

COMMUNITY & HOUSING OVERVIEW & SCRUTINY COMMITTEE
WEDNESDAY 8 MARCH 2023

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

PRESENT: Councillor Helen Brown (Chair)

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

SUBSTITUTION: Councillor Mel Buckley (for Ray Hughes)

ALSO PRESENT: Councillors: Bernie Attridge, Marion Bateman, Dave Hughes, Paul Johnson and Billy Mullin attended as observers

CONTRIBUTORS: Councillor Sean Bibby (Cabinet Member for Housing and Regeneration); Service Manager – Housing Welfare and Communities; Service Manager – Housing Assets; Strategic Housing & Delivery Programme Manager; Housing Manager; Strategic Finance Manager - Commercial and Housing and Business Manager

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

30. DECLARATIONS OF INTEREST (INCLUDING WHIPPING DECLARATIONS)

None.

31. MINUTES

Councillor Dale Selvester referred to his request for a breakdown between water rates arrears and rent arrears and said that he had not received this information. The Facilitator explained that due to year end and billing priorities it had not been possible to provide this information ahead of the meeting, but this could be provided in early April. Councillor Selvester confirmed that they would like to receive the information requested in April.

Councillor Dennis Hutchinson referred to his concerns on the reduction in opening days for the Connect Office in Buckley. The Facilitator explained that a response to his concern had been provided to the Committee via e-mail ahead of the meeting.

The minutes of the meeting held on 8 February 2023 were approved as a correct record as moved and seconded by Councillor Dennis Hutchinson and Councillor Dale Selvester.

RESOLVED:

That the minutes of the meeting held on 8 February be approved as a correct record and signed by the Chair.

32. FORWARD WORK PROGRAMME & ACTION TRACKING

The Facilitator presented the current Forward Work Programme for consideration.

The Facilitator outlined the following proposed changes to the items listed in the current forward work programme:-

- Temporary Accommodation Audit Update – suggest move to September to allow for a fuller report;
- Estate Management and Anti-Social Behaviour reports – suggest move to July. The original timeframe for reviewing these policies was to coincide with the implementation of the Renting (Homes) Wales Act and since the implementation was delayed six months the policy review and update would need to fall into the same time pattern.

The Facilitator also outlined the status of the actions arising from the last meeting, which were shown at Appendix 2 of the report.

Councillor Linda Thew referred to the refugee item listed on the forward work programme under 'items to be scheduled' and raised concerns around proposals to convert the Northop Hall Country House Hotel into a facility for asylum-seekers and refugees. It was agreed that Councillor Thew's concerns be feedback to the Chief Executive to ensure consultation with local Members and adjoining ward Members following the meeting.

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

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.

33. VOID MANAGEMENT

The Service Manager – Housing Assets presented a report to provide a further update on voids management and delivery.

The Service Manager explained that there had been a number of challenges to overcome from the past 24 months, which included the pandemic, Brexit and the war in

the Ukraine, which had increased pressures in securing skilled resources, raw materials and price increases and outlined work being undertaken to meet the key milestones within the Voids Action Plan, attached at Appendix 1 of the report, which covered the following areas:

- Budget
- Refurbishment
- Workforce
- Oversight & Reporting
- Compliance

The Service Manager also outlined the key activities delivered, adding that the Management Team met regularly to discuss progress and performance on the following areas:

- Transitional Accommodation Capital Programme (TACP) Funding
- Procurement of new Schedule of Rates (SORs)
- Procurement/tendering of the new framework
- Acquisition of new contractors
- Reallocation of internal resource positions (Team Leaders & Inspectors)
- Training for voids team
- Development of new allocations process.
- Identify any additional funding
- Looking at WHQs2 and de-carbonisation
- Full review of specification to voids standards, to build robust standard surveys
- Ensuring contractors were meeting benchmarks

In response to questions from Councillor Rosetta Dolphin around the average costs to bring a void property back into use and its comparison to neighbouring authorities, the Service Manager explained that neighbouring authorities typically spend between £18,000 to £20,000 on void properties, but the average costs for Flintshire was in the region of around £9,000. He agreed to provide information on how many of the void properties required works costing more than £10,000 to Members of the Committee following the meeting.

Councillor Dale Selvester welcomed the detailed report. He also welcomed that that all Team Leaders had returned to the workplace and recruitment exercises have been completed and said that he would like to see what improvement this had on the service. The Service Manager agreed to provide data analysis on the benefits of additional posts in the future update reports.

Councillor Selvester also asked if external contractors were made aware of what their performance targets were and what measures were taken if they were not meeting their target. He also questioned the multiple material and supply issues as outlined within the report and outlined conversations with a local builder who had stated that there were no material supply issues with materials such as windows. The Service Manager explained that external contractors worked to performance targets set, for example, a small contractor would be given 2 void properties and when the property was 75% completed, they would then be allocated additional properties to assist with

workflow and future planning. Any contractor late on completing a property or where there were quality issues would be defaulted and it would affect their allocation of properties going forward. In relation to materials, the report outlined the issues over the last 2 years during the pandemic and most of these issues had been resolved. It was proposed to work closely with local suppliers to start building stock levels up and share forward work programmes going forward.

Councillor Dave Evans asked if homes were regularly inspected in order to identify issues before they became major repairs when vacated. The Service Manager reported that a stock condition survey commenced in 2020 but access was restricted during the pandemic. A high-level stock condition survey to assess tenants' homes would be commencing but any tenant who had previously refused entry into their home as part of the WHQS works, access was gained to ensure the kitchens and bathrooms were safe. Any operative who attends a property where concerns were found, these would be reported as soon as possible. He was confident that robust processes were in place.

In response to concerns raised by Councillor Pam Banks on repairs to properties in her ward where the tenants had been waiting a number of years, the Service Manager agreed to pick this up with Councillor Banks following the meeting.

In response to a question from Councillor Selvester around housing officers reporting safeguarding issues when accessing a property, the Service Manager advised that Housing Officers work closely alongside Children's Services to ensure any concerns were reported as soon as possible.

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

RESOLVED:

- (a) That the progress made in delivering the planned activity previously outlined to the Committee in September 2022, the next steps and key milestones within the Voids Action Plan at attached at Appendix 1 be noted; and
- (b) That the proposals for addressing the challenges identified within the Voids Action Plan be supported.

34. DYNAMIC RESOURCE SCHEDULER (DRS) UPDATE

The Service Manager – Housing Assets and Business Manager jointly presented a report to provide an overview and update on the newly procured Dynamic Resource Scheduler (DRS), the changes made to the service during the testing stages of the pilot and the new measures implemented to improve our overall customer satisfaction rates with regards to the service provided.

The procurement and investment of the software was seen as a catalyst for delivering a more customer focused housing repairs function. It was also anticipated that the newly procured software provided strong potential for payback which could be

realised through a more productive, efficient, and effective housing repairs service, reduced customer call-backs and reduced travel times for the operatives.

The proposals within the report were fully aligned and complimented the work being undertaken to improve the online offer from the housing service, to make it easier and simpler for customers to diagnose faults and report repairs and support the preference from customers for a convenient appointments service to complete outstanding works.

Councillor Bernie Attridge asked how many operatives had been involved in the testing phase. He also if the system would work across all trade areas and if tenants called to report a fault how could the size of the job be recognised. The Service Manager advised that 4 operatives had been testing the system as part of the pilot. He confirmed that all trade areas would be able to work through the DRS system and that the size of the job would be identified as part of the pre-inspection phase.

Councillor Rosetta Dolphin asked if the DRS system was similar to the system already in place. The Service Manager explained that it was similar to a previous system but was now further enhanced to a digital process rather than the older manual process that was in place.

In response to a question from Councillor Linda Thew around the cost of the DRS System, the Service Manager agreed to provide this information following the meeting.

Councillor Pam Banks commented that some elderly tenants may not be confident with technology and raised concerns around how they would be able to report faults. The Service Manager assured Members that tenants would still be able to report faults manually and someone could contact them non digitally to avoid any technical discomfort issues.

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 next phase of the DRS testing and pilot stages before the Council moved into a fully functional and fully live DRS environment; and
- (b) That the Committee support the Council in promoting the service offer, where tenant could be provided with an appointment for repair and maintenance work requests, in line with the agreed target and attendance times.

35. RESULTS OF THE TENANTS SURVEY & DEVELOPING CUSTOMER INVOLVEMENT STRATEGY

The Service Manager – Housing Welfare and Communities introduced the outcome of the Survey of Tenants and Residents (STAR).

In 2022 a full census survey of all tenants was undertaken to gauge current opinions across the range of services Housing provided. This included asking them to rate their neighbourhood, the safety of their homes, the repair and maintenance service and how they could get involved and have their say on digital use. The survey received a 25% response rate with the key themes outlined in the report.

The Service Manager reported that the former Tenant Engagement Strategy expired in 2021 and the Council had been operating an interim strategy whilst the new draft strategy was being developed and the STAR survey was being concluded. This was to ensure the results of the STAR survey informed the development of a new strategy and it was aligned with the priorities and feedback from tenants.

Councillor Bernie Attridge asked how the Council were intending to make sure all tenants engaged with the STAR survey going forward and raised concerns around the Tenants Federation which he did feel represented the views of all tenants across Flintshire and fed into the Customer Involvement Strategy. The Cabinet Member for Housing & Regeneration said that it was important to consider how to improve engagement with all tenants and referred to the roadshows being held across Flintshire for tenants in order to inform them of the changes as part of the Renting (Homes) Wales Act. The Service Manager explained that the survey would be carried out bi-annually in the future in order to track tenants' satisfactions/concerns and the survey would be sent to every tenant across Flintshire. Initial consultation with tenants would focus on how the Customer Involvement Strategy would be developed.

In response to a question raised by Councillor Selvester around the data by ward it was explained that the wards detailed in the report were shown prior to the boundary changes and would be updated in future reports.

Councillor Dave Evans commented on the amount of work needed to ensure improvements were made and suggested that a workshop be arranged for all Members in order to highlight the strategy and work needed to be carried out to improve the current position.

The recommendations, as outlined within the report, were moved by Councillor Dale Selvester and seconded by Councillor Linda Thew.

RESOLVED:

- (a) That the results of the STAR survey and the draft strategy aims, and objectives be noted; and
- (b) That a presentation on the draft strategy aims and objectives be given at a future all Member workshop.

36. SHELTERED HOUSING REVIEW TASK & FINISH GROUP

The Facilitator introduced a report to seek the Committees consideration on setting up a Task & Finish Group.

During the Community & Housing Overview & Scrutiny Committee meeting held on 8 February 2023, whilst considering the Sheltered Housing Review report, a number of questions were raised around how the review would progress and consultation than ad been undertaken so far.

It was suggested that the Task & Finish Group be made up of 6 Members of the Committee and that the Facilitator contact Members following the meeting to request their nomination.

The recommendation, as outlined within the report, was moved by Councillor David Evans and seconded by Councillor Dennis Hutchinson.

RESOLVED:

That a Sheltered Housing Review Task & Finish Group be established.

37. NORTH EAST WALES (NEW) HOMES BUSINESS PLAN 2023/2052

The Strategic Housing & Delivery Programme Manager introduced the North East Wales (NEW) Homes Business Plan 2023/2052 following approval of the Plan by NEW Homes Board as a strategic planning document at its meeting on the 12 January 2023.

Following questions from Members and answers provided by the Strategic Housing & Delivery Programme Manager it was suggested that a report on the viability of NEW Homes be presented to the Committee at a future meeting.

The recommendation, as outlined within the report, was moved by Councillor Linda Thew and seconded by Councillor Kevin Rush.

RESOLVED:

That the Committee support the NEW Homes Business Plan 2023/2052.

38. 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 11.40 a m)

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Chair