

EAST DEVON DISTRICT COUNCIL

Minutes of a meeting of the Housing Review Board held at Knowle, Sidmouth on 31 January 2008

Present:

Councillors:	Co-opted tenant members:
Mrs A E Liverton (Chairman)	Mr T Brown (Vice Chairman)
Miss V Ash	Mr V Kemp
J Humphreys	Mrs C Morrison
J Knight	Mrs S Saunders
EDDC Officers:	Co-opted independent community representatives:
John Golding, Head of Housing & Social Inclusion	Mr R Finch
Rachel Perram, Democratic Services Officer	Mrs H Williamson

Also Present:

Councillors:

Miss J Elson
Mrs P A Stott
C Tratt

Mrs A Bickham

Apologies:

Councillor:
T Cope

EDDC Officers:
Giles Salter, Solicitor
Rachel Pocock, Head of Legal, Licensing & Democratic Services

The meeting started at 6.35 pm and ended at 8.55 pm

***57 Minutes**

The minutes of the meeting of the Housing Review Board held on 10 January 2008, were confirmed and signed as a true record.

***58 Welcome**

The Chairman welcomed Councillors Mrs Stott, Miss Elson, Portfolio Holder – Communities, Chris Tratt and Ann Bickham to the meeting.

***59 Matters arising from the minutes of the last meeting**

Scalding Risk from Faulty Heating Systems

The Head of Housing and Social Inclusion advised the Board of his concern following the last meeting. The proposed action following the recent public inquest into the sad death of a baby in Somerset did not go far enough to address the concerns of tenants and the EDDC alike.

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Matters arising from the minutes of the last meeting (cont'd)

A letter had therefore been sent to all tenants with important safety information on the risk of scalding from a domestic hot water system and the checks the Council's contractors will be making over the next 12 months. A copy of this letter was also circulated to the Members of the Board for their information. A press release had also been issued to back up this information. The Chairman thanked the Head of Housing & Social Inclusion for his swift action and for the wording of the letter, which was both clear and informative.

Letter to the Audit Commission

The Head of Housing & Social Inclusion distributed a copy of a letter which had been sent to Mr Colgan of the Audit Commission, following on from the last meeting of the Housing Review Board. He was again thanked by the Chairman and Board for this.

Letter to the Director General of Communities and Local Government Directorate

The Head of Housing & Social Inclusion circulated a copy of a letter which had been sent to express the Council's dismay over the level of Housing Revenue Account subsidy being paid by EDDC to the Government each year. A response from this letter was awaited.

Cllr Hull congratulated the Head of Housing & Social Inclusion on his initiative in sending this letter.

Cllr Miss Elson advised the Board that the matter had been raised as deplorable at the last meeting of the Executive Board.

The Chairman felt that the situation was particularly unfair as our tenants were so good at paying their rent but would not benefit. Money from well performing districts was being re-directed to aid councils which were not performing well.

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Question and answer session

The Vice Chairman advised the Board that Mr Daniels, of Lymebourne Park in Sidmouth had been hoping to attend the meeting tonight. This gentleman was very interested in the work of the Housing Review Board and used to be a chairman of a similar group. It was hoped that Mr Daniels would be able to attend a future meeting of the Board and it was agreed that he would be very welcome.

Cllr Miss Ash thanked the Head of Housing & Social Inclusion for responding so quickly to the two questions that she had asked at the last meeting of the Board.

The Board thanked the Housing and Social Inclusion Service for helping to organise the positive drop-in session for tenants at the Millwey estate in Axminster.

The Head of Housing & Social Inclusion advised that the feedback had been very positive and that it had been an excellent opportunity for the officers to meet tenants and others involved in the community. The attendance had been good from all sides.

Cllr Miss Ash said that it had been a good opportunity to speak to the Housing Officers and to put faces to names.

The Board was reminded that the next drop-in session, booked at Weycroft was on 19 February. The Head of Housing & Social Inclusion would check that the information had been sent out. The Chairman asked for the timings to be amended from 9am – 1pm to 10am – 12pm, as it was felt that a four hour session was too long.

RECOMMENDED that future Housing Review Board drop-in sessions for tenants be limited in time to 2 hours in length.

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

Mr Rowe had not come to the meeting again. It was hoped that everything was well with him and that there was not a logistical problem or a diary clash that prevented him from attending the meetings on a Thursday evening. The Board looked forward to meeting Mr Rowe at its next meeting.

62 **Draft Housing and Social Inclusion Service Plan**

The Head of Housing and Social Inclusion presented this draft Service Plan which was in the Corporate Service Plan layout. This was not entirely flexible for all reporting – for example, where projects did not have a specific end date (such as in the case of Partnering Opportunities). These were noted as ‘on-going’ for timing purposes.

The Board noted that this draft included some date glitches in Part C, the End Date for completion of projects in two sections would be amended from 2001 to 2011. In addition the report continued to refer to the Tenant and Council Partnership Agreement as the Tenant Compact and that this would need amending.

The Board was advised that the Plan would be monitored on a quarterly basis and performance reported to the Housing Review Board.

In response to a question on communal cleaning, the Head of Housing and Social Inclusion advised the Board that Street Scene was being encouraged to carry out a deep clean and to improve their service where necessary. Cllr Knight thanked Zoe Cozens, Housing Assistant for managing the recent estate walkabout so well.

Cllr Miss Elson commented on the service charges for support and leaseholder services. There was concern over the Government’s decision to change the way that they provide financial support to vulnerable people. The provision of financial assistance will be paid to individuals rather than to service providers in the future. At present, the Devon Supporting People service received £20m to carry out their various services. This would leave people with the choice of service providers and they may choose private rather than local authority care and support services.

In addition the Board was made aware of the big issue of decommissioning a number of the District’s sheltered housing schemes, which is necessary due to access issues for disabled people into these buildings, investment needs, location etc. There were clearly a lot of complex issues, and some assessment work is underway. Some decommissioning had taken place around the District, but this had been on an ad-hoc basis and the process needed to be more formalised in approach. A future report will propose a methodology for taking this project forward.

The Head of Housing and Social Inclusion was asked whether the Council had received any take-up from their offer to assist council tenants in downsizing their accommodation.

He advised that the take up rate for downsizing accommodation was approximately 20-30 tenants per year anyway. There had been recent coverage in the press that had generated an additional level of interest and a number of enquiries are being progressed.

In response to a request for further clarity on the operation of the Health and Welfare Panel, the Head of Housing and Social Inclusion advised that this panel was run by The Housing Needs Manager. It was very informative and included EDDC officers as well as social services and other health professionals. The panel helped officers to understand the complex health and welfare issues that people might have within our community and helped the council to prioritise and categorise them for housing assistance.

62 **Draft Housing and Social Inclusion Service Plan (cont'd)**

This system replaced the less effective Medical Officer point system and had the extra bonus of being a free consultation service to the Council. The Board agreed that this was a good panel.

In response to a request for clarification of how much of the Service Plan had been influenced by the Audit Commission report, the Head of Housing and Social Inclusion advised that a number of issues and plans were as a direct result of the recommendations of the Audit Commission.

RECOMMENDED that the Housing and Social Inclusion Service Plan for 2008-2011 be adopted

63 **Housing Customer Charter**

The Head of Housing and Social Inclusion referred the Board to the Housing Charter booklet that was included with their meeting agenda.

The Board was advised that Cllr Cope had kindly 'Plain Englished' the booklet. The Chairman and the Board asked that Cllr Cope be thanked for his time in completing this task.

Various comments were made on the booklet:

- Add an index inside the front cover and page numbers.
- Add a statement about a tenant's right to speak to a Councillor & how to contact them.
- Remove reference to 'tenant compact' and replace with 'Tenant and council Partnership Agreement'.
- Consider adding Spanish as a language to the back cover – although opinion was divided over whether we should offer a translation service to reach out to new people in the District. Amend wording at top of this page to read 'available in all languages, for example:'
- 10 day response time for questions from tenants was queried; however this allowed the council to provide a substantive response rather than simply an acknowledgement.
- Add to the complaints procedure that tenants have a right to seek the opinion of the Ombudsman if they are still dissatisfied, having already gone through the Council's 3 step complaints procedure.
- Add a 'version' date to the Charter document.

RECOMMENDED that the updated Housing Customer Charter is approved subject to the following amendments, namely to:

1. add page numbering and an index
2. add statement about a tenant's right to speak to their councillor.
3. replace reference to tenant compact and replace with Tenant and Partnership agreement.
4. amend wording to top of back cover page to read 'available in all languages, for example:'
5. add the following wording to the complaints procedure statement, 'if after going through the Council's complaints procedure you are still dissatisfied, you can then approach the Local Governments' Ombudsman for an independent review'.
6. add a review date to the Charter.

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Governance and the role of the Housing Review Board

The Head of Housing and Social Inclusion reminded the Board of the role and responsibilities of their involvement as Board members. He also talked about the good practice of the Board and reiterated the possible desire to use Mentors to aid effectiveness and share learning experiences with other Authorities/Landlords. The positive work of the Board was acknowledged and there was an increasing focus on positive outcomes.

The possible need in the future to co-opt members with a particular skills base was discussed by the Board

RECOMMENDED that the report be noted and the principles of good governance be adopted by the Council

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Allocation of Policy and Choice Based Lettings Scheme

The Head of Housing and Social Inclusion recognized the very positive work that had been carried out by the Choice Based Lettings Task and Finish Forum (TaFF). This TaFF had looked at a number of issues regarding vacant properties in the District, including the use of a telephone system that could help tenants to be updated on property availability. The TaFF also looked at the allocation policy (such as number of bedrooms v number of residents in the house). As a result, a change in the policy had been proposed.

The TaFF's thorough examination also considered applicants' financial position and their eligibility for housing. Vulnerable people and the way in which the Council could reach out to them was also considered and discussed at length.

The Regional Choice Fund had come about since the TaFF process.

The Head of Housing and Social Inclusion advised the Board that he would like a final legal check before publicising the Allocations Policy.

The Chairman offered her congratulations on this exercise and was pleased with the positive outcomes achieved.

In response to a question, the Head of Housing and Social Inclusion assured the Board that property banding had been changed and that the Housing Needs Team had looked at the bands to check for accuracy. The new banding accurately reflected the priorities of tenants and their particular needs.

As a result of a discussion with the Board members, two additional (4 and 5) points were included in the recommendations.

RECOMMENDED that the following be approved:

1. the proposed change to the Allocation Policy and Choice Based Lettings Scheme as set out in section 2.0 of the report
2. an annual budget of £35,000 be allocated to cover the cost of advertising empty properties and the proposal detailed in section 3.0 of the report
3. delegated authority been given to the Housing Needs Manager to exclude suitable empty property from the scheme, to help reduce the use of temporary accommodation and meet the Government target by 2010
4. approval of the scheme be subject to any legal implications
5. an annual report of the number, type and location of 'excluded properties' be presented to the Housing Review Board

66 **Empty Properties (Voids)**

The Head of Housing and Social Inclusion ran through this report with the Board and explained that the first quarter void figures for 2007 were particularly high, which had an effect on the cumulative position. Quarter 3 average void time was 28 days.

It was explained that the term 'COT' on the void data meant 'change of tenancy'. These are legitimately excluded from the calculations as they have had major work carried out on them.

The term 'DR' referred to a dining room, this in larger properties could be used either as additional living space or as a bedroom.

The term 'TOL TRESS' referred to a 'tolerated trespasser' – which was a tenant with more habitation rights than a squatter but less than a secure tenant.

The Board asked why properties that were in good condition were taking so long to transfer. The Chairman explained that these were not mutual exchanges but were new lets.

Mr Finch provided a comparison with the Devon and Cornwall Housing Association which took an average of 30 days to let void properties.

RECOMMENDED that the report and accompanying data be noted

67 **Repairs Performance Monitoring Report**

The Head of Housing and Social Inclusion presented this standard report to the Board. Detail had been added for the 'telephone answering service'.

It was noted that deterioration in contractor performance had taken place at the end of 2007. This was not an acceptable position and the contractors were being advised of this.

Service level improvement was targeted to 96% performance level, as compared with 93%, which was the current level being achieved.

Involving Tenants more with the Monitoring Process

The Head of Housing and Social Inclusion advised that steps were being taken to involve the Housing Contract Services Manager, who had regular meetings with the contractors and that tenants could be involved in these as customers. Mrs Bickham already sat in on this group. It was noted that the levels of customer satisfaction from the District's tenants was very high at 87%.

In response to a query about the cost of a particular contractor, the Head of Housing and Social Inclusion responded that this had been noted and was being looked into. The production of these statistics helped to highlight such inconsistencies.

RECOMMENDED

1. that the performance data on repairs to Council homes set out in the report be noted,
2. that the repairs performance monitoring data be supplied on a quarterly basis with the Housing Contract Services Manager being asked to come to the next meeting to update the Board.

*68 **2008 Housing Transfer Programme**

This report concerned a letter that the Council had received from the Chief Executive of the Communities and Local Government Directorate (CLG), inviting local authorities in England to apply to the 2008 Housing Transfer Programme.

The letter explained that this would most likely be the last year that the transfer programme would be operated by the CLG, future such programmes would be run in a much more flexible manner by the Homes and Communities Agency (HCA).

The Head of Housing and Social Inclusion suggested to the Board that late Summer/early Autumn would be a likely time for a Stock Options appraisal. This would be in the form of a review and refresh of the work done previously and there would be no pressure on timings for completion of this. It would enable the Board to consider the key factors influencing the Council's ability to manage and maintain the housing stock to the standard expected by tenants and the council. The major influence is likely to be the financial environment, in particular the HRA subsidy position.

The Chairman suggested that a special meeting be scheduled to discuss this appraisal.

RECOMMENDED

1. that the arrangements for the 2008 housing transfer programme be noted,
2. that the Head of Housing and Social Inclusion prepare a discussion document for a Housing Stock Options Appraisal in preparation for a special meeting of the Board later in 2008.

Chairman

Date