

MID DEVON DISTRICT COUNCIL

MINUTES of a **MEETING** of the **HOMES POLICY DEVELOPMENT GROUP** held on 18 January 2022 at 2.15 pm

Present

Councillors

R J Dolley (Chairman)
J Bartlett, J Cairney, S J Clist, D R Coren, C J Eginton,
S Pugh and R F Radford

Apology

Councillor

Mrs E M Andrews

Also Present

Councillors

G Barnell, Mrs C P Daw, R M Deed, R Evans, B A Moore
and B G J Warren

Present

Officers

Andrew Jarrett (Deputy Chief Executive (S151)), Jill May (Director of Business Improvement and Operations), Simon Newcombe (Corporate Manager for Public Health, Regulation and Housing), Paul Deal (Corporate Manager for Finance), Claire Fry (Housing Services Operations Manager), J P McLachlan (Principal Accountant), Mike Lowman (Building Services Operations Manager), Sarah Lees (Member Services Officer) and Jessica Watts (Member Services Apprentice)

40 APOLOGIES AND SUBSTITUTE MEMBERS

Apologies were received from Cllr Mrs E Andrews.

41 PUBLIC QUESTION TIME

There were no members of the public present and none had registered to ask a question in advance.

42 DECLARATION OF INTERESTS UNDER THE CODE OF CONDUCT

No interests were declared under this item.

43 MINUTES

The minutes of the meeting held on 9 November 2021 were approved as a correct record of the meeting and signed by the Chairman.

44 CHAIRMAN'S ANNOUNCEMENTS

The Chairman had no announcements to make.

45 DRAFT 2022/23 HOUSING REVENUE ACCOUNT (HRA) (00:05:00)

The Group had before it, a report * from the Deputy Chief Executive (S151) and Corporate Manager for Public Health, Regulation and Housing presenting proposals for the second draft of the Housing Revenue Account budget for 2022/23.

The Cabinet Member for Housing introduced the item highlighting the fact that the HRA currently showed a balanced position and the garage and units rents were proposed to remain at the current levels. Budgets to support the building and maintenance teams needed to remain at realistic levels in order to support the maintenance of the HRA housing stock. He highlighted the fact that there were additional responsibilities in terms of the decarbonisation programme which had a significant financial impact on the HRA. He thanked the staff involved for the detailed and complex work entailed in formulating a draft HRA budget that was both realistic whilst maintaining the interests of the tenants at the core.

Consideration was given to:

- The suggested level of the proposed rent increase. It was explained that this was proposed at an under inflation level despite the fact that inflation had continued to increase. Other local authorities had also proposed a 4.1% rise.
- The situation regarding rent arrears was dealt with very sensitively and proactively by Housing Department officers and significant liaison and support was offered.
- An error was highlighted at section 2.9 in the report, the figure should have been cited as £570k rather than £750k, this had been a transposition error.
- Fuel and energy costs were on an increasing trajectory.
- A new regime as part of the Social Housing white paper would require tenant satisfaction to be measured to a greater extent in future.
- Utilising redundant garage sites for possible module housing schemes.
- The cost of maintaining and repairing garages that were under used.
- It was confirmed that the management team within the Housing Department were always looking for efficiencies, this was part of their standard ongoing every day procedure.
- Borrowing was always a balancing act. The Council had a policy of seeking what other funds were available first such as internal borrowing.
- Debt levels were better than the sector average.
- Regarding decarbonisation and funding schemes available centrally to help – the team were always alive to these and entered into the very competitive process to apply for these everywhere they could.
- The need for more detail in relation to the programme for council house building over the next 5 years. It was confirmed this would be coming to the Cabinet meeting on 1st February 2022. A feasibility programme had been submitted to Homes England before Christmas and their response was awaited.

RECOMMENDED to the Cabinet that the rent increase proposed and other budget proposals for 2022/23 be approved.

(Proposed by Cllr D R Coren and seconded by Cllr C J Eginton)

Reason for the decision:

A balanced and realistic budget must be set for 2022/23 in order to maintain a sustainable Housing Revenue Account with adequate investment for necessary maintenance.

Notes: (i) * Report previously circulated; copy attached to the signed minutes.

(ii) Cllr S J Clist voted against the recommendation and requested that this be recorded.

(iii) Cllr J Cairney abstained from voting and requested that this be recorded.

46 BUDGET UPDATE 2022/2023 (00:50:00)

The Group had before it a report * from the Deputy Chief Executive (S151) reviewing the revised draft budget changes identified and discussing further changes required in order for the Council to move towards a balanced budget for 2022/23.

The Cabinet Member for Finance stated that there had been a £1.4m budget gap which had now reduced to £947k. He outlined the process the revised budget would take allowing all Members of Council the opportunity to participate in its development before finally needing Council approval at the end of February.

The Corporate Manager for Financial Services stated that the report attached to the agenda had been written before Christmas and a updated position needed to be relayed.

In order to address the current budget gap of £947k he outlined the following options to balance:

PDG Saving Target	-500
Release Earmarked Reserves	-200
Further savings / Income required	-247

Having looked at the income and expenditure of each PDG area the savings needing to be identified by this Group were circa £15,200 and/or above.

A number of suggested areas for discussion had been identified on the update sheet to aid this process and to provide officers with a steer as to the work needed to identify savings and possible increases in income going forwards.

Discussion took place regarding:

- How the Council could realistically reduce B&B costs whilst having a statutory obligation regarding Homelessness.
- The draft budget deficit position and the need for more detail.
- The complexities involved in trying to create a draft budget with so much uncertainty. Carefully educated forecasting had been undertaken during the preparation of the draft budget.
- Investment in IT systems and the move to a greener fleet as soon and as realistically possible.

- The difficulties presented to Members in trying to recommend savings when indicative figures hadn't been provided. However, it was explained that precise figures were not necessary just an indication or steer from Members as to the areas that could be looked at to aid the financial position of the Council. Having a steer would enable officers to go away and undertake some modelling work in line with Members wishes.
- A lack of appetite for out sourcing services at the current time.

RECOMMENDED to the Cabinet that the Council undertake a formal marketing campaign on the Piper Alarm System within the Private Sector, in particular in areas where there were large numbers of retired electors but also to notify all tenants of the facility as well.

(Proposed by Cllr C J Eginton and seconded by Cllr R J Dolley)

Reason for the decision:

In order to comply with the requirement to set a balanced budget, management must ensure that the proposed savings are robust and achievable. We must also ensure that the assumptions we have used are realistic and prudent. Failure to set a robust deliverable budget puts the Council at risk of not being able to meet its commitments and casts doubt on its "going concern" and VFM status.

- Notes:
- (i) * Report previously circulated; copy attached to the signed minutes.
 - (ii) Cllr S J Clist abstained from voting and requested that this be recorded.

47 THE TENANT INVOLVEMENT AND EMPOWERMENT STANDARD POLICY (01:45:00)

The Group had before it a report * from the Operations Manager for Housing Services. It was explained that the landlord service, Mid Devon Housing, was currently reviewing previously adopted policies with the aim of rationalising them and ensuring that they support work to ensure regulatory compliance. To this end, policies were being more closely aligned with each of the individual Standards within the regulatory framework.

The following was highlighted within the report:

- The after effects of the Grenfell Tower disaster and the lesson's learned regarding the need for tenants views to be heard. National housing policy would be changing as a result of this and a Government white paper calling for more tenant involvement had been issued at the end of 2020 with new legislation likely to be announced in the imminent future.
- The Housing Ombudsman has responsibility for dealing with complaints. As part of the new regime, there would be tenant satisfaction measures (TSMs) in place.

Discussion took place with regard to:

- Tenant Involvement in 'on-line' meetings – the Council now had a Customer Engagement Co-ordinator who would be undertaking work in this area. Although formal meetings were not being run at the moment, lots of interest

had been expressed and consideration of how best to run these meetings was being undertaken, such as offering evening meetings for those tenants who worked during the day.

- It was confirmed that only missed appointments, previously confirmed over the phone, would be charged for.
- Members had previously approved the Neighbourhood Management Policy which stated a zero tolerance for any obstructions brought in by tenants to communal hallways. These could pose a serious risk to escape routes should tenants need to evacuate in an emergency.
- The need to remember that rented properties were people's homes and a consequent need for respect.

RECOMMENDED to the Cabinet that the draft Tenant Involvement and Empowerment Standard policy be approved.

(Proposed by Cllr S J Clist and seconded by Cllr C J Eginton)

Reason for the decision:

MDH is a social landlord and is registered with the Regulator for Social Housing (RSH), meaning that it is a Registered Provider (RP). The RSH sets consumer standards and the Tenant Involvement and Empowerment Standard is one of these. The role of the regulator is to intervene where failure to meet the standards has caused, or could have caused, serious harm to tenants. MDH is also obliged to manage complaints in line with the Complaints Handling Code issued by the Housing Ombudsman Service (HOS) and completed a self-assessment against this, which is available to view on the Council's webpages, in line with the requirements of the HOS.

Agreed housing policy provides a framework for decision-making which ensures that customer-facing teams deliver consistency in the discharge of duties to support good housing management. This ensures that both properties and tenancies are managed effectively and reduces reputational risk.

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

48 IDENTIFICATION OF ITEMS FOR THE NEXT MEETING (02:12:00)

In addition to the items already identified within the work programme for the next meeting, the following was also requested to be provided:

- An update on the void situation within the private sector and whether anything could be done.

(The meeting ended at 4.26 pm)

CHAIRMAN