

HOUSING OVERVIEW & SCRUTINY COMMITTEE

16 APRIL 2014

Minutes of the meeting of the Housing Overview & Scrutiny Committee of Flintshire County Council held in the Delyn Committee Room, County Hall, Mold on Wednesday, 16 April 2014

PRESENT: Councillor Ron Hampson (Chairman)

Councillors: Amanda Bragg, David Cox, Peter Curtis, Ron Davies, Rosetta Dolphin, George Hardcastle, Ray Hughes, Hilary Isherwood, Brian Lloyd, Mike Reece and Gareth Roberts

APOLOGY: Councillor Jim Falshaw

CONTRIBUTORS: Cabinet Member for Housing, Director of Community Services, Head of Housing, Team Manager, Advice & Homeless Service, Neighbourhood Housing Manager (North), Performance Support Manager, Team Leader (North) and Team Leader, Income Section

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

Prior to the start of the meeting, the Chairman and Vice-Chairman congratulated the Director of Community Services and Head of Housing on their successful appointments to new roles within the Council structure.

59. DECLARATIONS OF INTEREST (INCLUDING WHIPPING DECLARATIONS)

Councillor Hilary Isherwood declared a personal interest on all items due to her husband being the Housing Shadow Minister.

60. MINUTES

The minutes of the meetings held on 21 January, 28 January (joint meeting), 5 February and 6 February 2014 (joint meeting) had been circulated with the agenda.

Matters Arising - Housing Overview & Scrutiny Committee - 21 January 2014

Minute number 50: Councillor Peter Curtis advised that he was still awaiting information on the Eco energy selection process. The Head of Housing said that this would be re-sent.

Matters Arising - Joint Housing and Social & Health Care Overview & Scrutiny Committee - 6 February 2014

Minute number 10: Delivering Home Adaptations - Following requests from Councillors Rosetta Dolphin and Hilary Isherwood, the Facilitator agreed to re-circulate the information on costs relating to the installation and removal of level access showers.

RESOLVED:

That the four sets of minutes be approved as correct records and signed by the Chairman.

61. WELFARE REFORM UPDATE

The Team Manager, Advice & Homeless Service introduced an update report on the latest position regarding Welfare Reform. The report detailed work carried out by the Welfare Reform Response Team including targeting help to the 42 households in Flintshire which had been affected by the benefit cap. An update on the Maximum Rent Social Sector (MRSS), commonly known as the Bedroom Tax, reported a recent change in legislation and it was also noted that two major reports were being produced on the impact of MRSS across Wales and the whole of the UK. On the Discretionary Assistance Fund, a Council officer had worked with a Welsh Government (WG) Task Group to assess the impact of changes and to identify ways of extending the scheme to benefit more vulnerable people. Although the Fund was currently available until the end of March 2015, WG was seeking clarification on the longer term.

The Committee was also advised that the Department of Work & Pensions (DWP) had implemented a new system to improve the timescale for processing applications for Personal Independent Payments, prior to the migration of working-age Disability Living Allowance claimants in Autumn 2015. As part of the initial stage of implementing Universal Credit across the UK, ten areas had been selected to accept claims from restricted groups, with Shotton Jobcentre beginning to accept claims from single unemployed claimants from 7 April 2014, with three claims being made during the first week. Plans to rollout Universal Credit to other areas over time would involve the widening of criteria to include other claimant groups. On Discretionary Housing Payments, proactive work was also being carried out to help households to manage their circumstances by alternative means, as this limited fund was unlikely to be extended over the longer term. An update was also received on the comprehensive training programme which would continue to be rolled out and highlighted the successful outcomes from work by the Welfare Reform Response Team.

Whilst giving an overview of the appendices to the report, the Neighbourhood Housing Manager (North) explained the approach taken to engage with those affected by welfare reform to provide information and discuss options on managing the impacts. As a result of the Maximum Rent Social Sector (Bedroom Tax), 890 tenants in Flintshire were currently subject to a reduction in Housing Benefit, although only a limited number had asked to be rehoused. She was pleased to report that through a supportive approach by the Welfare Reform Response Team and Income Management Section, there had been no evictions as a result of rent arrears. On the allocation statistics, it was noted that 9% of tenants had been transferred to alternative properties due to the Bedroom Tax, which exceeded the national average of 6%, however it was recognised that further work was needed.

The Chairman remarked on the positive work undertaken by the Rent Arrears Team.

Councillor Hilary Isherwood thanked the Housing team for the report and commented on the positive engagement with Shotton Jobcentre on Universal Credit. She felt it was important to offer assistance to vulnerable people, particularly those with mental health and substance misuse issues. In response to queries, the Neighbourhood Housing Manager agreed to provide a separate response on the number of tenants who had taken in a lodger and any known problems arising from this. She also agreed to advise of the number of tenants who were unable to transfer to another property for 12 months due to anti-social behaviour issues. It was noted that Members had previously agreed not to allow property transfers in the cases of existing Court Orders, although discretion could be applied. On the Bond scheme, the Head of Housing agreed to provide information on the number taken out and whether any reports had been received of Bonds not being returned from private landlords.

In response to queries from Councillor Rosetta Dolphin, the Team Manager, Advice & Homeless Service provided explanation on Universal Credit and said that the Benefit Cap impacted on housing benefit for households with four or more dependent children. In relation to working-age housing benefit claimants who had fallen behind with rent arrears due to the Bedroom Tax, he estimated that around a third were unable to pay anything with a similar number paying a proportion. Following concerns about the cost to the Council from Government decisions on welfare reform, it was explained that a report by the Wales Audit Office due to be published later in the year would include findings on this. The Head of Housing agreed that detail on the cost to Flintshire would be incorporated in the next update report to the Committee.

Councillor George Hardcastle thanked the officers and their teams for the positive approach which had been taken, particularly as the rent arrears position at year end 2013/14 had not been significantly affected during this challenging time. When asked about the households which had chosen not to accept the support offered and whether these had been in rent arrears prior to the changes, the Team Manager, Advice & Homeless Service said that support would continue to be available if the individuals wished to take this up. The Head of Housing spoke of the possibility of these households being subject to rent arrears and other issues, and agreed to look into this. In response to a question about the cost of removals, it was noted that the Tenant Incentive Scheme could provide some help however each case was considered on its own merits.

Councillor Amanda Bragg praised the early intervention steps to help those affected by the Benefit Cap and asked if those who had declined help were still able to access at a later date. The Team Manager, Advice & Homeless Service said that ongoing support was available with further attempts made to engage with households, subject to resources available. He agreed with comments that the full impact of those affected by welfare reform was not yet known. In response to a question about those affected by the Bedroom Tax falling into rent arrears, the Head of Housing pointed out the challenges in availability of suitable size accommodation and that in accordance with the agreed policy, Council properties would continue to be allocated based on need. She went on to suggest that this may be an area requiring future discussion by the Committee.

Concerns were raised by Councillor Peter Curtis about direct payments to tenants and checks carried out in relation to lodgers in households affected by the Bedroom Tax. The Head of Housing stressed that the Council did not recommend that such households place an advertisement for a lodger and that in many cases, these were acquaintances of the tenant.

Councillor Dolphin thanked the Team Leader (North) for helping to provide a positive solution to a property within her ward which had proved difficult to let, and suggested that this should be repeated for other similar properties.

RESOLVED:

That the Committee notes the report and the positive measures being implemented by the Housing Service to mitigate the full extent of impacts from the welfare reforms from falling upon council tenants and to protect, as far as practical, the Housing Revenue Account income stream.

62. 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 October to December 2013.

The Director and Head of Housing each gave a short presentation on performance within each of the sub-priority areas, highlighting work which had been undertaken to improve performance and areas where improvement was needed, as outlined within each report.

Extra Care Housing

The Director reported that the Llys Jasmine complex had been shortlisted for the UK Housing Awards in the large development category, for consideration later in the month. He went on to confirm that £550K was being made available from Welsh Government (WG) Intermediate Care Funding towards the development of two more extra care developments in Flint and Holywell.

In welcoming plans to develop further facilities following the success of Llys Eleanor and Llys Jasmine, Councillor Rosetta Dolphin asked how these would be publicised. The Director said that events would be held locally to advertise the benefits of these types of facilities, however word of mouth about the quality of service had helped to quickly fill places available at the two current sites.

Councillor Hilary Isherwood spoke about a need for facilities in all of the Council's wards and suggested that consideration of residents in surrounding areas should be built into the planning process for future developments to ensure that neighbouring properties were not overlooked. The Director said that there had been local Member representation on the Board and that consideration had been given to the wider community. When asked about the cost to individuals wishing to take up extra care provision such as Llys Jasmine, the Facilitator agreed to re-circulate details of costs.

In response to comments on plans for a facility in Holywell, the Director confirmed that plans to identify an appropriate site were underway and that all suggestions on potential sites had been evaluated.

Following a comment from Councillor Gareth Roberts, the Director confirmed that mixed tenure was part of the model, however demand for purchasing units was currently low across North Wales.

Councillor Brian Lloyd asked if priority was given to Council tenants as this would free up housing stock for allocation to others. The Head of Housing said that many Council tenants had been accepted into Llys Jasmine as they had met the necessary qualification criteria for extra care.

Modern, Efficient and Adapted Homes

In response to a query from Councillor George Hardcastle on the 29 empty homes which had been brought back into use during the period, the Performance Support Manager replied that these were a mix of 2-3 bedroom properties which had remained empty for at least six months.

Councillor Peter Curtis referred to a recent local press article which had raised concerns about page 10 of the revised Tenancy Agreement. The Neighbourhood Housing Manager explained that the changes had reflected the existing legal rights of tenants in terms of managing their properties. She agreed to email Councillor Curtis to explain this in more detail. It was noted that the Council had made a formal response to the press article.

When asked by Councillor Dolphin about repayment of loans for private houses, the Head of Housing confirmed that charges applied to these properties and that different funding streams were available to bring empty homes back into use. Under the Empty Homes initiative, loans for completing properties must be repaid to the WG within two or three years respectively if the property was sold or rented.

Achieve the Wales Housing Quality Standard (WHQS)

As a point of accuracy on page 1 of Appendix 3, the Head of Housing clarified that there was a six year work programme to achieve the WHQS and that the funding gap had been reduced from £14m to £8m.

In response to a comment from Councillor Hardcastle on exceeding the target on the number of bathrooms replaced in the capital programme, the Head of Housing explained that despite none being promised within the Choices Document, it was predicated that 60 would be replaced in 2013/14, in addition to wet room installations as part of Disabled Facilities Grant work.

Councillor Dolphin praised all those involved in exceeding the planned work targets and requested an updated list with proposed timescales. The Head of Housing said that Members and tenants would be consulted on areas of priority over the Summer period, prior to endorsement by Cabinet in the Autumn.

Welfare Reform

In relation to the homelessness service, the Chairman asked about current bed and breakfast placements. The Head of Housing was pleased to report that this was being well managed as this currently only applied to a small number of individuals and that partnership with the private sector would help to further reduce this need.

Fuel Poverty

Councillor Dolphin praised the energy efficiency measures being taken to help households and asked that her thanks be passed on to Gavin Griffith.

Following a query from Councillor Mike Reece on solid wall insulation, the Head of Housing said that funding was available through various sources such as Arbed, Energy Company Obligation (ECO) and Green Deal, however funding previously available was restricted to certain areas.

RESOLVED:

- (a) That the report be received; and
- (b) That feedback be provided to the Corporate Resources Overview & Scrutiny Committee.

63. FORWARD WORK PROGRAMME

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

It was agreed that the meeting scheduled for 10 June 2014 would include an update on the Housing Strategy and that the Facilitator would liaise with the Chairman and Head of Housing to bring updates on the housing company and Asset Management Plan to a future meeting.

Although all Members had been invited to the recent garage review workshop, Councillor Rosetta Dolphin suggested that the item should be discussed at a joint meeting with the Environment Overview & Scrutiny Committee. The Head of Housing gave assurance of consultation with local Members on ward issues and spoke of plans to bring a report to the Committee in June/July 2014 to deal with some of the garage sites identified at the workshop. Following a suggestion by Councillor Gareth Roberts for involvement by Planning, she said that consideration would be given to holding a joint meeting.

In response to a comment from Councillor Mike Reece on grass cutting services, the Head of Housing said that any specific issues could be raised with officers outside the meeting. She explained that recent billing problems, due to the data used, had been recognised and would be revisited. Following remarks by other Members, it was pointed out that the service was not mandatory and that tenants had been offered the choice and would continue to receive the service if they did not respond otherwise.

Following comments from Councillor Peter Curtis, it was explained that there were other elements within the welfare benefits system to help disabled tenants maintain their gardens.

Councillor Hilary Isherwood commented on the need to utilise resources that were already available and referred to employment of local people.

In response to Members' concerns, the Head of Housing agreed to bring an update report in six months' time to provide feedback in respect of quality of the service and the employment of local people in the service.

Councillor Isherwood asked about the potential for bulk buying oil for residents. The Head of Housing was aware of schemes in operation at some other Councils and agreed to look into this.

RESOLVED:

That the Forward Work Programme be updated accordingly.

64. MEMBERS OF THE PUBLIC AND PRESS IN ATTENDANCE

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

(The meeting started at 10.00 am and ended at 12.25 pm)

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Chairman