

MID DEVON DISTRICT COUNCIL

MINUTES of a **MEETING** of the **HOMES POLICY DEVELOPMENT GROUP** held on 8 August 2023 at 2.15 pm

Present

Councillors

C Adcock (Chairman)
J Cairney, C Harrower, F W Letch, N Letch,
H Tuffin, S Chenore and S Robinson

Also Present

Councillors

D Broom, E Buczkowski, J Buczkowski, M Farrell,
R Gilmour and S Keable

Also Present

Virtually

S Clist, A Glover, J Lock and D Wulff

Also Present

Officers

Simon Newcombe (Corporate Manager for Public Health, Regulation and Housing), Paul Deal (Corporate Manager for Finance, Property and Climate Change), Claire Fry (Housing Services Operations Manager), Mike Lowman (Building Services Operations Manager), Dr Stephen Carr (Corporate Performance & Improvement Manager), Carole Oliphant (Member Services Officer), Angie Howell (Member Services Officer) and Sarah Lees (Member Services Officer)

15 **ELECTION OF VICE CHAIRMAN**

RESOLVED that Cllr S Chenore be elected as the Vice Chairman of the Homes Policy Development Group for the municipal year 2023/2024.

16 **START TIME OF MEETINGS**

It was **AGREED** that the start time of meetings for the remainder of the municipal year continue to be 2.15pm on Tuesday afternoons.

17 **APOLOGIES AND SUBSTITUTE MEMBERS**

There were no apologies for absence.

18 **PUBLIC QUESTION TIME**

No members of the public had registered to ask a question.

19 **DECLARATION OF INTERESTS UNDER THE CODE OF CONDUCT**

No interests were declared under this item.

20 MINUTES

The minutes of the meeting held on 13 June 2023 were approved as a correct record of the meeting and signed by the Chairman subject to the following amendment:

- Minute no. 9 – Revenue and Capital Outturn Report – 5th bullet point under ‘Discussion took place regarding’ – the last word corrected from ‘highlight’ to ‘highlighted’.

21 CHAIRMAN'S ANNOUNCEMENTS

The Chairman had no announcements to make.

22 UPDATE TO MID DEVON HOUSING NEIGHBOURHOOD MANAGEMENT POLICY (00:11:00)

The Group had before it a report * from the Corporate Manager for Public Health, Regulation and Housing. Under the Neighbourhood and Community Standard, the Regulator of Social Housing (RSH) required all registered providers to publish a policy setting out, how in consultation with their tenants, they would maintain and improve the neighbourhood’s associated with their homes. This has been developed following an in-depth review of the policy in consultation with tenants and partner organisations.

The contents of the report were outlined with the following being highlighted:

- The requirements of the Regulator.
- The 22 new Tenant Satisfaction Measures (TSM’s), TM10 and TM11 being particularly relevant to Neighbourhood Management.
- Changes in the way the Government wanted some complaints recorded, for example, every day noise should not now be treated as Anti-Social Behaviour.
- The policy now provided clearer definitions of accountability in areas such as safety checks, risk assessments, pest control etc.
- Responsibilities in relation to seeking permissions for hanging structures and neighbourhood disputes, for example, had been tightened up.

Discussion took place regarding:

- The challenges involved in seeking tenant involvement particularly when tenants were ‘happy’ and did not have comments to make.
- A request that the tenant newsletter be circulated to the Policy Development Group Members.
- The problems associated with the communal areas of some housing estates where the properties were built decades ago when design standards were different and would not be chosen today.
- The time delay between an officer’s initial visit and an issue actually being resolved. It was acknowledged that teams were busy but the comments made would be fed back through operational leads.
- The number of Neighbourhood officers employed by the Council were within industry standards, however, this was kept under constant review.

- Neighbourhood teams worked in liaison with other services areas across the Council, such as Grounds Maintenance, as such, work needed to be co-ordinated.
- The key was 'communication' keeping everybody informed at each stage.
- Tenants needed to feel they were being listened to even if they received an acknowledgement but no immediate action.
- The benefits that the Apprenticeship scheme could bring, however, engaging with tenants was a demanding frontline role requiring a certain amount of 'resilience'.
- The benefit of employing officers who have or continue to be Council tenants. The same was true of serving Councillors.

It was suggested that an explanatory paper be brought to the next meeting setting out how Neighbourhood Management worked in reality.

RECOMMENDED to the Cabinet that the updated Neighbourhood Management Policy and Equality Impact Assessment contained in Annexes A and B respectively be approved.

(Proposed by Cllr F Letch and seconded by Cllr S Robinson)

Reason for the decision

Under the Neighbourhood and Community Standard, the Regulator of Social Housing (RSH) required all registered providers to publish a policy setting out, how in consultation with their tenants, they would maintain and improve the neighbourhood's associated with their homes.

Note: (i) * Report previously circulated.
(ii) Cllr A Glover declared a personal interest in that she was a Council tenant.

23 **BRIEFING ON VOIDS MANAGEMENT (00:50:00)**

The Corporate Manager for Public Health, Regulation and Housing and the Building Services Operations Manager provided the Group with a verbal update on Voids Management.

This included the following information:

- This was a complex area, often requiring difficult decisions to be made.
- An extensive review of the Voids Management Policy had been undertaken during 2023 and a revised policy had been approved by the Cabinet. A review of this policy would be undertaken by the Policy Development Group in the next 12 months.
- In reality 'a void' presented a critical, sometimes complex, asset management decision weighing-up cost efficiencies, opportunities, property safety or condition with loss of rent and maximising occupancy of our stock. It also required a balancing act of meeting the Council's legal obligations, strategic long-term goals and managing short-term pressures.
- 348 properties on the housing stock list were of the prefabricated variety, 10 towards the end of life.

- The historic approach and changes from two separate housing service areas to one amalgamated 'Mid Devon Housing' was explained. The service was working much more efficiently as a result.
- Trees and overgrown gardens were causing a lot of issues at the moment. Other challenges included all the sign off processes that needed to be completed before the keys to a previously void property could be handed over.

Consideration was given to the following:

- The challenges facing the service other than the cost and supply of materials which included an inability to fill staff vacancies in an industry where the Council paid less than the private sector.
- An additional challenge was the necessity to undertake compliance work in order to ensure the Council was not putting itself at legal risk. This often had to take priority over voids.
- How the number of days a property was vacant was calculated.
- New legislation in relation to fire doors and the impact of this on supply times.
- The difficulties involved in trying to undertake works or upgrades when the tenant was in place.
- Access was difficult in some cases, the Council needed good grounds to request access, for example, to check gas safety arrangements.
- The service sometimes had to deal with tenants who had a lot of complex issues.

24 MDH SERVICE DELIVERY UPDATE (01:42:00)

The Group had before it, and **NOTED**, a report * from the Corporate Manager for Public Health, Regulation and Housing setting out the performance and headline activity of the Mid Devon Housing (MDH) service for the first quarter (Q1) of 2023/24 using the updated reporting framework agreed at the previous Homes Policy Development Group meeting.

Discussion followed with regard to:

- This was a rolling report brought to the Group every quarter and now included the new Tenancy Satisfaction Measures. This was a new requirement and as such there was currently no data to compare with. Going forwards, it would be helpful to see how Mid Devon District Council compared with other similar rural authorities.
- Overall performance was quite strong. The service was not where it wanted to be in terms of voids targets but it needed to prioritise tenant safety over everything else, for example, a heating repair. Despite this, 98% of Council properties were currently occupied.
- Leasehold arrangements had been tightened to ensure gas safety checks were as robust as they could be.
- The Council had complied with the detailed Housing Ombudsman Complaints Handling Code and there was a new Tenant Satisfaction Measure (TSM) measuring tenant satisfaction would how complaints are handled. This TSM was a challenging one to assess and benchmark since whilst a tenant might be content that their complaint had been dealt with well, they may still unhappy about having to make a complaint in the first instance.

- Again, staff vacancies were an issue since potential applicants could be paid more in the private sector.
- The Regulators actively encouraged tenants to make complaints in the light of Grenfell.
- Of course it was the case that tenants were listened to but the Council also had to ask questions in relation to upgrades. There was a planned cycle of maintenance and unfortunately it simply was not possible to action low priority ad-hoc requests for upgrades. Any requests that compromised the safety of tenants would always be dealt with first, however, requests were considered on a case by case basis against the planned maintenance programme.

Note: * Report previously circulated.

25 **WORK PROGRAMME FOR 2023 / 2024 (02:00:00)**

The Group had before it their current work programme * for 2023/24.

The following was **AGREED** as needing to be added to the work programme for 2023/2024:

- An update on the Tenant Assistance Policy to the January 2024 meeting providing information on the use of Disabled Facilities Grants which had shown an underspend in recent years. This to include any links with Devon County Council.
- The first round of budget proposals to come to the September meeting as well as an update in relation to financial monitoring.
- Investigations would be undertaken to see if the Tenancy Inspection Policy could be moved from the planned November meeting to the September meeting instead.

Note: * Work Programme previously circulated.

26 **FINANCE AND PERFORMANCE UPDATE (02:14:00)**

The Corporate Manager for Finance, Property and Climate Change and the Corporate Performance & Improvement Manager provided the Group with a presentation on the financial and performance situation as it affected the Homes Policy Development Group which highlighted what the Group's responsibilities were in relation to monitoring the areas falling under its remit. Officers were particularly keen to receive feedback from Members on the new 'dashboard' showing financial and performance data for the Homes PDG.

The following was summarised:

- The basics in relation to local government finance.
- Net service expenditure and income streams.
- Budget by committee and the timetable involved.
- The Medium Term Financial Plan and how this facilitated budget reviews and shifts in focus to address local priorities.
- Future budget shortfalls which currently included a 10% budget gap for next year. The two main drivers for this were high inflation and lower government funding.

- The Group were requested to approach budget monitoring with an open, independent mind, asking questions in relation to whether or not a service was delivering in the most cost effective way. It was also encouraged to study the metrics used on the dashboard so that it had a really good grasp of how the housing service was performing. Were the targets right for example? Following this, officers could further refine the dashboard.
- Quarter 1 budget variances were also highlighted.
- Debt collection rates were currently commensurate with the previous year, however, bad debt provision had been built into the budget to allow for the 'cost of living' crisis.
- There may need to come a time when some of the discretionary services were reduced.
- The Council did have reserves as a safety net, however, if used, they would need to be paid back.

27 IDENTIFICATION OF ITEMS FOR THE NEXT MEETING (02:50:00)

In addition to the items already listed in the work programme for the next meeting the Group requested that it receive the following:

- A briefing on Neighbourhood Management.
- Financial monitoring and the first round of budget proposals for 2024/2025.

(The meeting ended at 5.08 pm)

CHAIRMAN