



Lewes District Council

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Housing Working Party

Minutes of a meeting of the **Housing Working Party** held in the **Warren Room, Lewes House, 32 High Street, Lewes** on **Monday 30 April 2012** at **2:30pm**

Present:

Councillor R K Maskell (Chair), M P Chartier, S B Davy, S J Osborne and S Saunders

Officers Attending:

A Chequers, Corporate Head – Housing Services
Z Downton, Committee Officer
T Johnson, Head of Housing Repairs and Improvements
S Jump, Head of Finance
L Martin, Housing Projects Manager
R Tahsin, Tenant Participation Manager

Also Present:

A Blanshard, Admin Team Leader
B Piper and L Steer, Tenants' Representatives

Minutes

10 Minutes

The Minutes of the meeting held on 15 February 2012 were approved as a correct record and signed by the Chair.

11 Apologies for Absence

An apology for absence had been received from Councillor A X Smith.

12 Draft Housing Revenue Account Business Plan 2012-2042

The Working Party considered the most recent version of the Draft Housing Revenue Business Plan 2012-2042. The update to the original Housing Revenue Account (HRA) Business Plan 2004-34 set out the Council's overall aims and objectives for the housing service, as a landlord of 3,250 homes. It analysed the current position of the service and the Council's housing stock, and presented the actions planned to achieve the Council's objectives.

The Corporate Head – Housing Services explained that members of the Working Party had played an important role in the development of the

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Business Plan which had been revised in conjunction with comments made by members at the previous meeting on 15 February 2012. He advised that a final draft would be used to consult with tenants and staff on a wider basis before the Business Plan was finalised. The 30 year Business Plan took into account the housing finance reform, which had come into effect on 1 April 2012, and was a working document which the Council would continue to monitor, review and develop in consultation with all stakeholders.

On behalf of the Working Party, the Chair thanked the Corporate Head – Housing Services for his explanation of the purpose of the Business Plan.

In response to a councillor's question, the Corporate Head – Housing Services advised that he would be able to circulate the 2011/2012 homeless applications figures, indicated as 'awaiting data' on page 7 of the Business Plan, to members of the Working Party once that data was available. Those figures would be included in the final draft of the Plan.

CHHS

In relation to pages 11 and 12 of the Business Plan, the Working Party noted that the rise in the average time to re-let vacant Council properties had been addressed and reduced to 29 days in 2011/2012. Members also expressed support regarding the intention to resume the programme of loft conversions for overcrowded households, subject to approved funding, and also the intention to annually review the recently enhanced Tenants Incentive Scheme to ensure that it continued to encourage tenants to downsize where appropriate.

The Working Party discussed the Council's programme for the continued refurbishment and rental potential of garage sites, under the 'Making Best Use of Non-Housing Assets' section, on page 13 of the Business Plan. Members suggested methods of advertising vacant garages, such as in the Council's quarterly newsletter 'District News', utilising the Council's website and contacting estate agents. The Working Party highlighted that there was a contradiction within the section in terms of the intention to maximise garage rental potential, compared with the statement that it would be unlikely that any further garage sites would need to be disposed of because of under-use. The Corporate Head – Housing Services responded that there was an anomaly and the wording would be revised. He advised that the ways of advertising vacant garages would be addressed.

CHHS

In response to a question regarding the housing self-financing reform which required the Council to make a debt settlement payment to the Government on 28 March 2012, the Head of Finance confirmed that the Council had secured a package of loans at an interest rate of 2.7%. In March 2012, the Government had launched an invigorated Right to Buy scheme, which incorporated increases in the discounts available to existing tenants. The Head of Finance explained that the policy document had been received, but further clarification of the details of the Right to Buy scheme were expected.

Regarding Welfare Reform, under section 7 'Risks and opportunities' of the Business Plan, the Working Party asked what the Council was doing in terms of establishing who the most vulnerable people were. The Corporate

Head - Housing Services advised that the vulnerable were identified through a combination of the recent customer profiling survey, anecdotal information from officers and that the Department for Communities and Local Government was expected to issue guidelines on vulnerable sectors within communities. He brought to councillors' attention that the Government intended to replace working age credits and benefits with a Universal Credit from October 2013 and it was anticipated that it would have an impact on the collection of rent and subsequently rent arrears. The main concern was a potential loss of income for the Council and Government guidelines regarding the collection of rents were expected. The Tenant Participation Manager advised that pro-active measures should be undertaken by the Council in light of the forthcoming changes, such as assisting tenants with setting up direct debits and managing Universal Credit accounts.

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In response to a councillor's question, the Corporate Head – Housing Services advised that the 2011/2012 figures relating to the Local and National Performance Indicators, as set out in Appendix 2 of the Business Plan, would be included in the final version.

CHHS

The Corporate Head – Housing Services thanked the Working Party for their comments and advised members that a final draft version of the Business Plan would next be presented for consideration at a meeting of the Cabinet, after completion of the full consultation exercise.

Resolved:

12.1 That the Draft Housing Revenue Account Business Plan 2012-2042 be agreed, subject to the following amendments:

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- (a) That a sentence be added to the beginning of the 'Introduction' section, on page 4 of the Business Plan, to read "This report reflects Lewes District Council's commitment to social housing and recognises the importance of its role as a landlord and its willingness to respond to ever changing circumstances.";
- (b) 'Aim One', on page 4 of the Business Plan, be amended to read 'Seek to meet the housing need through cross tenure solutions';
- (c) That the word 'successfully' be removed from the first sentence on page 9 of the Business Plan (under the header 'Lewes District Council's Vision "One District, One Council"');
- (d) On page 9 of the Business Plan, the sentence 'At the heart of Lewes District Council lies residents and our promise is simple' be deleted and replaced with '*Lewes District Council recognises the importance of our residents and our promise to them is simple.*';
- (e) That text be added, on page 11 of the Business Plan, to make

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<p>it clear that the Housing Services priorities set out were not listed in order of importance; and</p> <p>(f) That the two paragraphs under the section entitled 'Making Best Use of Non-Housing Assets', on page 13 of the Business Plan, be reviewed and re-worded where appropriate, to avoid contradictory statements.</p>	
<p>13 Date of Next Meeting</p>	
<p><u>Resolved:</u></p>	
<p>13.1 That it be noted that the next meeting of the Working Party will be called as necessary.</p>	All to note/CO
<p>The meeting ended at 3.30pm</p>	
<p>R K Maskell Chair</p>	