

MID DEVON DISTRICT COUNCIL

MINUTES of a **MEETING** of the **HOMES POLICY DEVELOPMENT GROUP** held on 15 November 2016 at 2.15 pm

Present

Councillors P J Heal (Chairman), Mrs E M Andrews, Mrs H Bainbridge, D R Coren, W J Daw, Mrs G Doe, R J Dolley, F W Letch and J D Squire

Also Present

Councillors R L Stanley and C J Eginton

Also Present

Officers Andrew Jarrett (Director of Finance, Assets and Resources), Nick Sanderson (Head of Housing and Property Services), Claire Fry (Housing Services Manager), Roderick Hewson (Principal Accountant), Mark Baglow (Building Services Manager), Michael Parker (Housing Options Manager), Angela Barrett (Accountant), Nicky Chandler (Auditor) and Sarah Lees (Member Services Officer)

41 APOLOGIES AND SUBSTITUTE MEMBERS

There were no apologies for absence.

42 PUBLIC QUESTION TIME

Laura Conyngham stated that she was representing the 'Welcoming Refugees in Crediton' organisation. She asked whether the Group were aware that her organisation had offered to work with the housing officer to undertake some of the practical tasks involved in housing refugee families thereby reducing the amount of time officers would need to dedicate to this?

Mr Arthur Shenton stated that he was a retired English teacher and now lived in Washfield. He was attending the meeting today with a number of other Washfield residents. They had been moved to tears by the images and stories on the news concerning the plight of innocent women, men and children. Locally they had raised over £2000 to help and other events were planned to raise more. Friends of his had a guest cottage which they were prepared to offer as accommodation for a Syrian family. He stated that this fitted the government's criteria having all the 'mod cons'. They had been inundated with offers of support including clothes, food and English lessons. He informed the group that today was the birthday of one of the most famous refugees of all time, Anne Frank and we should not forget that. He hoped that a decision would be made today to house as many families as the Council could. He stated that Devon as a whole were required to take 74 families, he asked how many specifically Mid Devon District Council would be rehousing and whether one at least of those could be resettled in Washfield?

43 **MINUTES**

The minutes of the meeting held on 13 September 2016 were confirmed as a true and accurate record and **SIGNED** by the Chairman.

44 **CHAIRMAN'S ANNOUNCEMENTS**

The Chairman stated that before the meeting five members of the Group had attended a tour of the Old Road depot with the Building Services Manager. This had been very interesting and enjoyable. He thanked the officer concerned for giving up his time and providing such a warm welcome.

45 **MEETING MANAGEMENT**

The Chairman stated that he would take item 11 'Verbal update on the Decent Homes' standard as the next item of business.

46 **VERBAL UPDATE ON THE 'DECENT HOMES' STANDARD (00:03:00)**

At the previous meeting it was requested that the Group receive an update regarding the Council's performance in relation to the 'Decent Home' standard. The Building Services Manager explained that as at 31 October 2016 of the 3041 social housing properties the council owned only one had fallen outside of the 'Decent Homes' standard. There had been one repair element outstanding on this property which related to an upgrade of loft insulation, however, works had now been carried out and as at today's date 100% of the Council's properties were classed as having a 'Decent' standard.

Some tenants refused to have necessary works carried out. This was particularly true of some elderly tenants who did not want the upheaval. On these occasions, as soon as the property became vacant the works were carried out. Most money was spent on upgrades to kitchens and bathrooms. The Council was currently concentrating on repairs to roofing structures, windows and doors.

The repairs team were congratulated on the improvements made in recent years and the efficient way in which they worked. They were a credit to the Council.

47 **COUNCIL MOTION - HOUSING SYRIAN REFUGEES (00:12:00)**

At its meeting on 26 October 2016 Council had agreed to support Motion no. 527 regarding Syrian refugees and had requested that the Motion be brought back to this group to discuss the finer details.

The Housing Options Manager provided the Group with a presentation regarding the Syrian Vulnerable Person's Scheme. This included the following information:

- Each Syrian refugee family came with a specific amount of funding which was intended to cover costs in relation to education, health and translation.
- Each property would need to be inspected in terms of health and safety and electricity and gas certificates.
- Legal documentation for each property may be required for anything from 12 months to 5 years.

- Furniture would also need to be provided.
- Based on the costings of other local authorities the cost to the Council was estimated to be £5,500 in officer time based on looking after one family for a year. Over a 5 year period staff costs would increase to over £13,500.
- At the end of the 5 year period the property condition may have deteriorated and this would need to be returned to the original state before re-letting it. Based on previous experience costs in relation to this could be anything from £1k to £6k.
- It was not intended that the original funding covered the cost of setting up a property.
- Rents would only be at the local housing allowance rate not at the normal market rent which may dissuade some landlords from coming forward.

Discussion took place regarding:

- The Council not being able to say categorically at this stage how many families they were prepared to re-house.
- It was explained that Exeter City Council had taken one family, as had East Devon District Council and Teignbridge District Council. West Devon Borough Council had taken two.
- It was clarified that the scheme related to families and not lone individuals.
- A lot of work needed to be done to understand the practical elements involved and any associated risks.
- Enough private sector landlords needed to come forward.
- Members needed a clearer understanding of the impact on officer time.
- Certain infrastructure was needed in addition to a suitable property such as available school placements.
- The Council needed to avoid further procrastination but also needed to fully understand the costs involved and the pitfalls to avoid especially for the families concerned.

RESOLVED that a Working Group be established to meet as soon as possible to gain an understanding of the issues involved and to come back with a recommendation for the next meeting which would then be forwarded to the Cabinet for approval. The Working Group to consist of Councillors: Mrs G Doe, P J Heal, F W Letch and one of the movers of the original Motion to Council. Meetings of the Working Group would also be attended by the Cabinet Member although he would not have any voting rights.

(Proposed by the Chairman)

48 **FINANCIAL MONITORING - FOR THE 6 MONTHS TO SEPTEMBER 2016 (00:42:28)**

The Group had before it, and **NOTED**, a report * from the Director of Finance, Assets & Resources presenting a financial update in respect of the income and expenditure so far in the year.

The Group was referred to a table showing the opening position of key operational balances of the Council, the forecasted in year movements and the final predicted position at 31 March 2017. The General Fund was currently showing an overspend of

£34k in year movement. The most significant service movements related to £220k savings as a result of the Shared Waste Agreement and a £83k deterioration in Leisure Services, made up of both costs and income.

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

49 **DRAFT 2017/18 GENERAL FUND AND CAPITAL BUDGETS (00:45:35)**

The Group had before it, and **NOTED**, a report from the Director of Finance, Assets & Resources considering options available in order for the Council to set a balanced budget for 2017/18 and agree a future strategy for further budget reductions for 2018/19 onwards.

The draft General Fund budget for 2017/18 was based on the following assumptions:

- a) Council Tax has been increased by £5 as an illustration with an increased property growth of 200.
- b) 2017/18 salary budgets included an increase of 1%.
- c) Car parking fees were based upon 2016/17 fees and vends.
- d) All earmarked reserves had been reviewed and adjustment made based upon existing need.
- e) All income flows had been reviewed and adjusted for changes in demand and unit price.
- f) Investment income had been based upon the existing lending criteria now in force.
- g) Support services had been inflated in accordance with the pay award.
- h) No reductions to grant budgets had been made

The following additional factors were brought to the Group's attention:

- At this time of year the budget was very much an evolving process.
- The Chancellors Autumn Statement was expected next week.
- Business Rates and New Homes Bonus were currently being consulted on.
- The Housing Department sought to house homeless people in temporary accommodation rather than put them in Bed and Breakfast establishments, however, preventing homelessness in the first place was a high priority for the department.
- The government provided a grant to the Council for any Business Rates they were unable to collect.
- Assumptions had been made in the draft budget for rising fuel costs.

It was confirmed that the Director of Finance, Assets & Resources would be providing briefings to Members on the budget over the coming weeks.

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

50 **HRA MEDIUM TERM FINANCIAL STRATEGY (01:06:23)**

The Group had before it, and **NOTED**, a report * from the Director of Finance, Assets & Resources providing an estimate of the budget required for the operation of the Housing Revenue Account (HRA) from 2017/18 - 2020/21.

It was explained that the largest number in the Housing Revenue Account (HRA) related to the dwelling rent figure. Central government had indicated that Mid Devon's Formula Rent would now decrease 1% each year for the next three years. The Medium Term Financial Strategy had assumed this reduction, however, the report concluded by stating the HRA should be able to deliver the services it proposed.

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

51 **DRAFT 2017/18 HOUSING REVENUE ACCOUNT (HRA) BUDGET (01:10:57)**

The Group had before it, and **NOTED**, a report * from the Director of Finance, Assets & Resources considering the options available in order for the Council to set a balanced budget for 2017/18 and agree a future strategy for further budgetary planning for 2018/19 onwards.

The draft HRA budget was currently showing a balanced position although it was expected that some of the figures would change before the next Group meeting.

It was proposed that the average weekly rent for a social rented property would be £79.05 and the average weekly rent for an affordable property would be £111.27. There were further proposals to slightly increase other fees and charges such as community alarms and garage rents although it was proposed that ground rents would be frozen.

A brief discussion took place regarding empty garages. Void figures were lower than they had been for a long time. Some void garages were not necessarily in the right location for some people. Void garages were being looked at as part of a scheme for redevelopment.

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

52 **PERFORMANCE AND RISK FOR THE SECOND QUARTER OF 2016/17 (01:17:27)**

The Group had before it, and **NOTED**, a report * from the Director of Corporate Affairs and Business Transformation providing Members with an update on performance against the Corporate Plan and local service targets for the first quarter of 2016/17 as well as providing an update on the key business risks.

The Internal Auditor explained that most of the performance indicators were at target or were slightly below and the report included notes to explain any variances.

The Group expressed concern at the different types of coloured green within the report and asked that the differences be made clearer in the future.

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

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

In addition to the items already listed in the work programme the following was also requested to be on the agenda for the next meeting:

- Refugee Working Group report
- Wessex Loan Scheme update
- Empty Homes update

(The meeting ended at 3.38 pm)

CHAIRMAN