

THE MINUTES OF THE SPECIAL MEETING
OF THE SERVICE DELIVERY SCRUTINY COMMITTEE
HELD ON THURSDAY 17 NOVEMBER 2005

Present: Councillor D Raine (Chair)
Councillors H High, A J Holmes,
Mrs E Huntington, Mrs A Naylor
and C Walker

T Taylor

Also Present: Councillors Mrs G Bleasdale, P J Campbell,
R Crute, R Davison, J Haggan,
B Joyce, A Napier, G Patterson,
W R Peardon, G Pinkney, B Quinn,
F Shaw, R Taylor and R J Todd

1 APOLOGIES FOR ABSENCE

Apologies for absence were submitted on behalf of Councillors D Chaytor and Mrs J Freak.

2 MONITORING PERFORMANCE OF EAST DURHAM HOMES AND FUTURE MONITORING ARRANGEMENTS

Consideration was given to the report of the Head of Housing Strategy which provided details of the performance of East Durham Homes for the first two quarters of the current financial year. The report also made recommendations for the future composition and scope of information presented to the committee in relation to the Council's monitoring of East Durham Homes and the Council's wider Strategic Housing function, a copy of which had been circulated to each Member.

Appendix 1 to the report contained the monitoring information and represented the fifth and sixth quarterly monitoring reports since the establishment of East Durham Homes in April 2004. Appendix 2 provided details of the Capital Works Programme for 2005/6.

The Head of Housing Strategy explained that there were 51 indicators in all, 10 of which were reported annually and there was no performance information for 4 of the indicators which were reported quarterly. Of the 37 where information was available, 40.5% were on target and 16.2% were within the 5% target tolerance and 43.3% were not on target.

The key service areas of concern were the void relet times, some of the repairs response times and appointments for responsive repairs.

Performance in the areas of homelessness, rent collection and response times of emergency repairs and those completed within 60 working days had improved since last year, and in some incidences 100% had been achieved.

The Head of Housing Strategy explained that a fundamental part of the process towards achieving the aims of the 3* Strategy was a more robust performance management by East Durham Homes Senior Management Team and Board. It was also important that a more clear and robust monitoring framework was put in place

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by the Council to ensure that the overall direction in achieving service improvements was scrutinised and challenged at the correct level whilst ensuring that East Durham Homes retained their “Arms Length” operational integrity.

Under the proposed new approach, future monitoring of East Durham Homes would be based on service improvements, performance indicators and targets set out in the Annual Delivery Plan. This would be based on the management agreement, delivery plan and management fee.

It was anticipated that future monitoring reports to the committee would consist of the performance indicators from the Delivery Plan and would be presented with performance indication from other elements of the Housing Service as detailed in the report. It was suggested that the existing monitoring format be continued for the remainder of the current financial year with new arrangements being introduced for 2006/7.

Members raised concerns that there were no officers from East Durham Homes at the meeting to answer any questions they had. The Head of Housing Strategy explained that his role was to ensure delivery of targets and any questions that he could not answer would be forwarded to East Durham Homes for a response and reported back.

The Chair explained that any questions Members had would be investigated and reported back to the Chair and Vice Chair and the individual Member would be notified of the answers.

The Leader of the Council explained that there needed to be a clear understanding between strategic and landlord duties. Throughout the country, 1.5m people were currently on waiting lists for Council housing therefore housing needed to be more strategic and look towards private landlords.

A Member commented that morale had been low in East Durham Homes and explained that morale was closely linked to productivity and performance.

Concerns were raised regarding the relet times for voids and the revenue that would be lost.

The Head of Housing Strategy explained that recent decisions by the Business Plan Working Group to bring long term void properties back into use had been a significant factor in the increase in relet times. He gave an example of some properties that had been empty for around 3 years being brought back into use, and added that he had seen longer term performance targets from EDH for a reduction in void rent loss from 5% to 1% over the next three years.

A Member referred to BV212 and explained that the top quartile was 27.43 days and other authorities must be working more efficiently. An explanation was requested as to why East Durham Homes could not achieve the top quartile. The Head of Housing Strategy advised that he would ask for a more detailed explanation. A report was recently presented to the HRA Business Working Group outlining options to resolve the shortfall to bring the longer term voids back into use. The recommended option was that the Council would increase its capital void works budget by £800,000 to meet the shortfall. He added that he had been working extensively with East Durham Homes on voids and new procedures had been implemented and improvement should be seen in the next report. Because of the long term voids being brought back into use this had caused a problem for BV212 and would take a little longer to show improvement.

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A member referred to the problems which had been experienced in respect of the Dawdon Private Sector Renewal Scheme. It was reported that EDH had indicated that due to a lack of capacity they were unable to undertake any more work in respect of this scheme. However, the member was aware that EDH had agreed to undertake works on behalf of Durham Aged Mineworkers Homes Association (DAMHA). The Member questioned why EDH priorities appeared to lie with DAMHA rather than the District Council's Private Sector Renewal projects. The Head of Housing Strategy advised that he would contact East Durham Homes for clarification on this issue.

A Member explained that historically it took three weeks to check a property for asbestos and asked what advances had been made and if East Durham Homes tested why the tenants were still in the properties. S Brown explained that asbestos checks were done by internal workforce was normally carried out within the notice period if at all possible.

T Taylor referred to the Estate Walkabouts and explained that some of the tenants were not wishing to conduct them. They had expected so much from East Durham Homes and the tenants thought they were not delivering. The Federation were conducting a consultation event to raise awareness of the importance of tenant participation.

The Scrutiny Support Manager explained that he had received an e-mail from Councillor Chaytor who had been unable to attend the meeting and had requested Officers be asked the following questions.

The OAP doors and window replacement (batch work) had to be completed before the end of the financial year but already there were rumours of a slippage in the timescales. However, only 36.8% of the proposed allocation had been spent and sought assurance that the works would be carried out to schedule and requested dates for the commencement of the work. The Head of Housing Strategy explained that more funding had been requested and 36.87% referred to the new proposed allocation. 52% of the original allocation had been expended and was on target. They were currently going through the process for formal appointment for external contractors to ensure that the project was completed on time.

Tenants seemed to be obtaining conflicting information from East Durham Homes personnel when asking about the windows replacement. Could East Durham Homes ensure that the tenants were kept informed as to when the work was commencing and if there was slippage in the project that tenants were told individually of this rather than hearing second hand. S Brown explained that tenants would be advised by the Tenant Liaison Officers. A copy of the programme would be forwarded to Members of the committee for information.

The Chair thanked the Head of Housing Strategy and the Service Compliance Manager for their report.

RESOLVED that:-

- (i) the information given, be noted;
- (ii) the future monitoring arrangements as detailed in the report be agreed.