

COMMUNITY AND ENTERPRISE OVERVIEW & SCRUTINY COMMITTEE
12 OCTOBER 2018

Minutes of the meeting of the Community and Enterprise Overview & Scrutiny Committee of Flintshire County Council held in Delyn Committee Room, Mold on Friday 12 October 2018

PRESENT: **Councillor Ian Dunbar (Chairman)**

Councillors: Jean Davies, Ron Davies, Rosetta Dolphin, George Hardcastle, Ray Hughes, Mike Reece, Paul Shotton and David Wisinger

SUBSTITUTES: Councillors: Chris Dolphin (for Mared Eastwood) and Glyn Banks (for Ted Palmer)

APOLOGIES: Councillors: Dave Cox and Dennis Hutchinson

ALSO PRESENT:

Councillors: Haydn Bateman, Helen Brown, Patrick Heesom and Tony Sharps (initiators of the call-in)

Councillors: Derek Butler, Carol Ellis, Christine Jones, Hilary McGuill and Aaron Shotton (as observers)

CONTRIBUTORS:

Councillor Bernie Attridge, Deputy Leader and Cabinet Member for Housing; Chief Officer (Housing & Assets); Customer Support Manager; Accommodation Support Services Manager and Connects Manager

IN ATTENDANCE:

Democratic Services Manager and Overview & Scrutiny Facilitator

27. DECLARATIONS OF INTEREST (INCLUDING WHIPPING DECLARATIONS)

No declarations of interest were made.

28. CONSIDERATION OF A MATTER REFERRED TO THE COMMITTEE PURSUANT TO THE CALL IN ARRANGEMENTS

The Democratic Services Manager gave an overview of the procedure for the call in of a Cabinet Decision as detailed in the supporting document. The Cabinet had considered a report on the *Single Access Route to Housing (SARTH)* at its meeting on 25th September 2018. The decision (Record of Decision 3560) had been called in by Councillors Haydn Bateman, Helen Brown, Patrick Heesom and Tony Sharps. Copies of the Cabinet report, the Record of Decision and Call in Notice, which identified four reasons for the call in, were included with the agenda papers for the meeting.

The Democratic Services Manager advised that, in consultation with the Monitoring Officer, he had accepted reasons 1 and 3, as set out in the Call in Notice, but had advised the signatories of the Call In that reasons 2 and 4 were requests for information rather than a challenge to the Cabinet decision. A report

on rent arrears was due to be submitted to the Community & Enterprise Overview & Scrutiny Committee at its meeting on 7th November, 2018.

29. SINGLE ACCESS ROUTE TO HOUSING (SARTH)

As initiators of the Call in, Councillors Haydn Bateman, Helen Brown, Patrick Heesom and Tony Sharps were invited to address the Committee first.

Councillor Helen Brown outlined a number of concerns around the bedroom requirements by household type, as detailed within the SARTH Policy. She felt that this section of the Policy was inconsistent and outlined an instance where a pregnant woman could be placed in a 1 bedroom property, only for this person to be moved following the birth of a child, which in turn placed an unnecessary cost to the tenant and the Council. She commented on the high number of instances where a 2 bedroom property would be offered to an applicant but raised concern that there were not enough 2 bedroom properties across Flintshire to support this. She opined that Cabinet should reconsider the Policy, in particular the sections relating to bedroom size and household type.

Councillor Patrick Heesom said that, whilst he recognised the pressure placed on the Council due to the continued increase in social housing demand, there was a need for Cabinet to reconsider the banding system as detailed within the SARTH Policy. He commented on the budget pressures incurred by the Council through the use of temporary/alternative accommodation due to the lack of suitable housing available across Flintshire and said that the Policy did not alleviate this pressure. He also raised concerns around the urgent actions which had been identified as part of an audit of the SARTH which he felt showed a need to revise the Policy, and around the Local Lettings Policy.

Councillor Haydn Bateman commented on the stress put on applicants who were housed away from family and friends and questioned how this was in line with the Future Well-Being and Generations Act. Wellbeing of Future Generations Act

Councillor Tony Sharps concurred with the comments made by Councillor Heesom around localism and spoke in support of referring the SARTH Policy back to Cabinet to reconsider as he felt that it was difficult to understand and explain to applicants.

Responses from the decision makers

The Cabinet Member for Housing explained that he had been Cabinet Member since May 2017. He said that Councillor Brown had held this role prior to this and had introduced the SARTH Policy which he had continued to support.

In response to the detailed comments and questions raised by the initiators of the Call in, the Customer Support Manager explained that a review of the SARTH Policy, carried out in 2017, had identified that the Policy required updating to ensure compliance with the Housing (Wales) Act 2014. The current Policy gave a high priority to applicants with a local connection to an area and performance and management information for the register was monitored. The most recent statistics found the following average wait times:-

- 1 bedroom properties – 16 ½ months waiting time;
- 2 bedroom properties – 15 months waiting time; and
- 3 bedroom properties – 13 months waiting time.

The data on general waiting times had identified longer waiting times for 1 and 2 bedroom properties but the Strategic Housing and Development Programme (SHARP) was going some way to address the additional need for these types of properties.

On the issue of the use of temporary accommodation, the Customer Support Manager reported that the cost of using temporary accommodation was lower than it had been in the last 3 years and that the SARTH Policy had played its part in bringing this cost down.

The audit of SARTH, undertaken during September 2017, had identified urgent actions, all of which had since been implemented. None of the actions related to the Policy document, but were around capacity issues and training for the teams. In terms of hosting SARTH for Denbighshire, this was a separate register with no shared applications and therefore no impact upon Flintshire applicants.

The Chief Officer (Housing and Assets) acknowledged the significant pressure placed on the Council housing stock due to the lack of available properties but said that the Council was responding positively to this demand through building homes across Flintshire through the SHARP. He said that the SARTH Policy was equitable and fair in dealing with the current pressures. The Cabinet Member for Housing said that he continued to fully support the SARTH Policy and said that he did not feel that the issues raised by the initiators warranted Cabinet to amend the Policy.

The Chairman invited Members of the Committee to comment and ask questions.

Councillor Rosetta Dolphin asked whether the Council still provided financial assistance to tenants who were under occupying a property. The Customer Support Manager advised that financial assistance through the Discretionary Housing Payment was provided but this was not a long term solution. The Chief Officer said that it was important to ensure applicants were matched to the appropriate property type in order not to set tenants up to fail and fall into rent arrears.

Councillor Paul Shotton proposed that the Committee support Option 1, as shown in the Call in arrangements document as he had been satisfied with the responses given to the concerns and questions raised by the initiators. This proposal was seconded by Councillor Ron Davies.

Councillor George Hardcastle spoke in support of Option 3, to refer the SARTH Policy back to Cabinet in order to provide the opportunity to address the concerns of the initiators. He also suggested that a workshop be arranged in order to allow all Members the opportunity to consider the Policy. The Cabinet

Member for Housing reiterated his comments that he did not feel that the issues raised warranted a change to the SARTH Policy.

Councillor Glyn Banks said that he had been satisfied with the responses by the decision makers. Councillor Ray Hughes commented on the Council house building programme (SHARP) within his own ward which had been welcomed by local residents and said that he would continue to support the current SARTH Policy. Councillor Chris Dolphin said that he had been satisfied with the responses provided by the Customer Support Manager.

The Chairman invited the initiators of the Call-in to sum up.

Councillor Brown responded to the comments that she had brought the SARTH Policy to Cabinet during her time as Cabinet Member for Housing but felt that the Policy now needed to be amended. She commented that not all tenants were claiming benefits so for those under occupying a property as a result of the Spare Room Subsidy they would not be eligible to apply for the Discretionary Housing Payment to assist them. The Customer Support Manager explained that when offered a property the applicant would be made fully aware of the impact of the Spare Room Subsidy if they would be under occupying a property.

Councillor Heesom expressed his disappointment with the debate. He felt that the current SARTH Policy was not working for the best interests of the applicants across Flintshire and sought the support of the Committee in amending the Policy with input from Members. He commented on issues around applicants not having a local connection within his own ward and said that the social housing demand would continue to increase, therefore a revised Policy was needed to meet this demand.

In response to a question from Councillor Sharps around the Local Lettings Policy, the Cabinet Member for Housing explained that the Policy was part of the SHARP to ensure that new Council properties were offered to applicants with a local connection to an area.

In response to a comment from Councillor Brown around matching applicants to properties in line with the Spare Room Subsidy, the Customer Services Manager explained that the 'bedroom requirement by household type' section of the SARTH Policy was dictated to the Council through Housing Legislation but said that the Council were the only organisation to provide flexibility around the opportunity to under occupy a property where appropriate.

The Chairman thanked the initiators of the Call in for their attendance and thanked the decisions makers for responding to the comments and questions.

Before a vote was taken, the Democratic Services Manager reminded the committee of the voting procedure at a call in meeting. As an option was proposed and seconded, it should be voted on before an alternative option could be considered.

RESOLVED:

That having considered the explanations which it has received, the Committee is satisfied and the decision to continue to support the management of the Single Access Route to Housing (SARTH) policy and to support the revised and updated policy document may now be implemented.

30. MEMBERS OF THE PRESS AND PUBLIC IN ATTENDANCE

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

(The meeting started at 2.00 pm and ended at 3.01 pm)

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Chairman