

HOUSING OVERVIEW & SCRUTINY COMMITTEE

24 APRIL 2013

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, 24 April 2013

PRESENT: Councillor Ron Hampson (Chairman)

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

SUBSTITUTES: Councillors: Ian Dunbar (for David Cox), Stella Jones (for Sharon Williams) and Paul Shotton (for Glenys Diskin)

ALSO PRESENT: Councillors: Haydn Bateman and Patrick Heesom

CONTRIBUTORS: Cabinet Member for Housing, Director of Community Services, Head of Housing, Housing Asset Manager, Neighbourhood Housing Manager (North), Housing Renewal Manager, Housing Strategy Manager and Operations Manager

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

64. DECLARATIONS OF INTEREST (INCLUDING WHIPPING DECLARATIONS)

No declarations of interest were made.

65. MINUTES

The minutes of the meeting held on 21 March 2013 had been circulated with the agenda.

Accuracy

Minute number 62: Forward Work Programme - Councillor G. Hardcastle said that he had requested an update on PDA devices.

RESOLVED:

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

66. UPDATE ON THE REPAIRS AND MAINTENANCE SERVICE

The Director of Community Services introduced an update report on progress with the repairs and maintenance service performance improvement workstreams. He said that although the report demonstrated significant performance improvements, it was acknowledged that there was a need for further progress to be made. He spoke of the challenges arising from the

implementation of mobile working and thanked senior officers, managers and their teams for their positive work in response to the severe weather which had impacted on the repairs and maintenance service.

The Housing Asset Manager reported on improvements in a number of key areas such as the revised staffing structure and the implementation of mobile working which had been assisted by an increased level of IT support and dedicated server. He advised that the extended hours service was due to be introduced on 13 May 2013 and expressed gratitude to the management team, staff and Trade Union colleagues for their contributions in progressing the change in contracts to reflect a 37 hour working week for all with effect from 1 April 2013, in line with other Council services. On performance improvement in the repairs service, the Housing Asset Manager reported that despite the impact of severe weather conditions, figures for Quarter 4 2012/13 remained below the target of 35 days for non-urgent repairs. He went on to report positively on the review of the in-house disabled adaptations team who were working in collaboration with other teams, and efficiencies achieved from the managed stores service. On the latter, it was noted that the Council and contractor would each receive a 50% share of the profits achieved through the successful performance over the past 12 months.

In thanking management and teams for the improvements made, the Chairman commented that Housing was the most improved department in the Council.

In response to a question from Councillor G. Hardcastle, the Housing Asset Manager said that following the implementation of the new server and software fixes, all staff in responsive repairs together with gas and electric teams (approximately 50 employees in total) would be using PDA devices. Although there would be less benefit in including the Voids team, this may be reviewed at a later stage. Councillor Hardcastle echoed the comments made by the Chairman and requested that the Head of Housing send a memo to staff to express the Committee's gratitude for the hard work carried out during the recent bad weather. The Cabinet Member said that over 40 emergency calls per day had been received during that period.

Councillor A.M. Halford questioned what had brought about the improvements in the service and sought clarification on the removal of vehicles. The Head of Housing felt that the most significant change was in management culture and paid tribute to teams within the service. She spoke of positive working with Trade Union colleagues to achieve a common goal and the sharing of information which contributed to greater confidence in officers by Members. Whilst staff morale had been affected by actions taken to improve services, there was a shared recognition that improvements needed to be made. On the removal of vehicles, it was explained that this applied to supervisors who were not required to transport materials to sites and would not affect trades staff. Through challenging negotiations with Trade Unions, agreement had been reached for this to be implemented with the new structure and would achieve £80K savings. Employees using their own vehicles for work purposes would be able to reclaim their mileage.

Whilst referring to an issue relating to one of the contractors involved in the kitchen replacement programme, Councillor W.P. Shotton asked about the level of management input on contractors' work. The Head of Housing gave reassurance that monitoring of work was robust, given the scale of the programme. She went on to say that although it was intended to further utilise the in-house team, a period of six months was required to build on non-urgent repairs work and to ensure that the day-to-day service was working effectively.

The Housing Asset Manager said that monitoring work had involved surveying carried out by independent officers, assessments by tenant liaison officers and involvement by the Capital Works Manager where required. As a result of the issue, a notice had been issued to the contractor regarding their performance which was measured against key performance indicators (KPIs) and a decision taken to reduce the proportion of work allocated to that contractor. He reiterated comments made by the Head of Housing in the aspiration to develop the in-house service to undertake work from the Capital Programme at a later stage. The Cabinet Member for Housing spoke in support of this and was confident that progress would be made in stages.

Councillor R. Dolphin questioned whether an appointments system was in place for residents who were awaiting repairs and whilst welcoming the improved performance in the repairs service, asked if the backlog of historic repairs was a separate issue. On the kitchen replacement programme, she reported on complaints received from residents due to design flaws and incomplete work and said that the Council's inspectors should be carrying out checks, commenting that this may impact on the performance figures.

The Head of Housing said that tenants should be offered appointments for non-urgent repairs and that the repairs backlog had been addressed, with £300K available to deal with some of the previously reported non-urgent planned repairs. Responding to the kitchen complaints, she spoke of the intention for the Council to utilise additional Council officers to inspect work, instead of this cost forming part of the contractors' fee and assured Members that contractors only received full payment on completion of the work.

The Housing Asset Manager agreed to liaise with his officer who was aware of the issues raised by Councillor Dolphin. In response to the question on appointments, he stated that the introduction of the new schedule of rates would assist in encouraging trades staff to self assess and carry out work on the same visit.

Councillor A.I. Dunbar also stressed the importance of inspection work and gave an example of problems arising from a replacement kitchen floor put down in a resident's property which he had reported to the Housing section.

Councillor M.A. Reece suggested that some employees in the Repairs and Maintenance Team could be offered the opportunity to return to work from sickness absence to carry out inspections on kitchen refurbishments.

Councillor Hardcastle said it had previously been indicated that Council officers were carrying out inspections and he asked if they signed a form for each property as confirmation of this. The Head of Housing was unable to confirm this

but agreed to find out and provide a separate response. Councillor P.J. Curtis suggested that the tenant should also be given the opportunity to sign-off the work. The Head of Housing was unsure whether the tenant signed off each job but would check how rigorous the process was. The Housing Asset Manager commented that a customer satisfaction survey was sent out after job completion, to enable the tenant to complete it at their discretion.

In response to further concerns, the Head of Housing explained the intention to replace around 1,000 kitchens during the year and that due to the problems experienced, the first contractor would be allocated a smaller proportion of work over the next few months. If no improvement was shown and less than 30% of the work completed satisfactorily, that contract would be ended. However, there were no such performance issues with the second contractor. Councillor Curtis requested a list of the areas currently being covered by the kitchen replacement programme, together with the future programme, which had previously been shared. The Head of Housing agreed to forward this information.

Councillor S. Jones welcomed the improvements made to the service and expressed her appreciation for the progress made. In response to a comment on under-performing contractors, the Housing Asset Manager explained that a terminated contract would result in all of the work being allocated to just one contractor. Following detailed discussion, the action previously discussed had been agreed as a compromise.

Councillor Halford asked about arrangements for engaging contractors and any future risks. It was explained that contractors were engaged via formal tendering procedures in line with the Council's regulations. The credentials of the contractor under review were acceptable and it was thought that the problems experienced could have been the result of sub-contracting work. The Housing Asset Manager advised that the improvements made to the service ensured that significant controls were now in place and the new processes had been agreed with Internal Audit. The Head of Housing added that PDA devices would be used to measure performance and identify any variances.

Councillor Curtis pointed out that during the tendering process, the Council had no input if contractors chose to sub-contract their work, posing a potential risk in compliance with the contract. The Head of Housing said that this was the responsibility of the main contractor and that the tendering process included an assessment of quality, experience, references of contractors as well as prices quoted.

RESOLVED:

- (a) That the positive progress being made to improve performance and to deliver the service improvement workstreams be noted; and
- (b) That the permanent establishment of the in-house disabled adaptations team be supported.

67. ANTI-SOCIAL BEHAVIOUR POLICY

The Neighbourhood Housing Manager (North) introduced the report on the proposed Anti-Social Behaviour (ASB) Policy which highlighted the key policy issues and changes, and potential challenges faced by the Council. She explained the background and range of definitions covering ASB together with the responsibility of the Housing service in helping to tackle the problem via a joint agency approach. In addition to enhancements to the policy, a more detailed proforma had been developed to assess the level of risk and response for each case and an out of hours witness support service was due to be introduced.

In welcoming the proposed improvements, Councillor W.P. Shotton said that some residents seemed to be unaware of the Council's ASB officers and asked if the Neighbourhood Housing Manager would be willing to attend Town and Community Council meetings to raise awareness of the policy changes. The Neighbourhood Housing Manager welcomed this suggestion and explained that the out of hours service was to function outside working hours from 6pm until 9am, together with weekends and bank holidays. The Director of Community Services stated that he would include the item on the County Forum agenda to broaden consultation with Town and Community Council representatives.

Councillor A.I. Dunbar welcomed the Council's proactive approach to tackling drug-related ASB and commented on the length of time taken to gather evidence to support action and the effect on nearby residents. The Cabinet Member for Housing said that the out of hours service would assist the Police in gathering evidence.

Councillor S. Jones said that the policy would not be fully effective as it could not apply to private households. The Neighbourhood Housing Manager pointed out that recent legislation extended Councils' powers so that if an incident of ASB affected any aspect of the housing management function, ie a Council tenant, action could still be taken. In any cases of ASB, information would be shared with the Joint Action Team and Police.

Councillor R. Dolphin felt that it was unfair for ASB perpetrators to receive kitchen replacements etc in line with other Council tenants. Councillor R. Davies commented on the need to fully enforce the policy and to use sensitivity when allocating properties. The Neighbourhood Housing Manager explained that an action planning approach would be taken as noted in the report and that a range of tools such as mediation or environmental improvements could be utilised to help resolve situations.

Councillor A.M. Halford raised queries on involvement from the Police and local press coverage on the eviction of Council tenants due to rent arrears and ASB. The Neighbourhood Housing Manager advised that the Joint Action Group included Police representation and that more informal arrangements, such as a Police Officer stationed at County Hall, were in place. In addition, Housing officers were to be involved in the training of Police Community Support Officers. There was an expectation to try to resolve an issue before any court action and for a range of remedies to be used for lower level persistent issues, however the incidents which had been publicised had involved a number of other breaches in

addition to those reported. The Neighbourhood Housing Manager agreed to provide information on the number of evictions and in responding to a further question, confirmed that a list of former tenants with whom there had been ASB issues, was held by the Council. This information was not currently shared with other landlords and advice would need to be obtained on whether this could be done without legal challenge.

Councillor P.J. Curtis made a suggestion for a poster to be displayed in the Flintshire Connects offices to raise awareness of ASB officers.

Following a comment from the Chairman on the need for Council tenants to maintain their own gardens, the Neighbourhood Housing Manager said that this was included in the policy.

Councillor H.G. Roberts called for a previously held 'annual clean up and collection day' to be reinstated in his ward. The Cabinet Member for Housing pointed out that only some areas had instigated this in the past, however there was now a range of recycling facilities available to households. Councillors Shotton and Bragg spoke about the availability of waste lorries during environmental visual audits (EVAs).

RESOLVED:

That the Committee supports the draft Anti-Social Behaviour Policy including the proposed changes.

68. FORWARD WORK PROGRAMME

The Housing & Learning Overview & Scrutiny Facilitator introduced a report to enable the Committee to consider the Forward Work Programme. She explained that dates from September 2013 had been included in the Diary of Meetings to be endorsed at the Annual County Council meeting. Members agreed to the suggestion for the Facilitator to liaise with the Chairman on a workshop to be held in July 2013 to populate the Forward Work Programme.

The Facilitator put forward a suggestion made by the Cabinet Member for Housing for a future meeting of the Committee to be held at Llys Eleanor in Shotton, including a tour of the extra care facilities. The Committee agreed that this would be scheduled for the meeting on 10 July 2013.

In response to a query by Councillor R. Dolphin on the availability of results from the review of garage sites, the Head of Housing advised that a report by the Head of Streetscene would include sites within the Housing Revenue Account (HRA) which were maintained by Streetscene in the same way as Council land. Feedback from this would be shared with the Committee at a future meeting.

Following a question from Councillor M.A. Reece on the sale of Council houses, the Head of Housing explained that only a small proportion of the receipts were put into the HRA which was utilised in the Capital Programme. A report on the HRA subsidy review system was due to be received by the Committee on 10 July 2013.

RESOLVED:

- (a) That, in liaison with the Chairman, the Housing & Learning Overview & Scrutiny Facilitator arrange a workshop for July 2013 to enable the Committee to populate its Forward Work Programme; and
- (b) That the meeting of the Committee on 10 July 2013 be held at Llys Eleanor in Shotton and include a tour of facilities.

69. 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 11.55 am)

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Chairman