

HOUSING OVERVIEW & SCRUTINY COMMITTEE

8 JANUARY 2014

Minutes of the meeting of the Housing Overview & Scrutiny Committee of Flintshire County Council held in the Delyn Committee Room, County Hall, Mold on Wednesday, 8 January 2014

PRESENT: Councillor Ron Hampson (Chairman)

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

SUBSTITUTES: Councillors: Ian Dunbar (for Sharon Williams) and Paul Shotton (for Ron Davies)

APOLOGY: Cabinet Member for Housing

CONTRIBUTORS: Director of Community Services, Head of Housing, Capital Works Manager, Housing Asset Manager and Neighbourhood Housing Manager (North)

Leader of the Council and Cabinet Member for Finance (minute number 44)

Deputy Leader and Cabinet Member for Environment (minute number 45)

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

42. DECLARATIONS OF INTEREST (INCLUDING WHIPPING DECLARATIONS)

No declarations of interest were made.

43. MINUTES

The minutes of the meetings held on 20 November and 13 December 2013 had been circulated with the agenda.

Councillor Amanda Bragg asked that her apologies be recorded for the latter meeting.

RESOLVED:

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

44. HOUSING ASSET MANAGEMENT STRATEGY

The Leader and Cabinet Member for Finance introduced the report to seek the Committee's views on proposals to deliver the Welsh Housing Quality Standard (WHQS) through the development of a new Asset Management Strategy (AMS), and to share these with Cabinet. In referring to the housing stock transfer ballot which had registered the highest turnout and 'No' vote in

Wales, he paid tribute to the previous administration for the manner in which the ballot had been carried out in detailing alternative options within the Choices document. In line with the Council's Improvement Priorities, £103m of capital investment in the Council's housing stock during the seven year plan to reach the WHQS would be delivered by the Council, representing a significant achievement. To support this, a commitment had been given to the creation of additional jobs together with 20 apprenticeships to deliver this investment. The Leader stated that these achievements were due to the significant improvements in Housing performance and thanked the Director of Community Services, Head of Housing, Cabinet Member and colleagues in Housing for their contributions.

The Head of Housing explained that whereas the current £49m investment programme focussed mainly on internal elements of work, the report set out options to move forward with different investment streams to achieve the WHQS by 2020. Once approved by Cabinet, extensive consultation would take place with ward Members over the Spring/Summer of 2014 to discuss the detail of proposed investment plans and timing of various workstreams across the county. The creation of 200 jobs through engagement of large and small contractors and local people, together with 20 apprenticeships, would provide a range of high quality work experience and training. Opportunities would also be available for the Council's trades teams to work on elements of capital works. The Head of Housing went on to refer to the four main workstreams detailed in the report and sought Members' views on the options.

The Chairman commended the creation of employment and training opportunities through achievement of the WHQS.

Councillor Paul Shotton spoke in favour of internal work being undertaken on a 'whole house' approach to minimise upheaval to the tenant and asked whether all funding streams had been explored. The Head of Housing explained that in line with the Council's Improvement Priorities, the Council had been successful in securing energy efficiency funding to supplement the programme. In addition, changes by Central Government could create opportunities for funding over the next two years to help with non-traditional stock and a successful outcome to the bid submitted to the Wales Vibrant and Viable Places programme could bring extra funds for WHQS plans in those areas.

Following a query from the Chairman on solid wall insulation, it was explained that this would be considered for areas across the Authority according to the different criteria which applied.

On the importance of having a multi-skilled workforce, Councillor Alison Halford commented that some individuals may have more expertise in one area than another and that sufficient numbers of contractors would be required to carry out the work. She asked that consideration be taken of weather impacts on external elements of work and had reservations about whether work should be carried out on an area-by-area basis at the expense of delays to those in other areas.

The Head of Housing advised that the Capital Works Manager had carried out visits to establish how other areas were delivering their investment programmes. Although the Capital Works team in Flintshire was smaller than in

some other areas, there was confidence in the ability to deliver the programme with a slight increase in the team. There was ongoing liaison with Wrexham Council to co-ordinate tenders to plan work more effectively, along with consideration of internal workforce skills and programme timing of different elements of work. In reference to work previously undertaken on the kitchen programme, the Head of Housing spoke of challenges arising from contractors moving around which could be alleviated if an 'estate by estate' approach was taken. In response to clarification sought on 'SAP', the Capital Works Manager provided explanation on the energy rating of properties and would inform the Committee of the full term after the meeting.

Councillor Rosetta Dolphin welcomed plans for pre-consultation with ward Members but had concerns about the effect on the tenant of carrying out internal work on a 'whole house' approach. In response to a query, it was confirmed that the WHQS did not apply to private houses taken on by the Council and that newer houses were built to more modern standards and were fit for purpose. The Capital Works Manager explained the different options for approaching the programme of works and that the approach to carry out all elements of work simultaneously could result in savings from project management costs which could then be allocated to new workstreams.

In welcoming the report, Councillor George Hardcastle echoed the point made by Councillor Halford on the timing of work, particularly in consideration of older residents.

Councillor Peter Curtis thanked officers for the informative report but thought that using the 'estate by estate' approach would create too much discontent amongst residents in other areas. He felt that working with other Councils was essential and commented on the need for a balanced approach to make the best use of funding available and skills needed.

In welcoming the comments put forward, the Leader and Cabinet Member for Finance said that difficult decisions would need to be made and that although these would not be agreeable to everyone, the Council was in a strong position to achieve the WHQS. He paid tribute to other Councils, alongside Flintshire, who had retained their housing stock and the impact of Welsh Government agreement to end the national housing subsidy scheme in Wales from 2015 which would benefit work on the AMS.

Councillor Mike Reece spoke of the practicalities of programming work appropriately such as repairs to back kitchens alongside external work with scaffolding. In response to a query relating to ongoing work at garage sites in Castle Heights, the Housing Asset Manager explained that these were security measures being put in place to prevent further incidents of vandalism.

Reference was made by Councillor Gareth Roberts to work previously carried out at a property on a 'whole house' approach in which the tenant had been satisfied. He felt that kitchen and bathroom programmes should not be undertaken at the same time and suggested that work be programmed on an area/town basis rather than by ward.

Councillor Halford suggested that officers be tasked with planning the most suitable and transparent approach to prioritising workload, taking into account workforce capacity and savings. Councillor Hardcastle echoed this view.

On behalf of the Committee, the Chairman congratulated the Director of Community Services and Head of Housing for their achievements.

RESOLVED:

- (a) That the three key aims of the draft strategy, as outlined in 2.02 of the report, be supported;
- (b) That the views of the Committee on the workstream approach be expressed to Cabinet; and
- (c) That the commitment for further consultations to develop schemes in more detail be noted.

45. ANTI-SOCIAL BEHAVIOUR AND NEIGHBOURHOOD MANAGEMENT

The Neighbourhood Housing Manager (North) presented an update on progress of the service in relation to the management of anti-social behaviour (ASB) following approval of the new ASB Policy in 2013.

In outlining the key considerations in the report, she spoke of the benefits of a new IT system (ReACT) and the recruitment of two additional specialist ASB officers together with provision of an external out of hours support service for victims of ASB. To support the Council's stance in tackling ASB and to protect the Council's investment in improvement works, there would be a reduced priority for tenants who deliberately damaged or neglected their properties. In example case studies where legal action had been taken, it was noted that the preferred approach was to apply for an injunction as this was cheaper, faster and more effective in terms of managing behaviour than eviction, which was used as a last resort. In addition, there were plans to develop a policy for responsible pet ownership in response to concerns from residents about pet related nuisance and in particular, the increasing problem of dog fouling.

In welcoming the progress made, Councillor Paul Shotton asked that his appreciation be relayed to Gerwyn Davies and his colleagues for their advice which encouraged tenants to report incidents of ASB. In response to plans to develop services for those experiencing domestic abuse, he referred to the 'White Ribbon Day' which had publicised excellent work in that area. He sought information on progress with the Responsible Pet Ownership Policy, particularly in view of the Tenant Satisfaction Survey which identified this as an area of concern for 54% of tenants who had responded. The Neighbourhood Housing Manager reported that work on the policy was due to commence the following week, linked with an RSPCA accredited scheme, and would be brought back to the Committee at a future date.

In response to comments from Councillor Rosetta Dolphin on the volume of ASB incidents involving children, the Neighbourhood Housing Manager confirmed that such issues were addressed with the parents and that Tenancy

Agreement terms reinforced the responsibility of parents within their property and the locality. Whilst further action could be explored, this did not apply to those in private tenancies. Following a further query, she advised that the out of hours service being piloted was currently on a referral basis only and that costs of £1200 would be required if the contact number was to be publicised.

Councillor Alison Halford congratulated officers on the excellent report and suggested that plans to establish the Responsible Pet Ownership Policy could include consultation with all Council Members. In response to a query on the map showing areas of ASB complaints, it was explained that this indicated cases outstanding since November 2013 and did not include cases which had closed. Following a request for more detail on the out of hours service, the Head of Housing, in consultation with the Cabinet Member for Environment, advised that £1200 would be allocated in the budget proposals for 2014/15 for the rollout of publicity. Members welcomed this and Councillor Dolphin suggested that details could be advertised in the next tenants' publication.

Councillor Peter Curtis asked that his thanks be passed to Lee Roberts and his team for their assistance on incidents within his ward. He referred to a promotional DVD available through Women's Aid which was most effective in highlighting the effects of domestic abuse issues on young people and suggested that this be shown in 6th form colleges and in the Council. In response to the issues which had been raised in the tenants' survey, he pointed out that dog fouling was a widespread issue which was not confined to social housing areas.

Councillor David Cox said that consulting with ward Members on ASB issues may be beneficial in terms of using local knowledge and that consideration of individuals' age and needs should be taken into account during allocation of tenancies. He and Councillor Curtis spoke of the benefits of Members undertaking environmental visual audits (EVAs) in their wards.

The Neighbourhood Housing Manager said that teams were encouraged to work with local Members on the allocation of properties and that consideration was being given to extending the remit of EVAs to include evidence of ASB.

Following her earlier suggestion, Councillor Halford proposed that all Members be invited to contribute to the Responsible Pet Ownership Policy to help tackle the problem of dog fouling. This was agreed by the Committee.

RESOLVED:

- (a) That the contents of the report be noted; and
- (b) That all Members be invited to contribute to the proposed Responsible Pet Ownership Policy for Council tenants.

46. TENANT SATISFACTION SURVEY RESULTS AND ACTION PLAN

The Director of Community Services presented the results of the independent tenant satisfaction survey and proposals for improvement to further raise satisfaction levels to achieve top quartile outcomes.

The Director said it was pleasing to note that the overall results had improved significantly from the survey undertaken three years ago and that favourable comparison with results from housing associations was particularly impressive given the difference in ages and condition of properties. For those areas where improvement in performance was needed to reach the upper quartile, the report outlined work to be undertaken to achieve this.

In welcoming the report, Councillor Peter Curtis commented on the 39% return rate of completed forms. The Director said that the involvement of younger tenants was recognised as a key issue to ensure that a wider range of views could be accessed.

Councillor Brian Lloyd referred to the sample size selected from each of the housing management areas and said that all tenants should be offered the opportunity to participate, for example by including the survey in the tenants' newsletter. The Head of Housing explained that cost was a factor and that the recognised approach had been followed in relation to the percentage of tenants surveyed as a representative sample. However, if Members wished to survey all Council tenants, consideration could be given to providing sufficient budget for this to take place for the next survey. The Chairman spoke in favour of this.

Following queries from Councillor Alison Halford, the Housing Asset Manager explained that changes had been put in place to enable trades teams to carry more items on their vehicles to carry out a wider range of repairs on the first visit, thus avoiding the need to return to stores to replenish stocks. On tenants' response to car parking issues, the Head of Housing acknowledged that this was a challenge due to the increasing number of vehicles per household and the design of many estates. The Capital Works Manager agreed and said that any additional parking provision should not restrict access to estates.

Councillor Ray Hughes asked if more could be done to encourage residents to park in appropriate areas, such as provision of adequate lighting where required and liaising with the Police to restrict parking in unsuitable areas. In response to his request for information on the survey of garage sites, the Head of Housing explained that dates were being sought for a workshop on this topic to receive input from Members.

RESOLVED:

That the outcomes of the survey and areas for continued improvement be noted and supported.

47. FORWARD WORK PROGRAMME

The Housing & Learning Overview & Scrutiny Facilitator introduced a report to enable the Committee to consider the Forward Work Programme. She advised that following earlier discussion, an update on the Responsible Pet Ownership Policy for tenants would be included.

In response to a request from Councillor Rosetta Dolphin for an item on garages, the Head of Housing advised that a workshop was being planned for March 2014. The Facilitator added that dates were being sought for a joint

meeting with the Environment Overview & Scrutiny Committee to include the review of garage sites.

The Chairman reminded Members that Carl Sargeant AM was to be invited to a future meeting.

RESOLVED:

That the Forward Work Programme be updated accordingly.

48. MEMBERS OF THE PUBLIC AND PRESS IN ATTENDANCE

There was one member of the press in attendance.

(The meeting started at 10.15 am and ended at 12.20 pm)

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Chairman