

HOUSING OVERVIEW & SCRUTINY COMMITTEE

7 JULY 2014

Minutes of the meeting of the Housing Overview & Scrutiny Committee of Flintshire County Council held in the Clwyd Committee Room, County Hall, Mold on Monday, 7 July 2014

PRESENT: Councillor Ron Hampson (Chairman)

Councillors: David Cox, Paul Cunningham, Peter Curtis, Ron Davies, Rosetta Dolphin, Jim Falshaw, George Hardcastle, Ray Hughes, Brian Lloyd, Mike Reece, Gareth Roberts and Sharon Williams

SUBSTITUTION:

Councillor Haydn Bateman for Amanda Bragg

ALSO PRESENT:

Councillor Bernie Attridge attended as an observer

APOLOGY:

Councillor Hilary Isherwood

CONTRIBUTORS:

Chief Officer (Community and Enterprise), Housing Regeneration & Strategy Manager and Programme Manager

IN ATTENDANCE:

Housing and Learning Overview and Scrutiny Facilitator and Committee Officer

17. DECLARATIONS OF INTEREST (INCLUDING WHIPPING DECLARATIONS)

No declarations of interest were made.

18. MINUTES

The minutes of the meetings of the Committee held on 21 May and 10 June 2014 had been circulated to Members with the agenda.

Councillor Haydn Bateman sought clarification on the energy efficiency measures for solid brick properties and asked about the process for privately owned properties. The Housing Regeneration & Strategy Manager explained that a sample of solid brick properties had been identified in areas where schemes could be put together. He added that he would speak to Councillor Bateman following the meeting on specific ward issues.

In highlighting the fifth paragraph on page 13, Councillor George Hardcastle indicated that he had not received details of the current total rent arrears which had been requested at the previous meeting. The Housing and Learning Overview and Scrutiny Facilitator advised that she had asked for the information but would speak to the appropriate officer again to obtain the details for the Members.

Councillor Peter Curtis asked about the possibility of direct telephone numbers for Flintshire Connects offices at the previous meeting and queried whether any feedback was available about the request. The Chief Officer (Community and Enterprise) explained that a review of contact centres was being undertaken and Councillor Curtis' request would form part of the review.

RESOLVED:

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

19. HOUSING REVENUE ACCOUNT SUBSIDY (HRAS) SYSTEM

The Chief Officer (Community and Enterprise) introduced a report to provide the Committee with the content of the Welsh Government (WG) consultation document identifying ways to end the Housing Revenue Account Subsidy (HRAS) system by voluntary agreement.

The Chief Officer detailed the background to the report and the key elements of the agreement were reported in paragraph 2.02. UK Government had agreed that exit from the system could take place from 1 April 2015 but this would require a voluntary agreement, secured and managed by Welsh Government and all 11 Councils must agree and sign the agreement. The WG consultation document identified a rationale, and proposal for, distribution of settlement buy out figures and three options for distribution of the borrowing cap. She provided full details of the figures for distribution of the Settlement Value with option one being the preferred option and also detailed the options for distributing the Borrowing Cap; consensus had been reached that option 3 was preferred.

Councillor George Hardcastle asked if the information provided could result in more than 100 new Council houses being built. The Chief Officer (Community and Enterprise) said that if the third option was approved, Flintshire County Council would receive £14.3m for new build which would allow the generation of 150 houses based on each costing an estimated £0.100m to build.

The Chief Officer (Community and Enterprise) drew Members' attention to the response to the consultation document on page 41 and highlighted question 7 in particular which identified that a clear understanding about the long term funding of Major Repairs Allowance (MRA) was required along with an urgent need for a review of the Right to Buy scheme.

Councillor Rosetta Dolphin raised concern about the request from Wrexham County Borough Council for £118m borrowing for the Welsh Housing Quality Standard and whether Flintshire County Council would be liable for any part of the monies in the event of a merger between the two Councils. She also expressed her disappointment that the allocation to Flintshire County Council for new build would drop to £14m if option three was approved. The Chief Officer (Community and Enterprise) said that if the authorities did join together any borrowing would also be "joined". She added that if efficiencies in the HRA could be maximised, then the number of new build Council housing could increase from the 100 already identified. WG had made clear that it was important that the new build allocation was used which could mean that there could be the opportunity for those Councils that had plans and programmes in place to receive additional

funding if the remaining authorities did not use their allocation, and agreed for others to utilise it.

Councillor Jim Falshaw asked how the WHQS standard could be maintained if the MRA was not guaranteed for future years. The Chief Officer (Community and Enterprise) said that investment was in place up to 2020 to meet the WHQS and to maintain the standards after that date; the plan had identified surpluses after 2020 which could also be utilised, but lack of certainty about MRA was a key risk area.

Councillor Gareth Roberts said that it was important to reach agreement with the other ten authorities and echoed the concerns of Councillor Dolphin about the figure from Wrexham County Borough Council of £118m for WHQS. Councillor George Hardcastle welcomed the proposals for 100 new build Council houses in six years, but he felt that the number should be higher. The Chief Officer (Community and Enterprise) explained that the borrowing cap allocation for new build only totalled £112m for the whole of Wales and it was therefore important to have a prudent use of capital and an increased programme of efficiencies in the HRA.

In response to a question from Councillor Hardcastle about whether pre-fabricated dwellings had been considered, the Chief Officer (Community and Enterprise) said that a range of options had been explored in consideration of the next agenda item. She added that it was important to identify whether such options were appropriate for Flintshire County Council and said that non-standard build was not always cheaper. She confirmed that the provision of bungalows would be included in any future proposals. It was possible to apply to WG to suspend the Right to Buy scheme for five years on new builds with a further five year extension possible but further measures were needed to ensure any new Council properties were protected as public assets.

RESOLVED:

That the Flintshire response to the HRAS Consultation document be noted and supported.

20. STRATEGIC HOUSING AND REGENERATION PROGRAMME (INCLUDING FLINT)

The Chief Officer (Community and Enterprise) introduced a report to seek Members' views on the commencement of early action (serving a Prior Information Notice (PIN notice)) to begin a procurement exercise for new build housing. This would include progressing the regeneration of Flint Town Centre and redevelopment of the cleared sites of the maisonettes, and to procure a development partner to deliver a council house building programme. The Strategic Procurement Advisor, was introduced to the Committee.

In detailing the background to the report, the Chief Officer (Community and Enterprise) explained that nearly all of the maisonettes had been emptied and that only ten tenants had not had a property identified for them to move into. There was a need to move forward with the demolition of the maisonette blocks and it was expected that all of the sites would be cleared by Spring 2015. Work

had been ongoing to develop options for the provision of extra care housing in the town and a preferred Registered Social Landlord partner had been chosen to take forward proposals for a new 60 plus bed scheme on the site of the maisonettes. Work was also underway to progress plans to provide a new primary health care centre in Flint. Betsi Cadwaladr University Health Board (BCUHB) had stated a preference for this to be on the site of the Leas maisonettes. The report contained details of the mixed tenure development on the Walks site and including the extra care scheme, the total scheme would provide 170 new homes and a Primary Health care centre on what was the site originally for 214 homes; details were provided of the proposed tenure mix.

The Chief Officer (Community and Enterprise) spoke of the land within the Housing Revenue Account (HRA) which was earmarked for development and of new sites being identified following a review of garage sites. Any homes developed for affordable rent or affordable purchase would be managed by NEW homes, with a view to them being purchased by the company longer term. The next step in the process was to carry out formal consultation with the market by serving a PIN notice, prior to seeking approval from Cabinet to commence a procurement process in September 2014. Procurement would take approximately nine months depending on the chosen procurement method which would allow the earliest start on site for any development to be autumn 2015, subject to planning permission. The Chief Officer also explained the appendices attached to the report.

The Chairman welcomed the exciting news for the Council.

Councillor George Hardcastle asked about paragraph 2.02 and the Chief Officer (Community and Enterprise) said that the property of the one remaining home owner had been purchased at market value. She added that some of the tenants had been reluctant to move but officers were now confident that agreement had been reached for all of the remaining tenants to be relocated. The Chief Officer (Community and Enterprise), in response to a question from Councillor Mike Reece, confirmed that the garage site in Flint was to be demolished.

Following questions from Councillors Rosetta Dolphin and Paul Cunningham, the Chief Officer (Community and Enterprise) said that if the extra care development did take place on the Leas maisonettes site, then a fair valuation would need to be agreed by all concerned. The Programme Manager said that a working group was looking at the feasibility at taking forward the proposal from BCUHB.

Councillor Haydn Bateman asked if the land had been included in the Local Development Plan. The Chief Officer (Community and Enterprise) said that some of the sites in HRA ownership and Council's ownership had been identified as housing sites. Discussions would need to take place with Planning colleagues about housing need for settlements which had exceeded their growth rate.

In response to a question from Councillor Ray Hughes, the Chief Officer (Community and Enterprise) confirmed that long term vacant properties could be considered.

RESOLVED:

That the proposals contained within the report to take forward the procurement of new homes in Flint to replace the maisonettes and for small scale new development on other key council sites be supported.

21. 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 2.00 pm and ended at 3.02 pm)

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Chairman