

MID DEVON DISTRICT COUNCIL

MINUTES of a **MEETING** of the **HOMES POLICY DEVELOPMENT GROUP** held on 16 March 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, C J Eginton,
S J Penny and Mrs C P Daw

Also Present

Councillors

R M Deed and R Evans

Also Present

Officers

Jill May (Director of Business Improvement and Operations), Simon Newcombe (Corporate Manager for Public Health, Regulation and Housing), Paul Deal (Corporate Manager for Finance), Claire Fry (Housing Services Operations Manager), Mike Lowman (Building Services Operations Manager), Catherine Yandle (Operations Manager for Performance, Governance and Health & Safety), J P McLachlan (Principal Accountant), Jason Ball (Climate and Sustainability Specialist) and Sarah Lees (Member Services Officer)

57 APOLOGIES AND SUBSTITUTE MEMBERS

There were no apologies for absence.

58 PROTOCOL FOR REMOTE MEETINGS

The protocol for remote meetings was noted.

59 PUBLIC QUESTION TIME

There were no members of the public present.

60 DECLARATION OF INTERESTS UNDER THE CODE OF CONDUCT

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

61 MINUTES

The minutes of the meeting held on 19 January 2021 were approved as a correct and accurate record of the meeting.

62 CHAIRMAN'S ANNOUNCEMENTS

The Chairman stated that 12 months ago the PDG had met in Phoenix House, he had not anticipated that the Group would still be meeting virtually a year on.

63 PERFORMANCE AND RISK (00:07:00)

The Group had before it a report * from the Operations Manager for Performance, Governance and Health & Safety providing it with an update on performance against the Corporate Plan and local service targets for 2020/21 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 Group were referred to the proposed targets for the next financial year against the Corporate Plan Performance Framework with a request that they be considered for recommendation to the Cabinet for approval.
- Regarding Council housing, all measures were either at or just below target.

Discussion took place regarding:

- The disappointing number of empty homes: It was explained however that this was common across the country at the moment and there were many reasons as to why this was potentially the case. These reasons included a possible state of disrepair, homes not being habitable, complex probate issues or the owners waiting to redevelop. The number being monitored currently by Private Sector Housing stood at 388. The Empty Homes plan focusses on those empty for more than six months with particular attention on those empty for more than 2 years.
- Whether the target of 20 new Council houses was achievable. It was stated that this was a realistic target but was dependent on many factors including the use of Right to Buy receipts which local authorities were awaiting a decision on from the Ministry of Housing, Communities & Local Government (MHCLG). Councils across the country were lobbying Government very hard for the right to be able to use these receipts to best effect for the housing provision within their own areas.
- More information being needed regarding the proposed target in relation to the provision of gypsy and traveller pitches. It was anticipated that the Housing Strategy which would be brought before the Group later in the year, would include consideration of this provision.

RECOMMENDED to the Cabinet that the targets suggested for 2021/22 against the Corporate Plan Performance Framework be approved.

(Proposed by the Chairman)

Reason for the decision:

If performance is not monitored the Council may fail to meet its corporate and local service plan targets or to take appropriate corrective action where necessary. If key business risks are not identified and monitored they cannot be mitigated effectively.

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

64 **FINANCIAL MONITORING (00:36:00)**

The Group had before it, and **NOTED**, a month 10 financial monitoring report * which was presented by the Principal Accountant.

Key highlights within the report were listed as follows:

- The month 10 reporting indicated a deficit of £46k which was an improvement of £43k.
- The Council was awaiting the outcome of the second Income Compensation Scheme.
- Regarding the HRA – the month 10 reporting showed a forecast reduction in the deficit by £193k to £37k which was a significant improvement.
- The Group were informed of the relevant salient points from the recent budget announced by the Chancellor, these included:
 - The extension of the Furlough scheme until September 2021
 - £20 increase in Universal Credit for another 6 months
 - Business Rate relief extended for another year
 - Funding confirmed for re-start grants
 - Test and Trace – the £500 given to individuals had been extended
 - Levelling up Fund for local authorities would be provided under the three themes of transport, regeneration and culture

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

65 **DEVON HOME CHOICE POLICY REVIEW (00:45:00)**

The Group had before it a report * from the Operations Manager for Housing and the Corporate Manager for Public Health, Regulation and Housing. The Management Board of the Devon Home Choice scheme had undertaken a consultation on proposed changes to associated policy and procedures and this report provides more information about this. Individual local authority members of the scheme had been asked to approve the adoption of these changes.

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

- The Devon Home Choice Scheme, which Mid Devon District Council had signed up to, was the mechanism by which housing need was assessed and how homes were allocated.
- There had been some minor changes over the years but more significant changes had been proposed recently which required consultation.

At a recent Management Board meeting not all the proposed changes had been agreed. The Operations Manager for Housing Services referred to each of the proposals listed in the report and provided an update:

Proposal 1 – related to bidding for larger 1 bed properties where applicants are lacking two bedrooms. This was agreed by the Board but the landlord would have discretion to decide whether or not the property met the needs of the family. Adverts would specify the household numbers.

Proposal 2 – related to some of the new products on the market now such as ‘Rent to Buy’ or ‘Build to Rent’. A new question had been added to the application form to ensure that people were aware of the other options available to them.

Proposal 3 – related to maximum occupancy of larger properties. Sometimes larger properties had different occupancy levels due to the size of bedrooms and could be reconfigured with the members of the household deciding how best to make use of the space available to them.

Proposal 4 – related to occupancy of high-rise flats by younger children. This was agreed by the Management Board but was not really applicable to Mid Devon as there were no large blocks of flats taller than 4 stories in the district.

Proposal 5 – related to those household members who could not succeed to a tenancy following the death of a tenant. It was agreed that some priority be given members of a household left in use to tenants who cannot succeed the tenancy.

Proposal 6 – related to management of financial risk. It was agreed that wording in relation to rent arrears be revised.

Proposal 7 – related to the assessment of cases where there was overcrowding. The suggested revision of the wording from 2 children to 2 people was not agreed by the Management Board.

Proposal 8 – related to the award of priority for rehousing when hazards may be present in a home. The Board felt that greater clarification was needed before a decision could be made in relation to this.

Discussion took place with regard to:

- Clarity was sought regarding the rights of an older child should his or her parents pass away. It was confirmed that the new provisions suggested did not conflict with our own policy relating to tenancy changes. Someone left in a property could apply for a homeless assessment and they would be given priority for rehousing. However, in order to make best use of stock, if the property was too large, they may be offered more suitable alternative accommodation.
- The importance of a garden to families with children.
- Being part of the Devon Home Choice letting system provided a consistent approach across the whole county.
- The Government had been undertaking some consultation regarding how houses should be allocated and more information regarding this would be presented to the next meeting.

RECOMMENDED to the Cabinet that the following proposed changes to the Devon Home Choice Scheme be approved (as listed within the report):

Proposal 1
Proposal 3
Proposal 4
Proposal 5
Proposal 6

(Proposed by Cllr L Cruwys and seconded by Cllr Mrs C Daw)

Reason for the decision:

Failure to run a housing register that is transparent could result in complaints from people who feel that they have been unfairly disadvantaged and this could result in reputational damage.

Note: (i) * Report previously circulated; copy attached to the signed minutes.
(ii) It was not recommended that proposals 2, 7 or 8 be approved.

66 HOUSING OMBUDSMAN SERVICE COMPLAINT HANDLING CODE - REVIEW OF COMPLIANCE (01:11:00)

The Group had before it, and **NOTED**, a report * from the Corporate Manager for Public Health, Regulation and Housing. The Housing Service was required to undertake an assessment against the Complaints Handling Code published by the Housing Ombudsman Service and to publish the outcome before 31 December 2020. This report contains information on this exercise and an update on the service improvements identified as a result of the findings.

The contents of the report were outlined with reference to:

- The results of the self assessment could be seen within the report.
- There were many areas that the Housing Services performed well in and there were some that needed improvement.
- The strict new code would require dedicated resources to handle any complaints.
- A formalised process would be needed to review findings.
- There was now an extra onus on the Housing Authority as a landlord as a result of the stricter code.

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

67 HOUSING DELIVERY UPDATE REPORT (01:19:00)

The Group had before it a report * from the Operations Manager for Housing and the Corporate Manager for Public Health, Regulation and Housing providing an update on enforcement and other activity undertaken by officers in the Housing Service.

The following issues were referred to within the report:

- The Neighbourhood teams had been able to undertake a range of work between lockdowns.
- The Government had announced a further pause to evictions.

Discussion took place regarding:

- The level of debt in relation to rent was actually going down which was a credit to the officers working in this area. There had been much engagement with tenants, many conversations and a helpful approach had been employed by all involved.

- There had needed to be some enforcement activity regarding drug activity in Tiverton and the Police had been involved

The Cabinet Member for Housing and Property Services requested that his thanks and congratulations to the Housing team be formally noted. This was endorsed by the Group.

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

68 **CHAIRMAN'S ANNUAL REPORT FOR 2020/2021**

The Group had before it, and **NOTED**, a draft report * from the Chairman of the Group on its work during 2020/2021. A final copy of the report would be submitted to Council on 28 April 2021.

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

69 **IDENTIFICATION OF ITEMS FOR THE NEXT MEETING**

No additional items were requested to be on the agenda for the next meeting other than those already listed in the work programme.

(The meeting ended at 3.48 pm)

CHAIRMAN