

MID DEVON DISTRICT COUNCIL

MINUTES of a **MEETING** of the **HOMES POLICY DEVELOPMENT GROUP** held on 3 December 2019 at 2.15 pm

Present

Councillors R J Dolley (Chairman)
J Cairney, D R Coren, L J Cruwys,
W J Daw, C J Eginton, F W Letch and
S J Penny

Apologies

Councillor(s) Mrs E M Andrews

Also Present

Councillor(s) R L Stanley

Also Present

Officer(s): Stephen Walford (Chief Executive), Andrew Pritchard (Director of Operations), Claire Fry (Group Manager for Housing), Catherine Yandle (Group Manager for Performance, Governance and Data Security), Joanne Nacey (Group Manager for Financial Services), J P McLachlan (Principal Accountant), Michael Parker (Housing Options Manager) and Sarah Lees (Member Services Officer)

44 **APOLOGIES AND SUBSTITUTE MEMBERS**

Apologies were received from Cllr Mrs E Andrews.

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

There were no interests declared under this item.

46 **PUBLIC QUESTION TIME**

There were no questions from the two members of the public present.

47 **MINUTES**

The minutes of the meeting held on 1 October 2019 were confirmed as a correct record and **SIGNED** by the Chairman.

48 **CHAIRMAN'S ANNOUNCEMENTS**

The Chairman had the following announcements to make:

- Cllr F Letch would be replacing Cllr Mrs I Hill on the Group for the foreseeable future.

- He thanked the Director of Operations, Mr Andrew Pritchard, for all he had done to support the Group over recent years and wished him well in his new role.

49 SYRIAN VULNERABLE PERSONS RESETTLEMENT SCHEME (SVPRS) (00:04:00)

The Group had before it, and **NOTED**, a report * from the Group Manager for Housing Services providing an update to the Policy Development Group on the provision of housing for Syrian Refugees in Mid Devon.

The contents of the report were outlined and a further update provided. It was noted that:

- A landlord in Crediton, who had made a property available to provide a home for a Syrian family, was now in contract with a third party which will manage the property and a request has been made to the Home Office seeking the identification of a suitable family to move in early in 2020. A positive outcome was envisaged.
- It was confirmed that the Council had housed three families since the scheme was approved.
- It was agreed that the way forward was to work very closely with Devon County Council and to judge each particular situation on a case by case basis.
- The work of the officers in doing what they had to secure the housing of these families was recognised and it was stated that there would be a six monthly update to this Group going forwards.

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

50 HOMELESSNESS STRATEGY 2020 - 2025 (00:10:19)

The Group had before it a report * from the Group Manager for Housing Services regarding the homelessness and rough sleeping strategy which now required review.

The following was highlighted within the report:

- In accordance with the Homelessness Act 2002, the Council must undertake a review of homelessness in the district on a five yearly basis and was required to have a homelessness strategy. The existing strategy covered the period from 2013 to 2018 and was extended by delegated decision made by the Cabinet Member for Housing to run until the end of 2019. The new draft strategy also included actions associated with rough sleeping.
- A consultation with stakeholders informed the review of the homelessness strategy. Officers in the housing options team were consulted, as were other colleagues within the Council. A meeting for councillors was held on 4 March 2019 and external stakeholders were invited to another meeting which took place on 8 March 2019. Two agencies had commented that whilst the strategy was very comprehensive, the action plan did not include very many 'smart' targets. This was taken on board by officers and it was confirmed that the action plan would be responsive to change and would be kept under review. Updates would be provided to the Group on a half-yearly basis.

- The strategy would include a live link to the Council's website and this would be refreshed on a quarterly basis.

Consideration was given to:

- CHAT had held two open evening evenings recently, one in Tiverton and one in Crediton. It was stated by the councillor who had attended the Crediton event that he had been the only district councillor present which was disappointing. The work of CHAT was highly commended as an extremely useful resource for families experiencing difficulties.
- The need for larger properties surpassed the number of properties available.
- Although the Council had been invited to bid for funding from the Rough Sleeping Initiative for a further twelve months, a need to identify other funding streams to continue this work should grant funding not be available in future years was seen as a priority.
- The Chairman informed the Group that Old Heathcoat School would again be providing a free Christmas meal to those people in need on Christmas Day.

RECOMMENDED to the Cabinet that the revised Homelessness Strategy 2020 – 2025 be approved.

(Proposed by the Chairman)

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

51 **PERFORMANCE AND RISK REPORT (00:23:17)**

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 outlined with reference in the report to the performance of the areas falling under the remit of this Group. Regarding the Corporate Plan Aim: Planning and enhancing the built environment: Performance Planning Guarantee determined within 26 weeks was just below target at 99% but all 4 speed and quality measures were well above the required target as at 30 September.

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

52 **FINANCIAL UPDATE FOR THE SIX MONTHS TO 30 SEPTEMBER 2019 (00:25:40)**

The group had before it, and **NOTED**, a report * from the Deputy Chief Executive (S151) presenting a financial update in respect of the income and expenditure so far in the year.

The key highlights within the report were as follows:

- This was the second report to the Group in the current financial year meaning that it was now easier to predict the end of year position.

- The forecasted General Fund surplus for the current year was £29k after transfers to and from Earmarked Reserves. This position had improved since Quarter 1.
- The most significant variances included additional waste savings and a large planning application.
- Overall the HRA was forecasted to be underspent by £486k in 2019/20, any surplus at the year end would be transferred to the maintenance fund.
- On the treasury management side the forecast was still volatile, however, there had been an increase in the interest received due to higher balances. It was confirmed that the Council had not undertaken any new borrowing this year.

Discussion took place with regard to the impact a saving of £163k in the repairs and maintenance area would have on the delivery of that service as the Customer Experience Working Group had received feedback that repairs were taking a long time to be actioned. The Director of Operations responded by stating that he was not aware of such feedback and requested that specific details be forwarded to him so that he could follow it up.

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

53 **DRAFT 2020/21 GENERAL FUND AND CAPITAL BUDGETS (00:32:37)**

The Group had before it, and **NOTED**, a report * from the Deputy Chief Executive (S151) considering the initial draft 2020/21 budget and the options available in order for the Council to set a balanced budget and agree a future strategy for further budget reductions for 2021/22 onwards.

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

- The Council had awaited with some trepidation the outcome of the Fair Funding Review and Business Rates reset which was due to be published in September of this year. Due to the pressure of Brexit, the Government had been unable to complete this piece of work and have instead confirmed that they will issue a one year settlement. This has resulted in the Fair Funding Review being postponed for a year.
- The initial aggregation of all service budgets (which also included assumptions surrounding predictions of interest receipts, contributions to the Council's capital programme, transfers from/to reserves and Council Tax levels) currently indicated a General Fund budget gap of £346k.
- The Group were reminded of the steps that had already been taken by the Council since the austerity programme began in 2010/11 and were directed to a list of the challenges that had been encountered in trying to balance the budget in recent years.
- A 2% increase in the salaries budget had been assumed, although this was linked to the national pay award.
- A budget consultation had been issued and 408 returns had been received. Officers would be exploring these responses and reflecting them back through an updated draft budget report to all Policy Development Groups in January 2020.

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

54 **DRAFT 2020/21 HOUSING REVENUE ACCOUNT (HRA) BUDGET (00:42:37)**

The Group had before it, and **NOTED**, a report * from the Deputy Chief Executive (S151) and Director of Operations considering the options available in order for the Council to set a balanced HRA budget for 2020/21.

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

- The report presented a proposed balanced budget for the HRA for 2020/21 and showed the over-all make-up of the budget at summary level as well as an extract from the planned and cyclical maintenance budget. It also showed the rental forecast figures for 2020/21, proposed garage rents and garage ground rents for 2020/21.
- Key issues related to Right to Buy Property Sales and Rent changes.
- Any surplus or deficit would be transferred to the maintenance fund

A brief discussion took place with regard to the effect of 'Right to Buy' on the council's finances.

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

55 **HRA MEDIUM TERM FINANCIAL PLAN (00:51:58)**

The Group had before it, and **NOTED**, a report * from the Deputy Chief Executive (S151) and Director of Operations providing an estimate of the budget required for the operation of the Housing Revenue Account (HRA) from 2020/21 – 2023/24.

It was explained that as well as collating a draft HRA budget for 2020/21 which proposed a balanced budget position, the Group Manager for Housing Services and Building Services, together with the HRA Accountant, had agreed assumptions for the forthcoming years, in order to determine a reasonable forecast of the financial position of the HRA in the coming years.

A breakdown of the four year plan was included as an appendix to the report and included assumptions based on a 2% salary increase and pension changes. It also included estimates in relation to fees and charges and the change to the rent policy.

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

56 **DRAFT CORPORATE PLAN 2020 - 2024 (00:54:25)**

The Group had before it, and **NOTED**, a report * from the Chief Executive considering the first draft text of a new Corporate Plan which will replace the current plan (expiring in March 2020).

The Chief Executive explained that the report before the Group was being presented to each Policy Development Group with the comments and views from each Group being fed back to the Cabinet before a final draft was considered by full Council in February 2020. If Members had any views they wanted conveying following the meeting they could do so through the Clerk.

The report reflected all the hard work that had been undertaken by Members at an Away Day in September and subsequent comments made regarding the future direction and focus of the council.

Discussion took place regarding:

- The tension within the document at this early stage between competing priorities and competing objectives. It was likely that the final plan would not necessarily contain 'absolute' statements on definitive approaches, since the decisions on how to implement activity and actions would be taken at a more detailed level at the appropriate time. However, it was important that the Corporate Plan set out what the Council was trying to achieve for the good of the local community.
- The difference between having direct control over an issue as a district council as compared to only having the ability to influence or lobby, for example, lobbying Devon County Council regarding the provision of post 16 education within the district. This was a good example of an issue that was collectively important across the district but which the Council had no direct control over.
- Another example of the Council working with partners would be to promote issues for the over 65's such as free bus passes as a means of promoting healthy lifestyles physically, socially and mentally.
- The need for a national policy for new developments regarding such issues as the installation of solar panels on new buildings.
- Whether information regarding emissions from farm animals was truly accurate?
- An analysis of the Council's carbon footprint would be brought to the Cabinet on 19 December 2019. The report would include all the necessary links to point Members in the direction of relevant information.
- Developers had become increasingly keen on stating that 'building materials' were locally sourced' but where a product was made and transported from needed to be borne in mind as well.

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

57 DHC PRESENTATION (01:29:24)

The Group Manager for Housing Services and the Housing Options Manager provided the Group with a presentation on Devon Home Choice and outlined how the system operated. This included reference to the following:

- Legal requirements
- Relevant legislation
- Regulatory Framework
- Tenancy Standard
- Partnership approach
- Website where properties are advertised
- Numbers of houses allocated and to tenants in which Band
- The criteria for applying e.g. local connection
- Available homes
- S106 planning conditions

- The bidding process
- Customer survey results
- Tenancy Fraud

Consideration was given to:

- The difficulties involved in the Council trying to house a family in a larger house if the current occupant, who might be living on their own, had security of tenure.
- The temporary exclusion of tenants from the choice based letting scheme if they had already refused 3 or more properties.
- How stressful it could be for individuals and families trying to engage with the DHC process in order to find a home, this was not to be underestimated in any way.
- The heavy caseloads of officers in the Housing Options team.

58 IDENTIFICATION OF ITEMS FOR THE NEXT MEETING

No further issues were identified for the next meeting other than those already listed in the work programme.

(The meeting ended at 4.25 pm)

CHAIRMAN