

HOUSING OVERVIEW & SCRUTINY COMMITTEE
26 SEPTEMBER 2012

Minutes of the meeting of the Housing Overview & Scrutiny Committee of Flintshire County Council held at Delyn Committee Room, County Hall, Mold CH7 6NA on Wednesday, 26 September 2012

PRESENT: **Councillor Ron Hampson (Chairman)**

Councillors David Cox, Peter Curtis, Ron Davies, Jim Falshaw, Alison Halford, George Hardcastle, Ray Hughes and Mike Reece

SUBSTITUTES: Councillors Ian Dunbar (for Sharon Williams), Richard Lloyd (for Rosetta Dolphin) and Paul Shotton (for Glenys Diskin)

APOLOGY: Councillor Brian Lloyd

ALSO PRESENT: Councillors Bernie Attridge and Haydn Bateman

CONTRIBUTORS: Cabinet Member for Housing, Director of Community Services, Head of Housing, Head of Legal & Democratic Services for item no.21, Housing Asset Manager, Community Support Services Manager, Housing Strategy Manager and Principal Planner

IN ATTENDANCE: Member Engagement Manager and Committee Officer

17. DECLARATIONS OF INTEREST (INCLUDING WHIPPING DECLARATIONS)

No declarations of interest were made.

18. MINUTES

The minutes of the meeting held on 27 June 2012 had been circulated with the agenda.

RESOLVED:

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

19. VARIATION OF ORDER OF BUSINESS

The Chairman indicated that the item on secure/introductory tenancies would be considered before the Local Housing Strategy.

20. SECURE/INTRODUCTORY TENANCY AGREEMENT

The Head of Housing provided Members with an updated version of the Secure/Introductory Tenancy Agreement for consideration following earlier proposals in April 2011. She asked for Members' views on the addition of the right to defer improvements to homes that were not kept in an acceptable condition. Tenants' views on the matter would be sought at the forthcoming

Annual Tenants' Conference. If in agreement, the clause would be added to the new tenancy agreements due to come into effect on 18 February 2013.

The Head of Housing distributed specimen copies of the proposed A5 Tenant's Handbook which would contain information on tenancy agreement and policies.

Councillor G. Hardcastle asked if workshops could be arranged for elderly tenants to explain the Tenant's Handbook. The Cabinet Member for Housing responded that wardens could discuss the handbook with tenants in sheltered accommodation. She added that there were also a number of older people in general needs accommodation who would possibly need assistance with the handbook.

Councillor A.M. Halford asked if the Council could make it a condition of the tenancy agreement that tenants purchase contents insurance. She asked if any such scheme was in operation in social housing providers and other councils. The Head of Housing said that Flintshire offered a competitive insurance scheme to tenants which could be promoted more widely and that other housing providers did not insist that tenants purchase contents insurance. The Head of Legal & Democratic Services advised that tenants were not legally obliged, as part of their tenancy, to purchase contents insurance. It was agreed that this should be investigated.

Councillor P. Shotton said that he agreed with the suggestion to defer improvement schemes in houses that were not kept to an acceptable standard and was in favour of a zero tolerance approach, a view echoed by other Members.

Councillor P.J. Curtis asked about how this would impact on the Welsh Housing Standards. The Head of Housing explained that the Council would be allowed to defer improvements to tenant's homes while they resolved/improved matters with regard to their tenancy as long as the Flintshire WHQS Implementation timetable was adhered to.

Councillor G. Hardcastle spoke about succession rights for tenants and how important it was that tenants be allowed to stay in their own home, even if this would result in under occupancy. The Cabinet Member for Housing replied that each case was looked at on its own merits and that this practice would continue. Councillor Hardcastle asked about the criteria employed in such cases. The Head of Housing responded that disability, health issues and local support networks would be taken into account. She added that such cases would become more complex with the onset of welfare reform and that persons living in under occupied houses might voluntarily ask to move to smaller properties due to decreases in housing benefit.

Councillor D.L. Cox asked if contents insurance could be automatically added to the rent and tenants offered the opportunity to opt out.

Councillor R. Lloyd asked if reference could be made in the waste and recycling section of the handbook to the correct procedure for removal of clinical

waste. He cited an example whereby a tenant had been reprimanded for putting a used bandage in a black bin.

RESOLVED:

- (a) That the Committee supports the final draft of the Tenancy Agreement which will be presented to Cabinet for approval;
- (b) That the Committee supports the inclusion of a clause in the tenancy agreement that where tenants breach their tenancy, that the Council reserves the right to withhold improvements to their property until the breach is addressed; and
- (c) That the means of providing low cost home contents insurance be investigated further.

21. LOCAL HOUSING STRATEGY

The Director of Community Services delivered a presentation about the draft Flintshire Local Housing Strategy 2012-17. The main features of the presentation were:

- Achievements in 2011-12
- Objectives such as more housing and choice, improving homes and communities and better services
- Next Steps

The Director then invited questions from the Committee.

Councillor P. Shotton asked about incentives to reduce under-occupancy and the possibility of using prefabricated modular housing on Flintshire owned land. The Director of Community Services said that prefabricated homes had been previously considered. The Housing Strategy Manager said that he would investigate further. The Principal Planner said that he was aware of "Ty Unos" modular buildings made from sustainable Welsh woodland materials which could be constructed in one day. He agreed that this should be explored. The Head of Housing said that areas of land for potential housing had been identified, that garage sites would be reviewed and that self build schemes would be explored. In response to the question about incentives for relocation, the Head of Housing explained that tenants who choose to downsize would be offered an incentive of up to £1000 and would receive help with removal costs.

Councillor A.M. Halford thanked the Director of Community Services for the presentation and report. She asked if the 300 proposed units for extra care identified in the strategy would be sufficient, given the projected increase in persons over 65 years of age. The Director of Community Services said that the Housing Strategy Manager had looked at the need for extra care in Flintshire and had concluded that 300 would be a modest expectation.

Councillor P.J. Curtis asked if the demolition of the Flint Maisonettes would have a detrimental effect on the housing waiting list and if applications were on hold until tenants of the maisonettes had been re-housed. The Head of Housing

said that she would investigate and asked Councillor Curtis to provide the background to his concerns. The Head of Housing said that cases that are prioritised include people with medical issues and the homeless.

Councillor Halford asked if the planning applications for Flint renewal had been submitted. The Principal Planner said that the project was at the design stage, prior to its submission to planning.

Councillor R. Hughes asked if there would be provision for older people in rural communities who wish to down size their property. He said that there was a vacant parcel of land in his ward which would be suitable for development. The Director of Community Services said that extra care could support such people and that flexible schemes in rural areas needed consideration. The Housing Strategy Manager said that there was a Rural Housing Enabler working in Flintshire who would analyse need and research various options besides the social rented sector such as affordable housing, part rent/part mortgage. The Principal Planner said that provision for local need was not in the Unitary Development Plan but would feature in the Local Development Plan Rural Development Strategy.

Councillor Halford asked if the parcel of land referred to by Councillor R. Hughes could be developed with prefabricated homes. The Principal Planner explained that if the site was on private land, the development would have to be financially viable, possibly through cross subsidisation. He added that the Council needed to be aware of all these sites in order to investigate their viability.

Councillor G. Hardcastle asked how many empty homes there were in Flintshire. The Housing Strategy Manager replied that there were 550 private sector homes. The Head of Housing said that under the Welsh Government Houses to Homes initiative, an interest free loan of up to £150,000 per applicant can be made and must be repaid within 3 years, in addition to £200,000 from the Council to bring private houses in disrepair back into use.

RESOLVED:

That the Committee endorse proposals contained within the Draft Local Housing Strategy.

22. QUARTER 1 SERVICE PERFORMANCE REPORTS

The Head of Housing announced that the Council's leadership work on improving energy efficiency and Mavis Croft, the chair of the tenant's federation had been nominated for Welsh Housing Awards.

The Head of Housing introduced the report and stated that she would comment on amber and red rated items. She circulated a rental arrears update which demonstrated a reduction in arrears of £109,357.89 and 472 fewer tenants in rent arrears compared to this time last year. The Head of Housing said that the focus was on reducing the number of tenants that owed more than £1000. The Head of Housing highlighted the following areas on the report to note:

- Empty properties took 44 days to return to the housing stock, which was a reduction of 100 days since the LEAN review.
- Emergency repairs had experienced issues about data transfer and back office reporting which had affected performance sliding.
- An improvement in urgent repairs to 8.87 days, narrowly missed the 8.5 day target
- Non urgent repairs at 82.16 days missed the target of 35 days. Currently 70 jobs were in the back log.

The Community Support Services Manager spoke about the current issues faced in Community Support Services such as the re-emergence of longer waiting times in B&B accommodation with all households spending an average of 26.7 days in such accommodation. She added that the Council had supported a house share with three single people who had elected to live together. The Community Support Services Manager reported that a Children's Services officer supported homeless young people and that all persons in B&B accommodation received weekly visits from a support officer. The Head of Housing said that welfare rights officers had secured, in the last quarter, £600,000 of welfare benefits for clients.

Councillor G. Hardcastle expressed concern that non urgent repairs had missed their target. The Asset Manager explained that planned maintenance such as replacement of pathways and fences featured in this category and that he was in discussion with the Cabinet Member for Housing to see how these jobs could be completed.

Councillor A.M. Halford expressed concern about the amount of time lost to staff training. The Asset Manager explained that the training in mobile technology did take a lot of time, especially for trades people who had never used such systems before. He said that the system came into effect in April 2012, but problems had still been experienced in September, despite assistance from the Council's ICT department. He added that a senior member of Capita staff would come to the Council to investigate the issues. Councillor Halford asked about redress from Capita and if they could make a presentation to the Council and set up a Civica/ICT steering group with Members. The Head of Housing said that this would be investigated. Councillor Halford asked about the difficulties experienced with the tracking devices in vehicles. The Asset Manager explained that the difficulties concerned older vehicles undertaking more frequent journeys which had caused more pressure on the battery and ultimately the tracking device. He suggested that this be resolved by the installation of larger batteries on the affected vehicles.

Councillor Hardcastle asked why some vehicle batteries had become flat. The Head of Housing said that vehicle batteries had been run down by the tracker, which drew on the battery even when the vehicle was not in use. The Head of Assets said that the tracker company had inspected vehicles and claimed the battery usage by the tracker was minimal. He added that approximately 10 out of 100 vehicles were affected.

Councillor P.J. Curtis asked if the repairs section was fully staffed. He also asked about issues which would arise with house shares and the re-designation of unsuitable sheltered housing. The Asset Manager said that there were four trades vacancies to fill. The Community Support Services Manager responded that a current house share comprised of three individuals who had lived together in a hostel and wanted to share a home. The Head of Housing said that a survey had been conducted about re-designation and that they would look at all the various options for single people under 60 years.

Councillor R. Lloyd said that he was pleased that Mavis Croft has been nominated for an award in recognition of her voluntary work. He went on to ask about how utility bills would be organised in a house share. The Community Support Services Manager said that bills would be built into the rent.

Councillor R. Davies said that a tenant had complained to him about a new gate post being installed without a catch. He asked if the tradesperson responsible would be identified and spoken to by their manager. The Head of Housing said that members should inform her of any shortcomings with standards of work.

The Chair thanked the Head of Housing for the report.

RESOLVED:

That Quarter 1 performance reports be received and the contents noted.

23. FORWARD WORK PROGRAMME

The Member Engagement Manager introduced the forward work programme which had been collated by the Committee's former facilitator, Samantha Roberts, after the recent Forward Work Programme workshop. He explained that the next meeting would include items on Repairs, Estate Management and Anti-Social Behaviour. The Member Engagement Manager reminded Members that there would be a Welfare Reform workshop on 31 October 2012 in the Council Chamber.

Councillor A.M. Halford said that she had not been made aware in advance of the departure of a number of staff which included Mike Bernard, Samantha Roberts and Brett Sadler. She asked if the Chair could send a note of thanks on behalf of the committee to them to wish them success in their new employment. The Member Engagement Manager said that Samantha Roberts was the new Clerk of Mold Town Council.

Councillor Halford commented that Telecare had disappeared from the work programme. The Member Engagement Manager replied that the Committee have the discretion to change items on the programme when it became necessary to do so. He added that items did not disappear from the work programme and that at the workshops, Members could decide which items to add or remove from the forward work programme.

Councillor P.J. Curtis expressed his concern at the number and use of workshops. The Member Engagement Manager responded that such workshops

were used in addition to formal scrutiny meetings to enable members to discuss issues such as the development of the work programme in a more informal session. He added that the work programme item, usually at the end of the agenda was important, but that its consideration was often rushed because of the constraints.

The Member Engagement Manager also asked that the Chair and Vice Chair in consultation with himself and the other officers be authorised to vary the work programme from time to time. Councillor Halford expressed a reservation, citing a specific example. The Member Engagement Manager responded and explained that he had sought the variations to add rather than remove items from the work programme.

RESOLVED:

That the Forward Work Programme as submitted be approved and that the Chairman and Vice Chairman acting in concert with the Member Engagement Manager and other Officers be given authority to vary the Forward Work Programme where circumstance dictate.

24. 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 10.00 am and ended at 11.50 am)

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Chairman