

HOUSING OVERVIEW & SCRUTINY COMMITTEE

31 OCTOBER 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, 31 October 2012

PRESENT: Councillor Ron Hampson (Chairman)

Councillors: Peter Curtis, Glenys Diskin, Rosetta Dolphin, Jim Falshaw, Alison Halford, George Hardcastle (Vice-Chairman), Brian Lloyd, Mike Reece, Gareth Roberts and Sharon Williams

APOLOGIES: Councillors Amanda Bragg and Ray Hughes

ALSO PRESENT: Councillor Haydn Bateman

CONTRIBUTORS: Cabinet Member for Housing, Director of Community Services, Head of Housing, Neighbourhood Housing Manager (South), Interim Asset Manager and Supporting People Manager

IN ATTENDANCE: Member Engagement Manager and Committee Officer

25. DECLARATIONS OF INTEREST (INCLUDING WHIPPING DECLARATIONS)

No declarations of interest were made.

26. MINUTES

The minutes of the meeting held on 26 September 2012 had been circulated with the agenda.

Accuracy

On the Forward Work Programme, Councillor A.M. Halford commented that she had been aware of Brett Sadler's departure from the Council and asked that the minute be amended to reflect this.

Matters Arising

Secure/Introductory Tenancy Agreement - The Head of Housing explained that a legal condition could not be included in tenancy agreements for tenants to purchase contents insurance, however officers would be proactive in encouraging as many new tenants as possible to sign up to the scheme.

Local Housing Strategy - In response to a query raised by Councillor Halford on comments made by the Principal Planner on the identification of sites, the Head of Housing said that a current review of garage sites may identify land for other uses in addition to land previously identified. She added that an item on adopted/un-adopted land would be considered by the Committee in April 2013. Councillor Halford suggested that as this was a Housing/Planning issue, the

Director of Community Services liaise with the Planning section. The Director agreed to do this.

Councillor P.J. Curtis explained that his comments regarding the housing waiting list had been due to reports that some people had been informed that tenants in the Flint maisonettes were being deemed a priority and that the Head of Housing was looking into this. The Head of Housing referred to a report to the Deputy Leader which had indicated that this was untrue and said that she would seek permission on circulating this to the Committee.

Quarter 2 Service Performance Reports - Councillor R. Dolphin sought an update on comments made on the planned maintenance of fences. The Cabinet Member for Housing said that discussions on such maintenance work was ongoing and that although no work for 'Planned - Other' was to go ahead for the current year, any included for future years would be minimal. She added that any fencing issues causing a safety breach would be resolved via the health and safety budget. Councillor Dolphin asked whether such work in next year's budget would be rolled forward in the programme to help alleviate the backlog. The Head of Housing said this was a possibility although only a limited budget was available as Members had previously agreed to prioritise heating, kitchen and bathroom upgrades. If additional funding could not be identified, then Members would need to make choices on any additional programme lines against available budget. The views of the Committee would be sought on proposals for the 2013/14 capital budget in January 2013.

On house sharing and the re-designation of unsuitable sheltered housing, Councillor Curtis felt that there should be involvement from the Committee in forming proposals and suggested that a sub-group be set up to do this. The Head of Housing said that proposals discussed with the Cabinet Member would be brought to the Committee and that the points raised by the Sheltered Housing Working Group had been taken into account. Councillor Curtis felt that Members' knowledge of their own wards was vital and the Head of Housing replied that any proposals for re-designating properties would include consultation with local Members.

RESOLVED:

- (a) That, subject to the aforementioned amendment, the minutes be approved as a correct record and signed by the Chairman;
- (b) That the Director of Community Services liaise with the Planning Manager and Head of Planning in regard to the need to identify land for development; and
- (c) That the Head of Housing seek permission to circulate the report on the housing waiting list to the Committee.

27. UPDATE ON THE REPAIRS AND MAINTENANCE SERVICE

The Head of Housing introduced the report to update Members on progress with repairs and maintenance service performance improvements. The Interim Asset Manager outlined key workstreams such as the introduction of the

new Contact Centre system in the Housing Asset Management section by December 2012, the developments in the new Stores service set up in April 2012 and consultation on the introduction of extended service hours to help improve services. Members welcomed the report and raised a number of queries.

Councillor A.M. Halford asked questions on Single Status, pay rates for trades staff and training requirements. The Head of Housing explained that Job Evaluation Questionnaires (JEQs) for the Asset Management back office staff were shortly due to be assessed. She said that following benchmarking with other Authorities, a multi-skilling development programme had been agreed to ensure that a robust process was put in place. On training, there were already a number of multi-skilled trades staff who were keen to and were undertaking tasks in alternative trades, and officers were working with Trade Unions to develop a four-tiered approach to staff development: apprentices, those qualified in a single trade, those who were also able to carry out minor tasks in an alternative trade and multi-skilled tradesmen who were able to undertake a complete job in a range of trades.

Following a further query, it was confirmed that the training would apply to the in-house team who were Flintshire employees, and not to contractors. It was also clarified that there would be 1600 training days over a 2½ year period. The Interim Asset Manager said it was important to note that more multi-skilled trades staff would enable repairs to be completed the first time around and improve the service to tenants.

Responding to comments made by Councillor R. Dolphin, the Head of Housing confirmed that one day per 16 week period would be allocated for study leave and that training small numbers of trades staff over a 16 week period would not have a negative impact on services. It was hoped that newly trained staff would remain with the Council and that increased job satisfaction would encourage this. Following a further question, the Head of Housing said that the Committee had previously received detailed information on the introduction of extended service hours and that this could be re-circulated if Members wished. She commented that these proposals had generated positive involvement from Trade Unions and a willingness to move forward.

In response to questions from Councillor M.A. Reece, it was acknowledged that there had been problems with some vehicles starting in the morning and that an ongoing review of fleet vehicle provision had prevented the procurement of new vehicles, however these issues had been raised with the Head of Streetscene who was leading on the review and resolving additional issues in his Fleet team. The Head of Housing spoke of the necessity for utilising agency workers on occasions where workload dictated, for example when permanent trade staff had been required to work on the in-house Disabled Facilities Grant pilot. She added that the long term aim was for internal teams to carry out more capital work as revenue backlogs were addressed.

Councillor P.J. Curtis agreed with the concept of multi-skilled workers, with the exception of gas and electrical technicians who should be trained to a specific standard in their areas. He also said that existing trades staff who did not qualify as multi-skilled should be allowed to continue in their own areas and not be penalised. The Head of Housing reassured Members on both points but said that

new apprentices would be made aware of the expectation for their skills to develop over time. The Interim Asset Manager agreed to seek a response from the Fleet Manager as to why operatives were not allowed to jump start Council owned vans.

In response to a query by Councillor J.E. Falshaw on the checking of van stocks, the Interim Asset Manager spoke of work to enable the back office IT system to keep a record of stock used.

Councillor Halford referred to ongoing problems with the mobile devices provided by Capita, which had been discussed at the previous meeting. The Head of Housing said that a meeting had been held with Capita. She said that options such as using a different software version and separating data from voice were being explored prior to meeting again with Capita. She gave assurance that officers were committed to resolving the problem as soon as possible, commenting that another Council using the same device had experienced similar problems. Responding to concerns raised by Councillor Halford, it was explained that Capita had provided the entire housing management computer system for Flintshire and were used by many Councils and Housing Associations with differing devices. Due to the ongoing problems experienced, Councillor Halford requested that a standard item be included on the Committee's Forward Work Programme and this was agreed.

RESOLVED:

- (a) That the report be noted;
- (b) That the Interim Asset Manager seek a response from the Fleet Manager on why operatives were forbidden to jump start Council vehicles; and
- (c) That a standard item on the mobile PDA devices be included on the Committee's Forward Work Programme.

28. ESTATE MANAGEMENT SERVICES

The Neighbourhood Housing Manager (South) presented an update report on proposals to develop Estate Management services and sought views from Members on a number of areas.

Assisted Garden Service

Views were sought on the consideration of low level intervention by gardeners in carrying out a 'good neighbour' check at tenants' properties whilst undertaking work and whether this option or high level intervention should be considered as part of the tender process. Members were also asked to consider options for the collection of grass cuttings.

Councillor P.J. Curtis agreed with the need for low level intervention but said that clarity would be required on the level of responsibility included in the job description of gardeners. The Head of Housing confirmed that this would be included in the contract of employment and that employees would only need to be as observant as a member of the public in reporting any concerns.

Councillor A.M. Halford thanked officers for the report but expressed concern that garden operatives may be expected to carry out tasks conflicting with that of trained officers in Social Services. The Director of Community Services explained that low level intervention would be an expectation for the operative to show a level of awareness of a good neighbour in which no special skills would be required. On the question of cost, he added that this would depend on which level of intervention that Members supported and that a higher level would require further development.

Councillor R. Dolphin also agreed with the proposal for low level intervention but said that consideration of a higher level would need costings provided. On grass cutting, she suggested that brown bins be utilised and that tenants should be asked if they required this service as opposed to blanket provision, with a small nominal fee applied. On the qualifying criteria, she felt that the proposed disqualification of 'able bodied relatives living in Flintshire' should be removed as some residents in need of the service may not be in contact with their local relatives.

On the proposal to amend the age criteria to tenants over the age of 65, Councillor H.G. Roberts suggested that this could be further extended to those aged 70+ as many may be able to carry out tasks.

Following a comment made by Councillor J.E. Falshaw on the benefits of mulching, it was explained that mulching mowers were not currently used but that this could be a future consideration. The Chairman commented on a number of complaints made about grass cutting in sheltered accommodation.

Environmental Visual Audits (EVAs)

The Neighbourhood Housing Manager (South) provided background to EVAs and thanked the Cabinet Member for Housing for championing these. She sought support from Members for EVAs in working with the Housing team, North Wales Police and Neighbourhood Watch to help identify local issues.

Councillor Dolphin commented that the details of forthcoming EVAs did not include any in the Holywell area and asked what could be done in relation to tenants who did not maintain their gardens. Councillor G.D. Diskin referred to a recent EVA in her ward and said that letters sent out had helped encourage tenants to attend to their gardens. The Neighbourhood Housing Manager (South) said that where tenants repeatedly failed to maintain their gardens, contractors had been utilised to tidy up and the tenant recharged. She added that Members may wish to consider more frequent use of this. The Cabinet Member for Housing added that this had been incorporated in the tenants' contracts. Councillor H.G. Roberts asked if this could be legally enforced if the tenant refused to pay to which officers replied that the Corporate Debt Policy would be used.

Garage Review

The Neighbourhood Housing Manager (South) reported on a review of private garages built on Council owned plots and asked Members to consider future use of any within their wards.

In relation to queries raised by Councillor A.M. Halford, the Neighbourhood Housing Manager (South) said that Housing officers were in discussion with the Legal section on giving notice to tenants. On clarity of information in the report, she spoke of the difficulty in collating data from different sources and offered to show Members the locations of private garage plots within their wards if requested.

Allotments (Housing Land)

Councillor Dolphin spoke in support of the increase in rent of the Dobshell allotment in line with others and also felt that the current standard ground rent of plots managed by Leisure Services could be increased.

Councillor Halford agreed, commenting that it was difficult to acquire sites for allotments and that they could be a valuable asset. The Neighbourhood Housing Manager (South) said that discussion was needed with Leisure Services on whether the ground rent amount was sufficient to cover maintenance. Councillor Halford referred to the renting out of garages. The Head of Housing said that this report was focussing on private garages built on Council owned land and that a review of Council owned garages was ongoing.

Councillor Falshaw remarked that some Council owned garages may be being used for storage. The Neighbourhood Housing Manager (South) said that this may be the case as some were so old, they may not be capable of accommodating modern larger vehicles.

Estate Caretaker Review

Members of the Committee commented on the excellent job undertaken by the Estates Caretakers.

RESOLVED:

- (a) Assisted Garden Service - that the Committee support low level intervention by garden operatives and that any proposals for high level intervention would require further information including costings;
- (b) Assisted Garden Service - that the Committee support the collection of grass cuttings at a small charge, with the use of brown bins to minimise cost;
- (c) That the Committee support in principle charging for the Garden Service;
- (d) Environmental Visual Audits - that Members support the EVAs in helping to identify local issues;

- (e) Garage Review - that Members of the Committee consider the future use of private garages on Council owned plots within their wards;
- (f) Allotments (Housing land) - that the Committee support the transfer of management of the Dobshill site to Leisure Services, the increase in rent for allotments situated on Housing land, the introduction of standardised rental agreements and a Council Tenant Preference Group for allotments situated on Housing Service owned land;
- (g) Maintenance of Housing Land (Street Scene) - that the Committee support in principle the early proposals to transfer the management of HRA land maintenance to Street Scene with a view to improving the customer experience; and
- (h) Estate Caretaker Review - that the considerations be noted.

29. SARTH

The Director of Community Services provided an update on the development of a Single Access Route To Housing (SARTH) across the North East Wales sub-region and sought Members' views on progressing to the next stages of the project following the workshop held in July 2012 on a Joint Register, Joint Policy and Joint Advice and Options.

The Supporting People Manager said it was important to note that Flintshire had not yet agreed to sign up to the scheme and that the aim of the report was to seek support from the Committee on proceeding to the next stages of the project.

In response to questions by Councillor A.M. Halford, the Supporting People Manager said that there would not be any additional costs other than those outlined and that savings would be made as a result of the initiative. She added that there would be no long-term development costs and that the one-off initial development cost of £394,000 would need to be made as part of the partnership. It had been estimated that Flintshire would need to pay around £23,000 for 2013/14.

RESOLVED:

- (a) That the development of the project to date and the responses to questions from the Member Workshop be noted; and
- (b) That the Committee support the continuation with the SARTH project and contribution to development costs, subject to budget approval.

30. FORWARD WORK PROGRAMME

The Member Engagement Manager introduced the report which gave Members the opportunity to consider and update the Committee's Forward Work Programme.

The Head of Housing requested that the HRA Subsidy report due to be received at the December 2012 meeting be deferred to a later meeting at a stage when further clarity had been given by the Welsh Government. She suggested that if it was possible to bring a different report in its place, this could be arranged in consultation with the Chair and Member Engagement Manager. This was agreed by the Committee. Councillor G. Hardcastle suggested that the Homelessness and Welfare Reform proposals scheduled for January 2013 be brought forward to the December 2012 meeting. The Head of Housing would endeavour to bring the report to the December 2012 meeting and if not, it would be brought in January 2012. She also encouraged Members to attend the Welfare Reform workshop scheduled for 12 November 2012.

In response to discussion on Capita and mobile devices earlier in the meeting, the Committee agreed to receive these reports on a quarterly basis.

The Member Engagement Manager drew Members' attention to the Committee's budget meeting scheduled for 22 January 2013 which had been confirmed in writing. In response to a query on frequency of meetings, he advised that the Committee met twice per ten week cycle.

RESOLVED:

That the draft Forward Work Programme be agreed with the following changes:

- The HRA Subsidy report to be deferred from the December 2012 meeting to a later date and any replacement report such as the Homelessness and Welfare Reform proposals to be brought in consultation with the Chair and Member Engagement Manager; and
- That quarterly reports on Capita be received by the Committee.

31. MEMBERS OF THE PUBLIC AND PRESS IN ATTENDANCE

There was one member of the press in attendance.

(The meeting started at 10.00 am and ended at 12.00 pm)

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Chairman