

MINUTES of a **MEETING** of the **HOMES POLICY DEVELOPMENT GROUP** held on 10 September 2024 at 2.15 pm

Present

Councillors

S Robinson (Chair)
C Adcock (Vice-Chair), J Cairney, C
Connor, A Glover, F W Letch, N Letch, and
H Tuffin

Also Present

Councillors

E Buczkowski, J Buczkowski and G Czapiewski

Also Present

Officers

Stephen Walford (Chief Executive), Simon Newcombe
(Head of Housing & Health), Mike Lowman (Building
Services Operations Manager), Sophie Richards
(Customer Engagement Officer, Mid Devon Housing) and
Sarah Lees (Democratic Services Officer)

Councillors

Online

J Lock and D Wulff

Officers Online

Dr Stephen Carr, Carole Oliphant and Laura Woon

21 **APOLOGIES AND SUBSTITUTE MEMBERS**

There were no apologies for absence.

22 **PUBLIC QUESTION TIME**

There were no questions from members of the public.

23 **DECLARATION OF INTERESTS UNDER THE CODE OF CONDUCT**

No interests were declared under this item.

24 **MINUTES**

The minutes of the meeting held on 11 June 2024 were approved as a correct record of the meeting and **SIGNED** by the Chair.

25 CHAIR'S ANNOUNCEMENTS

The Chair had the following announcements to make:

1. The Annual Report to Tenants was an impressive document and should be celebrated. She had a hard copy which she could let colleagues see.
2. Zed Pod new homes in Cullompton had received an award, this needed to be celebrated.
3. The forthcoming occupation of properties at St. Georges Court in Tiverton by Mid Devon Housing (MDH) tenants also needed to be acknowledged.

26 MEDIUM TERM FINANCIAL PLAN - GENERAL FUND (GF) (00:09:00)

The Group had before it a report * from the Deputy Chief Executive (S151) presenting the updated Medium Term Financial Plan (MTFP) which covered the period 2025/26 to 2028/29 and took into account the Council's key strategies (i.e. the Corporate Plan, Business Plans, Treasury Management Plan, Asset Management Plan, Work Force Plan and Capital Strategy) and demonstrated it had the financial resources to deliver the Corporate Plan.

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

- The MTFP covered a period from 2025/26 to 2028/29. Normally this would be a 5 year plan but were currently awaiting greater clarification from the new Government and the Chancellor's budget announcement on 30th October 2024. The 5th year will be added following this.
- The MTFP focussed on a framework of principles those being:
 - (i) General Fund Reserves
 - (ii) Optimise Income Generation
 - (iii) Allocation of Revenue Resources
 - (iv) Allocation of Capital Resources
- The MTFP built on a number of assumptions around inflation which were shown in Appendix 1.
- Overall the result of pressures on the budget left a £1.2m gap rising to 4m by year 4 if the Council took no action.
- Over the summer officers had looked at options which had been RAG rated as red, amber, green in terms of risk and deliverability.
- If the green and amber savings were accepted this would reduce the £1.2m gap down to £400,000
- All Policy Development Groups would be asked to look at possible savings which would then be presented to Cabinet.

Discussion took place regarding:

- Control over Building Control fees was limited but there were some discretionary areas that could be looked at.
- The effect of a brand new government elected very recently and as yet still to outline its direction in terms of local government funding. There was some certainty emerging regarding waste and some positive consultation in relation to the Planning fees. There was genuine concern however, regarding recent statements made by the Prime Minister about the forthcoming budget needing

to be 'painful'. As yet there had also been limited commentary around the issue of Right to Buy which was unsettling.

The Group **NOTED** the following:

1. The updated MTFP for the General Fund covering the years 2025/26 to 2028/29;
2. The principles and the approach to balancing the General Fund Revenue Budget outlined in paragraph 6.2 be endorsed;
3. The emerging budget pressures included within Appendix 3;

RECOMMENDED to Cabinet that:

The Round 1 Budget Proposals as set out in Appendix 4a be approved.

(Proposed by the Chair)

Reason for the decision

As set out in the report.

Note: * Report previously circulated.

27 **PERFORMANCE DASHBOARD Q1 (00:25:00)**

The Group were presented with, and **NOTED**, two slides showing performance information in the housing area both under the General Fund and the Housing Revenue Account.

The following was highlighted:

- The performance rating for MDH net-zero Modern Methods of Construction homes was red. This related to the nature of housing delivery in that it was not smooth across the year. Net zero properties would be added to the portfolio shortly. There were just two complaints not responded to within the relevant timescales, and justification for these was provided.
- The HRA development programme being a live and evolving plan.

Discussion took place with regard to:

- A significant number of families on the Devon Home Choice waiting list (Bands A-C) had been housed in quarter 1. This was a remarkable achievement.
- Annual figures were shown in relation to Capital Outturn, a full review would be undertaken of the development programme in the next quarter.

28 **REVIEW OF MID DEVON HOUSING HOARDING POLICY (00:33:00)**

The Group had before it a report * from the Head of Housing & Health reviewing the Mid Devon Housing Hoarding Policy.

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

- The complexities involved in dealing with a tenant displaying hoarding behaviour. Their environments were often chaotic and dangerous in terms of potential trips and falls, fire risks, sanitary and hygiene arrangements being compromised.
- There was a need to understand the underlying causes in each case and to be as supportive to the tenant as possible. This was a complex process involving many different agencies.

Consideration was given to the following:

- How it was discovered that a tenant was hoarding? It was explained that this was sometimes discovered as a result of a routine visit by a Neighbourhood Officer, a contractor dealing with a repair issue, a tenant themselves could reach out, family members could bring it to the attention of the Council or neighbours could report it. There were a number of ways hoarding came to light.
- Co-Regulation with the consumer regulation regime. Members themselves had a role to play in addressing the issue, particularly those on the Policy Development Group by holding to account the policy used to tackle such issues. There needed to be scrutiny, curiosity and interest in this area so that the approaches used towards handling it were sensible, supportive and appropriate. Members needed 'oversight' of all approaches.
- There had been some success stories involving a lot of effort and energy on everybody's part. A multi-agency approach involving the expertise of mental health colleagues was crucial. The levels of difficulty involved however should not be underestimated, often a tenant needed years of counselling to engage in an action plan fully. Every hoarding case was different and many in this position were initially resistant to outside help. Time needed to be spent building up a tenants confidence and working with them at an appropriate pace.
- It was recognised that there was a difference between being a hoarder and having a home that was just cluttered.
- Mental health services being oversubscribed and long waiting lists.
- Possible services available to help people de-clutter such as providing extra wheelie bins or sacks. This could be explored further especially dispensation for additional waste containers or black sacks temporarily to support those that are managing a hoarding issue.

RECOMMENDED to the Cabinet that:

The updated MDH Hoarding Policy and Equality Impact Assessment contained in Annexes A and B respectively be adopted.

(Proposed by the Chair)

Reason for the decision

As set out in the report.

Note: * Report previously circulated.

29 **MID DEVON HOUSING REPAIRS AND MAINTENANCE POLICY (NEW) (01:03:00)**

The Group had before it a report * from the Head of Housing & Health presenting a new policy with regards to Mid Devon Housing Repairs and Maintenance.

This was an amalgamation of 5 or 6 other policies and an attempt to bring them altogether under one umbrella. It was hoped that the new policy would also bring clarity to tenants.

Discussion took place regarding:

- The need to inform neighbours, if possible, if significant repair and maintenance works were to be carried out such that would impact them in terms of a communal access to and from their own properties. Some sort of warning would be helpful. It was confirmed that this could be added to the procedure going forwards where possible.
- The definition of the different types of repair and what constituted as a 'minor repair' and where the tenant was responsible was listed in each tenant handbook.
- Assistance was offered for those tenants who could not undertake minor repairs (such as changing a light bulb) themselves. It was stressed that this was only offered on a cost recovery basis not to make a profit in any way.

RECOMMENDED to the Cabinet that:

It recommends to Council that the new MDH Repairs and Maintenance Policy and Equality Impact Assessment be adopted.

(Proposed by the Chair)

Reason for the decision

As set out in the report.

Note: * Report previously circulated.

30 **REVIEW OF MID DEVON HOUSING ASBESTOS MANAGEMENT PLAN (01:10:00)**

The Group had before it a report * from the Head of Housing & Health presenting a revised Mid Devon Housing Asbestos Management Plan.

The following was highlighted within the report:

- There were stringent legal requirements in relation to asbestos management. Asbestos was not always dangerous in itself but it needed to be monitored carefully. Some blue and brown asbestos was extremely dangerous and contractors were used to dispose of this if it was found to be present in Mid Devon's housing stock.
- It was explained that there would always be the potential for hidden asbestos.

Consideration was given to:

- The contractors used were stated in the policy, this was a legal requirement.
- The word 'encapsulate' used within the report meant to 'enclose' or to 'clearly mark'.

RECOMMENDED to the Cabinet that:

The updated MDH Asbestos Management Plan be adopted.

(Proposed by the Chair)

Reason for the decision

As set out within the report.

Note: * Report previously circulated.

31 **MID DEVON HOUSING SERVICE DELIVERY REPORT FOR QUARTER 1 2024-2025 (01:19:00)**

The Group had before it, and **NOTED**, a report * from the Head of Housing & Health providing a quarterly update to Members on the activity undertaken by Mid Devon Housing, including some relating to enforcement.

The following was highlighted:

- There was currently a gap in the data around Tenant Satisfaction Measures perception survey results. This was purely related to a timing issue, this data would be provided next time following the first round of the tenant survey.
- Last year MDH undertook a single survey, this would be increased to three this year and four going forwards.
- Void turnaround times continued to be under pressure.
- Recruiting trained staff continued to be a problem with the lowest number of retained staff in ten years.
- Repairs would always be prioritised and the health and safety of tenants would always come before anything else.
- The Council was currently holding 22 development voids. Existing tenants needed to be decanted and this took some time.
- The Council was still managing to achieve a 97% occupancy rate, this included properties used for temporary accommodation by general fund where there was a greater turnover of occupants hence more void periods.
- MDH recently received a number of queries from the Regulator of Social Housing on its safety approach to electrical testing following the submission of the last years Tenant Satisfaction Measures (TSM) management data. They had a long list of questions but had gone away being satisfied that the Council was doing what it should to protect tenants and was compliant with requirements.

Discussion took place with regard to:

- Councillors needed to know where voids were being 'turned over'. It was explained that sometimes this happened quite quickly and that to inform Members each time might be a challenge, however, it might be possible to produce a short monthly update report to Members. This would be explored. However, it was stressed that the location of each void could not be publically advertised for obvious reasons.
- The definition of void categories was set out in the Voids Management Policy available online including the Decent Homes voids.
- MDH tried to get every major repair completed whilst a property was void so that there was minimal upheaval for incoming tenants.
- Loss of rent and repair costs needed to be weighed up. 'No win, no fee' disrepair claims had a part to play and could potentially cost the Council millions of pounds if issues such as damp and mould were not addressed as a priority, therefore treating conditions such as this whilst a property was void was vital to ensuring its future safe occupancy.
- It was noted that for the first time a performance report had been brought to the PDG showing a 100% gas safety check compliance.
- Officers would use a number of methods to survey tenants, not just by telephone.
- The Group requested a breakdown of the survey results once they were available.
- The question in relation to the TSM specifically on complaints handling. It was recognised as the most challenging as often what happened was that responses to this survey question ends up being obviously influenced by the fact a tenant has made a complaint and their reaction to the outcome of their complaint which may not always be objective in terms of how effective the handling process was understandably. It was potentially a bit of a false measure. It would be interesting to analyse the national position with regard to this question in the future and benchmark data.

Note: * Report previously circulated.

32 **DOWNSIZING WORKING GROUP VERBAL UPDATE (01:49:00)**

The Chair of the Working Group, Cllr A Glover, provided the Group with a brief update on the work undertaken so far. This included the following information:

- There had been an initial meeting to bring Members up to speed and the project had been scoped.
- Terms of Reference had been agreed and the next steps were:
 - There would be Tenant consultation and focus groups (different channels and approaches to maximise reach). It was hoped the output would be a clearer understanding of what motivated and would work for tenants (not just financial incentives). Officers would share that consultation with the Working Group.
 - The Working Group would obtain information from DHC partners on the take up of their current incentive schemes. This would lead to a better

understanding of what was / was not working well for partner local authorities regionally.

33 **TENURE REFORM & TENANCY AGREEMENT PROJECT PLAN - VERBAL UPDATE (01:56:00)**

The Customer Engagement Co-ordinator provided the Group with a verbal update on the Tenancy Reform & Tenancy Agreement Project plan.

This included the following information:

Flexible tenancies

- On the 9th July, Cabinet had approved the recommendation from the Homes PDG to halt the use of flexible tenancies. Since this date, no new flexible tenancies had been issued to new tenants.
- All current flexible tenants would be rolled on to a periodic secure tenancy when their fixed term ended.

Tenancy agreement terms and conditions

- When the original project plan was completed unfortunately there was not enough time factored in for complete legal oversight, and that, combined with a reduction in the number of meetings for the Homes PDG has resulted in the terms and conditions presentation being pushed to the November meeting.
- At the November meeting, depending on legal oversight, officers were hoping to bring the variation i.e. the new terms and conditions, along with a request that the Homes PDG recommends to Cabinet that the Section 103 as required by the Housing Act 1985 commences. This means, it will be recommended that MDH go out for consultation, and this will run after the December Cabinet meeting. MDH were pushing this to go live when the Council returned after Christmas as it was not desirable to have a consultation running when the office was closed and tenants could not contact the Council. The consultation would run for 28 days and would also go out to Members and partners at the same time. The results of the consultation would be presented at the Homes PDG in March 2025 with the hope that Cabinet approves them in April 2025. There were a few more steps to follow in line with the Housing Act 1985 with regards to sending notice of variation letters to secure and introductory tenants and there needed to be a 4 week wait between sending these and the implementation date which meant MDH would plan to go live with the new tenancy agreement from early June 2025.

The Group were reassured that the consultation would use a number of methods including face to face conversations, leaflets, online access, focus groups and drop in sessions.

The Group **NOTED** the update.

34 **DEVON HOUSING COMMISSION REPORT (02:01:00)**

The Head of Housing & Health provided the Group, by way of presentation, with the key highlights and recommendations arising from the Devon Housing Commission Report.

This included the following:

- A quote from Lord Best, Chair of the Devon Housing Commission regarding the '...real housing crisis in this county'.
- What the Housing Commission was and who had hosted this work.
- How they had conducted their work.
- Who the commissioners were and who they had been supported by.
- Their 7 key findings in terms of what had caused this housing crisis.
- A number of recommendations to central government.
- Devon strategic level recommendations.
- Local level recommendations.
- How well placed Mid Devon was to deliver on these recommendations.
- What was next in terms of local ambition and wider opportunities?
- Other recent housing reports looking at the social housing crisis.

It was requested that the presentation be circulated to the Group after the meeting and that the Devon Housing Commission Report be brought back to the next meeting for further discussion and debate with potential for the Group to make recommendations into Cabinet if they wish to do so.

35 IDENTIFICATION OF ITEMS FOR THE NEXT MEETING (02:33:00)

The items already listed in the work programme for the next meeting were **NOTED**.

It was explained that the 'Housing Strategy' was dependent upon the new government being clearer on certain influencing factors such as Right to Buy, and funding for affordable housing delivery therefore, it was likely that this would be moved on to a future meeting until such time as a meaningful document could be brought before Members underpinned by government direction.

A brief discussion took place regarding the importance of the Devon Housing Commission Report and the need for this Group to analyse it more closely in relation to local recommendations and to feed back its thoughts and comments to the Cabinet. This Report would therefore be on the agenda for the next meeting and would be one of the first items discussed so as to give it the necessary time and focus it needs.

(The meeting ended at 5:00pm)

CHAIR