

COMMUNITY AND ENTERPRISE OVERVIEW & SCRUTINY COMMITTEE
23 NOVEMBER 2016

Minutes of the meeting of the Community and Enterprise Overview & Scrutiny Committee of Flintshire County Council held in Connah's Quay Town Council offices, Fron Road, Connah's Quay on Wednesday, 23 November 2016

PRESENT: Councillor Ron Hampson (Chairman)

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

SUBSTITUTE: Councillor Andy Dunbobbin (for Mike Reece)

APOLOGIES: Councillors: Jim Falshaw, George Hardcastle, Hilary Isherwood and Sara Parker; and Councillor Bernie Attridge, Deputy Leader and Cabinet Member for Environment

CONTRIBUTORS: Councillor Helen Brown, Cabinet Member for Housing; Councillor Derek Butler, Cabinet Member for Economic Development; Chief Officer (Community & Enterprise); Service Manager (Enterprise and Regeneration); Revenues Manager; Regeneration Manager; and Housing Strategy Officer

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

23. APOLOGIES

Councillor Peter Curtis asked that the Facilitator write to Councillor Mike Reece to convey the good wishes of the Committee.

24. DECLARATIONS OF INTEREST

As a private landlord, Councillor David Roney declared a personal interest on Agenda Item 4 'Council Tax Base Setting for 2017-18'.

25. MINUTES

The minutes of the meeting held on 19 October 2016 were submitted.

RESOLVED:

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

26. COUNCIL TAX BASE SETTING FOR 2017-18

The Revenues Manager presented a report on the setting of the Council Tax Base of 63,543 band D equivalent properties for the financial year 2017-18, as approved by Cabinet. This was based on all properties subject to Council

Tax as at 31 October, taking into account new build developments such as that at Custom House Lane which Members were due to visit.

Following a steady growth in the county's Tax Base over the past ten years, there had been a significant increase from 2016-17 of almost 1.3% which reflected the strong economy and range of new build schemes across the county. The Council's decision to introduce the Council Tax premium scheme from April 2017 would have a further positive effect on the future Council Tax Base and would provide an incentive for property owners to bring some of the long-term empty properties back into use.

Councillor Peter Curtis raised concerns about long-term empty shops with accommodation, particularly those where grant funding had been received to return them to use. Officers explained that empty commercial premises were excluded from the Council Tax Base as they were subject to property rates, and that the vast majority of properties utilising external grant funding had been re-let following refurbishment.

Councillor David Cox asked whether it was the case that the Council was not able to intervene on long-term empty homes unless they were deemed unsafe. The Regeneration Manager explained that legislation allowed for enforcement action to be taken in response to statutory Housing Act issues or that forced sale of the property could be progressed subject to the policy previously scrutinised by the Committee and approved at Cabinet. Another option available was to pursue an Empty Dwelling Management Order for properties vacant over two years and causing neighbourhood issues. A dedicated officer, Stephen Roberts, was the point of contact for dealing with long-term empty homes defined as being empty over six months.

In response to comments from Councillor Paul Cunningham concerning a property in his ward, the Regeneration Manager spoke about the potential to explore Planning conditions or to utilise home improvement loans. The current number of empty homes in the county was 796, having reduced by 10% over the past 12 months following work by officers to raise awareness of the Council Tax premium liability from April 2017. A further reduction was expected after the implementation of this scheme.

Councillor Ian Dunbar raised similar ongoing concerns about properties in his ward and was asked to discuss these with the Regeneration Manager following the meeting. It was explained that whilst the Council had no jurisdiction on the advertisement of long-term empty properties for sale above market value, a condition within the exemptions to the Council Tax premium imposed a time limited exemption of one year on long-term empty properties being marketed for sale. The Regeneration Manager added that there was provision in the legislation for enforcement to be taken where physical damage or harm to neighbours' property could be demonstrated. Enforcement action could also be taken where there was proven detriment to the amenity of a neighbourhood, although this was subject to relatively high thresholds.

Following remarks by Councillor Ray Hughes on the challenges in letting flats above empty shops, the Regeneration Manager acknowledged the demand for one-bedroom accommodation. The availability of 'Living Over the Shops' grant funding from Welsh Government was being used to bring some of those properties back into use, however a significant cost element was needed to meet access and safety requirements.

In response to comments on improving conditions for tenants in private lettings, Councillor Helen Brown spoke about the imminent introduction of regulations through the Rent Smart Wales initiative which offered protection to tenants. Officers also explained that current legislation enabled enforcement against private landlords where living conditions were inadequate and that an increase in the number of enforcement officers within the Council would help to tackle issues.

The Regeneration Manager agreed to speak separately with Councillor Andy Dunbbobin about an issue on a private garage site.

Councillor Rosetta Dolphin referred to the level of resources within the Enforcement team and asked how many empty properties had been brought back into use through enforcement action. The Chief Officer (Community & Enterprise) explained that this information was included in the next report. Councillor Dolphin commented that enforcement spanned the remit of this Committee and that of the Environment Overview & Scrutiny Committee.

Councillor Gareth Roberts asked how many private landlords in Flintshire had so far registered for the Rent Smart Wales scheme. The Regeneration Manager would pursue a response from Environmental Health colleagues and respond separately, however it was likely that an increase in registrations would be seen over the coming weeks as the deadline approached.

RESOLVED:

That Committee notes the setting of the annual Tax Base of 63,543 band D equivalent properties (as shown in Appendix 1 to the report) for the financial year 2017-18.

27. REGENERATION PROGRAMMES

The Regeneration Manager presented an update report on the activities of the Regeneration Service over the past 18 months.

An overview was given of the significant progress made on a range of workstreams under the Vibrant and Viable Places (VVP) programme including regeneration and environmental improvements. On Disabled Facilities Grants (DFGs), officers were exploring different ways of delivery to reduce timescales. Although performance was improving, the aim was to exceed the target through recruitment, benchmarking with other councils and reviewing how performance was reported. An update was also given on empty homes activities, as referred

to in the previous item, including the 'Living Over the Shops' grant funding which the Council was keen to explore further to meet demand. A review was underway to identify how town centre regeneration could be supported and to consider the use of capital funding to support core activities given the reduction in external grant funding.

Councillor Ian Dunbar congratulated officers on the report and commended the work of the Green Team. He also expressed disappointment that his ward was outside the VVP. In response to concerns about an outstanding DFG, the Chief Officer asked that such issues be raised directly with the Regeneration team to follow up.

Councillor Derek Butler gave assurance that solutions were being explored to address DFG issues as well as addressing the disparity in performance reporting by different councils. He referred to complex issues around regeneration and highlighted the Council's success in delivering a number of key projects. He went on to talk about the impact of the loss of Communities First and uncertainty on external funding.

Whilst Councillor Rosetta Dolphin welcomed the empty homes activities set out in the report, she pointed out that this was a minor proportion of the 796 properties that were currently empty. The Chief Officer highlighted the range of measures being explored to encourage owners to return their properties to use and gave a reminder that the total number had reduced by 10% since the previous year. Councillor Dolphin stressed the importance of publicising the Council's powers to encourage other homeowners to bring their properties back into use. On town centre regeneration, she referred to funding available for groups to take on assets and said that outcomes may not always concur with the needs of the wider community. The Service Manager said that these points reinforced the need for partnership working which the Council was aiming to do by bringing together stakeholders.

Progress on the VVP was welcomed by Councillor Andy Dunbobbin for the improvements in his ward.

In response to comments from Councillor David Cox on the forthcoming Chancellor's Statement, the Regeneration Manager said there was a need for a balanced focus on regeneration as well as new build developments.

Councillor Peter Curtis felt that attempts should be made to establish the causes of long-term empty shops, such as those in his ward. Councillor Butler suggested that a range of factors could be involved and agreed that adequate resources were required to support town regeneration. The Service Manager pointed out that this was a national problem, in particular for small town centres, and that significant work had been done to support local shop owners. He agreed to contact the owners of a specific long-term vacant shop unit in Holywell.

RESOLVED:

That the progress of the Regeneration Service over the last 12 months be noted.

28. STRATEGIC HOUSING AND REGENERATION PROJECT (SHARP)

The Housing Strategy Officer introduced an update report on progress of the Strategic Housing and Regeneration Project (SHARP) to deliver 500 new Council and affordable homes over the five year period with the partner developer, Wates Residential.

Councillor Derek Butler asked that the Committee's good wishes be extended to the Service Manager (Housing Programmes) who was unable to attend.

The officer provided explanation on the phased approach to the programme, providing an update on the new housing schemes due for completion in Connah's Quay and Flint, as well as progress with the emerging schemes. As a further update, the scheme at Ysgol Delyn in Mold had been recently been given planning approval. With regard to funding, the Council's indicative allocation of Housing Finance Grant 2 (HFG2) was set out in the report, noting that more could be secured, depending on the take-up by other Authorities.

The Chief Officer spoke about the Council's proactive approach to meet the new homes target and that any additional HFG2 funding could help towards exceeding that target.

In welcoming the report, Councillor Derek Butler highlighted the positive relationship with the development partner to deliver on the Council's aims. He referred to the successful 'Meet the Buyer' event and the generation of employment and apprenticeship opportunities.

Councillor Rosetta Dolphin praised the positive outcomes for local people and asked about the allocation approach to the new build homes. The Chief Officer said that this would be done on a community basis, in line with the agreed policy.

The focus on local outcomes and partnership with Wates Residential was also praised by Councillors Paul Cunningham and Ray Hughes.

RESOLVED:

That the Committee supports the overall approach and progress for the delivery of new Council and affordable homes through the Strategic Housing and Regeneration Project (SHARP).

29. FORWARD WORK PROGRAMME

In presenting the Forward Work Programme for consideration, the Facilitator gave a reminder that the meeting on 21 December 2016 had been cancelled.

Councillor Rosetta Dolphin referred to her suggestion for an enterprise workshop to be attached to a future meeting. She was informed that a separate date would have to be scheduled to allow sufficient time for the item.

RESOLVED:

- (a) That the Forward Work Programme be noted; and
- (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.

30. MEMBERS OF THE PUBLIC AND PRESS IN ATTENDANCE

There was one member of the public in attendance.

(The meeting started at 10am and ended at 11.25am)

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Chairman