

COMMUNITY AND ENTERPRISE OVERVIEW & SCRUTINY COMMITTEE
7 OCTOBER 2015

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, 7 October, 2015

PRESENT: Councillor Ron Hampson (Chairman)

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

SUBSTITUTE: Councillor Nancy Matthews (for Amanda Bragg)

ALSO PRESENT: Councillors: Tony Sharps and Carolyn Thomas

CONTRIBUTORS: Councillor Helen Brown, Cabinet Member for Housing; Councillor Derek Butler, Cabinet Member for Economic Development; Chief Officer (Community & Enterprise); Service Manager, Housing Programmes; Service Manager, Customer Support; Service Manager, Council Housing; Service Manager, Enterprise & Regeneration Programmes; Manager - Advice and Homelessness Service and Supporting People Manager

Councillor Bernie Attridge, Deputy Leader and Cabinet Member for Environment (for minute number 41)

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

34. DECLARATIONS OF INTEREST (INCLUDING WHIPPING DECLARATIONS)

There were no declarations of interest.

35. MINUTES

The minutes of the meeting held on 2 September 2015 were submitted.

Matters Arising

A response to queries raised on the Council's new call handling arrangements was circulated to the Committee at the start of the meeting.

RESOLVED:

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

36. NEW HOMES BUSINESS PLAN 2015/20

The Service Manager, Housing Programmes presented the North East Wales (NEW) Homes Business Plan 2015/20 and updated Members on progress made since the company had been established. He spoke about work

undertaken to develop the business plan and the aim to work strategically with the Council's SHARP project and housing associations to address key areas of housing need. It was noted that the findings of the recent joint Local Housing Market Assessment which had indicated an annual shortfall of 246 affordable dwellings in Flintshire. In referring to the affordability of the market compared with average salaries in Flintshire, the Service Manager said that NEW Homes would also help to deliver long-term housing opportunities for those unable to access affordable properties who were not eligible for social housing.

Through the first phase of the SHARP project, NEW Homes would benefit from 300 new properties, starting with the first scheme proposed at The Walks in Flint. Feedback would be sought from a community consultation event on 9 October 2015 so that the scheme could be finalised prior to seeking approval at Cabinet: a similar approach would be taken for all future schemes. An update was also given on the 13 new build properties from developers under Section 106 Planning Agreements which were shortly to be transferred to the company.

A piece of work was underway to explore opportunities to borrow against existing assets to purchase circa eight new properties, which could be let on affordable rent in areas of proven housing need. Future proposals including how this would be funded would be brought to the Committee for consideration.

Councillor Peter Curtis welcomed the progress made by the company, particularly in view of the likely increased demand for affordable rent as a result of changes to Working Tax Credits and rent increases in the private sector.

In response to a question from Councillor Nancy Matthews on borrowing, the Chief Officer explained about options to borrow against existing assets potentially from the Council which could then reap a return for the Council. In terms of the scheme proposed in Flint, the recommendation would be to use long-term leasing financing from a private finance company. NEW Homes would receive the rental income to cover management and maintenance costs and would pay leasing finance costs over 30 years, after which the properties would revert to the company for £1 per property. Approval of the business plan would be sought from Cabinet before bringing forward each capital scheme for individual approval.

In welcoming the report, Councillor Mike Reece asked about the potential for the Council to take on derelict properties. The Chief Officer explained that various options were currently being explored to develop the number of properties in the company's portfolio within the legal powers available. Whilst the Empty Homes Scheme was already in place, other options could be considered such as re-purchasing unused ex-Council properties and bringing them back up to standard for letting.

Councillor Ian Dunbar welcomed the forthcoming community consultation event in Flint and asked that this be rolled out across other areas of the county to help inform local schemes. In highlighting the importance of meaningful consultation involving communities, the Service Manager gave an example of positive feedback generated from a consultation exercise in Connah's Quay to engage with local residents affected by a particular scheme. Following a question on the level of resources required to take forward the plans, the Service

Manager referred to recent staff changes within the service, implementation of the new management structure and the good working relationship between NEW Homes and the Council.

In response to a comment by Councillor David Cox on the importance of providing social housing, the Service Manager advised that 200 of the properties to be made available through SHARP would be for social housing starting with the scheme in Flint. Whilst it was not possible for NEW Homes to alone meet affordable housing need in the county, the intention was to work with the Council to prioritise housing in identified areas of need.

When asked by Councillor George Hardcastle about timescales, it was reported that work on the scheme at Flint was due to start in February 2016 followed by the site in Connah's Quay subject to planning approval. Learning from these initial schemes would be vital before progressing further schemes from the 12 sites identified through SHARP which would be subject to future consideration by the Committee prior to approval at Cabinet. It was anticipated that the entire programme for 500 properties would take around five years. It was also explained that as part of the contract and performance indicators, there was a need to use an element of local labour to create employment and training opportunities and that 'Meet the Buyer' events provided opportunities to engage with tradesmen and generate involvement by small and medium enterprises on future housing projects.

This was welcomed by Councillor Curtis who made the point that local labour should be utilised on all schemes wherever possible.

In response to a further query from Councillor Hardcastle, the Chief Officer gave a reminder that the Welsh Government had reduced the maximum discount for Right to Buy and that the Council would be supporting the suspension of Right to Buy for the new build Council homes. Under the SHARP programme, Right to Buy would not apply to the rented properties.

The Chairman expressed his appreciation to the Chief Officer and those on the NEW Homes board for their progress.

RESOLVED:

That the Committee recommends the NEW Homes Business Plan 2015/16 to Cabinet.

37. WELFARE REFORM - PHASE II

The Manager - Advice and Homelessness Service introduced an update report summarising the changes to be introduced to social security benefits over the next three years and, based on information available, the probable impact generated. He advised that a more detailed briefing session open to all Council Members would be arranged for the end of November 2015.

The Manager provided an overview of the proposed reforms set out in the report and the potential impact on households in Flintshire. Whilst the impact of the first phase of welfare reforms had been felt across the majority of

communities, this would continue in the second phase creating additional pressures for lower income households with children, especially those in social housing. Significant changes to Working Tax Credits and Universal Credit would have a greater impact on low income, working households. The appendix to the report illustrated the consequences of the reduction to the benefit cap ceiling, which was expected to affect a higher proportion of unemployed households with children. It was noted that the Government intended to implement around 70% of the proposals starting in April 2016, with some of the legislation possibly amended, however this would need to progress swiftly to achieve its aim of reducing expenditure on working-age benefits by a further £12 billion by 2018/19. The increase in child poverty for households with a parent in employment was expected to grow further as more proposals were implemented.

The Chairman commented on the increased number of households that would be affected by the changes and the consequences for the Council in dealing with this.

Councillor Rosetta Dolphin commented on the need for individuals to make appropriate family choices according to their income levels. She asked if any support was available to help hard-working households with low income who were likely to be particularly affected by the significant drop in the benefit cap ceiling. The Manager said that by remaining in employment, those individuals could help towards excluding them from the benefit cap. When the benefit cap had first been introduced in 2013, the Council had successfully targeted and helped a number of households to identify solutions to exempt them from the benefit cap, however there were some households with issues that meant that they were not able to work. With regard to the reduction in the amount of 'out of work' benefits to which a working age household is entitled, it was confirmed that this included any reduction in the amount of Council Tax.

Whilst agreeing with the point made, Councillor Peter Curtis pointed out that some individuals were not able to gain employment in their areas and that employers needed to do what they could by paying decent wages. He went on to refer to the responsibility of the Government to help keep people with disabilities out of poverty.

Councillor Nancy Matthews raised a query on eligibility for free school meals which impacted on school claims for the Pupil Deprivation Grant. It was explained that households currently in receipt of Child and Working Tax Credits were not entitled to free school meals whereas households in receipt of Child Tax Credits only, with income below £15K per annum, were eligible for free school meals. In Wales, households with children currently receiving Universal Credit would be passported to free school meals, however the system was likely to change as Universal Credit was rolled out.

Members of the Committee expressed their appreciation to the Manager and his team for their work, together with that of the Welfare & Benefits team.

RESOLVED:

- (a) That the report be noted; and

- (b) That the Committee continue to support the ongoing work that is being undertaken by the Council, together with its partners, to mitigate the full impact of present and future welfare reforms from falling upon Flintshire's most vulnerable households.

38. SARTH POLICY

The Service Manager, Customer Support presented an update on progress over the first five months of the Single Access Route To Housing (SARTH) Common Housing Register and Policy. She provided background information on the establishment of the partnership project and consultation process leading up to the implementation of the SARTH policy in April 2015.

The report set out the criteria and priorities for the four different bands to which applicants were allocated, in compliance with the statutory 'reasonable preference' categories. Information was provided on the phased approach to triage applicants from the former points register before transferring them to the new register, which gave an opportunity to ensure data was live. Following the resolution of some operational issues, calls would be recorded over the coming week for training purposes. Proposals to develop the local lettings policy would be shared at the next meeting and would address low demand of some sheltered accommodation schemes.

Councillor Rosetta Dolphin thanked officers for the clarity of the report and asked about Band 1 applicants who were deemed to be in urgent housing need. The Service Manager explained that Band 1 included those leaving the armed forces and that the service worked alongside other teams to provide a solution and could arrange temporary accommodation if needed, however each case was determined individually. Councillor Dolphin said that the high demand for one bedroom properties across the county could be a focus for NEW Homes and that housing association flats could be a better option for over 55s than bungalows. She went on to give an example where a larger property had been allocated to a single parent and spoke of the difficulties in explaining this to other applicants. The Service Manager explained that applicants were generally matched to the type of property requested, however larger properties could be allocated if available and subject to an affordability assessment.

Following a question by Councillor Peter Curtis on prioritising those with a local connection, it was explained that the regional policy clarified this to be applicants within the county.

Councillor George Hardcastle said that tenants with rent arrears should not be held accountable if they were willing to downgrade, but unable to do so because of the lack of smaller properties. The Service Manager advised that each case was considered on its own merits and that applicants such as this would not have their priority reduced.

In response to a comment from Councillor Gareth Roberts, the Service Manager explained that applicants were only entitled to register where they had a housing need by meeting the criteria of one of the 'reasonable preference' groups.

Following a suggestion by Councillor Mike Reece, the Service Manager agreed to arrange dates for November 2015 where Members could meet the Housing Options and Estate Management teams to receive information on the process from triage through to allocating properties.

RESOLVED:

- (a) That progress of the project since January 2015 be noted; and
- (b) That the Committee supports the next stage of the project to make best use of housing stock.

39. FORWARD WORK PROGRAMME

The Facilitator introduced the current Forward Work Programme for consideration by the Committee.

As the NEW Homes Business Plan formed part of this agenda, it would be removed from the items scheduled for the next meeting and replaced by the update on the Strategic Housing and Regeneration Programme (SHARP).

Following a request by Councillor Rosetta Dolphin, the Chief Officer agreed to provide a verbal update at the next meeting on alternative sites identified for the extra care facility in Holywell.

Councillor George Hardcastle asked if a future item could be scheduled to consider whether programmed upgrade work could be suspended for Council tenants with historic rent arrears. Councillor Helen Brown advised that work was currently being carried out on this issue but would not be ready for consideration by the Committee until the new year.

RESOLVED:

That, subject to the amendment, the Forward Work Programme be noted.

40. LOCAL GOVERNMENT (ACCESS TO INFORMATION) ACT 1985 - TO CONSIDER THE EXCLUSION OF THE PRESS AND PUBLIC

That the press and public be excluded from the meeting as the following item was considered to be exempt by virtue of paragraph 13 of Part 4 of Schedule 12A of the Local Government Act 1972 (as amended).

41. COUNCIL HOUSE ALLOCATIONS SERVICE

The Chief Officer presented a report to give assurance on the robustness of processes and management of the allocation of council homes which was compliant with legislation (1) in the transition to the Single Access Route to Housing (SARTH) shared allocation system and (2) following a recent disciplinary case. In relation to the disciplinary case, she clarified that this had been an isolated case, dealt with swiftly and in line with the Council's procedures.

Councillor Bernie Attridge spoke about the internal processes in place to deal with such matters, and reminded Members that they were able to seek information from management on such confidential matters if they wished. This prompted debate by Members of the Committee on sharing information and reporting to the Committee. The Chief Officer commented on the expectation for officers to use discretion in their work and that this was evidenced.

Councillor Rosetta Dolphin stated her confidence in officers in the way that the case had been dealt with. This was supported by other Members of the Committee.

RESOLVED:

That the Committee is assured over the level of control over the processes for allocating social housing.

42. MEMBERS OF THE PRESS AND PUBLIC IN ATTENDANCE

There was one member of the press and one member of the public in attendance.

(The meeting started at 10.00 am and ended at 12.10 pm)

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Chairman