

MID DEVON DISTRICT COUNCIL

MINUTES of a **MEETING** of the **HOMES POLICY DEVELOPMENT GROUP** held on 13 September 2016 at 2.15 pm

Present

Councillors Mrs E M Andrews, Mrs H Bainbridge, D R Coren, W J Daw, Mrs G Doe, R J Dolley, P J Heal, J D Squire and L D Taylor

Also Present

Councillors Mrs J B Binks, Mrs J Roach, R L Stanley and N A Way

Present

Officers Nick Sanderson (Head of Housing and Property Services), Claire Fry (Housing Services Manager), Roderick Hewson (Principal Accountant), Mark Baglow (Building Services Manager), Michael Parker (Housing Options Manager), Angela Barrett (Accountant), Nicky Chandler (Auditor) and Sarah Lees (Member Services Officer)

28 **APOLOGIES AND SUBSTITUTE MEMBERS**

There were no apologies for absence.

29 **PUBLIC QUESTION TIME**

Mr Gerald Conyngham spoke in relation to item 5 on the agenda (Motion 527). He explained that he was attending the meeting as a representative of 'Welcoming Refugees in Crediton' organisation. He asked whether the Group were aware that there were offers of support within the Crediton community if Syrian refugees needed to be re-housed within the district. Twenty seven offers of help and support had been received with 17 of those offering a welcome in their homes and 6 offers of accommodation. He was aware of a local landlord who would have vacant properties ready for occupation by Christmas. He stated that his organisation also had strong links with 'Refugee Support Devon' and they were currently working very closely together. He asked whether Councillors could provide assurance that the Council could cooperate with his organisation to ensure that families who come here would receive the best possible welcome and support?

The Chairman indicated that today's meeting was about whether or not to support or reject the Motion in principle only. A recommendation from the Group following today's meeting would go back to full Council on 26 October 2016 with a further recommendation that it returned to the Group to discuss the detail in the near future.

30 **MINUTES**

The minutes of the meeting held on 19 July 2016 were confirmed as a true and accurate record and **SIGNED** by the Chairman.

31 CHAIRMAN'S ANNOUNCEMENTS

The Chairman had the following announcements to make:

- a) He reminded the Group that its name had now changed from the 'Decent and Affordable Homes Policy Development Group' to the 'Homes Policy Development Group'.
- b) He also reminded the Group that there would be a visit to Old Road to see the housing repairs section before the next meeting on 15 November 2016.

32 MOTION 527 (COUNCILLORS MRS J BINKS, MRS J ROACH, MRS N WOOLLATT AND R WRIGHT) (00:06:49)

At Council on 31 August 2016 the following Motion was referred to the Homes Policy Development Group for its consideration.

Motion 527 (Councillors Mrs J Binks, Mrs J Roach, Mrs N Woollatt and R Wright)

"That this Council supports the Syrian Vulnerable Persons Scheme as detailed below and commits to working with the private sector to achieve placements."

The proposers of the Motion had been invited to the meeting to speak to their Motion and made the following comments:

- Mr Conyngham had precisely expressed the depth of good feeling and desire to work sensibly with private landlords.
- The Queen Elizabeth Academy Trust were keen to involve young students and for them to gain work experience in this area.
- The local community had a record of working with refugees over the past 100 years and there had been a consistent outpouring of hospitality and welcoming through that time.
- This was a matter of humanity.
- The 'Welcoming Refugees in Crediton' group were a voluntary organisation that had managed to galvanise opinion in the area.
- This was an all party Motion and party politics would not feature in any voting decision.
- Other local authorities in the area seemed to be further along in the process of housing refugees.

A briefing paper * had been included with the agenda to provide background information to the issue and the following points from the briefing paper were reiterated:

- The 'Yorkshire Migration' document referred to within the paper provided an excellent template for the processes that would be expected.
- The key part of the paper had been the considerations towards the end which had presented the facts in relation to the practicalities involved.
- Other neighbouring local authorities had only just started to house refugees or were in the process of the preparatory work.

Discussion took place regarding:

- Ideally, housing should take place within the three towns or communities where there was significant infrastructure and support (such as being on a reliable bus route) otherwise rural isolation might become a factor.
- The number of refugee families being offered accommodation would depend on the number of private landlords coming forward. The Group were reminded that there were restrictions on the amount of rent that could be charged therefore some landlords may not be interested.
- Private landlords should be directed to the Housing Options Team who could provide relevant information.
- Groups from within the voluntary sector would also be interested in providing accommodation not just private landlords.

It was **RECOMMENDED** to Council that:

- a. This Council supports the Syrian Vulnerable Persons Scheme and commits to working with the private sector to achieve placements.
- b. Following Council approval, the details regarding the practicalities involved be brought back to the Homes Policy Development Group for further detailed consideration.

(Proposed by Cllr Mrs H Bainbridge and seconded by Cllr G Doe)

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

33 MEETING MANAGEMENT

The Chairman stated that he would like the order of the agenda to change slightly so that item 9 be taken after item 11.

34 FINANCIAL UPDATE FOR THE THREE MONTHS TO 30 JUNE 2016 (00:31:17)

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

The Group were referred to the General Fund (GF) and Housing Revenue Account (HRA) balances where it was stated that the forecasted GF deficit for the current year was £202k. The HRA would start and end the financial year on a surplus of £2m.

Further details were provided relating to the following:

- Property Services was a new area for this Group to cover in terms of financial monitoring and there was currently a £2k overspend for the year so far.
- GF Housing had no variances.
- Dwelling rent was 0.4% ahead of where targeted and was forecasted to lead to a £48k variance by the end of the year which was good news.
- The HRA was showing £109k overspend which related to work carried over from the previous year due to under delivery. A corresponding underspend

had shown within the figures in the previous year. This was to do with the painting and repairs contract.

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

35 **PERFORMANCE AND RISK FOR THE FIRST QUARTER OF 2016-17 (00:37:58)**

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 the first quarter of 2016/17 as well as providing an update on the key business risks.

The variances within the report had officer notes beside them to provide explanation and the Group were content with this.

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

36 **SERVICE STANDARDS REVIEW (00:39:25)**

The Group had before it a report * from the Housing Services Manager reviewing the Service Standards for the housing service. It was explained that some minor changes had been made to the existing document to reflect what was shown in the regulatory framework. It was further explained that the policy previously stated that a review would be undertaken every two years but in the current climate the housing service would be looking to extend that period unless there was a very good reason to bring it back before Members.

RECOMMENDED to the Cabinet that the revised Service Standards be approved.

(Proposed by Cllr Mrs H Bainbridge and seconded by Cllr W J Daw)

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

37 **INTRODUCTORY TENANCY POLICY (00:42:00)**

The Group had before it a report * from the Housing Services Manager reviewing the Introductory Tenancy Policy. It was explained that the implications of the Housing and Planning Act would be quite profound and the group needed to bear that in mind. Changes in the legislation would provide the opportunity to increase the length of time somebody could have an Introductory Tenancy. The report set out the changes to the policy which also included changes to the authorisations needed. The number of officers available to sit on a panel should a tenant seek to appeal would be extended. Once officers had a firmer idea regarding the implications involved with the new legislation an updated policy would be brought before them outlining the options regarding future forms of tenure.

RECOMMENDED to the Cabinet that the revised Introductory Tenancy Policy be approved.

(Proposed by Cllr Mrs H Bainbridge and seconded by Cllr Mrs E Andrews)

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

38 **PAY TO STAY (00:48:15)**

The Group had before it a briefing paper * from the Housing Services Manager providing information in relation to the Governments' 'Pay to Stay' scheme.

It was explained that this seemed to be a popular policy with the public. The Government wanted to promote home ownership and if tenants had to pay more for rent they might consider alternative options. However, regulations were still awaited meaning that local authorities were unsure how to proceed at this stage.

Those with a joint household income of £31k or more would be expected to pay more rent. The DCLG was expecting 20% of those tenants not in receipt of Housing Benefit or Universal Credit to have to pay additional rent. In Mid Devon that equated to approximately 200 households, given that the Council had just over 3000 tenants and about 60% of those were in receipt of Housing Benefit. The Government was still expecting this policy to be implemented by April 2017 but there could be a delay. The delay in issuing the regulations seems to suggest that the implementation date may slip. The Council would be offered some financial support for administration but it was unclear at the current stage how this would operate and a shortfall in being able to cover costs was expected.

Further implications would mean that new policies would need to be written, for example, a Fraud Policy, as well as a re-write of some existing policies.

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

39 **AIDS AND ADAPTATIONS POLICY (01:05:25)**

The Group had before it a report * from the Building Services Manager reviewing the Aids and Adaptations Policy. It was explained that the revision to the policy contained only minor changes. Principally the revised document provided clarity to both officers and tenants. It included an update regarding tenants installing their own adaptations and who was responsible for repairs and maintenance. It also considered issues such as mobility scooters and who paid for what.

Discussion took place regarding the services of the repairs and maintenance team being offered to the private sector as a means of generating income for the Council. It was confirmed that the Council had undertaken approximately £100k of private sector work in the previous financial year but there were more commercial opportunities to be explored.

RECOMMENDED to the Cabinet that the revised Aids and Adaptations Policy be approved.

(Proposed by Cllr D R Coren and seconded by Cllr Mrs G Doe)

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

40 IDENTIFICATION OF ITEMS FOR THE NEXT MEETING

In addition to the items already listed in the work programme the following was also requested to be on the agenda for the next meeting:

- Draft Budget for 2017/18
- The Syrian Refugee Motion (should Council approve the recommendation on 26 October 2016)
- A report on the 'Decent Home' situation – was the Council up to standard?

(The meeting ended at 3.30 pm)

CHAIRMAN