

COMMUNITY & HOUSING OVERVIEW & SCRUTINY COMMITTEE
8 FEBRUARY 2023

Minutes of the meeting of the Community & Housing Overview & Scrutiny Committee of Flintshire County Council held as a remote attendance meeting on Wednesday, 8 February 2023

PRESENT: Councillor Helen Brown (Chair)

Councillors: Gillian Brockley, Tina Claydon, Geoff Collett, Rosetta Dolphin, David Evans, Dennis Hutchinson, Kevin Rush, Dale Selvester and Linda Thew

SUBSTITUTIONS: Councillors: Bernie Attridge (for Pam Banks)

ALSO PRESENT: Councillors Paul Johnson and Debbie Owen attended as observers

CONTRIBUTORS: Councillor Sean Bibby (Cabinet Member for Housing and Regeneration); Chief Executive; Chief Officer (Housing & Communities), Housing & Prevention Service Manager and Service Manager Housing Assets

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

21. DECLARATIONS OF INTEREST (INCLUDING WHIPPING DECLARATIONS)

None.

22. MINUTES

Councillor David Evans referred page 8 of the minutes and said that his question on the number of tenants previously evicted and then re-homed and whether they had then gone into arrears had not been captured in the actions arising from the meeting. The Facilitator said that she would pick this up after the meeting.

Councillor Dale Selvester referred to his question on the minutes and said that he had asked for a breakdown between water rates arrears and rent arrears. The Facilitator said that she would pick this up after the meeting.

The minutes of the meeting held on 11 January 2023 were approved as a correct record as moved and seconded by Councillor David Evans and Councillor Bernie Attridge.

RESOLVED:

That the minutes of the meeting held on 11 January be approved as a correct record and signed by the Chair.

23. FORWARD WORK PROGRAMME & ACTION TRACKING

The Overview & Scrutiny Facilitator presented the current Forward Work Programme for consideration.

The Facilitator commented that there were no proposed changes to the items listed for future meetings. In referring to the actions arising from the last meeting, the Facilitator reported that officers had confirmed that the actions relating to the Housing Rent Income & Welfare Reform report would be captured as additional information in future reports. The action on a letter being sent to the Department of Works and Pensions (DWP) would be completed later in the week.

Councillor Dave Evans referred to the following actions arising from the last meeting and asked that this information be circulated prior to the next Housing Rent Income & Welfare Reform update report in six months' time:-

- Information on the number of cases waiting to go back to court to be provided following the meeting; and
- Information on how many of the 454 households who were subject to a reduction in their housing benefit payment because of the Bedroom Tax and were in arrears to be provided following the meeting.

The recommendations, as 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;
- (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; and
- (c) That the Committee notes the progress made in completing the outstanding actions.

24. HOUSING SUPPORT GRANT

The Housing & Prevention Service Manager introduced a report which provided an overview of the Housing Support Grant (HSG) regime and details of the Housing Support Delivery Plan, which was a requirement of receiving the Welsh Government (WG) revenue supported HSG.

The HSG was a WG funded programme which provided housing related support services to people over the age of 16. It was an early intervention programme to support activity which prevented people from becoming homeless, stabilised their housing situation or helped potentially homeless people to find and keep accommodation.

The Housing & Prevention Service Manager provided a detail presentation of the report, advising that having initially anticipated a reduction in WG funding in December 2020, it was announced that a further £40m would be put into the national award for HSG and there was an expectation that the additional funding provided a platform to

transform services and build on the positive practice that had been developed during the response to Covid. The funding allowed for the Council to respond to the increasing pressures on housing and homelessness services post pandemic and the current cost of living crisis and should be aligned to the shift in service delivery towards Rapid Rehousing.

A detailed update on the following areas, as outlined within the report, were also provided to the Committee:-

- Current HSG Services
- Accessing Housing Support Services
- Developing the HSG Delivery Plan
- HSG Local Delivery Priorities
- Spend against the HSG
- Commissioning and Reviewing Services
- Regional Working Arrangements
- Sector Wide All Wales Recruitment Campaign

Councillor Bernie Attridge asked a number of questions as detailed below:-

- Could information on the split of Flintshire County Council CC services and Commissioned services in regard to spend for the HSG to be provided and what level of control and accountability was in place when money was being spent externally;
- Assurance requested that the HSG was not being used as a tool to keep waiting lists down on Council properties;
- What was the average case load per member of staff;
- Concerns around the reduction in days that the Connects Office in Connah's Quay was open and the impact this was having on residents being able to meet face to face with housing officers to discuss any issues;
- In developing the HSG Delivery Plan what consultation activities were carried out;
- In opening up the Private Rented Sector, how many private properties were exclusively for Flintshire County Council;
- In relation to the underspend within the HSG, were no other projects considered to ensure that all funding is used;
- Could information be provided on the future of the Plas Bellin site, given the concerning rumours circulating on social media on its future use;
- Why were void properties being held back given the high number of void properties and the number of people on the housing waiting list;
- Why are no elected Members sitting on the North Wales Regional Housing Support Collaborative Group (RHSCG);
- Could a breakdown of the spend plan 2022/23 categories be provided;
- How much does the Council contribute financially to the regional funded pot;
- Could negative case studies also be provided in order to provide balance and show lessons learnt.

The Housing & Prevention Service Manager responded to the questions, as follows:-

- Information on the split of Flintshire County Council services and commissioned services in regard to spend for HSG could be provided following the meeting;
- The HSG was not used to stop people getting on the housing register. The housing register was property focused and housing needs led but if through support a person could be assisted in not moving that does reduce the impact on the housing register;
- Future reports could show the impacts the HSG has;
- Staff within the tenancy support service manage an average of around 15 cases each with homelessness officers managing between 45 and 50 cases at the moment;
- Take on board the comments on the Connects Offices but this doesn't create too many operational challenges as the majority of the support provided is in homes or community based;
- Consultation has been carried out by survey carried out by staff supporting residents to engage with the survey. There was a mixture of electronic and form based surveys and focus groups for commissioned services;
- In terms of the Leasing Scheme there were currently 25 units of accommodation exclusively for Flintshire County Council. The focus of this funding stream is to encourage landlords to help with the discharge of duty for homelessness.
- The Landlord Forum was currently being held online post Covid with around 40 landlords currently engaging in the process. The last few meetings have been focused on the Renting Homes Wales Act and damp and disrepair issues which had been requested to be considered by the landlords;
- In relation to spend against HSG additional money was always welcome but staff were required to be able to deliver those services and the Council and it had been successful with additional funding in previous years.
- Not appropriate to comments on the rumours around the future use of Plas Bellin;
- In relation to the comment around holding voids, this was not voids within the Housing Revenue Account but voids within Plas Bellin. As soon as this was identified as a risk it was decided to stop letting properties there;
- In relation to the membership of the RHSCG, it had previously been a requirement to have a Member sitting on the Group but WG guidance had stated that Members were no longer required. Will check if this was guidance or direction following the meeting;
- Will need to seek advice on what level of detail within a breakdown of the spend plan 2022/23 categories could be provided and inform Members following the meeting;
- Flintshire County Council contribute £40,000 to the regional funding pot as do other Local Authorities. A large number of staff, not just in-house but across all commissioned services had been able to access mental health training through this and it had been good value for money;
- Can bring some negative case studies in future reports.

In response to a question from the Chair around a site identified for complex needs and managed moves at Plas Bellin, the Housing & Prevention Service Manager explained that the Complex Needs Project was due to go out to tender shortly. There was no specific site identified and as part of the tender process, providers would be asked to provide the Council with details on how it would meet specific expectations

and also source a site. He explained that the definition of complex needs was two or more needs, which could be, mental health, offending behaviours, substance misuse and a disability. In terms of Plas Bellin, he explained that a number of residents were in the process of being moved as they had met their support outcomes. The remaining residents were being assist through the homeless direct let quota which was linked to the Single Access Route to Housing (SARTH) project.

Councillor Sean Bibby, Cabinet Member for Housing & Regeneration, responded to the comments around the membership of the RHSCG and said that he was happy to discuss this matter with the Housing & Prevention Service Manager following the meeting. He provided information on the Cabinet Member network group meetings which were facilitated by the Welsh Local Government Association (WLGA) and discussions held around more frequent meetings with regional partners.

Councillor Dennis Hutchinson thanked the Cabinet Member for assisting him with a serious issue the previous day and also asked that his thanks be passed to Claire Ballard for her assistance. He raised concerns on the reduction in opening days for the Connects Office in Buckley, outlining that Buckley had the largest population in the County as a single town and also covered a large catchment area. He also commented on the number of days that the Mold Connects Office was open and asked if consideration could be given for the centre in Buckley to have parity with the Mold centre. The Chief Executive agreed to pick this up with the Chief Officer (Governance) following the meeting.

Councillor David Evans asked whether there had been the opportunity for the Council to purchase Plas Bellin before it went on the open market. The Housing & Prevention Service Manager responded that the Council were not notified that the building was being sold but advised that the site itself had a number of challenges, such as, its connectivity to the local community. Also, in order to meet the WHQS and decarbonisation agenda significant works would be required, and this would be a significant challenge.

In response to comments from Councillor Linda Thew around contact between residents and officers, the Housing & Prevention Service Manager explained that telephone numbers were provided within the report. He explained that the Connects officers were not the only avenue for residents to contact officers and that it was important to have the right number of staff to carry out front line activities while embracing digital information which could be made easily available.

The recommendations, as outlined within the report, were moved by Councillor Bernie Attridge and seconded by Councillor Dennis Hutchinson.

RESOLVED:

- (a) That the Committee support the Housing Support Grant Delivery Plan for 2023-2024 attached at Appendix 1 of the report;
- (b) That the overview of the Housing Support Grant regime and wide range of delivery of services locally be noted; and

- (c) That the feedback on the impact of the Housing Support Grant and range of good practice examples shared through the report be noted.

25. COMMON HOUSING REGISTER (SINGLE ACCESS ROUTE TO HOUSING – SARTH)

The Housing & Prevention Service Manager introduced a report on the Single Access Route to Housing (SARTH) which was a partnership between all the major providers of social housing in North Wales, covering the local authority areas of Conwy County Borough Council, Denbighshire and Flintshire.

The Council managed the housing register on behalf of Flintshire's Social Housing Partners (Flintshire County Council, Clwyd Alyn Housing, Wales and West Housing, Grwp Cynefin and Adra Housing Association) and a single Common Housing Register provided the list of all eligible applicants for social housing.

The Housing & Prevention Service Manager explained that the number of applicants accepted onto the Common Housing Register had grown significantly over the past three years. This was putting increasing pressure on the administrative burden and management of the register and was also leading to increased wait times for the limited amount of social housing that was available each year. The report outlined the increases in housing needs and the disparity with the availability of social housing which was not increasing at the same rate as the levels of housing needs that were prevalent within the community.

Councillor Rosetta Dolphin expressed concern around the lack of available social housing and commented on a recent report presented to the Committee on the current level of void properties. She asked if the number of void properties in Flintshire were comparable with neighbouring counties. The Service Manager Housing Assets advised that neighbouring counties had similar levels of void properties and in response to further questions advised that there were currently 259 void properties in Flintshire.

Councillor Bernie Attridge commented on previous concerns around the reduction in opening hours at Connects centres and raised concerns that this decision had been made without considering the impact on residents who need to speak to officers on housing issues, especially those who were unable to access information electronically. He also raised concern on the previous decision to not provide Members with the names of tenants when they move into Council properties in their ward and asked that this be re-considered.

Councillor Dale Selvester said that Members were provided with the names of residents on the electoral register and said that whilst this might be provided under different legislation, he agreed with the concerns raised by Councillor Attridge that tenants' details were not being provided to local Members. He commented on the very poor/poor satisfaction levels outlined within the report and said this was worrying and said further information on the reason for this needed to be provided. He welcomed the opportunity for applicants to update their application area and commented on a previous matrix which assisted applicants in reviewing their application area. He also commented on the waiting list calculator and raised concern that it was not possible to provide applicants with information on how long they would be waiting and he did not want to give applicants false hope.

The Housing & Prevention Service Manager explained that feedback from the dissatisfaction levels had shown that applicants/tenants did not like the Council managing their housing expectations and offer solutions during their first contact with the Council. The number of complaints where it was felt that the officer had not spoken to them appropriately were minimal. There was currently an interactive map available on the Council's website which assisted applicants when making a decision on an area. In relation to the waiting list calculator it was explained that the calculator could give an indication of waiting times based on the information provided by the applicant i.e. area, registration date, number of bedrooms, property types.

In response to the concerns raised around tenants details no longer being shared with Members, the Chief Officer (Housing & Communities) explained that there was specific legislation in relation to the electoral register and elector information being shared with Members. In relation to tenant's details, advice had been sought from information and governance colleagues who advised that in line with GDPR there was no lawful basis to provide this information to Members.

It was agreed that the Chief Officer review the legal advice with colleagues following the meeting and provide a response to the Committee.

In response to a question from Councillor Linda Thew around payments to smaller contractors, the Service Manager Housing Assets advised that the Council had a Policy in place which ensured that no contractor would fall into financial hardship while awaiting payment.

The recommendations, as outlined within the report, were moved by Councillor David Evans and seconded by Councillor Kevin Rush.

RESOLVED:

- (a) That the Committee note the significant increases in housing needs across the county and the growing pressures in regard to social housing which was not in line with the supply of available homes locally; and
- (b) That the Committee note the customer feedback following survey work and the progress in relation to opportunities for service improvement and in particular digital transformation.

26. HOUSING REVENUE ACCOUNT (HRA) GARAGE SITES AND PLOT SITES UPDATE

The Service Manager Housing Assets introduced a report to provide an update on the Council's garage demolition programme along with providing an insight into how the Council assessed the land for future use.

As part of the Council's continued investment works towards maintaining the Welsh Housing Quality Standard (WHQS), the garage sites across the County had been assessed in terms of their condition, investment requirements and revenue generation/income. The Council had developed a scoring matrix to allow an objective assessment of each garage site. Each of the categories, as detailed within the report,

were scored and re-scored during any new survey/assessment with the total score assisting with the prioritisation of the demolition programme.

In response to a question from Councillor Rosetta Dolphin, the Service Manager Housing Assets advised that the disposal of land was considered where it was found not suitable following a survey/assessment and all options considered.

Councillor Bernie Attridge referred to a previous commissioned report on garage sites and asked if the previous report had been considered as part of the basis for the report presented to the Committee. He also commented on the number of unusable garages across the County and asked if there was an option to fast track sites that could be developed in order to bring in additional revenue to the Council and assist with the lack of housing supply across the County. The Service Manager Housing Assets advised that the previous report had formed the basis for the matrix and had been used to prioritise garages to be demolished first alongside working with the Strategic Housing and Regeneration Programme (SHARP) team to identify sites for new development. In consultation with local Members and the Chair of the Committee sites had been identified and were being progressed by the SHARP team.

Councillor Sean Bibby, Cabinet Member for Housing & Regeneration, welcomed the report and advised that he had attended a number of site visits with the Strategic Housing & Program Delivery Manager to identify sites prior to consultation with local Members.

Councillor David Evans said that, alongside Councillor Ron Davies, he had recently met with residents of Poplar Avenue and Dodd's Court in Higher Shotton on parking issues. He commented on the garage site at Melrose Avenue which had recently been demolished and asked that when future plans for this site were being considered could consideration be given to ensuring that there was sufficient parking made available to ensure there is no further impact on adjacent streets. The Service Manager Housing Assets advised that prior to the disposal of any land and before any new build there was a need to consider the impact on the whole community, parking and congestion. The Environmental Works Programme addressed parking in the community.

The recommendations, as outlined within the report, were moved by Councillor David Evans and seconded by Councillor Bernie Attridge.

RESOLVED:

- (a) That the Committee support the garage demolition programme proposals for addressing those sites and assets in a poor condition; and
- (b) That the Committee support the matrix, outlined in the report, on the criteria for assessing the garage sites for demolition.

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

RESOLVED:

That the press and public be excluded from the meeting as the following item was considered to be exempt by virtue of paragraph 15 of Part 4 of Schedule 12A of the Local Government Act 1972 (as amended).

27. SHELTERED HOUSING REVIEW REPORT

The Service Manager Housing Assets presented a report to provide an update on the Council's sheltered housing review, the proposed methodology to be utilised to identify assets to be included in the review and the associated option appraisal of these assets.

In response to comments made by Councillor Bernie Attridge around communication, the Service Manager Housing Assets explained that the report was seeking the Committees' comments on the proposed methodology and that following this, the next stage of the process would be to engage/consult with Members and tenants. The Chief Executive referred to previous Scrutiny reports and added that the pandemic had slowed down the pace of the project but that it was still in its very early stages.

Councillor Attridge suggested that a Task & Finish Group be set up to consider how the project would proceed. This was supported by the Committee and the Facilitator advised that a report to outline the terms of reference of the Task & Finish Group would be presented to the next Committee meeting.

Councillor Attridge proposed that the report be noted and that a Task & Finish Group be established to consider the next steps for the Sheltered Housing Review. The proposal was seconded by Councillor Linda Thew.

RESOLVED:

- (a) That the report be noted; and
- (b) That a Task & Finish Group be established to consider the next steps for the Sheltered Housing Review.

28. MEMBERS OF THE PRESS IN ATTENDANCE

There were no members of the press in attendance.

(The meeting started at 10.00 am and ended at 13.30 pm)

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Chair