

COMMUNITY AND ENTERPRISE OVERVIEW & SCRUTINY COMMITTEE
22 JANUARY 2020

Minutes of the meeting of the Community & Enterprise Overview & Scrutiny Committee of Flintshire County Council held at County Hall, Mold on Wednesday, 22 January 2020

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

Councillors: David Cox, Jean S Davies, Ron Davies, Rosetta Dolphin, Mared Eastwood, Dennis Hutchinson, Ted Palmer, Kevin Rush, Paul Shotton and David Wisinger

SUBSTITUTIONS: Councillors: Bernie Attridge (for Helen Brown) and Patrick Heesom (for Brian Lloyd)

APOLOGY: Councillor Ray Hughes

ALSO PRESENT: Councillors: Christine Jones, Ian Roberts and Carolyn Thomas

CONTRIBUTORS: Councillor Derek Butler, Cabinet Member for Economic Development; Councillor Dave Hughes, Cabinet Member for Housing; Councillor Billy Mullin, Cabinet Member for Corporate Management and Assets; Chief Officer (Housing and Assets); Benefits Manager, Revenues Manager and Strategic Finance Manager – Commercial & Housing.

IN ATTENDANCE: Community & Enterprise Overview & Scrutiny Facilitator and Electoral Services Officer

36. DECLARATIONS OF INTEREST (INCLUDING WHIPPING DECLARATIONS)

Councillor Ted Palmer declared a personal interest in Agenda item 5 – Housing Revenue Account (HRA) 30 Year Financial Business Plan.

37. MINUTES

The minutes of the meeting held on 18th December 2019 were submitted.

Councillor Patrick Heesom referred to paragraph two, page 7 of the minutes and asked that this be amended to reflect the reference he had made to Mostyn Docks alongside his comments on the oil and gas terminal at Talacre.

RESOLVED:

That subject to the above amendment, the minutes be approved as a correct record and signed by the Chairman.

38. FORWARD WORK PROGRAMME AND ACTION TRACKING

The Facilitator presented the latest Forward Work Programme on which there were no changes. On Action Tracking, the majority of the actions arising from the previous meetings had been completed.

Councillor Rosetta Dolphin commented on a previous agreement that an officer would contact her around to discuss her concerns, following a request she had made for a report to be brought to a future meeting on the SARTH Policy. The Facilitator agreed to follow this up after the meeting.

Councillor Dennis Hutchinson raised concern that he had previously requested an item on the Allocations process and that this had not been included on the Forward Work Programme. This request was endorsed by Councillors Bernie Attridge and Patrick Heesom. The Facilitator explained that following Councillor Hutchinson's concern around anti-social behaviour as a result of an allocation within his ward, the Chief Officer had agreed to present a report to the Committee on Tenancy Enforcement and Anti-Social Behaviour in order to demonstrate options available to Housing Officers in dealing with anti-social behaviour. This had been included on the Forward Work Programme and would be presented to the meeting on 29 April, 2020.

The recommendations within the report were moved by Councillor Patrick Heesom and seconded by Councillor Ted Palmer.

RESOLVED:

- (a) That the Committee considers the draft Forward Work Programme and approve/amend as necessary;
- (b) That the Facilitator, in consultation with the Chair of the Committee be authorised to vary the Forward Work Programme between meetings, as the need arises; and
- (c) That the Committee notes the progress made in completing the outstanding actions.

39. HOUSING REVENUE ACCOUNT (HRA) 30 YEAR FINANCIAL BUSINESS PLAN

The Chief Officer (Housing and Assets) and Strategic Finance Manager gave a joint presentation which covered the following areas:-

- New 5 Year Rent Policy announced by Welsh Government
- Affordability for tenants
- Proposed Rent Uplift
- Other Income
- Service Charges
- Revenue Efficiencies
- Revenue Pressures
- Capital Programme Delivery
- Draft Capital Programme 2020/21
- HRA Capital Funding 2020/21
- HRA – Considering Value for Money
- Reserves

Councillor Patrick Heesom commented on the previous campaign to retain the Council's housing stock and sought an assurance that there were no proposals to move this service into an Alternative Delivery Model in the future. The Chief Officer provided this assurance.

Councillor Bernie Attridge complimented officers on the report. He commented on the increased borrowing levels and raised concerns that this may affect the target to build 500 homes in the next 5 years. He referred to estate management action plans and asked if this information, ward by ward, could be provided to Members. He welcomed the proposal for Housing Officers to be based in hubs across Flintshire and also welcomed the funding from Welsh Government but was concerned that the accumulative effect of the increase in rent, together with service charges and changes to housing benefits could negatively impact tenants. He also asked if the Tenants Federation had been consulted on the HRA Business Plan. The Strategic Finance Manager – Commercial & Housing provided information on the borrowing levels, explaining that an increase in borrowing levels meant an increase in risk to the build programme and therefore it had been necessary to increase reserves to a sufficient level in order to mitigate this. The Chief Officer confirmed that the Tenants Federation would be consulted on the business plan prior to its consideration at Cabinet and County Council.

In response to questions from Councillor Attridge on the reduction in costs for a Health and Safety Officer and insurance claim services visiting vulnerable tenants with promises of no win no fee services, the Chief Officer explained that the Health and Safety Officer role would now be delivered in-house which provided an efficiency. He was aware of insurance claim services visiting tenants across Flintshire but advised that they were dealt with by Legal Services and were defended vigorously.

Councillor Paul Shotton thanked officers for the report and commented on the high vote to retain Council homes across Flintshire and praised the work being carried out on the installation of modular homes at Garden City.

Councillor Ted Palmer asked if consideration had been given to continuing with a programme once the Welsh Housing Quality Standard (WHQS) had been completed across Flintshire. The Chief Officer advised that the WHQS programme would be re-shaped with similar levels of funding attached to deliver de-carbonisation programmes and also to maintain the WHQS standard in homes.

In response to concerns raised by Councillor Dennis Hutchinson on the potential to reduce the number of homes built due to increased borrowing costs, the Chief Officer explained that there were no proposals to reduce the number of homes built through the Strategic Housing and Regeneration Programme (SHARP).

The recommendation within the report were moved by Councillor Paul Shotton and seconded by Councillor Patrick Heesom.

RESOLVED:

- (a) That the Committee support the HRA Budget for 2020/21 as set out in the appendices to the report;
- (b) That the proposed rent increase of up to 1.7% (plus up to £2) be supported;
- (c) That the Committee support a garage rent increase of £1.22 per week and a garage plot increase of £0.20 per week;
- (d) That the Committee support the phased increase in Service Charges recovery;
- (e) That the Committee support the rationale behind an increased level of reserves to 4%; and
- (f) That the proposed HRA Capital programme for 2020/21 as set out in Appendix B be supported.

40. WELFARE REFORM UPDATE

The Benefits Manager introduced an update on the impacts that Universal Credit 'Full Service' and other welfare reforms were having on Flintshire residents and the work that was ongoing to mitigate this and support households.

According to statistics provided by the Department for Work & Pensions (DWP) as at August 2019, 21,591 recipients of Housing Benefit in Wales had a reduction to their weekly award with 80% of Housing Benefit recipients in Wales deemed to be under-occupying their property by one room. 136 households in Flintshire were subject to a 25% reduction in their weekly housing benefit payment and 474 households were subject to a 14% reduction in their weekly housing benefit payment. As at December 2019, 154 Universal Credit customers affected by the bedroom tax were supported with help towards their rent through a Discretionary Housing Payment (DHP).

The Benefits Manager provided detailed information on the following areas, as detailed within the report:-

- Help to Claim Service;
- Universal Credit 'Managed Migration';
- Council Tax Reduction Scheme;
- Welfare Reform Team;
- Discretionary Housing Payments (DHP); and
- Financial Implications

Councillor Paul Shotton raised concern over the number of claimants who were in work, which he felt was the result of a low wage economy. He also raised concerns on the waiting time for applications to be processed which he said was inadequate. He also commented on the 'Can Cook' initiative which he felt was positive in assisting people in poverty. The Benefits Manager advised that the 'Can Cook' initiative was part of a wider Strategy to tackle food poverty across Flintshire.

Councillor Patrick Heesom supported the comments made by Councillor Shotton also commenting that DHP were subsidising low wages. He also asked if information on the level of DHP requests by areas within Flintshire could be provided. The Benefits Manager agreed to provide this information at a later date following a mapping exercise on locations.

Councillor David Wisinger raised concerns around young people leaving care and asked whether there was any additional support for them in paying their rent. The Benefits Manager advised that the DWP were undertaking a review of Local Housing Allowance Rates and the outcome of the review as awaited. It was hoped that the review would assist landlords in providing assistance to people under 35.

In moving the recommendations within the report, Councillor Heesom complimented officers on the report. This was seconded by Councillor Shotton.

RESOLVED:

- (a) That the report be noted: and
- (b) That the ongoing work to manage the impacts that Welfare Reforms was having and would continue to have upon Flintshire's most vulnerable households be supported.

41. HOUSING RENT INCOME

The Chief Officer (Housing & Assets) introduced the quarterly update on rent collection including the latest position for the current financial year, following the last update report in February 2019.

The Revenues Manager advised that the total rent arrears in 2019/20, up to week 34 (25/11/2019) was £2.23m, compared to £2.38m at the same point in 2018/19, which showed an improved collection position with overall rent falling by £150k. He commented that steady progress was being made to reduce rent arrears, and this was being achieved as a direct result of the following:-

- Increased resources
- Introducing an early intervention hub to assist those tenants at most risk of losing their homes
- Adopting a more robust stance around the importance of paying rent on time
- Investing in Mobyssoft 'Rent Sense' Software.

The Revenues Manager explained that the deployment of the Mobyssoft 'Rent Sense' software was helping the service to identify rent arrear cases quickly and earlier interventions were being put in place on a case by case basis to prevent arrears building-up but ensuring that tenants met their payment obligations.

The Chairman welcomed the outcome and robustness of the new software and service.

Councillor Patrick Heesom asked whether there would be an impact on the Council if a Registered Social Landlord evicted a tenant. The Chief Officer (Housing & Assets) advised that Clwyd Alyn Housing Association had adopted a no-eviction policy.

Councillor Bernie Attridge thanked officers for the report and welcomed the reduction in rent arrears. He raised concerns around tenants being encouraged to take out debt relief orders through advertisements and asked whether this would impact the ability for the Council to claim back owed rent. The Revenues Manager explained that provision was made for debt relief orders but this was monitored to ensure tenants did not apply for second debt relief orders.

Councillor Heesom complimented officers and the team for the way in which they were assisting tenants in debt to facilitate their ability to keep their home and reduce their debt.

In response to a question from Councillor David Wisinger, the Revenues Manager explained that roughly 140 tenants owed between £2500 and £5000 in rent.

Councillor Attridge moved the recommendation outlined within the report, with an additional recommendation that the thanks of the Committee be passed to officers within the Revenue Team for the work being carried out to continue to reduce the rent arrears. This was seconded by Councillor Heesom.

RESOLVED:

- (a) That the latest financial position for rent arrears in 2019/20, as provided during the meeting be noted; and
- (b) That the thanks of the Committee be passed to officers within the Revenue Team for the work being carried out to continue to reduce the rent arrears.

42. MEMBERS OF THE PRESS AND PUBLIC IN ATTENDANCE

There were no members of the public and press in attendance.

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

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Chairman