

## **MID DEVON DISTRICT COUNCIL**

**MINUTES** of a **MEETING** of the **HOMES POLICY DEVELOPMENT GROUP** held on 17 January 2023 at 2.15 pm

### **Present**

#### **Councillors**

R J Dolley (Chairman), G Barnell (attended via Zoom)  
J Bartlett, J Cairney, D R Coren, R Evans, P J Heal and  
L J Cruwys

### **Apology**

#### **Councillor**

S J Clist

### **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), Sue Hanwell (Operations Manager for Housing), Mike Lowman (Building Services Operations Manager), Lisa Lewis (Corporate Manager for Business Transformation and Customer Engagement), Tanya Wenham (Operations Manager for Public Health and Housing Options), Sam Barnett (Housing Initiatives Officer), Andrew Seaman (Member Services Manager) and Sarah Lees (Member Services Officer)

## **47 Apologies and Substitute Members**

Apologies were received from Cllr S Clist who was substituted by Cllr L Cruwys.

Cllr G Barnell attended the meeting via Zoom.

## **48 Public Question Time**

There were no members of the public present and none had registered to ask a question in advance.

## **49 Declaration of Interests under the Code of Conduct**

No interests were declared under this item.

## **50 Minutes**

The minutes of the meeting held on 15<sup>th</sup> November 2022 were agreed as a true and accurate record and signed by the Chairman.

## **51 Chairman's Announcements**

The Chairman had no announcements to make.

## 52 **2023/24 Budget Update (00:06:00)**

The Group had before it, and **NOTED**, a report \* from the Deputy Chief Executive (S151). This report updates the General Fund deficit to the current position of £905k and proposes options to consider to achieve the statutorily required neutrality. The HRA Budget position shows a balanced position for 2023/24 and a reduced shortfall across the remainder of the MTFP.

Key highlights within the report were as follows:

- The services reporting to this committee have small budgets that are largely funding through external funding, thereby making the identification of savings difficult.
- The draft budget still had a residual gap with inflation, not grant cuts, being the chief cause.
- Other influencing factors included the rise in energy costs, a rise in pay and pension contributions and slightly lower Council Tax income due to the loss of any surpluses.
- Towns and Parish Council's had been approached to discuss options for financial support towards service provision, however, there had not been a great deal of response so far.
- Pay assumptions had been reviewed as had Business Rate income and the Asset Management Programme.
- The turnover of staff and vacancy assessment. A robust process was in place to assess each vacant post in terms of income generating opportunities and health and safety risks.
- Some areas of the Council's activity needed to be topped up going forwards such as providing sufficient budget for Planning Appeals.
- The outcome of 3 Rivers Ltd was not yet known.
- The Housing Revenue Account (HRA) was currently showing a balanced position, with below inflation assumptions for Rental Income and a significant plan for housing development.

Discussion took place with regard to:

- More detail was requested regarding the housing development programme. It was confirmed that this would be included within a Housing Strategy update report to be presented to the next meeting but a firmer idea of the HRA budget for next year was needed first.
- Opportunities for income generation existed within the HRA, particularly within the Repairs and Maintenance area.
- Opportunities to develop old garages into housing units.

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

## 53 **Tenant Involvement and Empowerment update (00:40:00)**

The Group had before it, and **NOTED**, a report \* from the Corporate Manager for Public Health, Regulation and Housing providing an update to Members on the work relating to tenant involvement and empowerment and how this supports statutory and regulatory obligations including important changes to the social housing regulatory regime.

Key highlights within the report were identified as follows and discussion took place regarding:

- The new Regulations required the Council to report on a number of factors with the vast majority relating to Tenant Satisfaction therefore work around this was very important.
- New Tenant Champion roles were being advertised.
- Very good lines of communication between Tenants and the Council were already in operation.
- Small wins made a big difference to Tenants.
- A 'Winter Warm Club' continued to run and provided a good opportunity for the Neighbourhood Teams to have face to face contact with Tenants.

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

#### 54 **Damp & Mould Review (00:55:00)**

The Group received a presentation from the Corporate Manager for Public Health, Regulation and Housing regarding damp and mould in Housing.

Key elements within the presentation were as follows:

- Reference was made to a tragic case recently in the media and the conclusions of the Coroner.
- As a result a detailed, timely and combined response had been provided by Mid Devon Housing and Public Health Services to Government.
- A recently completed in-depth review of the situation within the Mid Devon Housing stock had already been undertaken and the results of this were available on the website.
- Every report of damp and mould was investigated (both private sector housing standards and as a landlord). A large number of factors could be responsible for damp and mould, including the age of a property and how much ventilation there was.
- A dedicated Mid Devon Housing Damp and Mould policy would be drawn up later in the year following updated guidance from the Government.
- Damp and Mould would always occur especially in a country with high seasonal temperature variations and varied housing stock.
- The importance of managing complaints to ensure there is no long-term exposure to persistent damp and mould.

Consideration was given to:

- Damp and mould having long term health implications.
- More private homes did not meet the Decent Homes Standard compared to the Council's Housing stock. Private Sector landlords faced a number of challenges with this.
- Damp and mould occurred in properties both in the rural and the urban environments.

## 55 **Private Sector Housing Assistance Policy (01:22:00)**

The Group had before it a report from the Corporate Manager for Public Health, Regulation and Housing present a revised Housing Assistance Policy under Article 4 of the Regulatory Reform (Housing Assistance) (England and Wales) Order 2002, following a review of the current Housing Assistance Policy 2019-22.

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

- It was confirmed that the Private Sector Housing team looked after this area of work and that there was a real focus on trying to keep people safe in their homes and offering advice and support with grants and adaptations.
- Staff involved in the delivery of this were funded by the Better Care Fund which was a pot of money available to local authorities to support tenants in the Private Sector.

Discussion took place with regard to:

- The range of comprehensive help that was available to support Tenants.
- Disabled Facility Grants being used to make adaptations within homes needing them.
- There would always be properties that were impossible to adapt but the funding and support available often helped to unlock some of these barriers.

**RECOMMENDED** to the Cabinet that:

1. It approves the revised Housing Assistance Policy 2022-2025 attached in Annex A.
2. That delegated authority is given to the Corporate Manager for Public Health, Regulation and Housing, in consultation with the Cabinet Member for Housing, to make minor adjustments to the policy based on demand and local priorities.
3. That delegated authority is given to the Corporate Manager for Public Health, Regulation and Housing, in consultation with the Cabinet Member for Housing, to suspend some or all non-mandatory parts of the revised Housing Assistance Policy attached in Annex A (all elements of the Policy other than Section 4 Mandatory Disabled Facilities Grants) if adequate funding is not available.

(Proposed by Cllr P Heal and seconded by Cllr B Evans)

### Reason for decision

As set out in the report.

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

## 56 **Void Management Policy (01:42:00)**

The Group had before it a report \* from the Corporate Manager for Public Health, Regulation and Housing. An updated, draft policy on the management of void properties within the Council's housing stock is presented to Members. This has

been developed following an in-depth review of voids management and with an aim to ensure that properties which become void continue to be re-let as quickly and efficiently as possible. The policy also seeks to balance this approach with the needs of tenants and the requirement to maintain our properties to an appropriate, safe lettings standard whilst retaining a sustainable stock and Housing Revenue Account.

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

- The management of void was undertaken as quickly and as efficiently as possible, carefully balanced with the requirement for effective stock management in order to provide a decent, sustainable estate for the future
- Housing stock had to be 'fit for purpose' when re-let and going forwards.
- The Cabinet Member for Housing and officers had overseen a thorough review of this area, listening to views of all members and taking into account the findings of Devon Audit Partnership audit commissioned by the Mid Devon Housing.
- The updated policy sought to provide clarity on all aspects of voids management
- Previous re-letting targets had been unrealistic and unachievable.
- Recent constraints had included the ability to get materials quickly as well of regulatory pressures alongside new pressures from increasing levels of tenant damage, decarbonisation of our properties and meeting Decent Homes Standards.
- New targets were more measurable and achievable and there were 4 new categories of Voids.
- The proposed overarching occupancy rate target of 97%.
- The views of tenants had been listened to.
- There would be more financial monitoring going forwards.
- It was proposed that the revised policy be reviewed in 12 months time allowing for additional engagement with tenants who had experienced the updated voids approach.

**RECOMMENDED** to the Cabinet that it approves the updated Voids Management Policy contained in Annex B.

(Proposed by Cllr P Heal and seconded by Cllr L Cruwys)

Reason for decision

As set out in the report.

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

**57 Identification of items for the next meeting (01:55:00)**

Members **NOTED** the items listed in the work programme for the next meeting.

(The meeting ended at 4.14 pm)

**CHAIRMAN**