

HOUSING OVERVIEW & SCRUTINY COMMITTEE

27 JUNE 2012

Minutes of the meeting of the Housing Overview & Scrutiny Committee of Flintshire County Council held at Delyn Committee Room, County Hall, Mold CH7 6NA on Wednesday, 27 June 2012

PRESENT: Councillor Ron Hampson (Chairman)

Councillors Amanda Bragg, Peter Curtis, Ron Davies, Glenys Diskin, Jim Falshaw, Alison Halford, George Hardcastle, Ray Hughes, Brian Lloyd, Mike Reece, Gareth Roberts and Sharon Williams

SUBSTITUTES: Councillors Ian Dunbar (for David Cox) and Arnold Woolley (for Rosetta Dolphin)

ALSO PRESENT: Members of the Environment Overview & Scrutiny and Planning & Development Control Committees were invited and the following attended the meeting:- Councillors Haydn Bateman, Christine Jones, Richard Lloyd, Paul Shotton, Carolyn Thomas and David Wisinger

CONTRIBUTORS: The Leader of the Council, Deputy Leader, Cabinet Member for Housing, Director of Community Services, Head of Housing Services, Head of Planning, Housing Renewal Manager, Housing Strategy Manager, Asset and Property Maintenance Manager and Team Manager Advice & Homeless Services

IN ATTENDANCE: Environment & Housing Overview & Scrutiny Facilitator and Committee Officer

9. DECLARATIONS OF INTEREST (INCLUDING WHIPPING DECLARATIONS)

No declarations of interest were made.

10. MINUTES

The minutes of the meeting of the Committee held on 30 May 2012 had been circulated to Members with the agenda.

Matters Arising

Councillor G. Hardcastle said that Councillor G.H. Bateman had substituted for him and not for Councillor R. Hughes as was indicated in the minutes.

RESOLVED:

That subject to the foregoing, the minutes be approved as a correct record and signed by the Chairman.

11. **WELSH GOVERNMENT WHITE PAPER (HOMES FOR WALES - BETTER LIVES AND COMMUNITIES)**

The Head of Housing Services and the Head of Planning provided a presentation on the Welsh Government White Paper (Homes for Wales – Better Lives and Communities). The main features of the presentation were as follows:

- Main Aims
- Increasing the supply of new homes
- Factors to consider
- Empty Homes
- Improving the quality of existing LA homes
- Improving the Private Sector Rented Sector
- Factors to Consider
- Tackling Homelessness
- Other actions and proposals – not law
- Other planned developments
- Links to other policy areas
- What are we doing already?
- Timetable

Councillor A.M. Halford thanked the officers for the presentation and said that there was a clear need for Planning and Housing Teams to work together which she felt should be encouraged. She highlighted a problem where the private rented sector were not able to find out the background of tenants because of the Data Protection Act and asked whether anything could be done to identify those who had damaged previous properties that they had been tenants of. The Head of Housing Services said that it was hoped, for the more challenging tenants, that a support mechanism would be put in place to ensure that they complied with the terms of their tenancy agreement. The Housing Renewal Manager commented on a voluntary tenancy accreditation scheme which could be considered; this was a similar scheme to the one in place for landlords.

In response to comments made on the Housing Revenue Account (HRA) subsidy system, the Head of Housing Services said that once an outcome had been agreed between Welsh Government and Westminster Government settlement it would be discussed with the Local Authority on how the payments would be distributed in Wales. She said that Councils would not be significantly better off initially as authorities would be required to take on some debt but she confirmed that additional resources could be used to invest in housing stock for the future.

On the issue of payment of Council Tax for empty properties, Councillor J. Falshaw suggested that extra consideration should be given to families where bereavement was the reason for the empty property. He also felt that mortgage lenders and local authorities should liaise more closely to avoid repossessions where difficulties with mortgage payments were being experienced. He said that it was important to understand why properties were empty and that owners should be encouraged to bring properties back into use. The Cabinet Member for Housing said that during January to March 2012, four residents who had attended mortgage hearings had not been evicted from their properties following

negotiation. On the issue of mortgage payments, the Team Manager Advice & Homeless Services advised that some mortgage lenders did provide notification where problems were being experienced and the Authority would then contact the mortgagee. It was found that those who used the service were able to resolve the issues which had been raised and were not evicted from their property.

On the issue of empty homes, the Housing Renewal Manager said that the aim was to have a strategic joined up approach and he said that a specific officer was in post to find the best solution for the property owner.

Councillor I. Dunbar commented on the changes to benefits and felt that it would result in increases in homelessness; he asked what was in place to protect those affected. The Head of Housing Services explained that the proposed changes meant that where properties were under-occupied by one bedroom or more, a reduced benefit payment would be made. Work was ongoing with colleagues in the Housing Benefit team to draw up a list of those affected to identify how they could be helped. It would be a significant challenge for the local authority as there would be a mis-match between the number affected and the number of smaller properties available. She added that in the private rental sector, changes were already underway and tenants aged under 35 only received an amount of benefit equivalent to that for a bedsit. The Team Manager Advice & Homeless Services said that the average loss for a tenant in a one bedroomed property was £10 per week which increased to £19 for a two bed property. Councillor Dunbar queried what would be the alternative for people who could not pay and the Chairman responded that there had been situations in the past where the Council had been faced with a large bill for bed and breakfast accommodation. He felt that these changes would result in a similar situation and said that it was important that extra staff were recruited in the Welfare Rights Section.

The Head of Housing Services said that a number of different schemes were being piloted to identify measures to prevent people losing their homes.

Councillor P. Curtis commented on properties which could be difficult to sell through no fault of their owner which could be charged higher Council Tax rates if they were unsold after more than 12 months. He raised concern at the suggestion to extend the “threatened with homelessness” definition from 28 to 56 days.

Councillor C.A. Thomas said that there should be a strong evidence of need when considering sites for property development and that attention be paid to property type. She felt that there was insufficient discussion at pre-planning stage and that there was a low supply of one bedroom accommodation coming forward. She referred to page 6 of the White Paper and queried what Community Land Trusts meant. On the issue of properties which were empty for more than 12 months, she suggested talking to estate agents and that discussions be undertaken on the possibility of renting the property out. On page 21 it was reported that the typical age for a first time buyer was 29 with the average income being between £32,000 to £34,000; she felt that this was not correct for Flintshire and asked that representation be made to Welsh Government (WG) to advise them of statistics for age and income for the area.

In response to comments on working with estate agents, the Head of Housing Services said that one option was for the authority to consider establishing a Social Letting Agency. She advised that Community Land Trusts were schemes where houses were built on community owned land. She also confirmed that information on average income and ages for Flintshire would be provided to WG.

The Leader of the Councillor said that the document was an exciting and radical approach and the change of focus should be welcomed. He said that the co-operative approach and pioneer schemes operating in Europe would be an exciting opportunity for Flintshire. He said that the common denominator was private land and that the opportunity to identify land as part of the Local Development Plan (LDP) provision was critical. He referred Members to paragraph 4.42 of the White Paper and said that the HRA Subsidy system was an opportunity for local authorities.

Councillor H.G. Roberts expressed disappointment at the content of the White Paper. He highlighted paragraph 4.69 and the proposal to use enforcement measures to bring properties back into use and commented on two properties in his ward where because of issues with the owners, the properties on either side could not be let. He also raised concern at the statement in the White Paper that there would be no homelessness by 2019.

In response to a question from Councillor Halford on paragraph 4.70 and the ability to charge more council tax on properties which had been empty for more than 12 months, the Director of Community Services said that the Authority was not currently permitted to do so.

In conclusion, the Head of Housing Services asked that Members forward any comments or views to either herself or the Head of Planning by Friday, 13 July 2012.

RESOLVED:

- (a) That the comments provided by Members are considered when responding to the Welsh Government consultation; and
- (b) That any additional comments or views be forwarded by Members to the Head of Housing Services or Head of Planning by Friday 13 July 2012.

12. DELIVERING PRIVATE SECTOR HOUSING RENEWAL

The Director of Community Services introduced the report to seek the support of Housing Overview & Scrutiny Committee for a revised Private Sector Housing Renewal & Improvement Policy including the proposal to introduce equity loans and also repayment loans at an interest rate of 4% for the first year.

He detailed the background to the report and explained that the current policy had been implemented on 1 April 2010. The format of the new policy had been substantially altered to make it easier to read and understand and also to minimise duplication which existed within the previous policy. The existing policy

had moved the Council from providing traditional housing grants, to a system of interest free loans for all assistance, with the exception of Disabled Facilities Grant which remained mandatory; paragraph 2.04 detailed the number of loans which had been granted and the value of those loans. Approval was given to tender for a suitably qualified organisation to manage a portfolio of interest bearing and equity loans last year. The successful organisation which won the tender was Street UK Ltd. A Task and Finish Group was formed and a series of meetings were held and the valuable contributions from the group contributed to the formation of this draft Policy.

The Director detailed the four themes which the policy centred around and he explained that the review of the existing policy identified that there were gaps in provision which existed and these were detailed in the report. Discussions had been held with Street UK Ltd and they had recommended that interest rates for the repayment loans be set at 4%. On the issue of Empty Homes Support, the Director explained that Welsh Government had committed £10m to an empty homes recyclable loan fund. The fund would provide interest free loans to property owners who wished to renovate an empty property for the purpose of rent or sale; £2.4m had been allocated to the North Wales authorities.

Councillor A.M. Halford commented on the work which had been undertaken but said that she did not feel that the Policy was easier to read and understand. She highlighted page 23 in particular where it appeared that the wording had been duplicated and commented on the final sentence at the bottom of the page where it was reported that the loan had been suspended. In response the Housing Renewal Manager said that he had felt that a table form for the wording was more effective and that summary leaflets were to be produced for each category in addition to the policy document. He confirmed that the Council's empty homes loan was suspended until such time as the additional resources from the WG houses into homes initiative were spent. A failure to spend this money could result in Flintshire losing out. However, the suspended loan had to be included within the Policy document to prevent the need to return to Cabinet at a later date to reintroduce that particular loan.

Following questions from Councillor G. Hardcastle on Street UK and Independent Financial Advisors, the Housing Renewal Manager said that 57 English authorities used Street UK Ltd and with the inclusion of Flintshire, Denbighshire and Gwynedd Councils, this brought the total up to 60. He added that on the issue of Independent Financial Advisors, there was an initial cost for residents but experience had shown that there had only been a 30% take up of this facility. A loan administrator who operated in Wales had not bid for the contract.

RESOLVED:

The Housing Overview & Scrutiny Committee support the revised Private Sector Housing Renewal & Improvement Policy, including the proposal to introduce equity loans and repayment loans at an interest rate of 4% for the first year.

13. QUARTER 4 AND YEAR END SERVICE PERFORMANCE REPORTS

The Head of Housing Services introduced a report for Committee to note and consider the 2011/12 Quarter 4 (January to March 2012)/Year End service performance reports, note the draft year end position of the Strategic Assessment of Risks and Challenges (SARC) and note the progress made against the Improvement Targets contained within the performance reports.

The Head of Housing Services gave a short presentation on the performance, outlining work which had been undertaken to improve performance and areas where improvement was needed, as outlined within the report.

Councillor A.M. Halford congratulated the Director of Community Services, the Head of Housing Services and their teams for the document. She highlighted page 81 and raised concern that the development of a Gypsy Traveller Strategy for Flintshire had been delayed. She also explained that the previous Chairman of Audit Committee had indicated that the red/amber/green status did not reflect whether the data provided was improving or worsening. This was highlighted on page 67 which showed the data for non-urgent repairs as 'red' even though there had been an improvement in the average days taken to carry out the non-urgent repairs. The Head of Housing Services welcomed the comments made on the red/amber/green designation. The Housing Strategy Manager said that the needs assessment had been completed and that the new Gypsy Traveller strategy had been rescheduled for delivery in September 2012.

In response to a series of questions from Councillor G. Hardcastle, the Head of Housing Services said that three teams were undertaking agile working and these included the Asset Management Team, Housing Renewal Team and the Housing Strategy Team. Anti-Social Behaviour (ASB) was to be discussed at the Forward Work Programme workshop but she added that the aim was to have additional resources for the ASB service to fulfil the commitment to tenants. Councillor Hardcastle had also felt that the outcomes for current tenant rent arrears (page 59) and non-urgent repairs (page 67) should be amber and not red; the Head of Housing Service agreed with this. Councillor P. Curtis felt that it was important to leave the status as red where improvement had been made but not sufficiently to warrant changing the status to amber; he felt that this applied to sickness levels which he highlighted as a concern.

Councillor A. Bragg queried how well the Welfare Rights service was publicised. In response the Team Manager Advice & Homeless Services said that it was advertised widely but that the areas that were deemed to be the highest priority were targeted. The Director of Community Services said that considerations were being given as to whether an 'invest to save' bid could be submitted to expand the team.

RESOLVED:

That the comments/observations of the Committee are fed back to the Corporate Resources Overview & Scrutiny Committee who are responsible for the overview and monitoring of improvement targets.

14. FORWARD WORK PROGRAMME

The Environment & Housing Overview & Scrutiny Facilitator introduced the report to consider the Forward Work Programme for the Committee.

The Facilitator reminded the Committee of the Forward Work Programme Planning workshop scheduled for Monday, 2 July 2012. A workshop on Common Housing Register had also been arranged for 25 July 2012.

RESOLVED:

That the report be noted.

15. DURATION OF MEETING

The meeting commenced at 10.00am and ended at 12 noon.

16. MEMBERS OF THE PUBLIC AND PRESS IN ATTENDANCE

There was one member of the press in attendance.

.....

Chairman