

Minutes 10 September 2013

MID DEVON DISTRICT COUNCIL

MINUTES of a **MEETING** of the **DECENT AND AFFORDABLE HOMES POLICY DEVELOPMENT GROUP** held on Tuesday 10 September 2013 at 2.15pm

Present Councillors: P J Heal (Chairman), W J Daw, Mrs J R Rendle, R F Radford and R Wright

Apology Councillor: Mrs E M Andrews

Also Present Councillors: R L Stanley and K D Wilson

Also Present Officers: N Sanderson (Head of Housing and Property Services), C Fry (Housing Services Manager), R Hewson (Principal Accountant), C Yandle (Internal Audit Team Leader), J Stuckey (Member Services Officer) and S J Lees (Member Services Officer)

24 PUBLIC QUESTION TIME

There were no members of the public present.


25 MINUTES

The Minutes of the Meeting held on 16 July 2013 were approved as a correct record and **SIGNED** by the Chairman.

26 CHAIRMAN'S ANNOUNCEMENTS

The Chairman had no announcements to make.

27 FINANCIAL UPDATE FOR THE THREE MONTHS TO 30 JUNE 2013

The Group had before it, and **NOTED**, a report  [Minute 27 \[122kb\]](#) from the Head of Finance presenting a financial update in respect of the three months to 30 June 2013. The Principal Accountant reported on the key figures within the report, which included the fact that the Housing Revenue Account was currently in a healthy position. He also reported on significant budget variances, these included:


- - General Fund Housing - a bad debt provision of £20K for DARS (Deposit and Repayment Scheme) had been inserted to reflect the likelihood of being unable to recoup the full amount of loans provided;
 - Housing Revenue Account (HRA) - the largest variance related to additional income from adaptations work, an amount of £180k had been transferred from the HRA to the adaptations budget.

Discussion took place regarding:

- The effect on income of houses remaining empty for lengthy periods of time;
- How the Capital Programme was subject to changing circumstances and priorities, although some monies were earmarked for specific projects it was not always possible to proceed with previously made plans due to building or planning constraints.

Note: *Report previously circulated; copy attached to the signed minutes.

28 PERFORMANCE AND RISK REPORT FOR THE FIRST QUARTER OF 2013/14


The Group had before it, and **NOTED**, a report  [Minute 28 \[143kb\]](#) of the Head of Communities and Governance providing Members with an update on performance against the corporate plan and local service targets for 2013/14 as well as providing an update on the key business risks. The Internal Audit Team Leader explained that data provided in relation to rent arrears was slightly behind target but this was being addressed. She also reported that only one risk had been identified which met the criteria for the corporate Risk Register which was in relation to asbestos, although the severity of the risk was high, the likelihood of a problem occurring was very low.

Discussion took place regarding:

- Rent recovery targets would be met or exceeded by the end of the year;
- By the end of 2014, the percentage of houses reaching the Decent Homes Standard would need to be 100%;
- Data in relation to the average number of days it took to re-let properties was behind target. The Head of Housing and Property Services explained that measures were being taken to address this. On occasions it was not economical to spend £1k on subcontractors to bring a property back into use to then only receive £100/wk in rent, careful resource management had to be employed.

Note: *Report previously circulated; copy attached to the signed minutes.

29 REVIEW OF TENANT INVOLVEMENT ARRANGEMENTS


The Group had before it a briefing paper  [Minute 29 \[27kb\]](#) from the Housing Services Manager (HSM) reviewing the current arrangements for tenant involvement. It set out the regulatory requirements and the menu of involvement. It also contained information about the impact of various initiatives.

The HSM explained that the Tenancy Standard is also relevant when talking about tenant involvement as it states that Registered Providers of social housing should also develop and provide services that will support tenants to maintain their tenancy and prevent unnecessary eviction. It was noted that Tenant Void Inspectors had been particularly effective in identifying issues and had played a real and meaningful role in scrutiny activities. However, the "Make Your Money Go Further" events had not been very successful despite the fact that the second one, in Crediton, had been well publicised in advance. The Tenant Involvement Co-ordinator has

therefore been tasked with undertaking some research which will involve engaging with tenants from all sections of society to find out how they would like to engage with the Council. Facebook and Twitter were proving to be effective methods of engagement, she said, with 88 people currently 'liking' the Housing Facebook page and 82 Twitter followers. Furthermore, the use of social media was viewed as a cost effective and helpful way forward.

Note: *Briefing paper previously circulated; copy attached to the signed minutes.

30 RENT ARREARS LETTERS INITIATIVE


The Group had before it a briefing paper * [Minute 30 \[25kb\]](#) from the Housing Services Manager providing information in relation to the implementation of the new 'Traffic Light' letters system for rent arrears. Welfare reform, and in particular the impact of the spare bedroom deduction of Housing Benefit, were beginning to affect the ability of some tenants to keep their rent accounts up to date.

The Housing Services Manager circulated examples of set of letters from Croydon Churches Houses Association which were numbered and contained graphics in one of three colours: green, amber and red as a means of demonstrating how far in terms of the procedure the case had progressed. These were very visual and would particularly help people with literacy problems. The letters were in Plain English and information regarding support available was printed in different languages on the back of each letter because Croydon is a very diverse area and Registered Providers of social housing need to tailor their service to meet the needs of their tenants. The Housing Service is planning to amend the standard letter templates held within Orchard Housing, the integrated housing management system, and introduce a suite of letters such as those used by Croydon Churches Housing Association. A two month project would commence to change all of the letter templates. It was emphasised that a lot of work was required to amend the current letters of which there was anything up to 150 different types of scenario depending on people's individual circumstances.

The Chairman requested that an update be brought back to the Group when the new system had been implemented in the New Year.

Note: *Briefing paper previously circulated; copy attached to the signed minutes.

31 PROGRAMME OF PLANNED MAINTENANCE EXPENDITURE 2013/14

The Group had before it, and **NOTED**, a report * [Minute 31 \[15kb\]](#) from the Head of Housing and Property Services informing it of the Planned Maintenance expenditure for the 2013/14 financial year. Clarification was provided regarding an additional £70K for fire safety works as well as £70K for voids work, leaving £110K in miscellaneous not yet earmarked.

Note: *Report previously circulated; copy attached to the signed minutes.

32 NEW HOMES BONUS

The Head of Housing and Property Services circulated a paper regarding the New Homes Bonus (NHB) which had been introduced to provide an incentive for growth and to provide funding for communities where an increased population in the area could result in a deterioration in the level of public services and other amenities. The NHB would be for a limited time only ending in 2017. In two tier authorities, the NHB was split so that 80% of the total went to second tier authorities such as Mid Devon District Council and 20% to Devon County Council. The Mid Devon payment for 2013/14 had been £698,604.

It was explained that this had not been ring fenced for providing new homes specifically but for providing a number of initiatives to meet the government's expectation that public services generally were maintained to meet the needs of an increased population, for example, two new Forward Planners had been employed to underpin such initiatives out of the £100K that had been earmarked for economic regeneration.

Following a lengthy discussion regarding the use of the New Homes Bonus monies the Group felt that more information was needed before making a possible recommendation to the Cabinet on this matter. If a recommendation was made it would need to go to the Cabinet on 28 November 2013 therefore it was **AGREED** that a Special Meeting of the Decent and Affordable Homes Policy Development Group would be held on Monday 4 November 2013 to discuss this matter further.

33 WELL PARKS, CREDITON

It was reported that all tenants had moved in and despite some very minor snagging problems all tenants were very happy. It was confirmed that seventeen out of the twenty two new tenants were originally from Crediton. The Chairman asked that the Head of Housing and Property Services pass on the thanks and congratulations of the Group to the housing staff involved in the successful completion of this scheme.

34 IDENTIFICATION OF ITEMS FOR THE NEXT MEETING - 26 NOVEMBER 2013

In addition to the items already listed in the work programme, the following items were requested to be on the agenda for the next meeting:

- Homelessness Strategy
- Gas Safety Policy
- New Homes Bonus update

(The meeting ended at 4.05pm)

CHAIRMAN