

HOUSING OVERVIEW & SCRUTINY COMMITTEE
5 FEBRUARY 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, 5 February 2014

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

Councillors: Amanda Bragg, Ron Davies, Rosetta Dolphin, George Hardcastle, Brian Lloyd, Mike Reece and Gareth Roberts

SUBSTITUTES: Councillors: Ian Dunbar (for Sharon Williams) and Paul Shotton (for Glenys Diskin)

APOLOGIES: Councillors: David Cox, Peter Curtis, Alison Halford and Ray Hughes

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

Senior Sheltered Housing Officer and Accommodation Support Officers (for minute number 54)

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

52. DECLARATIONS OF INTEREST (INCLUDING WHIPPING DECLARATIONS)

No declarations of interest were made.

53. MINUTES

The minutes of the meeting held on 8 January 2014 had been circulated with the agenda.

RESOLVED:

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

54. SHELTERED HOUSING IMPROVEMENT PROJECT

The Director of Community Services introduced the update report on the successful completion of the improvement programme within the Community Based Accommodation Support Service (previously the Sheltered Housing service). Whilst reporting on further elements of the improvement project, he provided explanation on the implementation of the 'needs based' support service to respond to the changing needs of service users and welcomed the achievement of at least 70% of available staff time allocated to this support. Following the relocation of seven of the community-based hubs to alternative accommodation to free up Council stock, plans were being made to relocate the remaining two. Information was given on the establishment of two new referral

routes to the service and progress with implementing the new staffing structure. Feedback from current and past users of the service had indicated an overall positive response.

The Director introduced the Senior Sheltered Housing Officer (Dawn Kent) and invited the two Accommodation Support Officers who were present to share their views on service changes.

Sue Roberts and Carmen Wellings explained that whilst the transition period had initially seemed challenging, the benefits resulting from the improvements to the service had been recognised and welcomed by staff and service users. They felt it was important to recognise the necessity to expand the service to deliver support to a wider range of people with varying needs and that the approach to working as a team rather than as individuals was more professional and rewarding for them. Sue and Carmen spoke of the range of support on offer to equip individuals with the tools to promote their own independence and deal with any crisis arising in their lives, such as information on changes to benefits and signposting to relevant networks for more challenging needs. Discussion at a recent Housing Forum meeting had promoted the services to residents from different areas who had welcomed the range of services on offer. The five staff located at the Ewloe hub were responsible for supporting around 500 service users, each with a support plan in place to identify and respond to their differing needs.

The Chairman said that the improvements to the service had proved to be a great success and welcomed the efficiencies made.

In thanking officers for the positive report, Councillor Paul Shotton asked if the number of current service users not in sheltered accommodation was likely to change from 42, and whether links could be made with partner agencies to provide a befriending service to older people in need. The Director said that there was an expectation for this number to increase and that positive work was ongoing to support those who were lonely with a recognition that the service would need to adapt flexibly to respond to more complex issues.

The Community Support Services Manager gave assurance of monitoring of the number of services users to ensure that appropriate capacity was available and that a reduced need for support would impact on those figures. Sue and Carmen explained that the service was able to provide transport for those wanting to attend activities at local community centres and that links with Age Concern and the Red Cross were used to provide a befriending service to those in need.

Councillor George Hardcastle, who had attended the recent Housing Forum meeting, praised Dawn and her team for the range of work they undertook. In response to a query, the Director said that there were no plans to reduce the number of hubs to below seven.

Councillor Amanda Bragg welcomed the improvements to the service, particularly in view of the ageing population, and asked for clarification on reduced levels of support within the report. The Community Support Services Manager explained that services were gradually reduced to individuals to whom

no further support was deemed necessary. Councillor Bragg went on to remark on valuable assistance from wardens and Streetscene officers at an elderly person's property during a period of severe weather.

In response to a query on contact information, the Community Support Services Manager explained that the 'Practical Assistance line' promoting volunteer assistance was in the early stages of implementation and would be developed further. An informal arrangement was in place whereby Council officers were deployed to provide assistance to those in need during severe weather.

Councillor Rosetta Dolphin spoke of the benefits of the community-based hubs in supporting each other and hoped that the support service could be rolled out further to all residents in need. The Director referred to the two new areas of referrals which would enable the services to be targeted at a wider range of individuals and said that whilst it was intended to develop this further, there was a need to monitor it to ensure that sufficient capacity was in place to respond.

RESOLVED:

That the progress of the Sheltered Housing Improvement Project from February 2013 and successful completion of the Improvement Programme be noted.

55. UPDATE ON THE DELIVERY OF THE CHOICES DOCUMENT

The Head of Housing introduced a report detailing progress in delivering an improved service to Council tenants, in line with the commitment given as part of the Choices Document, following the majority vote by tenants in 2012 for the Council to retain its housing stock. An annual progress report would be received by the Committee.

The Head of Housing explained that proposals for the budget in 2014/15 would include the allocation of funding for the development of a handy person service together with additional posts relating to financial inclusion support. She referred to the commitment given for £49m of investment over five years in the capital programme and for previous expectations to be surpassed, resulting in full achievement of the Welsh Housing Quality Standard (WHQS) by 2020.

The Chairman congratulated Mrs Mavis Crofts (Chair of the Flintshire Tenants' Federation) who had been awarded an MBE for voluntary services in the community and invited her to address the Committee.

Mrs Crofts reflected on the significant progress which had been made since the housing ballot and particularly welcomed the opportunity for involvement by the Tenants' Federation in the process. She thanked the Head of Housing for keeping the Federation informed of progress by sharing accurate up-to-date information and spoke of the improved approach to working on void properties.

In praising the work undertaken, Councillor Paul Shotton hoped that the Welsh Government had recognised the achievements by the Council in exceeding expectations for the delivery of improvements during the previous

year. He welcomed the indication for achievement of the WHQS by 2020, which was many years earlier than originally anticipated.

Councillor Ian Dunbar expressed his appreciation to the Housing team for their assistance and flexibility in carrying out improvements at the properties of elderly tenants in line with their needs.

RESOLVED:

That the progress being made to deliver the promises in the Choices Document be noted.

56. COLLABORATIVE WORKING IN HOUSING

The Head of Housing introduced an update report on current collaborative work across North Wales in Housing services, which was reported regularly to the Committee. She explained that with the emphasis on joint working between Councils, opportunities were explored at regular meetings of the North Wales Heads of Housing group in addition to that already underway as part of the Flintshire Futures programme. A summary of current collaborative activity was appended to the report whilst at a lower level options for a joint approach on other issues, such as workforce training, were being explored to share the cost.

In response to a query from Councillor Rosetta Dolphin on the North Wales gypsy and traveller co-ordination group, the Head of Housing explained that a needs assessment had identified the need for a transient site for gypsies and travellers. Following comments about current site provision in Flintshire, Wrexham and Anglesey, it was noted that Conwy and Denbighshire were identifying potential locations within their areas through the Local Development Plan (LDP) process.

Councillor Ian Dunbar referred to previous discussions on the Single Access Route to Housing (SARTH) project and sought an update on progress with the housing allocations system. The Head of Housing advised that the policy, which had only recently been approved by Cabinet, would require a phased approach for implementation by December 2014. Development of the Housing Options service would result in individuals having access to a wider range of information to ascertain the most appropriate housing option, thus enabling them to make an informed choice on their housing needs.

Councillor Dolphin spoke about the importance of due consideration of others in the area, such as elderly people, when allocating tenancies to individuals and suggested that local knowledge from the Police could assist. Councillor George Hardcastle referred to the availability of Police resources and spoke of the need for stronger conditions within the tenancy agreement.

The Head of Housing gave assurances of thorough checks and balances prior to allocating tenancies and reminded Members that the Council had a duty to house individuals in the best place for them. Although it was not possible to share tenancy information with Members, any concerns could be raised with Housing officers about vacant properties which were awaiting allocation.

The Cabinet Member for Housing advised that the SARTH policy included provision for improved sharing of information between landlords. The Head of Housing added that a protocol was in place to work with the Police on more serious cases of breach of tenancies.

In response to comments from Councillor Paul Shotton on the Eco scheme, the Head of Housing advised that Wrexham Council was leading on the tendering exercise and that additional funding for energy efficiency schemes had been secured to work with local contractors. She went on to suggest that an update on progress be submitted to a future meeting of the Committee.

Housing officers noted Councillor Mike Reece's request for the collection of waste at some Council properties following repairs carried out.

RESOLVED:

That the collaborative work undertaken to date and that currently in development be supported.

57. FORWARD WORK PROGRAMME

The Housing & Learning Overview & Scrutiny Facilitator introduced a report to enable the Committee to consider the Forward Work Programme.

Following previous discussion at the Committee, items on domestic abuse (with the showing of a DVD suggested by Councillor Peter Curtis) and the Responsible Pet Ownership Policy would be included on the Forward Work Programme, together with an item on Vibrant and Viable Places. The Facilitator would liaise with the Chair and Head of Housing on scheduling these three items for the meetings in March and April 2014.

The Facilitator suggested that the scheduled items on Universal Credit Implementation Update and Welfare Reform be considered together at the meeting on 21 May 2014 and that the energy efficiency item, suggested earlier in the meeting, be included as a future item on the Forward Work Programme.

Councillor George Hardcastle's proposal that the quarterly update on the Sheltered Housing Improvement Project be removed from the Forward Work Programme was supported by the Committee.

In response to a query, it was confirmed that the Member workshops on the review of garage sites had been arranged for 27 and 31 March 2014. The joint meeting with Environment Overview & Scrutiny Committee to consider the Housing Supply Task Force would be arranged for a later date.

RESOLVED:

That the Forward Work Programme be updated accordingly.

58. 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 11.10 am)

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Chairman