

HOUSING OVERVIEW & SCRUTINY COMMITTEE

16 OCTOBER 2013

Minutes of the meeting of the Housing Overview & Scrutiny Committee of Flintshire County Council held at Flintshire Connects, High Street, Holywell on Wednesday, 16 October 2013

PRESENT: Councillor Ron Hampson (Chairman)

Councillors: Amanda Bragg, Peter Curtis, Rosetta Dolphin, Jim Falshaw, George Hardcastle, Ray Hughes, Brian Lloyd, Gareth Roberts and Sharon Williams

APOLOGIES: Councillors: David Cox, Ron Davies and Mike Reece

CONTRIBUTORS: Cabinet Member for Housing, Director of Community Services and Head of Housing

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

25. FLINTSHIRE CONNECTS

Prior to the meeting, the Committee took part in a tour of the facilities. The Head of Housing explained that Flintshire Connects aimed to offer integrated face-to-face, high level services provided by multi-skilled employees whilst supporting the revitalisation of town centres across Flintshire and working collaboratively with partners to provide a holistic approach. A further three centres were due to be opened across Flintshire the following year with involvement by other agencies such as North Wales Police, Communities First, Job Centre Plus, Deeside College and Credit Union. Members spoke positively of the service which had been established in Holywell in relation to the centralised location, partnership working and excellent employees and facilities available.

The Chair commented on the recent 'Inspire' awards which celebrated achievements for outstanding performance in various areas of Housing. In thanking the Director of Community Services and Head of Housing for this excellent event, he referred to the significant improvements which had been made in the service. Councillor George Hardcastle also spoke in support of the event which had been organised by Hannah Fargher and said that the awards were a credit to the workforce of the Council and particularly Housing. The Cabinet Member for Housing remarked that the awards had been given as a result of employees nominating their colleagues.

26. DECLARATIONS OF INTEREST (INCLUDING WHIPPING DECLARATIONS)

No declarations of interest were made.

27. MINUTES

The minutes of the meeting held on 23 September 2013 had been circulated with the agenda.

RESOLVED:

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

28. HOUSING REVENUE ACCOUNT 30 YEAR BUSINESS PLAN

The Director of Community Services presented the final revised Housing Revenue Account (HRA) Business Plan which had been submitted to the Welsh Government (WG). There were two potential options to achieve the Welsh Housing Quality Standard (WHQS) either by securing a 2022/23 deadline with no borrowing or for a 2020/21 deadline with prudential borrowing. In detailing the background in the report, he referred to the team effort on this matter including work undertaken by Rachael Corbelli on the business plan.

Following the request by WG for all Councils to review their original requests for borrowing capacity in light of the changes arising from the HRA Subsidy review, Flintshire had reduced this figure from £50m to £45m. The Head of Housing explained that although a settlement of £1.85bn had been reached by WG on the 'buy out' figure to be divided equitably amongst councils, the final outcome was not yet known, however it was hoped that this would be positive in revenue terms for Flintshire.

The Director reported that a significant amount of work had been undertaken, led by senior Members and officers, to demonstrate achievement of the WHQS within the timescale. The ending of the HRA Subsidy system was likely to be a further benefit although the extent of this was yet to be confirmed.

In response to questions from Councillor George Hardcastle on boilers and smoke alarms, the Director explained that the decision to extend the expected life cycles of these appliances was a viable approach also taken by other Councils and had been borne out of practical experience. Boilers would continue to be checked annually and the longer life cycle meant that unnecessary replacement was avoided where the appliance remained in working order. The Head of Housing spoke of the positive financial impact of this, including labour costs, and confirmed that boilers which failed would be replaced.

Councillor Gareth Roberts felt that this change could be justified if improved boilers were used with improved running costs. In response to comments, the Head of Housing provided clarity on non-traditional stock.

Councillor Rosetta Dolphin asked about the frequency of smoke alarm testing and whether testing on smoke alarms and boilers was undertaken at the same time. The Head of Housing said that the Council had a legal responsibility to test electrical appliances within a set timeframe and would provide a separate response by email.

When asked about the potential to use the borrowing from WG to build houses, the Director advised that the amount requested would allow some flexibility but that this would be reliant on the business plan. The Cabinet Member for Housing said that this tied in with the current review of HRA land and garage sites. The Head of Housing said that any proposals to develop would

need to take into account the necessary skills to take this forward, however the priority was to demonstrate to WG that the WHQS could be achieved by 2020.

In response to a question on the removal of the Right to Buy (RTB) option on housing, the Cabinet Member for Housing said that evidence was required on why a particular area would need the exemption. The Head of Housing said that any developments made through the HRA would include social housing units and that discussions would need to be held with WG on the rules to restrict RTB.

Councillor Ray Hughes welcomed the report and asked that Members' thanks be passed on to all those involved. He spoke of the need for the Council to re-build where there were pockets of land available, particularly to provide options to those affected by the Bedroom Tax.

Whilst Councillor Peter Curtis hoped for a positive outcome, he recognised the priority to achieve the WHQS and said that options must be realistic in view of the current financial climate.

In response to comments on the potential to build houses, the Head of Housing stressed that any borrowing costs would be met by rental income.

The Chair suggested that Carl Sergeant AM be invited to a future meeting of the Committee. In response to a query on Stock Condition Surveys, the Head of Housing advised that appointment interviews were scheduled for the following week, with results expected before Christmas. She provided an explanation on the use of data from the surveys, in line with practice in other councils.

On the Capital Programme, the Head of Housing referred to the review of the Asset Management Strategy now taking place to meet the 2020 target. A report with proposals and options on the Asset Management Strategy would be brought to a future meeting for Members' consideration.

RESOLVED:

That the Committee note the revised Business Plan and that Flintshire is now able to achieve the Wales Housing Quality Standard by 2020/21.

29. FORWARD WORK PROGRAMME

The Housing & Learning Overview & Scrutiny Facilitator introduced a report to enable the Committee to consider the Forward Work Programme. She confirmed that the budget consultation meeting for the Committee would be held on 12 December 2013 and suggested some changes to the Programme.

Following recent consideration by Cabinet, the item on Governance Arrangements for a Local Housing Company would be brought forward to the next meeting on 20 November 2013. The items on the Draft Asset Management Strategy and Tenant Satisfaction Survey Results/Action Plan would be deferred to 8 January 2014 and the Sheltered Housing Improvement Project would be moved to 5 February 2014.

The Facilitator explained that she was liaising with a colleague on a suitable date for the joint meeting with the Environment Overview & Scrutiny Committee. A date for a joint meeting with the Social & Health Care Overview & Scrutiny Committee was being progressed by the Head of Adult Services and would include a site visit to Llys Jasmine. Both meeting dates would be advised in due course. In response to a query raised by the Chair, the Director of Community Services reported that Llys Jasmine had opened and was expected to be fully tenanted by late November 2013.

RESOLVED:

That the Forward Work Programme be updated accordingly.

30. 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 11.20 am)

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Chairman