

COMMUNITY AND ENTERPRISE OVERVIEW & SCRUTINY COMMITTEE
20 MAY 2015

Minutes of the meeting of the Community and Enterprise Overview & Scrutiny Committee of Flintshire County Council held in the Delyn Committee Room, County Hall, Mold on Wednesday, 20 May 2015

PRESENT:

Councillors: Paul Cunningham, Ron Davies, Rosetta Dolphin, Ian Dunbar, Ron Hampson, George Hardcastle, Ray Hughes, Brian Lloyd, Vicky Perfect and Mike Reece

SUBSTITUTE: Councillor Dave Mackie (for Gareth Roberts)

APOLOGY: Councillor Amanda Bragg

ALSO PRESENT: Councillors Derek Butler and David Cox

CONTRIBUTORS: Cabinet Member for Housing, Chief Officer (Community & Enterprise), Manager - Advice & Homelessness Service, Revenues & Benefits Manager, Revenues Manager and Housing Regeneration & Strategy Manager

IN ATTENDANCE: Member Engagement Manager and Committee Officer

1. APPOINTMENT OF CHAIR

The Member Engagement Manager said that Councillor Ron Hampson had been appointed to this role at the Council's Annual General Meeting on 12 May 2015 and therefore a vote on the nomination was not required.

RESOLVED:

That the appointment of Councillor Ron Hampson as Chair be confirmed.

2. APPOINTMENT OF VICE-CHAIR

In seeking nominations for a Vice-Chair for the Committee, the Chairman nominated Councillor G. Hardcastle. This was seconded by Councillor Ian Dunbar and on being put to the vote, this was carried. No further nominations were received.

RESOLVED:

That Councillor George Hardcastle be appointed Vice-Chair of the Committee.

3. DECLARATIONS OF INTEREST (INCLUDING WHIPPING DECLARATIONS)

No declarations of interest were received.

4. TERMS OF REFERENCE OF THE COMMITTEE

The Member Engagement Manager presented the Committee's Terms of Reference which had been produced as part of an extensive review of the Overview & Scrutiny structure. The Terms of Reference combined the responsibilities of the former Housing Overview & Scrutiny Committee, along with scrutiny responsibility for the regeneration functions of the Environment Overview & Scrutiny Committee and Revenues & Benefits functions of the Corporate Resources Overview & Scrutiny Committee.

RESOLVED:

That the report be received.

5. WELFARE REFORM UPDATE

The Chief Officer (Community & Enterprise) reminded Members that updates on welfare reform would no longer be shared with the Corporate Resources Overview & Scrutiny in line with the revised Terms of Reference.

The Manager - Advice & Homelessness Service presented the update on the latest position with the ongoing transformation of the social security system and the activities to provide help and support to Flintshire residents affected by changes to their social security and tax credit income. He spoke about the support given to Flintshire households impacted by the benefit cap and advised that additional funding had been given by the Welsh Government (WG) to continue to support the Discretionary Assistance Fund for 2015/16.

An update on Discretionary Housing Payments described an assessment process to help target financial help at households most in need and encourage them to put in place appropriate measures to achieve a manageable, sustainable financial position. It had been found that the majority of households being awarded these payments had been in rent arrears due to the impact of one or more welfare forms, mainly the spare room subsidy. On Personal Independence Payments (PIP), the Welfare Rights team had helped 220 residents to make successful applications during 2014/15. By March 2015, the average waiting time for a decision on a PIP application had reduced to 12 weeks.

On the spare room subsidy, it was reported that a legal case relating to disabled tenants was due to be heard later in the year by the Supreme Court with the outcome eagerly awaited across the UK. Attention was drawn to information in the report showing the impact of the spare room subsidy and the Council's proactive response.

The Manager - Advice & Homelessness Service also updated the Committee on progress with the continued phased rollout of Universal Credit and work done by the Council to support the safe implementation across the county, an approach which had been recognised and welcomed. As part of the next phase of welfare reforms, he highlight further expected changes and work by the Council to help manage the impact on residents.

The Chairman praised the good work of the teams in helping those affected welfare reform, but raised concerns about future cuts to funding.

Following comments by Councillor George Hardcastle on Table 2 in the report, it was explained that this showed the position in March 2015 where 439 tenants were in rent arrears affected partly or wholly by the spare room subsidy. The Revenues & Benefits Manager provided explanation on the circumstances of one tenant owing total arrears of £5,280 leading to a court decision to suspend the eviction order. He said that this was typical of a number of cases where the arrears were paid off in small amounts over a long period of time.

The Chief Officer commented on the complexity of such cases, adding that Members' views would be sought on the future approach due to the shortage of smaller properties for those affected to move to. She gave assurance that the Council pursued non-payment of rent and took a proactive stance in seeking agreement of affordable terms with those individuals. In response to a request from Councillor Hardcastle, she explained that it was not possible to separate payments for rent arrears and spare room subsidy on accounts as both formed part of the rent owed. However, she agreed to bring a full update on rent arrears to a future meeting.

Councillor Rosetta Dolphin asked about the rent arrears total. The Revenues & Benefits Manager replied that arrears were currently in the region of £1.003m, an increase of £33K on the same period last year mainly due to the impacts of welfare reforms. Consequently the Income Team had made a number of changes such as reviewing each case accruing arrears of over £300 and switching their focus to debt management.

In response to a question on Universal Credit, officers clarified that the changes in data sharing law only applied to claims made by social housing tenants and not those with private landlords.

Councillor Paul Cunningham welcomed the approach being taken by the Council to mitigate the impact of welfare reforms and praised the teams involved. Councillor Ron Davies echoed these views but added his concerns about the time taken for some rent arrears to be recuperated. Councillor Mike Reece added his thanks to the Cabinet Member and officer team.

When asked about the time of the last eviction for rent arrears, the Revenues & Benefits Manager did not have the information to hand. The Chief Officer agreed that this would be included in the rent arrears update.

RESOLVED:

- (a) That the report be received: and
- (b) That the Committee continues to support the ongoing work that is being undertaken by the Council and its partners to attempt to mitigate the full impact of the welfare reforms on vulnerable households.

6. WELSH GOVERNMENT CONSULTATION ON COUNCIL TAX PREMIUMS FOR SECOND HOMES AND LONG TERM EMPTY PROPERTY

The Committee received a report detailing Welsh Government (WG) consultations seeking views on the policy of giving Local Authorities discretionary powers regarding a Council Tax premium that could be applied to second homes and long-term empty properties. The Chief Officer (Community & Enterprise) explained that the report had been submitted to the first available meeting of this Committee in line with its revised Terms of Reference. Due to the timing of this change, Cabinet had already endorsed the responses to the consultation earlier in the week, however the Committee was assured that its views would be shared with the Deputy Leader to consider including in the Council's response to WG by 13 June 2015.

The Revenues Manager summarised the background to the report relating to legislation allowing local authorities to charge a Council Tax premium at a level of up to 100% above the normal level on long-term empty homes and second homes in their areas. The consultation by WG sought feedback on possible exemptions from the premium, as set out in the report, with appropriate time limits set as a safeguarding measure. As a future consideration, the Revenues Manager explained that any decision made by the Council to introduce a premium of up to an additional 100% would need to allow for a minimum of 12 months before the implementation of that policy.

Councillor Rosetta Dolphin felt it was unfair for some residents to be potentially charged double the amount of Council Tax on their empty properties. The Chief Officer said that she understood the concerns raised but that maximising income to the Council would minimise the need to seek savings. Whilst there was empathy with many of the households potentially affected, she pointed out that there were many more cases where empty properties were the subject of wider concerns in the community.

Councillor Dolphin referred to the proposed delayed premium charging applicable to empty and substantially unfurnished properties for 12 months and said that this could be evaded by the property being marketed for sale at an unrealistic price to delay the premium. The Revenues Manager advised that safeguards would be put in place to identify and monitor such activity. On another matter, he assured Members that owners of empty properties who were living in residential care homes would not be subject to the premium as they were already exempt.

The Housing Regeneration & Strategy Manager said that increasing housing supply was a priority for WG who had made available specific funding to help return long-term vacant properties back into use. In addition, the Council's housing company, North East Wales Homes, was able to work closely to support homeowners to make their empty properties available to let.

Councillor Dave Mackie referred to the difficulties in selling properties and felt that another mechanism was needed to deal with 'problem' properties that remained vacant over the longer term. Officers explained that the proposed additional Council Tax premium was one of a range of tools available to the

Council and provided information on the introduction of 'empty dwelling management orders' agreed by Cabinet in 2014.

The Housing Regeneration & Strategy Manager agreed to speak separately with Councillor Paul Cunningham about a query on the completion of property developments.

In response to a question from Councillor George Hardcastle, the Revenues Manager said that liability for paying Council Tax was generally with the owner of the property.

Councillor Mike Reece thanked the Housing Regeneration & Strategy Manager and his team for their work on properties in his ward.

Following comments from Councillor Ray Hughes on the proposals, the Revenues Manager clarified that the criteria for charging the premium rate would be set as part of the regulations and that there were no plans for local discretion to be applied.

RESOLVED:

That the Committee supports the proposals to exempt certain properties from the Council Tax premium, as set out in the report and endorsed by Cabinet at its meeting on 19 May 2015.

7. DELIVERY OF THE HOUSING REGENERATION & STRATEGY SERVICE

The Housing Regeneration & Strategy Manager presented the report to update the Committee and seek views on the activity of the Housing Regeneration & Strategy Service during 2014/15.

In detailing the key considerations, he referred to the pressures around reduced funding and staff vacancies. Despite this, 2014/15 had been positive in terms of the range of interventions and support given by the service, which had retained its Customer Service Excellence accreditation. The report detailed plans to focus on reducing the timescale for the delivery of disabled adaptations whilst noting that customer satisfaction feedback remained high. The update also included progress on energy efficiency measures and management of the Social Housing Grant Programme as well as WG funding streams for Houses into Homes and Home Improvement Loans.

Following a question from Councillor Mike Reece on solid brick properties, Members were advised that information was currently awaited on the Arbed programme for the current year and that areas would need to be targeted according to that guidance.

Councillor Ian Dunbar welcomed the Group Repair Scheme and in particular the engagement of local contractors and apprenticeships. In response to a question on Renewal Area funding, the Housing Regeneration & Strategy Manager advised that the budget allocation was awaited, but was expected to be less than the £282K allocated for the previous year.

In response to comments by Councillor Dave Mackie on reference to commuted sums in the report, officers said that existing planning consents remained in place and that the Planning Strategy Group was due to review local planning guidance in relation to affordable housing.

Councillor George Hardcastle expressed his appreciation to the officer team for their work on home improvements and repairs.

RESOLVED:

That the Committee welcomes and endorses the activity of the Housing Regeneration & Strategy Service during 2014/15.

8. FORWARD WORK PROGRAMME

The Member Engagement Manager introduced the current Forward Work Programme. The following changes were agreed:

- To move the Update on North East Wales Homes & Property Management to the next meeting on 1 June 2015.
- Following earlier discussion, an update on Rent Arrears would be scheduled for the meeting in September 2015.

The Member Engagement Manager advised that following the change in the Committee's Terms of Reference, a planning session would take place to consider future topics and populate the Forward Work Programme prior to the Summer recess.

RESOLVED:

That the Forward Work Programme be updated accordingly.

9. MEMBERS OF THE PRESS AND PUBLIC IN ATTENDANCE

There was one member of the press in attendance.

(The meeting started at 10.00am and ended at 11.50am)

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Chairman