

HOUSING OVERVIEW & SCRUTINY COMMITTEE

21 MARCH 2013

Minutes of the meeting of the Housing Overview & Scrutiny Committee of Flintshire County Council held at Delyn Committee Room, County Hall, Mold CH7 6NA on Thursday, 21 March 2013

PRESENT: Councillor Ron Hampson (Chairman)

Councillors: Amanda Bragg, David Cox, Peter Curtis, Ron Davies, Rosetta Dolphin, Jim Falshaw, Alison Halford, George Hardcastle, Ray Hughes, Brian Lloyd and Mike Reece

SUBSTITUTE: Councillor Dave Mackie (for Gareth Roberts)

ALSO PRESENT: Councillor Patrick Heesom

CONTRIBUTORS: Cabinet Member for Housing, Director of Community Services, Head of Housing, Interim Manager (Finance), Supporting People Manager, Housing Asset Manager and Housing Strategy Manager (for minute number 61)

IN ATTENDANCE: Housing & Learning Overview & Scrutiny Facilitator, Environment & Social Overview & Scrutiny Facilitator and Committee Officer

57. DECLARATIONS OF INTEREST (INCLUDING WHIPPING DECLARATIONS)

No declarations of interest were made.

58. MINUTES

The minutes of the meetings held on 22 January and 21 February 2013 had been circulated with the agenda.

Matters Arising - Minutes of 21 February 2013

Minute number 53: Sheltered Housing Improvement Project - Councillor A.M. Bragg expressed her appreciation to officers following positive feedback she had received from a Warden.

Minute number 54: PDA and Capita Update - Councillor J.E. Falshaw asked for an update on negotiations with Capita. The Head of Housing reported that officers had met with the suppliers of both the device and the software and that progress was being made. She said that an update would be brought to the next meeting.

RESOLVED:

That the minutes be approved as a correct record and signed by the Chairman.

59. DISCRETIONARY HOUSING PAYMENTS 2013/14

The Interim Manager (Finance) introduced a report to consider the Council's revised Discretionary Housing Payment (DHP) Policy for 2013/14 following consideration of the item by the Corporate Housing Overview & Scrutiny Committee on 14 February 2013. Views taken by both Committees would be reported to Cabinet in April 2013.

The Interim Manager explained the background to DHP which provided short-term financial assistance to help residents with their housing costs. She spoke of the challenges faced by householders due to welfare reforms and said that the Council could not rely on DHP to underpin any under-occupancy problems. In detailing the criteria used to assess entitlement to DHP, she said that this could not be used for help with Council Tax liability.

Councillor G. Hardcastle asked for clarification on the criteria described in the report. The Interim Manager said that the individual's circumstances would be taken into consideration together with steps that the person had taken to find alternative accommodation, however it was acknowledged that private sector rents were higher.

Councillor A.M. Halford asked if any thought had been given to Member involvement in the decision-reviewing process. The Interim Manager said that this could be considered in due course.

Councillor R. Dolphin referred to residents who were still struggling with living costs despite moving to more manageable properties. She pointed out that DHP was a short-term solution whereas this was a long-term problem. The Interim Manager stressed that DHP was not a panacea and that funding was not unlimited, however each case would be considered individually. The Welfare Reform Board understood the difficulties and assistance with budgeting could be provided to help residents make choices.

Councillor P.J. Curtis spoke of the unfairness in penalising residents who lived in under-occupied properties and the reduced funding available to Local Authorities who were aiming to help residents.

In praising the efforts of Flintshire housing officers, Councillor Hardcastle pointed out that all Authorities were in the same position.

Councillor Halford referred to comments made at a previous meeting by the Leader of the Council on the aspiration for the Council to build houses, which was an item included on the Forward Work Programme.

RESOLVED:

- (a) That the Committee support the revised Discretionary Housing Payment (DHP) Policy for 2013/14; and
- (b) That the views of the Committee be reported to Cabinet in April 2013.

60. SUPPORTING PEOPLE COMMISSIONING PLAN, HOUSING

The Supporting People Manager introduced the report to update Members on the Supporting People Programme in Flintshire and to seek approval for the Supporting People Local Commissioning Plan and the Local Spend Plan.

It was reported that the Supporting People Programme was undergoing significant changes due to reduced funding and a move to regional arrangements. An intermediate Plan had been produced to cover the 12 month period leading up to the Regional Commissioning Strategy and a regional collaborative committee had been established. A commitment had been given to set up 'off the shelf' projects which could be run at short-notice to support the work of the Welfare Reform Board. The Supporting People Manager detailed the list of new committed projects, realignment actions and reductions in funding in the Local Commissioning Plan.

In response to queries raised by Councillor A.M. Halford, the Supporting People Manager explained that the Plan would be approved by the Committee and then endorsed by the Regional Collaborative Committee. The reference to Telecare had only been in relation to service development due to community alarms being funded by Supporting People. On the list of client groups within the Plan, it was explained that more generic projects were preferred over specific provision which would have limited demand. The 'zero' number of units was not an indication of lack of provision and work was ongoing in these areas. On the inclusion of service personnel as a client group, the Supporting People Manager confirmed that this group was picked up and that services were available if the need was identified.

Councillor D.L. Cox raised concern about the limited funding available to meet ongoing demand. In sharing this concern, the Supporting People Manager said that the approach being taken by the service was currently working well and that such changes to service delivery could make a difference.

RESOLVED:

That the Committee supports the Flintshire Supporting People Local Commissioning and Spend Plan.

61. QUARTER 3 SERVICE PERFORMANCE REPORTS

The Director of Community Services introduced a report for the Committee to note and consider the 2012/13 Quarter 3 (October to December 2012) service performance reports, note the position of the Strategic Assessment of Risks and Challenges (SARC) and progress made against the Improvement Targets contained within the performance reports. He reported on the improvement of many key performance indicators including some which had exceeded their targets but recognised that some major challenges remained. He thanked the Committee, senior Members, Head of Housing and teams for their positive contributions which had led to the improvements.

The Director gave a short presentation on performance, outlining work which had been undertaken to improve performance and areas where improvement was needed, as outlined within the report.

The Cabinet Member referred to a report from some years ago which had been highly critical of the Housing service, including spend on bed and breakfast accommodation. She said that the comments made by Councillor Attridge, the Executive Member at that time, had led to a commitment given to improve the situation. She said that this had been a challenging journey and that the appointment of the Head of Housing had resulted in significant improvements to the service. In thanking the Head of Housing, management team and workforce for their achievements in performance, she said that this backed up the commitment given to housing tenants who had voted in the ballot.

The Director commended Simon Abbot for his work on the report and gave assurance that the increase in sickness absence figures was being addressed and progressed through the Council's procedures.

Councillor G. Hardcastle asked if the Chairman would send a personal letter to the Housing workforce to express the Committee's appreciation for their hard work over the years. The Chairman agreed to liaise with the Facilitator on this.

Councillor A.M. Halford asked what steps had been taken to reduce sickness absence levels and whether there was any link between this and the inconsistency in carrying out appraisals. The Director assured Members that sickness absence had been identified as a key area for improvement within Housing services with declining figures on four out of the five service areas. The differing issues behind short and long-term absences had been recognised and addressed by separating these types of absences. When intervention was required on absence levels, this was recognised and taken forward and a more flexible approach taken to help employees return to work from long-term absences by offering them more appropriate duties.

The Head of Housing said that the report highlighted an increase in sickness absence levels in the Asset Management Team but that accidents at work were more likely to occur in this area. Appraisals included discussion with the employee on their performance, which was impacted by attendance. She agreed that regular appraisals would help to manage attendance and also spoke of the importance of one-to-one meetings with the workforce. Issues in fully complying with the new Sickness Absence Policy had been addressed and appraisal timeframes were now in place. The inconsistency in carrying out appraisals had been due to training required for Team Leaders to effectively carry this out. There had also been sharing of good practice during senior management team discussions.

In relation to trades staff who were returning to work from long-term sickness with an injury preventing them from carrying out their usual duties, the Housing Asset Manager said that efforts were made to accommodate them in other suitable areas whilst taking consideration of skills matching and office capacity.

Following comments from Councillor R. Dolphin on an incident in a pensioner's bungalow, the Cabinet Member for Housing confirmed that there were communication links between the Capital Works team and Social Services for Adults and Children. The Director also gave assurance of shared communication between Social Services and Housing, but pointed out that officers would be unable to intervene if a person refused assistance. He confirmed that work was in progress for Warden services to be accessible to as many residents as possible. Councillor Dolphin welcomed the piloting of the Financial Awareness workshops and asked if a letter could be sent to residents advising them of any available option for payments to be taken out at source. The Head of Housing advised that there was an option for vulnerable people to opt for direct payments but that this would be time limited. A 'jam jar' account was available through the Credit Union where payments could be directly allocated to pay for rent etc.

In response to a request by Councillor Hardcastle, the Housing Asset Manager detailed the procedure for dealing with sickness absence. He also confirmed that in regard to trades staff returning to work, the same rate of pay applied regardless of the duties allocated.

Following a query by Councillor Halford on the average number of days that homeless households spent in other temporary accommodation, the Head of Housing commented on the challenging nature of this performance target as some families refused offers to move on which meant that they remained in temporary accommodation for a longer period. The example cited in the report related to a family who had been adequately housed and were awaiting permanent accommodation and it was likely that the penalty points had arisen from a previous tenancy. She said it was important to note that the temporary accommodation was good quality housing and was not bed and breakfast provision and went on to say that once residents had moved to another property, the support would continue to ensure that they managed their tenancy successfully.

Councillor Halford asked if a scheme similar to the 'Genesis' project was available to help families improve their life skills. The Supporting People Manager said that the Supporting People service did not provide specific support aside from the financial awareness course and that services to help residents were more cost effective than dealing with homelessness.

On gypsy-traveller accommodation, Councillor Halford sought an update on the Riverside site from the Housing Strategy Manager who was present in the public gallery. He reported that a ground condition survey had been completed and that the results of a flood risk assessment were awaited. A planning application for an extension to the site would be submitted upon completion of the flood risk assessment, however access remained an issue. The findings of the Gypsy-Traveller Needs Assessment had been agreed by Local Authorities and would be submitted for approval. In addition, consideration would be required on the content of the White Paper on Local Authorities' duty to make provision for gypsy/traveller accommodation and the need to include site provision in the Local Development Plan process.

In welcoming the decision to split sickness figures between long and short term absences, Councillor P.J. Curtis pointed out that sickness absence was an issue in other areas of the Council and was not unique to Housing.

Councillor A.M. Bragg advised that she had written to the Prime Minister and Deputy Prime Minister in relation to concerns about direct benefit payments made to vulnerable people under Universal Credit. A response from the Deputy Prime Minister's office had referred to the launch of six demonstration projects throughout the UK to prepare for these changes. Councillor Curtis stated that Torfaen Council were involved in one of the projects. The Head of Housing was aware of a project mentioned under discussion on welfare reforms which may be the same report.

On empty homes, Councillor M.A. Reece welcomed the progress made by letters sent to homeowners which offered assistance.

The Chairman referred to the improvement in rent arrears performance and asked if there were plans to provide additional resources in the Income Maximisation Team to deal with the upcoming significant challenges. The Head of Housing said that although the target had not been achieved, good progress had been made by reducing rent arrears by £50K from the same time as last year. To address the impact of welfare reforms, additional temporary resources were being considered for the Welfare Rights team in assisting Council tenants to claim additional benefits.

On the 'bedroom tax', Councillor Dolphin asked for clarification on whether a box room would be classed as a bedroom. The Head of Housing explained that in line with criteria in Welsh Government guidance, a bedroom should be classed as such if a bed could fit into the room. Members who were aware of genuine cases where this should not apply were encouraged to refer them to the Housing section. It was acknowledged that each case would need to be considered on its own merits, however any re-assessment of bedrooms may possibly impact on the HRA.

The Cabinet Member for Housing commented that properties with a separate dining room and living room could also be categorised as having an additional bedroom. The Head of Housing agreed, saying this was included in legislation. She also advised Members that visits to tenants identified as under-occupying properties had resulted in only a very small number being deemed as such.

RESOLVED:

- (a) That the comments/observations of the Committee are fed back to the Corporate Resources Overview & Scrutiny Committee who are responsible for the overview and monitoring of improvement targets; and
- (b) That the Chairman liaise with the Facilitator to send a personal letter to the Housing workforce to express the Committee's appreciation for their hard work over the years.

62. FORWARD WORK PROGRAMME

The Housing & Learning Overview & Scrutiny Facilitator introduced a report to enable the Committee to consider the Forward Work Programme. She detailed the items scheduled for the next meeting on 24 April 2013 including the item on Anti-Social Behaviour which had been moved, as agreed at the last meeting.

Councillor A.M. Halford suggested that items for future meetings could include the use of consultants and an update on the success of the financial awareness workshops. Following earlier discussion, she also asked if an item on sickness absence could be included for the meeting in July 2013. When asked if the item on consultants would be best covered by the Corporate Resources Overview & Scrutiny Committee, Councillor Halford acknowledged the overlap with that Committee but stressed the importance of Overview & Scrutiny Committees monitoring the spend on consultants in areas within their remit.

The Head of Housing suggested that an item on ways to support the development of affordable housing in the county could be scheduled for a future meeting. She said that progress on the business plan for the Housing Revenue Account (HRA) and achieving Welsh Housing Quality Standards could link to the HRA Subsidy item. In reference to the Adopted/Unadopted Land item due for consideration at the April 2013 meeting, she commented that this had been overtaken by the report by the Head of Streetscene on transferring the management of HRA land co-joined with Council owned land.

It was agreed that the Chairman and Facilitator would liaise with the Head of Housing and Cabinet Member to schedule items into the Forward Work Programme.

Councillor G. Hardcastle asked if a progress report on the vehicle tracking system could be submitted and Councillor R. Dolphin asked about progress on the planned maintenance programme. The Head of Housing said that both of these issues and PDA devices would be incorporated in the item on Repairs & Maintenance due at the next meeting.

In relation to discussion on building on Council land, Councillor R. Hughes pointed out that some land was not suitable for this purpose. The Head of Housing explained that the Head of Assets & Transportation was in the process of carrying out a mapping exercise on garages and HRA land, with options to be submitted for Members' consideration. The Cabinet Member for Housing commented that this would be mentioned in the next tenants' newsletter.

The Housing Asset Manager reported that following a restructure of the Asset Management Team, Tony Jones had been appointed as Capital Works Manager, Kevin Eccles and Ian Peters as Operational Team Managers and Denise Price as Business Performance Manager. Councillor Halford remarked that photographs of the officers would be helpful for Members.

RESOLVED:

That the Chairman and Facilitator liaise with the Head of Housing and Cabinet Member on the items submitted for the Committee's Forward Work Programme.

63. MEMBERS OF THE PUBLIC AND PRESS IN ATTENDANCE

There was one member of the press in attendance.

(The meeting started at 10.00 am and ended at 11.40 am)

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Chairman