

COMMUNITY AND ENTERPRISE OVERVIEW & SCRUTINY COMMITTEE
2 SEPTEMBER 2015

Minutes of the meeting of the Community and Enterprise Overview & Scrutiny Committee of Flintshire County Council held at Delyn Committee Room, County Hall, Mold on Wednesday, 2 September 2015

PRESENT: **Ron Hampson (Chairman)**

Councillors: David Cox, Paul Cunningham, Peter Curtis, Ron Davies, Rosetta Dolphin, Ian Dunbar, Ray Hughes, Brian Lloyd, Mike Reece and Gareth Roberts

SUBSTITUTE: Councillor Marion Bateman (for George Hardcastle)

APOLOGY: Councillor Amanda Bragg

ALSO PRESENT: Councillors: Bernie Attridge, Haydn Bateman, Vicky Perfect and Tony Sharps

CONTRIBUTORS: Councillor Helen Brown, Cabinet Member for Housing; Councillor Derek Butler, Cabinet Member for Economic Development; Chief Officer (Community & Enterprise); Senior Manager, Council Housing; Revenues Manager and Community Support Services Manager

Income Team Leader and Income Officers (for minute number 19)
Economic Development Manager (for minute number 21)

IN ATTENDANCE: Community and Enterprise Overview & Scrutiny Facilitator and Committee Officer

26. DECLARATIONS OF INTEREST (INCLUDING WHIPPING DECLARATIONS)

On Agenda Item 5: Arrears - Council Housing, Councillor Rosetta Dolphin gave a reminder that she had been granted dispensation to speak on matters relating to Flintshire payments at post offices.

27. MINUTES

The minutes of the meeting held on 8 July 2015 were submitted.

Matters Arising

Minute number 11: Year End Chief Officer Performance Report and Year End Improvement Plan Monitoring Reports - following a query from Councillor Ian Dunbar on the Welsh Government Home Improvement Loan, Councillor Helen Brown confirmed that the information had been updated on the Council's website. The Chief Officer (Community & Enterprise) agreed to ascertain whether this had resulted in more enquiries and respond to the Committee.

RESOLVED:

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

28. HOUSING REVENUE ACCOUNT (HRA) AND SELF-FINANCING

The Chief Officer introduced an update report on the final outcome of arrangements to introduce self-financing for the Housing Revenue Account (HRA) and the long-term strategic plans for stock improvement and development of new council homes. In detailing the background, she explained that negotiations between the UK Government, Welsh Government (WG) and the eleven stock-retaining councils to end the negative subsidy system had resulted in agreement on a borrowing cap and buy-out payment. The outcome of the self-financing arrangements meant that Flintshire's share of the buy-out settlement figure was £79.2m with a total borrowing cap on the HRA of £143.9m. Due to the drop in interest rates, WG had agreed an artificial rate which meant that the HRA share of the Council's total borrowing was lower than predicted at the budget-setting stage, creating an additional benefit of around £0.5m per annum to the HRA. Subject to the business plan proceeding as expected, there would be sufficient resources to meet the Welsh Housing Quality Standard (WHQS) by 2020 and to support the Council's new build programme, on which a detailed update would be brought to the next meeting.

The Senior Manager, Council Housing gave an overview of planned actions to mitigate the ongoing risk areas identified in the report, which would be subject to monitoring.

Councillor Rosetta Dolphin passed on tenants' concerns in relation to a particular contractor with whom complaints had been raised over their work. Whilst the Chief Officer felt that some complaints were inevitable given the scale of the work programme, she said that those raised to date had not been significant and would be resolved positively. She agreed to follow up the issues raised by Councillor Dolphin and on a similar matter by Councillor Peter Curtis.

Councillor Ian Dunbar thanked officers for the glossary of terms within the new report format and welcomed the introduction of self-financing which would benefit the Council over the longer term. In response to a query, the Chief Officer provided clarification on the terms of the self-financing agreement.

Concerning the WHQS, Councillor Marion Bateman asked whether tenants with long-term arrears would benefit from the programme of improvements at the same time as other tenants. The Senior Manager, Council Housing confirmed that the aim was for every property in the programme to receive upgrades, regardless of this.

The Chief Officer reminded the Committee that the approach - previously agreed with the support of the Cabinet Member - was to defer WHQS improvements where legal action was being taken on breaches of tenancies in respect of anti-social behaviour issues, including damage to property. If Members wished to extend this further to include tenants with long-term rent arrears, this could be considered along with any cost implications. She asked that Councillor Bateman liaise with her outside the meeting regarding a particular tenant in her ward.

Following a suggestion by the Facilitator, the Committee agreed to receive regular reports on the programme of savings/efficiencies as part of the HRA budget together with the ongoing risks identified in the report.

RESOLVED:

- (a) That the final outcome of the negotiations to introduce self-financing for the HRA to ensure that plans to deliver WHQS by 2020 can be achieved alongside commencement of a new build programme be noted.
- (b) That the Committee receive regular monitoring reports on the programme of efficiencies and the Risk Register.

29. ARREARS - COUNCIL HOUSING

The Chief Officer (Community & Enterprise) introduced an update on recent changes to the operational process and current levels of rent arrears compared with the previous year, together with proposed changes to manage the impact of welfare reforms. As set out in the report, she detailed the various improvements made to the rent recovery process to focus on debt management and help tenants to manage their rent payments. Despite the challenges of welfare reforms, the levels of income collected in Quarter 1 had exceeded that collected in Quarter 1 2014/15. Although there was an overall increase in rent arrears compared with 2014/15, the number of arrears cases owing under £1K had reduced as a result of the decision to target this particular group to prevent escalation, which meant that there were now 118 fewer tenants in rent arrears.

On the impact of welfare reforms, it was reported that 660 tenants were currently in arrears, partly as a consequence of the Bedroom Tax, however only a small number were choosing to move to a smaller property. Following the rollout of Universal Credit at all Flintshire Job Centres, an update would be brought to the October meeting of the Committee. The report also detailed the support available to tenants in line with the Council's increased responsibilities to prevent homelessness. The Chief Officer advised that the Council was managing overall to control rent arrears and to help individuals to manage their tenancies, however the outcome of legal action on eviction notices often resulted in the Court ruling in favour of small repayments over a long period. On paragraph 3.06 of the report, it was clarified that there had been six evictions during Quarter 1 of 2015/16.

The Committee was introduced to staff members from the Income Team, who gave examples of different cases where tenants' willingness to engage with the Council and accept the support available had resulted in actions taken to reduce their rent arrears. They also spoke about the challenges where the outcome of legal action reflected the sympathetic view taken by most Courts in recognition of an increased awareness of welfare reforms.

The Chief Officer referred to the proposed appointment of a dedicated Tenancy Support Officer within the Income Team who could work with tenants to help further reduce rent arrears.

An update on post office transactions was given by the Revenues Manager, who advised that a Member briefing would be issued on the

continuation of the post office contract until March 2016. This would enable more opportunity to help vulnerable tenants to explore alternative payment options such as direct debit before the deadline. It was noted that significant progress had already been made to reduce the number of post office transactions by 75%, with around half of the 500 tenants still processing payments at their post offices living near urban areas with access to Flintshire Connects centres. Officers would continue to work with tenants to encourage use of alternative payment arrangements before the deadline.

Councillor Peter Curtis relayed some tenants' concerns around charges for laundry services which were not required by everyone and the need for cleaning charges to reflect an appropriate quality service. The Chief Officer agreed that communal cleaning services needed improvement and reminded Members that currently service charges only applied to new tenancies, including those transferred from other Council properties. The outcome of consultation with existing tenants would be reported to the Committee in December 2015.

On rent arrears, Councillor Rosetta Dolphin felt that tenants who were unable to downsize due to the lack of smaller properties should be treated differently as it was not their intention to be in that position. She also felt that services charges should specify the frequency of those services to give assurance to paying tenants. In response to concerns about alternative payment methods for tenants in rural areas, the Revenues Manager gave assurances that the team continued to identify and work with individuals using post office transactions and that post offices were being asked to encourage individuals to switch to different methods of payment before the deadline. Councillor Dolphin asked that an update be received after three months to report progress including how many tenants paid late.

The Chief Officer spoke about the Council's agreed approach to avoid legal action against tenants with no history of rent arrears before the introduction of the Bedroom Tax. Where practical and possible, individual cases could be assessed for Discretionary Housing Payments as a temporary measure to help with arrears.

A suggestion was made by Councillor Gareth Roberts for local Member involvement to help encourage tenants to seek support on their rent arrears.

On the appendix to the report, Councillor Marion Bateman pointed out that of the 91 tenants with arrears of £2K-6K in 2014/15, only a small percentage were affected by the under-occupation charge. She went on to ask how many of the 91 were habitual non-payers, over what period was the rent owed and whether any had benefited from the Welsh Housing Quality Standard (WHQS) improvements. In noting that only two of the 91 paid by direct debit, she asked how many accounts had been written off. The Income Team Leader agreed to provide the information for the next meeting.

The Chief Officer reminded the Committee of previous discussion on the agreed approach to target tenants with lower level rent arrears to prevent accumulation, due to the length of time taken to recover larger debts. She acknowledged that there would always be some tenants with historic debts but

spoke about the frustrations in pursuing legal action, often with repeated attempts, together with the implications of the Council's duty on homelessness.

In response to Councillor Bateman's comments on the previous agenda item, Councillor Dolphin asked if consideration could be given to deferring WHQS improvements for tenants with long-standing rent arrears. Councillor Helen Brown agreed that this could be looked at.

Following a query by Councillor David Cox on exemptions to the Bedroom Tax where the tenant had a medical need, it was explained that each case was considered on its own merits for Housing Benefit.

Councillor Ron Davies welcomed the proposal for a dedicated Tenancy Support Officer. The Chief Officer suggested that the Committee may wish to review this arrangement after a year to assess the impact.

RESOLVED:

- (a) That the content of the report be noted;
- (b) That the establishment of a dedicated Tenancy Support Officer on a temporary basis within the Income Team be supported; and
- (c) That the Cabinet Member for Housing look into the suggestion for WHQS improvements to be delayed for tenants with long-term rent arrears.

30. THE DEVELOPMENT OF A COMMUNITY BENEFIT TRAINING ACADEMY

The Senior Manager, Council Housing introduced the report on the creation of a Community Benefit Training Academy (CBTA) as a vehicle to deliver jobs and training opportunities and community initiatives linked to externally procured services through the three investment programmes: Welsh Housing Quality Standard (WHQS), 21st Century Schools and the Strategic Housing and Regeneration Programme (SHARP). The approach to this new initiative of employing trainees/apprentices directly through the Council presented an opportunity for greater flexibility in allocating individuals to different workstreams thus benefitting the Council and the individuals themselves in acquiring a range of skills. Members were asked to support the creation of a new post to manage and administer the function and services of the CBTA which would be monitored and reported back to the Committee.

The report was welcomed by Councillor Rosetta Dolphin who praised the benefits of the CBTA.

Councillor Derek Butler described this as a flagship initiative for Flintshire which would utilise the three investment streams to work towards achieving Welsh Government apprenticeship targets.

A suggestion was made by Councillor Mike Reece to engage with Housing Associations on the use of apprenticeships.

RESOLVED:

- (a) That the creation of the Community Benefit and Training Academy to manage the implementation of the community benefit commitments be supported; and
- (b) That the creation of a new position to manage and administer the function and services of the academy be supported. The lead officer will be supported initially through existing resource in terms of administration and support. These posts will be funded by a contribution from contractors, WHQS 21st Century Schools and SHARP programmes.

31. QUARTER 1 – IMPROVEMENT PLAN MONITORING REPORT

The Chief Officer introduced the report for the Committee to consider progress towards the delivery of the impacts set out in the 2015/16 Improvement Plan, focussing on the areas of under-performance relevant to the Committee during the first quarter of 2015/16.

A short presentation was given on each of the red (high level) risk areas under priority headings, highlighting work which had been undertaken to improve performance to meet the targets.

On the supply of affordable housing to meet community need, it was reported that an update on the Strategic Housing and Regeneration Programme (SHARP) would be brought to the October meeting.

Councillor Marion Bateman raised her ongoing concerns about a property which had been adapted for a particular member of that household who had since moved on. In referring to the costs of the adaptations, she explained that the remaining occupiers were unwilling to move on, which meant that the property could not be made available to someone else in need of the equipment. On the SHARP programme, she was aware that garage sites were being considered but asked if void properties with large gardens could also be looked at. The Chief Officer agreed that examples could be considered if brought to officers' attention.

In response to a query from Councillor Rosetta Dolphin about the development of extra care provision, the Chief Officer advised that options were being collated by Wales & West Housing on a range of sites identified, including Holywell.

On improving the local broadband infrastructure, Councillor Dolphin reported significant problems with broadband speed in areas away from towns, including the Deeside Industrial Park. It was reported that the contract between Welsh Government (WG) and British Telecom to rollout the Superfast Cymru programme was currently focussed on residential use rather than commercial. However, following representations made by Local Authorities and the Chair of the Deeside Forum, it was thought that WG would aim to give commercial properties a higher priority in the rollout across Wales.

RESOLVED:

That the report be noted.

32. FORWARD WORK PROGRAMME

The Facilitator introduced the current Forward Work Programme which had been populated following consultation with the Chairman and Chief Officer and included Regeneration items as reflected in the Committee's Terms of Reference.

Following comments from Councillor Mike Reece on the need to extend solid brick insulation work to other areas of the county, the Chief Officer explained that the criteria for energy efficiency funding applied only to certain areas. If no further funding was available, this would need to be addressed separately under the Welsh Housing Quality Standard programme.

Councillor Marion Bateman raised concerns about the new automated arrangements for incoming calls to the Council and asked about the level of priority given to option 4 in the call queue. The Chief Officer explained that various options were being piloted but that overall, calls were being answered faster than previously. In response to similar concerns raised by the Chairman, the Chief Officer agreed to provide an update to the Committee including information on training for the Member Services' team in dealing with calls previously dealt with by the switchboard.

Concerns were also shared by Councillor Ray Hughes on the loss of the switchboard, availability of officers and directing of calls to the correct department. Councillor Bateman spoke in support of these comments. The Chief Officer commented that this topic was under the remit of the Corporate Resources Overview & Scrutiny Committee.

RESOLVED:

That the Forward Work Programme be noted.

33. MEMBERS OF THE PRESS AND PUBLIC IN ATTENDANCE

There was one member of the press in attendance.

(The meeting started at 10.30 am and ended at 12.25 pm)

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Chairman