

COMMUNITY & HOUSING OVERVIEW & SCRUTINY COMMITTEE
19 APRIL 2023

Minutes of the meeting of the Community & Housing Overview & Scrutiny Committee of Flintshire County Council held as a hybrid meeting on Wednesday, 19 April 2023

PRESENT:

Councillors: Pam Banks, Gillian Brockley, Tina Claydon, Geoff Collett, Rosetta Dolphin, David Evans, Dennis Hutchinson, Dale Selvester and Linda Thew

SUBSTITUTION: Councillors: Glyn Banks (for Helen Brown) and Ted Palmer (for Ray Hughes)

ALSO PRESENT: Councillors: Paul Johnson, Dave Hughes, Allan Marshall and Billy Mullin attended as observers

CONTRIBUTORS: Councillor Sean Bibby (Cabinet Member for Housing and Regeneration); Chief Executive; Service Manager Housing Assets; Housing & Prevention Senior Manager and Business Manager

IN ATTENDANCE: Community & Education Overview & Scrutiny Facilitator & Electoral Services Officer

39. APPOINTMENT OF CHAIR

The Overview & Scrutiny Facilitator reported that the Chair and Vice-Chair had given apologies for the meeting and sought a nomination for a Chair for the meeting.

Councillor David Evans proposed Councillor Ted Palmer as Chair of the meeting. This was seconded by Councillor Tina Claydon. No further nominations were made.

RESOLVED:

That Councillor Ted Palmer be appointed as Chair for the meeting.

40. DECLARATIONS OF INTEREST (INCLUDING WHIPPING DECLARATIONS)

Councillor Ted Palmer declared a personal interest as a Council Tenant.

41. FORWARD WORK PROGRAMME AND ACTION TRACKING

The Overview & Scrutiny Facilitator presented the current Forward Work Programme for consideration and advised that following a request from the Chair a regular update on Void Management had been added to the Forward Work Programme for all future meetings.

The Facilitator advised on the actions arising from previous meetings, as shown at Appendix 2 of the report and said that information on the breakdown of categories for the Housing Support Grant, information on the number of void properties which would cost in excess of £10,000 to bring back into use and the cost of the automated DRS system would be circulated to the Committee following the meeting.

In relation to the Sheltered Housing Review Task & Finish Group, the Facilitator reported that she had received 4 nominations from the Committee and would be liaising with officers to find a suitable date for the first meeting.

The recommendations, as outlined within the report, were moved by Councillor David Evans and seconded by Councillor Gillian Brockley.

RESOLVED:

- (a) That the Forward Work Programme be noted.
- (b) That the Facilitator, in consultation with the Chair 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.

42. VOID MANAGEMENT

The Service Manager Housing Assets reported that a request had been made by the Chair of the Committee for regular update reports on void management and delivery to be provided at all future meetings. Following consultation with the Chair, he proposed that future reports focus on the following areas: -

- The number of properties terminated resulting in new void properties
- Number of void allocations
- Reasons for the void property
- Type of void properties
- Identify those properties in high demand and low demand
- How many void properties are general need and how many are sheltered

The Service Manager Housing Assets reported on the key activities undertaken, as detailed within the action plan, previously presented to the Committee. He advised that the contract framework had been re-tendered, and he had recently met with the newly commissioned contractors. Work had commenced on the stock condition surveys which would inform future works and a training co-ordinator post had been procured to provide detailed trainings to inspectors and surveyors over the next 12 months.

The next steps, as outlined in the action plan, would include continued engagement with the Welsh Government through grant funding with the Council having been successful in obtaining £207,000 of grant funding towards void properties last year. A further bid would be submitted later in the year.

Finally, consideration had been given to the prioritisation of voids and where resources should be allocated. A panel had been established which would meet to consider which void properties should be classed as urgent. The report being presented to the Committee at the next meeting would capture all the information previously outlined, provide information on the current positions, what was the allocation numbers and what were the next steps against the current action plan.

Councillor Rosetta Dolphin asked that the update report provided to the Committee at the next meeting be in written format. She also raised concerns around voids being allocated to tenants prior to works being completed on the properties and the long waiting times being experienced by tenants. The Service Manager Housing Assets confirmed that the update report which would be presented at the next meeting would be in written format. In relation to the allocations process, he advised that concerns had been raised around this at the recent Member workshop and, as a result, changes had been made to the allocation process to ensure that the allocation began when the property was becoming available.

Following a suggestion from Councillor David Evans, the Service Manager Housing Assets agreed to provide information on the previous months data on allocation figures and number of voids in the report being presented to the next meeting. He also said that Members should see the backlog of voids reduce following the increase in the number of contractors and reported that each contractor was allocated 5 properties each within the last week and progress on works would continue to be tracked.

Councillor Glyn Banks echoed the comments previously made by Members. He said that he had previously requested a regular update report for the Committee on void properties but had been told that it would not be possible. He said that he had similar concerns to other Members around the number of void properties but felt that positive improvements were being made. The Service Manager Housing Assets responded that it had been important that officers were given the time and opportunity to work through the actions as outlined in the action plan, previously presented to the Committee, in order for improvements to the number of void properties to be made and fuller update reports to be made to the Committee.

Following a question from Councillor Dennis Hutchinson, The Service Manager Housing Assets agreed to provide information on the budget for bringing voids back into use in the report being presented to the next meeting. He clarified that when speaking of available resources, he had been referring to staff resources.

Councillor Dale Selvester said that following the end of the Covid pandemic, this could not be used as a reason for void properties going forward. He welcomed the increase in Team Leaders and said that, with the actions taken, he hoped to see void properties brought back into use at a quicker pace. The Service Manager Housing Assets said that the Covid pandemic had had a significant impact on the increase in the number of void properties and whilst

there was an improvement on the position there remained legacy issues which continued to be addressed.

The Chief Executive advised that the Covid pandemic had not ended and that during the pandemic work on void properties had slowed considerably across all Local Authorities but had not stopped completely across Flintshire. He said that he was confident that the actions taken by the Service Manager Housing Assets and his team would lead to significant improvements and hoped that the update gave Member's confidence in the work being taken forward.

The Cabinet Member for Housing & Regeneration said that all Members shared the frustration on the number of void properties and that this issue was currently being faced by all Local Authorities. Whilst he agreed in some vain with the comments made by Councillor Selvester, he said that the reductions in the number of trade operatives accessing a property during the Covid pandemic had had a negative effect on the number of void properties. He gave an assurance that reducing the number of void properties was a priority and whilst he appreciated Members wanting regular update reports, he did not want any resources diverted from dealing with the issue spent on writing reports. He said that the update from the Service Manager Housing Assets had been appropriate, and he was confident that Members would see a reduction in the number of voids over the next few months.

Councillor David Evans moved that the verbal update be noted and this was seconded by Councillor Tina Claydon.

RESOLVED:

That the verbal update be noted.

43. HOMELESSNESS AND ROUGH SLEEPER UPDATE REPORT

The Chief Executive introduced an update report which outlined the work being carried out by the Housing & Prevention Service.

The Housing & Prevention Senior Manager provided a detailed report on the following areas, as detailed within the report:-

- Statutory Homeless Services
- Funding Homeless Services
- Demand for Services
- Positive Homeless Outcomes
- National Policy – Homelessness
- Priority Need – Rough Sleepers
- Use of Homeless Accommodation
- Challenging Housing Market Conditions

Councillor Glyn Banks thanked the Housing & Prevention Senior Manager for an excellent report which he said had been well presented. He also thanked the Chief Executive for his dedication to the issues around homelessness which had been evident over a number of years. He said that the Council were dealing with people who were at their lowest ebb and said that the Council dealt with this

well and provided an example of where assistance had been provided to a tenant within his ward.

In response to Councillor Bank's concerns around private landlords evicting tenants, the Housing & Prevention Senior Manager advised that this issue was dealt with on a daily basis and said that often, once a tenant had received an eviction notice, the trust between them was negatively affected. Whilst the Council did not want to add any additional pressure to the situation it was important that tenants were clear on what their legal rights were.

Councillor David Evans said that the Service Manager Housing Assets and Housing & Prevention Senior Manager were excellent officers who had provided excellent reports to the Committee. He referred to the reasons for homeless presentation, shown at Appendix 2 of the report, and asked why the number for prison leavers was high as he believed the Council would be informed if a prisoner was to be released. He asked what the 'Others' category referred to and whether any data was held for people with a military service background. The Housing & Prevention Senior Manager explained that the data for the reasons for homeless presentations was currently unvalidated due to systems and also a person could present with one reason and once officers look into the case it could be established that there were other needs as well. Work on the back-office data system for housing support and homelessness was being carried out to ensure better clarity on data in the future.

The Housing & Prevention Senior Manager reported that the Council do see some veterans presenting as homeless, but this was a small number. The Armed Forces Covenant and Common Allocation Policy does extend additional duties to veterans. He also reported that there were currently 2 dedicated prison leaver liaison officers who worked closely with prisons. Where a notice has been issued, the Council seek to treat prison leavers the same as everyone else. Notification is sent to the Council if a prison leaver has no home to go to and an assessment would be completed within 56 days of when they were due to be homeless. Notifications of release were not as prompt as they used to be, and the Council were finding some short notice on release dates.

The Cabinet Member for Housing & Regeneration thanked the Housing & Prevention Senior Manager and his team for the excellent support provided to people across Flintshire. He said that this was a challenging and difficult service area with homelessness being one of the most traumatic experience a person could experience in their lives. He said that years of housing policy failure had made the situation worse and that it was only recently that as a Local Authority we were allowed to build Council houses. During that time the demand for social housing had continued to grow. He said that the difficulties with the private rented sector were acute with local housing allowance not keeping pace with the market and no single property in Flintshire currently meeting the local housing allowance threshold. This required national action for the housing allowance to be raised in line with the increase in rents.

The recommendations, as outlined within the report, were moved by Councillor David Evans and seconded by Councillor Tina Claydon.

RESOLVED:

- (a) That the report be noted; and
- (b) That the Committee support the work being undertaken by the Housing and Prevention Service.

44. DISREPAIR UPDATE

The Chief Executive introduced a report to provide an update on the Council's current position relation to disrepair and the number of disrepair claims received, settled and successfully defended.

The Service Manager Housing Assets reported that the Housing Assets Service was responsible for ensuring all stock was compliant with the various housing standards and regulations and the report provided an update on the measures the Council had in place to ensure all repairs were completed in a timely manner and that the work associated with any disrepair claims the Council may receive are completed effectively and efficiently.

He also outlined the disrepair statistical data, as outlined in the report, and reported that the Housing Assets service team hold weekly meetings relating to active disrepair claims and hold monthly management meetings to report progress and discuss any trends or concerns that may have been identified.

The Service Manager Housing Assets concluded that the team encourage all tenants to work with the Council. The majority of resources committed to defending all disrepair claims were in-house, with only the appointed solicitors external to the Council.

Councillor Dennis Hutchinson praised the team and the work carried out as part of the Welsh Housing Quality Standard (WHQS) in terms of replacement windows, kitchens and bathrooms etc. but asked whether tenants could refuse works to be completed to their property. The Service Manager Housing Assets advised that a tenants had the right to refuse elements of works but only after a full assessment had been carried out to ensure the safety of the tenants. Tenants were not allowed to refuse works on boilers or gas elements.

The recommendations, as outlined within the report, were moved by Councillor Dennis Hutchinson and seconded by Councillor David Evans.

RESOLVED:

- (a) That the report be noted; and
- (b) That the Committee support the Housing Assets service to continue to manage the Housing Disrepair (HDR) protocol on behalf of the Council, ensuring the obligations placed upon the Council were met.

45. COUNCIL PLAN 2023-28 DEVELOPMENT

The Chief Executive presented a report on the refreshed priorities, sub-priorities, and well-being objectives within the Council Plan for 2023-28 which

reflected a long-term view of recovery, projects and ambitions over the period. Part 2 of the Council Plan was being considered by Overview & Scrutiny committees to ensure full coverage of Part 1 and its respective measures and targets, prior to adoption by County Council.

Councillor Dave Evans referred to the Social Housing priority and the comment 'ensuring increase in stock capacity meets the identified needs and demands by March 2028'. He asked whether this was realistic. The Chief Executive said that this was an aspiration and if stock capacity could be increased further then this would assist in addressing the issues outlined to the Committee in previous reports. Issues to be mindful of were around availability of land and new requirements around phosphate but the Council was focused and determined to achieve the target.

Councillor Dennis Hutchinson asked how the new requirements around phosphate would affect existing housing stock. The Chief Executive explained that it was not retrospective so did not apply to existing stock. He said that the basis of new requirements was right and proper with everyone wanting high levels of water quality unpolluted rivers but there would be difficulties around building if phosphate had not been considered as part of the building solutions.

Councillor Glyn Banks asked if any baseline data could be provided to show that projects were moving in the right direction. The Chief Executive explained that there was a plan in place to map out the delivery of projects and he would take this comment back to ensure that updates on the delivery of projects were being effectively reported to Members going forward.

The recommendation, as outlined within the report, was moved by Councillor David Evans and seconded by Councillor Dennis Hutchinson.

RESOLVED:

That the Committee support the Council Plan 2023-28 Part 1 and Part 2 documents that outline the actions, measures and risks that underpin the Priorities, Sub-Priorities and Well-being objectives of the Council Plan 2023-28.

46. MEMBERS OF THE PRESS IN ATTENDANCE

There were no members of the press in attendance.

(The meeting started at 10.00 am and ended at 11.44 a m)

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Chair