

HOUSING OVERVIEW & SCRUTINY COMMITTEE
26 NOVEMBER 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, 26 November 2014

PRESENT: Councillor Ron Hampson (Chairman)

Councillors: Amanda Bragg, David Cox, Paul Cunningham, Peter Curtis, Ron Davies, Rosetta Dolphin, George Hardcastle, Brian Lloyd, Mike Reece and Gareth Roberts

SUBSTITUTE: Councillor Alison Halford (for Jim Falshaw)

APOLOGIES: Councillors Ray Hughes and Sharon Williams

ALSO PRESENT: Councillors Haydn Bateman and Adele Davies-Cooke

CONTRIBUTORS: Cabinet Member for Housing, Chief Officer (Community & Enterprise), Neighbourhood Housing Manager, Community Support Services Manager and Team Leader (Neighbourhood Housing)

Flintshire Strategic Housing & Regeneration Programme Manager (for minute number 39)

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

At the start of the meeting, the Chairman congratulated the Housing team following the success of North East Wales Homes as overall winner in the 'New Idea of the Year' category of the Welsh Housing Awards 2014. He also paid tribute to Helen Grant, the Neighbourhood Housing Manager, who was due to leave the Council and wished her success in her new job. Councillor George Hardcastle added his own congratulations to all in the Housing team and to Helen Grant.

36. DECLARATIONS OF INTEREST (INCLUDING WHIPPING DECLARATIONS)

None were received.

37. MINUTES

The minutes of the meeting held on 15 October 2014 had been circulated with the agenda.

Matters Arising

Minute number 30: Welfare Reform Update - the Neighbourhood Housing Manager agreed to respond to Councillor Paul Cunningham's question about the number of tenants who had fallen into the 'won't pay' rather than 'can't pay' category of rent arrears and had refused support offered by the Council.

Minute number 31: Welsh Housing Quality Standard (WHQS) Delivery Programme Update - Councillor Mike Reece expressed his gratitude to the Housing team for their work on solid brick wall properties and called for representations to be made to the Welsh Government (WG) for further schemes to benefit more areas. The Chief Officer (Community & Enterprise) explained that the programme had initially been targeted at specific wards fitting the criteria set by WG, however Cabinet approval had recently been given to bidding for European funding which, if successful, could extend energy programmes across the county.

Councillor Peter Curtis referred to comments he had made around the cladding of high-rise flats in Flint and Councillor Ron Davies spoke about the need to use local products. The Chief Officer confirmed that the work would be undertaken on all three high-rise blocks, as included in the Asset Management report to the Committee in June 2014. She said that local suppliers were used wherever possible and would ascertain details of the insulation products to be used.

RESOLVED:

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

38. VARIATION IN ORDER OF BUSINESS

Following a suggestion by the Chair, a change in the order of business was agreed to bring forward agenda items 5 and 6 due to the availability of the officers concerned.

39. NORTH EAST WALES HOMES - UPDATE

The Flintshire Strategic Housing & Regeneration Programme Manager introduced the report detailing progress on the establishment of North East Wales (NEW) Homes along with progress to date against the business plan since the company had started trading in April 2014. Members were reminded of the Council's objectives in creating the housing company - the first in Wales to do so - which had been acknowledged in the award mentioned by the Chairman at the start of the meeting. Information was shared on the setup and role of the Board of Directors and the working arrangement with Council officers, recharged to the company.

To date, 15 new-build properties had been transferred to the company by developers as part of Section 106 obligations, with a further ten expected over the next 12 months. These properties currently managed by the company (2-3 bedroom homes in Penyffordd and Penymynydd) were helping to address local housing need in those areas and provided income streams for re-investment.

Although the take-up on the landlord management offer was below that projected, it was felt that the target number in the business plan may have been too ambitious in the first year, however negotiations were ongoing with other interested private landlords. Proposals were also outlined for an over-55 lease

scheme (identified as an area of need), although slower progress was anticipated due to the complexities involved.

Work was being undertaken to develop a robust framework to deliver services in the long-term and there were plans to increase marketing of the company which had so far been limited. As part of the Strategic Housing & Regeneration Programme (SHARP), the number of affordable properties managed by the Council would increase in future years and discussions were taking place on proposed sites, with the successful bidder due to be announced by May 2015. Although progress on NEW Homes had been slower than expected, partly due to some issues outside the Council's control, it was felt that excellent progress had been made overall and lessons learned which would be taken forward.

Councillor Rosetta Dolphin said that slow progress was positive as it was important to get it right. In response to queries, the Flintshire Strategic Housing & Regeneration Programme Manager advised that the properties managed by the company were exempt from Right to Buy legislation and that no future delays were expected on gifted units as the process previously used was now in place and the Welsh Government aware of the company's aims. Assurances were given that charges for Council officer time and the type of work undertaken for NEW Homes was closely monitored so that this was not at the expense of the Council. As the company's portfolio developed, future income streams would enable staff to be directly employed. In response to comments on the over 55 lease scheme, this would take longer to develop due to the complex process involved and to ensure that this was not to the detriment of individuals already on the housing register.

Whilst Councillor Amanda Bragg welcomed the over 55 lease scheme, she asked for clarification on the process. The Community Support Services Manager explained the need for individual discussions with interested homeowners to help remove potential barriers and help them access more suitable accommodation. Criteria would also involve assessing rentable demand for the individual's property and managing expectations and prioritisation of properties.

Councillor Mike Reece spoke of the potential for any unused Council buildings such as libraries to be converted to flats for management by NEW Homes.

RESOLVED:

- (a) That progress in establishing and setting up the company and the first six months' performance be noted; and
- (b) That the future development plans of the company be noted.

40. HOUSING ACT WALES 2014

The Community Support Services Manager introduced an update on progress and early findings from the Council's pilot of the new homeless prevention duty to be introduced as part of the Housing Act Wales 2014. The

report detailed the key changes to homelessness legislation required by the Act to be implemented from April 2015. As part of this, Councils would be required to take all reasonable steps to help individuals threatened with homelessness, irrespective of their priority need status. To help prepare for these significant changes, a pilot had been carried out by the Housing Options Team on aspects of the legislation, with the support of a Shelter Cymru worker, and utilising funding from Welsh Government (WG).

The Community Support Services Manager summarised the results from the first six months of the pilot, as appended to the report, which would be shared with other Councils and WG. During this period, there had been no reduction in the number of homeless applications, however an improvement had been shown in the reduced use of bed and breakfast accommodation. Following this first update, the team was keen to develop some of the key areas and a further progress report would be brought back to the Committee at a later date.

Councillor Paul Cunningham praised the early proactive approach being taken by the team. In response to a question, the Community Support Services Manager said that those unable to pay rent were referred to Supporting People where help was available to retain tenancies and prevent homelessness. Further feedback would be given in future update reports.

Councillor Peter Curtis spoke of the Council's duty on homelessness and the challenges of allocating properties to perpetrators of anti-social behaviour which impacted on neighbours. He was advised of the Council's stance in taking action against any tenants demonstrating persistent bad behaviour, however evidence suggested that the majority of homelessness occurred when individuals were unable to pay their rent through no fault of their own. A breakdown of reasons for homelessness would be included in the next update report to the Committee.

Councillor David Cox welcomed the approach taken by the team and felt that a greater financial responsibility should be taken by WG to deal with homelessness in view of the legislation.

Comments were raised by Councillor Gareth Roberts on prioritising the allocation of Council properties and the importance of retaining local connection in some cases. In response, it was explained that ex-offenders would be treated the same as other homeless presentations under the new legislation.

RESOLVED:

That the progress of the pilot and the early findings and implications be noted.

41. SERVICE CHARGES/ASSISTED GARDENING SERVICE

The Chief Officer (Community & Enterprise) presented the report detailing options for the Council to separate services from base rents and to introduce service charging to individual tenants, as required by the Welsh Government (WG).

Proposals to introduce service charging had been agreed as part of the rent policy for Council housing, approved by Cabinet in September 2014. Whilst a full range of chargeable services had been set out by WG, the Council had taken a view that additional charges should not be applied for services that were essential to living in particular accommodation. It was proposed that charges would be made for communal services such as cleaning as well as individual services for grass and hedge cutting. A review of quality/provision of services was planned, together with a full consultation process prior to the introduction of charging on a phased approach over three years starting in 2016, with new tenants due to incur the charges from April 2015 having received notification of this at the tenancy offer stage.

Explanation was provided on the outcome of changes to the assisted gardening service in April 2014, which had prompted a review. The new approach was more simplified: two different charges for small or medium/large gardens and a single charge for hedge cutting. Charges would be payable weekly/monthly with rent payments and discounts would be applied for older or disabled tenants who were unable to carry out the service themselves.

In relation to the options for the service charging policy, Councillor Peter Curtis commented on the need for fair charging on the use of shared services by those in sheltered accommodation. He stressed the importance of meaningful consultation with involvement of Members, and raised concerns about the effect of charges on tenants and the potential challenge for tenants who were living off a pension or disability benefit.

Councillor Rosetta Dolphin raised concerns about the cost of grass cutting, the additional percentage of charges on top of base rent and possible discrepancies in the levels of rent paid for flats and houses. Whilst noting that 67% of Flintshire's tenants were currently in receipt of full or partial housing benefit, she pointed out that the remaining tenants may be just above the threshold and therefore unable to afford this additional cost if they required the services.

The Cabinet Member for Housing pointed out that the proposals demonstrated fairness in ensuring that tenants were not paying for services that they did not require.

The Chief Officer acknowledged the concerns raised but pointed out that the proposals reflected the minimum requirements to comply with the WG mandate and that extensive work had been carried out to consider the fairness of options, taking into account the different needs of individuals. Those in receipt of full housing benefit would be exempt from the charges (apart from the individual gardening service which was not eligible) and those in receipt of partial housing benefit would receive a proportionate discount. In terms of base rent on properties, the Council had followed the rent policy set by WG, subsequently approved by Cabinet, where for example the target rent on a 3-bedroom flat was lower than a 3-bedroom house. The separation of service charges would help to address any discrepancies where the same rent applied to 2-bedroom flats and houses. Clarification was given on the individual grass cutting service where 14 cuts per year amounted to just over £5 per cut.

The Neighbourhood Housing Manager explained that the proposals had been shared at the Tenants' Conference where various options had been put forward. However, examples such as coin operated laundry services to charge only those who used them could mean those who would be eligible for the charge to be covered by Housing Benefit would then have to pay directly to use the service. The approach was therefore to consider charging on a scheme-by-scheme basis in line with demand/feedback from tenants.

The Team Leader provided information on her involvement in a regional group to exchange ideas with other Councils on charging options and gave assurances of Member involvement in the consultation process. She gave examples of the type of discussions held and referred to assessments of standards to ensure that services provided value for money for tenants.

The Chief Officer highlighted the importance of reviewing the needs of individual schemes as opposed to a blanket approach.

In response to concerns raised by some Members, Councillor George Hardcastle said that separation of charges was a requirement put upon all Councils by WG. In moving the report, he stated that assurances had been given for thorough consultation to ensure the best outcome for tenants.

Councillor Brian Lloyd suggested that the Council's newsletter could help to raise awareness of the future charges to enable tenants to plan ahead.

In thanking the officers for the report, Councillor Ron Davies welcomed the approach to minimise the impact of WG requirements but felt that the timing of charges introduced for new tenants may raise issues.

Following a similar comment from Councillor Dolphin, the Chief Officer reiterated that new tenants would be made fully aware of the base rent and service charges at the point of being offered a property.

Members felt it was important that all tenants should be made fully aware that the separation of service charges had been instigated by WG and not the Council.

RESOLVED:

- (a) That the agreed plan for the phased implementation of service charges for existing tenants from 2016 following detailed consultation, be noted;
- (b) That full implementation of service charges will take effect for new tenants from April 2015 be noted; and
- (c) That the proposals in the report to re-introduce charging for the assisted garden service in 2016, following detailed customer consultation, be supported, on the basis that there should only be two charges for grass cutting and one for hedges, and that payments can be made weekly.

42. FORWARD WORK PROGRAMME

The Housing & Learning Overview & Scrutiny Facilitator introduced a report to enable the Committee to consider the Forward Work Programme. The following changes were agreed:

- Update on Tenant Involvement to be deferred to 24 April 2015
- Performance of the Anti-Social Behaviour Unit to be brought forward to 14 January 2015
- Allocation Policy for Sheltered Accommodation (in response to concerns raised by Councillor Rosetta Dolphin) to be added as a future agenda item

The Facilitator gave a reminder of the workshop scheduled for 7 January 2015 on the introduction of self-financing for the Housing Revenue Account. Notification had been issued to all Members by email and letter.

Members who had been unable to attend the recent Welsh Housing Quality Standard (WHQS) workshops would be forwarded the information which had been circulated, with the opportunity to raise any questions with Tony Jones. Councillor Peter Curtis commended the information and responses provided at the workshops. The Chief Officer said that she would pass this feedback on to those concerned.

RESOLVED:

That the Forward Work Programme be updated accordingly.

43. 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 11.35 am)

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Chairman