

HOUSING OVERVIEW & SCRUTINY COMMITTEE
5 DECEMBER 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, 5 December 2012

PRESENT: Councillor Ron Hampson (Chairman)

Councillors: Amanda Bragg, Peter Curtis, Rosetta Dolphin, Jim Falshaw, Alison Halford, George Hardcastle, Ray Hughes, Brian Lloyd, Mike Reece and Gareth Roberts

APOLOGIES: Councillors: David Cox, Ron Davies and Sharon Williams

ALSO PRESENT: Councillors: Haydn Bateman, Veronica Gay and Patrick Heesom

CONTRIBUTORS: Deputy Leader and Cabinet Member for Environment (for minute number 34), Cabinet Member for Housing, Director of Community Services, Head of Housing, Housing Strategy Manager, Neighbourhood Housing Manager (North), Interim Asset Manager and Community Support Services Manager

IN ATTENDANCE: Member Engagement Manager and Committee Officer

32. DECLARATIONS OF INTEREST (INCLUDING WHIPPING DECLARATIONS)

No declarations of interest were made.

33. MINUTES

The minutes of the meeting held on 31 October 2012 had been circulated with the agenda.

RESOLVED:

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

34. GYPSY/TRAVELLERS NEEDS ASSESSMENT

The Head of Housing introduced the report to consider the Gypsy-Traveller Needs Assessment that would inform the development of a Gypsy-Traveller Strategy. The Housing Strategy Manager detailed background including the Council's involvement in the North West Wales Gypsy Traveller Accommodation Assessment (GTAA), the findings of which were attached to the report. Councillor P.J. Curtis pointed out that the privately owned site at Dollar Park was located in Holywell and not Greenfield as stated in the report.

The assessment of sites across North Wales indicated that Flintshire was the most significant provider, which raised concerns amongst Members at the lack of progress made by the other Councils in the area. The Housing Strategy

Manager commented on the expectation by the Welsh Government (WG) for all Councils to make provision where the need was identified. The Deputy Leader and Cabinet Member for Environment said that he would endeavour to persuade other Councils in North Wales to be as proactive as Flintshire in the provision of sites and to share the responsibility, in line with WG guidance.

Councillor A.M. Halford enquired as to the latest position on the Council owned Riverside site in Queensferry. The Housing Strategy Manager explained that a flood risk assessment had been commissioned by the Environment Directorate and that if a positive conclusion was reached, a planning application would be submitted for the extension to the site. Access to the site was the subject of ongoing negotiations and a small amount of WG funding would be available. The Deputy Leader and Cabinet Member for Environment said he was hopeful that the site would be extended with provision for a transit section.

RESOLVED:

- (a) That the findings of the North West Wales Gypsy-Traveller Accommodation Assessment (GTNA) be noted; and
- (b) That the approach to develop a dedicated Gypsy-Traveller Strategy for Flintshire be endorsed.

35. QUARTER 2 SERVICE PERFORMANCE REPORTS

The Head of Housing Services introduced a report for the Committee to note and consider the 2012/13 Quarter 2 (July to September 2012) service performance reports, note the position of the Strategic Assessment of Risks and Challenges (SARC) and progress made against the Improvement Targets contained within the performance reports.

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

People & Customer Indicators

Councillor G. Hardcastle asked why there had been a downturn in complaint handling during the period. The Head of Housing explained that under the Corporate Complaints procedures, each service area manager was responsible for responding to complaints in their areas. The downturn in figures for Housing was due to insufficient prioritising of responses to complaints, however a review had been undertaken and assurances were given that work would be carried out with managers to improve this.

Councillor J.E. Falshaw referred to the increase in absenteeism in the section, which also occurred in some other areas of the Council, and asked how this could be improved. The Head of Housing said that changes to Council policy in reducing Human Resources involvement at early stages of absences meant that more responsibility was given to service area managers which she felt was positive in alleviating any possible delays. She pointed out that although the figures in the report were split between different sections of Housing, this did not

reflect the number of long-term absences within each section which had a significant impact on figures. Proactive work was being carried out by managers to help employees return to the workplace as quickly as possible such as analysing the causes of absences, helping individuals to access Occupational Therapy services at a cost to the section and considering the potential for employees to carry out the part of their job that they were able to, although they may be unable to undertake the full duties.

In response to a question from Councillor A.M. Halford on the process for employees accessing Occupational Therapy services, the Head of Housing said that HR assistance was needed on promoting services and approaching employees to discuss phased return to work. The Director of Community Services added that HR resources dedicated to assisting the Directorate were small but were committed to supporting managers through the sickness absence process.

Following queries raised by Councillor Hardcastle, it was confirmed that return to work interviews were undertaken and that the sickness absence target for all Council employees was no more than 9.8 full-time equivalent (FTE) days per annum.

Councillor P.J. Curtis felt that this target should be reduced and suggested that long-term absence figures should be separated in future to reflect a clearer position. The Head of Housing agreed that this would be helpful and had been raised on previous occasions with the suggestion for a summary of long-term absences to be given. She went on to say that no absences had been recorded for a third of employees in Housing and that a 100% attendance pilot project in the section had resulted in those employees receiving certificates.

Councillor Halford asked if the suggestion to split long-term absence figures could be passed to the Corporate Resources Overview & Scrutiny Committee which received reports from HR on absences. The Head of Housing agreed that this could be done.

Neighbourhood Management

The Head of Housing introduced the newly appointed Neighbourhood Manager for the North area who was also responsible for managing the Income Team.

Councillor R. Dolphin welcomed the reduction in rent arrears which she said would be significantly affected by the 'Bedroom tax' and asked for clarification on the allocation of voids properties for homeless individuals. The Head of Housing explained that Members had previously agreed to allocate six units from the Council's stock across the county to use as temporary accommodation for homeless families to reduce reliance on using B&B facilities. Individuals who were homeless were prioritised on the housing waiting list, in line with the Council's statutory duty, and could be placed in these units. There was potential for tenancies to be granted on these properties whilst taking into account ability to pay rent.

In response to further comments, the Head of Housing said that officers were mindful of local Member concerns when placing individuals in accommodation but that this arrangement was a more cost-effective alternative to using B&B facilities which were mainly located away from villages. The Community Support Services Manager added that Members had previously raised concerns about families being housed outside their area and schools and that allocating void properties in this way reduced the likelihood of this.

The Head of Housing agreed to look into queries raised by the Chairman and Councillor Curtis on void properties in their wards that were allocated for homeless people.

In response to queries raised on the Welsh Water Assist Scheme, the Head of Housing explained that the scheme had so far resulted in reduced charges for 100 Council tenants and would be promoted in the Council newsletter. The Neighbourhood Manager (North) explained that the scheme was to benefit low income families with high water usage who would not benefit from using a water meter. Following Councillor Dolphin's request for Members to be made aware of such schemes so that they could share information with residents, the Head of Housing agreed to share a briefing note with tenants and Members. Councillor Halford said that discussion on the Welsh Water Assist Scheme tied in with concerns previously raised by the Committee on the Council's process for paying water rates.

Councillor M. Reece said he would speak to officers on suggested alternative uses to the empty library building and other properties in Bagillt.

Housing Asset Maintenance

Members welcomed the significant improvement in time taken to resolve non-urgent repairs. In response to queries from the Chairman, the Interim Asset Manager said that the time taken to resolve repairs started from the time the request was received and that any inspection cards left at properties in which the owner was not present, now included the operative's mobile telephone number for ease of contact.

Community Support Services

The Community Support Services Manager provided explanation on the increase in the average number of days that families had spent in B&B facilities and spoke about the challenges faced by the increasing number of people who were presenting themselves as homeless, which now included individuals who had not previously used this service. Officers were working proactively to help although there were difficulties due to B&B facilities within the county being accessed by other Councils.

Members were also advised that the Community Support Services Manager would be working with the Welsh Local Government Association and Welsh Government (WG) on the potential impact of welfare reform changes which would also be discussed at the Committee's meeting in January 2013.

In response to questions asked by Councillor H.G Roberts, the Director of Community Services confirmed that Flintshire had offered assistance to Denbighshire County Council following the recent flooding in St Asaph. The Head of Housing said that Flintshire had not been approached by any Councils in England to accommodate homeless families.

Housing Renewal and Housing Strategy

Following a comment from Councillor Roberts, the Head of Housing said that the WG White Paper included proposals to help encourage residents to bring their properties into use with the potential for enforcement to be used on those who did not co-operate. Councillor Halford asked if an update could be received on letters which had been sent to owners of empty properties and the Head of Housing replied that progress would be reported at the January 2013 meeting.

On the Community Energy Saving Programme, Councillor Dolphin was aware of a case where grant funding had been withdrawn due to work not being carried out and asked if another application could be made for further funding which was to be made available. The Head of Housing agreed to look into this and respond.

Councillor Curtis spoke about the effect of unkempt empty properties and shops on surrounding areas and gave examples within his ward. The Head of Housing agreed to respond on this.

Councillor Hardcastle asked if Members' thanks could be passed to the Rent Arrears team following a recent visit.

RESOLVED:

- (a) 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;
- (b) That the Head of Housing and Member Engagement Manager raise with the Corporate Resources Overview & Scrutiny Committee the suggestion for future absence reports to separate figures for long-term and short-term sickness absences;
- (c) That the Head of Housing pursue queries raised by the Chairman and Councillor Curtis on allocated void properties in their wards;
- (d) That the Head of Housing provide a briefing note to Council tenants and Members on the Welsh Water Assist Scheme; and
- (e) That the Head of Housing pursue the enquiries made by Councillors Curtis and Dolphin and provide responses.

36. 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 Committee agreed to the suggestion for progress reports on mobile PDA devices and Capita to be scheduled into the Forward Work Programme.

Councillor P.J. Curtis and other Members welcomed the detailed and informative reports which were being received from the Housing section.

RESOLVED:

That the draft Forward Work Programme be agreed, with the inclusion of progress reports on mobile PDA devices and Capita.

37. MEMBERS OF THE PUBLIC AND PRESS IN ATTENDANCE

There were no members of the press or public in attendance.

(The meeting started at 10.00 am and ended at 11.45 am)

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Chairman