

MID DEVON DISTRICT COUNCIL

MINUTES of a **MEETING** of the **HOMES POLICY DEVELOPMENT GROUP** held on 13 August 2019 at 2.15 pm

Present

Councillors

R J Dolley (Chairman)
Mrs E M Andrews, D R Coren, L J Cruwys,
W J Daw, C J Eginton, Mrs I Hill, S J Penny
and B Holdman

Apologies

Councillor(s)

J Cairney

Also Present

Councillor(s)

R M Deed, L D Taylor and Ms E J Wainwright

Also Present

Officer(s):

Andrew Pritchard (Director of Operations), Claire Fry (Group Manager for Housing), Joanne Nacey (Group Manager for Finance), Simon Newcombe (Group Manager for Public Health and Regulatory Services), Catherine Yandle (Group Manager for Performance, Governance and Data Security), J P McLachlan (Principal Accountant) and Sally Gabriel (Member Services Manager)

15 APOLOGIES AND SUBSTITUTE MEMBERS

Apologies were received from Cllr J Cairney who was substituted by Cllr B Holdman.

16 DECLARATION OF INTERESTS UNDER THE CODE OF CONDUCT

Cllr Mrs E M Andrews declared a personal interest with regard to council housing issues as she was a tenant.

17 PUBLIC QUESTION TIME (00-02-25)

Reverend Helen Drever referring to Item 5 on the agenda (Syrian Vulnerable Persons Resettlement Scheme) spoke on behalf of Anthea Duquemin who thanked the officers who had prepared the useful discussion document outlining various approaches that different district councils have used to operate the Syrian Vulnerable Persons Resettlement Scheme. These seem to offer a way forward by which Council officers can avoid undertaking too much additional work or costs while Mid Devon can still offer a safe home to a small number of displaced Syrian families in the way that many of us in Mid Devon feel very motivated to support .

As the person who has bought a house in Crediton for this purpose, I would like to say that I very much hope that we can have a decision today that Mid Devon will definitely agree to go ahead with the original proposal that the next place to settle a Syrian family would be Crediton, and that the house that I have bought, which was selected specifically according to the criteria identified by council officers, and which

has already been approved by Housing officers for the Syrian Vulnerable Persons Resettlement Scheme, can be put into use as soon as possible.

At present the house is empty, although it seems a terrible waste, I have avoided using it for any other purpose as I am aware that the Council cannot start looking for a family through the Syrian Vulnerable Persons Resettlement Scheme unless or until the house is actually vacant. I would therefore like to ask if I can (a) be given confirmation that my house will be used for the scheme and (b) ask for a specific date from when my house will be considered to be secured for the scheme.

Finally having read the discussion paper prepared for today's meeting, I would like to assure you in relation to point 3.4 about the risk to private landlords not being able to support the refugee families living in their homes, that I cannot imagine any way in which this would happen. I am fully committed to providing a house for this purpose and if for any reason I wasn't able to provide full support myself, I would find some other way of achieving this, quite separate from any support from the council.

Mr Conyngham again referring to item 5 on the agenda stated that he wanted to endorse the words of the previous speaker and that he was impressed with the officers report, he had worked with others for 4 years to find a house and was overjoyed when the house in Crediton came forward, he felt that it would be shocking if the project did not go ahead, the house was empty and in good order, he asked that the PDG do more than note the report but provide a clear commitment that Mid Devon would take a 3rd Syrian family and would start the necessary process.

The Chairman indicated that the answers to the questions would be provided when the item was debated.

18 **MINUTES (00-07-23)**

The minutes of the meeting held on 18 June 2019 were confirmed as a correct record and **SIGNED** by the Chairman.

19 **CHAIRMAN'S ANNOUNCEMENTS (00-08-00)**

The Chairman stated that a lot of good work had been identified within the work programme.

20 **SYRIAN VULNERABLE PERSONS RESETTLEMENT SCHEME (00-09-02)**

The Group had before it a report * from the Group Manager for Housing Services providing an update on work relating to the Syrian Vulnerable Persons Resettlement Scheme. Specifically the report addressed what could be achieved by working with a third party or parties such as the Churches Housing Action Team (CHAT). In addition to this the report examined how other local authorities were managing families given that they were also required to comply with the Homelessness Reduction Act 2017 and were likely to be experiencing the same time constraints.

The Director of Operations outlined the contents of the report stating that the scheme had resource and financial liabilities for the authority and that there was no imposed model regarding how properties should be managed and that there was an acceptance that there would be different policies and procedures used by each local

authority with several other local authorities engaging with a third party. He informed the meeting that it was the local authority who was the tenant of the property and therefore it would retain the tenant's liability; officer resource was required to deal with statutory functions and any funding available for the scheme would not finance an additional officer. There was a need to find a way forward which negated the need for the Council's direct involvement in the scheme.

In response to questions posed in public question time, the officer stated that there was a need to direct resources to comply with the statutory requirement of the Homelessness Reduction Act 2019. To expand the Syrian Vulnerable Persons Resettlement Scheme would have financial implications which were not within the approved budget.

Consideration was given to:

- The fact that the local residents were willing to support the scheme and there was a property available
- The amount of funding that was recoverable from the Home Office
- The amount of officer resource that was required to extend the scheme
- The tenancy management costs
- The 2 properties that were already in use for the scheme
- The various models used by other local authorities
- The original policy agreed by the Cabinet to take up to 5 Syrian families, at the time of the original decision, the costs of the scheme were unknown
- The original scheme and the fact that the scheme was a non-statutory function of the council, the economic climate and the financially challenging position that the council was in
- Home Office guidance with regard to specialist support required for the families and that vulnerable people could not be attended to by volunteers
- Investigation into a new model and discussions with Devon County Council which could allow the scheme to be progressed by a third party

It was therefore **AGREED** that representations be made to Devon County Council requesting it to develop a scheme that allowed landlords to accept Syrian refugees with a direct contract with the landlord through the Home Office Scheme.

Notes:

- i) A recommendation to expand the scheme was not supported;
- ii) * Report previously circulated; copy attached to the signed minutes.

21 **PERFORMANCE AND RISK FIRST QUARTER 2019/20 (0-10-00)**

The Group had before it, and **NOTED**, a report * from the Director of Operations providing Members with an update on performance against the Corporate Plan and local service targets for 2019/20 as well as providing an update on the key business risks.

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

22 **PERFORMANCE INDICATOR IN RELATION TO VOIDS (TO RECEIVE AND DISCUSS A RECOMMENDATION FROM THE AUDIT COMMITTEE) (1-11-08)**

The Group had received a recommendation from the Audit Committee that it considered the performance indicator in relation to 'the average number of days to re-let a property', otherwise known as 'void turn around'. The Audit Committee had specifically requested that the Group consider the best use of resource in this area.

The Director of Operations stated that targets needed to be challenging, there was a need for void turnaround time to be as short as possible as this added social value and the receipt of rent. The performance with regard to this indicator for the months from April was very close to the target of 14 days.

Consideration was given to: the target being acceptable and that it should be maintained and if a property required major works it would become a major void which would fit within another performance indicator.

It was **AGREED** that the target for the average number of days to re-let a property remain at 14 and that this be referred back to the Audit Committee.

23 **PRESENTATION ON PRIVATE SECTOR HOUSING (1-18-28)**

The Group was provided with a presentation on the work undertaken in the Private Sector Housing area. This included the following summary of activity:

- An overview of the service with a range of statutory functions
- The gross budget for the service and the number of staff with a breakdown of revenue and capital expenditure relevant to the PDG
- The work of the Private Sector Housing Team with regard to adaptations, housing assistance, improvement loans and the facilitation of energy saving programmes
- Statutory duties to inspect properties in the private sector to make sure they were up to standard and examples of properties that had been identified and closed down. This included reactive work and proactive work such as the Rogue Landlords project in Cullompton
- The licensing of houses of multiple occupation (HMO's) and the enforcement tools available
- The reinstatement of empty homes, 366 properties were now back in use following this initiative
- The Annual Landlords Network Event
- The corporate risk work undertaken for the Housing Service with regard to fire risk assessments, asbestos surveying and water sampling

24 OVERVIEW OF THE HOUSING SERVICE (1-49-35)

The Group had before it, and **NOTED**, a briefing paper * from the Group Manager for Housing Services providing information on the structure of the Housing Service and the functions for which the housing teams were responsible.

The officer outlined the contents of the report bringing particular attention to the following:

- The areas of responsibility of the Group Manager: that of the Housing Options Team and housing management of the Council's retained stock,
- The number of staff and the budget for the service through the Housing Revenue Account and the General Fund
- The strategic housing functions: homelessness, Devon Home Choice, neighbourhood management, fire safety, tenancy fraud, anti-social behaviour, tenancy involvement and housing policy

Discussion took place regarding:

- The implications of the Homelessness Reduction Act and the new duties it introduced
- The number of homeless people in Mid Devon and the work that was taking place to engage with these people
- The fact that the team were fully occupied with the new duties outlined in the recent legislation

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

25 HOMELESSNESS (1-56-59)

The Group had before it, and **NOTED**, a briefing paper * from the Group Manager for Housing Services providing an overview of how the Council works to prevent and manage homelessness.

The officer outlined the contents of the report with particular reference to the new Homelessness Reduction Act 2017 and the implications that this had on officers and the fact that the council was now duty bound to make investigations if someone at risk of becoming homeless approached the council for assistance. If it was established that there was a threat of this, the Council had a statutory obligation to work with the person for 56 days in order to prevent them becoming homeless, this could include helping them to find alternative accommodation.

Consideration was given to:

- The budgetary pressures associated with the new Act
- Housing people in rural areas where it would be more appropriate for them to be housed in the towns.
- How officers considered the appropriateness of locations for tenants
- Wherever possible people would be placed in Mid Devon and their needs would be considered.

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

26 **DEVON HOME CHOICE: HOUSING NEEDS ASSESSMENT FRAMEWORK AND CHOICE BASED LETTINGS SCHEME (2-02-51)**

The Group had before it, and **NOTED**, a report * from the Group Manager for Housing Services providing information on the Devon Home Choice scheme and how it was used in Mid Devon.

The Director of Operations outlined the contents of the report stating that local authorities were required to have allocation schemes which gave reasonable preference to certain categories of those in housing need. Whilst councils were required to give reasonable preference to some people as defined in the statutory guidance, they could manage the housing waiting list in such a way as to support any local priorities; therefore they could refuse to accept applications from those who are not in housing need (Band E). He identified the number of households in housing need in Mid Devon as at 31 March 2019:

Band	Number
A	0 (0%)
B	110 (13%)
C	262 (30%)
D	503 (57%)
Total A to D	875 (100%)
E	1018

Members were asked whether they wished to pursue options to remove band E (those not in housing need) from the scheme used in Mid Devon.

Consideration was given to :

- whether or not to retain Band E within the scheme and that there were a lot of people in private rented accommodation that would like a council property
- The number of properties available via Devon Home Choice and the number available for Band E applications
- Properties in the rural areas were difficult to fill
- Whether to dispose of properties that were difficult to fill in rural areas and purchase properties where there was a need
- People did not always stay within the same band if their circumstances changed
- The mutual exchange programme.

It was **AGREED** that there was no appetite to amend the banding at the current time and that Band E should remain within the scheme.

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

27 **HOUSING SECTOR UPDATE (2-29-15)**

The Group had before it, and **NOTED**, a briefing paper * from the Group Manager for Housing Services providing information on the latest developments relating to social housing.

The officer outlined the contents of the report with particular reference to:

- matters relating to fire safety and cladding which continued to dominate the housing press
- Possible new regulations with regard to health and safety in council owned properties.

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

28 **IDENTIFICATION OF ITEMS FOR THE NEXT MEETING (2-32-00)**

Other than the reports already listed in the work programme no additional items were listed for the following meeting.

(The meeting ended at 4.55 pm)

CHAIRMAN