

COMMUNITY & HOUSING OVERVIEW & SCRUTINY COMMITTEE
15 NOVEMBER 2023

Minutes of the meeting of the Community & Housing Overview & Scrutiny Committee of Flintshire County Council held as a hybrid meeting on Wednesday, 15 November 2023

PRESENT: Councillor Helen Brown (Chair)

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Councillors: Gillian Brockley, Tina Claydon, Geoff Collett, Rosetta Dolphin, David Evans, Kevin Rush and Linda Thew

SUBSTITUTIONS: Councillors: Bill Crease (for Dale Selvester), Ted Palmer (for Ray Hughes) and Antony Wren (for Pam Banks)

ALSO PRESENT: Councillors: Bernie Attridge, Marion Bateman, Dave Hughes and Billy Mullin attended as observers
Julie Hughes – Chair of the Standards Committee

CONTRIBUTORS: Councillor Ian Roberts (Leader of the Council); Councillor Paul Johnson (Cabinet Member for Finance, Inclusion, Resilient Communities including Social Value and Procurement); Councillor Sean Bibby (Cabinet Member for Housing and Regeneration); Chief Officer (Housing & Communities); Senior Manager (Housing, Welfare & Communities); Service Manager – Housing & Prevention; Service Manager – Housing Assets; Service Manager – Revenues and Procurement and Strategic Finance Manager – Commercial and Housing

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

44. DECLARATIONS OF INTEREST (INCLUDING WHIPPING DECLARATIONS)

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

45. MINUTES

The minutes of the meetings held on 13th September and 11th October were submitted for approval.

13.09.2023

It was suggested that the word 'properties' be amended to read 'prioritised' in the 4th paragraph of page 12 of the minutes.

Subject to the suggested amendment, the minutes of the meetings held on 13th September and 11th October, 2023 were approved as a correct record, as moved and seconded by Councillor David Evans and Councillor Kevin Rush.

RESOLVED:

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

46. FORWARD WORK PROGRAMME AND ACTION TRACKING

The Facilitator presented the current Forward Work Programme for consideration and advised that following a meeting with the Chair and Vice-Chair, following the previous meeting, the Forward Work Programme had been updated with additional reports to future meetings.

In relation to the proposed all Member workshop on resettlement and asylum, the Facilitator advised that a workshop had been arranged and would be held on 23rd November, 2023.

The Facilitator also provided an update on the actions arising from previous meetings, reporting that the majority of actions has been completed.

The recommendations, as outlined within the report, were moved by Councillor Ted Palmer and seconded by Councillor David Evans.

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.

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

The Chief Officer (Housing & Communities) and Strategic Finance Manager - Commercial and Housing introduced the draft Housing Revenue Account (HRA) 30-year Financial Business Plan and the proposed HRA Budget for 2024/25.

A detailed presentation was given, which outlined the following areas:-

- Welsh Government (WG) net zero carbon target for social housing;
- FCC pilot to achieve net zero carbon for social housing;
- Net zero carbon social housing - Business case estimate;
- Rents;
- HRA Business Plan - Pressures and Efficiencies;
- Affordability;
- Rents – Impact of setting rents lower than the Welsh Government rent cap;
- Service Charges;
- Reserves;
- Summary

Councillor Rosetta Dolphin commented, that whilst she understood the need to raise rent levels, she was concerned around the proposed increase to aerial costs, outlining the current cost and that contract holders were not allowed to procure their own aerials in order to bring the costs down. The Service Manager – Housing & Assets advised that contract holders were not permitted to install their own aerials as health and safety needed to be adhered to. The cost of the aerial included a broad package including Sky, FM radio etc. The Council entered into an agreement with a company many years ago that had been the most cost effective at the time for a rental hire purchase. The contract would be coming to an end over the next few years and other options would be explored to help reduce costs. Aerial costs could be reviewed separately.

Councillor Bernie Attridge queried the information listed within the section on the Welsh Housing Quality Standard 2 (WHQS2) and asked whether many of the improvements had been accounted for as part of the works carried out under the Welsh Housing Quality Standard (WHQS). He commented on the service charges and asked whether officers felt that tenants were receiving value for money and provided an example where services were being used by non-tenants at a complex within his ward. He raised concern around the rent increase which he felt was excessive during the current cost of living crisis and would impact hard working tenants who were not eligible for benefit assistance.

The Service Manager – Housing & Assets advised that many of the improvements for WHQS2 were contained within the current WHQS maintenance programme. The WHQS would focus on de-carbonisation measures to reduce running costs for tenants, and this would be financed through rental income. There had been a great deal of investment in housing stock over the previous years but WG were now seeking Local Authorities to move to energy efficiency works and produce a business plan to meet their de-carbonisation agenda. In relation to service charges, it was proposed that a review be undertaken on all communal washing areas across the County.

In relation to the comments around the proposed rent increase, the Chief Officer (Housing & Communities) said that there was a need to balance investment with affordability and this was one of the reasons that a hardship fund had been set up which would be targeted at tenants who paid partial or full rent and were not eligible for benefit assistance.

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

RESOLVED:

- (a) That the Committee note the HRA budget for 2024/25 as set out in the report;
- (b) That the Committee note the proposed minimum rent increase of 6.5%;
- (c) That the Committee note the proposed garage rent increase of 6.5%;

- (d) That the Committee note the proposed increase in serve charges to full cost recovery; and
- (e) That the Committee note the proposed HRA Capital Programme for 2024/25 as set out in Appendix B of the report.

48. HOMELESSNESS BUDGET PRESSURE - OPTIONS PAPER

The Service Manager – Housing & Prevention introduced a report to outline options that had been developed for consideration to manage the overspend on the homelessness budget.

Within the Housing Solutions service there were specific budgets for homeless accommodation settings for 'interim housing'. In addition to this budgeted provision for these locations, including the Homeless Hub, there was a further specific budget for emergency accommodation. This budget was 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.

The Service Manager reported that within the Revenue Budget Monitoring Report 2023/24 (Month 4) reported to Cabinet in September 2023, it was recommended that, as required by the Council's Finance Procedure Rules, a separate report was prepared to expand on the reasons for the significant overspend on the homelessness budget and the mitigations being put in place.

Within the Housing Solutions service there were specific budgets for homeless accommodation settings for 'interim housing'. In addition to this budgeted provision for these locations, including the Homeless Hub, there was a further specific budget for emergency accommodation. This budget was 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.

The Service Manager reported that options had been developed for consideration to manage the overspend on the homelessness budget, which were as follows:-

1. Fast tracking review of sheltered housing – covering accommodation for groups over the age of 55 and mini groups for those 50+ and the possible reduction on the age threshold.
2. Increase in homeless accommodation and review similar model to the Queensferry hub.
3. Changes to allocation policy – SARTH changes to single access property. (Caveat on this approach due to upcoming major changes in legislation).

4. Alternative use of FCC stock – to take more Housing from the HRA to use as temporary accommodation and create house sharing for single occupancy.
5. Review offers to private landlords – increasing the amount of money to landlords for leasing, and or offering more incentives.

The Committee were asked to consider and provide feedback on each of the options, as outlined at Appendix 1 of the report.

Option 1

The Service Manager – Housing & Prevention detailed the proposals under option 1, which related to the options for fast tracking the review of sheltered housing.

A number of concerns were raised around the impact reducing the age threshold could have on elderly people living in sheltered accommodation. Assurance was given by Officers and the Cabinet Member that there would not be a blanket approach and that they were not proposing to let all available properties to young people, potentially challenging individuals, alongside elderly tenants. The Cabinet Member hoped that the report and his comments provided assurance that proposals would be carried out in a sensitive manner.

Comments were also made around the need to start the Sheltered Housing Review as soon as possible, and the Chair of the Committee advised that a report on the work of the Task & Finish Group would be presented to the December Committee meeting for support.

Officers and the Cabinet Member responded to a number of questions around the disconnect between the needs of people waiting for properties and the properties available across the County.

Option 2

The Service Manager – Housing & Prevention detailed the proposals under option 2, which related to the options for increasing homeless accommodation.

Councillor Bill Crease commented that Option 2a seemed to be more achievable and the need to find quick solutions to a longer term problem.

Comments were made around the need to have sites identified to progress these options at pace. Officers provided an assurance that the strategy team were working to identify sites.

Councillor Dave Evans suggested that both options 2a and 2b should be progressed.

In response to comments made by Members, the Leader of the Council and Cabinet Member spoke in support of the comments around having homeless

hubs across the County which had been discussed at Informal Cabinet and Cabinet. Homelessness was experienced across all communities across Flintshire and the Cabinet Member said that there needed to be a provision to meet that in order for people to access work and families to continue with accessing schools.

Option 3

The Service Manager – Housing & Prevention detailed the proposals under option 3, which related to the options for making changes to the allocation policy.

Councillor Dave Evans outlined his support for option 3a.

Officers responded to comments made around the impact to people's mental health when being encouraged to stay in a property that they were being evicted from, detailing the unpleasant homelessness journey that could be experienced and the support provided to them.

The Chair commented on a decision taken a number of years ago which put a hold on all allocations to allow for the properties to be provided to people experiencing homelessness. She suggested that officers look into how this was done previously.

Councillor Bernie Attridge commented on the impact the options could have on those people in the Band B waiting list who had been waiting for a property for a number of years.

Option 4

The Service Manager – Housing & Prevention detailed the proposals under option 4, which related to the options for alternative use of FCC stock.

Councillor Dave Evans referred to the number of 4-bed void properties and asked if those properties could be used to create house shared for single people. Officers advised that they would be targeting 2 and 3-bed properties and that the model being developed would be specific for 2 people sharing. For 3 people or more sharing this would mean the need for planning, enforcement and licensing as this would be classed as a mini House of Multiple Occupancy (HMO)

Option 5

The Service Manager – Housing & Prevention detailed the proposals under option 5, which related to the options for reviewing the offer to private landlords.

Councillor Dave Evans commented on the number of landlords reducing due to the difficulties now being faced with being a landlord, and therefore he did not feel that option 5a would assist. He also referred to a scheme undertaken through the Regeneration Team a number of years ago within his ward where 2 unfit properties had been improved and continued to be let. Officers explained

that the options would assist with aligning council properties to a number of workstreams.

The Chair thanked Members for the comments/questions. She also asked if information on the on the 1 bed demand across general needs and sheltered housing could be provided. The Service Manager – Housing & Prevention agreed to provide this information to the Committee following the meeting.

The Facilitator advised that the comments made by the Committee would be provided to Cabinet ahead of its meeting to consider the options on 21st November, 2023.

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

RESOLVED:

- (a) That the Committee note the latest financial position in relation to homelessness; and
- (b) That the Committee support the options outlined in Appendix 1 to increase supply and mitigate further overspends on the homelessness budget.

49. HOUSING RENT INCOME

The Service Manager – Revenues and Procurement introduced the latest operational update on the collection of housing rent, an analysis of arrears more than £5k, and proposals to strengthen the debt recovery process by amending the Corporate Debt Recovery Policy and automatically taking court action against contract holders who owe the equivalent of 12 weeks unpaid rent and/or £1,500 and who were not addressing their weekly rent payments and arrears.

The Service Manager reported that the collection of housing rent remained an area of risk but total rent arrears up to week 27 were £2.6m compared to £2.7m at the same week in the previous year, an improvement of £100k.

The Service Manager reported that during the July 2023 Committee meeting, it was agreed to provide Members with an in-depth analysis of those contract holders who owed the Council more than £5k of unpaid rent. This information was shown at 1.04 the report.

In relation to the Corporate Debt Policy, the Service Manager reported that, although court action was taken as a last resort, there was a growing need to adopt a more commercial approach to the collection of rent arrears to ensure losses in collections were minimised for the Housing Revenue Account (HRA). Appendix 1 of the report set out proposed changes to parts of the Corporate Debt Policy in relation to collection of housing rent. The Committee was asked to endorse the proposed changes to the Policy in relation to the trigger points for legal action for housing rent.

The Chair questioned the number of tenants in arrears between £200 - £500 and asked if this included tenants who paid by Direct Debit. Officers

explained that if a tenants paid monthly by direct debit this could show as them owing £250 but they would not be in arrears, broadly speaking the first column for tenants owing between £200 - £500 could be discounted.

Questions were raised around the additional costs by taking court action and whether the additional costs could be recovered. The Service Manager agreed to provide information around the schedule of court fees to the Committee following the meeting.

Comments were made around whether considerations of evicted tenants becoming homeless and then having to be provided with temporary accommodation was considered along with the cost implication attached to that. Officers explained the work of the Case Review Panel who go through a rigorous process and only once all options had been exhausted would the Council proceed with eviction. There were safeguards which sat outside the Corporate Debt Policy. The Service Manager also advised that of those tenants previously evicted, none had been re-homed by the Council.

Recommendation (a), as outlined within the report, was moved by Councillor Geoff Collett and seconded by Councillor Antony Wren. Recommendation (b), as outlined within the report, was moved by Councillor Ted Palmer and seconded by Linda Thew.

RESOLVED:

- (a) That the Committee note the latest financial position for rent collections in 2023/24 as set out in the report; and
- (b) That the Committee support the proposed changes to the Corporate Debt Policy to strengthen the collection of Housing Rent by taking court action, as a default position, in cases where contract holders were not making payment, were 12 weeks in arrears and/or who owe £1,500 or more and who were not engaging with the housing service to address the arrears.

50. 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 29 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 229
- The performance of the current contractors
- Top reasons for terminations

As requested at previous meetings, the Service Manager provided information on the number of new voids and how many had been completed by capital district area, as outlined in the briefing note.

In response to a question around property type, the Service Manager reported that there were currently 5 4-bed properties, but they required major investment works which had caused delays in them being returned for allocation. He added that they continue to increase supplier allocation through careful management and constant monitoring.

In response to a question around increasing the number of contractors, the Service Manager responded that the framework had been developed for 6 contractors so it would not be possible to increase the number at this time. He also informed the Committee that the in house DLO's continue to work on 25-30 properties. External contractors had increased their workload from 50 voids to 60 voids as an average.

Councillor David Evans expressed his concerns about the number of empty properties without quick enough intervention.

Councillor Geoff Collett suggested that the Committee move away from receiving the briefing note monthly and suggested that the Committee receive an update on a quarterly basis. The Chair felt that the number of void properties needed to continue to be monitored monthly, which was supported by the Committee.

RESOLVED:

That the update be noted.

51. 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 13.43 p.m.)

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Chair