

MINUTES of a **MEETING** of the **HOMES POLICY DEVELOPMENT GROUP** held on 18 November 2025 at 2.15 pm

Present

Councillors

A Glover (Chair)
C Adcock (Vice-Chair), J Cairney,
G Czapiewski, B Holdman, Henwood, Jones
and Sixsmith

Apologies

Councillors

S Chenore, C Harrower, N Letch and H Tuffin

Also Present

Councillor

J Lock

Also Present

Officers

Simon Newcombe (Head of Housing & Health), Paul Deal (Head of Finance, Property & Climate Resilience), Dr Stephen Carr (Corporate Performance & Improvement Manager), Tanya Wenham (Operations Manager for Public Health and Housing Options), Sophie Richards (Customer Manager, Mid Devon Housing), Sarah Thomas (Housing Options Manager), Sam Barnett (Housing Initiatives Officer) and Sarah Lees (Democratic Services Officer)

Councillors

Online

S Chenore, H Tuffin and D Wulff

Officers Online

Dr Stephen Carr (Corporate Performance and Improvement Manager), Dean Emery (Head of Revenues, Benefits & Leisure), Tina Lowe (Tenancy Manager) and Carole Oliphant (Housing Policy Officer)

Also in

Attendance

I Henwood (Co-Opted Tenant), M Jones (Co-Opted Tenant) and T Sixsmith (Co-Opted Tenant)

30 **APOLOGIES AND SUBSTITUTE MEMBERS**

Apologies were received from:

- Cllr S Chenore (online)
- C Harrower
- Cllr N Letch who was substituted by Cllr B Holdman
- Cllr H Tuffin (online)

31 **PUBLIC QUESTION TIME**

There were no public questions.

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

Cllr A Glover declared a personal interest in relation to item 10 on the agenda, 'Mid Devon Housing Rent Error Update' in that she was a Council tenant.

No other interests were declared under this item.

33 **MINUTES**

The minutes of the meeting held on 9 September 2025 were approved as a correct record of the meeting and **SIGNED** by the Chair.

34 **CHAIR'S ANNOUNCEMENTS**

The Chair welcomed Tina Lowe, the new Tenancy Manager, to the Mid Devon Housing team and asked her to introduce herself. She also welcomed the new Housing Management Apprentices to the team.

35 **PERFORMANCE DASHBOARD Q2 (00:10:00)**

The Group were presented with, and **NOTED**, two slides * showing performance information in the Mid Devon Housing (MDH) area under the Housing Revenue Account (HRA) and the General Fund (GF).

The dashboard aimed to give an 'at a glance' understanding of how services were performing in terms of performance measures, finance and risk. Any measures that were also part of the Corporate Plan were listed in yellow text.

The indicators were presented with current performance, the annual target and a RAG (red/amber/green) rating to indicate whether or not the Council was on track to meet its target. Overall performance was presented in a pie chart which combined the RAG ratings for both the performance and the finance measures.

A summary of the performance position was presented as follows:

- For the General Fund, the projected outturn was showing as amber due to a very small projected overspend on community alarm installations.

Housing Revenue Account:

- The 'MDH delivery of new social housing' was showing as amber. 46 homes had been added to the Housing Revenue Account during the financial year so far, therefore, performance was just behind the target. The mid year target was 50. However the delivery with housing projects was not linear and it would be more suitable to fully consider performance at the year end.
- 'New MDH net zero properties' was showing as red. 5 had been added to the housing stock in the year to date. However, the Housing Service was

expecting a high number of completions in quarter four with 51 additional properties being added.

- The housing stock occupancy rate was showing as amber and the rate had fallen below the target at the end of September 2025. This was mainly because the 28 flats at Saint George's Court were brought into the social housing stock on the 4th August 2025. These flats were currently going through the letting process. There were also 14 properties awaiting demolition elsewhere which affected the occupancy rate.
- The projected outturn for the HRA was showing as red and this was largely due to an increased cost of contractors and higher than inflation increase in materials. It was also due to premises insurance. Officers were confident that the overspend could be managed over the remainder of the year and be reduced.
- Projected tenant income was showing as amber. This was below budget due in part to the increased number of void properties. This was partially offset by the additional income from affordable properties.
- The projected capital outturn was showing as red. This was driven mainly by 5 large projects. Slippage was due to various factors, including delays in plan, in obtaining planning permission or no bids being received on tenders and delays in contract signing.

Discussion took place regarding:

- The 'type of build' listed in the 'MDH Delivery of new Social Housing' was confirmed as being more traditional build in the year to end of Q2. New 'net-zero' properties were more modular in design and were expected to be ready later in the year.
- Projected Capital Outturn figures whilst lagging behind at the moment were predicted to catch up by the time the year end figures were presented.
- The reasons why particular void properties took a while to be reoccupied were many and often complex. Sometimes properties were 'end of life' or needed complex survey's undertaking due to the fabrication of the building, for example, 'concrete cancer' may be present. Also on occasions a property may appear void where a tenant might be in care meaning the property was empty but could not be classified as 'void' as it was still under tenancy. A 'cost/benefit' analysis needed to be undertaken as sometimes the cost of repair was too great due to the extensively poor condition of a building. In addition the tender process was not always straight forward and could be drawn out if no bidders came forward.
- Whether there would be additional pressures on the team due to the introduction of Awab's Law in terms of resources and available budget? It was explained that it was still very early days so the true impact was not yet known but the Council would need to comply and budgetary provision had been made at the start of the year. It was likely that there would need to be additional spend on contractors but this would be closely monitored. An initial spike of calls had been received but it was too early to say how this would level out in the near future. There had been communications with tenants providing advice on how to avoid opportunists and scammers seeking to target vulnerable tenants who may be in properties with damp and mould.

Note: * Slides previously circulated.

The Group had before it, and **NOTED**, a report * from the Deputy Chief Executive (S151) presenting an update on the 2026/27 Budget and the emerging Capital Programme covering the period 2026/27 to 2030/31.

The following was highlighted within the report:

- This was only a very brief budget update since clarification from central Government was still needed. The forecasted position based on a number of assumptions was presented to the last meeting, no greater detail had been received from central Government since then. The autumn statement was due on the 26th November 2025 and that would give, at a very high level, national indications of where funding would go but not at a local authority level. The Council would have to wait until the Local Government Finance Settlement in December for that. Budget proposals had been presented and supported by this Group in September 2025. All the green recommendations were approved subsequently by the Cabinet. In terms of the HRA, there had been some amber proposals which the Cabinet was currently awaiting clarification on before reaching a decision.
- In terms of the Capital Programme where there were new proposals or changes to the existing scheme, these were shown in Appendix 1.
- Also included within the report was more information regarding the financial implications of 'rent convergence'. The Government had consulted on either a £1 increase or a £2 increase in relation to formula rent. The £1 increase would generate additional income, but it would not move all properties on to the new correct formula rent. The Council would prefer the £2 cap to be the Government's outcome from their consultation because of the increase in the revenue that it would generate and also the movement of all tenants onto the correct formula rent by the end of a 10 year process. The outcome of the Government's consultation was awaited and once known, the Council would look to implement or at least consult on the options that the Government had selected.

Discussion took place regarding:

- The meaning of the negative and positive figures in relation to the Housing Development Programme was explained.
- The effect of the delay with the Government announcing it's Budget mainly affected the General Fund and not the HRA as the HRA did not receive grant funding only tenant income.
- Formula rent was set by Government. The only time the Council could currently bring rent in line with this was when there was a change of tenancy. It would take many years, perhaps decades to bring all rents in line with formula rent if rent convergence did not take place. Ultimately it would present a much fairer and consistent approach to rent setting than existed at the moment. It was not clear at the current time which option the Government was going to opt for.

Note: * Report previously circulated.

37 **DOWNSIZING RECOMMENDATIONS UPDATE (00:55:00)**

The Group received an update from the Mid Devon Housing Customer Manager on the uptake of the Downsizing recommendations.

This included the following summary information:

- The downsizing incentive was launched on the 14th July 2025 and as of Friday 14th November, 23 households had formally registered to downsize. Of those 23, 12 were currently in three bedroom properties, 10 were in two bedroom properties and there was one six bedroom house.
- So far there had been a series of communications and engagement on downsizing with tenants. This had included newsletters and information on Facebook, the Council's website, Let's Talk Mid Devon and on the engagement hub. Those most likely to benefit from the scheme were also targeted such as tenants that were in three bedroom or more properties. The Downsizing Scheme would continue to be publicised on various platforms. There needed to be a better understanding of what had worked and what hadn't which could then be fed back into the project. Although the scheme had freed up some family sized homes, the uptake had been limited. It was currently having a small impact at the moment with the current policy being broadly in-line with the Devon Home Choice policy, which meant no under occupation was allowed and downsizing had to be based on actual bedroom need. Those in a three or more bed property often had a preference to downsize to a two bed but they were only eligible for a one bed. The scheme was going to be formally reviewed in 12 months time as set out in the beginning of the scheme. The scheme could deliver meaningful benefits for tenants whilst also releasing much needed housing stock.

Discussion took place regarding:

- Currently tenants could only bid on a property based on bedroom need. There were exceptions for people with a medical need, for example, if there was a situation where a carer needed to stay overnight.
- The premise behind the scheme was to free up much needed housing stock in the fairest and most equitable way but the scheme was never going to be perfect for everybody hence the need for a 12 month review. If bedroom need could be demonstrated then this would be considered.
- There wasn't much more the service could do in terms of communication and advertising of the scheme. Some families had been in their properties for many many years and were extremely reluctant to move.
- Different providers had different policies, there was limited consistency across the sector in terms of downsizing schemes.
- Mutual exchanges with alternative providers and within MDH stock was an option open to tenants.

38 **PREPARING FOR THE RENTERS' RIGHTS ACT 2025 (01:15:00)**

The Group had before it, and **NOTED**, a report * from the Head of Housing and Health providing information in relation to the Renters Rights Bill (formerly Renters Reform Bill) which had now been through all the parliamentary stages required and received Royal Assent on 27th October 2025.

The following was highlighted within the report:

- This was a significant piece of legislation brought in at the end of October 2025 and introduced a 'once in a generation' change in the rights of tenants. It set out what landlords could do and what landlords could not do in the private sector.
- Over time the legislation would bring similar provisions to private landlords which existed for social landlords.
- The key changes were set out in Section 2 of the report.
- The Council's Public Health Service would have to manage this regulatory change, providing support and guidance to tenants. They would have to enforce a number of provisions for landlords who weren't compliant. The volume of regulatory work was not yet known but was anticipated to be significant. Whilst the Council knew the conditions of all of its own stock, little if anything was known about the condition of private sector stock. The Government would be providing some funding but hadn't told Council's how much yet.
- The legislation would be brought in in three phases. The first phase would take effect from May 2026. From this date there would be an abolition of 'no fault eviction'. Fixed term tenancies would end and be replaced by rolling periodic tenancies giving tenants more protection. The grounds for landlords to gain possession of a property were also changing. There would be clearer rules around anti-social behaviour and persistent arrears. That would be partly to protect the landlord. There would be situations where it was perfectly legitimate for the landlord to gain possession, but they were made much clearer in the new Act. Landlords would only be able to increase rent once a year and two months notice would need to be given beforehand. There would be a ban on rental bidding. Landlords would also have to reasonably consider pet requests. There would be strengthened enforcement powers and expanded civil penalties.
- Phase 2 would come into force from late 2026 onwards and that would require a national database of landlords (where it would be compulsory for landlords to register) and the introduction of a new private rented sector landlord Ombudsman.
- Phase 3 was very much about long term measures and providing better quality housing in line with the 'Decent Home Standards' and energy efficiency considerations.
- The Private Sector Housing team knew roughly how many private sector properties did not meet the 'Decent Home Standard' (through a modelling process) but they did not know where they were located.

Consideration was given to:

- It was estimated that there were over 6.5k private sector landlords in Mid Devon but the Private Sector Housing team only communicated with approximately 200 of them. The team consisted of 3 full time members of staff and one part time. The team may need to expand in order to comply with the requirements of the new legislation and our legal duties as a Council. There would be a need to research letting agents, ensure compliance within the market place and ensuring enforcement took place where it could. All of this would place a significant extra burden on the resources of the team, therefore

any promised Government new-burdens funding would be welcome in supporting this additional work.

- There was a fear that many private sector landlords would ‘disappear’ and their properties would be lost from the market place due to the requirements of the new legislation. The Council would need to work with them offering guidance and education where it could. The ultimate aim was to bridge the gap between the private sector and the social housing sector in terms of housing standards and bring in greater protections for private sector tenants.
- Enforcing civil penalties was a familiar tool to the Housing Service but it did not want there to be an over reliance on this.
- Fears that the onus would fall on tenants to report landlord non-compliance. It was confirmed that the Private Housing Sector team did act on any intelligence that it received and tried to identify patterns in non-compliance.

Note: * Report previously circulated.

39 MID DEVON HOUSING RENT ERROR UPDATE (02:04:00)

The Group had before it, and **NOTED**, a report * from the Deputy Chief Executive (S151) and the Head of Housing and Health providing a further update on the corrective measures completed and next steps to rectify an identified historic rent setting error.

The following information was highlighted:

- 100% of non-benefit current tenancy cases had been processed and refunds offered where due. Not included within those were the cases that involved tenants in receipt of Universal Credit. The Council could not process these without further support and guidance from the DWP (Department for Work and Pensions). DWP had informed the Council that they were waiting for a ministerial letter to be signed off and until that was received these particular cases could not be processed.
- The team were now starting to look at former tenancies.
- The report, when written, stated that £169k had been refunded, since then it was confirmed that £238k had now refunded with further cases processed and refunds claimed. There was also a higher number of unclaimed refunds as a result of more cases been updated and the numbers would continue to move. Where there were unclaimed amounts the tenants had been contacted and everything was being done to help tenants receive what was due to them, including reducing outstanding balances on their rent accounts where appropriate. The team had also been engaging vulnerable tenants, for example where English was not the first language, to assist where they could.
- The Regulator of Social Housing was content with the progress that was being made following a further monitoring meeting on 13 November.
- Another update would come to the Policy Development Group once the implications of the ministerial letter were better understood and to provide a further update on progress with former tenancy cases.

Discussion took place regarding:

- It was confirmed that if a tenant passed away then contact would be made with the next of kin to ensure the refund was returned to the family.

- As the Housing Revenue Account was ring fenced any monies held here would be secure regardless of Local Government Reorganisation and would pass to the new authority for correct transfer where needed.

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

40 **MID DEVON HOUSING SERVICE DELIVERY REPORT FOR Q2 2025/2026 (02:26:00)**

The Group had before it, and **NOTED**, a report * from the Head of Housing and Health presenting information in support of an ongoing commitment to provide a quarterly update to Members on activity undertaken by Mid Devon Housing (MDH), including some relating to enforcement.

The following summary information was provided:

- Performance data indicated that all areas were performing well.
- The one area presenting a challenge was void properties. There was currently a record number of voids this year. The number was on track to be over 200 for the 2025/26 year, a 40% increase on the annual number completed to 2023/24. The reasons for this were varied and complex. It had been a tough autumn with more 'deceased' tenants than usual. Also, the Housing Development Programme and the moving of tenants to these newer properties was having an effect on void numbers. Major construction projects at Hinkley and Bridgewater, where higher wages were being paid, was also having an effect in terms of attracting operatives meaning increased vacancies and delivery via contractors. Added to this, the health and safety of existing tenants requiring repairs on the properties would always take priority over repairing an empty property.

Discussion took place regarding:

- Why some heating repairs took so long? This was another area presenting a challenge. It was explained that all repairs were triaged. Heating systems were complex and there were many different types depending on the age of each property and what was installed initially. Some systems were at 'end of life' and replacement parts were difficult to obtain. In these cases full system replacements may need to be installed. There had also been challenges with the contractor but the contract with them would be ending in March and a new contractor sought.
- The number of stage one complaints had reduced and there was a very robust 'lessons learned' process in place.

Note: * Report previously circulated.

41 IDENTIFICATION OF ITEMS FOR THE NEXT MEETING (02:41:00)

The items already listed in the work programme for the next scheduled meeting were **NOTED**.

The Group were informed that:

- The Domestic Abuse Policy would not now be coming as a separate policy item as the provisions within the existing Anti-Social Behaviour Policy already included the necessary requirements for this.
- The Housing Strategy would need to move to the June 2026 meeting following the release of guidance from central Government next year.

(The meeting ended at 4.57 pm)

CHAIR