

HOUSING OVERVIEW & SCRUTINY COMMITTEE

21 MAY 2014

Minutes of the meeting of the Housing Overview & Scrutiny Committee of Flintshire County Council held in the Clwyd Committee Room, County Hall, Mold CH7 6NA on Wednesday, 21 May 2014

PRESENT: Councillor Ron Hampson (Chairman)

Councillors: Amanda Bragg, David Cox, Ron Davies, Rosetta Dolphin, Jim Falshaw, George Hardcastle, Ray Hughes, Hilary Isherwood, Brian Lloyd, Mike Reece, Gareth Roberts and Sharon Williams

SUBSTITUTES:

Councillors: Ian Dunbar for Peter Curtis and Marion Bateman for Glenys Diskin

ALSO PRESENT:

Mrs. Mavis Crofts from the Tenants Federation

CONTRIBUTORS:

Cabinet Member for Housing, Head of Housing, Neighbourhood Housing Manager, Housing Asset Manager and Business Performance Manager

IN ATTENDANCE:

Housing and Learning Overview and Scrutiny Facilitator and Committee Officer

1. DECLARATIONS OF INTEREST (INCLUDING WHIPPING DECLARATIONS)

Councillor Hilary Isherwood declared a personal interest in all items due to her husband being the Housing Shadow Minister.

2. MINUTES

The minutes of the meeting of the Committee held on 16 April, 2014 had been circulated to Members with the agenda.

RESOLVED:

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

3. DOMESTIC ABUSE

The Neighbourhood Housing Manager introduced a report to provide an overview and update of the work taking place within Neighbourhood Housing in relation to customers who were affected by domestic abuse.

The Committee were shown a dvd entitled 'Leaving' which had been requested by Councillor Peter Curtis. In response to a comment from Councillor George Hardcastle about the content of the dvd, the Neighbourhood Housing Manager said that it was hardhitting and disturbing but was a harsh reality of the issues that some Council tenants faced.

The Neighbourhood Housing Manager explained that it was difficult to measure the number of cases of domestic abuse as not all incidents were reported. Figures provided by Police indicated that there were 2348 recorded incidents of domestic abuse in Flintshire in 2012/13 and on average, people had 30 experiences of domestic abuse before they sought help.

Councillor Hilary Isherwood felt that the dvd had been difficult to watch. She spoke of issues around domestic abuse, both physically and mentally, and how it could be-little people that were experiencing it and highlighted the fact that a significant number of people over the age of 70 were also domestically abused. She felt that discussions around domestic abuse should be included in the school curriculum and said that it was important to highlight the issue before it became a problem. Councillor Isherwood said that the dvd highlighted that making the call to seek help was difficult. The Neighbourhood Housing Manager commented on the work of the Housing Officers and the relationships that the officers built up with the tenants and said that it was important that the officers were trained to deal with such disclosures of domestic abuse.

Councillor Sharon Williams thanked the officer for the dvd and welcomed the training for Housing officers to allow them to look out for any signs of domestic abuse. She spoke of signposting to agencies that could provide assistance and support for victims and welcomed that awareness of the issue was being raised within the Housing Service.

The Neighbourhood Housing Manager commented on the multi-agency arrangements around domestic abuse and spoke of the work undertaken at the Multi-Agency Risk Assessment Conference (MARAC). The number of referrals to MARAC by housing staff had historically been low but it was felt that this could be because an appropriate referral had already been made to MARAC by other agencies or the Police. This had prompted the team in Neighbourhood Housing to ask whether there were opportunities to identify domestic abuse being missed. The Housing Service was working with the Domestic Abuse Co-ordinator within Community Safety and other social landlords in the area to enhance the approach to identifying and dealing with incidents of domestic abuse.

It was reported that Housing Officers and front line staff who may go into customer's homes would be trained, which would also include the Council's Income Officers who were to be trained in recognising domestic abuse and being confident to ask the right questions. Trades staff such as joiners would also be given awareness training so that they would know what to do if they attended a property and had concerns about domestic abuse. Recruitment of additional specialist officers in anti-social behaviour would allow them to also be the lead officers within neighbourhood housing for reports of domestic abuse and would act as a link between neighbourhood housing, support services and other agencies such as the police. The Neighbourhood Housing Manager said that the Housing Service was also looking to develop clear branding, such as badges or a lanyard, so that customers could clearly identify who was trained in domestic abuse to allow customers to overcome concerns when wanting to disclose incidents. She also provided details of re-charges where damage to a property had been caused by a perpetrator of the abuse rather than the tenant, and issues to be considered by Anti-Social Behaviour Officers when dealing with complaints.

Councillor Gareth Roberts highlighted the excellent work undertaken by Delyn Women's Aid and the difficulties that victims of domestic abuse experienced in disclosing incidents. Councillor Ian Dunbar welcomed the fact that the issue of domestic abuse was being highlighted within the Housing Service and the suggestion that badges or lanyards were to be considered for clear identification of trained officers. He commented on a situation where a victim of domestic abuse lived close to their family and support network and whether in such cases it was possible to move the perpetrator out of the property rather than relocating the victim away from their family. The Neighbourhood Housing Manager said that powers were different depending on whether the perpetrator was the tenant or not and she commented on the powers within the Housing Act and Anti-Social Behaviour Act. The Police were also to have additional powers where they could exclude the perpetrator for 48 hours but this could be extended to 28 days if an application to the Magistrates was successful.

In response to a question from Councillor George Hardcastle, the Neighbourhood Housing Manager said that there were formal information sharing meetings with the Police and other agencies as well as regular contact on an ad hoc basis. The recruitment of specialist domestic abuse officers had also given the Housing Service the capacity to deal with the issue.

Councillor Rosetta Dolphin asked whether counselling would be provided to officers dealing with reports of domestic abuse. The Neighbourhood Housing Manager confirmed that counselling would be offered and spoke of the Council's responsibility to the health and wellbeing of its staff. Councillor Sharon Williams felt that people did not know what help was available to them if they were experiencing domestic abuse and welcomed the ongoing support that was to be provided by officers within the Housing Team. Councillor Marion Bateman suggested that the dvd also be shown to the Social and Health Care Overview & Scrutiny Committee as she felt that it was important for as many people as possible to see the dvd. In response to a comment from Councillor Isherwood, the Neighbourhood Housing Manager said that older people did not always relate to the wording of 'domestic abuse' and suggested that different wording be considered.

RESOLVED:

- (a) That the report be noted; and
- (b) That the Committee support the ongoing work of the Neighbourhood Housing Team in tackling domestic abuse.

4. RESPONSIBLE PET OWNERSHIP POLICY

The Neighbourhood Housing Manager introduced a report on the Housing Service's proposed Responsible Pet Ownership Policy.

She detailed the background to the report and explained that the need for developing such a policy had arisen for a wide variety of reasons. The Neighbourhood Housing Team received a broad range of calls from complaints about animal related nuisance to concerns for the welfare of animals kept in council properties. The aim of the policy was to allow the Neighbourhood

Housing Teams to provide clear guidance and a consistent approach across the county. It would deal with a broad range of issues faced by the Housing Team and had been developed through feedback from residents who had reported animal related problems, through a Member workshop held in March 2014 and in consultation with the Tenants Federation. The Neighbourhood Housing Manager advised that if the policy was supported at this meeting, it would be submitted to Cabinet in June and if agreed, an implementation date in the future would be agreed rather than applying the policy retrospectively. She provided a detailed explanation of the issues which had been considered which included implementation issues, the legal framework, the application process, decision making and enforcement. The Neighbourhood Housing Manager also spoke of an accreditation scheme which the Council would look to apply for if the policy was applied.

Mrs. Mavis Crofts from the Tenants Federation said that the Federation had welcomed the opportunity to be consulted on the policy but said that in her opinion, it would be a difficult policy to enforce. She added that it was important that tenants were aware of their responsibilities and she praised the Housing Team for their consistent hard work.

Councillor Rosetta Dolphin echoed the comments that the policy would be difficult to enforce and asked for clarification on when it would be implemented from. She did not agree that residents in flats should be allowed to keep pets unless the property was on the ground floor. In response to a question from Councillor George Hardcastle about the number of staff working within the team, the Neighbourhood Housing Manager said that the team consisted of 11.5 Housing Officers and 3 specialist Anti-social Behaviour Officers. Following a further question from Councillor Hardcastle, she said that whether pets were permitted would depend on individual circumstances but the policy would provide guidance to the Housing Officers for a consistent approach to all requests. She was not aware of any legal action being taken since November 2012 about pets being in properties but she said that tools and powers were in place if required.

Councillor Ray Hughes raised concern about a property in his ward where dogs were kept but which fouled in a play area across the road from the dwelling. He had repeatedly reported it and he added that he felt that the Council should have powers to refuse permission for pets if problems had occurred with tenants in the past. The Neighbourhood Housing Manager advised Councillor Hughes to speak to her following the meeting to provide details of the property.

In referring to an earlier comment about pets being kept in flats, Councillor David Cox said that it was important not to set a precedent about the keeping of pets. The Neighbourhood Housing Manager said that it was an important point but reminded Members that there were different types of flats. Councillor Mike Reece asked if the policy covered the keeping of lambs as pets. The Neighbourhood Housing Manager confirmed that they were not classed as household pets and were therefore not permitted. Councillor Brian Lloyd sought clarification on whether the policy covered the selling of livestock such as rabbits, fish and snakes as a business. The Neighbourhood Housing Manager said that the commercial aspect of animals was detailed in the policy along with the nuisance element of keeping pets. The policy indicated that breeding of pets should not take place and even though neutering of animals could not be

enforced, it would be recommended. The Head of Housing added that if complaints were received about tenants running a business from their property then this could be picked up under the Tenancy Agreement.

Councillor Rosetta Dolphin spoke of a property that had approximately 8 dogs which were being bred and the puppies being sold and asked how large number of dogs being kept in private sector properties was dealt with. The Neighbourhood Housing Manager said that if the business was being undertaken legally and was registered, then there was nothing to prevent private tenants from doing so, but Council tenants would be investigated. Councillor Marion Bateman raised concern about a property in her ward where dogs which were locked up outside barked all day and caused a nuisance for the neighbours. The Neighbourhood Housing Manager said that the application process involved tenants having to indicate where the animals would be kept so that any noise nuisance could be prevented before it began. She agreed to speak to Councillor Bateman about the property following this meeting. Councillor George Hardcastle asked if the policy could include a condition that all dog owners needed to acquire a licence to keep a dog. The Neighbourhood Housing Manager confirmed that this was not possible and added that the policy was the best that the Council could do in its legal framework.

RESOLVED:

- (a) That the proposed Responsible Pet Ownership Policy be supported; and
- (b) That the Committee support the proposal to apply the Responsible Pet Ownership Policy going forward, and not retrospectively.

5. UPDATE ON THE HOUSING ASSET MANAGEMENT SERVICE

The Housing Asset Manager introduced a report to update Members on the progress of the Housing Asset Management Service improvement workstreams. He introduced Denise Price, the Business Performance Manager, to the Committee.

He detailed the background to the report and provided details of some of the main highlights of 2013-14 which included improved performance across all categories of repairs and full delivery of the Capital Programme, again outperforming the promises made in the Choices Document. It was reported that the team had worked closely with the Housing Training Manager to provide both necessary and added value training to all members of the service and a full list of the training provided was detailed. One of the courses which had been identified as being of benefit to the service was scaffolding, as being able to carry out this task in-house would reduce the amount of spend with external contractors. A corporate fleet review had been undertaken and the proposed new ownership model would generate efficiencies through both cost of vehicles and improved productivity as a result of revised arrangements for vehicle servicing and safety checks.

On the issue of mobile working, the Housing Asset Manager said that there had been some initial difficulties but the issues were being addressed and a robust solution to provide an effective, fit for purpose Mobile Working solution for

the future was being identified. A site visit had been undertaken by Housing and IT officers to an authority where the proposed solution had been implemented in order to view the new solution in a working environment and to discuss the risks and benefits of the system. The Housing Asset Manager provided details of the new solution and explained that the project to implement the new solution would be undertaken in three stages which he detailed. The team had achieved significant improvements in performance across all categories of repairs over the last 12 months and continued to work towards further improvement with the aim of achieving top quartile status for the service. It was predicted that over 49,000 additional repairs would have been carried out in 2013-14 which was over 3000 more than the last financial year and a further 2000 more than the 2011-12 financial year. The Housing Asset Manager spoke of the performance around vacant properties and added that there had been a number of improvements to management arrangements and business processes during the year which had driven the improvements. Further developments were planned for the forthcoming year to continue progress which included revised voids standards, in-house Welsh Housing Quality Standard (WHQS) kitchen team and improved performance reports. He advised that 99.69% of gas servicing checks had been undertaken in 2013-14 but added that the target remained as 100% and the team was committed to working with Housing Management to achieve that in 2014-15.

The Housing Asset Manager provided details of the works which it had been intended to provide under the Capital Works Programme for 2013/14 and also details of the works which had been carried out which exceeded the targets. This included 200 bathrooms which had been delivered to meet WHQS which had not initially been included in the programme but which had since been allocated some funding. Following agreement with Welsh Government of a revised business plan to achieve WHQS by 2020, a number of measures had been undertaken to progress delivery of the standard, which were detailed in the report. The next step was to develop a revised delivery programme incorporating information and feedback and this would be undertaken in three stages which were also detailed. The priorities for the forthcoming financial year 2014-15 included implementing a revised Mobile Working solution in the service, improving van stock management and developing a six year Investment Programme to achieve WHQS.

Councillor Mike Reece welcomed the report but raised concern about van users taking their vehicles home when they were on holiday. Also he felt that the supervision of the caretakers should be undertaken as part of the Building Maintenance Team. The Housing Asset Manager said that he would discuss both of these issues with the Head of Housing following this meeting.

In raising concern about problems that had previously occurred on Mobile Working, Councillor Rosetta Dolphin said that it was important to ensure that the new system was suitable for the service. The Housing Asset Manager acknowledged that there had been problems in the past but said that the service would have been looking to upgrade at this time anyway so a system that was more flexible and updated would be of benefit. In response to a further comment from Councillor Dolphin, the Housing Asset Manager said that once the analysis of the Capital Programme had been undertaken the programme would be revised. Councillor Ian Dunbar raised concern about delays in the provision of kitchens which were being specifically designed to fit but welcomed the

improvement in the repairs service. In response to a question from Councillor Dunbar, the Housing Asset Manager provided further details of lone working and explained that processes and procedures were in place to ensure the safety of the workforce.

Councillor George Hardcastle welcomed the report and asked that the thanks of the Committee be passed to the workforce for the improvements made. Following a question from Councillor Hardcastle about mobile working, the Housing Asset Manager explained that the new proposal would cost significantly less than what had been budgeted for and said that the budget would cover the new devices and include a scheduling element too. If problems occurred with the new devices then the back-up system would be the devices that were currently in place which would mean that there would never be any risk that the service could not continue.

Councillor Hilary Isherwood raised concern about two issues with resident's kitchens in her ward which she asked the Head of Housing to consider. She also raised concern about council houses which did not have a back door as she felt that it was crucial to have two escape routes from a property. She asked whether this would be covered by the WHQS. The Housing Asset Manager advised that he did not know whether this would be part of WHQS but said that he would make enquiries and would provide a response to Councillor Isherwood. He added that the issue of properties not having a back door would be addressed during the property having a kitchen upgrade.

In response to a question from Councillor Amanda Bragg about problems that may arise with gardens of properties when residents take over a tenancy, the Head of Housing said that it was hoped that any issues could be dealt with under the new six year capital programme. She added that the Tenancy Agreement would make clear that the garden was the responsibility of the tenant, but it was important to ensure that it was in a suitable condition before the tenancy commenced. The Housing Asset Manager said that ideally, all of the issues would be addressed when the property was void and added that external repairs/alterations would form a large part of the new six year plan. Councillor Isherwood asked if there were any proposals to use parts of larger gardens as parking areas in wards which had a lack of parking and the Housing Asset Manager said that it could be looked at as part of the environmental project and that each area would be addressed on its merits.

RESOLVED:

- (a) That the report be noted;
- (b) That now the service was delivering sustained improved performance that an annual update report to Committee be provided in future.

6. FORWARD WORK PROGRAMME

The Housing and Learning Overview and Scrutiny Facilitator introduced the report to consider the Forward Work Programme for the Committee.

The Facilitator explained that an All Member workshop on Tackling Long Term Vacant Private Homes had been arranged for 2 June 2014. She detailed the items for consideration at the 10 June 2014 meeting of the Committee and explained that there were several items listed which were to be scheduled. As the diary for 2014/15 had been agreed at the Annual Meeting held earlier in the week, the Facilitator suggested that a Forward Work Programme planning workshop be held so that the agreed meeting dates for the Committee could be populated.

RESOLVED:

- (a) That the Forward Work Programme be agreed; and
- (b) That a Forward Work Programme planning workshop be arranged to allow the meeting dates for 2014/15 to be populated.

7. MEMBERS OF THE PUBLIC AND PRESS IN ATTENDANCE

There was one member of the public and one member of the press in attendance.

(The meeting started at 10.00and and ended at 12.26pm)

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Chairman