

**HOUSING OVERVIEW & SCRUTINY COMMITTEE**  
**5 JUNE 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, 5 June 2013

**PRESENT: Councillor Ron Hampson (Chairman)**

Councillors: Amanda Bragg, David Cox, Peter Curtis, Ron Davies, Rosetta Dolphin, Jim Falshaw, Alison Halford, Ray Hughes, Brian Lloyd, Mike Reece, Gareth Roberts and Sharon Williams

**SUBSTITUTES:** Councillors: Haydn Bateman (for George Hardcastle) and Paul Shotton (for Glenys Diskin)

**ALSO PRESENT:** Councillors: Marion Bateman and Ian Dunbar

**CONTRIBUTORS:** Cabinet Member for Housing, Director of Community Services, Head of Housing, Housing Asset Manager, Housing Renewal Manager and Supporting People Manager

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

**1. DECLARATIONS OF INTEREST (INCLUDING WHIPPING DECLARATIONS)**

No declarations of interest were made.

**2. APPOINTMENT OF VICE-CHAIR**

The Chairman sought nominations for a Vice-Chair for the Committee. A nomination for Councillor G. Hardcastle was duly seconded and on being put to the vote, this was carried. No further nominations were received.

**RESOLVED:**

That Councillor G. Hardcastle be appointed Vice-Chair of the Committee.

**3. MINUTES**

The minutes of the meeting held on 24 April 2013 had been circulated with the agenda.

**Accuracy**

Councillor M.A. Reece reiterated his suggestion that 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. He asked if this could be included in the minutes.

## Matters Arising

Minute number 66: Update on the Repairs and Maintenance Service - The Head of Housing confirmed that a memo had been circulated to staff to express the Committee's gratitude for the hard work undertaken during the severe weather.

Minute number 67: Anti-Social Behaviour Policy - Councillor G.H. Bateman sought clarification on comments which had been made by the Neighbourhood Housing Manager on potential actions which could be deployed by the Council to help resolve situations. The Head of Housing said that for lower levels of anti-social behaviour (ASB), an external organisation may be engaged to act as mediator between the parties concerned. She also gave examples of practical physical environmental improvements which could be used.

In response to a query by Councillor A.M. Halford, the Housing & Learning Overview & Scrutiny Facilitator explained that details of tenants with rent arrears and ASB issues had been forwarded to the Committee following the previous meeting, but that she would re-send the information to Councillor Halford. The Head of Housing gave an update on positive progress relating to a long-standing ASB issue in Holywell.

### **RESOLVED:**

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

## **4. QUARTER 4/YEAR END PERFORMANCE REPORT**

The Director of Community Services introduced a report for the Committee to note and consider the 2012/13 Quarter 4 (January to March 2013)/Year End 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 Director 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.

Councillor W.P. Shotton welcomed the improved result in rent collection, particularly in view of the impact of Welfare Reforms and asked whether the modelling of community based hubs had responded to the identified needs. The Director replied that the hub services were bedding in but that further progress would be made. The Supporting People Manager said it was acknowledged that the hubs would require a period of adjustment during transition and that information was being collated on needs assessment for the remaining hubs. On the issue with the contractor, the Director reported that there had been a reduction in the number of concerns but that officers remained vigilant in enforcing robustly. When asked about penalty clauses, the Housing Asset Manager explained that default notices had been issued to the contractor. In response to a further question on Flintshire's first Energy Company Obligation

(ECO) scheme, which was one of the first in Wales, the Housing Renewal Manager confirmed that this related to external solid wall insulation.

Councillor R. Dolphin noted the downturn in dealing with urgent repairs during Quarter 4 despite achieving the target and said that tenants would pay attention to issues such as this. On voids properties, she said that some tenants felt obliged to sign-off on properties rather than miss out. She referred to an incident where a tenant moving into a void property had paid for their garden to be cleared and that Council officers had then refused to remove the garden waste. She said that the previous tenant should have been charged for this before the new tenant moved into the property. The Head of Housing asked if details could be provided following the meeting so that she could follow up.

Councillor J.E. Falshaw asked how many void properties had been brought back into use during the last year and commented on statistics from another Authority. The Head of Housing advised that this was between 550-600 Council properties. Information on private properties was contained in the report and around 33 available empty stock had been brought into use. The Housing Renewal Manager said that the figures for Flintshire represented additional activity not related to Houses into Homes, for whilst the loans were being provided, the first properties had not yet been fully completed and occupied. Responding to a comment on the allocation of additional funding, he explained that £2.3m had been apportioned to North Wales of which £550K was directed to Flintshire during the last financial year.

Councillor M.A. Reece referred to a property in his ward where old plasterboards on the kitchen ceiling had been covered with newer ones and said that another tenant had an issue with the build-up of uncollected rubbish. On the first comment, the Head of Housing said that this had been raised previously and was being rectified. On the latter, she explained that each case was dealt with individually, but that generally an initial warning was given followed up by a more formal warning and the option to charge for the waste removal. She advised Members to contact her with specific details if they felt that issues such as this were not being adequately addressed.

On the re-designated Council property which had been piloted for use as a house-share between young people, Councillor H.G. Roberts remarked on an adjoining unused property which was not Council owned. The Housing Renewal Manager explained that a significant amount of work was being undertaken in that area to tackle issues and that powers could be used by the Council. In response to Councillor H.G. Roberts' query on the RAG (Red, Amber, Green) status which had been allocated to non-urgent repairs, the Director explained that this was Green as the target had been met. Despite a downturn in performance due to the impact of the severe weather on repairs, there had been a significant improvement on the previous year. The Housing Asset Manager said that the figure of 24.22 days for non-urgent repairs in Quarter 3 was exceptional.

Councillor P.J. Curtis felt that grants should not be made available to owners who failed to maintain their properties to an acceptable standard and asked what steps the Council took to ensure that owners understood their responsibility. The Cabinet Member for Housing pointed out that these were

loans rather than grants. The Housing Renewal Manager said that the Private Sector Renewal Policy included information on the availability of loans to vulnerable householders to maintain their properties and that this type of funding was limited and prioritised. Also, the Authority had powers under Section 215 of the Town and Country Planning Act and Environmental Health which could assist in resolving more significant issues. Members were asked to contact officers if there were any properties of concern. Councillor Curtis referred to a property in Strand Walk, Holywell, which had remained empty. The Head of Housing was aware of the property and would follow up progress on its re-letting.

Councillor R. Hughes gave an example where tradesmen had removed a sink from a property on a Friday, leaving the tenant and young family without provision for the weekend. He said that tradesmen should bear in mind the timing of such work and referred to other incidents where tradesmen had undertaken work for a short time and then left for another job. The Housing Asset Manager requested the address of the property to look into the matter.

In response to earlier comments about powers that were available to the Council to tackle empty private sector properties, Councillor A.M. Halford suggested that more information could be received by the Committee. The Director said that the Forward Work Programme workshop scheduled for 15 July 2013 could include discussion on a date for this, with possible involvement from colleagues in Environment and Planning. The Housing Renewal Manager reported on a forthcoming visit by a Welsh Local Government Association (WLGA) funded consultant to provide advice and share best practice on this topic. Following this, an action plan would be developed which could be useful for Members.

In relation to discussion on criteria for the 'bedroom tax' at a previous meeting, Councillor Dolphin said that some tenants from Abbey Court had been advised that the Council was awaiting legal advice. She also requested that the review of garage sites be brought forward on the Forward Work Programme. The Head of Housing said that she would follow up the comments made about the bedroom tax and would brief managers after the meeting. She explained that some housing associations had made decisions to re-designate stock at an earlier stage prior to the introduction of bedroom tax. Welsh Government (WG) advice had stated that Councils must make their own decisions, bearing in mind the consequences in terms of the Housing Revenue Account (HRA) subsidy, historical rents and housing benefit payments. It had been identified by Flintshire that there would only be a small number of properties where, legitimately, rooms could be deemed too small to use as a bedroom and these cases would be considered individually. Also, separate dining rooms in parlour houses would be classed as extra bedrooms.

Councillor Shotton referred to cases in other counties where some properties were being re-classified and the impact of this on the HRA. He also spoke about properties that were in states of disrepair which were a blight on the surrounding areas. The Housing Renewal Manager said that the WG had announced the availability of a further £10m funding for Wales through Houses into Homes, to tackle private sector empty properties.

The Chairman said that the report was pleasing in view of the impact of severe weather. On rent arrears, he raised queries on the higher amounts which were owed and direct payments to tenants. The Head of Housing said that rent arrears had reduced by £69K last year but there was still concern about the number of individuals with arrears of over £1K. There were around 250 accounts where rent arrears had built up over time and were being repaid in small amounts, and the Income Team were focussing on tackling this. Universal Credit was due to be rolled out in October 2013 over a 2-3 year period.

In response to a query from Councillor G.H. Bateman on the types of urgent repairs which were reported during the severe weather period, the Housing Asset Manager said that loss of heating and water were classed as emergencies and that many calls had been received about guttering. The Head of Housing explained that some repairs to guttering had arisen as a result of the previous spell of bad weather in January and work which had not been completed in March had been carried forward to April. She went on to say that more emergency work was undertaken than that described in the category and over 700 extra jobs were carried out between Quarters 3 and 4 by the same size workforce, which had impacted on performance.

When asked about the delay in turning around void properties, the Housing Asset Manager said that a key area for officers was to look at waiting times and working times, particularly when a greater allocation of time was required to deal with larger properties. Utilising Neighbourhood Housing Officers to carry out utility checks during the notice period helped to reduce turnaround times.

Responding to a question by Councillor D.L Cox, the Housing Renewal Manager said there was no statutory period for owners to put right any significant problems with their private properties. However, as an incentive to do this, the WG had granted powers for Councils to charge 100% Council Tax on empty properties and consultation was ongoing as to a possible increase to this threshold. Councillor Roberts questioned whether this would have any impact on some households. The Housing Renewal Manager said that non-payment of Council Tax was grounds for progressing an enforced sale, whilst it was acknowledged that there may be difficulties in tracing some homeowners.

Councillor Halford asked if the Income Team dealing with rent arrears could be invited to a future meeting of the Committee and asked what was being done to resolve the problem of gas engineers being unable to access some properties. The Housing Asset Manager said that access remained a problem in a small number of cases and that Housing Asset and Housing Management were working together to tackle this. It was hoped that the extended hours service would also help with this issue. Responding to the suggestion made, the Director said that this could be considered at the forthcoming Forward Work Programme workshop.

Councillor Bateman sought clarification on the pilot project to deliver money management workshops to Council tenants and asked whether tenants under the age of 60 living in a larger property would be prioritised on the list for sheltered housing. The Supporting People Manager explained that skills learned

through this workshop were recognised by Deeside College and linked to a qualification. On the latter question, the Head of Housing advised that Cabinet had approved that, where appropriate and sensitively, individuals over the age of 50 could be considered for sheltered accommodation where the need was supported, for example if level access was required or for an assessed medical condition.

**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; and
- (b) That the forthcoming Forward Work Programme workshop include prioritising of the topics suggested.

**5. FORWARD WORK PROGRAMME**

The Housing & Learning Overview & Scrutiny Facilitator introduced a report to enable the Committee to consider the Forward Work Programme. She gave a reminder that the next meeting of the Committee would be held at Llys Eleanor in Shotton and requested that Members arrive at 1.30pm for a site visit prior to the meeting at 2.30pm. Directions to Llys Eleanor would be provided to the Committee.

The Facilitator suggested that the Housing Plan and Community Services Directorate Plan be received at the July meeting and that the three scheduled items be included in discussion on populating the Forward Work Programme at the workshop on 15 July, along with the items raised today. The Committee was in agreement to this.

The Head of Housing reported that the White Paper on Renting Homes had been received from the Welsh Government, which dealt with consistency of the types of tenancies granted by Councils and Housing Associations. It was agreed that this would be dealt with as part of the Forward Work Programme workshop and that the White Paper would be circulated to the Committee in advance.

Councillor M.A. Reece thanked the Director of Community Services for his assistance during the recent fire at the Mainetti factory in Greenfield.

**RESOLVED:**

- (a) That the Forward Work Programme be updated accordingly; and
- (b) That the White Paper on Renting Homes and topics raised at today's meeting be included in discussion on populating the Forward Work Programme at the workshop on 15 July 2013.

6. **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 11.15 am)

.....

**Chairman**