

## MID DEVON DISTRICT COUNCIL

**MINUTES** of a **MEETING** of the **HOMES POLICY DEVELOPMENT GROUP** held on 14 March 2017 at 2.15 pm

### **Present**

**Councillors** Mrs E M Andrews, D R Coren, W J Daw, Mrs G Doe, P J Heal and J D Squire

### **Apologies**

**Councillors** Mrs H Bainbridge, R J Dolley and F W Letch

### **Present**

**Officers** Andrew Pritchard (Director of Operations), Claire Fry (Housing Services Manager), Michael Parker (Housing Options Manager), Roderick Hewson (Principal Accountant), Nicky Chandler (Auditor), Rosie Williams (Building Services Office Manager) and Sarah Lees (Member Services Officer)

## 68 **Apologies and Substitute Members**

Apologies were received from Councillors Mrs H Bainbridge, R J Dolley and F W Letch.

## 69 **Public Question Time**

There were no members of the public present.

## 70 **Minutes**

The minutes of the meeting held on 17 January 2017 were confirmed as a true and accurate record and **SIGNED** by the Chairman.

## 71 **Chairman's Announcements**

The Chairman had the following announcements to make:

- He introduced Andrew Pritchard, the new Director of Operations, to the Group.
- He informed the Group that this would be his last meeting as Chairman of the Group since he would be taking up the post of Chairman of the Council in May.

Councillor Mrs E M Andrews thanked the Chairman of behalf of the Group for his Chairmanship over the last few years and referred to his ability to be fair and to always allow everybody a chance to speak.

## 72 Meeting Management

The Chairman informed the Group that he would be rearranging the order of several items on the agenda as follows:

- Item 10, Rechargeable Service, would be taken as the next item of business.
- Item 11, Houses in Multiple Occupation, would be taken after the Private Sector fees and charges item since they were closely linked.

## 73 Rechargeable Service (00:05:00)

The Group received a presentation from the Building Services Office Manager outlining the key features of the Rechargeable Service which included the following:

- Record keeping had improved which had allowed for more repairs to be recharged.
- The Tenancy Agreement stated that there would be a charge for missed appointments. There were also warnings in the repairs handbook.
- The types of repairs that were recharged included the following:
  - Blocked toilets
  - Appliance faults
  - Call out for leaks
  - Installing own lights and showers
- Repairs were booked verbally by phone and a record kept of all attempted calls. Text messaging was also used.
- Customer First use a computer programme which helps them interact with tenants ringing the Council to report a fault. It provides scripts which enable officers to talk through an appliance check giving tenants every opportunity to avoid a rechargeable visit.

The Group were shown a list showing the type of repairs undertaken in recent months and the costs involved.

Discussion took place regarding:

- The handyman service which tenants could be referred to if they were elderly or unable to ask a family member or neighbour for help.
- The need for some flexibility whilst also managing expectations.

It was **AGREED** that a list of all repairs incurring a charge be sent to all Members.

## 74 Vulnerability Policy (0029:50)

The Group had before it a report \* from the Housing Services Manager explaining the rationale for a new policy for the Housing Service relating to identifying and supporting vulnerable tenants.

The contents of the report were outlined and reference was made to the fact that it was important that all agencies working with the Housing Service knew how vulnerability was identified. It was explained that people could step in and out of vulnerability. The service had reviewed the support they provided to people coming to them via the homelessness route. The policy explained what services were

available to support vulnerable people, for example hearing loops, and the support offered to people with mental health issues.

Discussion followed with regard to:

- Statutory duties in relation to homeless people.
- The experience and professionalism of the Neighbourhood Teams who worked imaginatively and creatively to house and support people.
- The Housing Service worked very closely with the police and social services.
- Officers were trained on a regular basis on how to respond to vulnerable tenants in the most appropriate way.
- The need to make the best use of the housing stock.
- Temporary accommodation placements were monitored on a regular basis.
- The needs of neighbours were also taken into consideration wherever possible.

**RECOMMENDED** that the Cabinet recommends to Council the adoption of the new Vulnerability Policy.

(Proposed by the Chairman)

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

#### 75 **Telecare Policy (00:52:40)**

The Group had before it a report \* of the Housing Services Manager explaining the rationale for a new policy for the Housing Service relating to the lifeline alarm service.

It was explained that as at 23 February 2017, 1198 residents had signed up to the alarm service which had generated income in excess of £221k. However, it was about much more than an alarm system and included other equipment such as smoke detectors and large face watches which were all designed to encourage people to remain and live independently in their home. Charges were varied and the policy set out how the Housing Service responded to non-payment. Many tenants were vulnerable and there needed to be a tailored and sensitive approach.

The Group discussed the peace of mind provided to the family and friends of the tenant with an alarm system.

**RECOMMENDED** that the Cabinet recommends to Council the adoption of the new Telecare Policy.

(Proposed by Cllr W J Daw and seconded by Cllr Mrs G Doe)

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

#### 76 **Private Sector Housing Fees and Charges (01:01:20)**

The Group had before it a report \* from the Public Health & Professional Services Manager providing Members with the revised fees and charges for statutory and discretionary functions within the Private Sector Housing team. The Private Sector Housing team carried out duties to ensure that private accommodation met minimum

standards. In particular there were regulations for the licensing, management and use of houses in multiple occupation (HMO), carbon monoxide detectors, smoke alarms and hazards within the home.

The contents of the report were summarised and discussion took place with regard to the following:

- The range of enforcement options available.
- The Council was not looking to make a profit but to recover costs.
- New requirements as a result of new legislation.
- The benchmarking that had taken place with other Devon authorities.
- The rationale behind the proposed fees as a calculation of officer time.
- The seriousness of carbon monoxide poisoning and the Fixed Penalty Notices in relation to this.

**RECOMMENDED** to the Cabinet that the Private Sector revised fees and charges be approved.

(Proposed by Cllr D R Coren and seconded by Cllr Mrs G Doe)

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

#### 77 **Houses in multiple occupation (01:21:05)**

The Group had before it, and **NOTED**, a briefing paper \* from the Private Sector Housing Lead Officer providing an update on the current position with mandatory Houses in Multiple Occupation (HMO) licensing. It also provided details on the expected legislative changes that were due in spring 2017 and the potential impact this would have on the service.

It was explained that the government was looking to extend the HMO regime. In Mid Devon there were currently 9 HMO licensed properties, however, the team were in the process of developing a project to identify potential licensable HMO's to ensure compliance with the legislation. Recently there had been a government consultation on extending the scope of the criteria for mandatory licensing and this had proposed the removal of the restriction around storeys allowing all HMO's with 5 or more people, forming 2 or more households with shared facilities regardless of the number of storeys to be included in mandatory licensing. The team were in the process of establishing what impact these changes would have on the number of properties that required a licence. The Group would be updated once more was known and the regulations had been released.

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

#### 78 **Financial Monitoring - for the 9 months to December 2016 (01:30:15)**

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.

Key highlights within the report included the following:

- The General Fund was forecasted to be overspent by £64k with £31k of this falling under the remit of this Group.
- The largest variance related to some salary savings.
- The Housing Revenue Account (HRA) was due to be underspent by £250k.
- The largest variance in the HRA related to savings due to restructuring of staffing across several teams as well as several smaller savings across operational budgets.
- Garage income was ahead of target.

Discussion took place with regard to publicising vacant garages and using the knowledge of Ward Members to identify vacant units in their own areas.

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

#### 79 **Performance and Risk Q3 (01:37:55)**

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 2016/17 as well as providing an update on the key business risks.

It was explained that the collection of rents continued to do well and the average number of days to re-let a property had reduced. There was one outstanding property where it had not been possible to check the validity of a gas certificate. This property was now considered to be abandoned. The Council was seeking possession for non-payment of rent. The gas meter associated with the property was located internally which meant that it was not possible to isolate the supply.

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

#### 80 **Homelessness Reduction Bill - briefing paper (01:40:44)**

The Group had before it a briefing paper \* from the Housing Services Manager and the Housing Options and Enabling Manager providing details regarding the Homelessness Reduction Bill 2016-2017 which had now completed its progress through the House of Commons and was shortly due to be debated in the House of Lords.

It was explained that when a person was homeless or threatened with homelessness, the Council were currently obliged to deal with them within 28 days of this happening. Under the new legislation the number of days would increase to 56 days. This had the potential to impact upon the resources available within the Housing Options team. Essentially the new legislation would place more of a responsibility on local authorities to tackle homelessness.

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

## 81 **Chairman Annual Report 2016/17 (01:44:10)**

The Group had before it a draft annual report \* by the Chairman on the work of the Policy Development Group during 2016/17. There being no suggested amendments to the report it was **AGREED** that it would be included with the Council Summons for the meeting on 26 April 2017.

## 82 **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:

- Election of Chairman
- Election of Vice Chairman
- Performance & Risk outturn report for 2016/17
- Update on empty homes
- Update on the Wessex scheme
- Update on Syrian refugees
- Section 106 on local connections
- Disabled Facility Grant update
- Start time of future meetings

(The meeting ended at 4.05 pm)

**CHAIRMAN**