

COMMUNITY & HOUSING OVERVIEW & SCRUTINY COMMITTEE
WEDNESDAY 6 MARCH 2024

Minutes of the meeting of the Community & Housing Overview & Scrutiny Committee of Flintshire County Council held as a hybrid meeting on Wednesday, 6 March 2024

PRESENT: Councillor Helen Brown (Chair)

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

SUBSTITUTIONS: Councillor Rob Davis (for Dale Selvester)

ALSO PRESENT: Councillors Allan Marshall and Billy Mullin 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); Chief Officer (Housing and Communities); Housing & Prevention Service Manager; Service Manager (Housing Assets) and Business Manager

IN ATTENDANCE: Community & Education Overview & Scrutiny Facilitator

76. DECLARATIONS OF INTEREST (INCLUDING WHIPPING DECLARATIONS)

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

77. 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:-

- 'Together we can' Community resilience and self-reliance report added to the Forward Work Programme for the 12th June meeting.

In relation to the actions outstanding from the previous meetings, the Facilitator reported that a letter requesting that, at a national level, Welsh Government (WG) encourage parents to continue to apply for Free School Meals had been sent to WG and that a copy of the response would be circulated once it had been received. All of the actions relating to the Common Housing Register (Single Access Route to Housing – SARTH) had been completed.

The Facilitator agreed to circulate a copy of the letter sent to WG to the Cabinet Member following the meeting.

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

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.

78. AUDIT WALES REPORT: HOMELESSNESS SERVICES – FLINTSHIRE COUNTY COUNCIL

The Chief Officer (Housing and Communities) introduced a report which outlined the process of the review by Audit Wales and shared the findings in their recommendations for the Council regarding the local approach to homelessness. The report also outlined the Council's response to those recommendations.

The Housing & Prevention Service Manager outlined the process of the Audit Wales review, which involved document reviews, interviews with key senior officers and Elected Members, and focus groups with front line staff directly involved in providing homelessness services. The overall findings of the review were that: the Council was delivering a high quality service, but this was unsustainable with the level of current funding.

The Housing & Prevention Service Manager outlined the three recommendations for the Council following the review of Homelessness Services in Flintshire, as outlined within the report. The Council's response to the Audit Wales report and the three recommendations was attached at Appendix 2 of the report.

The Cabinet Member for Housing and Regeneration commended the positive report received in a current challenging environment.

Councillor Rosetta Dolphin congratulated officers on a positive report. She commented on the lack of available properties to house people presented as homeless but said that the Homelessness Services Team were doing an excellent job given the restraints being faced.

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

RESOLVED:

- (a) That the Audit Wales report into Homelessness Services at Flintshire County Council be noted; and
- (b) That the suggested responses to the recommendations of Audit Wales be supported.

79. HOMELESSNESS AND ROUGH SLEEPER UPDATE REPORT AND HOMELESSNESS POLICY

The Chief Officer (Housing and Communities) introduced a report to provide an insight into homelessness and rough sleeping for 2023 which included the draft Homeless Accommodation Policy for review and approval.

The Housing & Prevention Service Manager provided a detailed update on the Statutory Homelessness Service. He outlined that Local Authorities duties were outlined in the Housing Wales Act 2014 Part 2, with regards to the prevention of homelessness and the management of homelessness when it occurred. Detailed in section 6 of the report was information about the duties within the legislation (Helping You Understand Housing Wales Act 2014).

In relation to funding, the Housing & Prevention Service Manager reported that whilst a significant amount of funding was provided for prevention activity through the Housing Support Grant (HSG), statutory services could not be funded through HSG. Therefore, the Council Fund was the main source of funding for the delivery of statutory homelessness services.

Demand for services continues to be high and the Housing & Prevention Service Manager referred to Appendix 1 of the report which outlined data relating to:-

- Homelessness Presentations;
- Out Of Hours Emergency Response;
- Homeless Accommodation; and
- Rough Sleeper Response

The Housing & Prevention Service Manager also provided a detailed update on the housing market challenges, as outlined within the report.

Councillor David Evans referred to the table outlined at appendix 1 showing the timeframe of homeless risk. In relation to people who present as 'homeless on the day,' he asked if those people were previously known to the Council, for example, had they contacted the Council previously and had now reached a housing position that couldn't continue. He also referred to the table outlined at appendix 1 showing the out of hours homeless emergency calls and asked whether any analysis of why some months were worse than others had been carried out.

The Housing & Prevention Service Manager outlined that the service was being proactive with data and working with the IT service to improve systems and reporting functions. Further analysis of the percentage of people presenting as 'homeless on the day' was being undertaken which would assist the service in the future. In relation to the data around out of hours homeless emergency calls, there was a perception that hot weather could drive tensions within homes, and it was known that domestic abuse reports often increase during periods of sport tournaments, where alcohol consumption increases. There was a need for further analysis of this data to understand better the fluctuations in numbers in different months.

The Cabinet Member commented on the data which was informative and had enabled comparative data with the rest of Wales. He agreed that legislative data from

WG was forward thinking and progressive and said that it was positive to see an uplift in the housing support grant but commented that in order to deliver such ambitious and wide ranging levels of support there was a need for adequate resources to be provided to the Council, as there continued to be pressure on the general budget.

Councillor Linda Thew thanked officers for the work they were undertaking which was difficult due to the lack of funding being provided by WG to meet all of the challenges. She asked that local Members be informed when properties were being purchased by the Council and people being moved into wards in order that they can respond to any queries from local residents. She also asked if the £1.6m acquired as part of the Transitional Accommodation Capital Funding Programme (TACP) was being used to purchase properties.

The Housing & Prevention Service Manager responded that where accommodation was being procured to meet the needs of the service or where development or intensive work was being carried out, local Members would be notified. He advised that the £1.6m was being invested in purchasing a number of properties, including exploring the purchase of properties from landlords who were looking to sell their properties in order to prevent tenants from becoming homeless. Some of the properties purchased would go into the Housing Revenue Account with others being used as temporary accommodation.

Appendix 2 – A Day in the life of the Homeless Team Case Study

The Housing & Prevention Service Manager presented the case study as shown at Appendix 2 of the report.

Appendix 3 – Homeless Accommodation Policy

The Housing & Prevention Service Manager presented the new Homeless Accommodation Policy as shown at Appendix 3 of the report.

In response to question from Councillor Ted Palmer around the eligibility for homeless accommodation, the Housing & Prevention Service Manager explained that the information presented was the categories of people, not the reason for their homelessness.

The recommendations as outlined within the report were moved by Councillor Dennis Hutchinson and seconded by Councillor Ted Palmer.

RESOLVED:

- (a) That the work being undertaken by the Housing and Prevention Service be noted and supported; and
- (b) That the draft Homeless Accommodation Policy be approved.

80. DYNAMIC RESOURCE SCHEDULING SYSTEM (DRS) UPDATE

The Service Manager (Housing Assets) introduced the report which provided an overview and update on the Dynamic Resource Scheduler (DRS) software, the changes made to the service during the pilot testing stages and the new measures implemented to improve overall customer satisfaction rates with regards to the service provided.

The Service Manager advised that the work outlined in the report was fully aligned and complementary to the work presently 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. The report also focused on what had been delivered to date and outlined the next phase of the DRS pilot.

Review meetings had taken place with the lead planner and the operatives currently working on the pilot. The Service Manager reported that this had provided an opportunity to receive feedback on areas that had worked well and areas that required further improvements.

Councillor David Evans welcomed the report and said that he would be interested to see how the next phase of the DRS progressed. He asked if this system was exclusively for the Housing portfolio or whether other portfolios could utilise the system. The Service Manager explained that the system had been focused on the repairs and maintenance service, with a view to bringing in inspection appointments to the system at a later date. He advised that the Streetscene portfolio had their own system but staff briefings/workshops to demonstrate the DRS system would be arranged for all portfolios across the Council.

In response to a question from Councillor Linda Thew around contract costs, the Senior Manager said that the contract costs were provided in a previous report to the Committee but that he would extract and share with the Committee this information following the meeting.

The Cabinet Member thanked the officers for the report and said that tenants knowing when operatives would be visiting their properties to carry out repairs and maintenance was a positive improvement to the service.

The Chair suggested that a demonstration of the DRS be given to the Committee once the system has gone fully live.

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

RESOLVED:

That the pilot stages and next phase of the DRS testing before the Council moves into a fully functional and fully live DRS environment be noted.

81. VOID MANAGEMENT

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 and reported that 33 properties had been completed ready for allocation. He also outlined the following, as presented in the briefing note:-

- The number of major voids
- Total overall number of void properties which had decreased to 227
- The performance of the current contractors
- Top reasons for terminations

In response to comments made by Councillor Dave Hughes on difficult to let properties, the Service Manager suggested amending the total number of voids information in future briefing notes to show how many of those were difficult to let.

In response to comments made by the Chair on the difficult to let properties being considered as part of the Sheltered Housing Review, the Service Manager agreed that difficult to let properties would go through the agreed matrix to consider if they could be improved/refurbished to be compliant with the Welsh Housing Quality Standard (WHQS). The Chief Officer (Housing & Assets) advised that low demand properties were being prioritised as part of the Sheltered Housing Review and that a progress report on the review would be presented to the Committee at a future meeting.

Councillor David Evans said that if properties were in low demand and required minor improvement works, shouldn't the Council be getting on with carrying out the works as soon as possible so that the properties could be allocated. The Chief Officer said that the majority of low demand properties were sheltered accommodation. One of the options to be considered was the re-designation of the properties but in order to do this it required an approval process to be undertaken.

Councillor Evans said that he had reviewed the last 12 months of data, and taking into consideration the hard to let properties, the number of void properties had only reduced by 32 over the last 12 months. He raised concerns that at the current rate, it would take around 7 years to reduce the void property backlog and asked what was being done to reduce this number quicker and what additional resources were required to drastically reduce this number. The Service Manager commented on the need to have terminated arrangements with one of the contractors and the possibility of bringing on board another contractor, but outlined the need to ensure that there was adequate staff in place as there were only a number of people who could manage and inspect works being carried out. He agreed that the number of void properties was high but anticipated that the number of properties would reduce to under 200 by the summer and reported that spend was currently between £12,000 and £15,000 per property to make them complaint before being let.

In response to further concerns raised by Councillor Evans, the Chief Officer (Housing and Communities) advised that contractors were robustly monitored and that it was possible to add additional contractors from the framework when feasible to do so. There was a commitment to bring back into use 40/50 void properties per month and

there were currently 120 properties being worked on. It was hoped that there would be a significant de-crease by the month of June.

In response to a question from Councillor Ted Palmer around the number of properties being worked on, the Service Manager explained that 90 properties had been allocated to contractors with 30 allocated to the Council's Direct Labour Organisation (DLO). He commented that the figures presented to the Committee did not reflect the amount of time spent at a property and the need to prioritise properties to be available to the Homeless Team.

The Cabinet Member commented on the number of properties being worked on, which he said was unprecedented in scale and said that he was confident that Members would see the backlog reduce.

In response to comments made by Councillor Geoff Collett on the management of contractors, the Service Manager advised that the contractors had been brought on through the framework and were getting used to the Council's specifications and standard of work. He said that the standard of work had been very high but if the Council felt that targets were not being met, there were options to explore the use of other contractors from the framework.

RESOLVED:

That the update be noted.

82. 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 11.49 am)

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Chair