

COMMUNITY HOUSING & ASSETS OVERVIEW & SCRUTINY COMMITTEE
6 JULY 2022

Minutes of the meeting of the Community, Housing & Assets Overview & Scrutiny Committee of Flintshire County Council held as a hybrid meeting on Wednesday, 6 July 2022

PRESENT: Councillor Helen Brown (Chair)

Councillors: Pam Banks, Tina Claydon, Geoff Collett, David Evans, Kevin Rush and Dale Selvester

SUBSTITUTIONS: Councillors: Bernie Attridge (for Andy Hughes) and Rob Davies (for Dennis Hutchinson)

CONTRIBUTORS: Councillor Sean Bibby (Cabinet Member for Housing and Regeneration); Councillor Dave Hughes (Deputy Leader of the Council and Cabinet Member for Streetscene and the Regional Transport Strategy); Councillor Paul Johnson (Cabinet Member for Finance, Inclusion, Resilient Communities including Social Value and Procurement); Councillor Billy Mullin (Cabinet Member for Governance and Corporate Services including Health and Safety and Human Resources); Chief Executive; Chief Officer (Housing & Communities); Service Manager – Housing & Prevention; Service Manager - Revenues and Procurement; Senior Manager - Housing & Asset Management; Principal Accountant and Strategic Finance Manager (Commercial & Housing)

IN ATTENDANCE: Community & Education Overview & Scrutiny Facilitator and Electoral Services Officer

6. DECLARATIONS OF INTEREST (INCLUDING WHIPPING DECLARATIONS)

Councillors Bernie Attridge, Pam Banks, Helen Brown and Rob Davies declared a personal interest on the Welfare Reform Update/Housing Rent Income (agenda item 7) as they had each received the eligible payment as part of the Cost of Living Support Scheme.

7. MINUTES

The minutes of the meeting held on 7 June 2022 were approved, as moved and seconded by Councillor Geoff Collett and Councillor Kevin Rush.

RESOLVED:

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

8. FORWARD WORK PROGRAMME

The Overview & Scrutiny Facilitator presented the current Forward Work Programme for consideration. She outlined the items that had been added to the Forward Work Programme in consultation with the Chair and relevant officers since the last meeting.

Following a question from Councillor Bernie Attridge, it was agreed that a report on the Tenants Federation would be brought to the Committee at a later date.

It was also agreed that the report on Estate Management and Anti-Social Behaviour, due to be presented to the Committee in December 2022, be split into 2 separate reports as follows: -

- Estate Management – to outline what is being done by the Council and how this would impact positively/negatively on tenants. Councillor Bernie Attridge requested that the report provide information on estate clear ups and walkabouts to ensure consistency across the County.
- Anti-Social Behaviour – to update Members on the Policy and to outline any proposed changes to the Policy.

The recommendations outlined within the report were moved by Councillor Bernie Attridge and seconded by Councillor Dale Selvester.

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

9. TERMS OF REFERENCE

The Overview & Scrutiny Facilitator presented a report on proposed amendments to the Committee's terms of reference to align with changes to portfolio service areas. The proposals were to move the Capital Programme and Assets, together with NEWydd Catering & Cleaning to the Corporate Resources Overview & Scrutiny Committee remit which would provide that Committee with oversight of the complete Community Asset Programme.

Councillor Bernie Attridge asked if Housing Programmes covered private sector homes. The Chief Executive explained that new builds as part of the Strategic Housing and Regeneration Programme (SHARP) would be reported to the Environment & Economy Overview & Scrutiny Committee. The Overview & Scrutiny Facilitator advised that where a matter for consideration by an Overview and Scrutiny Committee fell within the remit of one or more other Overview and Scrutiny Committee, it would be possible for Members of both Committees to take part in consideration of a relevant report.

The recommendation outlined within the report was moved by Councillor Bernie Attridge and seconded by Councillor Dale Selvester.

RESOLVED:

That the Committee support the proposed amendments to its terms of reference as set out in Appendix 2 of the report.

10. COMMUNAL HEATING CHARGES

The Chief Executive presented a report which provided information on proposed communal heating charges at council properties with communal heating schemes. The proposed recharges for 2022/23 were set out within the report and were pending Cabinet approval. In most cases, the recharge to tenants had reduced for 2022/23, which as in other years, would allow Flintshire to recover the projected costs of the heating charges whilst still passing on the benefit of reduced energy costs to tenants.

Tenants were currently benefitting from preferential unit rates due to the Council having secured a fixed rate for fuel until March 2023. It was possible that Communal Heating Charges would increase from 2023/24 when the Council had renegotiated its energy tariff.

Councillor Bernie Attridge expressed concerns around the expected increase from 2023/24 and asked if tenants would be informed in advance of proposed increases and what support would be provided to those tenants who were unable to manage the increase. The Chief Executive agreed that tenants would need to be informed of any increases as soon as possible and outlined the pro-active approach taken by the Council in providing financial support/advice to tenants.

Councillor Dale Selvester commented on his previous experience when working within the Housing Portfolio and the need to update many of the heating systems which in turn would save money and would allow for those savings to be passed on to tenants. The Chief Executive outlined efficiencies and savings that had been made within the service and added that most communal heating schemes had been updated to add heating valves so that tenants could control the temperature themselves.

The recommendation outlined within the report was moved by Councillor Bernie Attridge and seconded by Councillor Dale Selvester.

RESOLVED:

That the Committee support the changes to the current heating charges at Council properties with communal heating schemes, as outlined within the report.

11. WELFARE REFORM UPDATE / HOUSING RENT INCOME

The Chief Executive introduced an update on the impacts that welfare reforms continued to have on Flintshire residents and the work that was ongoing to mitigate this and support these households. He explained that previously the Committee had received reports on Welfare Reform and Housing Rent Income but that in future these updates would be provided in one report.

The Chief Executive gave an update on the benefits cap and the Cost of Living Scheme, advising that currently, 42,023 individual payments of £150 had already been made to eligible households, which equated to a total funding distribution of £6.3m and a take-up rate of 90% for eligible households. He also provided an update on Winter Fuel Support Scheme and explained that during implementation of the scheme the

payments were increased by Welsh Government (WG) to £200.00 which resulted in reviewing payments already made and increasing them by a further £100.00. The scheme would be re-introduced in the Autumn of 2022.

The Service Manager - Revenues and Procurement introduced the operational update for 2021/22 housing rent collection.

The collection of rent during 2021/22 had remained challenging for several reasons – the ban on evictions for much of the year and the need to provide tenants with six months' notice prior to enforcement action being taken, coupled then with delays with the courts in progressing cases. The ongoing impact of the pandemic and the impact rising costs of living for social tenants who were least likely to have sufficient disposable income to cope with inflationary increases also had had a direct impact on the ability of the Housing Service to collect rent on time.

The Service Manager - Revenues and Procurement reported that in appropriate cases, it had been necessary to re-start evictions for a small number of tenancies during 2021/22 where tenants have refused to engage. In some cases, tenants had abandoned the properties.

He added that on a positive note the vast majority of tenants had remained up to date with rent payments, and that between March 2021 and March 2022 figures for rent arrears had stayed the same.

Councillor Geoff Collett asked if the Council were actively identifying abandoned properties. The Chief Executive commented on the legal issues when dealing with abandoned properties but advised that they were being identified through statutory inspections.

Councillor Bernie Attridge commented on the Tenancy Hardship Grant Scheme (THG) and Self Isolation Scheme and raised concerns around the low number of applications granted. The Chief Executive explained that applications for the Self Isolation Scheme continued to be processed. In terms of the THG, it was suggested that a detailed paper on the Scheme, to include information on how the scheme was promoted, the eligibility criteria and why the take up was so low be provided to the Committee.

In response to a question from Councillor Attridge on the impact of the new revenues software, the Service Manager - Revenues and Procurement explained that the software highly automated the system from what used to be in place and was a far better early intervention tool than that of the previous excel spreadsheets. He added that the software was very successful across the council, but the impact was unfortunately being lost at present due to the Covid-19 crisis.

The Revenue Manager also added that they do sometimes try to take rent arrear deductions at source from the Universal Credit with the DWP, but it was hard to keep the stability on the Universal Credit deductions if the tenant had gone back into work. He commented that tenants might also have other deductions being taken which provides further challenges for the council and the tenant.

The recommendations outlined within the report were moved by Councillor Bernie Attridge and seconded by Councillor Dale Selvester.

RESOLVED:

- (a) That the latest financial positions for rent collections in 2021/22 as set out in the report be noted; and
- (b) That the Committee support the ongoing work to manage the impacts that welfare reform had and would continue to have upon some of the most vulnerable residents in Flintshire along with implementing support via Welsh Government support measures to mitigate the cost of living crisis.

12. END OF YEAR PERFORMANCE MONITORING REPORT

The Chief Executive presented the monitoring report to review year-end progress against Council Plan priorities identified for 2021/22. Overall, this was a positive report given the challenges from the emergency situation, with 82% of performance indicators (PIs) relevant to the Committee having met or exceeded their targets.

There were two PIs which showed a red RAG status for current performance against target, relevant to the Committee. In relation to the Number of Affordable Homes under construction via NEW Homes, the current financial viability of the development was being reviewed due to some specification changes on the development and this revised review, once completed, would be presented to the NEW Homes Board for consideration. In relation to the Number of Council Homes completed, the difficulties with the supply chain were still present, with a shortfall in labour with increased costs in materials and manpower effecting all developments. These impacting factors along with a sudden resurgence in overall activity and new policies from Natural Resource Wales relating to phosphates had delayed commencement on site.

Councillor Bernie Attridge commented on the difficulties with the supply chain, which he felt was not affecting the private sector in the same manner. He asked whether the problem lay with Wates Group and asked when the contract with them would come to an end. He also said that he had only recently been made aware of Housing First and asked how locations for homeless hubs were identified. He commented on the need for Members to be informed of when locations of homeless hubs were identified, even if they were not directly in their ward but in neighbouring wards.

The Chief Executive explained that Housing First was not a physical entity but rather a process and went on to explain the pockets of funding, and how properties can be purchased when the opportunities arose.

It was agreed that on the customer satisfaction data for the Housing Register Service, The Housing & Prevention Senior Manager said that a report would be presented to the Committee in due course, on the outcome of the survey and how the Service was addressing and better understanding the data.

In response to a question from Councillor Attridge on the houses built at Maes Gwern, the Senior Manager - Housing & Asset Management explained that the development was due to be completed in August/September. He added that 10 properties were of equity shares and explained that if they were not sold, they would go out to the open market.

Councillor Attridge said that he had a number of further questions on the information contained within the report and it was agreed that he submit them to the relevant officers for a response following the meeting.

Councillor Pamela Banks raised concern around Members not being updated on issues within their ward. The Chief Executive advised that if Members were aware of any issues within their ward that they should contact the relevant officer.

The recommendation outlined within the report was moved by Councillor Geoff Collett and seconded by Councillor Bernie Attridge.

RESOLVED:

That the report be noted.

13. MEMBERS OF THE PRESS IN ATTENDANCE

None.

(The meeting started at 10.00 am and ended at 11.45 am)

.....
Chair