

COMMUNITY & HOUSING OVERVIEW & SCRUTINY COMMITTEE
WEDNESDAY 17 MAY 2023

Minutes of the meeting of the Community & Housing Overview & Scrutiny Committee of Flintshire County Council held as a hybrid meeting on Wednesday 17 May 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

ALSO PRESENT: Councillors: Bernie Attridge, Marion Bateman, Paul Johnson and Allan Marshall attended as observers

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

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

Prior to the start of the meeting, the Committee stood in a minute silence to remember the late Tony Sharps.

1. APPOINTMENT OF CHAIR

The Facilitator advised that at the Annual Meeting, Council determined that the Independent Group would chair this Committee. The Committee was advised that Councillor Helen Brown was the Chair of the Committee for the municipal year.

RESOLVED:

That the appointment of Councillor Helen Brown as Chair of the Committee be noted.

2. APPOINTMENT OF VICE-CHAIR

Councillor Linda Thew nominated Councillor Dale Selvester as Vice-Chair of the Committee. This was seconded by Councillor Dennis Hutchinson.

Councillor Tina Claydon nominated Councillor Ray Hughes as Vice-Chair of the Committee. This was seconded by Councillor Kevin Rush.

On being put to the vote, both Councillors Hughes and Selvester received 5 votes each. The Chair was asked to give her casting vote and confirmed her vote for Councillor Selvester.

RESOLVED:

That Councillor Dale Selvester be appointed Vice-Chair of the Committee.

3. DECLARATIONS OF INTEREST (INCLUDING WHIPPING DECLARATIONS)

None.

4. MINUTES

8th March 2023

Councillor Linda Thew referred to paragraph 3 of page 7 for the minutes and suggested that the word 'asked' should be included.

19th April 2023

Councillor Kevin Rush said that he had submitted his apologies for the meeting and asked that they be included.

Councillor Thew referred to the second paragraph on page 15 of the minutes and suggested that the word 'prions' be amended to read 'prisons'.

Councillor Thew also referred to the fourth paragraph on page 16 of the minutes and suggested that the word 'in-hose' be amended to read 'in-house'.

Subject to the amendments listed above, the minutes were moved as a correct record by Councillor Thew and seconded by Councillor Dale Selvester.

RESOLVED:

That subject to the amendments listed above, the minutes of the meetings held on 8 March 2023 and 19 April 2023 be approved as a correct record and signed by the chair.

5. FORWARD WORK PROGRAMME & ACTION TRACKING

The Facilitator presented the current Forward Work Programme for consideration, adding that there were no proposed changes to the items showing for the future meetings in June and July, 2023.

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

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

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.

6. VOID MANAGEMENT

The Chief Officer (Housing & Communities) introduced the Void Management update as shown within the agenda. The update provided key figures on the number of void properties and the key activities against the void action plan. The Committee would continue to receive this information monthly with a formal report on voids being presented to the Committee in September.

The Service Manager – Housing Assets presented the key figures and key activities against the void action plan, as outlined in the briefing note.

He outlined the number of new voids and those which had been completed. From March, 26 void properties were received, and 23 properties were completed, which had been completed prior to the appointment of the new contractors to the service. From April, 24 void properties were received and 18 completed. Delays experienced were due to absences and delays in certification. More voids had been completed, but due to delays in certification they were still yet to be signed off.

The Service Manager also outlined the number of properties requiring major works and those which required minor works along with demand for the properties.

In relation to the key activities against the void action plan, the Service Manager outlined the following:-

- The Service had met with all newly commissioned contractors;
- 6 out of 6 pre-contract meetings had been undertaken with the new contractors;
- The signing of contractors were nearing completion;
- The stock condition survey had commenced in October 2022;
- Additional resources had been allocated to undertake the stock condition surveys;
- The Training Coordinator was now in post;
- The Coordinator was scheduling all required core training for the next 12 months.

The Service Manager also drew the Committee's attention to the budget information and top 3 reasons for tenancy terminations, which had been requested by Members of the Committee at previous meetings.

Councillor David Evans commented on the number of void properties which had increased in April compared with March and asked whether the Committee would see this figure decrease in future months. He said that there was a need for more void properties to be brought back into use to get on top of the current situation. He also asked if the following information could be provided in future briefing updates:-

- Information on the bedroom type of property becoming void alongside the breakdown of total void figures;

- Type of properties tenants were moving to as part of a transfer to another FCC property;
- Geographical areas of void properties.

The Service Manager commented on the increase of void properties and reminded the Committee that the newly commissioned contractors were only recently in place. He reiterated his previous comments that the process could not be rushed and that the number of void properties may increase prior to them consistently reducing. In relation to the request for additional information, he said that information on bedroom types and a heat map to show the geographical location of void properties could be provided and that he would look into whether information on the type of properties tenants were moving too could be collated.

Councillor Bernie Attridge asked how many of the Council's own workforce were working on void properties and why more of the Direct Labour Organisation (DLO) could not be used. He said that there was a current crisis with void properties resulting in people having to temporarily stay in hotels whilst waiting for a Council property. He also asked why so many properties needed major works to be carried out and asked if housing management were assessing the properties and whether previous tenants were being re-charged for any damage done. He also asked why tenants were being allocated properties some 6/7 months ahead of the void property being released.

The Service Manager advised that the Council's DLO mainly carried out minor works on void properties as they were a maintenance and repair team but informed the Committee that consideration was being given to the DLO carrying out works around fencing and smoke detector fitting at void properties. He also advised that recharges were raised accordingly with previous tenants where damage had been done.

The Service Manager – Housing, Welfare & Communities advised on the process of allocating a void property and explained that they contact potential tenants to ask if they would like to be allocated a property months in advance of it being ready.

The Chair raised concern around the amount of rent/council tax not being collected due to the number of void properties. In response to her question around how many staff were in the DLO teams, the Service Manager - Housing Assets suggested that he provide the following information in the next update:-

- Number of staff within the DLO team;
- Number of Team Leaders who manage the DLO; and
- Number of Team Leaders who manage contractors

Councillor Dale Selvester asked if mutual exchanges were factored into the total of void properties. He commented on the need to ensure inspections were carried out at properties especially if they were aware that the property was becoming vacant and asked whether consideration had been given to holding back transfers of properties for a few months to allow for the number of void properties to reduce. He also questioned the allocation process and asked if a formal offer was refused would that person, then be removed from the waiting list.

The Service Manager - Housing Assets explained that mutual exchanges did not factor into the total of void properties. He also explained the process for transfer of properties and the inspections of housing officers and said that he could provide further detail on this at a future meeting if requested. He also did not feel that holding back transfers would assist, highlighting the current waiting list and number of people waiting for a property. The Service Manager - Housing, Welfare & Communities explained that during conversations with potential tenants when asked if they would like to be allocated a property months in advance of it being ready, this was done ahead of a formal offer then being given.

Councillor Geoff Collett expressed concern around the number of void properties. He commented on a site visit and meeting with Members held a number of months ago and said that he was concerned that the number of void properties had only increased since this meeting. Councillor Dennis Hutchinson agreed with these comments and said that there was a need to ensure regular inspections of tenant's homes which he felt would address the issue around major works needing to be carried out on void properties.

The Cabinet Member for Housing & Regeneration said that he shared the concerns of Members but added that it was important not to rush the process to ensure that the Council did not find itself in the same situation in 12 months' time. He said that Members needed to allow between 9 and 12 months to see improvements in the number of void properties given the newly commissioned contractors who were now working on these properties.

Councillor Kevin Rush asked if the inspection of the standards of work being carried out by the contractors could be done ahead of the 6 week period. He also asked if the DLO could be moved to work on void properties for a couple of months.

The Service Manager – Housing Assets explained that the DLO were working on a backlog of repairs. He also advised that inspections of the work of the contractors would be carried out before a 6 week period.

In response to a question from Councillor Linda Thew around the number of contractors, the Service Manager – Housing Assets advised that there were 6 contractors with 3 available to step in if there were issues with the standard of works being carried out.

Councillor Thew asked how many void properties were expected to be returned in the next week. The Service Manager – Housing Assets advised that 10 void properties were expected to be returned by the next meeting.

Councillor Pam Bank asked if there was the possibility to extend the current DLO's. The Service Manager – Housing Assets explained that the Council was not currently in a position to expand the DLO.

Councillor Evans moved that the update be noted. This was seconded by Councillor Rosetta Dolphin.

RESOLVED:

That the update be noted.

7. **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 11.22 a.m.)

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Chair