

HOUSING OVERVIEW & SCRUTINY COMMITTEE

10 JULY 2013

Minutes of the meeting of the Housing Overview & Scrutiny Committee of Flintshire County Council held at Llys Eleanor, Shotton Lane, Shotton, Deeside CH5 1QU on Wednesday, 10 July 2013

PRESENT: Councillor Ron Hampson (Chairman)

Councillors: Amanda Bragg, David Cox, Peter Curtis, Glenys Diskin, Jim Falshaw, Alison Halford, George Hardcastle, Ray Hughes, Brian Lloyd, Mike Reece, Gareth Roberts and Sharon Williams

APOLOGIES:

Councillors: Ron Davies and Rosetta Dolphin

CONTRIBUTORS:

Cabinet Member for Housing, Director of Community Services, Head of Housing, Housing Strategy Manager, Housing Asset Manager, Operations Manager and Housing Strategy Officer

IN ATTENDANCE:

Housing and Learning Overview & Scrutiny Facilitator and Committee Officer

7. ANNOUNCEMENT BY THE CHAIRMAN

The Chairman welcomed those in attendance to the meeting at Llys Eleanor and praised the wonderful facility which he felt Flintshire County Council should be proud of. He thanked the staff and residents for their hospitality.

The Chairman then explained to Members that Gill Conway, the Operations Manager, would be retiring from the Council shortly. He presented her with a bouquet of flowers and thanked her for the work that she had undertaken during her employment at the Council.

8. DECLARATIONS OF INTEREST (INCLUDING WHIPPING DECLARATIONS)

No declarations of interest were made.

9. MINUTES

The minutes of the meeting held on 5 June 2013 had been circulated with the agenda.

Matters Arising

Councillor Alison Halford referred to the penultimate paragraph on page 5 and asked whether the Income Team dealing with rent arrears were to be invited to a future meeting of the Committee. The Head of Housing responded that a report on rent arrears would be considered as part of the Quarter 1 performance report at the meeting of the Committee scheduled for 11 September 2013 and suggested that the Income Team attend that meeting.

RESOLVED:

That the minutes be approved as a correct record and signed by the Chairman.

10. VARIATION IN ORDER OF BUSINESS

The Chairman indicated that there would be a slight change in the order of business to bring forward the item on the Community Services Directorate Plan.

11. COMMUNITY SERVICES DIRECTORATE PLAN

The Director of Community Services introduced a report on the Community Services Directorate Plan to present the final draft to Members and to seek any final views and comments before approval by Cabinet.

He provided a detailed presentation on the Improvement Plan and highlighted the four priorities and the sub priorities for Housing which included Extra Care Housing, achieving the Wales Housing Quality Standard and modern, efficient and adapted homes. The Director then provided a detailed presentation on the Directorate Plan. It was reported that a user friendly style to the format had been adopted by Community Services in 2012 and this had been retained for the update. Section 3 of the Directorate Plan detailed the vision and values of the Directorate of Community Services and the performance highlights were reported in section 4. The extra care facility at Llys Jasmine was on schedule to open in September 2013 and would be similar to the development at Llys Eleanor in Shotton.

Councillor George Hardcastle thanked the Director for his presentation and report. He asked whether there had been any significant impacts since the introduction of Welfare Reform. The Head of Housing responded that as at the end June 2013 rent arrears had increased by £30,000 on the same period last year and even though this was a concern, about 80% of income due was still being collected. She added that 21 tenants who were being charged for under occupancy charges had been moved to smaller properties. Discretionary Housing Payments had been made to some tenants following claims and a key issue was ensuring that tenants were aware of the Welfare Benefits Service who could assist in identifying whether they were receiving the benefits that they were entitled to. On the issue of homelessness, there had been an increase in the use of bed and breakfast accommodation but this was currently being contained within the budget and the impact was being managed. Following a further question from Councillor Hardcastle on what would happen if tenants had a three bedroom property and there were insufficient one or two bedroom properties available for them to move into, the Head of Housing said that each case was looked at on its merits. She detailed the approach taken for those who were in arrears before the introduction of the Welfare Reform and those who had not been in arrears prior to April 2013. She advised that the Council were not yet at the position of taking tenants to court over the rent arrears which had accrued as a result of Welfare Reform but there would be a need to look at how this would be managed for the future.

Councillor Peter Curtis said that there would be situations in the whole of the country where tenants wanted to move to smaller properties to avoid the

extra charge, but the properties were not available for them to move to. He spoke of the 30 empty properties which were being brought back into use for residential living and also commented on the increased use of foodbanks. Councillor Curtis referred to the large number of empty properties in the Holywell and Greenfield areas and queried whether this was due to high rents being charged. The Head of Housing said that ways were being considered of how to work with private landlords and suggested that this could be the subject of a report to a future meeting. Councillor Curtis welcomed the reduction in the number of void properties.

Councillor Alison Halford thanked the Director, the Head of Housing and officers for the report and the information provided. She asked for further information on why the authority was in the bottom quartile for the average time taken to complete Disabled Facilities Grants (DFGs) and undertaking visits to looked after children within statutory timescales. On the issue of DFGs, the Director said that improvements had been made in the last quarter but that Flintshire County Council was still below average for Councils in Wales. Work had been undertaken to work more effectively and the position was improving but was still a challenge. On the issue of visits within statutory timescales, he said that these were for individual cases and could result in a missed performance indicator if the visit was undertaken a day later than scheduled, however the situation was improving. In response to a query from Councillor Halford about whether DFGs could be included as an item on the Forward Work Programme for discussion at a future meeting, the Director concurred and suggested that it be included as an item for discussion at a joint meeting with the Social and Health Care Overview & Scrutiny Committee.

Councillor Halford referred to the Deeside Housing Renewal Area and asked whether there had been any slippage. The Director confirmed that it was reported in the Directorate Plan that this issue remained a key priority. The Head of Housing said that there were no significant issues and added that the renewal area budget was ringfenced but the funding at £300,000 had been significantly lower than the £1m expected. Last year all of the commitments were achieved.

On the issue of vacant properties which were beyond repair, Councillor Mike Reece queried whether demolition could be forced to free up land to build new properties. The Director suggested that this be included as an item on the Forward Work Programme for a future meeting. Councillor David Cox raised concern about properties which had stood empty for over five years and the problems associated with identifying and contacting the owners. The Director commented on the challenges but said that a target of bringing 30 empty homes back into use had been set. The Head of Housing said that the empty homes activity had improved and she commented on work which was being undertaken on options available to Councils such as charging higher rates of Council Tax for empty properties. She suggested that a report on empty properties be considered at a future meeting of the Committee and that the Housing Renewal Manager be invited to attend to answer questions from Members.

The Chairman queried whether there was any funding available which could be used to build council houses on land owned by the authority. The Head of Housing explained that Welsh Government (WG) had been able to secure

agreement with Central Government to exit the HRA subsidy system but the implications of this for Flintshire were not yet known.

In response to a question from Council Halford about whether the Council would buy back properties in good condition which had previously been council houses, the Head of Housing said that this had not happened yet but there was an option for the authority to do so. Councillor Gareth Roberts did not feel that the Council were legally able to do this.

Councillor Jim Falshaw referred to the issue of Section 106 agreements for affordable housing and said that he felt that developers would not agree to comply with this requirement.

The Head of Housing advised that just under 3000 people were on the housing register and, following a comment from Councillor Falshaw, confirmed that modern and different methods of construction were being explored to develop new homes.

In response to a question from Councillor Halford, the Head of Housing explained that the land review was underway but had not yet been completed. The Director advised that he would provide further information on land owned by Flintshire County Council at a future meeting.

RESOLVED:

That the final draft of the Community Services Directorate Plan be endorsed.

12. HOUSING SERVICE PLAN

The Head of Housing introduced a report to seek Member endorsement of the 2013-2014 Housing Service Plan.

The Head of Housing detailed the background to the report and explained that the service plan set out the housing service's priorities and key actions to secure continuous improvement in 2013-2014. A summary of the challenges faced by the service and the opportunities for change and improvement were detailed in the report and included improving performance in void management; working towards delivery of a regional allocations policy and housing register; delivering projects and initiatives to mitigate the effect of Welfare Reform and delivering the Flint Regeneration Housing Scheme.

Councillor Alison Halford asked for further information on staff appraisals and sickness absence and also on gypsies and travellers. The Head of Housing said that the target for appraisals was 100% for all staff. She added that sickness absence figures were improving and she was confident that sickness absence would continue to reduce. On the issue of gypsies and travellers the Housing Strategy Manager said that consideration was being given to the expansion of the Riverside Site and for a transit site in Greenfield. Councillor Peter Curtis asked whether there was an update on the Dollar Park site as he felt that there was an unlawful expansion of the site. The Head of Housing suggested that the Housing Strategy Manager look at the issue following this meeting and advise Councillor Curtis of his findings. Councillor Gareth Roberts said that the site had been

granted permission on appeal until 2015 for 12 pitches but these had not all been used. He added that if all of the pitches were now being used, it could appear that the site had expanded.

Councillor Roberts also queried whether there was adequate provision in the other North Wales authority areas. In response, the Housing Strategy Manager said that in North Wales, Flintshire County Council provided 58% of the sites and Wrexham County Borough Council provided 33%. There were a small number of sites in Anglesey but Conwy, Denbighshire and Gwynedd County Councils did not have any formal provision for gypsies and travellers. He referred to a housing white paper which proposed a statutory duty for all authorities to make provision for sites.

In response to a query from Councillor Mike Reece on the boarding up of some of the maisonettes in Flint, the Head of Housing said that this was necessary due to risks to remaining residents.

RESOLVED:

That the Housing Service Plan 2013-2014 be endorsed.

13. DELIVERING HOUSING DEVELOPMENT IN FLINTSHIRE WITHOUT THE REQUIREMENT FOR PUBLIC GRANT SUBSIDY

The Head of Housing introduced a report to outline to Members the variety of financial models available to the Council to facilitate housing development in Flintshire without the requirement for public grant subsidy.

She detailed the background to the report and explained that the Council needed to rethink its approach to housing development. It was reported that the Council needed to ensure that the right types of housing offered in the right locations were delivered to meet the needs of existing households. To attract economically active households into Flintshire, the Council must therefore consider new delivery models, seek out alternative forms of funding and consider different tenures and housing products. The report raised the issue of what to do with land that was owned by Flintshire County Council and detailed how it could deliver housing in the future. The Head of Housing spoke of some of the financial models which included disposing of the land at no value or joint venture arrangements.

Councillor Peter Curtis asked whether options which were used in other countries had been considered and disagreed with the idea of giving land away as he felt that the highest price should be achieved.

In response to questions from Councillor Alison Halford, the Head of Housing provided further information on a co-operative delivery model. The Cabinet Member for Housing said that discussions were ongoing and a visit was to be undertaken to view properties built by other local authorities. Councillor Ray Hughes asked whether building log cabins had been considered.

Councillor Gareth Roberts felt that the Council would like to be able to build its own Council housing but in highlighting paragraph 3.14, he raised

concern that the models suggested in the report were about building properties for others. He also felt that it was inappropriate to consider undertaking prudential borrowing.

In response to the comments made, the Head of Housing said that it was not the role of the Council to just look at social needs as there was a need to provide adequate housing provision for all. She spoke of the differences between affordable/social rent and market rents and said that there was a need to look at how to meet all the different needs.

RESOLVED:

That the report be noted.

14. FORWARD WORK PROGRAMME

The Housing and Learning Overview & Scrutiny Facilitator reminded Members of the Forward Work Programme planning session which was due to take place on Monday, 15th July. She circulated a pack of papers for their consideration at the planning session.

Councillor George Hardcastle asked whether the meeting of the Committee scheduled for 11 September 2013 could be held at the Holywell Flintshire Connects office.

RESOLVED:

That the Forward Work Programme be noted.

15. MEMBERS OF THE PUBLIC AND PRESS IN ATTENDANCE

There was one member of the press and no members of the public in attendance.

(The meeting started at 2.30 pm and ended at 3.55 pm)

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Chairman