

## **MID DEVON DISTRICT COUNCIL**

**MINUTES** of a **MEETING** of the **HOMES POLICY DEVELOPMENT GROUP** held on 21 July 2020 at 2.15 pm

### **Present**

#### **Councillors**

R J Dolley (Chairman)  
Mrs E M Andrews, J Cairney, D R Coren,  
L J Cruwys, C J Eginton, F W Letch,  
S J Penny and Mrs C P Daw

### **Also Present**

#### **Councillor**

R M Deed

### **Also Present**

#### **Officers**

Jill May (Director of Corporate Affairs and Business Transformation), Claire Fry (Group Manager for Housing), Simon Newcombe (Group Manager for Public Health and Regulatory Services), Catherine Yandle (Group Manager for Performance, Governance and Data Security), Ian Chilver (Group Manager for Financial Services), Mike Lowman (Interim Building Maintenance Manager) and Sarah Lees (Member Services Officer)

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

**RESOLVED** that Cllr R Dolley be elected Chairman of the Group for 2020 / 2021.

## **2 ELECTION OF VICE CHAIRMAN**

**RESOLVED** that Cllr S Penny be elected Vice Chairman of the Group for 2020 / 2021.

## **3 APOLOGIES AND SUBSTITUTE MEMBERS**

There were no apologies for absence.

## **4 REMOTE MEETINGS PROTOCOL**

The protocol for remote meetings was noted.

## **5 PUBLIC QUESTION TIME**

There were no members of the public present.

## **6 DECLARATION OF INTERESTS UNDER THE CODE OF CONDUCT**

Cllr Mrs E Andrews declared a personal interest as she was a Council tenant.

## 7 MINUTES

The minutes of the meeting held on 17 March 2020 were confirmed as a correct record by the Members who had been present at the meeting.

## 8 CHAIRMAN'S ANNOUNCEMENTS (00:11:00)

The Chairman stated that these were unprecedented times and Housing and Building Services had worked exceptionally hard during a very challenging period.

## 9 PERFORMANCE AND RISK (00:11:33)

The Group had before it, and **NOTED**, a report \* from the Group Manager for Performance, Governance and Data Security providing it with an update on performance against the Corporate Plan and local service targets for 2020/2021 as well providing an update on the key business risks.

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

- This was the first report of 2020/2021 containing details of performance against the new Corporate Plan.
- The number of 'Net additional homes provided' would have a target of 393 for this year from the Local Plan.
- Targets in relation to 'Affordable Homes delivered' had not yet been set.

Discussion took place regarding:

- Figures in relation to the number of empty homes being brought back into use had dropped significantly. It was explained that, as a result of the pandemic, it had not been possible to conduct the normal number of inspections, however, it was hoped that this would be brought back on track for the remainder of the year. Consideration would need to be given towards the funding of this service when the budget was reconsidered in the autumn. A long term view would need to be taken.
- It had been difficult gaining access to some properties for repairs and gas servicing as some tenants were shielding, isolating or just unhappy about people entering their home during the pandemic.
- The number of complaints responded to on time was showing as 100% against target. The Group Manager for Performance, Governance and Data Security was asked to check this.
- Risks in relation to the 'Supply of Housing' and 'Homelessness' remained high in terms of severity.

The Group wished for their sincere thanks to be passed onto the Housing and Building teams who had had an extremely difficult job in recent months.

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

## 10 CAPITAL AND REVENUE OUTTURN FIGURES FOR 2019 / 2020 (00:22:20)

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.

This report and been presented to the Cabinet on 9<sup>th</sup> July and the recommendations within it had been approved.

The Group Manager for Finance explained that this was a generic report detailing how spending for the 2019/2020 financial year had compared against budget. The effect of the pandemic upon these reports had been minimal since they concerned the previous year. However, details were provided regarding the 3 tranches of compensation received from the Government since lockdown totalling £994k as well as payments in respect of the job retention scheme and an expected amount in relation to the income protection guarantee.

Returning to the previous financial year it was explained that at the year end the closing position had shown a deficit of £232k across all services. This had been predicted to be £252k, therefore the final position had shown a small improvement. The shortfall had been met by Ear Marked Reserves.

The following was also noted within the report:

- For 2019/20 the Housing Revenue Account (HRA) had achieved a surplus of £608k. The Cabinet had approved a transfer to the HRA Reserves in order to bring this to zero.
- A number of capital projects had been funded during the year including works at the Lords Meadow Leisure Centre, including a gym refurbishment. Six new tipper vehicles had also been purchased.
- Underspends within the capital programme had been transferred to Ear Marked Reserves.
- There had been a drop in the return on investment relating to units purchased by the Council in Market Walk and Fore Street, Tiverton. This had been as a consequence of the recent pandemic.

Discussion took place regarding:

- It was confirmed that the percentage of Council Tax not collected was divided between all beneficiaries.
- The large variance between 'budget' and 'actual' in the Corporate Management area. Impairment loans in respect of the 3 Rivers Development Co.had been a large factor in this.
- CCTV initiatives budget – more detail was requested since two of the towns did not have CCTV. The Leader informed the Group that he had met with the Police and Crime Commissioner earlier in the year to discuss initiatives to expand CCTV provision within the district. He would ask the Cabinet Member for Community Well Being to chase this up.
- Additional employee costs in the Legal & Democratic Services area. It was explained that this was in relation to election costs.
- Why expenditure costs were showing in relation to Tiverton Town Hall and the Crediton Offices when both had been sold off.

- It was difficult to predict the extent of non-collection of Council Tax at the current time since the effects of the pandemic and people's ability to pay would not be felt for some time yet. However, the current shortfall was not as significant as feared.
- Cost centre SH027, 'Depreciation', was showing a significant variance. It was explained that assets in relation to this cost centre were introduced at cost and then a revaluation process had had to take place in relation to the social housing element.
- Cost centre SH029 'Bad debt provision': There had been a significant increase between the budget and the actual figure. It was explained that a reasonable provision had had to be recalculated as a result of lockdown.
- Businesses within Tiverton Town Centre were returning and the current situation was not as bad as originally feared.
- It was noted that there appeared to be a minor housing boom at the moment.

Note: (i) \* Report previously circulated; copy attached to the signed minutes.

(ii) Cllr C Eginton declared a personal interest as he owned a business in Tiverton.

## 11 **BUILDING AND HOUSING SERVICE DELIVERY DURING THE PANDEMIC (00:51:08)**

The Group had before it, and **NOTED**, a report \* from the Group Manager for Housing Services providing an update on the work of the Building and Housing services during the national emergency arising from the Covid 19 pandemic.

The contents of the report were outlined area by area with additional reference being made to the following:

- It was predicted that the end of the Government's furlough scheme would have an effect upon the income received by the housing service.
- Homeless people had been housed in the Council's accommodation during the pandemic. There had been challenges in the Homelessness area of work with a lot of liaison Government which had also provided some additional funding from the MCHLG.
- Rather than face to face a lot of communication had taken place with tenants electronically.
- The Housing Service had worked closely with other Devon local authorities as well as the Local Resilience Forum in connection with homelessness.
- The number of gas safety inspections being able to be carried out had decreased significantly during lockdown. This had been as a result of people shielding, people in isolation or tenants just being nervous about strangers entering their home. Non-compliance had not been so much of an issue as long as tenants had maintained contact with the Council.
- It had also been difficult to maintain the routine servicing schedule during recent months.
- For tenants that were unable to access Devon Home Choice (DHC) on-line, adverts were usually placed in libraries. Also a dedicated DHC co-ordinator had been present in Phoenix House throughout lockdown and could be contacted by phone and in person when the offices were open. An auto-bid system could also be set up to bid on their behalf.

- The effect of the pandemic on income was a 'watch and wait' situation at the current time. However, it was noted that the HRA was mainly funded by tenant rent and therefore housing services would need to be tailored accordingly if there was a significant drop in tenant income. A significant number of tenants were receiving Housing Benefit or Universal Credit and this had had a positive impact upon our performance in recent weeks.
- A letter had been sent out to tenants by the Housing Minister approximately 6 weeks ago stating that there was £500m available nationally to help tenants if they were suffering financial hardship as a result of the pandemic. This was not paid directly to Council's but could be applied for via the Revenues team. This was known as the "Council Tax Hardship Scheme' and many applications to it had been made.
- It was confirmed that access to support didn't just have to be by digital means but also contact could be made by tenants on the phone or in person.
- Tenants had been extremely co-operative in terms of social distancing and disinfecting their properties when Council operatives have had to enter for maintenance or repair reasons.
- All emergency repairs had been able to be carried out during April and May. Adaptations had also still been completed enabling some people to be released from hospital early.
- The window replacement and modernisation contracts were both still on hold due to employees being furloughed.

The Group wished again to extend its thanks, and the thanks of the tenants who had spoken to Members, to the Housing Service staff for all they had done to support tenants through a very difficult time.

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

## 12 **START TIME OF MEETINGS (01:30:00)**

The Group **AGREED** to continue to hold meetings at 2.15pm on Tuesday afternoons for the remainder of the municipal year.

## 13 **IDENTIFICATION OF ITEMS FOR THE NEXT MEETING (01:32:00)**

The following items were identified for the next meeting (in addition to those already listed in the work programme):

- An update regarding the painting and decorating companies the Council used who had had to furlough their staff during the pandemic.
- Enforcement update
- Houses of multiple occupation (HMO) update
- Syrian Refugee Scheme update

(The meeting ended at 4.00 pm)

**CHAIRMAN**