant and Leaseholder Customer Panel had nominated Mr Charlie Rowe as the new tenant and leaseholder representative to be co-opted onto the Housing Review Board. However, Mr Rowe had given his apologies for the meeting. The Board looked forward to meeting Mr Rowe at its next meeting on 10 January 2008.

36 **Tenant and Council Partnership Agreement**

Members of the Housing Review Board considered a report of the Housing Projects Officer which presented the draft Tenant and Council Partnership Agreement (Tenant Compact). This set out how tenants and leaseholders could have a voice in the housing service and be involved in decision making on housing management issues at all levels within the Council. It outlined previous achievements, set out the ways in which tenants were currently participating and making a difference, and made suggestions for the future.

The Tenant Compact was an agreement between the Council (as landlord) and its tenants, and tenant representatives had been fully involved in deciding on the contents and actions. There was a commitment that all involvement and consultation would be entered into with a spirit of trust, openness and willingness to share ideas.

It was noted that compacts were part of the Government's agenda to improve local services, build civil renewal and strengthen and sustain local communities. They helped tenants to decide how they wished to be involved in influencing and shaping the decisions taken by their Council on housing issues in a way that met their needs and priorities. This included enabling tenants to be involved with setting the standards the Council worked to, agreeing priorities and setting budgets. It was suggested by the CLG (Communities and Local Government Department) that a compact package should contain a formal agreement, an action plan and a summary.

36 **Tenant and Council Partnership Agreement (cont'd)**

The Council's previous compact had been published in October 2001 and was now out of date. The new agreement had a bottom-up approach and was tenant led. Tenants had been involved in working on the document since the start and were still being consulted. The working party consisted of five councillors and eight tenants. The word 'compact' would now be replaced with 'agreement', the document would be written in plain English and a glossary of terms would be included. It was noted that the Tenant and Leaseholder Customer Panel had met earlier in the week to consider the Tenant and Council Partnership Agreement. They felt that the mission statement should be more welcoming and aimed at tenants and that the agreement should start with an introduction. A revised draft introduction was circulated at the meeting and discussed. The Tenant and Leaseholder Customer Panel would have overall responsibility for monitoring the agreement.

Various comments were made on the draft Tenant and Council Partnership Agreement during the meeting and it was agreed that these would be incorporated into the final version of the document. This version would then be sent to the working party, the Chairman and the Vice Chairman of the Board for consideration before being adopted.

A request was made for a vote of thanks to be sent from the Housing Review Board to the tenant participation staff involved in creating the document.

RECOMMENDED that the Tenant and Council Partnership Agreement be adopted, subject to the comments of the Board being incorporated into the agreement and the final version being sent to members of the working party, as well as the Chairman and Vice Chairman of the Housing Review Board, for consultation.

37 **Back to basics revisited**

Consideration was given to the report of the Head of Housing and Social Inclusion which included an addition to the 'back to basics' approach to the Council's housing management services. It was suggested that the addition of a ten point management plan and a series of values would complement the approach, and work alongside the Housing Customer Charter, Tenant Compact and the Council's general approach to promoting good housing management services. These principles of good housing management and the housing values were noted in the report.

All housing management staff would be briefed on the ten management principles and values at team meetings and through one to one sessions. The plan and values could be published in the Housing Standard and on the Council's website, and the Tenant and Leaseholder Customer Panel could assist in monitoring compliance with the commitments.

RECOMMENDED that the housing management plan and set of core values for housing management services be adopted.

38 **Improvement programmes and tenant choice**

Consideration was given to the report of the Head of Housing and Social Inclusion which proposed new arrangements for the planning and delivery of major improvement and modernisation programmes, and to offer tenants greater choice in respect of improvement works undertaken to their homes. It was noted that to date the financial implications of major works had been planned for in the Housing Revenue Account Business Plan with property specific works organised on a short term annual basis, and in compliance with the Decent Homes Standard. When major works had been undertaken tenants had been offered limited choice, and a standardised range of fixtures and fittings. It was felt that tenants should be given more choice, within a menu of options and that major programmed works should be more property/location specific.

38 **Improvement programmes and tenant choice (cont'd)**

The report recommended that the Council devised five year property specific improvement programmes and that choice over kitchen and bathroom upgrades and other major works should be offered to tenants in the future. The Council should consult on the programmes and ensure that a degree of flexibility was built in to cover unforeseen circumstances.

It was agreed that when negotiating/tendering improvement programmes the Council should explore the opportunities for partnering arrangements and procurement initiatives which would provide improved value for money through bulk purchase or joint procurement. A number of improvement actions in relation to procurement in the self-assessment on stock condition and asset management were identified and produced prior to the Audit Commission housing inspection.

It was noted that when modernising void properties, the new tenants should be involved and given choices where they had been 'signed up' prior to working being ordered.

The Head of Housing and Social Inclusion reported that he would bring to the Housing Review Board a proposed five year plan. This would be based on existing stock condition data, which would dictate the cycle of works and he would also consult with tenants and the Tenant and Leaseholder Customer Panel.

- RECOMMENDED**
- 1) that the principle of producing a five year property specific programme for major improvement works be approved.
 - 2) that officers be invited to prepare a draft property specific major improvement programme for presentation to a future Housing Review Board meeting.
 - 3) that the approach of offering tenants choice when improvements were planned for their homes be adopted.
 - 4) that the Tenant and Customer Leaseholder Panel be consulted on the five year property specific programme for major improvement works, as well as the choices to be offered to tenants when improvements were made to their homes.

39 **Communal cleaning and caretaking service**

Consideration was given to a report of the Head of Housing and Social Inclusion which reviewed existing arrangements for communal cleaning and caretaking services. The report recognised that there was considerable room for improvement in the service provided, and proposed changes to benefit those tenants and leaseholders who received the service.

Communal cleaning applied to communal areas of blocks of general needs, sheltered and leaseholder flats. The areas cleaned included halls, stairs and landings, paths, community centres and the Home Safeguard offices. The work generally involved vacuuming, washing down surfaces, dusting, polishing, removing marks and stains, cleaning and replenishing toilets, sweeping and cleaning external paths etc. It was noted that the communal cleaning and caretaking service was currently provided by Street Scene at a cost of £54,100 per annum (2007/08 cost), which paid for two operatives to provide a basic cleaning service to communal areas and included an element of supervision.

39 **Communal cleaning and caretaking service (cont'd)**

Specified communal areas were cleaned weekly, with windows on a three month cycle. However, Street Scene had indicated that they did not wish to provide the service long term as it was not part of their core business and they were keen to pass responsibility and supervision of the two operatives over to the Housing and Social Inclusion Service. In future the cleaning and any caretaking service could be tendered or run 'in house'.

The Head of Housing and Social Inclusion reported that the Secure Tenancy Agreement placed the responsibility of cleaning communal areas with tenants, with the Council service being regarded as a 'backup' service. However, many tenants were not physically able to clean communal areas. There was no similar obligation in the lease agreement for leaseholders. The Audit Commission Housing Inspection Team identified the standard of communal cleaning as a weakness.

The report suggested a minimum level of communal cleaning which should be undertaken every four to six weeks. Although this would mean less frequently than the current specification, it would allow areas to be cleaned more thoroughly. Community centres and offices would require more frequent cleaning. Concern was expressed that a gap of 4 to 6 weeks was too long and that the timescales should be revised. Historically, a caretaking service had not been provided for residents. However, in reviewing the communal cleaning service there was an opportunity to consider providing a caretaking service which could undertake some elements of routine maintenance, grounds maintenance, clearing paths, litter picking, painting etc. This would be done by utilising existing resources or providing additional resources to deliver the service.

The cost of communal cleaning and caretaking services was recovered in service charges for leaseholders and included in the rent for tenants. Charges had not been increased for a number of years due to the basic level of service provided. It was suggested that the charges be reviewed and the cost of the service be recovered from those who derived benefit. If the service was improved and additional resources, greater frequency of cleaning and a caretaking service introduced, a service charge could be applied to tenants benefiting from the service.

The Board were asked to give a steer on the type of communal cleaning and caretaking service that should be provided for tenants and leaseholders. The Head of Housing and Social Inclusion suggested that the Tenant and Leaseholder Customer Panel and individual tenants and leaseholders receiving the service should be consulted, to determine their views on the need for an enhanced service and whether they would be willing to pay the additional cost through a service charge.

The Board indicated that they would like to renegotiate the specification to provide an improved communal cleaning service in respect of the quality and frequency of cleaning, that the service should be expanded to provide higher quality communal cleaning and defined caretaking duties, paid for through a service charge, and that the work should be tendered on the basis of a detailed specification. The Board agreed that the Tenant and Leaseholder Customer Panel should be consulted on the proposals to charge tenants for an improved communal area cleaning service and to provide a caretaking service.

It was proposed that detailed, costed proposals for service improvements be brought back once those receiving the service and the service provider had been consulted. In the meantime the Council would take steps to improve the quality and consistency of the current service and update the service specification to ensure that it was accurate.

39 **Communal cleaning and caretaking service (cont'd)**

- RECOMMENDED**
- 1) that officers review and renegotiate the contract and specification for communal cleaning with the aim of delivering an improved service for tenants and leaseholders, and,
 - 2) that the review includes consultation with the Tenant and Leaseholder Customer Panel on the contents of any revised contract and specification.

40 **Rechargeable repairs and charging for damage to council homes**

The Head of Housing and Social Inclusion outlined a report proposing a procedure for recovering the cost of repairs and other works that were tenants' responsibility and where damage had been caused to council homes. In the past the Council had been inconsistent in its approach to recharging for works to council homes, in part due to the time and effort it took to recover relatively small sums of money. The Council recognised that this did not represent good practice and sent the wrong message to tenants about their responsibilities under the tenancy agreement. The report set out a draft procedure to recover costs in appropriate circumstances.

Good practice in housing management suggested that there should be in place and applied a policy to recharge tenants for repairs and other works/services that were their responsibility. The secure tenancy agreement, tenant handbook and responsive repairs procedures allowed for rechargeable repairs. Attention would be drawn to the policy at tenancy 'sign up' and existing tenants would be made aware of the policy. A simplified version would be published and the Head of Housing and Social Inclusion would ensure that staff enforced the policy.

Consideration was given to a draft recharge repair procedure, outlined in annex 1 to the report. Works which would be rechargeable included cleaning the house/flat, clearing the house/flat/garden/garage, deliberate damage to the property, and incidental or avoidable damage to fixtures and fittings. It was noted that no recharge would be made for wear and tear, or for accidental damage. Under section 16 of the draft policy, 'deceased tenants', members agreed to amend the second sentence of the paragraph to read 'However, payment will not normally be requested or pursued'. The Tenant and Leaseholder Customer Panel would also be consulted on the procedure.

- RECOMMENDED** that the policy and procedure for rechargeable works as set out in the report be adopted, subject to the amendment made to section 16 relating to deceased tenants.

41 **Sheltered housing services – Senior Housing Support Officer**

Consideration was given to the report of the Housing Business Unit Manager which set out a proposal for the recruitment of a Senior Housing Support Officer, a new post in the Home Safeguard team. This post was required to assist further development of the service, improve the quality of service provided and share in the operational management functions of the support services for older persons living in sheltered accommodation.

The Housing Revenue Account Business Plan 2006 highlighted the need for this post to be created as part of the sheltered support services re-structure, and to contribute towards improvements necessary to ensure that the service was 'fit for purpose' now and in the future. The post holder would work alongside the current service managers. The job description and main duties were noted.

41 **Sheltered housing services – Senior Housing Support Officer (cont'd)**

Members of the Board hoped that the person recruited to the post would show real enthusiasm and vision and it was suggested that tenant representatives should also be included on the interviewing panel.

- RECOMMENDED**
- 1) that the post be approved for recruitment.
 - 2) that tenants form part of the interviewing panel for the post.

42 **Tackling young people's issues in Council housing**

Members of the Housing Review Board considered a report of the Corporate Director – Communities which recommended the appointment of a Community Development Officer specifically to work on youth issues in Council housing. This appointment would tackle young people's issues and seek to address the lack of a younger people's voice on housing management issues.

Children and young people had recently become a corporate priority for the Council. Although East Devon District Council had a number of services which were providing facilities and initiatives that touched the lives of children and young people, there was currently no officer who had a role specifically to advocate for this important sector of the community. As a result there was no corporate capacity for the Housing and Social Inclusion service to draw upon in order to engage with young people. There were also no officers in the service who had been recruited for their specific skills in working with children and young people.

It was noted that approximately 2,400 people living in District Council housing were under 18 years old. This represented 26.5% of the residents in Council housing. As very few children and young people were 'tenants' (in the sense of legal housing responsibility) they were rarely consulted about their needs. A major concern across the district was the lack of activities for young people. However, it was felt that young people should not be looked at in isolation. It was noted that special consideration should be given to young carers.

There was an opportunity to fund such a post through the Housing Revenue Account. It was noted that this funding would only be applied to work which benefited (the children of) tenants and leaseholders, however the work should be socially inclusive and not exclusive. The Community Development Worker would be based in the Housing Strategy Unit. Those present noted the role of such a worker, who would have a specific youth focus.

- RECOMMENDED** that the proposal for the role of Community Development Worker be refined and that an officer be recruited to this post to work specifically with younger people.

43 **Allocation of funds to enable adaptation works to be undertaken in sheltered accommodation**

Consideration was given to the report of the Housing Services Manager which detailed the actions to be undertaken to supplement the current budgets allocated for Social Service adaptations, in order to prevent long delays and to meet an additional need for walk-in showers in sheltered accommodation.

It was noted that since 1 April 2007, 204 requests had been received from Social Services for adaptation works to be undertaken, of which 109 were for tenants with a disability or experiencing mobility problems living in sheltered housing accommodation. Over the last two years there had been an increase of 45% on previous years for requests for adaptation works. It was felt that this increase in adaptations to homes was as a result of Government policies to keep people in the community and out of care homes.

43 **Allocation of funds to enable adaptation works to be undertaken in sheltered accommodation (cont'd)**

It was proposed that £150,000 of the Capital Plan budget be allocated for Social Services recommended adaptations to sheltered accommodation. This would ensure that works in sheltered accommodation continued to be undertaken within a reasonable time scale, and that the current position within the Council's general purpose dwellings was maintained, with the re-distribution of the Social Services budget being used to fund adaptations for other tenants.

RECOMMENDED that £150,000 of the Capital Plan provision be allocated to fund Social Services recommended adaptations in sheltered housing accommodation.

44 **Provision of adaptations in homes of disabled people in order to meet their needs and statutory entitlements in Council owned dwellings**

Consideration was given to the report of the Housing Services Manager which outlined an approach to ensure that the provision of disabled adaptations provided by East Devon District Council was not dependent upon the housing tenure of the disabled person applying for assistance. The report proposed a cost limit of £25,000 consistent with Disabled Facilities Grants, and a procedure for exceptional cases where hardship would be caused by the strict imposition of a financial limit.

In addition, in order to help the Housing and Social Inclusion Service to maintain spending within budget, the report suggested that a priority scheme be introduced and that if demand significantly outstripped the budget, the application would go on a waiting list. However, to avoid undue hardship there should be the opportunity to refer individual cases to the Board and/or the Portfolio Holder – Communities for consideration where the work exceeded the limit and the cost could not be financed from other sources.

- RECOMMENDED**
- 1) that the maximum amount of funding for adaptation works in Council dwellings be limited to £25,000,
 - 2) that cases exceeding the financial cap be referred to the Portfolio Holder – Communities for a decision to exceed the limit where undue hardship would be caused, and
 - 3) that the Housing and Social Inclusion Service introduce a priority scheme and waiting list in order that allocations for adaptation work may be contained within the annual budget.

*45 **Empty properties - voids**

Members of the Housing Review Board considered the report of the Housing Needs Manager which set out the quarterly report on void performance required by the Housing Review Board for the period July to September 2007. The report detailed all of the lettings for the second quarter of 2007/08, showing the average length of time taken to relet properties. Performance continued to improve and the relet target of 30 days was achievable in the current financial year. It was noted that the average relet time over the second quarter was 26 days.

The Housing Review Board congratulated all those concerned with the improvements in the relet figures.

RESOLVED that the report be noted.

***46 Informal meetings of Housing Review Board members and tenants**

Those present noted that three informal meetings had been set up around the district to give tenants an opportunity to ask questions to members of the Housing Review Board. Ward councillors for each of the areas and the Portfolio Holder – Communities had also been invited to the events. Each session would run from 10.00am to 12noon. A review would be undertaken of these three events and if successful, more bimonthly meetings would be set up elsewhere across the district. The dates and venues were as follows:

Monday 3 December 2007 - Lymebourne community room in Sidmouth

Tuesday 19 February 2008 - Weycroft Senior Citizens Hall, Millwey Rise in Axminster

Tuesday 8 April 2008 - 38 St Pauls Road, Honiton (Heathpark estate)

***47 Additional meeting of the Housing Review Board**

Those present noted that an additional meeting of the Housing Review Board would be held on Thursday, 10 January 2008, at 6.30pm, in the Council Chamber, Knowle, Sidmouth.

***48 Liaison meeting of the Housing Review Board and Tenant and Leaseholder Customer Panel**

It was noted that a liaison meeting of the Housing Review Board and the Tenant and Leaseholder Customer Panel would be held on Monday 17 December 2007 at 10.00am in the Council Chamber, Knowle, Sidmouth.

***49 Tenant and Leaseholder Customer Panel meetings**

Those present noted a list of dates, times and venues of Tenant and Leaseholder Customer Panel meetings to be held during 2008. The Panel welcomed members of the Housing Review Board to attend these meetings.

Chairman

Date