

# EAST DEVON DISTRICT COUNCIL

## Minutes of a meeting of the Housing Review Board held at Knowle, Sidmouth on 30 April 2009

**Present:**

Councillors:	Co-opted tenant members:
Ann Liverton (Chairman)	Ted Brown (Vice Chairman)
Vivienne Ash	Christine Morrison
Douglas Hull	Victor Kemp
Jim Knight	Sue Saunders
EDDC Officers:	Co-opted independent community representatives:
Dennis Boobier, Housing Needs Manager	Rob Finch
Emma Charlton,	
John Golding, Head of Housing & Social Inclusion	
Jill Johnson, Housing Business Manager	
Giles Salter, Solicitor	
Debbie Meakin, Democratic Services Officer	

**Also Present:**

Councillors:

Jill Elson, Portfolio Holder, Communities  
Graham Liverton  
Marion Olive  
Pauline Stott

**Apologies:**

Councillor:	Co-opted tenant member:
John Humphreys	Ann Bickham

The meeting started at 6.30pm and ended at 9.10pm

### \*83 **Public Question time**

There were no questions raised by members of the public.

Sue Saunders raised the issue of unresolved repairs for tenants that had come to her attention, giving two case examples of tenant dissatisfaction, and asked if the subject could be a future agenda item for the Board. She also reported that a Customer Support Review group, consisting of tenants and officers, would be set up.

John Golding was concerned to hear of the cases detailed and urged for those cases to be directly reported to the Housing Services Manager; action could then be considered on those cases; and a review of how the tenants had been dealt with by officers investigated. The Chairman also advised that contact with officers should be made in the first instance for urgent problems, and the Local Ward Member advised. The Chairman felt that discussion on such individual cases should not come before the Board at this time, unless there was a proven systematic failing of the repairs reporting procedure that warranted the Board to undertake a review.

**\*83 Public Question time (continued)**

Pauline Stott asked if any prioritisation exercise was being undertaken for the Housing Revenue Account, because of the declining fund. In response, John Golding explained that the 30 year business plan for the Housing Revenue Account was flexed where necessary, and that the concept of service transformation would be a good housekeeping exercise for the account.

Jim Knight asked if the authority was moving towards taking over empty properties as now permitted by legislation.

John Golding responded, explaining the role is undertaken by Environmental Health colleagues and their Empty Homes Strategy currently under consultation covers this activity. We work with Housing Associations in trying to secure unsold properties from recent developments, which had had limited success so far.

**\*84 Minutes**

The minutes of the meeting of the Housing Review Board held on 5 March 2009, were confirmed and signed as a true record.

**\*85 Urgent item**

**Resignation of Heather Williamson**

The Chairman read a letter from Heather Williamson, who had tendered her resignation in light of health issues.

Members of the Board were saddened to hear of her resignation. They praised her enthusiasm and dedication whilst serving as a member of the Board. Sue Saunders also expressed her thanks on behalf of the tenants.

**RESOLVED** that a letter be sent from the Housing Review Board to Heather Williamson, thanking her for her work, and expressing regret in losing her from the membership of the Board.

**\*86 Housing Review Board Forward Plan**

The Head of Housing and Social Inclusion presented the Forward Plan to the Board and the contents were noted. No new coffee morning dates were detailed on the plan. The Board debated the merits of the drop in sessions and how attendance could be maximised by looking at alternative times of the day for the sessions.

Alternative venues were also discussed and all suggestions were welcomed. These were to be directed to Sue Bewes for her consideration.

**RESOLVED** that Sue Bewes continues to progress arrangements of the coffee morning sessions, with consideration to alternative venues.

**\*87 Anti-social behavior – scoping report**

Peter Jeffs had produced a paper setting out some suggestions and inviting feedback from the Board covering to assist him in producing the report to a future meeting. The Board requested the report includes:

- Feedback from the LSP on Honiton
- General explanation about the Council role in tackling anti-social behavior
- Legislation to tackle anti-social behavior
- Council policy on anti-social behavior (within or beyond Housing Service)
- Feedback from the Place Survey

Concern was expressed that Honiton Town Council had not been consulted by the LSP on the issue.

**RESOLVED**

- 1 that the report on anti-social behavior contains a general explanation about the Council's role, including legislation obligations and current policy; as well as feedback from the LSP and Place Survey and specific consideration of anti-social behavior issues affecting Honiton;
- 2 that for the item, an invitation be extended to Councillor Chris Gibbings, Member Champion for Community Safety; Gerry Moore, Community Safety and Anti-Social Behavior Coordinator; a representative from Honiton Town Council; and Honiton Ward Members.

**\*88 Carbon management in Council owned housing**

Diana Berry gave a presentation to the Board, outlining a brief background to climate change and how the Council's owned housing was a major factor in contributing to the carbon dioxide emissions from activities under the Council's direct control.

Work had already been undertaken on council stock to reduce emissions; however because of the number of properties owned, and with 74.5% of total emissions coming from the energy use of tenants, any further work on reducing emissions from the housing stock would therefore impact greatly on the overall target for the Council.

Diane took the Board through the number of options for projects for improving the energy efficiency of the housing stock, including:

- Insulation, such as for cavity walls; solid walls; floor; pitched roof; flat roof; and glazing;
- Air tightness, giving a balance between energy efficiency and indoor air quality. The Board was shown an illustration showing how many points there were in a home where drafts could potentially occur;
- Behavior awareness, encouraging tenants to think about how they use their heating, lighting, electrical appliances – for example, using digital energy meters;
- Renewable energy, such as solar water heating and ground source heat pumps as two examples.

Rob Finch updated Members on the planned trip to South Molton Devon and Cornwall Housing Association project; he just required the number of people from the Board who wanted to attend and he would obtain some prospective dates for the visit.

**\*88 Carbon management in Council owned housing (continued)**

The Board debated the issues around some of the suggested projects, including:

- Obtaining information on the number of properties that would be suitable for fitting with solar panels; this would depend on orientation and pitch of roof, so accurate information could only be obtained by visiting each property, perhaps undertaken alongside a programmed visit to the property, such as tenant change-over or programmed maintenance;
- Working towards an ideal energy certificate level for each property, rather than just reporting what level it had; to aspire to making improvements that brought each property to a minimum of level C;
- Provide a leaflet to new tenants on ways that they could reduce their energy consumption, in a positive and encouraging way;
- If digital energy meters are to be rolled out, clear instructions need to be issued so that tenants can use them effectively;
- Effective insulation could also work to keep a property cool in summer; any form of air conditioning would require renewable energy;
- Information on how many of our properties had water meters could not be obtained from South West Water. On tenant change-over or during maintenance contracts, water meters noted for our property database;
- Other sources of funding needed to be explored as a number of the projects did involve considerable cost;
- The Tenants and Leaseholder Customer Panel could try to establish any tenant difficulties with meeting heating bills, via its newsletter and at its conference in June;
- A temperature reading card could be obtained and given to vulnerable tenants so that they could easily monitor the temperature in their home.

**RESOLVED**

- 1 that a target of a further 23% cut in carbon dioxide emissions from Council owned housing stock over 5 years, from 2009 until 2014, be adopted;
- 2 that in reviewing the Housing Revenue Account, priority be given to funding projects for reducing carbon emissions from Council owned housing stock;
- 3 that the Government be lobbied for financial aid in meeting the funding required for such projects, including specifically targeting the Secretary of State for Energy and Climate Change with copy to local Members of Parliament.

**\*89 Systems Thinking Check and Redesign**

The report provided outlined progress to date on the Systems Thinking review of the Housing Service.

The Board raised some issues to bear in mind for the process, including:

- Ensuring that all Members are informed of the outcome of the process, perhaps by means of presentation at Full Council;
- Consider having a low step as part of the door replacement programme as standard;
- Reducing the problem of tenants having rent arrears following a move; John Golding assured the Board that this was an important part of the re-design and that measures were being trialed to secure housing benefits prior to the new tenant moving in. He would report back to the Board on the success of those measures;

\*89 **Systems Thinking Check and Redesign (continued)**

- Advice was being given to tenants who enquired about low cost furniture for their home;
- Advice was being given in applying for funds for those on income support and other qualifying benefits, when moving.

**RESOLVED** that the Systems Thinking Redesign proposals be endorsed and the report be noted.

\*90 **Rent increase 2009/2010**

John Golding updated the Board on the further advice from Government, in the form of a consultation exercise, on how to deal with the adjustment of a lower level of increase in rent (average 3.1%) without creating a large gap in the Housing Revenue Account. Once the consultation exercise had been completed, it was likely to mean a 2.95% adjusted rent increase.

**RESOLVED** that a lower level of rent increase be implemented in accordance with revised Government advice for 2009/10.

\*91 **TSA Landlord event**

The report set out the role and purpose of the Tenant Services Authority in respect of the regulation of social landlords. The TSA will become the regulatory body for local housing authorities from 2010 and John Golding would keep a watching brief on how their policy position developed.

**RESOLVED** that the report on the Tenant Services Authority event be noted.

\*92 **Audit Commission Delivery Plan**

This regular report showed that good progress had been made on the implementation of the recommendations contained in the Audit Commission report on the inspection of housing management services. All recommendations in the report were shown as either "green" or "amber" and significant in that there were none flagged as "red".

The Chairman congratulated the Housing Service for their hard work in undertaking the implementation alongside the Systems Thinking review, which was echoed by the Board.

**RESOLVED** that the progress on the recommendations flowing from the Audit Commission inspection of housing management services be noted.

\*93 **Regional Choice Based Letting scheme – Devon Home Choice**

Dennis Boobier updated the Board on the progress made in reaching a final draft of the Devon Home Choice Policy and the acquisition of the Abrisas system that will maintain the Council's housing register.

The timetable for implementation was discussed, with a slight delay in the Abrisas system coming online. Joint working between all of the authorities in Devon, including the unitary authorities, had gone much better than expected and the report set out some points of note in the policy that would differ from current practice, including:

**\*93 Regional Choice Based Letting scheme – Devon Home Choice (cont.)**

- Applicants will be placed in 1 of 5 housing need “bands” rather than the three bands currently used – this follows legal advice including band E termed “no housing need”;
- Applicants may be able to move to another area of Devon if the right home is available – to deal with the concerns over meeting local need, initially only 2% of each Council’s housing stock will be allocated to applicants who are in housing need and have been on the waiting list longest and are from outside their area;
- Applicants can manage their application online – a paper form of application will still be provided, but applicants will have the option to both register online and manage their application online, following success in Exeter and Teignbridge;
- Allocations will be based in housing need, not on the length of time an applicant has waited on the housing register. If an applicant’s need changes to a higher band, the “start” date will change to the date the change in banding occurred. This is in line with good practice from other authorities;
- Newspaper adverts would cease and a newsletter sent out to vulnerable people to ensure they are kept informed.

The Board raised concern over clear guidance to tenants regarding the size of property required depending on the number and gender of any children in the family; and also warned against the possible scenario of incorrect data entered by the applicant if registering online and how that could affect their application. Dennis Boobier assured the Board that clear information would be given to applicants; there would also be assistance in completing an application over the telephone or by visiting officer to complete online.

**RESOLVED**

- 1 that the ongoing development of Devon Home Choice and the benefits that this will bring to people seeking housing in Devon be noted;
- 2 that the signing of a contract with Northern Consortium to purchase the Abrisas system be noted;
- 3 that the current project implementation programme for the scheme be noted.

**RECOMMENDED**

that the proposed Devon Home Choice Policy be adopted.

**\*94 Leaseholder survey**

A survey was conducted of all of the Council’s leaseholders to find out their views, including how they rate the service provided by the Housing Service. The Board reviewed the statistical results of the survey and considered the suggestions for further action which included:

- Updated Leaseholders handbook
- Detailed billing statement
- Frequent consultation
- Frequent updating on work carried out
- Demonstrating how improvements were value for money
- Encourage involvement with panels
- Checking work after completion
- Assessing quality of work
- Clarification on responsibilities

\*94 **Leaseholder survey (continued)**

**RESOLVED**

- 1 that the suggestions detailed in the report on the Leaseholder Survey be carried out;
- 2 that the terms of reference of the Tenant and Leaseholder Customer Panel be explored to consider the forming of a sub-panel of leaseholders to report their concerns to the main Tenant Panel.

\*95 **STATUS Survey benchmarking**

John Golding outlined to the Board the benchmarking information on the STATUS survey which was reported to the Board in November 2008. One point of note was the high rating for satisfaction with the value for money for rent. In terms of ranking, all the descriptors shown in the report were ranked in the upper quartile bar two.

The Chairman congratulated the Housing Service on the rankings and agreed that this was good evidence for the Audit Commission to demonstrate improvement.

**RESOLVED**

that the benchmarking report be noted.

\*96 **Weycroft community centre**

Emma Charlton set out the history to the outline proposal for joint working with the community group and Football Club at Millwey Rise, Axminster.

A survey had been conducted regarding the Weycroft Community Centre, with the key findings that:

- 93% of respondents were aware of the Centre
- 48% had been to the centre in the previous six months
- 24% were members or had family that used the centre on a regular basis
- 40% said they or a family member would use the Centre if it was improved
- 29% would be willing to work with the Council to move the project forward

The Football Club, based on the Millwey Estate, approached the Council in light of the survey because of their wish to extend their facilities and provide a better facility for young people in the area. The outline of the proposal was explained to the Board and there were a number of steps highlighted that would need to be carried out before the proposal could become viable, including extending a lease with the Town Council, successfully relocating some play facilities, obtaining the necessary planning permission and raising funding for the project.

A meeting of residents and other representatives including 2 members from the Board had met on the 3 April 2009. The meeting provided useful feedback on both the survey results and the outline proposal by the Football Club, with a strong suggestion that the new centre must be a community centre, and that the existing centre must be kept running and maintained during any new build. Residents were keen to see the planned improvements to the existing Centre, especially relating to the kitchen improvements.

Douglas Hull gave glowing praise to the work Emma Charlton had put in to bring the residents together to help drive the outline proposals forward, echoed by Christine Morrison who reported a positive community spirit directly after the meeting of residents on the 3 April. The Chairman added her thanks to Emma for her hard work.

**\*96 Weycroft community centre (continued)**

The Board appreciated that there were a number of hurdles still to tackle before the outline proposal was viable, and agreed that negotiations with the Planning Service should be started to progress the matter further. John Golding confirmed that some improvement work had been undertaken to the toilets at the existing Centre.

**RESOLVED**

- 1 that the Housing Review Board supports, in principle, the proposals from the Football Club including a community hall on their land;
- 2 that the setting up of a community group to progress the project be supported;
- 3 That officers progress negotiations with the Planning Service regarding the relocation of the Play Area;
- 4 that the maintenance and management of the Weycroft Senior Citizens Centre be continued until the proposals have been fully investigated and if possible delivered;
- 5 That the state of the Weycroft Senior Citizens Centre be confirmed to the working group to be safely used for the next few years.

**\*97 Housing Review Board annual report**

The Chairman commended the draft Annual report to the Board, and congratulated Alethea Thompson for her hard work in compiling the report.

**RESOLVED**

that the Housing Review Board Annual Report be adopted and submitted to the Annual Council meeting on the 20 May 2009.

Chairman .....

Date .....