

HOUSING OVERVIEW & SCRUTINY COMMITTEE
20 NOVEMBER 2013

Minutes of the meeting of the Housing Overview & Scrutiny Committee of Flintshire County Council held in the Delyn Committee Room, County Hall, Mold CH7 6NA on Wednesday, 20 November 2013

PRESENT: Councillor Ron Hampson (Chairman)

Councillors: Amanda Bragg, David Cox, Ron Davies, Glenys Diskin, Alison Halford, George Hardcastle, Brian Lloyd, Mike Reece, Gareth Roberts and Sharon Williams

SUBSTITUTES:

Councillors: Ian Dunbar for Peter Curtis and Dave Mackie for Rosetta Dolphin

APOLOGIES:

Councillors: Jim Falshaw and Ray Hughes

CONTRIBUTORS:

Cabinet Member for Housing, Director of Community Services, Head of Housing, Community Support Services Manager, Housing Asset Manager, Housing Renewal Manager and Housing Strategy Manager

IN ATTENDANCE:

Housing and Learning Overview & Scrutiny Facilitator and Committee Officer

31. DECLARATIONS OF INTEREST (INCLUDING WHIPPING DECLARATIONS)

No declarations of interest were made.

32. MINUTES

The minutes of the meeting of the Committee held on 16 October 2013 had been circulated to Members with the agenda.

Councillor Mike Reece indicated that he had submitted his apologies for the meeting but they had not been recorded.

Councillor George Hardcastle referred to the second paragraph of minute 25 and the comments of the Chairman on the recent 'Inspire' awards which celebrated achievements for outstanding performance in various areas of Housing. Councillor Hardcastle said that in October 2013 there had been a problem at Prince of Wales Court due to a surge in electricity. He congratulated Kevin Eccles and Nik Evans for the fantastic job that they had undertaken and praised the workforce for assisting the residents by purchasing and installing replacement televisions. He asked that his thanks to the workforce be passed on by the Director of Community Services, Head of Housing and Cabinet Member for Housing.

RESOLVED:

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

33. SARTH

The Community Support Services Manager introduced the report to update Members on the development of the Single Access Route to Housing (SARTH) Project across the North East Wales sub region and to seek support to continue with the project and implement the policy locally.

She detailed the background to the report, explaining that in 2011, the Welsh Government supported a project to explore the options for a sub regional common housing register and policy. In November 2012, Cabinet gave approval for Flintshire to put the policy out to public consultation. Members were invited to attend a workshop in April 2013 as part of that consultation and an update report had been circulated to Members in July 2013 providing feedback on the consultation results. The overall aim of the SARTH was to simplify access to a range of affordable housing options which was transparent, legal, efficient and accessible to all sections of the community. From a customer perspective, the policy would result in a simpler scheme than the current points based scheme and applicants would be given reasonable preference determined by a banding scheme which listed people in date order of their application within each band; the categories for reasonable preference were detailed in the report. The Community Support Services Manager explained that applicants who were not in the categories entitled to reasonable preference would not be given any priority in the banding scheme and would not be recorded on the housing register, however advice and assistance would be provided to assist those applicants in finding affordable housing that met their needs.

On the issue of a regional policy and register, the Community Support Services Manager explained that the development of a regional register to support the policy was more complex and required an IT system to be purchased or developed. Some work had been carried out to consider the most appropriate IT solution to support the policy but there had been no financial commitment from all partners to contribute to a regional system at this time. Flintshire County Council was committed to continuing with the regional project but a local register would support local service delivery which was closely aligned to the existing housing options teams. It had taken the step towards delivering the enhanced service by piloting a Central Housing Register Team. The proposal was that the Central Housing Register Team and the Housing Options Team join to form a 'Housing Solutions Model' which would deal with all requests for housing by assessing an individual's requirements and needs, and advising them on the most suitable option. The Community Support Services Manager explained that from 2015, the Local Authority would have a duty to provide full advice and assistance to all those who approached the Council in housing need. This early work would assist Flintshire County Council to manage the additional burden of the legislation change without needing to invest in additional staff resources.

A review of the Medical Panel had suggested that lower level issues be assessed by the Housing Asset Officer and Housing Occupational Therapist and

that better use be made of internal expertise including mental health services and Occupational Therapy. These changes would be supported by a robust appeals process.

The timeline for the implementation of the changes was detailed at appendix 2 where it was proposed that the change to the banding system be gradual but that the merging of the two teams start from January 2014, if the proposals were approved.

The Chairman suggested that an update be provided to a future meeting.

Councillor Alison Halford congratulated the Community Support Services Manager for her report. She referred to page 13 where the list of partners in the collaboration were reported and asked why this had not happened previously. She also queried that if Flintshire County Council were responsible for Flintshire needs why was a collaboration needed. The Community Support Services Manager said that all of the partners had signed up to a common policy of banding and a single access route for consistency. She added that even though a regional approach was still being considered, this would take longer to implement. Councillor Halford also referred to paragraph 3.13 and asked if Flintshire County Council was to provide the IT system for all partners. The Community Support Services Manager explained that not all partners would share the same capita system. She said that SARTH was more than just allocating properties; it was around giving options and advice.

Councillor George Hardcastle asked about the criteria that would be used for determining if a person would need to attend a medical panel. The Community Support Services Manager said that there were no proposals at present to change the medical points system but it was suggested that simpler cases be dealt with by the Housing Asset Officer and Occupational Therapist with only the more complex cases being referred to the Medical Panel.

Councillor Mike Reece said that there was currently a policy in place where a letter was sent from Flintshire County Council to local Members informing them of tenants who had moved into their wards. He asked if the other organisations in the collaboration would adopt the same policy. The Head of Housing said that discussions could be undertaken with the Housing Associations. Councillor Ron Davies said that local knowledge was important and that sensitivity when placing tenants also needed to be considered. The Head of Housing said that it was appropriate for the local Member to contact the Housing Officer about sensitive allocation needs but reminded the Committee that local Members could not be involved in the allocation of properties. Councillor David Cox felt that local knowledge provided by local Members was important in the consideration of where to house tenants. The Cabinet Member for Housing said that legal advice had previously been sought on this matter and local Members were not able to influence property allocations. The Head of Housing said that discussions between the Housing Team and local Members could be reviewed so that Councillors could give information to officers about their local knowledge without them being involved in making a decision as to who moved into their ward.

Councillor Cox asked if there would be a single point of contact for all partners and whether they would be located together. The Community Support Services Manager said that there would be a single contact number for Flintshire but that there would be different contact details for different organisations. On a regional perspective, the Head of Housing said that it would be difficult for all organisations to know details of all areas of North East Wales but that the best practice for the region would be delivered locally.

In response to a question from Councillor Halford, the Community Support Services Manager detailed the criteria for each of the bandings. Councillor Halford referred to paragraph 3(b) on page 31 about people who had left the armed forces under Discharge as of Right (DAOR) being excluded from this provision and would not be given band one status under category three; she raised concern about this issue. The Community Support Services Manager said that there had been an overwhelming amount of support in the consultation for those from the armed forces to be given high priority and they were therefore included in Band one. Councillor Halford referred to the difference between those who had left the armed forces under DAOR and those who had been made redundant from the armed forces without a pension. The Community Support Services Manager explained that the phased approach to bring in the policy had been suggested so that it could be ensured that it worked; the suggestion to further consider the needs of those who had been in the armed forces would be passed on to the Steering Group.

Councillor Amanda Bragg referred to the bullet point on page 16 and asked whether the new scheme would make it easier to determine timing for the likelihood of a property becoming available to tenants. The Community Support Services Manager confirmed that the date order in the new proposals would improve the situation about the timeframe as it would be easier for people to understand where they were on the list. She added that no-one currently on the register would be asked to come off it.

Councillor Ian Dunbar referred to prisoners who were provided with housing on their discharge from prison and asked if consideration had been given in the policy to amend the criteria to stop this from occurring under the new policy. The Community Support Services Manager explained that under the Homelessness Legislation, Local Authorities had a statutory requirement to house ex prisoners. The Head of Housing said that there was a suggestion that this could change so that in future the ex offender would need to prove their vulnerability.

In response to a question from Councillor Gareth Roberts, the Community Support Services Manager said that data cleansing work would be undertaken to ensure that those on the Housing register still needed to be on it.

Councillor Halford asked whether a Single Access Route would allow easier identification of those tenants who damaged properties then moved on to other authorities or organisations. On the issue of behaviour, the Community Support Services Manager said that there was a proposal in the policy to reduce a tenant's priority for unreasonable behaviour. The Head of Housing said that the shared information that SARTH would provide would improve the situation of tenants who did not look after their property. Councillor Halford also queried

whether there was still a need for the Local Housing Company if SARTH was approved. The Head of Housing said that the Housing Company was proposed to meet a range of housing needs that the Council were not currently able to meet through current structures/arrangements. This could include encouraging the private housing sector to rent their properties at a lower market rent, or developers gifting properties to the Council through the Planning system and major regeneration schemes.

RESOLVED:

- (a) That the new allocations policy for Flintshire County Council be supported;
- (b) That the continued involvement in the regional project and the contribution of £10,000 in 2014-15 for the Regional Project Officer post be supported;
- (c) That the phased implementation of the new allocations policy and register in Flintshire as detailed in the project plan be supported;
- (d) That the Committee receive an update report in September 2014; and
- (e) That the comments made in relation to people who have left the armed forces under Discharge as of Right be conveyed to the Steering Group.

34. IMPROVEMENT PLAN MONITORING REPORT

The Director of Community Services introduced the report for the Committee to note and consider elements of the 2013/14 Mid Year Improvement Plan Monitoring Report relevant to the Committee for the period April to September 2013.

He explained that the new style Improvement Plan adopted by the Council in June 2013 was aligned to the new three year Outcome Agreement and focussed on the priorities which were expected to have the most impact during 2013/14. In addition to the Improvement Plan Monitoring Report, bi-annually performance highlight reports would be presented from the Heads of Service. The five sub-priority reports were included as appendices to the report and a short presentation on each of the areas was provided as follows:-

- Extra Care Housing – Director of Community Services
- Modern, Efficient and Adapted Homes - Head of Housing
- Achieve the Wales Housing Quality Standard – Housing Asset Manager
- Welfare Reform - Community Support Services Manager
- Fuel Poverty - Housing Renewal Manager

Councillor George Hardcastle thanked the officers for the report. He queried the initials used in the tables and highlighted pages 56 and 57 as an example. He also queried why the future actions section on page 56 was blank. Councillor Dave Mackie said that it had been proposed that a workshop be held to look at the layout of the new style Improvement Plan reports. The Director of Community Services said that the comments made about the style and layout of the reports could be forwarded onto the Policy Unit. In response to the question from Councillor Hardcastle, he explained that the gross score for the risk about

ensuring that the Council prevent delays in planning approvals for affordable housing developments was amber and that with the current action which was identified in the report, the score would change to green; a future action was therefore not required.

Councillor Alison Halford queried whether the previous system of Red/Amber/Green (RAG) and up/down arrows had now been replaced with this system. The Head of Housing explained that the Mid Year Performance Report (item 6 on this agenda) had been produced in the traditional format. She agreed that the risk information contained in this report had not been clear and that a simpler system needed to be developed.

In response to a question from Councillor Halford about whether the 3% target referred to on page 59 was about void properties, the Head of Housing explained that this was to do with private sector empty properties not Council housing; she gave assurance that the year end target would be achieved.

Councillor Halford also queried whether schemes for insulating properties also applied to landlords of private rented properties. In response the Housing Renewal Manager explained that if it was a solid walled property, schemes with a proportion of funding were available and he provided further information on the schemes. He also assured Members that the more challenging target of 6% which had been set for retuning empty properties back in to use had already been exceeded.

Councillor Ron Davies referred to the Extra Care Housing at Llys Eleanor, which he said was a great facility, and asked that his thanks be passed on to the Manager. Councillor Amanda Bragg referred to page 49 and asked where the two further extra care schemes which were currently being taken through the procurement process were to be sited. The Director of Community Services responded that these would be in Holywell and Flint but sites had not yet been chosen. Councillor Gareth Roberts said that it was important to include local Members when choosing sites due to their local knowledge of the areas.

Councillor Brian Lloyd asked if there had been an increase in the Council housing stock due to tenants in Council properties moving to Llys Jasmine or Llys Eleanor. The Head of Housing responded that she could undertake some analysis and report back to the Committee.

RESOLVED:

- (a) That the report be received; and
- (b) That the comments about the layout and style of the report be collated and sent to the Policy Unit.

35. MID YEAR SERVICE PERFORMANCE REPORT

The Head of Housing introduced a report for the Committee to note and consider the 2013/14 Mid Year Service Performance Report produced under the adopted business model of the Council. Members were also asked to comment on the new approach to performance reporting.

She gave a short presentation on the performance within Housing Services, and circulated a benchmarking report comparing housing performance to other landlords and outlining work which had been undertaken to improve performance and areas where improvement was needed, as outlined within the report.

In response to a question from the Chairman about Disabled Facilities Grants, the Housing Renewal Manager said that work was being undertaken to speed up the process which could include strengthening the process so that Occupational Therapy assessments were only undertaken where necessary. The average number of days for DFGs in Flintshire was 177 days compared to the national average across Wales of 271 days.

The Head of Housing highlighted page 104 where it was reported that the Housing Renewal Service had now completed the full accreditation process and had been awarded the Customer Service Excellence Standard award. The comment from the assessors had been included in the report and included the comments that *"Flintshire County Council Housing Renewal Service is a service that provides high levels of customer service. There was evidence that the Housing Renewal Service is committed and inspired in delivering the best possible customer experience"*. She said that the service should be proud of the achievement and added that other services were being identified to go through the accreditation process.

Councillor Alison Halford congratulated the Head of Housing for the report and in referring to page 95 and the section on Gas Servicing and No Access, queried why tenants had not allowed access to their properties. In response, the Housing Asset Manager said that since the report had been written the percentage of gas servicing carried out had increased to 98.8%. This had been as a result of staff working longer hours and offering appointments on Saturday mornings. The process of the number of times that a property was visited was to be reviewed to get to the end stage quicker. Work was also ongoing with the Neighbourhood Housing Management and a Housing Association had been visited to establish whether their working practices could improve the situation in Flintshire. On the issue of why tenants did not permit access, the Head of Housing said that some tenants may be working but others did not want to permit access due to issues with their tenancy. She reminded Members that the Council had a legal responsibility to undertake the gas servicing. Councillor Halford suggested that an update be provided to a future meeting of the Committee and that this be included in the Forward Work Programme.

In referring to page 98 and the section on Supporting People, Councillor Alison Halford asked if the funding had been reduced and what problems this would present. The Community Support Services Manager said that there were planned ongoing reductions but there were plans in place to undertake a lean approach without reducing the services provided at the moment.

Councillor George Hardcastle raised concern about the outturn of 36.11 days for the average number of days all homeless households spent in Bed and Breakfast (B&B) accommodation. The Community Support Services Manager explained that alternative options were being considered and that future reports would highlight the number of people who did not have to use B&B.

Councillor Halford praised the Housing Renewal Service for the Excellence award and congratulated the team on achieving it. She referred to the section on Gypsies and Travellers on page 103 and asked whether the officer working group that had been established was to take forward the regional needs assessment work. She also asked for an update on the proposed improvements at the Riverside site in Queensferry. The Chairman invited the Housing Strategy Manager to the table. The Housing Strategy Manager said that the group were considering issues relating to Gypsies and Travellers including unauthorised encampments and the better co-ordination of actions for their future needs. Any issues or concerns could also be fed through to the Regional Group for further discussion. On the issue of Riverside, he said that information from Natural Resources Wales had been sought. A planning application for the expansion of the site was being prepared and this would be submitted as soon as it was available. Work was also being undertaken with Highways on the existing access on to the A494 and it had been identified that the neighbouring scrap yard was to close so this would reduce the number of vehicles using the access; it was felt that the Riverside site would have a lower level of traffic movement than the scrap yard. The cabinet Member for Housing said that the issue of the A494 could be addressed in the North East Wales Transport Strategy. Councillor Ron Davies felt that the access onto the A494 was dangerous and that the alternative access into Pentre should be considered.

The Head of Housing introduced Simon Abbot to the Committee and explained that he had prepared the performance report and the Benchmarking Information which had been circulated to Members. She asked the Committee to acknowledge the work that he had undertaken.

RESOLVED:

That the report be received.

36. FORWARD WORK PROGRAMME

The Housing and Learning Overview & Scrutiny Facilitator introduced the report to enable the Committee to consider the Forward Work Programme.

The Facilitator explained that the budget meetings which had been scheduled to take place in December 2013 had been cancelled and replaced with workshops. It was suggested that a special meeting be held on 12 December 2013, which had initially been a slot for the budget meeting, to consider reports on Governance Arrangements for the Local Housing Company and also a draft Scooter Policy. On page 119, it was reported that a Joint meeting was to be held with Social and Health Care Overview & Scrutiny Committee at Llys Jasmine in Mold. Following consultation with the Chairman, it had been suggested that the meeting be arranged for Thursday, 6 February 2014 and that a tour of the facility take place prior to the meeting.

At the previous meeting, it had also been suggested that Carl Sargeant, the Minister for Housing and Regeneration, be invited to attend a future meeting of the Committee. It had been suggested that he be asked to attend the meeting on 8 January 2014. Councillor George Hardcastle suggested that the meeting

could be moved from 8 January 2014 to accommodate the Minister being able to attend the meeting.

The Facilitator also indicated that an update on the Choices document be considered at the 5 February 2014 meeting. Following earlier discussions, update reports on Gas servicing and SARTH would also be added to the Forward Work Programme for submission to future meetings of the Committee.

RESOLVED:

That the Forward Work Programme be noted and updated accordingly.

37. MEMBERS OF THE PUBLIC AND PRESS IN ATTENDANCE

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

(The meeting started at 10.00 am and ended at 12.10 pm)

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Chairman