

MID DEVON DISTRICT COUNCIL

MINUTES of a **MEETING** of the **HOMES POLICY DEVELOPMENT GROUP** held on 1 October 2019 at 2.15 pm

Present

Councillors

R J Dolley (Chairman)
B Holdman, J Cairney, D R Coren, L J Cruwys, C J Eginton and
S J Penny

Apologies

Councillors

Mrs E M Andrews and Mrs I Hill

Also Present

Councillors

R M Deed and R L Stanley

Present

Officers

Andrew Pritchard (Director of Operations), Claire Fry (Group Manager for Housing), Catherine Yandle (Group Manager for Performance, Governance and Data Security), Mark Baglow (Group Manager for Building Services), Joanne Nacey (Group Manager for Financial Services), J P McLachlan (Principal Accountant) and Sarah Lees (Member Services Officer)

29 **APOLOGIES AND SUBSTITUTE MEMBERS**

Apologies were received from Cllr Mrs E Andrews and Cllr Mrs I Hill who was substituted by Cllr B Holdman.

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

No interests were declared under this item.

31 **PUBLIC QUESTION TIME**

There were no questions from the one member of the public present.

32 **MINUTES**

The minutes of the meeting held on 13 August 2019 were confirmed as a correct record and **SIGNED** by the Chairman.

33 **CHAIRMAN'S ANNOUNCEMENTS**

The Chairman had the following announcements to make:

- The development at Turner Rise, Palmerston Park, Tiverton, had had its official opening on 26 September 2019. It was hoped tenants would be occupying the properties as soon as possible.
- He reminded the Group that there was a Landlord Networking Event at the Hartnoll Hotel the following day between 4pm and 9pm and all Members were welcome.

34 **PERFORMANCE AND RISK REPORT(00:04:38)**

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 2019/20 as well as providing an update on the key business risks.

The contents of the report were briefly outlined and consideration was given to the average number of days to re-let a property having a target of 14 days. It was explained that this was a challenging target but the Council continued to remain in the top quartile for performance. There was a fixed resource available and during school holidays there had been some issues but overall 14 days, or near about, was achievable.

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

35 **FINANCIAL MONITORING (00:08:31)**

The Group received, and **NOTED**, a verbal update from the Group Manager for Financial Services summarising the income and expenditure position in the year to date.

Key highlights within the update including the following:

- There was still predicted to be a deficit against the budget at the year end. Figures for July indicated this to be in the region of £378k.
- The main area providing the variance was in Planning. Since it was a demand led service it was very reliant on applications coming forward. Should they do so within the remaining months of the financial year, the position could improve significantly.
- The position regarding General Fund Housing had not changed since June.
- A favourable forecast for the Housing Revenue Account was still predicted. Some of this related to a number of vacant posts.
- The Group were pleased that the Economy PDG had recommended that the Council retain car parking overpayments and recognised that it would have cost more to administer the overpayments than the amount overpaid in the first place.

36 **COUNCIL TENANCY RENT DEBIT FREQUENCY (00:12:07)**

The Group had before it a report * from the Group Manager for Housing Services reviewing the weeks over which rent was charged on a yearly basis.

The officer outlined the contents of the report and made reference to the following key factors:

- 385 tenants were in receipt of Universal Credit. Some of these tenants were in a vulnerable position having to learn how to manage their money which was paid directly to them on a monthly basis.
- The Tenants Together Group had been consulted on the proposed change from 48 weeks to 52 weeks and there had been no feedback from them.

- This was just a proposal at this stage and if approved by the Cabinet the Housing Act 1985 would require the Council to conduct a full consultation with the whole tenant base before any changes could be implemented.

Consideration was given to the following:

- The average rental costs of council owned properties depending on the number of bedrooms.
- Tenants would be encouraged to move to direct debit payments where they had not already done so.
- Tenants had an obligation to pay their rent regardless of whether or not they are in receipt of Universal Credit.

RECOMMENDED to the Cabinet that Council tenants be charged rent over 52 weeks each year and not 48 as currently.

(Proposed by Cllr J Cairney and seconded by Cllr B Holdman)

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

37 **UPDATE ON PROGRESS RELATING TO THE REVIEW OF THE HOMELESSNESS STRATEGY (00:30:19)**

The Group had before it, and **NOTED**, a report * from the Group Manager for Housing Services stating that the Homelessness Strategy was being currently reviewed.

The following was highlighted within the report:

- The Housing Services department were seeing a lot more people through the door presenting themselves as homeless.
- The Homelessness Reduction Act 2017 required the Council to conduct a full data review and stated that it must work closely with tier one authorities such as Devon County Council.
- The existing Homelessness Strategy was extended to the end of December 2019 under delegated powers by the Cabinet Member for Housing to allow a thorough review of the Strategy to take place.

Discussion took place with regard to:

- Whether homelessness was worse in the towns? It was explained that homelessness was just as acute in the rural areas but the agencies providing support were probably located in the towns. Just because a large number of homeless people visited CHAT for example in Tiverton that didn't mean there was a bigger problem in Tiverton than anywhere else.

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

38 DEPOSIT AND ADVANCE RENT SCHEME (00:35:46)

The Group had before it, and **NOTED**, a report * from the Group Manager for Housing briefing Members on the Deposit and Advance Rent Scheme (DARS). The contents of the report were outlined with the following key areas being highlighted:

- This scheme was one of the tools used by the Housing Service to manage homelessness and it was a valuable resource.
- For some tenants their previous history prevented them from accessing bank loans.
- The scheme assisted in reducing the amount of money the Council needed to spend on temporary accommodation and was sometimes a very cost effective solution all round.

Consideration was given to:

- This being a loan like any other loan and robust measures were taken to recover outstanding monies.
- It was confirmed that the loan was considerably cheaper than the cost of temporary accommodation for a tenant.
- The circumstances of everybody who presented as homeless were investigated. Housing options advice was given whenever possible, DARS being one option.
- Last year central Government had provided some funding to local authorities to help support the council with rough sleepers.
- Because the numbers of homeless people were increasing work in this area had also increased within the Housing Service.
- Is someone applying for social housing had an outstanding debt to the Council, they would be asked to agree an arrangement for repayment otherwise their housing application could be excluded from the housing register.

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

39 REVIEW OF THE HOUSING SERVICE HARASSMENT POLICY (00:50:04)

The Group had before it a report * from the Group Manager for Housing reviewing the Housing Service's Harassment Policy.

The content of the report was outlined with the following key factors being highlighted:

- It was important to be aware of the regulations in relation to this issue.
- At a recent meeting of the Tenants Together Group there had been a lot of discussion around the issue of 'Equality Impact Assessments' and as a result more emphasis would be placed on this section of PDG policies in the future.
- The Harassment Policy is related to the ASB policy and procedures. Mediation is a key part of the Council's strategy to manage low level nuisance but officers did not feel that it was a tool which could be used in a serious case such as that of harassment.

A brief discussion took place regarding the very serious nature of harassment and that a true definition of it would include reference to the victim fearing for their safety. It was not just about throwing grass clippings over a garden fence, for example.

RECOMMENDED to the Cabinet that the changes identified in the tracked changed Harassment Policy be approved.

(Proposed by Cllr D R Coren and seconded by Cllr J Cairney)

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

40 **REVIEW OF HOUSING SERVICE HOARDING POLICY (01:00:32)**

The Group had before it a report * from the Group Manager for Housing Services reviewing the Housing Service's Hoarding Policy.

The contents of the report were outlined with the following key factors being highlighted:

- There had only been minor changes to the policy and these were tracked for ease of reference.
- People who hoarded were sometimes very vulnerable and often there were mental health issues. However, the Council had a duty to assess a situation from a health and safety perspective as well as supporting the tenant who was hoarding. The possibility of fire was a particular concern as was being able to get to parts of a property to conduct necessary repairs.
- If a situation was particularly bad, for example, if rodents were an issue, then legal action would be pursued.
- Housing officers worked very closely with the Building Services team to monitor and maintain affected properties.

RECOMMENDED to the Cabinet that the tracked changes in the revised Hoarding Policy be approved.

(Proposed by Cllr B Holdman and seconded by Cllr D R Coren)

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

41 **REVIEW OF THE HOUSING SERVICE PETS AND ANIMALS POLICY (01:07:28)**

The Group had before it a report * from the Group Manager for Housing Services reviewing the Housing Service's policy in relation to pets and animals.

The contents of the report were outlined with particular reference to the following:

- There was the potential for pets and animals to cause a real issue for tenants, for example, a barking dog, chewed door frames and rotting floor boards.
- Tenants needed to be aware of the policy and have a full understanding of what the boundaries were.
- The Housing Service did understand that people get very attached to their pets.
- The policy provided clear guidance to officers dealing with these issues.

A brief discussion took place regarding the policy clearly stating that a maximum of two cats or dogs were allowed, the Group felt that it was important the Council adhered to this and took action when the policy was breached.

RECOMMENDED to the Cabinet that the revised changes to the Pets and Animals Policy be approved.

(Proposed by the Chairman)

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

42 **HOUSING UPDATE REPORT (01:13:01)**

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

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

43 **IDENTIFICATION OF ITEMS FOR THE NEXT MEETING (01:19:23)**

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

- **Devon Home Choice** (how it operated, what were the difficulties, examples of where it hadn't worked). Demonstration to be provided to the Group.
- **Syrian Vulnerable Persons Resettlement Scheme** – update.
- **Housing Benefit** – update, including the roll out of Universal Credit, what were the caps, the limits, how much was being claimed etc?

(The meeting ended at 3.45 pm)

CHAIRMAN