

HOUSING OVERVIEW & SCRUTINY COMMITTEE
14 JANUARY 2015

Minutes of the meeting of the Housing Overview & Scrutiny Committee of Flintshire County Council held in the Delyn Committee Room, County Hall, Mold CH7 6NA on Wednesday, 14 January 2015

PRESENT: Councillor Ron Hampson (Chairman)

Councillors: Paul Cunningham, Ron Davies, Rosetta Dolphin, Jim Falshaw, George Hardcastle (Vice-Chairman), Hilary Isherwood, Brian Lloyd and Gareth Roberts

SUBSTITUTES: Councillors Nancy Matthews (for Amanda Bragg), Ian Dunbar (for Peter Curtis) and Paul Shotton (for Sharon Williams)

APOLOGIES: Councillor Mike Reece

ALSO PRESENT: Senior Officer (Allocations and Homelessness)

CONTRIBUTORS: : Cabinet Member for Housing, Chief Officer (Community & Enterprise), Senior Manager Council Housing Services, Housing Regeneration and Strategy Manager, Team Leader Neighbourhood Housing Management, and Acting Community Support Services Manager

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

44. DECLARATIONS OF INTEREST (INCLUDING WHIPPING DECLARATIONS)

None were received.

45. MINUTES

The minutes of the meeting held on 26 November 2014 had been circulated with the agenda.

RESOLVED:

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

46. QUARTER 2 IMPROVEMENT PLAN MONITORING REPORTS (HOUSING)

The Chief Officer (Community and Enterprise) introduced a report on the 2014/15 Improvement Plan Monitoring Report relevant to the Committee. The report covered the period July – September 2014.

The Chief Officer advised that the following Improvement Plan sub-priority reports were attached to the report for the Committee's consideration:

- Extra Care Housing
- Modern, Efficient and Adapted Homes

- Achieve the Wales Housing Quality Standard (WQHS)
- Welfare Reform
- Fuel Poverty

The Chief Officer reported on progress and risks concerning the Extra Care Housing, Modern, Efficient and Adapted Homes, and Welfare Reform. She invited the Senior Manager Council Housing Services, and Housing Regeneration and Strategy Manager, to report on the sub priorities to achieve the WQHS, and Fuel Poverty.

The Chairman invited members to raise questions.

Councillor Paul Shotton referred to the 'van stock' trial and asked if it was working well. He also commented on the introduction of Universal Credit forms which had to be completed online and asked if staff at the Connects Centres would be able to assist individuals with this task. The Senior Manager Council Housing Services advised that the phased roll out of van stock by trade type would be completed by the end of January. The impact of this had been monitored and early indications were showing reduced visits to the trade store at Greenfield. The Chief Officer gave an assurance that training would be provided at the Connects Centres to enable staff to assist claimants complete forms online.

Councillor Hilary Isherwood asked how the Authority was supporting tenants who found themselves in debt as a result of mental health issues. The Acting Community Support Services Manager advised that the Supporting People Team were providing assistance to tenants with low level mental health problems as part of a pilot scheme which was being launched by HAFAL for two years which would assist people to move on from accessing statutory services.

Councillor Rosetta Dolphin raised concerns over the proposed location of the Extra Care facility in Holywell and asked whether alternative sites could be considered. She also asked whether the Extra Care facility would provide support for specialist dementia care. Referring to the sub priority to achieve the WQHS, she commented on the need for inspections to be carried out after contractors had completed property renovations. She also asked how many tenants had agreed to the full 'whole house approach'. The Chief Officer advised that a full evaluation of all the potential sites was undertaken and if local Members had any objections they could feed these to the Council as appropriate. She gave an assurance that specialist support for dementia patients would be provided at the Extra Care facility in Holywell. The Senior Manager Council Housing Services explained that as part of the new WQHS delivery programme a Project Manager, Tenant Liaison Officer, and Clerk of Works, would be appointed. The role of the Clerk of Works would be specifically to monitor and inspect the work of the contractors. He agreed to provide information to Councillor Dolphin on the number of tenants who were in support of the 'whole house approach' following the meeting.

Councillor Ian Dunbar referred to the issue of rent arrears and asked what actions were being taken to reduce the level of rent arrears. The Acting Community Support Services Manager outlined the action taken to support

tenants to remain in their homes and the work undertaken with them to develop a payment plan which would assist them to reduce the debt.

Councillor Nancy Matthews sought clarification on the legislation on the Right to Buy scheme. The Chief Officer explained that tenants could currently purchase their property under the Right to Buy scheme if they had lived in the property for more than 5 years. As part of the new council house development programme the Council was looking to request that the Welsh Government suspended the Right to Buy scheme for any new council houses built in Flintshire for initially 5 years with a view to seeking a further suspension at the end of the 5 years. This suspension would not effect current housing tenants.

Councillor George Hardcastle welcomed the increase in the number of council houses that were to be built and asked whether there was likely to be a further increase in the future. The Chief Officer explained that £15m of funding had been allocated to build 150 new homes with a view to the remaining 50 homes being funded from further efficiencies in the Housing Service.

Councillor Hilary Isherwood expressed the view that local Members should have an input into the council house allocation process due to their knowledge of the local community. The Chief Officer explained that it was helpful for Members to be proactive in contacting the Housing Officer when they became aware of a vacant property if sensitive issues needed to be considered, however, Members could not be consulted regarding council house allocation.

Councillor Rosetta Dolphin requested that an update report be provided to the Committee on the proposed suspension of the Right to Buy scheme for new council houses. The Committee agreed that this would be added to the Forward Work Programme.

RESOLVED:

- (a) That the report be noted;
- (b) That the comments/observations of the Committee are fed back to the Corporate Resources Overview & Scrutiny Committee who are responsible for the overview and monitoring of performance.

47. HOUSING MID YEAR CHIEF OFFICER PERFORMANCE REPORTS

The Committee received a report on the 2014/15 Mid Year Service Performance Report produced at Chief Officer level for the respective portfolio. The report covered the period April to September 2014.

The Chief Officer (Community and Enterprise) presented the Mid Year Chief Officer Performance Report for Community and Enterprise and reported on the positive performance and concerns for the following business plan areas:

- Housing Revenue Account
- Regeneration
- Customer Services
- Economic Development

Referring to the Housing Revenue Account (HRA), the Chief Officer agreed to provide feedback following a meeting she was attending in Cardiff .on the proposed changes to the HRA Subsidy, to the meeting of the Committee to be held on 24 February 2015.

RESOLVED:

- (a) That the report be noted;
- (b) That the comments/observations of the Committee are fed back to the Corporate Resources Overview & Scrutiny Committee who are responsible for the overview and monitoring of performance.

48. UPDATE ON THE IMPLEMENTATION OF SARTH

The Acting Community Support Services Manager introduced a report to update the committee on the development of the Single Access Route to Housing Project (SARTH) across the North East Wales sub region and the development of a Common Housing Register in Flintshire.

The Acting Community Support Services Manager provided background information and explained that the SARTH policy would be simpler than the current points based system. Applicants would be given reasonable preference determined by a banding scheme which listed people in date order of their application within each band. Reasonable preference would be given to those who fell within the statutory categories such as homelessness, overcrowding, living in unsanitary conditions, medical grounds or hardship. She advised that the SARTH policy included a revised allocation policy and changes to the way that the register was currently managed to move away from a focus on accessing social housing towards providing advice on realistic housing options.

The Acting Community Support Services Manager referred to the key considerations which were detailed in the report and advised that all current applicants for social housing would receive a letter at the beginning of January 2015 requesting that they complete and return a reply slip if they wish to remain on the housing register and still require social housing. Once the applicant had

confirmed that they wished to remain on the Register they would be contacted by a member of staff from the Housing Solutions Team so that they could discuss the changes to the allocation policy, their circumstances, and assess which band, if any, they could be placed into. The new system would place people in date order in their priority band group. For existing applicants their original application date would transfer.

The Acting Community Support Services Manager explained that only those people with an identified housing need would be placed on the new housing register, although the Council had made a commitment that if a current applicant did not meet the criteria for any of the new Banding priorities they would be able to remain on the old register and may be considered for a housing allocation if there were no suitable applicants for a vacancy on the new common housing register. Applicants would be informed that if no suitable allocation was identified within a 12-month period then they would be assisted with other options and removed from the register. During discussion it was agreed that a copy of the letter being sent to applicants and the FAQ booklets, which were also to be sent to tenants, would be circulated to Members beforehand.

Members considered the draft Common Allocation Policy which was appended to the report. In response to the comments raised on the quality of the Policy and the text which was missing in section 13.3, the Acting Community Support Services Manager agreed to amend the Policy and provide an updated version to Members.

RESOLVED:

- (a) That the Committee note the progress made to implement a new allocation policy and common housing register;
- (b) That the phased transfer of applicants to the new register including Housing Association applicants, be supported; and
- (c) That the proposals to set a 12 month timescale for those with no identified housing need to be able to remain on the original register be supported.

49. ANTI-SOCIAL BEHAVIOUR POLICY

The Senior Manager Council Housing Services introduced a report on the changes made by the Anti-Social Behaviour Crime and Policing Act 2014 as they effected housing management. He explained that to utilise the new tools and powers made available by the new legislation it had been necessary to revise the Council's Anti-Social Behaviour Policy. The revised Anti-Social Behaviour Policy was appended to the report for Members' consideration.

The Senior Manager Council Housing Services provided background information and referred to the new powers introduced by the above Act which were available to social landlords such as the Council's Housing Team.

Councillor Paul Shotton commented on the use of 48 hour Dispersal Notices and asked how often it had been used. The Team Leader, Neighbourhood Housing Management, explained that this Notice was issued by

the Police and agreed to provide information about the Notice to the Committee following the meeting.

Councillor Ron Davies commented on his experience as a Magistrate and said that in the consideration of cases of tenants who had vandalised their properties the values of compensation were not being provided by the Council. The Senior Manager Council Housing Services explained that the re-charge value was based on the labour and material rate but would seek further information on this to ensure the amounts were being presented to the Courts.

Councillor Paul Cunningham suggested that the number of Anti Social Behaviour (ASB) cases addressed should be better publicised in the media. He also suggested that the Committee received quarterly update reports on the number of ASB cases dealt with. The Chief Officer (Community and Enterprise) agreed that this information would be included in future quarterly performance reports.

Councillor Paul Shotton asked what support was provided to witnesses of incidents of ASB. The Team Leader, Neighbourhood Housing Management explained that witnesses were supported by Officers throughout the process and that the Authority had signed up to PROTEC.

RESOLVED:

- (a) That the new tools and powers available to social landlords and amendments to the Anti-Social Behaviour Policy be supported; and
- (b) That the Council's continued approach of dealing with each complaint of Anti-Social Behaviour on a case by case basis, and only taking legal enforcement action when it is reasonable and proportionate to do so be supported.

50. HOUSING FORWARD WORK PROGRAMME

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

The Committee agreed with the suggestion that Officers from Wales and West be invited to the meeting of the Committee to be held on 24 February 2015, and that the other two Registered Social Landlord's be invited to attend the meetings of the Committee to be held on 24 April, and 1 June 2015.

The Chief Officer (Community and Enterprise) suggested that the Supporting People Commissioning Plan also be presented to the meeting of the Committee to be held on 24 February 2015. The Committee supported the suggestion. It was further agreed that a report on Homelessness – Intentionality be presented at the meeting on 24 February.

The Committee agreed that a report on the Allocation Policy for Sheltered Accommodation be presented to the meeting of the Committee to be held on 1 June 2015.

RESOLVED:

That the Forward Work Programme be updated accordingly.

51. MEMBERS OF THE PUBLIC AND PRESS IN ATTENDANCE

There was one member of the press in attendance.

(The meeting started at 2.00 pm and ended at 3.50 pm)

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Chairman