

COMMUNITY AND ENTERPRISE OVERVIEW & SCRUTINY COMMITTEE
26 JUNE 2019

Minutes of the meeting of the Community and Enterprise Overview & Scrutiny Committee of Flintshire County Council held in the Delyn Committee Room, County Hall, Mold on Wednesday, 26 June 2019

PRESENT: Councillor Ian Dunbar (Chairman)

Councillors: Helen Brown, David Cox, Jean Davies, Ron Davies, Rosetta Dolphin, Mared Eastwood, Ray Hughes, Brian Lloyd, Mike Reece, Paul Shotton and David Wisinger

SUBSTITUTE: Councillor: Paul Johnson (for Ted Palmer)

ALSO PRESENT: Councillor Patrick Heesom attended as an observer

CONTRIBUTORS: Councillor Derek Butler, Cabinet Member for Economic Development; Councillor Dave Hughes, Cabinet Member for Housing; Chief Officer (Housing and Assets); Benefits Manager; Revenues Manager; Connects Manager; and Team Leader (Income)

Welfare Reform Managers - for minute number 6

IN ATTENDANCE: Community & Enterprise Overview & Scrutiny Facilitator and Democratic Services Officers

1. APPOINTMENT OF CHAIR

The Facilitator said that it had been confirmed at the Annual Meeting of the County Council that the Chair of the Committee should come from the Labour Group. Members were advised that the Group had appointed Councillor Dunbar to this role.

(From this point, Councillor Dunbar chaired the remainder of the meeting)

2. APPOINTMENT OF VICE-CHAIR

Councillor Wisinger's nomination for Councillor Ray Hughes as Vice-Chair was seconded by Councillor Ron Davies. No further nominations were received. On being put to the vote, this was carried.

RESOLVED:

That Ray Hughes be appointed Vice-Chair of the Committee.

3. DECLARATIONS OF INTEREST

None.

4. MINUTES

The minutes of the meeting held on 1 May 2019 were submitted.

Minute 73: North East Wales (NEW) Homes Business Plan - Councillor Reece said that during discussion on the Strategic Housing and Regeneration Programme (SHARP), he had enquired about the former Canton depot site. The Chief Officer advised that a scheme was currently still viable subject to the ongoing discussions with Natural Resources Wales.

Subject to the change, Councillor Wisinger moved approval of the minutes which were agreed by the Committee.

RESOLVED:

That subject to the amendment, the minutes be approved as a correct record and signed by the Chairman.

5. FORWARD WORK PROGRAMME AND ACTION TRACKING

The Facilitator presented the current Forward Work Programme, together with an update on actions arising from previous meetings, all of which were now completed.

The recommendations were moved by Councillor Wisinger and seconded by Councillor Jean Davies.

RESOLVED:

- (a) That the Forward Work Programme be noted;
- (b) That the Facilitator, in consultation with the Chairman of the Committee, be authorised to vary the Forward Work Programme between meetings, as the need arises; and
- (c) That the Committee notes the progress made in completing the outstanding actions.

6. WELFARE REFORM UPDATE

The Benefits Manager introduced Sian Humphreys and Dawn Barnes who led the Welfare Response team. They gave a presentation on the work of their team to support households affected by the reforms, which covered the following:

- Background
- Current impacts of Welfare Reforms
- Highest proportion of residents impacted by the 'Bedroom Tax'
- Universal Credit (UC) caseload
- Households affected by the Benefit Cap
- Welfare Reform Team Support
- Discretionary Housing Payments (DHP)
- April 2019 - What Changed

- Proactive engagement
- Case study

The analysis showed that Bedroom Tax remained the greatest impact on residents in Flintshire, affecting 677 households as at March 2019. A total of 979 DHP applications had been awarded in 2018/19, with Bedroom Tax cited as the main reason. The team's holistic approach was to explore all options to support individuals including early intervention which helped to mitigate the impact on other services, for example preventing homelessness. The decision by the Department of Work & Pensions (DWP) meant that Universal Support was now being delivered by the Citizens Advice Bureau through the 'Help to Claim' process.

Councillor Shotton reiterated his concerns about the Help to Claim process which excluded much-needed personal budgeting support. The Benefits Manager spoke about the importance of that support being continued by the team, albeit without funding from DWP. Although outcomes from the Help to Claim process were not yet determined at this stage, there were concerns that the support was only provided until the date when customers received their first full UC payment.

In highlighting the importance of raising awareness of the work of the team, Councillor Dolphin suggested that Members could help or the team could engage directly with residents in local community events. The Benefits Manager said that the team planned to attend two forthcoming local festivals and she welcomed requests for them to attend similar events. On the Help to Claim model, access to data was an issue however the team would continue to monitor progress. On the Bedroom Tax, she agreed to provide an update on the number of people waiting to downsize to smaller accommodation, including the 58 people reported in October 2017. Although DHP was a short-term solution, that support continued if there was no other option available.

Councillor Brown suggested that a leaflet on initiatives such as the Council Tax Reduction Scheme (CTRS) could accompany Council Tax bills and Rent Statements, and distributed at summer playschemes. The Benefits Manager said that the reduction in CTRS claims had been a concern and that eligible claimants were being tracked and monitored to help with re-submission of claims. Promotion of the CTRS was being progressed through an internal working group who would welcome ideas from Members.

Councillor Brown also referred to the number of safeguarding tenancies receiving support from the team and suggested that the former Welfare Reform Board be re-established. She asked if members of the team were available to attend the forthcoming Hawarden Carnival.

In response to Councillor Dolphin's comments about the importance of publicising discount/exemption schemes, the Revenues Manager said that the teams were trained to identify eligible individuals and signpost to those schemes, for example the recent campaign to raise awareness of the Council Tax exemption scheme for individuals diagnosed as 'severely mentally impaired'. On the latter, links with the Health Board would help to promote a better understanding of that scheme with GPs.

In response to Councillor Brown's suggestion, the Revenues Manager would consider inserting a briefing note in the quarterly rent statement despatch. The Chief Officer said that details of such schemes could be promoted with the local press and through the 'My Account' initiative on which Members were urged to encourage residents to sign up.

Councillor Cox said that the Council's achievements on regeneration should be collated within a booklet for wider distribution to highlight the progress made in Flintshire.

Councillor Johnson suggested using internal resources to raise awareness of the contact number of the Welfare Response team, e.g. Council vans and Council funded buses. The Chief Officer said that Housing fleet vehicles had been used for a similar purpose and that this approach would be explored further.

During the meeting, a number of Members commended the work of the team to mitigate the negative effects of Welfare Reform including proactive engagement with individuals who may be at risk. The Chairman thanked the officers for their presentation and responses to questions.

The recommendation was moved by Councillor Shotton and seconded by Councillor Johnson.

RESOLVED:

That the Committee supports the report and the ongoing work to manage the impacts that Welfare Reform has and will continue to have upon Flintshire's most vulnerable households.

7. HOUSING RENT INCOME

The Chief Officer (Housing & Assets) introduced the quarterly update on rent collection including the latest position for the current financial year, following the last update report in February 2019.

The Revenues Manager advised that rent arrears were £1.88m at year end 2018/19 which was a reduction of £0.26m since February. This reflected a position where rent arrears were starting to stabilise and demonstrated the impact of early intervention by the team to engage with tenants experiencing difficulties. A breakdown of rent arrears bandings which was circulated showed the majority of cases owed lower amounts of arrears. Analysis of the figures indicated that Welfare Reform was a key factor for tenants falling into arrears and most of the households in receipt of Universal Credit were being fast-tracked onto managed payments to avoid escalation. The increased migration from Housing Benefit to Universal Credit inevitably created cashflow problems as managed payments were paid to the Council in arrears by the Department of Work & Pensions (DWP). Due to the timing of those payments, it was more likely that rent arrears were around £1.69m which was broadly the same position as the year before.

The Chief Officer said that whilst rent arrears were stabilising, the impact of cashflow and delayed payments would inevitably influence the final figure.

Councillor Dave Hughes shared his disappointment about the outcome of a recent court case involving the recovery of unpaid rent over a lengthy period.

On the banded arrears, Councillor Brown said that the information was not too concerning as some of the lower levels involved monthly direct debit payments which were not technically in arrears. She supported the additional resources to manage increased caseloads and on risk management, she suggested that a tenant loyalty incentive scheme could be explored further to reduce rent arrears and protect the Council's housing investment. The Chief Officer said that this was under consideration. On resources, he provided a brief update on senior management vacancies and the restructuring of the team. In response to a further question, the Revenues Manager agreed to provide information on the total loss of rent income from the 30 evictions for non-payment of rent during 2018/19.

In praising the efforts of the team, Councillor Shotton welcomed the introduction of housing software which would help to monitor payment patterns and identify potential risk cases.

Councillor Dolphin referred to managed payments in arrears and suggested that new tenants could be asked to pay at least half the amount owing as an initial contribution. It was noted that some landlords refused managed payments and that households needed to prioritise other bills.

Councillor Lloyd asked about the average rent paid by the Council's tenants in comparison with others, and whether the banded rent arrear information applied to new or existing tenants. The Revenues Manager said that it was a combination of both and that the Housing Intervention Team mainly focussed on low level arrears through early engagement with tenants.

The recommendations were moved by Councillor Shotton and seconded by Councillor Dolphin.

RESOLVED:

- (a) That the Committee notes the £1.87m year-end position for rent arrears in 2018-19 which shows collection of rent is starting to stabilise; and
- (b) That the Committee endorses the ongoing measures being taken to improve rent collection during 2019-20.

8. HOMELESSNESS UPDATE ON LOCAL ACTION PLAN

The Chief Officer presented an update on progress with the Council's action plan to support the regional Homelessness Strategy.

He provided an overview of the activities under the three themes which reflected local priorities. On the 'People' theme, good progress had been made in extending the range of support available to young people. Attention was drawn

to the 'Streetlink' app which enabled members of the public to report people rough sleeping to instigate support from the local outreach worker. On the 'Homes' theme, the work of the Housing Solutions Team involved increasing access to private rented accommodation. On 'Services', the success of the Preventing Evictions pilot would be rolled out across other teams.

Councillor Brown spoke about the difficulty in increasing access to private rented sector accommodation. During discussion, she referred to a complex case involving an individual who was rough sleeping. The Chief Officer said that the service had already engaged extensively with the individual on numerous occasions to offer support. On capacity in the Night Shelter, the Team Leader explained that provision would be increased following a successful pilot. On private rented accommodation, she spoke about plans to engage with private landlords in an attempt to overcome barriers.

Councillor Dave Hughes said that recent bad weather had affected availability in the Night Shelter and he welcomed plans to extend capacity.

On private rented accommodation, Councillor Shotton spoke about availability within a disused public house. His comments about a modular accommodation scheme in South Wales were acknowledged by the Chief Officer who said that a report on the implications of a similar scheme in Flintshire would be considered by Cabinet.

The recommendation was moved by Councillor Reece and seconded by Councillor Ron Davies.

RESOLVED:

That the Committee supports the updates provided against the Local Action Plan for Homelessness.

9. MEMBERS OF THE PUBLIC AND PRESS IN ATTENDANCE

There were no members of the press or public in attendance.

(The meeting started at 10am and ended at 11.45am)

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Chairman