

COMMUNITY & HOUSING OVERVIEW & SCRUTINY COMMITTEE
13 SEPTEMBER 2023

Minutes of the meeting of the Community & Housing Overview & Scrutiny Committee of Flintshire County Council held as a remote attendance meeting on Wednesday, 13 September 2023

PRESENT: Councillor Helen Brown (Chairman)

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

ALSO PRESENT:

Councillors: Bernie Attridge, Bill Crease and Paul Johnson attended as observers
Councillors: Mel Buckley, Gladys Healey, Dave Mackie, Hilary McGuill and Linda Thomas attended for Agenda Item 5 – Disabled Adaptations Policy, as Members of the Social & Health Care Overview & Scrutiny Committee

CONTRIBUTORS: Councillor Sean Bibby (Cabinet Member for Housing and Regeneration); Chief Officer (Housing & Communities); Senior Manager (Housing, Welfare & Communities); Service Manager – Housing Assets; Service Manager – Housing & Prevention; Strategic Housing & Programme Delivery Manager and Housing Strategy Manager

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

28. DECLARATIONS OF INTEREST (INCLUDING WHIPPING DECLARATIONS)

Councillor Bernie Attridge declared a personal interest in Agenda item 5 – Disabled Adaptations Policy.

29. MINUTES

The minutes of the meetings held on 3rd and 12th July, 2023 were approved as a correct record, as moved and seconded by Councillor Rosetta Dolphin and Councillor Dale Selvester.

RESOLVED:

That the minutes of the meetings held on 3rd and 12th July be approved as a correct record and signed by the Chair.

30. FORWARD WORK PROGRAMME AND ACTION TRACKING

The Facilitator presented the current Forward Work Programme for consideration and advised that the Temporary Accommodation Audit report had been moved and would be reported to the Committee at its meeting scheduled for 11th October 2023.

The Facilitator informed the Committee that a meeting between the Chair, Vice-Chair and Senior Officers within the Housing & Communities Portfolio had been arranged ahead of the next Committee meeting, to discuss items for the Forward Work Programme. An updated Forward Work Programme would be presented to the Committee at the next meeting.

In relation to the action tracking document, shown at Appendix 2 of the report, the Facilitator reported that she had received a response from Mark Tami MP, who had contacted the Department of Works and Pensions (DWP) on the Committees' behalf. Once a response had been received, this would be circulated to the Committee.

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

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.

31. DISABLED ADAPTATIONS POLICY

The Senior Manager (Housing, Welfare & Communities) introduced the report which detailed the amendments to the policy that had been necessary to align adaptations for the private sector or with those for Local Authority Council housing.

The Housing Grants, Construction and Regeneration Act 1996 placed a mandatory duty on Local Authorities to provide disabled facilities grants (DFG's) which was available for adapting or providing facilities for a disabled person in a dwelling. The statutory limit for a DFG was set by the Welsh Government (WG) and was currently £36,000 per application within a five year period.

The Senior Manager outlined the numbers of medium and large adaptations for the private sector, along with a review of each year to explain the increases and decreases in the figures, as outlined in the report.

Councillor Dale Selvester in referring to the report asked if there was only one Occupational Therapist (OT) working within the Housing & Communities Portfolio. Senior Manager (Housing, Welfare & Communities) explained that there was one OT within the portfolio but there was the possibility of engaging with OT's within the Social Services portfolio. She advised that this did not cause a delay in the delivery of adaptations.

Councillor Rosetta Dolphin asked if the Council re-claimed costs for adaptations in private properties if the person requiring the adaptation passed

away. She also asked how many OT's worked within the Social Services portfolio. The Senior Manager advised that the Council did not reclaim the costs but put a charge on the property, so that if a property was disposed of within a 10 year period, the Council would claim back costs to a limit on the sale of a property. The Senior Manager said that she would confirm the number of OT's within the Social Services portfolio with the Committee following the meeting.

Councillor Hilary McGuill commented on the improvements made to the service and the reduction in the number of days taken for adaptations, as outlined within the report. She asked whether adaptations in Local Authority properties were means tested if a tenant moved from a property with an adaptation to a sheltered housing property and would the property be utilised by a tenants with a need for that particular adaptation. The Senior Manager advised that there was no financial reclaim from Local Authority tenants as there would be no financial benefit to the tenant for the adaptation. The Council would also look to re-allocate the property to someone who had the same adaptation requirement.

Councillor McGuill also asked if the service had close links with the North East Wales store based in Hawarden. The Senior Manager explained that the store held minor adaptation equipment and that the adaptations service carried out medium and major adaptation works. She explained that improvements had been made to reconditioning and reusing stock, such as stairlifts and advised that they were robustly tested before being reused to ensure their safety.

The recommendation, as outlined within the report, was moved by Councillor Hilary McGuill and seconded by Councillor Gladys Healey.

RESOLVED:

That the Committee support the updated Disabled Adaptations policy which covered both private homes and council stock properties.

32. HOMELESSNESS BUDGET PRESSURES

The Service Manager – Housing & Prevention provided an update on emergency accommodation budget pressures. A briefing note had been circulated to the Committee ahead of the meeting, which provided further detail.

In referring to the briefing note, the Service Manager advised that within the Housing Solutions Service, there were a number of specific budgets for homeless accommodation settings for 'interim housing'. In addition, there was a further specific budget for emergency accommodation which needed to be used when there was no remaining capacity in other budgeted temporary accommodation. The emergency accommodation used was mostly hotel rooms within and beyond the boundaries of Flintshire, together with some use of other forms of holiday lets, such as caravans and apartments. A summary of in year spend to date was outlined within the briefing note.

The Committee was advised that the projected total spend for the year was based on the spend to date with adjustments for prepaid accommodation and also for outstanding commitments. Further allowance was then made for the expected spend for the remainder of the year using the spend to date as the

initial base point, but also taking account of the full year impacts of growth in numbers in the year to date and further expected growth in numbers in the remainder of the year.

The Service Manager reported that since October 2022 there had been significant and sustained growth in the numbers of homeless people needing to be accommodated in emergency accommodation due to homelessness. As had been referenced in previous reports to Committee on homelessness, the challenging market conditions, instability in the private rented sector, tensions at home, increases in people's complexity of needs and changes to homelessness legislation were all key drivers for ongoing and sustained demand for homeless services and emergency accommodation. The lack of appropriate social housing to meet the needs of those who experience homelessness, along with affordability and availability issues within the private rented sector, continued to present significant barriers to assisting people to exit homelessness in a timely manner.

In response to a question from Councillor Gladys Healey around rough sleepers, the Service Manager reported that there were currently four rough sleepers in Flintshire and advised that these were not included within the figures presented to the Committee within the briefing note. Support was provided to the rough sleepers to ensure that they were aware of the support available to them.

In response to a question from Councillor Pam Banks on the Homeless unit within her ward, the Service Manager agreed to speak to Councillor Banks following the meeting.

In response to a question from Councillor Rosetta Dolphin on whether the homeless units at Park Lane and Duke Street had been completed, the Service Manager advised that completion was imminent.

Councillor Bernie Attridge thanked the Service Manager for the briefing note. He said that the budget pressures were very concerning and would only get worse over the next 12 months. He asked the Chief Officer and Cabinet Member what representation they were making at a national level to secure additional funding to assist the Council in meeting the requirement of Welsh Government (WG) legislation to support people presenting as homeless and providing emergency accommodation.

The Cabinet Member for Housing & Regeneration agreed that there seemed to be a mismatch between WG aspirations and resources being provided to deal with issues at a local level. He gave an assurance that he was meeting regularly with counterparts across Wales, as this issue was not limited to Flintshire, to be very clear to WG that new legislation required adequate resources to be provided.

Councillor Hilary McGuill asked if the service communicated with the Empty Homes Scheme as she was aware of two private properties within her ward which had been empty for a considerable amount of time. The Service Manager advised that the Council were actively looking to purchase ex Council homes with a number of leads being progressed. The Chair advised that this had

been previously considered but there was a lot of barriers to purchasing private homes.

Councillor Dale Selvester asked whether consideration would be given to suspending the housing register, as had been carried out previously, to assist with the accommodation available for people who presented as homeless and bring the budget pressure down. The Service Manager that all options needed to be considered prior to bringing back options to the Committee to consider. He outlined the number of people currently listed on the housing register who also had housing needs.

In response to further concerns raised by the Committee, the Chair suggested that a letter be written to the WG to express the Committee's concerns around the financial implications to the Local Authority following changes to the Housing Wales Act 2014 (HWA 2014) and the need for appropriate levels of resource and support to be provided to the Local Authority.

Councillor Dennis Hutchinson recommended that the Chair write to the WG, on behalf of the Committee, to express its concerns around the financial implications to the Local Authority following changes to the Housing Wales Act 2014 (HWA 2014) and the need for appropriate levels of resource and support to be provided to the Local Authority. This was seconded by Councillor Ray Hughes.

RESOLVED:

That the Chair write to the Welsh Government, on behalf of the Committee, to express its concerns around the financial implications to the Local Authority following changes to the Housing Wales Act 2014 (HWA 2014) and the need for appropriate levels of resource and support to be provided to the Local Authority.

33. HOUSING STRATEGY ACTION PLAN PERFORMANCE UPDATE

The Strategic Housing & Programme Delivery Manager introduced the report to provide an update on the delivery of the Housing Strategy Delivery Plan 2019-2024 with particular emphasis on financial year 2022/23. The Housing Strategy had a delivery plan which set out 3 strategic priorities and related activity to achieve those priorities.

An internal Audit was undertaken in 2022/23 – Right Types of Home in the Right Location – Housing and Communities. The final report dated March 2022/23 was rated amber/green: key controls generally operating effectively but with recommendations in relation to some fine tuning which had been implemented, including the creation of a risk register. Schemes were appraised on a regular basis to ensure that where possible, risks were identified at an early stage and mitigating actions were taken to ensure the timely delivery of the schemes within the Delivery Plan.

The Strategic Housing & Programme Delivery Manager reported that the cost of living pressures and the impacts of the War in Ukraine were continuing to place significant cost and availability pressures placed on labour and materials.

There was also a continued risk of increased demand on homeless prevention services as termination notices had risen.

The recommendation, as outlined within the report, was moved by Councillor Dennis Hutchinson and seconded by Councillor Ray Hughes.

RESOLVED:

That the Committee note the following changes outlined in the report:-

- The Planned Development Delivery Programme (PDP) process and the move to an online portal;
- The removal of the 20% limitation on the budget for acquisitions; and
- The alignment of standards and intervention rate for acquisitions under Social Housing Grant (SHG) with those from Transitional Accommodation Capital Programme (TACP)

34. FLINTSHIRE HOUSING NEED PROSPECTUS

The Strategic Housing & Programme Delivery Manager introduced the updated draft Housing Needs Prospectus.

The Welsh Government (WG) required that each Local Authority develop a Housing Needs Prospectus to be updated on an annual basis. The format and content of the prospectus had not changed significantly to alter the director of travel set out in last year's prospectus. The changes identified in the report reflected the increasing demand for social housing from the housing register and homelessness duties, including significant demand for temporary accommodation, which was impacting on the homeless prevention team and the Council's revenue budget.

The Strategic Housing & Programme Delivery Manager advised that the prospectus would be used by WG to approve the Programme Delivery/Development Plan and to ensure that schemes were meeting the identified need and properties, including progress towards meeting the priorities set out in the Local Housing Strategy 2019-24.

The Chair referred to the Canton Depot site at Bagillt and asked whether the proposed development on this site would take place. The Strategic Housing & Programme Delivery Manager advised that Natural Resources Wales (NRW) had produced a redesignation of flood mapping a number of years ago which gave the site a designation where it would not be possible to develop. The formal implementation of the flood mapping had been pushed back, therefore in the meantime, the Council had engaged consultants to carry out feasibility work to provide evidence to NRW that the designation was incorrect and that it was technically possible to overcome the flooding issues on the site. Work continued on assessing whether technically the issues could be overcome in order to bring an application forward.

In response to a further question from the Chair around the cost for the use of consultants, the Strategic Housing & Programme Delivery Manager advised that the proposal was staggered in a stepped approach so that if they

demonstrated that it was not technically possible to proceed with developing the site at Canton Depot or that it would be too costly, then the Council could stop engaging with the consultants before going further.

Councillor Linda Thew referred to the Transitional Accommodation Capital Programme (TACP) being re-opened and the WG inviting application for funding. She asked how much the Council had applied for. The Strategic Housing & Programme Delivery Manager advised that the Council had bid in excess of £2m to bring back empty voids across the County and in excess of £3m to acquire empty dwellings or to acquire homes where a landlord had sitting tenants who the Council would have a duty to house, but they could remain in the property. In total the Council had bid just under £10m funding from the TACP programme, but the indicative allocation was £1.6m. The priority was bringing back the void properties and the acquisition of ex right to buy properties. Further information on the final allocation would be available from 30 September 2023.

Councillor Pam Banks asked if ex right to buy properties were purchased at market rate. The Strategic Housing & Programme Delivery Manager advised that properties had to be independently valued in order to access the grant from WG, and within that valuation, the condition of the property was taken into account.

The recommendations, as outlined within the report, were moved by Councillor Geoff Collett and seconded by Councillor Pam Banks.

RESOLVED:

- (a) That the Committee support the content of the draft Flintshire Housing Need Prospectus; and
- (b) That the Committee note the Local Housing Strategy 2019-24 was due for review next year.

35. VOID MANAGEMENT

The Service Manager – Housing Assets presented the key figures and key activities against the void action plan, as outlined in the briefing note.

He outlined the number of new voids and those which had been completed and reported that 33 properties had been completed ready for allocation. He also outlined the following, as presented in the briefing note:-

- The number of major voids
- Total overall number of void properties which had reduced to 234
- The performance of the current contractors
- Top reasons for terminations

The Chair commented on positive feedback that had been provided on the condition of the void properties being returned.

Councillor Dale Selvester commented on the low and high demand properties outlined in the briefing note and asked why low demand properties were being returned sooner. He commented on the 1-bed properties and felt that they should be returned sooner to assist with the pressure on the homelessness budget and also was concerned that there had not been an improvement in the number of voids within the Deeside area in comparison to other district areas across the County. He was also concerned about the high number of major voids given the work being undertaken as part of the Welsh Housing Quality Standard (WHQS) and questioned why so many properties required major improvement.

The Service Manager explained that the total figures where the number of properties at the current time and were not necessarily the same properties and said that he was happy to provide further information on the breakdown of the figures to Councillor Selvester following the meeting. In relation to the poor condition of some properties, he advised that the team were working closely with housing management and that they were carrying out 100% pre-termination visits to ascertain the condition of properties. Unfortunately, the WHQS works had not included plastering work which was the major work required on the void properties.

In response to a question from Councillor Selvester around how many void properties had been empty for longer than six months, meaning a Council Tax cost to the Council, the Service Manager agreed to speak to the Service Manager – Revenues and Procurement and provide a response following the meeting.

The Chair asked who determined whether a property was low demand or high demand. The Service Manager explained that a property was classed as high demand where there was already an allocation for a tenant. A property was classed as low demand if there wasn't a tenant allocated which could be due to access issues. Once a tenant had been allocated or improvements made to accessibility, the property would be moved to be classed as high demand.

Councillor David Evans supported the comments made by Councillor Selvester around the number of properties by district area and whilst acknowledging the response provided by the Service Manager, he felt that over the last six months the Committee would see a reduction in the number of void properties in the Deeside district area, but this was not the case. He suggested that additional information on the number of new void properties within a district area and the number returned be provided in order to reassure Members that one area was not being prioritised over another. He raised concern over the length of time being taken to bring void properties back into use. He recognised that the overall number of void properties had reduced but was concerned that at the current rate it would take four years to reduce the number of properties completely.

The Service Manager directed the Committee to the total voids figure shown on the briefing note which showed that the overall total number was reducing. He explained that some properties within each district area may require more complex work to bring back into use and that it would take some time for the contractors to get up to speed. He was working closely with contractors and the feedback on the quality and standard of the work had been positive.

In response to comments made by Councillor Evans and Councillor Linda Thew around the pressure being put on tenants to leave a property quickly following a bereavement, and the level of rent to be paid, the Senior Manager (Housing, Welfare & Communities) advised that a family were given a two week notice to empty a property and that full rent continued to be due until the property had been emptied and returned to the Council. She said that she would like to think that pressure was not put on families but understood that some families wanted to empty properties sooner rather than later due to the rent payments.

Councillor Pam Banks asked if apprentices were employed within the service to assist with work on void properties. She also thanked the Service Manager for his assistance within her ward. The Service Manager advised that there were a number of apprentices within the DLO who were carrying work in minor void properties.

In response to a question from Councillor Bernie Attridge around the Transitional Accommodation Capital Programme (TACP) funding from Welsh Government (WG), the Service Manager explained that the TACP funding allocated to the Council last year allowed the Council to target properties that would not necessarily have been invested in. The TACP funding also focussed on the acquisition of properties that would not necessarily have been invested in to assist with accommodation issues.

Councillor Thew asked whether focus should be given to bringing back minor void properties in order to bring the overall figure down sooner and assist with the allocation of properties. The Service Manager advised that minor void properties were being targeted. Work also took place with the allocations team to ascertain which properties need to be returned very quickly.

In response to a question from Councillor Geoff Collett around the figures presented in the briefing note, the Service Manager advised that 20 new properties had been received and 33 properties had been completed ready for allocation. The reason this was not reflected in the total void properties figure was that not all of them had been let yet.

Councillor Kevin Rush asked about the TBC properties as shown in the briefing note and asked if they were waiting to be inspected and whether the Council was short of inspectors. He also asked if the Council were satisfied with the productive and quality of work from the DLO and Contractors. The Service Manager said that there had been a dip in performance in the number of properties allocated as major or minor voids but explained that focus had been on scheduling works. The Committee should see an improvement in this allocation figure with the right number of inspectors now in post. He also said he was satisfied with the productivity of the DLO and that the quality and standard of work from the Contractors had been excellent.

Following a request for additional information on the following areas to be included in future Void Management reports, it was agreed that consideration of the information included in future reports be undertaken during the meeting with the Chair and Vice-Chair around the FWP:-

- Details of how many properties sent back from each district area;
- Breakdown of transfers from Allocation Team to show what the transfers were for and where they transferred to;
- Information on how properties are classed as low demand and high demand; and
- Low demand properties, per ward.

RESOLVED:

That the update be noted.

36. MEMBERS OF THE PRESS IN ATTENDANCE

There were no members of the press in attendance.

(The meeting started at 10.30 am and ended at 1.03 p.m.)

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Chair