

MID DEVON DISTRICT COUNCIL

MINUTES of a **MEETING** of the **HOMES POLICY DEVELOPMENT GROUP** held on 17 January 2017 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 and F W Letch

Apologies

Councillor J D Squire

Also Present

Councillors C J Eginton and R L Stanley

Also Present

Officers Nick Sanderson (Head of Housing and Property Services), Claire Fry (Housing Services Manager), Simon Newcombe (Public Health and Professional Services Manager), Michael Parker (Housing Options Manager), Roderick Hewson (Principal Accountant), Tanya Wenham (Lead Officer Public Sector Housing), Nicky Chandler (Auditor) and Sarah Lees (Member Services Officer)

54 APOLOGIES AND SUBSTITUTE MEMBERS

Apologies were received from Councillor J D Squire.

55 PUBLIC QUESTION TIME

Referring to item 6 on the agenda, Syrian Vulnerable Persons Scheme, Hazel Underwood stated that Devon County Council as a whole had agreed to take 74 families, why then had Mid Devon District Council discussed only taking 5?

Richard Bunning stated that he was a local farmer from Washfield and when he had first moved there he had been asked by an elderly gentleman whether he could walk around his farm. When Mr Bunning asked him why, the gentleman stated that he had been evacuated there during the war and had proceeded to tell him stories about how the women of Washfield had pulled together to operate a search light system to detect German war planes. He could remember very well the community spirit of the Washfield people and how they had pulled together to help those who were vulnerable and who needed assistance during times of trouble. Mr Bunning stated that there were many people in Washfield wanting to help refugee families and he asked what Mid Devon District Council was prepared to do to show similar humanitarian spirit?

The Chairman read out a statement from Honorary Alderman D J Nation who been unable to attend the meeting in person. This read as follows:

“Over the last year or two I have attended meetings of local people held to discuss the level of support our local community might provide to Syrians seeking refuge here from the terror they have experienced in their homeland. It has been clear that a significant number of us are willing and able to help these unfortunate folk settle locally so that they may enjoy a peaceful life and begin to contribute, as we are confident that they will, to our community.

I understand that the cost of the exercise will be reimbursed by central government. In the event there is a shortfall, I appreciate that this may have repercussions for other budgets. Whilst this would be regrettable, I think that we can all agree that the plight of these people is far worse than any other disadvantage being experienced by our native population, though I would hope that other vital social needs could continue to be addressed adequately.”

The Committee had also received an information sheet from a member of the public, shortly before the meeting, entitled ‘Washfield ready to welcome a Syrian Family’.

56 **MINUTES**

The minutes of the meeting held on 15 November 2016 were confirmed as a true and accurate record and **SIGNED** by the Chairman.

57 **CHAIRMAN'S ANNOUNCEMENTS (00:00:56)**

The Chairman had the following announcements to make:

- a) TPAS, the Tenants Participation Advisory Service, had recognised the meaningful work Mid Devon’s housing services teams had been doing with regard to tenant engagement and they had been nominated to receive a national award. The results would be known on 3 February 2017.
- b) He reminded those present of the importance of estate ‘walk about’s’ and the fact that housing officers valued being accompanied by Ward Members. Some Members did not attend any of these. He felt they needed to be reminded how important they were.

58 **MOTION 531 (COUNCILLOR T W SNOW - 17 NOVEMBER 2016) (00:02:50)**

The following Motion had been referred by the Council to the Homes Policy Development Group for its consideration.

Motion 531 (Councillor T W Snow)

“That as MDDC owns the land at Station Yard that we investigate and develop this land for our own local Council housing needs. This would help the extreme housing needs of our local residents as the cost of any houses built would be reduced by having no land purchase cost involved.

That our MP be kept informed in order to support this motion.”

Cllr T W Snow had been invited to the meeting to speak to his Motion. He stated that the biggest cost of any housing development was the land. The Council could

potentially build here and house some of the Syrian families being discussed later in the agenda. The site was in a prime location being in the centre of town and in his opinion maintenance would cost next to nothing. He requested that the Council develop this land to help local people and to not just take profit into account.

The Head of Housing and Property Services stated that officers were not currently considering this land as a potential site for development due to the fact that it was contaminated land and classed as B8, meaning that it was for general industrial storage only. He stated that the amount of infrastructure works needed would be considerable and would also be subject to a planning decision. There were other sites that were more advantageous.

Discussed took place regarding:

- Whether any initial outlay might be able to be recouped through rental income in the long term. Rental income would go to the Housing Revenue Account if developed by the HRA.
- How difficult it would be to get a change of use from a brown field site to a housing development site and the potential costs involved in doing this.

Following discussion thereon Cllr T W Snow **AGREED** to amend the wording of his Motion to state the following:

“That as MDDC owns the land at Station Yard that we investigate and consider developing this land, taking all matters into consideration, for our own local Council housing needs. This would help the extreme housing needs of our local residents as the cost of any houses built would be reduced by having no land purchase cost involved.

That our MP be kept informed in order to support this motion.”

It was therefore **RECOMMENDED** to Council that the amended Motion, as agreed, be supported.

(Proposed by Cllr F W Letch and seconded by Cllr D R Coren)

59 SYRIAN VULNERABLE PERSONS SCHEME (00:29:30)

The Group had before it a report * from the Head of Housing and Property Services providing an overview of the Syrian Vulnerable Persons' Resettlement Scheme (SVPRS) and the possible implications for the Council.

The following factors were brought to the attention of the Group:

- The report needed to be corrected slightly to state that families would not have leave to remain in this country after resettlement but would have humanitarian visas which would be reviewed after 5 years.
- There were now 4 not 5 years remaining for the resettlement programme in line with the current parliamentary term.
- The Working Group had met with a representative from Devon County Council who had fully briefed them on what was happening throughout the county. The

recommendation within the officer report had been made directly by the members of the Working Group.

- Other Devon local authorities who had initially signed up to the programme and who had originally put forward ambitious targets in terms of the numbers of families they had hoped to re-house were now having to revise those figures based upon experience relating to such issues as rural isolation, poor transport links, religion, language and educational complexities.
- The low number of private sector landlords coming forward with properties to let.
- The Council could not afford to employ a dedicated officer for this resettlement programme, it would need to be fitted into the day to day business of the Housing Options team, this might have a detrimental effect upon homelessness work.

Discussion took place regarding:

- The disturbing news images from Syria compared to living in the rural Mid Devon countryside.
- The lack of public transport in some rurally isolated villages together with potential language difficulties. However, it was recognised that some Syrian families may have previously lived within rural communities in their own country.
- The fact that the Group needed to make a recommendation based upon the **number** of families the Council would support not on **where** they would be located.
- The merits involved in taking one family initially and monitoring the situation before agreeing to take more.
- The fact that it took approximately 3-4 months after initial agreement before families actually arrived.

It was **RECOMMENDED** to the Cabinet that:

- i. Up to 5 refugee families are housed / supported, as and when properties come forward, for the duration of the scheme providing the costs are met by the Devon County Council led resettlement programme and that this be reviewed four months after the arrival of the first family (Note: the programme is currently of 4 years duration).
- ii. These refugee families be accommodated in Private Sector accommodation. However, further consideration must be given to the need for support (help) which would involve a minimum of weekly visits by one or more officers and also an exit strategy involving the landlord, the Council and DCC.

(Proposed by Cllr W J Daw and seconded by Cllr D R Coren)

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

60 **FINANCIAL MONITORING (01:03:40)**

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

Key highlights within the report included the following:

- The forecast General Fund deficit for the current year was £52k with the main movements relating to Non Domestic Rates 2015/16 Devon pooling gain, Developmental Control staff vacancies and the Discretionary Housing payment funding being greater than budgeted.
- There was a forecasted underspend in the Housing Revenue Account which could increase what could be spent on the housing maintenance fund as several projects were planned in the next few years.

Discussion took place regarding:

- 'Tenant Charges for Services' as listed in Appendix E related to the previous warden service including the learning disability warden service.
- Alarm expenditure was showing a saving of £61k as the Council was not planning to purchase as many alarms as budgeted for since many of the current ones continued to be fit for purpose.
- The need for boiler repairs at Tiverton Town Hall.
- There was now only one vacant unit at Market Walk.

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

61 **FINAL 2017/18 HOUSING REVENUE ACCOUNT (HRA) BUDGET (01:14:05)**

The Group had before it, and **NOTED**, a report * from the Director of Finance, Assets & Resources considering the options available in order for the Council to set a balanced budget for 2017/18 and agree a future strategy for further budgetary planning for 2018/19 onwards.

Key highlights within the report included the following:

- The assumptions made within Appendix 1 of the report including all rents being decreased by 1%.
- The proposal to increase community alarm charges by £0.30 per week per property and garage rents by £0.10 per week

Discussion took place regarding:

- Costs in relation to asbestos work which was unavoidable and a reasonable amount to be spending year on year.
- Income of £230k in relation to solar panels.

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

62 **GENERAL FUND BUDGET 2017/18 - UPDATE (01:18:25)**

The Group had before it, and **NOTED**, a report * from the Director of Finance, Assets and Resources considering the options available in order for the Council to move towards a balanced budget for 2017/18.

Key highlights within the report included the following:

- A number of assumptions had been made which were listed at the bottom of Appendix 1 including a Council Tax increase of £5 on a Band D property.
- The budget gap had been £419k in November 2016 but following the receipt of the Formula Grant figure and a lot of work by Managers this had now reduced to £231k.
- New Homes Bonus would be £110k less in 2017/18 than in 2016/17.
- Income from the garden waste scheme had reduced by £50k based on the original assumption and similarly leisure income was not where it had been expected to be.
- A Cabinet report was being prepared at the moment for its meeting on 2 February and it was hoped that the budget gap would have been reduced further still. Any remaining gap would require Members to make a decision about where the shortfall came from.

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

63 **DECANT POLICY (01:24:11)**

The Group had before it a report from the Housing Services Manager presenting the revised Decanting Policy. She explained the importance of having a detailed policy as it avoided confusion and allowed everybody to know where they stood. The Council tried to ensure a co-ordinated approach and were pragmatic wherever possible.

Discussion took place regarding:

- The need for Tenants to seek their own contents insurance which was emphasised at Tenant Sign Up meetings.
- The Decant Policy was averagely invoked between 3 to 4 times a year.

It was **RECOMMENDED** to the Cabinet that the revised Decant Policy be approved.

(Proposed by Cllr F W Letch and seconded by Cllr D R Coren)

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

64 **PERFORMANCE AND RISK (01:35:50)**

The Group had before it, and **NOTED**, a report * from the Director of Corporate Affairs and Business Transformation providing Members with an update on performance against the Corporate Plan and local service targets for 2016/17 as well as providing an update on the key business risks.

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

65 **UPDATE ON EMPTY HOMES (01:39:07)**

The Group had before it, and **NOTED**, a briefing paper * from the Lead Officer for Private Sector Housing. The Officer was new in post and was introduced to the Group by the Public Health and Professional Services Manager. The contents of the

report were summarised with an emphasis placed on how the work in this area related to the Corporate Plan. A lot of progress had been made in the last 6 months in terms of trying to identify those empty homes needing regeneration which were currently having an adverse effect on communities.

Discussion took place regarding:

- The dispersment of neglected empty properties across the district, they were not all concentrated in the larger towns.
- The importance of Ward Member involvement since they were best placed to know their own 'patch'.
- A range of enforcement options which were within 'the tool kit'.

It was **AGREED** that a list of known empty properties be sent to Ward Members on a quarterly basis providing that personal data had been removed.

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

66 **BRIEFING ON HOME IMPROVEMENT LOANS (01:52:20)**

The Group had before it, and **NOTED**, a briefing paper * from the Lead Officer for Private Sector Housing. The contents of the report were summarised with the new pilot approach already proving to be a success. A final decision on the permanent approach going forwards would be made by the end of April and would be delegated to the Director of Corporate Affairs and Business Transformation and the Cabinet Member for Housing.

It was suggested that details of the new scheme be forwarded to Town and Parish Councils on a regular basis. It was noted that a leaflet would be included in the Council Tax bills being sent out in the Spring (subject to the above final decision).

The current interest rate was 4% although this was being reviewed. The length of time given to people to repay the loan was dependent on the individual's personal circumstances. Efforts would be made to find the most affordable repayment mechanism for each individual.

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

67 **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:

- A presentation regarding how the rechargeable service works
- Houses in Multiple Occupation (HMO)
- Briefing paper on the Homelessness Reduction Bill currently going through Parliament.

(The meeting ended at 4.46 pm)

CHAIRMAN

