

Agenda Item 10

Housing Review Board

26 November 2009

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Review of the Housing Review Board

Summary

This report initiates a review of the role and effectiveness of the Housing Review Board. The Chairman has requested the report as part of an evaluation of the purpose and main activities of the Board, and what has been achieved in the three years of operation. I have set out my thoughts on a SWOT (strengths, weaknesses, opportunities, and threats) analysis for the Board to consider and develop with its own contributions.

A number of suggestions are made to ensure that the Board maintains a clear focus, pays attention to outcomes, monitors achievements and performance, and continuously improves its effectiveness.

The Board may wish to consider the value of a development plan to assist it in improving its own performance.

Recommendation

The Board need to agree where it can improve and how this might be achieved.

a) Reasons for Recommendation

To improve the effectiveness and capacity of the Housing Review Board.

b) Alternative Options

Not to consider the performance or effectiveness of the Board. Assess the performance in a different way to that suggested in the report.

c) Risk Considerations

That there is no appetite for assessing achievements, performance and improvement opportunities.

d) Policy and Budgetary Considerations

The policy considerations are set out in the report. There are not significant budgetary considerations.

e) Date for Review of Decision

An annual review of the Board's achievements is undertaken at the end of each Council year.

1 Introduction

1.1 The Chairman of the Board has asked me to initiate a review of the effectiveness and achievements of the Housing Review Board.

1.2 The Board was established in 2006 following a recommendation flowing from the Housing Stock Options Appraisal.

- 1.3 The terms of reference for the Board are part of the Councils Constitution and the relevant parts are reproduced below:

Housing Review Board (Housing Overview Committee)

Role and purpose:

The Housing Review Board is an Overview Committee and will consider matters relating to the Council's landlord and housing management functions. The Board will advise the Council's Executive Board on housing policy and operational practice, where this affects the Council's tenants and leaseholders.

The Board will keep under review the housing stock options appraisal and monitor the conditions which will influence the future arrangements for the ownership and management of the Council's housing stock.

Form and composition:

The Housing Review Board will consist of 5 Council Member representatives; 5 tenant and leaseholder representatives; and 2 independent community representatives. The noncouncillor members will be co-opted members and shall have the right to vote.

Council officers and others, where appropriate, will support the work of the Board.

The Board will meet at least 4 times a year.

The Board will elect its own chair.

Council Members and co-opted members on the Board will be appointed at the annual Council meeting.

Tenant and leaseholder representatives on the Board will initially be selected by elections (unless there is no need because the number of candidates equals the number of places) and serve a three year term. Should a vacancy occur during the three year term, the unsuccessful candidate who received most votes in the last election will normally be offered the appointment. All tenant and leaseholder appointments are subject to Council approval.

Normally Board members will serve for a maximum of six years, subject to annual reappointment by the Council, with the objective that every three years one third of the committee will stand down.

The Housing Review Board will:

- i) Advise the Executive Board on the Council's landlord activities and functions affecting tenants and leaseholders;
- ii) Maintain an active involvement in the on-going review of the options for the future ownership and management of Council owned homes, and make recommendations;
- iii) Promote good practice and oversee Service improvements;
- iv) Monitor performance on core housing management activities and report to the Executive Board;
- v) Assist the Executive Board monitor and prepare the Housing Revenue Account budget and the Housing Revenue Account Business Plan;

vi) Promote tenant and leaseholder involvement and implementation of the Tenant Compact;

vii) Consult with the Tenant Customer Panel who will liaise with tenant groups and representatives;

viii) Encourage good practice in relation to equality and diversity issues, and ensure that the needs of vulnerable tenants are satisfied;

ix) Advise on any other matters affecting the Council's landlord duties and responsibilities.

1.4 The Audit Commission considered the work of the Board during the inspection of housing management services two years ago and I have extracted a number of comments from the final report as follows:

- the Housing Review Board - where key decisions are now made - does not yet have the experience and confidence to drive improvement;
- *Recommendation - improving the capacity and focusing the attention of the Housing Review Board on the key outcome targets;*
- At the more strategic level there are a range of consultation groups and the Housing Review Board has had the training and opportunity to influence agendas and, in particular, the budget for the service.
- There are sound procedures in place to manage budgets and risks and to ensure effective performance management of staff. However, the Housing Review Board does not yet scrutinise reports and drive improvement as effectively as it could.
- The Housing Review Board provides a very good opportunity for five tenants to have a strong influence on the Council's decisions. It has only been in existence for a matter of months, but is recognised as the key decision-making body for the service. Board members have been able to influence the agenda and the recommendations that it makes to the Council. Members of the Board have been able to take up plentiful training opportunities during its short existence, including, for example, training on housing finance prior to consideration of the budget for the service.

However, the burden placed upon the Board does not lend itself to business-like decision making. Agendas and reports received by the Housing Review Board are over-long; for the September meeting the agenda ran to 220 pages. Reports are over-detailed and are not always well structured. In the meeting that we observed, key policy proposals were not subject to a high degree of scrutiny and challenge, with virtually no comment on the performance report. The Board is still in its infancy and it will take time for it to match the performance and confidence of the best performing ALMOs or housing association boards.

- The Council has invested heavily in tenant participation, but the Housing Review Board is not yet strong enough to direct and drive forward the service. There is now a much improved framework for tenant participation which is reflected in high levels of tenant satisfaction in this area. The options appraisal work created a foundation for tenant involvement which has been built on. The Housing Review Board is now acting as a key decision making body. And the Tenant and Leaseholder Customer Panel and a repairs and maintenance review group is also beginning to have an influence. In addition, a successful residents' conference was held in July 2007. In addition, the service is promoting (albeit with limited success) the development of residents associations and is taking a proactive approach to using consultation to inform service delivery. This all helps to explain why the level of satisfaction with opportunities to participate is high. However, our observation of the Board showed that it has not yet matured into a body that is strong and experienced enough to provide a constructive challenge to the managers of the service. In part this is because of the weight of the agenda it is presented with (and a confident Board would have challenged this). But it is also down to the inexperience of Board members who did not scrutinise the reports to any depth, did not ask searching questions and in effect rubber-stamped the recommendations of officers. Stronger, constructive Boards can make a big difference to the quality of service being provided.

2. Annual reviews and Board appraisal

- 2.1 Each year a summary of the Board's work is presented to a meeting and the last report was presented to your April 2009 meeting. A considerable amount of work has been undertaken and this is useful in assessing the performance of the Board.
- 2.2 The Board have utilised the discipline of a Forward Plan to ensure that it plans future agendas and agrees future reports to come forward for consideration. We have used a sub group of the Board on two occasions in the form of Task and Finish Fora for Choice Based Lettings and the Review of sheltered housing. We have also run a series of coffee mornings/drop in sessions where Board members have taken a lead role in liaising with customers in various locations around the district.
- 2.3 We have appointed Board Members Champions to work with specific officer teams to develop expertise in a housing specialism and provide a valued customer perspective to our operational activities. Members will have a view on the success of this initiative and how we might improve the arrangement.
- 2.4 I produced a report on Governance that was considered by the Board in January 2008 and I append this as **annex 1**. The Board have adopted the principles of this report to steer its work.
- 2.5 Many RSL Boards undertake an appraisal of individual Board Members and/or evaluate the work of their Board. This represents good practice and is something we should consider.
- 2.6 An appraisal is a mature and responsible thing to undertake even though it may be awkward, done well it will be of benefit in the longer term. An honest and open appraisal will enable us to build on our successes and ensure the Board adds value to our governance arrangements and drives continuous improvement.

3. Issues for the Board to consider

- 3.1 The Board needs to undertake a certain amount of self-assessment and I would suggest that the following themes or questions need to be asked:

- What added value does the Board provide ?

- What has the Board achieved over the past three years ?
- What is the potential to develop the work of the Board ?
- Are our governance arrangements suitable and robust ?
- Do we now have the necessary experience and expertise ?
- Have we addressed the Audit Commissions concerns ?
- Is the standard of reporting, debate and decision making appropriate ?
- What is the purpose of the Board and are we achieving purpose ?
- Is the Board doing 'what matters' ?
- What are the Boards ambitions ?

4. Strengths, weaknesses, opportunities and threats

4.1 It would be useful for the Board to undertake a SWOT analysis of its activities in order to assist in identifying a development plan to guide its further development and improvement over the next year. Whilst it is fair to say that the Board has achieved a lot in its three years there is always room for improvement and a sign of self-confidence and maturity is a Board that appraises itself on a regular basis with a view to improvement.

4.2 Some of the **strengths** the Board possess include:

- Members with a range of interests, experience and backgrounds;
- The commitment and enthusiasm of Board members;
- The wide range of housing issues considered;
- Developing experience;
- Clear purpose and terms of reference;
- Effective sounding board for officers on housing issues;
- Board assumes responsibility for its decision making/recommendations;
- Strong customer focus.

4.3 **Weaknesses** have been identified by the Audit Commission and the Board may wish to consider how well it has addressed the issues set out above. I consider that we still have weaknesses in:

- The quality of debate and understanding of complex issues;
- Insufficient strategic 'high level' focus;
- Insufficient outcome focus;
- Being largely officer led;
- Limited challenge of officers during meetings;
- Not operating as a unified Board;
- Tenant representatives ability to articulate wider tenant views;
- Uncertainty over the relationship with the Tenant and Leaseholder Customer Panel.

4.4 **Opportunities** for future development of the Board include:

- Learning and mentoring from experienced RSL Boards;
- Expanding the Board Member Champion roles;
- Corporate Member development and training;
- Changes in council housing finance leading to investment opportunities;
- Collaboration with Mid Devon at Member level;
- Achieving a better balance between Member/officer lead.

4.5 **Threats** to the Board achieving its purpose include:

- Differences and divisions between Board members;
- Fixed or entrenched views and positions;
- A preoccupation with non strategic issues;
- Local Government reorganisation.

5. Conclusions

- 5.1 This report attempts to initiate some debate on whether the Housing Review Board has fulfilled its intended role and initiate a review on how it may develop further to meet the demands of tenants, leaseholders and service delivery and improvement. In many ways it is for the Board to decide how it wishes to take this matter forward.
- 5.2 The Board needs to decide whether it wants to produce a development plan for its improved effectiveness and how it might want to deal with the appraisal of Board members, if at all. It is important that the Board take ownership of this issue if it wants to develop its role and achieve more in the future.

Legal Implications

There are no legal implications highlighted which require comment.

Financial Implications

There are no financial implications.

Consultation on Reports to the Executive

None.

Background Papers

- Report to the Board on governance January 2008.
- Audit Commission report on the inspection of housing management services, December 2007.

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Housing Review Board
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