

**THE MINUTES OF THE SPECIAL MEETING OF THE  
SERVICE DELIVERY SCRUTINY COMMITTEE**

**HELD ON FRIDAY 1st DECEMBER 2006**

Present:- Councillor D. Raine (Chair)  
Councillors S. Bishop, J. Goodwin,  
H. High and W.R. Peardon

Also present:- Councillors D. Armstrong, B. Burn,  
A. Collinson, R. Crute, Mrs. J. Freak,  
D. Milsom, Mrs. A. Naylor, G. Patterson,  
B. Quinn, M. Routledge and F. Shaw.

**1. PERFORMANCE OF EAST DURHAM HOMES AND THE HOUSING SERVICES UNIT**

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

The Head of Housing explained that Homelessness and Care Services had been returned to the Management of the Council on 1st June 2006, and now formed part of the Housing Service Unit which was made up of the following teams:-

- \* Housing Renewals
- \* 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 by way of either statutory Best Value Performance Indicators or locally agreed indicators. At present, the performance targets were set annually, however, it was intended in future to profile quarterly targets wherever possible. This would produce a more robust performance system particularly in areas where there were seasonal fluctuations or planned work arranged at particular times throughout the year.

The Head of Housing explained that 17 key indicators were selected for monitoring purposes which consisted of 5 Best Value Performance Indicators and 12 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 service areas of concern were Rent Arrears and Void Re-let times whereas the time taken to complete responsive repairs had improved.

Members were advised that Decent Homes was an annual target. He was currently working with East Durham Homes to produce a quarterly update on the figures. Currently, there was 81% of local authority dwellings which were non-decent and three maintenance contractors had been appointed in order to reduce this figure. East Durham Homes had been approached by the Department for Communities and Local Government (DCLOG) to extend the target date for decent homes. East Durham Homes were trying to resist the move in targets.

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The total number of void dwellings as a percentage of the stock was currently at 2.15% which showed an increase in performance. The average time taken to re-let local authority housing was 62 days and the 'real' re-let times for local authority housing was 46.9 days. It was hoped that performance would improve in the next quarter.

The Head of Housing explained that he had made a comparison from when the Council stock was managed by the District Council in 2003/4 to the current time and the targets on rent arrears, rent collection, void rent loss and repairs had improved. The targets on decent homes and void re-lets both 'real' and gross had declined. The tenant satisfaction target had stayed the same.

Details of complaints and compliments received in each service area were detailed in the report.

With regard to Housing Services, of the 20 indicators where information was available, 60% were on target, 20% were within the tolerance and 20% were not on target.

Members were advised that 122 properties had been brought back into use or demolished. There were a total of 94 accredited landlords registered through the District of Easington Private Landlords Accreditation Scheme which covered 509 properties. 83.3% of notices served had resulted in remedial action and 7 new units of social housing had been made available in the period.

With regard to Supported Housing, there was a 6.68 second response time and 97.1% of calls were answered within 20 minutes. The service had a 99% customer satisfaction.

The Head of Housing explained that a proportion of households accepted as statutory homeless who were accepted as statutory homeless by the same authority within the last 2 years was 3.45% and 98.2% of homelessness applications made were dealt with within 33 working days.

With regard to service support, 100% of complaints received were responded to within the timescales and service standards were in place. The percentage of BVPI's attributable to East Durham Homes that were on target or within the 5% tolerance was 50%.

Members raised concerns regarding void re-let times and queried how East Durham Homes could justify using their employees to carry out work for other social landlords when a lot of the Council house stock was standing empty awaiting repairs. The Head of Housing explained that to avoid redundancies, East Durham Homes Board had made a decision to carry out work for registered social landlords. East Durham Homes was currently making an operational profit which was ploughed back into the Company. This decision had been made purely to avoid redundancies which would have impacted upon the Council's Capital Programme budget.

Concern was also raised regarding rent arrears and it was queried why tenants were allowed to fall so far behind. The Head of Housing explained that the lower level arrears and the amount of rent arrears collected was improving. Support was being given to tenants to access benefits.

A Member commented that more detail was given on rent arrears a number of years ago. The Head of Housing explained that a more detailed breakdown could be given in the next report.

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A Member raised concerns regarding void properties. The Head of Housing explained that East Durham Homes performance was poor and unacceptable and suggested that the Committee may wish to do some further work on how to influence performance.

A Member queried what the definition of homelessness was. The Head of Housing explained that homelessness was when people presented themselves to the Council or other agencies as homeless. It was very rare that they were rough sleepers and the vast majority of homeless people were dealt with extremely quickly.

A Member referred to an individual case in his Ward where a property had been empty for 3 months. The homeless family had been informed that they would have to wait 12 months. He added that East Durham Homes needed to find a way to reduce the voids.

The Head of Housing explained that if any Member had any individual cases that they wished investigating, they should contact a member of his staff who would contact East Durham Homes and try to resolve the situation. He added that some Members felt they did not have a direct link to East Durham Homes but this could be achieved through his team.

A Member referred to the disposal of long term voids and asked for an update on the current situation. The Head of Housing explained that there were a number of reasons why properties had been brought back into use. The main reason was that the market had changed. The District Council had sold over 3,000 properties and house prices had risen and residents now found it more difficult to buy. Some properties that were in low demand now had a high demand for them. A sustainability matrix was used which looked at the cost of bringing houses back into use as well as demand. Points were allocated on a number of different factors and where there was a demand for properties, they were brought back into use.

The Chair explained that the selling of long term voids had been a policy of the Housing Business Plan.

Members explained that they felt that a representative of East Durham Homes should be at future meetings to answer any queries and complaints from Members.

The Chair suggested that a Sub-Committee could be formed to monitor the performance of East Durham Homes. He also queried why the Accredited Landlord Scheme was not made compulsory.

The Head of Housing explained that Selective Licensing was introduced in the Housing Act 2004. A secondary piece of legislation had just been enacted and guidance had been received from DCLOG. A meeting had been held with other Officers and a report would be presented to Members early in the New Year seeking authority to use Selective Licensing within the District which would run alongside the Accredited Landlord Scheme.

A Member explained that a presentation was to be held on 8th December 2006 regarding Choice Based Lettings and asked that Members contact Emma Regan to inform her if they were attending. The Head of Housing explained that he had arranged for a guest speaker from another authority who had been running a Choice Based Letting Scheme.

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The Scrutiny Support Manager explained that a query had been received from Councillor Chaytor regarding the Empty Homes Strategy who had requested the Head of Housing to expand on what the strategy entailed.

The Head of Housing explained that the Empty Property Officer which was jointly funded with the Neighbourhood Management Pathfinder had been appointed. A Draft Empty Property Strategy was currently being drawn up which would look in detail at powers introduced by the Housing Act 2004. Empty Dwelling Management Orders could be used which allowed the District Council to gain entry to a property, repair it, rent it out and keep the rent until the costs the Council had incurred, were met. Forced sales could also be used on long term voids. The District Council could gain entry to the property to repair it and put it on the market for sale. Any costs incurred by the Council would be taken out of the proceeds of sale and the remainder would be returned to the owner. Five properties had been identified where Empty Dwelling Management Orders could be piloted. A report would be considered by Members in the New Year

The Chair thanked Officers for their attendance.

### **RESOLVED** that

- (i) the information given be noted;
- (ii) the principle of establishing a Working Party to look at the performance monitoring of East Durham Homes be considered at a future meeting.
- (ii) a representative of East Durham Homes be requested to attend future meetings when the report was being considered.

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