

MID DEVON DISTRICT COUNCIL

MINUTES of a **MEETING** of the **HOMES POLICY DEVELOPMENT GROUP** held on 19 January 2021 at 2.15 pm

Present

Councillors

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

Also Present

Councillors

G Barnell, R M Deed, R Evans and B G J Warren

Also Present

Officers

Jill May (Director of Business Improvement and Operations), Simon Newcombe (Corporate Manager for Public Health, Regulation and Housing), Claire Fry (Housing Services Operations Manager), Catherine Yandle (Group Manager for Performance, Governance and Data Security), Ian Chilver (Group Manager for Financial Services), Mike Lowman (Building Services Operations Manager), Michael Parker (Housing Options Manager) and Sarah Lees (Member Services Officer)

42 APOLOGIES AND SUBSTITUTE MEMBERS

There were no apologies for absence although it was reported that Cllr D Coren would be arriving late to the meeting.

43 REMOTE MEETING PROTOCOL

The protocol for remote meetings was noted.

44 PUBLIC QUESTION TIME

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

45 DECLARATION OF INTERESTS UNDER THE CODE OF CONDUCT

Cllr Mrs E Andrews declared a personal interest in that she is a council tenant.

46 MINUTES

The minutes of the meeting held on 10 November 2020 were approved as a correct and accurate record of the meeting.

47 CHAIRMAN'S ANNOUNCEMENTS

The Chairman had the following announcements to make:

- He had attended the Economy Policy Development Group in the previous week where the same finance reports were discussed which would be discussed today. These were difficult times and some tough decisions would need to be made regarding the budget for next year.
- The Group were reminded that there would be an all Member briefing at 5.30pm that evening to do with Mid Devon District Council as a landlord, the Housing Revenue Account and Social Housing.

48 **PERFORMANCE AND RISK REPORT (00:08:00)**

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

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

- The report included key performance indicators up to the end of December 2020.
- 71 empty homes had now been brought back into use which was above target.
- Landlord engagement and support actions, under the area of Private Sector Housing, now stood at a figure of 12.
- Homelessness had reduced slightly but safeguarding issues remained a high priority during the ongoing pandemic.

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

49 **FINANCIAL MONITORING (00:14:00)**

The Group had before it, and **NOTED**, a month 8 financial monitoring report * which was presented by the Group Manager for Financial Services.

Key highlights within the report were listed as follows:

- Month 8 reporting showed a forecast improvement of £131k which now indicated a surplus of £109k.
- The uncertain times that we were living with and how the figures could fluctuate.
- Any surplus monies would be added to reserves to support any future gaps in budget.
- The Medium Term Financial Plan and estimates of budget gaps for future years.
- November saw a second period of lockdown which from a financial perspective stalled the recovery in service activity and therefore income.
- The income compensation scheme was active and the first payment of £530k relating to return period April to July had been received. The second return (August to November) had been accelerated and submission was currently in progress.
- A further £53k had been received in furlough monies for November.

- The variances outlined within the report.
- Month 8 reporting for the Housing Revenue Account which showed a forecast reduction in the deficit by £34k to £324k.

Discussion took place with regard to:

- Corporate Management – 3RDL fees being in relation to the recruitment of new Directors and an element of legal fees.
- ‘Garage tenancy - new lets’ had not been occurring during the pandemic. It was explained that this had been due to the need to physically handover keys. A safer method of doing this had needed to be sought and a review of the process had taken place in December. Lets had recommenced this month.
- Why the HRA was currently in a deficit position to the tune of £324k? It was explained that this related to costs in relation to the settlement of an historic contract dispute which was subject to a confidentiality agreement. An indication of the costs in relation to this was given as £624k and had this not occurred the HRA would have been in a surplus position at this point.
- A question was asked as to why there had been a salary overspend in the Property Services area. The Group Manager for Financial Services explained that he did not have the information to hand but would provide a written response to the Group following the meeting.

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

50 BUDGET 2021/22 UPDATE (00:28:00)

The Group had before it, and **NOTED**, a report * from the Deputy Chief Executive (S151) reviewing the revised draft budget changes. This had been previously considered by the Cabinet on 7 January 2021 and the Group was asked to discuss any changes that it may require prior to the formal recommendation of the budget proposals to Cabinet and Council in February.

The following was highlighted within the report:

- The current snapshot of where the council was at the current time, the deficit had reduced from circa £3m down to £490k but there was a lot more work to do.
- Key movements and assumptions shown within the report highlighting, the Funding Settlement which included details regarding the Government Income Protection Scheme, New Homes Bonus and the Lower Tier Service Grant. In addition adjustment has been made to the provision relating to the pay settlement.
- The ongoing unknown impact of the pandemic on the budget.
- Members were invited to highlight any areas of saving which they thought may contribute to closing the budget gap and so be worthy of further investigation.

Discussion took place with regard to:

- The proposals shown within the report in relation to 3 weekly waste savings. However, it was pointed out that the trial in relation to this would not begin until June 2021 and would last 3 months, outcomes were not known yet. No decision had been made in relation to this and a number of options would be

placed on the table before a final decision was made. However, the finance team had been tasked with bringing forward potential savings within the budget report and this was what they had done. Final approval of the budget would be given by full Council in February.

- It was noted that HRA recharges would be adjusted in the final draft budget to account for some minor additional changes and so align general fund and HRA budgets.
- There may or may not be a staff pay adjustment in the coming year. The result of any discussions or negotiations regarding this were not known yet but the finance team had assumed a small increase of 0.5% for budget purposes.

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

51 **DRAFT 2021/2022 HOUSING REVENUE ACCOUNT (HRA) (00:47:00)**

The Group had before it a report * from the Deputy Chief Executive and Corporate Manager for Public Health, Regulation and Housing presenting proposals for the second draft of the Housing Revenue Account for 2021/22.

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

- The HRA was ring fenced and legally required to be kept separate from the General Fund (GF).
- The HRA had not suffered as extensively as the GF due to the pandemic receiving the majority of its income from rents. Rental income had been maintained but risks in relation to this going forwards were acknowledged within the report.
- There had been a small improvement in dwelling rents relating to the annual CPI increment.
- The HRA investment income figures were reflective of the general state of the financial markets at the moment.
- There has been recognition of further savings within Repairs and Maintenance of £146k, largely relating to a restructure which included the redevelopment budget.
- Cleaning company costs had been adjusted for.
- Falling interest rate adjustments had taken place.
- Overall, the HRA budget, like the GF, had to balance.

Consideration was given to:

- The “rent written off” figure and the “write offs recovered” were discussed. Further information regarding these values as a % of total outstanding debt was made. The Group Manager for Financial Services stated that he would be able to provide a written response after the meeting when he had the necessary information to hand.
- Non dwelling rental income being down on what was expected – what proportion of this was due to garages not being re-let? The Group Manager again stated that he would provide a written response in relation to this question.
- Interest on previous loans and the effect of this on the HRA? More information in relation to this would be provided after the meeting.

- The Group requested that the written responses be supplied to Member Services who would then circulate them to the whole Group.

RECOMMENDED to the Cabinet that the rent increase proposed and the other budget proposals for 2021/2022 be approved.

(Proposed by the Chairman)

Reason for decision:

A balanced and realistic budget must be set for 2021/2022 in order to maintain a sustainable Housing Revenue Account with adequate investment for necessary maintenance.

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

(ii) Cllr Coren arrived to the meeting half way through the discussion and therefore did not take part in the vote.

(iii) Cllrs L Cruwys and S Clist requested that their abstention from voting be recorded.

52 **CONDITION AND FUTURE USE OF COUNCIL OWNED GARAGES (01:01:00)**

The Group had before it a report * from the Corporate Manager for Public Health, Regulation and Housing and the Building Services Operations Manager providing an update to Members on the current garage stock situation, with plans for modernisations and opportunities for change of use/redevelopment, and the adoption of a 6 year rather than the existing 12 year planned maintenance programme.

The following was referenced within the report:

- There had been an annual budget of £75k to support a planned maintenance programme of the council's garage stock. Overall occupancy was currently at 70% although of the 199 garages that had been modernised 83% were now occupied.
- The report provided an annexe showing all garage sites, exact occupancy rates and the condition of each site.
- A number of garages had been identified as having the potential for alternative uses.
- There was an opportunity to bring forward increased occupancy and income by doubling the rate of modernisation and reducing this from a 12 yearly to a 6 yearly planned maintenance programme. There was capacity within the Building Services team to meet this programme but not if it were to be shortened to fewer than 6 years

Consideration was given to:

- Many garages were now too small for the size of modern cars.
- The garages at Eastlands in Hemyock were not shown within the annexe as they were ground rent plots.
- Significant problems with asbestos and how it was to be dealt with safely.

- Increasing number of voids over recent years and the effect of this on income.
- The Group appreciated the work that had gone into the report.
- The very poor state of repair of many garages with vegetation growing inside and out.
- Derelict garages within the Cranmore Ward.
- The dangers presented to children and families living near to some of these garages.
- The importance of the need to keep Ward Members updated and involved with any garage plans going forwards. Also, for Ward Members to bring particular issues to the attention of the neighbourhood teams so issues could be addressed.
- It was confirmed that Members would be involved in the consultation process, as of course, would tenants.
- The possibility of demolishing some garages and providing social housing or parking bays would be explored.
- A programme of garage maintenance and modernisation would be provided for the whole of the district not just one particular part of it.
- A 6 yearly programme was realistic and could be achievable.
- The possibility of providing one large garage rather than 2 small ones was discussed as was the provision of electric charging points.
- Key considerations would be demand, conditions and suitability for development. Some sites may not be suitable for development. Each site would need to be assessed individually.
- In considering the recommendation, the Group discussed whether the stated 'maintenance' programme also included 'modernisation'? The Corporate Manager for Public Health, Regulation and housing stated that it did, they were part and parcel of the planned programme and the Leader of the Council confirmed that when the recommendation came forward to the Cabinet, approval would be considered on that basis.

RECOMMENDED to the Cabinet that the adoption of a 6 yearly planned garage maintenance programme by bringing forward budgeted funds from future years be approved.

(Proposed by Cllr L Cruwys and seconded by Cllr S Clist)

Reason for the decision:

In order to recommend the adoption of a 6 yearly planned garage maintenance and modernisation programme by bringing forward budgeted funds from future years.

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

53 **GRASS VERGES LOCATED ON HOUSING REVENUE ACCOUNT REPORT (01:58:00)**

The Group had before it a report * from the Corporate Manager for Public Health, Regulation and Housing setting out a policy / procedure relating to a decision making framework which was agreed at the meeting of the Grass Verges Task and Finish Group held on 11 November 2020.

The work of the Task and Finish Group was explained. The Chairman of the Task and Finish Group provided the following summary of the discussions that had taken place:

- He thanked the Members and officers who had worked hard to try and ascertain what was needed.
- Initially there had been discussions about viewing all 180 maps showing the areas of land in question. This had felt like an impossible task, he had therefore spent time with the Operations Manager for Housing trying to understand the true scale of the problem. It had transpired that issues existed in a few areas only and related to areas which were part owned by private individuals and partly rented by council tenants. Individuals from each group had had their own ideas about how grassed areas were to be dealt with. A procedure was needed to help resolve queries going forwards.
- He had also spoken to Cllr Eginton on this issue who had a deal of knowledge in this area.

Discussion took place regarding:

- There were specific issues in Shobrooke which this procedure may not be helpful in resolving.
- Site visits were very difficult during the pandemic.
- ‘One size did not fit all’ and a review would be needed in the near future to see if the procedure was working. It was confirmed that the procedure would be reviewed in 12 months time.

RECOMMENDED to the Cabinet that the following be approved:

- a) The procedure shown at Appendix A which is designed to ensure that the conflicting needs of stakeholders are taken into account when residents make requests regarding different maintenance arrangements/agreements relating to the upkeep of grass verges and other grassed areas on the housing estate.***
- b) An increase in the Environmental Improvement Budget to £10,000 and a review of the procedures relating to it to ensure that it can be better used to support initiatives designed to encourage greater biodiversity.***

(Proposed by Cllr C Eginton and seconded by Cllr R Dolley)

Reason for the decision:

In order for a policy / procedure to be in place which provides a decision making framework for officers within the Estates team to use when considering requests made by different stakeholders.

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

(ii) A proposal to defer a decision until there had been some further dialogue with the necessary parties involved was not supported.

54 **HOUSING STRATEGY UPDATE (02:16:00)**

The Group had before it, and **NOTED**, a report * from the Corporate Manager for Public Health, Regulation and Housing providing an update to Members of the Group on the development of a revised corporate Housing Strategy.

It was explained that the report set out the preliminary work that had been completed in the development of an updated Housing Strategy. This would set out those opportunities and challenges in respect of several key delivery functions; housing delivery, enabling and renewal/standards alongside housing needs and homelessness.

Consideration was given to:

- The proposed approach appearing to contain a well structured set of proposals and the need to progress this in a post Covid world.
- It was also sensible to include climate change and eco / green considerations in relation to any projects.
- The Strategic Housing Needs Assessment was vital so as to look at all housing tenures, not just affordable housing.
- The Corporate Manager for Property, Leisure and Climate Change would be leading on the carbon work and was a member of the Project Board as well as the newly appointed Climate Change Officer. There would be a range of experts addressing this key part of the strategy.

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

55 **HOUSING HOMELESS PEOPLE DURING THE PANDEMIC (02:27:00)**

The Group had before it, and **NOTED**, a report * from the Operations Manager for Housing Services providing more information about how the Housing Options Team had been working to resolve homelessness during the pandemic.

The contents of the report were summarised by the Operations Manager with an emphasis on safeguarding homeless individuals being a high priority within the Housing Service.

The Cabinet Member for Housing and Property Services and Deputy Leader wished to place on public record his thanks to the Operations Manager and her team for the magnificent job they had undertaken and were continuing to undertake on behalf of Homeless people during the pandemic. He explained that a lot of work took place behind the scenes and that the sheer nature of the work involved emotional individuals and subjects.

The Group also wished for their thanks to be taken back to the team.

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

56 **IDENTIFICATION OF ITEMS FOR THE NEXT MEETING (02:46:00)**

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

However, it was requested that all Members receive a regular email update on relevant matters within the Housing and Property Service areas, especially during the current time. This was especially helpful to the Homes Policy Development Group Members.

(The meeting ended at 5.00 pm)

CHAIRMAN