

MID DEVON DISTRICT COUNCIL

MINUTES of a MEETING of the DECENT AND AFFORDABLE HOMES POLICY DEVELOPMENT GROUP held on 17 March 2015 at 2.15 pm

Present

Councillors

P J Heal (Chairman)
Mrs E M Andrews, W J Daw (Vice
Chairman), D J Knowles, R F Radford,
Mrs J Rendle and R Wright

Also Present

Councillors

C J Eginton, Mrs J Roach and R L Stanley

Also Present

Officers:

Nick Sanderson (Head of Housing and Property Services),
Clare Fry (Housing Services Manager), Helen Carty
(Housing Policy Officer), Andrew Cawdron (Finance
Manager), David Snape (Supported Housing Manager),
Hedley Steele (Private Sector Housing Lead Officer),
Sandra Hunt (Tenant Involvement Manager), Catherine
Yandle (Internal Audit Team Leader) and Sarah Lees
(Member Services Officer)

52 APOLOGIES AND SUBSTITUTE MEMBERS

There were no apologies for absence.

53 PUBLIC QUESTION TIME

There were no members of the public present.

54 MINUTES

The Minutes of the Meeting held on 20 January 2015 were approved as an accurate record and **SIGNED** by the Chairman.

55 CHAIRMAN'S ANNOUNCEMENTS

The Chairman had no announcements to make.

56 MEETING MANAGEMENT

The Chairman informed the Group that he would take item 6 on the agenda before item 5.

57 DRAFT TENANT INVOLVEMENT STRATEGY (00:02:09)

The Group had before it a report * from the Housing Services Manager (HSM) reviewing the existing Tenant Involvement Strategy which was now due for review.

The HSM outlined the contents of the report stating that the strategy was based upon the principles of co-regulation and that the Council had an obligation to give tenants opportunities to get involved. Tenants were less inclined to engage with the Council in traditional ways and electronic methods of communication such as Facebook and Twitter were proving far more popular. She further explained that there was a very active Scrutiny Improvement Group with committed tenant representation.

As part of the Council's commitment to tenant involvement it was able to organise training to suit tenant's individual needs. These skills, once acquired, could be transferable into wider community activities.

Discussion took place regarding neighbourhood walkabouts and whether checks for repair needs actually did take place. It was confirmed that it was good practice for the Council to carry out these checks in consultation with tenants themselves. The most common areas of concern were trip hazards, damaged gutters and overgrown hedges on communal paths.

Unfortunately the Group had only been sent a copy of the strategy itself the day prior to the meeting, therefore this had not given the Group enough time to consider the matter thoroughly enough in advance of the meeting.

RESOLVED that consideration of the Tenant Involvement Strategy be deferred until the next meeting.

(Proposed by Cllr D J Knowles and seconded by Cllr E M Andrews)

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

58 **DRAFT TENANT INVOLVEMENT POLICY (00:12:55)**

The Group had before it a report * from the Housing Services Manager (HSM) reviewing the existing Tenant Involvement Policy which was now due for review.

The HSM stated that the report set out the Council's commitment and contractual obligations to tenants which included an equality duty under the provisions of the Equality Act 2010 and there was some discussion regarding the obligation to consult secure tenants on changes to tenancy agreement. It was noted that it is good practice to provide tenants with training if necessary to enable them to participate and make a contribution.

Unfortunately the Group had only been sent a copy of the policy itself the day prior to the meeting, therefore there had not been enough time to consider the matter thoroughly enough in advance of the meeting.

RESOLVED that consideration of the Tenant Involvement Policy be deferred until the next meeting.

(Proposed by Cllr D K Knowles and seconded by Cllr E M Andrews)

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

59 FINANCIAL UPDATE FOR THE TEN MONTHS TO 31 JANUARY 2015 (00:17:00)

The Group had before it a report * from the Head of Finance presenting a financial update in respect of the income and expenditure so far in the year.

Key highlights within the report included the following:

- A surplus of £107k on General Funding Housing Account which was a significant improvement compared to the last monitoring report. This related to a reduction in bad debt provision based on a detailed review of previous years and income being received.
- The Housing Revenue Account showed a surplus of £344k, this included £149k of revenue contribution to capital which was not required for this financial year and some staff savings.
- The major repairs reserve would have a projected balance of over £500k.
- It was confirmed that funds would be carried forward to the following financial year.

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

60 MEETING MANAGEMENT

The Chairman informed the Group that he would take item 9 on the agenda next followed by item 8.

61 AFFORDABLE HOUSING PROJECTS UPDATE (00:19:00)

The Group had before it a report * from the Head of Housing and Property Services (HoHPS) providing it with details of current developments in respect of the Council's affordable housing programme and proposed future schemes.

The HoHPS outlined the contents of the report which included the following:

- The new borrowing arrangements in relation to the Housing Revenue Account Self-Financing which had enabled extra spending on the Council's existing stock and also some affordable housing schemes to be developed in Crediton, Willand and St Andrew's Street, Tiverton.
- A number of additional potential affordable housing schemes.

Discussion took place with regard to the need to take advantage of Homes and Communities Agency (HCA) grant funding as well as other funding sources for the continued provision of affordable housing in the District. Sometimes these funding opportunities were time limited therefore the HoHPS, in consultation with the Cabinet Member for Housing, needed to be able to act quickly. The current arrangements within the Constitution prevented this.

Further discussion took place with regard to:

- The Council did not currently have a scheme on its own land within Cullompton but if sites were identified it would be willing to consider any suitable scheme.
- The Council had a commitment to act as a housing 'enabler' and to facilitate as many affordable housing schemes as it could within available resources.

RECOMMENDED to the Cabinet that it be recommended to full Council that delegated authority be given to the Head of Housing and Property Services, in consultation with the Cabinet Member for Housing, to apply for Homes and Communities Agency (HCA) or any other funding for the continued provision of affordable housing in the District.

(Proposed by Cllr Mrs J R Rendle and seconded by Cllr R F Radford)

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

62 **PERFORMANCE AND RISK REPORT FOR THE FIRST THREE QUARTERS OF 2014-15 (00:46:39)**

The Group had before it, and **NOTED**, a report * from the Head of Communities and Governance providing it with an update on performance against the Corporate Plan and local service targets for 2014/15 as well as providing an update on the key business risks.

It was explained that most performance indicators were on target with the exception of 'Delivering 15 homes per year by bringing empty houses into use' and the 'Number of affordable homes delivered', however, there were factors relating to this that were outside of the Council's control. Also, the 'Percentage of Decent Homes' was currently below target, however, it was explained that 82 homes had refused access to the Council to carry out the works necessary. Finally, the percentage of homes without a valid gas safety certificate was also very slightly below target, the reason for this being that access had also been refused but the Council had policies in place to deal with this.

A brief discussion took place regarding how many Council properties are re-let per year. It was confirmed that currently there were around 250 voids and mutual exchanges per year.

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

63 **COUNCIL MOTION NO. 514 (COUNCILLOR MRS J ROACH - 19 JANUARY 2015) (00:51:08)**

Consideration was given to the following Motion referred by Council to this Group:

"That this Council considers and investigates the possibility of applying to the Secretary of State to transfer Charlton Lodge to Mid Devon District Council (Localism Act Sect 15) to enable Mid Devon District Council to provide a scheme similar to the Abundant Life Project being run at Dartington."

Cllr Mrs Roach spoke regarding the Motion and began by explaining that there were two important issues regarding her Motion. One was that the Council needed to look

into the possibility of using Section 15 of the Localism Act to transfer Charlton Lodge from Devon County Council to Mid Devon District Council. The second issue related to the fact that these homes were valuable resources lying empty. The residents of Mid Devon perceived them as belonging to the district and had concerns regarding where the money was going to if they were sold. She further explained that there were many different community housing schemes available. Reference was made to some excellent models in Norway. Investigations needed to take place to understand what the opportunities were and what would be required to make them work. She questioned what the Council was doing to empower people and how was it helping them as they got older. In her view problems were being looked at in isolation, however, a more holistic approach was needed.

The Head of Housing and Property Services agreed that the matter needed further investigation and that the Council could look at the options. However, he was not sure if the Abundant Life example would work in Mid Devon. He did not see the Council as being the provider of a care home facility but rather consideration could be given to it being an 'enabler' but it would need to be right for the area.

The Cabinet Member for Housing informed the Group that he had met with the Chief Executive and a leading member of the Barnhaven Community Care proposal to discuss this matter but the finances hadn't 'stacked up' and there had been a heavy reliance on the voluntary sector.

A Member stated that the Council's role as an 'enabler' was very important and that it was right to raise this as an issue needing investigation. There was a great need for care facilities but any potential scheme needed to be right for the district and specifically the area the building was in.

It was therefore **AGREED** that the issues raised were worthy of further investigation and that the Head of Housing would report back to the Group at their meeting in June.

RESOLVED that the Council be recommended to support Motion 514.

(Proposed by the Chairman)

64 **COUNCIL MOTION NO. 516 (COUNCILLOR MRS J ROACH - 22 JANUARY 2015)
(01:02:48)**

Consideration was given to the following Motion referred by Council to this Group:

"That this Council resolves to investigate the possibility of acquiring Charlton Lodge, Orchard Lea and Bampton residential Homes in order to meet unmet housing needs in this district."

Cllr Mrs Roach spoke regarding the Motion and stated that the tax payers of Mid Devon had paid for the building of these care homes and that any proceeds acquired from the selling of them should be used to address other housing needs. She referred to the needs of the homeless and also again to the various community housing models available. She asked whether there was a possibility the Council could acquire these assets as well as encouraging social enterprise. The Localism Act provided opportunities for communities to acquire assets of community value and

by working with the Council there was a tremendous opportunity which should not be missed.

She further asked whether it was possible to acquire the care homes through an asset transfer and to then set up a committee of interested partners who could then seek the necessary funding.

It was agreed that Legal Services needed to investigate what was possible under Section 15 of the Localism Act.

Discussion took place regarding the condition of some of the buildings and the fact that they might need to be demolished and rebuilt which would be a great expense.

A Member commented that investigations needed to be made to ascertain the state of repair regarding all the buildings concerned. It may be that some were more useable than others or have more potential.

It was therefore **AGREED** that the issues raised were worthy of further investigation and that the Head of Housing would report back to the Group at their meeting in June.

RESOLVED that the Council be recommended to support Motion 516.

(Proposed by Cllr W J Daw and seconded by Cllr R F Radford)

65 **HOMES AND COMMUNITIES (HCA) CONSUMER STANDARDS (01:16:59)**

The Group had before it, and **NOTED**, a briefing paper * from the Housing Services Manager updating it on the Homes and Communities (HCA) Consumer Standards and compliance with complaint handling.

It was explained that the whole regulatory process was underpinned by the principles of co-regulation meaning that tenants had a role in scrutinising what the Council did for its tenants. It was good practice to set out what the Council's roles and responsibilities were. The paper also set out what the regulator would do if they found a 'serious detriment'.

It was important to publish data on performance, compliance and other matters as appropriate in order to reassure Members that the Council was doing all it could to secure the health and safety of its tenants. The Housing Ombudsman Service committed to dispute resolution and will not intervene in a complaint if the Council does not have a contractual relationship with the complainant. However, if an owner/occupier remains dissatisfied once they have exhausted the Council's complaints procedure, they could take legal action against a Council. It was noted that sometimes compensation has to be paid if a complaint made by a tenant is upheld.

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

66 **RENTPLUS (01:26:17)**

The Group had before it, and **NOTED**, a briefing paper from the Housing Enabler & Business Support Manager providing information regarding a new affordable housing product. The scheme was explained as being a contract between RENTplus and a tenant for fixed period, for example, 5 years. The contract would state that after paying rent for 5 years the tenant would buy the property with the help of a 10% deposit from RENTplus. This was one way of getting more people to buy their own home.

The new scheme had only been operating for 12 months therefore there was not enough data to analyse to ascertain what the advantages could be to the Council. However, officers had agreed for 20 RENTplus homes to be included as a pilot scheme as part of the affordable housing mix on the Knowle Lane site at Cullompton.

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

67 **PRIVATE SECTOR HOUSING POLICY AND EMPTY HOMES STRATEGY (01:38:24)**

The Group received a verbal update from the Private Sector Housing Lead Officer on the timetable for the review of the Private Sector Housing Policy and the Empty Homes Strategy. It was explained that the Empty Homes Strategy document expired at the end of March 2015 and the Private Sector Housing Policy was last approved in January 2013. The original intention had been to review this document on an annual basis but because of various circumstances this had not been possible. Written proposals regarding the timetable for review would be brought to the June meeting of the Group, with a formal proposal to it in August and a recommendation to the Cabinet meeting in September 2015.

Note: Cllrs Mrs J R Rendle and R F Radford declared personal interests in that they were private landlords.

68 **PRESENTATION ON THE NEW ARRANGEMENTS FOR HOUSING SUPPORT (01:40:00)**

The Group were provided with a presentation from the Tenant Involvement Manager and Supported Housing Manager on the new arrangements for housing support.

Questions were asked in relation to how much the alarm service cost and also about the new handyman service. With regard to the latter, it was confirmed that each job was quoted on an individual basis and that there had been a huge demand in people requesting assistance. With regard to the telecare options available, it was noted that a deluxe model existed where by clients could pay for additional services. There was some discussion regarding the new community housing support service and it was noted that the service was still new therefore it was not possible at this stage to ascertain what the levels of need would be or whether the two new members of staff would be able to cope with demand. It was explained that the new members of staff had come from the previous wardens service therefore it had not been necessary to make any redundancies after the cessation of the Devon County Council funded service.

69 DEVON HOME CHOICE WORKING GROUP UPDATE (01:57:34)

The Head of Housing and Property Services informed the Group that the recommendations of the Working Group report had been considered by the Cabinet on 8 January 2015. They had resolved that the recommendations be referred back to the Head of Housing and Property Services for further consideration. The Head of Housing and Property Services has since met with the Working Group where it was concluded that more time was needed to gather together information from the authorities who had already taken steps to remove Band E. The proposal was to revisit this issue at the June PDG meeting with any revised recommendations being presented to the Cabinet in September 2015.

70 CHAIRMAN'S ANNUAL REPORT FOR 2014/15 (01:58:09)

The Group had before it a draft annual report * by the Chairman on the work of the Group during 2014/15. The Chairman apologised for referring to 'Sandra Hutchings' in the report rather than 'Sandra Hunt' and stated that he wished this to be corrected. The corrected report would be included with the Council Summons for the meeting on 29 April 2015.

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

71 IDENTIFICATION OF ITEMS FOR THE NEXT MEETING - 16 JUNE 2015 (01:58:40)

In addition to the items already listed in the work programme for the next meeting, the following reports were requested to come to the next meeting:

- Performance and Risk Outturn Report for 2014/15
- Devon Home Choice Working Group reestablishment
- Private Sector Housing Policy (initial proposals)
- Empty Homes Strategy (initial proposals)
- Tenant Involvement Strategy
- Tenant Involvement Policy
- Update regarding the investigation by the Head of Housing into the possibility transferring residential care homes identified for closure by Devon County Council to Mid Devon District Council

(The meeting ended at 4.15 pm)

CHAIRMAN