

**MINUTES** of a **MEETING** of the **HOMES POLICY DEVELOPMENT GROUP** held on 19 March 2024 at 2.15 pm

**Present**

**Councillors**

C Adcock (Chairman)  
J Cairney, C Harrower, L Knight, F W Letch, N Letch and  
S Robinson

**Apologies**

**Councillors**

S Chenore and A Glover

**Also Present**

**Councillors**

D Wulff, D Broom, S J Clist, G Duchesne and S Keable

**Present**

**Officers**

Richard Marsh (Director of Place & Economy), Simon Newcombe (Corporate Manager for Public Health, Regulation and Housing), Dr Stephen Carr (Corporate Performance & Improvement Manager), Mike Lowman (Building Services Operations Manager), Claire Fry (Operations Manager for Housing Management Services), Jason Ball (Climate and Sustainability Specialist), Sophie Richards (Customer Engagement Officer, Mid Devon Housing), David Parker (Democratic Services & Policy Research Officer) and Sarah Lees (Democratic Services Officer)

**Councillors**

**Online**

J Buczkowski and H Tuffin

**62 Apologies and Substitute Members**

Apologies were received from Cllr A Glover and Cllr S Chenore who was substituted by Cllr L Knight.

**63 Public Question Time**

No members of the public had registered to ask a question and none were present.

**64 Declaration of Interests under the Code of Conduct**

No interests were declared under this item.

## 65 Minutes

The minutes of the meeting held on 16 January 2024 were approved as a correct record and **SIGNED** by the Chairman.

## 66 Chairman's Announcements

The Chairman had the following announcements to make:

1. On behalf of the Group he extended his thanks and appreciation to Claire Fry, who would shortly be retiring, for all her help, advice and assistance in the 16 years she had been reporting to the Homes PDG. He wished her a long and happy retirement.
2. He thanked the officers for providing the reports to the meeting.
3. As Cllr Chenore had sent apologies for the meeting he proposed from the Chair that Cllr J Cairney be elected Vice Chairman for this meeting only. This was **AGREED** by the Group and accordingly Cllr J Cairney took his position in the Vice Chairman's seat.

## 67 Government consultation on reforms to allocation of social housing (00:09:00)

The Group had before it, and **NOTED**, a report \* from the Corporate Manager for Public Health, Regulation and Housing which had been written in response to a letter received by all Council leaders from Baroness Scott (Parliamentary Under Secretary for Social Housing and Faith) setting out that government had launched a consultation seeking views on a series of reforms to how social housing was allocated in England.

The proposals were summarised and discussion took place regarding:

- Views were being sought by the Government in relation to the following new or updated tests: UK connection test, local connection test, income test, anti-social behaviour test, terrorism test and the false statement test.
- The Government were trying to create a more consistent approach nationally.
- The Council's current Devon Home Choice policy was still fit for purpose under the new proposals although it may require some small tweaks.
- Officers had some concerns regarding the proposed reforms on the anti-social behaviour (ASB) tests. More clarification was needed. ASB was a complex area, some ASB was gratuitous and unjustified other cases less so. The proposal of '3 strikes and you are out' seemed harsh and allowed little room for manoeuvre. Would these proposals, if implemented, actually create more homeless people? The Council aspired to be compassionate where it could, the proposals as currently set out prevented this.
- Concerns regarding the proposals for the UK connection test and the lack of detail provided in the proposals.

It was **AGREED** that the review, as set out within the report, form the basis of a proposed response to the consultation from Mid Devon District Council whilst also bearing in mind comments made by the Group today in relation to ASB and the UK connection test.

Note: \* Report previously circulated.

## 68 Performance Dashboard Q3 (00:45:00)

The Group were presented with, and **NOTED**, the Performance Dashboard \* providing summary information reflecting performance in the Mid Devon Housing (MDH) area for the previous quarter.

The following was highlighted:

- There were 2 corporate risks in relation to the Homes Policy Development Group.
- Under the General Fund, 4 indicators were either red or amber. However, it was explained that performance was likely to be higher than that reported with the utilisation of grants due to take place in quarter 3 and 4, therefore the year end performance figures would show a more favourable position.
- Under the Housing Revenue Account (HRA), performance levels were increasing. Staffing levels had improved slightly and 60 houses were on track to be completed by 31 March 2024.

Discussion took place with regard to:

- The need to see data in terms of 'direction of travel' rather than 'N/A' as this was not felt to be very helpful.
- More targets were needed and it was hoped these would be forthcoming once the Tenant Satisfaction Measures had been thoroughly analysed.
- Refinement of the Dashboard was still a 'work in progress' and a full year of data was needed in order to get most benefit from viewing performance data in this way.
- The Group needed to be aware that a new Corporate Plan was being developed and dashboards were likely to change as a result.

Note: \* Dashboard previously provided.

## 69 Biodiversity Duty Report

The Group had before it a briefing paper \* from the Climate and Sustainability Specialist and the Director of Place and Economy setting out the need for all of the Council's operating areas to be fully aware of their responsibility in needing to meet the biodiversity duty.

The following was highlighted within the paper:

- The Cabinet had asked for all Policy Development Groups to consider this statutory duty under their own remits and to provide ideas and policies to take back to it so that they could be incorporated into an action plan.
- Engagement with tenants regarding this issue needed to continue and be progressed. Achievements needed to be celebrated Enhancement projects needed to be considered, for example, roosting bricks in housing developments.
- Other ideas included awareness training and improving access to the green areas when developing housing estates.

- It was confirmed that new housing schemes already incorporated enhanced levels of Biodiversity. However, one of the tensions the Group needed to be aware of was the potential conflict with other aspirations, such as the pressure for parking on housing developments. Difficult conversations may be needed going forwards if the priority of one aspiration meant other aspirations, such as housing schemes, may not get permission for development.
- There needed to be more planting of wild flower meadows where possible.

Note: \* Briefing paper previously circulated.

## 70 **MDH Service Delivery Report for Q3 (01:07:00)**

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 activity undertaken by MDH, including some relating to enforcement.

The following was highlighted within the report and discussion took place with regard to:

- The report was slightly out of date due to timing issues between the end of quarter 3 and today's meeting. The outturn report for the whole year would be presented to the next meeting.
- Much work was taking place in relation to Tenant Satisfaction Measures. Some proposals for change would be brought to the next meeting.
- The Government had published new revised Consumer Standards, for example, in the area of accountability.
- There was lots of evidence of good performance.
- Heating repairs and routine repairs had dipped below target as there had been a focus on emergency repairs, however, performance had bounced back, any dip had been due to staffing issues and difficulty recruiting to this type of work.
- Some void properties had been left in a very damaged state which had needed time to rectify. Recharges needed to take place and non-payment followed up.
- There were different types of void including, structural, voids for decarbonisation, developmental voids and voids requiring adaptation.
- The Council had been given some 'new burdens' funding by the Government.
- 77% of the Council's properties contained asbestos. A licenced contractor was needed to remove this, approximately 300 houses were dealt with in this regard each year.
- No RAAC (reinforced autoclaved aerated concrete) had been found in any of the Council's properties.
- The service was now better staffed although there was a high turnover of Neighbourhood Officers.

Note: \* Report previously circulated.

## 71 **Garage / Asset Management presentation (01:37:00)**

The Group received a presentation from the Corporate Manager for Public Health, Regulation and Housing and the Operations Manager for Building Services providing information in relation to asset and garage management as requested at the last

meeting. It was explained that the Council's Asset Management Strategy was being reviewed and a revised and updated version would be brought to the Homes Policy Development Group in the near future.

A summary of the information provided was as follows:

- Health & Safety was a key priority which was managed through an effective maintenance programme.
- There were still over 1000 garages in the Council's stock and the Council was 2 years into a 5 year modernisation programme.
- In terms of progress so far, every garage had been visited and measured, each one being assessed for a change of use. A key consideration was the potential to modernise and adapt a garage for housing.
- Garages were a good income source for the Council.
- Currently 87% were tenanted. 334 had been modernised.
- 600 people were on the waiting list for a garage with some people waiting because they wanted a specific garage.
- It cost around £2k to modernise a garage with these costs being recouped in around 5 years.
- Key components of the overall strategy included: homes, parking, sewerage, roads and green spaces.
- Garages were not treated any differently to any other asset owned by the Council.

Discussion took place with regard to:

- The information provided in the presentation had been very valuable to the Group to aid their understanding.
- The content of the presentation also demonstrated what a valuable income source the garages were to the Council.

## 72 **Tenant Satisfaction Measures perception survey and action plan update (01:49:00)**

The Group received and **NOTED** a presentation from the Operations Manager for Housing Services providing an update on the Tenant Satisfaction Measures (TSM) perception survey and associated action plan.

A summary of the information provided was as follows:

- There are a number of standards in the framework for social housing.
- There is a Tenant Satisfaction Measures Standard within the framework which requires Registered Providers of social housing to collect and record data to inform an annual return to the Government.
- Performance data needs to be collected and also 10 measures which relate to the tenants view of different aspects of the service.
- This perception data was collected by a survey sent out by a contractor, procured by a group of local landlords in partnership.
- 2830 surveys had been sent out; 635 had been returned. 100 people had responded by telephone, 187 by post and 338 online.

- A lot of data had been collected and was currently in the process of being analysed. The results would be formally reported at a later date and an action plan would be shared.
- The top three 'headlines' from the data analysed so far indicated that the Council's stock was well maintained, repairs were carried out effectively and Mid Devon Housing listened to its tenants.
- A free text question had been included in the survey which it was hoped would include some very valuable feedback from tenants.
- This would be an annual process and the approach for 2024/2025 was already being considered.
- Some initial lessons learned included the need to target different groups in the future to generate a wider response. Members would also be asked for their input.
- The biggest group of responders was in the 55+ age bracket.

Discussion took place with regard to:

- A question was asked as to whether results could be separated by ward? It was explained that agreeing to this request needed careful consideration as being able to identify individual tenants might be possible in some of the smaller more rural wards. Town wards would be less problematic.
- This was the first time the Council (and other Council's) had a consistent set of questions which could be assessed and benchmarked against others. This would be helpful in creating a blended improvement plan going forwards. Prior to this survey there was no real way of the Council comparing itself with others. It would enable a comparison across Devon, the South West and nationally.

### 73 **Work Programme for 2024/2025 (02:10:00)**

The Group had before it, and **NOTED**, the draft Work Programme for 2024/2025 \*.

The Group agreed that the draft work programme already listed a big programme of activity for the coming year.

However, it was requested that the following items be added to it within appropriate time scales indicated if possible:

- Regular and programmed consideration of the Biodiversity duty.
- Revised Asset Management Strategy to the August 2024 meeting.

Note: \* Work Programme previously circulated.

### 74 **Chairman's Annual Report for 2023/2024 (02:12:00)**

The Group had before it, and **NOTED**, the Chairman's Annual Report for 2023/2024 \*.

The Group congratulated the Chairman on his excellent chairing and lead since being elected.

There being no further comment on the report, this would now be presented to full Council at their meeting on 24<sup>th</sup> April 2024.

Note: \* Report previously circulated.

**75 Identification of items for the next meeting (02:13:00)**

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

(The meeting ended at 4.29 pm)

**CHAIRMAN**