

**THE MINUTES OF THE MEETING OF THE
REGENERATION SERVICES SCRUTINY COMMITTEE
HELD ON MONDAY, 16TH JULY, 2007**

Present: Councillor D. Raine (Chair)

Councillors S. Bishop, Mrs. E.M. Connor,
Mrs. S. Forster, H. High, A.J. Holmes,
Mrs. B.A. Sloan, D.J. Taylor-Gooby
and C. Walker

Also present: Councillor B. Quinn

1. **THE MINUTES OF THE LAST MEETING** held on 25th June, 2007, a copy of which had been circulated to each Member, were agreed.
2. **THE MINUTES OF THE MEETING OF THE EXECUTIVE** held on 3rd July, 2007 and of the **SPECIAL MEETING** held on 25th June, 2007, a copy of which had been circulated to each had been circulated to each Member, were submitted.

RESOLVED that the information contained within the Minutes, be noted.

3. **PUBLIC QUESTION AND ANSWER SESSION**

There were no members of the public present.

4. **FEEDBACK FROM SCRUTINY MANAGEMENT BOARD**

At the last meeting of the Scrutiny Management Board held on 11th July, 2007, the following issue was discussed:-

- * North East Regional Overview and Scrutiny Annual Conference

RESOLVED that the information given, be noted.

5. **SERVICE UNIT PERFORMANCE REPORTING - HOUSING SERVICES**

Consideration was given to the report of the Head of Housing which outlined the performance information in respect of East Durham Homes and the Housing Service Unit for the fourth quarter of the last financial year, a copy of which had been circulated to each Member.

The Head of Housing explained that the Housing Service Unit was made up of the following teams:-

Housing Renewal
Housing Policy and Strategy
Supported Housing
Service Support

All service areas managed by East Durham Homes and those in the housing service were subject to performance monitoring. Performance Indicators were set out in Appendix 1 and 3 to the report.

AT THIS POINT, COUNCILLORS MRS. E.M. CONNOR, MRS. B.A. SLOAN AND D.J. TAYLOR-GOOPY DECLARED A PERSONAL AND PREJUDICIAL INTEREST AND LEFT THE MEETING.

The Head of Housing explained that East Durham Homes had a ten year management agreement with the Council and the decent homes funding had been dependent on receiving the two star status.

Seventeen key indicators were selected for monitoring purposes which consisted of five best value performance indicators and twelve locally agreed indicators. Appendix 1 to the report set out East Durham Homes' Performance against those indicators and targets which had been set.

The key area of concern was once again the average re-let times where there had been only a slight improvement since the third quarter, although there had been a reduction of 28.6% since 2005/6. There had been further improvement in the first quarter of this financial year.

Another area of concern was the percentage of void repair jobs completed on time, where performance had fallen throughout 2006/7 to 93.1% overall. East Durham Homes' performance was 94.96% and Morrison Facilities Services was 82.13%.

The amount of rent collected had again increased in the fourth quarter and performance represented HouseMark top quartile performance. The percentage of former tenant rent arrears written off had reduced from 0.99% in 2005/6 to 0.30% in 2006/7, which again represented top quartile performance.

The other area where top quartile performance had been achieved was in the percentage of tenants stating they were satisfied with opportunities for participation in management and decision making, where there had been an increase of 12.3%.

The Head of Housing explained that overall there had been a reduction of £53,887 in the total of all rent arrears in 2006/7. The figure was calculated taking into account the reduction of former tenant rent arrears written off between 2005/6 and 2006/7, which was £148,218.

In the fourth quarter of 2006/7, East Durham Homes received a total of 106 complaints of which 55 were found to be justified. There was also a total of 24 compliments received. Details of complaints received were detailed in Appendix 2.

Since the second quarter of 2006/7, the number of complaints and complaints received by East Durham Homes had increased, however this could be due to a number of improvements East Durham Homes had introduced which were outlined in the report.

The Head of Housing explained that it was unlikely that East Durham Homes would hit the 2010 target for the Decent Homes standard. Meetings had been held with Government Office North East and DCLG and timescales were likely to be 2012/2013. If East Durham Homes had gained the two star status, it was very unlikely that they would have been able to deliver the Decent Homes by 2010 as the Government had huge problems in the amount of funding that was available.

A Member suggested that the Head of Housing provide Members with information on East Durham Homes' performance five times per year rather than four. He

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commented that he had carried out some research into lettable properties and felt that the information given was now out of date.

The Chair referred to the void reduction and explained that a lot of sales and demolitions had been suggested by the Housing Business Plan Group. The Head of Housing explained that staff were working hard to work through the hotspot areas although there were still some pockets of housing that needed to be addressed. It was down to significant efforts of the Council that the voids had reduced.

A Member referred to the amount of time taken to carry out repairs on voids and commented that some works were not carried out to the highest standard. Repairs should be carried out right first time without the need for repeat visits.

A Member referred to Edenhill in Peterlee and queried why the successful developer Gladedale had not signed the contract. The Head of Housing explained that the contract was subject to planning permission. Planning permission was expected to be granted very shortly.

A Member commented that over 50% of complaints had been justified and felt that this was unacceptable.

The Chair queried if the unachievable target of 2010 for the Decent Homes standard would have any consequences for East Durham Homes. The Head of Housing explained that last year the Government had acknowledged that the 2010 target was not achievable for a number of local authorities. Officers had attended a meeting in London when it was explained that the Government did not have the funding to give to all local authorities before 2010, and requested that the target be changed. Even if East Durham Homes had achieved the two star rating, the 2010 target would not have been achieved. He had met with the new Chief Executive of East Durham Homes who had made contact with colleagues in London and arrangements were being made for further meetings. Formal consent was required from the Secretary of State for the change in target.

The Chair queried if the tenants who had had meetings with East Durham Homes regarding their improvements would still have works carried out. The Head of Housing explained that the tenants already programmed for this year would have the improvements carried out. He added that he would raise the issue with East Durham Homes but was certain that all residents in the programme had been contacted.

A Member suggested that Councillors be kept informed as to the works progressing with the Decent Homes standard. The Head of Housing explained that a presentation was held for all Members and a booklet was circulated which showed which properties were in the programme for this financial year.

A Member queried the cost of recovering rent arrears. The Head of Housing explained that East Durham Homes had a bad debt policy for recovering rent arrears. He added that he would obtain further details and circulate to Members.

A Member referred to the responsive repair performance indicator and queried why East Durham Homes had carried out 35,000 jobs and Morrisons only 6,000. The Head of Housing explained that Morrisons did not commence until July and the performance monitoring was for the whole of the financial year. S. Brown explained that the re-let times for the first quarter of the year was 45 days.

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A Member suggested that a blitz should be carried out on family houses and East Durham Homes would be making great strides for the two stars. He referred to a complaint he had received where a tenant had to wait one week without hot water.

The Head of Housing explained that at the end of the Decent Homes presentation, he had demonstrated a new system for recording and dealing with complaints from Members. Members needed to contact a member of the Service Improvement Team, whereby the complaint would be logged and followed up, and a reply given to the Member concerned.

With regard to void properties, the Chief Executive of East Durham Homes had met with his staff and the workforce was being realigned to start working on the voids. He added that the Chief Executive had advised that no one of suitable seniority was available to attend the meeting but would make sure someone was available at future meetings.

COUNCILLOR D.J. TAYLOR-GOOPY REJOINED THE MEETING.

With regard to Housing Services, Appendix 3 set out the performance against indicators and targets which had been set. Of the twenty-three Indicators where information was available, ten were on target, four were within the 5% tolerance and nine were not on target.

The Head of Housing explained that forty landlords had joined the accreditation scheme in the last quarter. He gave details of energy conservation, development of the new District Housing Strategy, Area Renewal and Settlement Plans, Supported Housing, Homelessness and Housing Advice Service and Service Support.

An Affordable Housing Strategy had been adopted and any new housing developments of fifteen units or more must have 20% affordable housing.

A Member referred to the North East Industrial Estate in Peterlee and queried the delay. The Head of Housing explained that there had been some delays as this was a very complex project to acquire the land but the development brief was still being taken forward. The Manager of East Durham Business Service was leading on the project and he could not give of any more detail.

A Member referred to the Old Boys Club site in Peterlee and explained that he was concerned regarding the Estates Department's policy of marketing for the best offer. The Head of Housing explained that he was not aware of the current situation with the Boys Club. Where land was sold for social benefit, the Council could discount the land price.

A Member commented that 213 properties had been brought back into use and queried if the District Council owned them. The Head of Housing explained that approximately eighty of the properties had been demolished. The owners of the derelict properties would be located and pressure put on them to bring them back into use. He added that he was working on reports on Private Sector Leasing Scheme and new powers for dealing with empty properties. Empty Property Management Orders and Enforced Sale Procedure were hoped to be introduced. A notice could be served on an owner to gain entry and carry out works on their behalf. Once the property was sold the Council could deduct any expenses they had incurred.

A Member queried if the Enforced Sale Procedure was for a dwelling house or any building. The Head of Housing explained that it could be used on any property. There was a power available under the Land and Property Act 1925 whereby if a Council

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incurred expenses then they could recover costs. Empty Property Management Orders were specific to dwelling houses.

The Chair queried if East Durham Homes vetted prospective tenants. The Head of Housing explained that East Durham Homes did not carry out Police checks but would check against their own records unless they had reason to believe further checks were necessary. He added that he was consulting with residents in the Wembly area of Easington Colliery for a Mandatory Licensing Scheme. This would need to be applied to the Secretary of State and any landlord would need to apply for a licence before they could rent out their houses.

The Chair thanked the Officers for their report.

RESOLVED that the information given, be noted.

6. ADDITIONAL URGENT ITEMS OF BUSINESS

In accordance with the Local Government Act, 1972, as amended by the Local Government (Access to Information) Act 1985, Section 100B(4)(b) the Chair, following consultation with the Proper Officer, agreed that following item of business, not shown on the Agenda, be considered as a matter of urgency.

7. HEALTH STATISTICS IN EASINGTON DISTRICT (AOB)

At the last meeting, a Member had raised concerns regarding the recently published health statistics and the negative press given to the Easington area. Claire Sullivan, Consultant in Public Health for County Durham and Darlington, had confirmed that she could attend the meeting on Monday, 17th September to give a presentation on the health development work that was taking place in the District as well as the Public Health's Annual Report. This would be an opportunity for the Council to publicise the positive measures that were being carried out in the District.

RESOLVED that the information given, be noted.