

COMMUNITY & HOUSING OVERVIEW & SCRUTINY COMMITTEE
WEDNESDAY 10 JANUARY 2024

Minutes of the meeting of the Community & Housing Overview & Scrutiny Committee of Flintshire County Council held as a hybrid meeting on Wednesday, 10 January 2024

PRESENT: Councillor Helen Brown (Chair)

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

SUBSTITUTIONS: Councillor Bernie Attridge (for Dale Selvester) and Councillor Ted Palmer (for Ray Hughes)

ALSO PRESENT: Councillors Marion Bateman and Chrissy Gee attended as observers

CONTRIBUTORS: Councillor Dave Hughes (Deputy Leader of the Council and Cabinet Member for Streetscene and the Regional Transport Strategy); Councillor Sean Bibby (Cabinet Member for Housing and Regeneration); Councillor Paul Johnson (Cabinet Member for Finance, Inclusion, Resilient Communities including Social Value and Procurement); Service Manager (Housing, Welfare and Communities); Service Manager – Housing Assets and Capital Works Manager

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

59. DECLARATIONS OF INTEREST (INCLUDING WHIPPING DECLARATIONS)

Councillor Bernie Attridge declared a personal interest in Agenda Item 8 – Cost of Living and Welfare Reform as his daughter was in receipt of Discretionary Housing Payment.

Councillor Ted Palmer declared a personal interest as a Council Tenant.

60. MINUTES

The minutes of the meetings held on 15th November and 13th December, 2023 were submitted for approval.

13th December 2023

Following a query from Councillor Rosetta Dolphin, it was agreed that a copy of the outcome of the garage site review by ward be circulated to Members of the Committee within the next month.

The minutes of the meetings held on 15th November and 13th December, 2023 were approved as a correct record, as moved and seconded by Councillor David Evans and Councillor Dennis Hutchinson.

RESOLVED:

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

61. FORWARD WORK PROGRAMME & ACTION TRACKING

The Facilitator presented the current Forward Work Programme for consideration and advised on the following amendments which had been made since the last meeting:-

- The Local Housing Market Assessment report, which had been scheduled to be presented in February would now be presented at the March meeting; and
- The Budget 2024/25 report would now be presented to the Committee at the February meeting.

In relation to the action tracking document, shown at Appendix 2 of the report, the Facilitator reported that the letter to be sent to Welsh Government (WG) around funding pressures for homelessness had been approved by the Chair but was being reviewed following the recent WG budget announcement and would be sent prior to the next meeting.

The Facilitator also advised that she was chasing the financial information requested on Out of County Placements, which maybe included in the budget report due for consideration at the next meeting.

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

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.

62. WELSH HOUSING QUALITY STANDARDS (WHQS) 2023

The Service Manager – Housing Assets introduced a report to provide an update on the new Welsh Housing Quality Standards (WHQS 2 2023) and the Council's obligations relating to the delivery of the new standards.

The Council were successful in delivering the previous WHQS programme of works to all Council stock and were now in the maintenance phase of the programme, delivering further investment works to those components within properties where required. As a result of the new standards, the Council would be required to update its specifications, work briefs and programmes of work to comply with the new guidance.

The Service Manager outlined the main Standards set out for all social housing as follows:-

- Is in a good state of repair.
- Is safe and secure.
- Is affordable to heat and has minimal environmental impact.
- Has an up-to-date kitchen and utility area.
- Has an up to date bathroom;
- Is comfortable and promotes wellbeing.
- Has a suitable garden; and
- Has an attractive outside space.

The Service Manager highlighted the new themes of the WHQS 2 and the timeline for achievement of the standard, as outlined within the report.

Councillor Ted Palmer raised concern that he had not received a questionnaire as a Contract Holder and also asked if WHQS 2 would be an improvement on the works carried out as part of the WHQS. The Service Manager explained that the questionnaires he was referring to in his presentation referred to the original questionnaires sent to Contract Holders in 2014. Further questionnaires would be sent out as part of the consultation process for the WHQS 2. He also advised that the WHQS 2 would be an improvement above the standard of the WHQS, in particular community open space and access.

In response to a question from Councillor Geoff Collett around 'Net Zero', the Capital Works Manager explained the meaning around 'Net Zero' as part of the WHQS 2, outlining biodiversity as a driver towards net zero and reducing carbon emissions. He also explained that there was also a need to look at all green spaces and spaces which could be utilised to help promote wildlife.

Councillor Bernie Attridge commented on the potential to undertake regeneration schemes on some of the estates and asked whether consideration would be given to the benefits provided to areas where many of the Council properties had been purchased as part of the right to buy scheme. The Service Manager agreed that it would be easier to regenerate an area where all of the Council properties were still under the ownership of the Council and that the Council needed to be mindful of how Housing Revenue Account monies were spent. He advised that consultation would be held with Members and contract holders as the Council progressed with its investment plans.

In response to concerns raised by Councillor Pam Banks around damage caused at properties, the Service Manager advised that all contractors were briefed and asked to provide appropriate care to protect properties from unnecessary damage. The Cabinet Member for Housing and Regeneration asked Members to contact him if any incidents arose so that they could be dealt with in a timely manner.

The Chair asked if there was still allowance for acceptable fails. The Capital Works Manager advised that WG had changed the wording from 'acceptable fails' to 'conditional pass', but the meaning remained the same, so if a Contract Holder did not want any of the works carried out, subject to health and safety, this would be allowed.

The recommendation, as outlined within the report, was moved by Councillor Bernie Attridge and seconded by Councillor Ted Palmer.

RESOLVED:

That the Committee support the capital investment programme in the next phase of delivery as it moved towards complying with the new updated Welsh Housing Quality Standards and requirements.

63. CAR PARKING PROVISION – COUNCIL OWNED PROPERTIES

The Service Manager – Housing Assets introduced a report which focussed on the works which had been completed and continued to be delivered through the Council's Environmental Programme, which included the provision of car parking.

The Service Manager informed the Committee on how the schemes were assessed and discussed the scoring matrix of how they determined where works would be prioritised and completed. The car parking matrix was used to score all those that were feasible and could go ahead in line with the budget.

He reported that a number of Members had put in several requests for schemes, including projects that required permits to park. He added that several complexes had been identified which were being considered but added that they must also comply with Streetscene Policy. Engagement would be carried out with all Members as to which schemes could be moved forward.

The Deputy Leader of the Council and Cabinet Member for Streetscene and the Regional Transport Strategy and Cabinet Member for Housing and Regeneration both outlined the need to carefully consider the implementation of car parking permit schemes due to the current pressure on the Enforcement Team.

In response to comments made by Councillor Rosetta Dolphin around Member consultation, the Service Manager said that the majority of requests for parking schemes were made by Members and that Local Members would be consulted prior to a decision being made on a scheme.

In response to a question from Councillor Linda Thew around car parking schemes linking to the demolition of garage sites, the Service Manager explained that they do have a similar scheme in place for such sites which forms part of a separate programme. Such sites were considered for parking areas/new builds/wilding areas. He asked Councillor Thew to share information on sites she had identified.

Councillor David Evans commented on the need for more off road parking for residents but raised concern around parking permits and the fairness of how they would be allocated with it benefitting some and not others and that it could make neighbours compete for the space. He added that there would always be an inequality to those who had driveways and could park for free and those who don't have a driveway and were required to pay for a permit. For the reasons he outlined, he said that he was not in support a permit parking scheme.

The Service Manager advise that car parking permits would be for Council properties only, with sheltered housing accommodation currently under review. The scheme would not include private residents. The Cabinet Member for Housing and Regeneration commented on the challenges around providing adequate car parking spaces with families having multiple vehicles.

Councillor Kevin Rush asked for information on the average cost for providing a driveway. The Service Manager advised that the average cost was around £2,000-£3,000 per driveway. Budget dictated how many driveways could be completed within a year and he re-iterated that driveways were very costly to provide, which was why other options were considered.

The Chair asked if some of the proposed car parking schemes could be incorporated within the sheltered housing review. The Service Manager advised that some would be picked up as part of the Welsh Housing Quality Standards 2 programme.

Following questions around future schemes, it was agreed that information on the priority of schemes be shared with Members of the Committee.

Councillor Ted Palmer suggested that the recommendation as outlined within the report be amended to reflect that the Committee supported the feasibility of a car parking scheme in principle following consultation with Contract Holders and Local Members.

The Chair suggested that the recommendation outlined within the report be amended to read:-

- That the Committee support the proposed actions relating to the feasibility of a car parking permit scheme, following consultation with Contract Holders and Local Members.

The above recommendation was moved by Councillor Dennis Hutchinson and seconded by Councillor Kevin Rush.

RESOLVED:

That the Committee support the proposed actions relating to the feasibility of a car parking permit scheme, following consultation with Contract Holders and Local Members.

64. ALARM SERVICE CHARGES REVIEW

The Service Manager (Housing, Welfare and Communities) introduced a report which provided details of a proposal to increase the service charge to all sheltered residents who were currently using the alarm service and that the service charge would be applied to all sheltered properties at the point they were let in future.

The Service Manager reported that the Council provided a range of services to residents, the community and visitors for which it could apply a fee or charge and

generate income accordingly. Within the Council's housing stock (HRA) there were 2592 sheltered housing accommodation units and following a review of the warden service in 2009 this service was ceased, and the Community Based Accommodation Service (CBASS) was created. The service provided a tenure neutral service for any older person in Flintshire who may need housing related support.

In addition, the service provided a response service for alarm activations. For HRA residents this was a 24-hour service, operating an out of hours service from within the team for outside office hours (evenings, nights and weekends). The proposal outlined within the report was to apply the increased service charge to all sheltered residents who were currently using the alarm service. All new residents in sheltered schemes with an alarm would have the charge applied as per current process at the beginning of their new contract.

The Committee praised the alarm service which they said was an excellent service for contract holders in sheltered accommodation and was highly valued by the contract holders.

Councillor Ted Palmer raised concern around the service charge being applied to all sheltered properties at the point they were let in future given that some contract holders in sheltered accommodation were around the age of 55 and may not require the service. The Committee was reassured that contract holders would be made aware of the service charge ahead of agreeing a let of a sheltered accommodation in the future.

In response to a question around the increase being backdated, the Service Manager advised that the rise would be implemented from 1st April, 2024, therefore there would be no backdated costs added.

It was agreed that the comments and recommendation made by the Committee be feedback to Cabinet.

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

RESOLVED:

That the Committee support and endorses the proposal to achieve full cost recovery for the housing revenue account alarms service.

65. COST OF LIVING AND WELFARE REFORM

The Service Manager (Housing, Welfare and Communities) introduced a report to provide a combined operational update on the latest welfare response impacts, and the cost-of-living schemes to support residents.

The report provided an update on the impact that welfare reforms continued to have on Flintshire residents and the ongoing work to mitigate this, and support households affected. Vulnerable households were now also being impacted by the cost-of-living crisis and the report provided information around a range of measures

implemented to help those affected by the cost-of-living crisis and the support provided to residents to help mitigate these negative impacts.

The Service Manager provided a detailed update on the following areas outlined within the report:-

- Spare Room Subsidy
- Impact in Flintshire
- Benefit Cap
- Impact in Flintshire
- Energy Bills Support Scheme – Alternative Fund (EBSS-AF)
- Alternative Fuel Payment – Alternative Fund (AFP-AF)
- Universal Primary Free School Meals (UPFSM) and Eligibility Free School Meals (eFSM)
- School Essentials Grant (Uniform Grants)
- Welfare Support
- Discretionary Housing Payments (DHP's)
- Future Changes

Councillor Rosetta Dolphin commented on the difficulties around getting parents to sign up for the schemes and asked if there was any information that could be provided to parents to inform them if they applied for certain financial support that they could also apply for other financial support. The Service Manager advised that the Council would continue to work with schools to promote the UPFSM.

Following a request that the information contained within the report be circulated to all Members for information, it was suggested that an information flyer be produced and circulated to all Members of the Council.

Following further comments around encouraging parents to apply for UPFSM, it was suggested that a letter be sent to Welsh Government (WG) to request at a national level they encourage parents to continue to apply for Free School Meals.

The recommendations, as outlined within the report, including an additional recommendation that the Committee write to the WG to request that, at a national level, they encourage parents to continue to apply for Free School Meals, were moved by Councillor Ted Palmer and seconded by Councillor David Evans.

RESOLVED:

- (a) That the Committee support the ongoing work to manage the impacts that welfare reform has, and would continue to have, on some of the most vulnerable residents.
- (b) That the support measures implemented via Welsh Government to mitigate the cost-of-living crisis be noted; and
- (c) That the Committee write to Welsh Government to request that, at a national level, they encourage parents to continue to apply for Free School Meals.

66. HOUSING MANAGEMENT AND ANTI-SOCIAL BEHAVIOUR POLICY

The Service Manager (Housing, Welfare and Communities) introduced a report to provide an overview of the changes that had been made to the Housing Management Policy and the Anti-Social Behaviour Policy.

The Service Manager reported that the Renting Homes (Wales) Act 2016, which came into effect from the 1st December 2022 was the biggest change to housing law in Wales for decades. The new legislation had and would change the way all landlords in Wales rent their properties. The Renting Homes (Wales) Act 2016 aims to simplify the process of renting a home in Wales and to provide parties with more information about their rights and obligations. The Act was now partially in force, for the purpose of making regulations and issuing guidance.

In relation to the Housing Management Policy, a summary of the main changes were detailed within the report.

The Service Manager also reported that the Council was committed to tackling anti-social behaviour as it had a devastating impact on the lives of the Council's customers. The policy needed to reflect best practice and protect the rights of contract holders as well as minimising risk to the Council for not complying with appropriate legislation. The aim of the policy was to ensure that effective systems were adopted to prevent and minimise instances of anti-social behaviour and to resolve them as early as possible through timely and appropriate intervention.

Councillor Bernie Attridge requested that procedures for the storage of Scooters be included in the Housing Management Policy. The Senior Manager advised that the Housing Management Policy could not cover everything, as separate policies that dealt with things such as scooters and pets sat under the Housing Management Policy.

Concern was raised around the strength of the Anti-Social Behaviour Policy in dealing with instances of dog attacks. The Committee were advised that the Anti-Social Behaviour Policy had been developed in such a way that all aspects of Anti-Social Behaviour would be covered, and Members were reminded that such instances could fall into criminal charges. It was suggested that a copy of the Pet Policy be circulated to all Members of the Council so that they were clear on the obligations of the Contract Holders in this regard.

Councillor David Evans welcomed the inclusion of Estate Walkabouts within the Policy but questioned how the outcome of actions/issues raised were communicated. It was agreed that officers would pick this up as a procedural issue to improve communication.

It was agreed that the comments and recommendation made by the Committee be feedback to Cabinet.

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

RESOLVED:

That the Committee support the Housing Management and Anti-Social Behaviour policies.

67. 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 11.59 a.m.)

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Chair