

COMMUNITY & HOUSING OVERVIEW & SCRUTINY COMMITTEE
11 JANUARY 2023

Minutes of the meeting of the Community & Housing Overview & Scrutiny Committee of Flintshire County Council held as a hybrid meeting on Wednesday, 11 January 2023

PRESENT: Councillor Helen Brown (Chair)

Councillors: Pam Banks, Gillian Brockley, Tina Claydon, Geoff Collett, Rosetta Dolphin, David Evans, Dennis Hutchinson, Kevin Rush and Dale Selvester

SUBSTITUTIONS: Councillors: Bernie Attridge (for Linda Thew), Ted Palmer (for Ray Hughes)

ALSO PRESENT: Councillors: Bill Crease, Dave Hughes and Alan Marshall attended as observers

CONTRIBUTORS: Councillor Sean Bibby (Cabinet Member for Housing and Regeneration); Councillor Paul Johnson (Cabinet Member for Finance, Inclusion, Resilient Communities including Social Value and Procurement); Councillor Billy Mullin (Cabinet Member for Governance and Corporate Services including Health and Safety and Human Resources); Chief Officer (Housing & Assets); Service Manager - Revenues and Procurement; Service Manager - Housing Welfare and Communities; Service Manager – Housing Assets and Business Manager

IN ATTENDANCE: Community & Education Overview & Scrutiny Facilitator & Electoral Services Officer

15. DECLARATIONS OF INTEREST (INCLUDING WHIPPING DECLARATIONS)

Councillor Ted Palmer declared a personal interest as a Council Tenant.

16. MINUTES

The minutes of the meeting held on 14 December, 2022 were approved as a correct record, and moved and seconded by Councillor Bernie Attridge and Councillor Rosetta Dolphin.

RESOLVED:

That the minutes of the meetings held on 14 December be approved as a correct record and signed by the Chair.

17. FORWARD WORK PROGRAMME AND ACTION TRACKING

The Overview & Scrutiny Facilitator presented the current Forward Work Programme for consideration.

The Facilitator commented that there were no proposed changes to the items listed for future meetings. In referring to the actions arising from the last meeting, the Facilitator reported that all actions had been completed and that the

recommendation from the Committee on the use of reserves to reduce the number of void properties would be considered by Cabinet at its next meeting on 17th January, 2022.

The recommendations, as outlined within the report, were moved by Councillor Bernie Attridge and seconded by Councillor Kevin Rush.

RESOLVED:

- (a) That the Forward Work Programme be noted;
- (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.

18. HOUSING RENT INCOME AND WELFARE RESPONSE

The Chief Officer (Housing & Assets) introduced an operational update on the latest welfare reform response impacts and current levels of 2022/23 housing rent arrears. The report provided an update on the impacts that welfare reforms continued to have on residents and the work that was ongoing to mitigate many of the challenges and to support households through the cost-of-living crisis.

The Service Manager - Housing Welfare and Communities provided a detailed update on the latest position for welfare reform and cost-of-living crisis mitigation, outlining a range of measures that had been developed to help those affected by the cost-of-living and the support provided to residents to help mitigate the negative impacts. A further update was provided on each of the following areas, as outlined in the report:-

- Spare Room Subsidy
- Benefit Cap
- Cost of Living Support Scheme
- Unpaid Carers
- Winter Fuel Support Scheme
- Welfare Support
- Discretionary Housing Payments (DHP's)

The Service Manager - Revenues and Procurement provided a detailed update on the latest position of rent arrears, advising that the collect of rent continued to remain challenging with the rise of cost-of-living and the impacts on some tenant's ability to pay. The Rent Income service had experienced increased workloads with a 1.2% increase in cases where tenants needed to be contacted and the service continued to signpost tenants with referrals to specialist teams across the Council, including Supporting People and Welfare Response teams.

The Service Manager - Revenues and Procurement highlighted the current level of rent arrears and number of evictions for rent arrears, as detailed within

the report. The challenge for collection of rent from those tenants in receipt of universal credit continued to present a risk to the Council with more tenants migrating across to universal credit and the delays experienced with putting management payment arrangement for some tenants where the Department of Work and Pensions (DWP) deduct rent payment as source.

As part of the Councils ongoing response to mitigate the impacts on tenants and ensure the long-term financial stability of the Housing Revenue Account, in 2021 Audit Wales undertook a comprehensive review to assess the effectiveness of the Council in supporting tenants. The Audit Wales review acknowledged the proactive measures already taken by the Council in supporting tenants and stabilising rent collections during a period of unprecedented change, especially with the rollout of Universal Credit and the impacts of the pandemic.

Councillor Rosetta Dolphin thanked the officers for the report and welcomed that there had been only 1 eviction, which she felt avoided causing further pressure on the homelessness service. She referred to the table showing the banded arrears for 2022/23 commenting on the different levels of rent paid by tenants, and asked if the levels of rent could be identified within the table in future reports. The Service Manager - Revenues and Procurement agreed to look into whether this could be provided in future reports.

Councillor Dennis Hutchinson thanked officers for the report, which he felt provided the most accurate and up to date information available. In relation to the increase on the trend for rent arrears, he asked if the Service Manager expected this to reduce by the end of the financial year. The Service Manager - Revenues and Procurement advised that expected the rent arrears to reduce by the end of the financial year but commented on the effects of the pandemic and the need to ensure that the arrears remained stable.

Councillor Bernie Attridge raised concerns around the current level of rent arrears which he did not feel was under control, highlighting previous occasions where Members had raised significant concern when rent arrears had increased to £1M. He did not feel that there being only 1 eviction should be celebrated as he felt that those properties could be provided to tenants who were willing to pay their rent and this would reduce the rent arrears and benefit the Housing Revenue Account. He asked how many officers formed part of the Income Maximisation Team, which he said had been put in place to free up Housing Officer time. The Service Manager - Revenues and Procurement and Service Manager - Housing Welfare and Communities advised that there were 7 officers within the rent collection team and 5 officers within the income maximisation welfare reform team.

In response to a further question from Councillor Attridge around comparisons on rent arrears with other Local Authorities and Registered Social Landlords (RSL's), the Service Manager - Revenues and Procurement agreed to look at what benchmarking data could be provided in the future reports. This information may have to be anonymised.

In response to a question from the Chair, the Service Manager - Revenues and Procurement agreed to provide information on the number of cases waiting to go back to court to the Committee following the meeting.

Councillor Dave Evans commented on the 454 households in Flintshire which were subject to a reduction in their housing benefit payments because of the Bedroom Tax, and asked how many of these household were in rent arrears. He also asked how many of those tenants previously evicted had been re-homed by the Council and had they gone into rent arrears again. The Service Manager - Housing Welfare and Communities agreed to provide the information on requested around tenants affected by the Bedroom Tax following the meeting. The Service Manager - Revenues and Procurement said that he was not aware of tenants who had been evicted and had gone into rent arrears again with the Council, but that this data could be reviewed.

Councillor Dale Selvester commented on the changes on how tenants pay their water and sewerage charges and asked whether officers felt this would have a significant impact on rent arrears with tenants paying charges directly to Welsh Water from April 2023. He also asked whether tenants affected by the Bedroom Tax were encouraged to move to smaller properties. The Service Manager - Revenues and Procurement advised that very few Local Authorities across Wales collected water rates on behalf of Welsh Water. He felt that the changes would have a positive effect on the Council and would provide a better deal for tenants. He also advised that the Council would have a statutory duty to ensure Welsh Water were informed if a property was empty. The Service Manager - Housing Welfare and Communities advised that tenants were encouraged to move to smaller properties if they were affected by the Bedroom Tax but unfortunately there was a shortage of smaller properties available across Flintshire.

The Chair asked if the percentage of arrears relating to water charges could be shown in future reports. The Service Manager - Revenues and Procurement agreed to look if it was possible to show what arrears were rent and what percentage was residual water charges for future reports.

The Cabinet Member for Housing and Regeneration thanked officers for the report and the Committee Members for their comments and questions. He referred to the information provided to the Council from the DWP on tenants receiving Universal Credit and suggested that the Committee may wish to consider writing to the DWP to assist the Council in obtaining this information in the future.

The recommendations, as outlined within the report, with the following additional recommendation, were moved and seconded by Councillor Bernie Attridge and seconded by Councillor Dave Evans:-

- That the Chair, on behalf of the Committee, write to the Department for Work and Pensions to seek their agreement to share information with the Local Authority on which tenants received Universal Credit, to allow for appropriate assistance/support to be provided for any tenants falling into arrears.

RESOLVED:

- (a) That the latest financial position for 2022/23 rent collections be noted;

- (b) That the Committee support the ongoing work to manage the impacts that welfare reform has, and will continue to have, on some of the most vulnerable residents along with implementing support via Welsh Government support measures to mitigate the cost of living crisis; and
- (c) That the Chair, on behalf of the Committee, write to the Department for Work and Pensions to seek their agreement to share information with the Local Authority on which tenants received Universal Credit, to allow for appropriate assistance/support to be provided for any tenants falling into arrears.

19. COUNCIL PLAN 2022-23 MID-YEAR PERFORMANCE REPORTING

The Chief Officer (Housing & Assets) presented the monitoring report to review mid-year progress against the Council Plan priorities identified for 2022/23. The out-turn report for the 2022/23 Council Plan showed 59% of activities were making good progress. 70% of the performance indicators had met or exceeded their targets, 9% were being closely monitored and 21% were currently not meeting target.

The report was an exception-based report and concentrated on those areas of performance which were currently not achieving their target. The performance indicators which showed a red RAG status for current performance against target, relevant to the Committee, were detailed within the report.

Councillor Bernie Attridge commented on the total number of mandatory large disabled adaptations and the average number of days to complete a mandatory large disabled adaptations and asked for an explanation for the delays with planning applications for large jobs. He also asked if there was a delay with Occupational Therapist visits. The Service Manager - Housing Welfare and Communities explained that the planning delays were due to the backlog and complexities around some of the disabled adaptations which needed to take place. She also explained that a new framework was imminent which would enable the Council to use local suppliers and increase the number of quotes. With regards to Occupational Therapists, she explained that there was currently a number of vacancies to fill within the service, and added that it was an area that was currently hard to recruit in. Work was progressing to link with Universities to see if they could assist with recruitment.

The recommendations, as outlined within the report, were moved by Councillor Bernie Attridge and seconded by Councillor Dennis Hutchinson.

RESOLVED:

- (a) That the Committee support the levels of progress and confidence in the achievements of priorities as at mid-year within the 2022/23 Council Plan;
- (b) That the Committee endorse and support overall performance against 2022/23 Council Plan performance indicators as at mid-year; and
- (c) That the Committee is assured by the explanations given for those areas of underperformance.

20. **MEMBERS OF THE PRESS IN ATTENDANCE**

There were no members of the press in attendance.

(The meeting started at 10.00 am and ended at 11.32 am)

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Chair