

HOUSING OVERVIEW & SCRUTINY COMMITTEE
10 JUNE 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 Tuesday, 10 June 2014

PRESENT: Councillor Ron Hampson (Chairman)

Councillors: Amanda Bragg, Paul Cunningham, Peter Curtis, Ron Davies, Rosetta Dolphin, Jim Falshaw, George Hardcastle, Brian Lloyd, Mike Reece and Gareth Roberts

SUBSTITUTES: Councillors Alex Aldridge (for David Cox) and Paul Shotton (for Sharon Williams)

APOLOGIES: Councillors: Ray Hughes and Hilary Isherwood

CONTRIBUTORS: Cabinet Member for Housing, Chief Officer (Community & Enterprise), Housing Regeneration & Strategy Manager, Neighbourhood Housing Manager, Community Support Services Manager and Performance Team Leader

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

8. DECLARATIONS OF INTEREST (INCLUDING WHIPPING DECLARATIONS)

No declarations of interest were made.

9. APPOINTMENT OF VICE-CHAIR

The Chairman sought nominations for a Vice-Chair for the Committee. A nomination for Councillor George Hardcastle was duly seconded and on being put to the vote, was carried. No further nominations were received.

RESOLVED:

That Councillor George Hardcastle be appointed Vice-Chair of the Committee.

10. MINUTES

The minutes of the meeting held on 28 April 2014 (joint meeting with the Environment Overview & Scrutiny Committee) had been circulated with the agenda.

Matters Arising

Minute number 4: Private Sector Housing Renewal - in response to a query from Councillor Rosetta Dolphin, the Chief Officer (Community & Enterprise) advised that Neal Cockerton was looking into the collective energy switching scheme and would report back to the Environment Overview & Scrutiny Committee.

RESOLVED:

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

11. IMPROVEMENT PLAN 2014/15

The Performance Team Leader delivered a presentation and presented extracts from the draft Improvement Plan 2014/15 detailing sub-priorities relevant to the Committee, prior to the full Plan being submitted to Cabinet and Council for adoption later in the month. The report also included an extract from the supporting document entitled 'How achievement will be measured'.

As detailed in the report, a refresh of the Improvement Priorities had resulted in the setting of 22 sub-priorities for 2014/15 (as opposed to 24 sub-priorities for 2013/14) under eight over-arching Priorities. It was noted that the Wales Audit Office had reflected positively on changes to the Improvement Plan for 2013/14 in terms of its clarity and enabling public engagement.

The Housing Regeneration & Strategy Manager gave an overview of the sub-priorities to be considered by the Committee.

In welcoming the report, the Chairman highlighted the positive work carried out by the Welfare Rights team which had resulted in £2.3m of additional Social Security and Tax Credits received by Flintshire households during 2013/14. During the item, he congratulated the Chief Officer (Community & Enterprise) on her new role and looked forward to her continuing to work with the Committee.

This was echoed by Councillor Paul Shotton, who suggested that information recently shared with Members on the Flintshire Credit Union scheme should be promoted to residents as a better alternative to payday loans. On the Wales Housing Quality Standard, he was pleased to note continued investment in the Council's housing stock and noted that tenants had expressed their satisfaction in the work completed. He commented on the exiting of the Housing Revenue Account (HRA) subsidy system which would help to support plans to build new Council houses and hoped that locations would be identified across the county. The Cabinet Member for Housing said that no decision had been reached on locations and that various sites were currently under consideration.

Councillor George Hardcastle asked about progress reporting from meetings of the Council's wholly owned property management company, North East Wales Homes. The Chief Officer (Community & Enterprise) reported on the set up of the Board which had met twice to date, and said that performance reports would be submitted to the Committee every six months, with the first due in the Autumn.

Councillor Peter Curtis asked if the Council would publicise the second phase of a new Green Deal initiative by the Government for residents to apply for loans of up to £7K towards energy efficiency measures. The Housing Regeneration & Strategy Manager said that residents were being directed to such national loan schemes or alternative schemes available through the Council

where this was more appropriate, for example where funding was available for vulnerable client groups.

In response to queries raised by Councillor Rosetta Dolphin, the Housing Regeneration & Strategy Manager explained the difficulty in assessing the impact of Universal Credit at this early stage and that a phased approach was being taken across the UK, with full implementation estimated to take around 2-3 years. Progress would be reported to the Committee at a later date, however since 7 April 2014, claims had been accepted by Shotton Job Centre for Jobseeker's Allowance, with live claims currently being processed for seven residents. On the suggestion for extra care provision in Greenfield, it was reported that sites in Holywell were under consideration.

When asked by Councillor Mike Reece about energy efficiency measures for solid brick properties, it was reported that various funding streams were available through the central Government Green Deal, the Welsh Government's Arbed scheme and ECO funding from utility companies.

In response to comments from Councillor Gareth Roberts on additional extra care facilities in the county, the Housing Regeneration & Strategy Manager explained that potential funding was available from the Intermediate Care Fund and that discussions with social landlords had been positive.

Councillor Curtis referred to money invested in improving shop fronts and said that steps should be taken to ensure that the flats above these shops were brought back into use. The Housing Regeneration & Strategy Manager explained that the new structure allowed for Housing and Regeneration to work more closely on such initiatives.

Councillor Hardcastle welcomed proposals to build 100 Council houses over a six year period and asked about the potential for additional provision. The Chief Officer (Community & Enterprise) said that the commitment given for 100 properties was based on likely borrowing approval from negotiations through exiting the HRA subsidy system, however it was possible that capacity may increase over time.

Following comments from Councillor Curtis on building new Council houses, the Chief Officer (Community & Enterprise) said that representations had been made to the Welsh Government to make changes to the current Right to Buy suspension policy to allow Council assets to be retained over the longer term.

RESOLVED:

- (a) That the draft Improvement Plan 2014/15 and the 'How achievement will be measured' document be noted prior to final publication in June; and
- (b) That the comments of the Committee be collated and sent to the Performance Unit.

12. YEAR END IMPROVEMENT PLAN MONITORING REPORT

The Housing Regeneration & Strategy Manager introduced the report for the Committee to note and consider elements of the 2013/14 Year End Improvement Plan Monitoring Report relevant to the Committee for the period January to March 2014. He spoke positively about the new format of the Improvement Plan which he felt was more helpful in providing a steer on targets.

He 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.

Modern, Efficient and Adapted Homes

Councillor Paul Shotton welcomed the establishment of North East Wales Homes, and hoped the initiative received the publicity it deserved. He referred to the company being able to lease properties of older homeowners who wished to access sheltered housing accommodation and asked how this would be publicised. The Community Support Services Manager explained that publicity had only been low key to date but this would be picked up more broadly in the coming months. Private landlords had been previously contacted and that the company was working with those who had shown interest. Information on the initiative had been made available through a press release and social media. The Housing Regeneration & Strategy Manager added that owners of long-term vacant properties had also been made aware of the services of the company.

Councillor George Hardcastle referred to the Boar's Head in Ewloe, which was due to be demolished, and asked about the potential for this to be converted for use as accommodation, similar to that planned for other former public houses in the county. Whilst the Chief Officer (Community & Enterprise) agreed with the point made, she explained that this was not something the Council would insist on.

In response to a question from Councillor Shotton the Housing Regeneration & Strategy Manager provided an update on plans to convert the Swan in Connah's Quay to four self-contained flats with a start date anticipated in due course.

Councillor Gareth Roberts commented on the site acquired by Wales & West Housing near the Watkin Jones site in Holywell, which could provide a significant opportunity for accommodation. The Housing Regeneration & Strategy Manager was not aware of the detail but offered to find out and respond.

RESOLVED:

- (a) That the report be noted; and
- (b) That feedback be provided to the Corporate Resources Overview & Scrutiny Committee who are responsible for the overview and monitoring of improvement targets.

13. YEAR END SERVICE PERFORMANCE REPORT

The Chief Officer (Community & Enterprise) introduced a report for the Committee to note and consider the 2013/14 Year End (January to March 2014) service performance report produced under the adopted business model of the Council. Out of the 24 indicators for Housing Services, 16 were 'green', eight 'amber' and none were red, helping to increase confidence in the service meeting its targets.

The team managers each 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. In particular, attention was drawn to the outcomes of the capital works programme for 2013/14 which had exceeded the expectations set out in the Choices Document, and the fact that this continued increase had been achieved with no significant change to the workforce and budget.

On corporate reporting, whilst days lost to sickness absence showed continual improvement, it was noted that this remained an area of priority for the service.

Councillor George Hardcastle commented on the efficiency of the urgent repairs team and asked that his appreciation be passed on. He welcomed the 2013/14 outturn for current tenant rent arrears which, although just under the annual target, showed improvement on last year and was an excellent achievement in view of the impacts of welfare reform.

In response to a query on bed and breakfast accommodation, the Community Support Services Manager referred to the commentary in the report which alluded to the difficulties in moving some families out of this type of accommodation. Despite this, during 2013/14 there had been a significant fall in the number of families placed in bed and breakfasts (17) and the average number of days spent at this provision had slightly reduced to 21 days. The Neighbourhood Housing Manager agreed to provide figures for current total rent arrears separately, including those for year end 2013/14.

The Chairman praised the Housing Options team for their efforts in reducing the bed and breakfast statistics.

Councillor Rosetta Dolphin referred to the anti-social behaviour survey and suggested that this would be best carried out by speaking with residents. The Neighbourhood Housing Manager explained that individuals who had reported anti-social behaviour issues would be contacted by telephone by a separate team to complete the survey. Where an issue had been reported, an action plan was agreed and progressed. Following the introduction of a new IT system to manage cases, an update report on performance in anti-social behaviour would be submitted to the Committee later in the year.

In response to a further question, the Community Support Services Manager advised that low income households, including single people, were eligible for the Bond scheme. The Housing Regeneration & Strategy Manager provided clarification on the Countywide Home Repair and Renovations support

service where loans of up to £30K could be allocated for improvements identified through a health and safety rating system assessment of the property.

Councillor Paul Shotton asked that his thanks be relayed to officers for their prompt actions to address anti-social behaviour issues in his ward. In response to concerns about the implementation of Universal Credit, the Community Support Services Manager gave assurance that preparations were underway to ensure that Flintshire Connects officers were trained to provide low-level advice and offer help to individuals wishing to make online claims.

Councillor Peter Curtis asked about the possibility of direct telephone numbers for Flintshire Connects offices. The Chief Officer (Community & Enterprise) said that options were under consideration to provide a telephone service which did not impact on the face-to-face service already in place, and would report back to the Committee on this.

Councillor Gareth Roberts asked if the apprenticeship scheme could be extended to help restore properties that had been left in a bad state. The Cabinet Member for Housing gave an example where this was already being done successfully.

RESOLVED:

- (a) That the report be noted; and
- (b) 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 performance.

14. FLINTSHIRE'S LOCAL HOUSING STRATEGY - A REPORT ON PROGRESS

The Housing Regeneration & Strategy Manager introduced a report to review progress against the aims contained within the Council's Local Housing Strategy 2012-2017 'A Quality Home for Everyone'.

The Local Housing Strategy, adopted in 2012, set out the Council's ambitions under three established themes of 'More Housing, More Choice', 'Improving Homes and Communities' and 'Better services to improve people's lives'. Progress to date against targets under each theme identified positive actions with many completed or on track to do so.

On 'improving homes and communities', Councillor Rosetta Dolphin welcomed the achievements in exceeding expectations made in the Choices Document. Although the target of smoke detector installations had not been reached, it was explained that properties already had the equipment installed and that overall the programme was ahead of schedule.

Councillor Paul Cunningham congratulated officers for their work in installing smoke detectors which was an important part of fire safety and was aware that the Fire Authority was also able to offer this service.

Councillor George Hardcastle thanked officers and the Cabinet Member for Housing for the excellent progress made.

RESOLVED:

That the progress made against the actions within the Council's Local Housing Strategy 2012-2017 'A Quality Home for Everyone' be noted.

15. FORWARD WORK PROGRAMME

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

The Facilitator would ensure that invitations had been sent to Members of the Committee to attend a self-assessment workshop on 26 June 2014.

With regard to the workshop scheduled for the afternoon of 10 July 2014, it was agreed that this slot would be used for a formal meeting of the Committee to consider the proposed Flint Masterplan followed by the informal workshop to populate the Committee's Forward Work Programme.

In response to a request from Councillor Rosetta Dolphin for an item on grass cutting, the Facilitator said that this was one of the items to be scheduled on the Forward Work Programme at the workshop.

RESOLVED:

That the Forward Work Programme be updated accordingly.

16. 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 11.45 am)

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Chairman