MID DEVON DISTRICT COUNCIL

MINUTES of a **MEETING** of the **DECENT AND AFFORDABLE HOMES POLICY DEVELOPMENT GROUP** held on 11 August 2015 at 2.15 pm

Present Councillors	P J Heal (Chairman) Mrs E M Andrews, Mrs H Bainbridge, W J Daw, Mrs G Doe, R Evans, J D Squire and L Taylor
Apologies Councillor	R Dolley
Also Present Officers	Nick Sanderson (Head of Housing and Property Services), Amy Tregellas (Head of Communities and Governance and Monitoring Officer), Clare Fry (Housing Services Manager), Andrew Cawdron (Finance Manager), Angela Barrett (Accountant), Helen Carty (Housing Policy Officer) and Sarah Lees (Member Services Officer)
Also in Attendance	Mrs Trudy Saunders and Mrs Patricia Cowie from 'Tenants Together'

21 APOLOGIES AND SUBSTITUTE MEMBERS

Apologies were received from Cllr R J Dolley.

22 PUBLIC QUESTION TIME

There were no members of the public present.

23 MINUTES

The Minutes of the meeting held on 16 June 2015 were confirmed as a true and accurate record and **SIGNED** by the Chairman.

24 CHAIRMAN'S ANNOUNCEMENTS

The Chairman had no announcements to make.

25 VOIDS SERVICE REVIEW REPORT AND PRESENTATION (00:01:30)

The Group received and **NOTED** a report * and presentation from two representatives of the 'Tenants Together' Group, Mrs Trudy Saunders and Mrs Patricia Cowie. The Voids Service had been selected for scrutiny by 'Tenants Together' as they were striving to improve performance in this area.

Mrs Saunders began by summarising the steps they had taken to undertake the review. This had included an analysis of tenant satisfaction forms, speaking to members of the voids team and comparing policy with other local authorities. They had also visited void properties and had studied the void process from beginning to end. They had concluded that:

- In certain areas Mid Devon District Council was spending more money than other similar authorities particularly with regard to the supply of paint packs. They commented that tenants were 'paid' to complete their own painting jobs, however, they may not have the necessary skills to complete this to the required standard. The Head of Housing and Property Services clarified the position by stating that tenants were not 'paid' as such but received a 'reward' if the job was completed to the required standard. This was part of trying to encourage tenants to take pride in their homes. Some sheltered accommodation was decorated by the Council but for other Council properties a handyman service was available at a cost to the tenant.
- 'Tenants Together' had considered that the 17 day void target was already a tight turnaround and should not be shortened any further.
- Tenancy Home Checks were vital when checking potential damage before a tenant vacated a property.
- 'Procurement' needed to be looked at as part of the ongoing review

The Cabinet Member for Housing, whilst complimenting the representatives for their tireless work in producing such a comprehensive report reminded the Group that this review had been undertaken by tenants themselves and the report represented their views, not necessarily the views of the Housing Service. Resources were a problem but all homes made the Decent Homes Standard. The Head of Housing and Property Services stated that an updated Void Policy would be coming to the Group at their next meeting and that comments and views made with regard to the tenants review would be taken on board.

The Chairman thanked the representatives on behalf of the Group for the work they had undertaken in conducting this review.

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

26 TENANCY POLICY (00:35:00)

The Group had before it a report * from the Housing Services Manager reviewing the Housing Services Tenancy Policy. As a Registered Provider of social housing, the Council was required to publish clear and accessible policies which outline its approach to tenancy management, including interventions to sustain tenancies and prevent unnecessary evictions and tackling tenancy fraud.

Discussion took place with regard to:

- Flexible Tenancies - officers were expected to refer to the Tenancy Policy when making offers of accommodation and as such the policy was a working document. Flexible Tenancies were explained as being issued either on a 2 year or 5 year fixed term basis. They were 'flexible' in that at the end of the term officers looked at the circumstances of the tenancy and decided whether or not the tenancy needed to be reviewed. Often people's circumstances

changed, this could be in relation to income or family members moving out of the property or indeed whether an adapted property was still required. 'Tenancies for life' are still issued in cases where the tenants are deemed to be vulnerable in any way; however, the Housing Service had to make best use of its housing stock.

RECOMMENDED to the Cabinet that the revised Housing Services Tenancy Policy be approved.

(Proposed by Cllr Mrs H Bainbridge and seconded by Cllr J D Squire)

Note: (i) * Report previously circulated; copy attached to the signed Minutes.

(ii) Cllr Mrs E M Andrews requested that her abstention from voting be recorded.

27 **INCOME MANAGEMENT POLICY (00:53:30)**

The Group had before it a report * from the Housing Services Manager reviewing the Housing Services Income Management Policy. The review of this policy reflected changes in good practice and allowed for any legislative changes to be updated accordingly.

Discussion took place regarding:

- One of the Councils main income streams being housing rents and the necessity to maximise income wherever possible.
- Neighbourhood Teams were responsible for this function and made regular contact with tenants who may have fallen behind with their rental payments. The system used within the Housing Service prompted action whenever arrears were due. A traffic light letter system was used which was helpful for vulnerable tenants or those whose first language was not English.
- The Policy treated everybody fairly.
- Every effort was made by officers to engage with tenants in order to avoid eviction including working with other agencies such as 'Wiser£Money' who could offer specialist advice to those struggling financially.

RECOMMENDED to the Cabinet that the revised Housing Services Income Management Policy be approved.

(Proposed by Cllr W J Daw and seconded by Cllr Mrs E M Andrews)

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

28 **FINANCIAL UPDATE FOR THE THREE MONTHS TO 30 JUNE 2015 (01:04:04)**

The Group had before it and **NOTED** a report from the Head of Finance presenting a financial update in respect of the income and expenditure so far in the year.

The Principal Accountant outlined the contents of the report stating that for the first three months of the year the General Fund and Private Sector Housing Grants were

both on budget. Currently there was only a small variation of £4k showing against the Housing Revenue Account.

Note: * Report previously circulated, copy attached to the signed Minutes.

29 PERFORMANCE AND RISK (01:08:55)

The Group had before it, and **NOTED**, a report * from the Head of Communities and Governance providing it with an update on performance against the Corporate Plan and local service targets for 2015/16 as well as providing an update on the key business risks.

There were several performance indicators that were below target which included the following:

- 'Repairs Completed at First Visit' - this indicator was currently under review as the target set previously was unrealistically strict.
- Figures in relation to the proportion of rent owed did not accurately reflect the true position and needed re-profiling.
- It was envisaged that 100% of Council properties would have reached the Decent Home Standard by the end of the year.

A brief discussion took place regarding why some tenants would not let officers into their homes to test for gas safety. This sometimes related to the fact that people were fearful of letting strangers in.

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

30 DEVON HOME CHOICE WORKING GROUP - RE-ESTABLISHMENT (01:15:25)

There had been a need for the Group to appoint new Members to the Devon Home Choice Working Group following the retirement of previous Members. It had been agreed in March 2015 that the work of the group be held in abeyance until such time that it was possible to seek feedback from authorities who had decided to remove Band E from their housing allocation schemes.

The Head of Housing and Property Services provided new Members to the Group with the background behind the original working group. He suggested that at the first meeting of the 'new' group Members ought to receive a presentation on how Devon Home Choice worked. In addition they should receive a copy of the report which had been previously presented to the Cabinet summarising the work and initial thoughts of the original group. The first meeting should also be used as a scoping exercise with a clear time table put in place.

RESOLVED that Councillors Mrs H Bainbridge, Mrs G Doe, R Evans, P J Heal and J D Squire be appointed to the re-established Devon Home Choice Working Group and that the Committee Clerk organise a date for the first meeting.

31 IDENTIFICATION OF ITEMS FOR THE NEXT MEETING (01:23:28)

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:

- Supply and Demand Policy

Following the budget announced by Central Government on 8 July 2015, the Head of Housing and Property Services informed the Group that it was his intention to circulate some information regarding the implications of this on the Housing Service over the next few years.

(The meeting ended at 3.40 pm) **CHAIRMAN**