

MID DEVON DISTRICT COUNCIL

MINUTES of a **MEETING** of the **HOMES POLICY DEVELOPMENT GROUP** held on 18 June 2019 at 2.15 pm

Present

Councillors

J Cairney, D R Coren, L J Cruwys,
W J Daw, R J Dolley, C J Eginton, Mrs I Hill
and S J Penny

Apologies

Councillor

Mrs E M Andrews

Also Present

Councillors

S J Clist and R L Stanley

Also Present

Officers

Andrew Pritchard (Director of Operations), Andrew Jarrett (Deputy Chief Executive (S151)), Joanne Nacey (Group Manager for Finance), Catherine Yandle (Group Manager for Performance, Governance and Data Security), Mark Baglow (Group Manager for Building Services), Simon Newcombe (Group Manager for Public Health and Regulatory Services), J P McLachlan (Principal Accountant), Michael Parker (Housing Options Manager), Lisa Harber (Neighbourhood Team Leader), Helen Carty (Housing Policy Officer) and Sarah Lees (Member Services Officer)

1 ELECTION OF CHAIRMAN (CHAIRMAN OF THE COUNCIL IN THE CHAIR)

RESOLVED that Cllr R J Dolley be elected Chairman of the Group for the municipal year 2019/20.

2 ELECTION OF VICE CHAIRMAN

RESOLVED that Cllr W J Daw be elected Vice Chairman of the Group for the municipal year 2019/20.

3 APOLOGIES AND SUBSTITUTE MEMBERS

Apologies were received from Cllr Mrs E M Andrews

4 DECLARATION OF INTERESTS UNDER THE CODE OF CONDUCT

All members of the Group stated that they had received correspondence with regard to item 8 on the agenda, Syrian Vulnerable Persons Resettlement Scheme.

5 PUBLIC QUESTION TIME

Ms Ali Dominy stated in relation to item 8 on the agenda, Syrian Vulnerable Persons Resettlement Scheme, that she and her husband were the landlords of a house in Cullompton that has, since the autumn of 2017, been home to a family from Syria who were fleeing the horrors and destruction of war, a family who have been given this life saving and life changing opportunity by Mid Devon District Council decision to take part in the Syrian Vulnerable Persons Resettlement Scheme in which they and we thank you all so much. It was with great sadness that Mid Devon's commitment to take five families seemed to stall after the first two in 2017. This we were told was due to a lack of private landlords having suitable properties, so it was with pleasure that we had heard that Anthea had come forward with the offer to purchase a house to facilitate another family being offered a home. Like ourselves, Anthea took the route of involving Mid Devon District Council from the start and so chose a house that was suitable in an area that would also be suitable. All seemed to be going well until at the last moment Anthea was told that Mid Devon had changed their mind and would not be taking any more families on the resettlement scheme. It was obviously a cruel blow particularly as Anthea had gone so far down the line of purchase with the approval of the Council.

When we were asked to have a look at the report issued in preparation of this meeting we were confused and concerned about paragraph 4.3 in the report that states that the work with the existing landlords, us being one of them has been extensive. This really hasn't been the case. The report quotes concerns about possible issues that were raised before the first families arrived but did not accurately reflect the actual situation of the last two years. The report talks about consideration being given to the need for support that would need a minimum of two weekly visits by one or more officers. It also talks about twice weekly visits in the early months. We are pleased to say that both of these concerns proved unnecessary. Certainly there were initial visits required to welcome and settle the family and run through procedures but talking to those involved in our house and also those involved with the other Syrian family in Mid Devon we believe that two visits per family was all that was ever required.

As landlords we look after the maintenance of the property, Mid Devon are our tenants so as with any landlord/tenant relationship, we would expect them to leave any problems to us. Indeed we are more than happy to say that during the time that Mid Devon have rented the house from us, to our knowledge any problems with the house have been sorted out by us with no involvement from Mid Devon. There is a tireless band of volunteers who work with the families. We spoke to the lady who volunteers with our family in Cullompton, she is also involved with the family in Bradninch. She confirmed after setting up the property, Mid Devon had no further involvement with the families. All support is supplied by volunteers from the Refugee Support Group of Exeter.

We are all aware that things are unbelievably difficult for those juggling priorities within the housing services department of Mid Devon. However the commitment made by Mid Devon District Council to be part of the Vulnerable Persons Resettlement Scheme was a humanitarian decision of importance and should be honoured. Anthea and other volunteers are committed to make it happen. In 2018/19 the report states that there were 599 homeless approaches in Mid Devon, amid this vast number we are talking about one family. This is not a policy that is going to open

flood gates to a tsunami of extra commitment, its one house and one family and one that comes with funding and volunteers. With this in mind surely Mid Devon can see their way to honouring their commitment to provide a vulnerable family, who have been through more than we can ever imagine, a safe home.

Laura Conyngham, also in relation to item 8 on the agenda stated that, it was heartening to see new faces in this Council and on this committee and we hope for a new approach. Mid Devon as you have heard already has two families, one in Bradninch and one in Cullompton. As well as the moral imperative Mid Devon are part of this nationally funded scheme. Are councillors aware of the cultural wealth that a Syrian family will bring to our community?

Anthea Duquemin stated that she lived in Bradninch and that she would like to ask a question about the marginal differences it would make to the total work of the council's housing team if it accepts one more family under the Syrian Vulnerable Persons Resettlement Scheme? The Council made a pledge in 2017 to accept up to 5 families under this scheme and at the time it didn't seem like a lot but for those of us in the district who care a lot about being part of a community that makes this sort of commitment we felt very very positive about this. I understand there has been a change since that time and that the officers who are part of the housing team are having to work harder than they were before. However, since that time, as we know, the Council has already resettled two Syrian displaced families and in order to do that quite a lot of the tasks that were identified at the time that the scheme was originally discussed have already been undertaken so the scheme is already set up and ready to operate. We understood that until February this year the reason we couldn't have more families here was because there weren't enough private landlords ready to offer their houses for this scheme. Therefore, the house we are talking about in Crediton and which was chosen specifically for this scheme was chosen according to the directions we were given by the Council so that it would be suitable for a family and its already been approved. So lots of the work has already been done. In the discussion paper it says that twice weekly visits by Council officers are needed initially for a family at the start of their resettlement, I can accept that might be the case but as Ali says, how long does that go on for and really in the light of everything that the housing team do, what is the marginal difference of bringing in one more family? Particularly if you weigh up the additional amount of work for the housing officers against what it means for the family that is resettled and for those of us that really want to be part of a community that makes this sort of contribution.

Gerald Conyngham stated that he was the convenor of Welcoming Refugees in Crediton Group. I sent you all a letter as I wanted you to get a proper briefing beforehand. I just want to say that we did welcome the decision made by Mid Devon District Council in 2017. It was really great, we were overjoyed at the decision to take up to 5 families. Since then it has been really difficult to try to get private landlords, they can get more rents commercially than from people on housing benefit. So it was absolutely wonderful when we heard about this house and we were very upset when the decision was taken not to continue. We totally understand the pressure of homelessness, it is a big issue we are concerned about in Crediton. We understand that fully but we hope a way can be found going forwards. There is an alternative way that other councils use whereby they do it through an agency and they actually manage the house direct. I realise that also involves a bit of work but ultimately it would be less time consuming. What we are really saying is that we very much hope

that you will look at this again and reconsider your decision so that we can welcome a family into Crediton.

Natalia Letch stated that she represented an organisation called the 'Crediton International and Cultural Organisation'. We started in 2009 so we are not new in the business. We run free English lessons for migrant workers at the moment but refugees can also join our wonderful group. We have an advice centre, we have been trained by CAB and we run all sorts of social events like meeting with the Police if there are some hate crime issues. We also do a lot of cultural events like sharing food skills and special international crafts. Crediton is used to that, we are building this bridge between non English speakers and the host community and we certainly can welcome these people and we will be looking after them, so my question is would you consider that we can take a lot of this responsibility from you and only occasionally in very very serious cases would you need to be involved?

Ros Reeves, again speaking in relation to item 8 on the agenda stated that she also came from Crediton. Ever since she had volunteered at the Calais camp about three years ago I have wanted to be part of a group to rehouse a family here in Mid Devon. So, I am asking you, would you agree with us that there is a moral imperative for our communities to reach out to just this one family given the horrors endured by these people and our Government's own scheme to help councils achieve this. We have worked so long and hard to comply with the council's requirements and have come so close to being able to offer this house to a Syrian family only to see it disappear. It is tragic for us but most of all for a refugee family.

The Chairman thanked those who had spoken for their input and questions and stated that they would be addressed during discussion of the item.

6 **MINUTES**

The minutes of the meeting held on 12 March 2019 were confirmed as a correct record and **SIGNED** by the Chairman.

7 **CHAIRMAN'S ANNOUNCEMENTS**

The Chairman had no announcements to make.

8 **SYRIAN VULNERABLE PERSONS RESETTLEMENT SCHEME (SVPRS) (00:18:30)**

The Group had before it a report * from the Group Manager for Housing Services updating it on the provision of housing for Syrian Refugees in Mid Devon.

The Chairman opened the discussion by stating that he had a lot of sympathy for the families involved and he congratulated those that had tried to help and who had worked so hard up until now.

The Director of Operations briefly outlined the contents of the reports.

Consideration was given to the following:

- The advantages and disadvantages of using a third party agency one being that the liability would still rest with the Council as they would own the tenancy. A lot of negotiations took place behind the scenes before a family was housed and there was only so much a charity or third party could be asked to do.
- The positive and welcoming nature of the Crediton community.
- CHAT being prepared to help set up and support these families.
- The legal obligations of the Council.
- The implications on the housing options team following the introduction of the Homelessness Act which placed extra responsibilities on councils in terms of its statutory obligations and a requirement to have to work with all eligible applicants regardless of any priority need. There was work that the team had to undertake statutorily and there was work that they didn't, participation in the resettlement scheme was not a statutory obligation. The local authority needed to act lawfully with limited resources.
- The need for a 'can do' attitude and a full appreciation of the challenges faced by Syrian families.
- A similar resettlement programme had existed for the Vietnamese Boat People back in the 1980's. One family had been rehoused in Tiverton but they had not stayed having felt isolated and preferring to move north where other Vietnamese families were living.

It was **AGREED** that the issue be brought back to the next meeting having taken on board the representations made and investigations taken place regarding the following:

- a) What could be achieved by working with a third party or parties such as CHAT and;
- b) How other local authorities were managing to resettle families given that they were also required to comply with the Homelessness Act and would be experiencing the same time constraints.

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

9 **PERFORMANCE AND RISK REPORT FOR 2018/19 (00:44:00)**

The Group had before it, and **NOTED**, a report * from the Director of Operations providing Members with an update on performance against the Corporate Plan and local service targets for 2018/19 as well as providing an update on the key business risks.

The officer summarised the key highlights throughout the year which fell under the housing area. This included mention of the fact that 4 new housing units had been completed in November 2019 and 6 in March 2019. 26 units at Palmerston Park were due for completion in the autumn of 2019.

The Housing Department were congratulated for an excellent set of results and wished for this to be passed back to the wider team.

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

10 REVENUE AND CAPITAL OUTTURN 2018/19 (00:49:08)

The Group had before it, and **NOTED**, a report * from the Deputy Chief Executive (S151) presenting the revenue and capital outturn figures for the financial year 2019/20. The report also contained recommendations to the Cabinet which would be presented to them at their meeting on 27 June 2019.

The Deputy Chief Executive (S151) outlined the contents of the report and drew the Group's attention to the following areas:

- The external auditors were currently undertaking an audit of the 2018/19 accounts and their work was progressing well.
- The General Fund outturn for 2018/19 showed an overall underspend of £19k.
- The Council had managed to transfer some funds to ear marked reserves due to several factors including some additional payments in relation to New Homes Bonus.
- The Council had changed the way it financed the vehicle fleet making sure that it got better value for money.
- The General Fund reserve was held at 25% of the operational budget.
- Financial Monitoring presented to each Policy Development Group throughout the year had been very accurate.
- Investments had performed well.
- In December every single unit in Market Walk had been occupied although it was acknowledged that rents had been low.
- The Council Tax collection rate for 2018/19 was 97.8% demonstrating how effective the Revenues section had been in collecting the annual charge in extremely challenging economic times.

The Group were presented with a budget position paper summarising the key areas within the housing area. Particular mention was made of the following:

- Private Sector Housing was showing a variance of £59k. This had occurred as a result of receiving a rogue landlord grant. The intention was transfer to this to reserves for future years.
- The Housing Revenue Account (HRA) investment income had performed very well helped by a Bank of England rate change in December 2018.
- Staff vacancy savings in the Repairs and Maintenance area.
- Savings on the gas servicing contract.
- An underspend on the estates budget.
- The ongoing detrimental effect on the HRA of Right to Buy (RTB).
- The need to look at the overall budget position rather than just individual cost centres.

The following was requested to take place:

- a) That a precise breakdown of the budget position with regard to the Crediton building be circulated to all members of the Group.

- b) That some training with regard to finances in this area be provided to the Group before the next meeting and certainly before budget considerations were brought before it.

The Group congratulated the Finance team on an excellent set of results and wished for this to be conveyed to the wider team.

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

11 HOUSING REVENUE ACCOUNT (HRA) ASSET POSITION (01:12:43)

The Group Manager for Building Services provided the Group with a presentation on the asset position of the Housing Revenue Account.

Discussion took place with regard to:

- The pressure on the HRA of Right to Buy and the inflexible nature of the Government's stance on this issue.
- On average there were 25 RTB's per year.
- The Council's responsibility to provide social housing.
- The lack of financial incentive to build properties.
- In order to maintain the housing stock it was vital that the Council collected all the rent that was due to it.
- Replacement kitchens and bathrooms would need to be prioritised.
- It was a priority of the Housing Department to reduce the numbers on the housing waiting list wherever it could. This was managed through Devon Home Choice system which categorised tenants in terms of their housing need.

The Group requested that they receive information with regard to Council owned garages; how many were fit to be let and how many were in a state of disrepair for example? Also, how many garages were let to charities at a reduced rate? It was explained that information could be provided as long as it was of a general nature and did not relate to specific lets.

12 HOUSING UPDATE REPORT (01:46:09)

The Group had before it, and **NOTED**, a briefing paper from the Group Manager for Housing providing a written briefing on the latest developments relating to social housing.

The Neighbourhood Team Leader briefly outlined the contents of the report with reference to:

- The Hackett Review
- A new deal for social housing with the development of key performance indicators and how these could help tenants to hold their landlords to account.
- Recent regulatory judgements demonstrating how important it was for Registered Providers to be compliant with both legislative and regulatory requirements.
- The consultation in relation to a new five year Rent Standard.

- Yarlington (a housing association) had announced that they were exploring options to form a partnership.
- Tenure Reform and the drive to simplify the tenancy process especially in relation to flexible tenancies.
- Leasehold Reform.
- Welfare Reform

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

13 START TIME OF MEETINGS (01:53:47)

It was **AGREED** to continue to hold meetings of the Group at 2.15pm for the remainder of the municipal year.

14 IDENTIFICATION OF ITEMS FOR THE NEXT MEETING (01:55:25)

In addition to the items already listed in the work programme for the next meeting, the Syrian Vulnerable Persons Resettlement Scheme was also requested to be on the agenda.

(The meeting ended at 4.15 pm)

CHAIRMAN