

HOUSING OVERVIEW & SCRUTINY COMMITTEE
24 FEBRUARY 2015

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, 24 February 2015

PRESENT: Councillor Ron Hampson (Chairman)

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

CONTRIBUTORS: Cabinet Member for Housing, Chief Officer (Community & Enterprise) and Team Manager - Advice & Homeless Service

Mr. Shayne Hembrow of Wales & West Housing (for minute number 57)

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

55. DECLARATIONS OF INTEREST (INCLUDING WHIPPING DECLARATIONS)

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

56. MINUTES

The minutes of the meetings held on 14 and 23 January 2015 had been circulated with the agenda.

RESOLVED:

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

57. WORK OF WALES AND WEST HOUSING ASSOCIATION

The Chairman welcomed Mr. Shayne Hembrow of Wales & West Housing and invited him to deliver his presentation to the Committee.

In thanking the Committee for this opportunity, Mr. Hembrow gave an overview of the establishment of Wales & West Housing which now had a portfolio of 10,000 properties across Wales, including 860 in Flintshire. As a major provider of new homes, a diverse range of stock was held to offer a range of accommodation options to customers. The creation of smaller companies under Wales & West Housing, for example to undertake repairs and maintenance, provided a more efficient and controlled way of working, and would continue to expand. An update was given on current/new developments together with investments on energy efficiency measures to combat fuel poverty, provision of free WiFi and the Connect24 telecare service. Details were also shared on the creation of opportunities for training and employment and joint working with the

Council's Housing Options team to support residents in keeping their own homes, prevent homelessness and minimise the impact of the 'bedroom tax'.

Councillor Peter Curtis welcomed the approach taken by Wales & West Housing, particularly in its stance as a 'living wage employer' and its work to help individuals access housing through shared ownership schemes.

Responding to a question from Councillor Mike Reece, Mr. Hembrow explained that Right to Buy only applied to around 1,000 of the company's properties with secured tenancies whilst others had a Right to Acquire under different legislation. He added that no Right to Buy requests had been received over the past three years.

Councillor Rosetta Dolphin asked about progress with the housing development taking place in her adjoining ward as she was aware of a number of complaints due to the building work. Mr. Hembrow explained the necessity of moving soil on the site, with steps taken to minimise the impact, and that the scheme was due for completion early in 2016. Individuals who wished to register for the scheme were able to do so via the Council's Single Access Route to Housing (SARTH) project.

Councillor Paul Cunningham welcomed the Dementia/disability friendly ethos adopted for services provided by Castell Care and Support.

Councillor George Hardcastle welcomed the provision of free WiFi for residents at Llys Jasmine and asked about the company's policy on rent arrears concerning anti-social behaviour issues. Councillor Dolphin pointed out the effects of anti-social behaviour on neighbouring properties. Mr. Hembrow emphasised that the approach taken by Wales & West Housing was based on values to 'do the right thing' for its customers and make a difference in people's lives, homes and communities. He said that the majority of tenants valued their homes and wanted to keep up their rent payments but required help to do this. Due to the challenges in resolving most anti-social behaviour issues through legal measures, the shift in focus was for direct contact with the tenant to discuss and find a way forward, with lower payments if necessary.

Following a query from Councillor Gareth Roberts on the development near Brignant in Holywell, Mr. Hembrow said that work was expected to start on site during this calendar year.

In response to a question from Councillor David Cox, Mr. Hembrow said that the provision of catering services via Castell Catering was not common for housing associations and that this concept had been instigated through a suggestion made by the Council. He referred to ongoing discussions to deliver support through a partnership with Age Connects.

In thanking Mr. Hembrow for his presentation, the Chairman welcomed the progress made by Wales & West Housing and joint working on extra care schemes, in particular on allocations.

RESOLVED:

That the presentation be noted.

58. HOUSING ACT 2014 (WALES) - HOMELESSNESS AND POWER TO DISREGARD THE TEST OF INTENTIONALITY

The Team Manager - Advice & Homeless Service introduced the report summarising the new powers to Local Authorities under the Housing (Wales) Act 2014 to decide whether or not to apply the intentionality test to requests for housing assistance from homeless applicants.

On the key considerations of the report, the Team Manager explained that the focus of this significant change in legislation was to put the individual at the centre of engagement to identify a solution to their housing problem. From April 2015, the Authority had a statutory duty to help anyone at risk of losing their property within 56 days and would have the power to disregard the test of intentionality for any category of homeless applicant (listed in the appendix to the report) rather than on a 'case by case' basis. The Team Manager explained the reasons behind the intentionality test, as set out in the report and advised that the Welsh Government (WG) had granted powers for Authorities to opt back into the use of the intentionality test, if they wished, through a set approach.

As reported to the Committee in November 2014, in preparation for the new legislation, the Housing Options team had been piloting enhanced homelessness prevention to take reasonable steps to help anyone threatened with homelessness within 56 days, irrespective of their priority need status. The Team Manager reported continued positive progress on the pilot however the Authority did not have full powers until April 2015. The recommendation was therefore to take a prudent approach and continue maintaining the intentionality test until a later stage to seek assurance on the cost effectiveness in undertaking the new statutory duty.

In response to a query from Councillor Rosetta Dolphin, the Team Manager said that the Authority must be satisfied that the applicant is at risk of homelessness within the given timeframe, ie 56 days. The Chief Officer (Community & Enterprise) gave an example which detailed the assessment process and preventative work carried out with the individual to help maintain their current accommodation where possible. Following concerns raised by Councillor Dolphin around affordability of private rent, the Team Manager spoke of assistance by the Housing Options team in helping to provide short-term measures or work with the individual on a housing plan for long-term solutions.

Councillor Hilary Isherwood welcomed the proactive approach being taken by the Council and asked about information exchange between departments to plan ahead, for example with Social Services in respect of care leavers. The Team Manager stated that some figures had been identified through the pilot, however as this only represented elements of the legislation, this was not a complete picture. With regard to preventative work, he pointed out the challenges if care leavers chose not to engage with the Authority. The emphasis of the legislation on preventing homelessness as a corporate duty would be shared in a Member workshop to be arranged.

Queries were raised on homeless applicants from outside the county where a history of anti-social behaviour issues had been identified. The Team Manager provided information on the powers of Authorities to refer back those individuals where a local connection could not be identified.

Councillor Ray Hughes felt that consideration should be given to the criteria for a local connection, as the county covered a substantial area. The Team Manager replied that the legislation on local connections applied to local housing authorities rather than towns.

When asked by Councillor George Hardcastle about the allocation points and banding system, the Chief Officer advised that this was currently in transition with the policy due to be implemented from April 2015.

Following comments from Councillor Peter Curtis, explanation was given on work undertaken by the Income team to tackle rent arrears by working with tenants on income expenditure.

Councillor Mike Reece suggested that representatives from Conwy and Denbighshire Councils be invited to attend the workshop as both were proposing to use a similar approach to that of Flintshire.

RESOLVED:

That the Committee support the proposal that, until it is confident that it is cost effectively undertaking its new homelessness prevention statutory duty, the Authority should still have regard to the homelessness intentionality test and take the appropriate steps to inform the Welsh Minister of this decision.

59. SUPPORTING PEOPLE COMMISSIONING PLAN

The Team Manager - Advice & Homeless Service introduced an update on work being undertaken to put appropriate measures in place to manage the reduction within the 2015-2016 Flintshire Supporting People Programme Grant to protect service delivery as much as possible.

Table 1 of the report highlighted year on year reductions in the grant for Flintshire, culminating in a 10.4% reduction (£659,026) for 2015/16 with further cuts expected for 2016/17. Major concerns about the negative impact of these cuts on budgets for other services had prompted a review of service provision by remodelling existing services. Table 2 in the report set out identified efficiency savings of £649,000 for 2015/16 across five service areas.

Councillor Peter Curtis requested that the information in Table 2 show the current budget figures for each service area. The Chief Officer (Community & Enterprise) agreed to provide the Committee with percentage cuts for each area, along with the full commissioning plan once discussions with service providers had been completed.

Councillor Hilary Isherwood asked if there was any rationale behind the more substantial reduction in funding for the grant in 2015/16. The Chief Officer

explained that work in redistributing the grant across Wales had impacted more negatively on North Wales, with similar levels of cuts expected for 2016/17 onwards. She added that this remained a ringfenced budget in Wales and stressed the need for all Council in Wales to make representations to the Welsh Government to highlight the importance of this grant due to the positive effect that these services could have in reducing expenditure on acute services.

Following a request by Councillor Isherwood for a breakdown of Supporting People Programme Grant cuts for Wrexham and Denbighshire Councils, the Chief Officer agreed to provide this information in relation to councils in North and South Wales over the past few years.

RESOLVED:

That the actions being taken by Flintshire's Supporting People team to manage the reduction in the 2015/16 Supporting People Programme Grant to protect, as much as possible, housing support services for vulnerable residents, be noted.

60. UPDATE ON THE HOUSING REVENUE ACCOUNT (HRA) SUBSIDY

The Chief Officer (Community & Enterprise) advised that confirmation had been received that the Welsh Government (WG) had reached agreement with the Treasury of the final settlement amount of £919m to enable the 11 stock-retaining Councils to exit the Housing Revenue Account Subsidy (HRAS) system. Flintshire's share of this amount was just under £80m.

In line with WG requirements on borrowing, there was a need for some remodelling work to be carried out by treasury management colleagues before the agreement could be signed. All 11 Councils were expected to sign the agreement. The Chief Officer praised the team effort by all involved in reaching this stage. A final update would be reported to the next meeting in March 2015.

Councillor George Hardcastle thanked the Cabinet Member, Chief Officer and her team for their hard work.

RESOLVED:

That the verbal update be noted.

61. FORWARD WORK PROGRAMME

The Housing & Learning Overview & Scrutiny Facilitator introduced a report to enable the Committee to consider the Forward Work Programme. The following changes were agreed:

- Welsh Government consultation on the future of Right to Buy/Right to Acquire to be scheduled for the next meeting on 24 March 2015.
- Draft Improvement Plan 2015/16 to be included for the meeting on 24 April 2015.
- Reports on the Review of Strategic Housing Partnership, Private Sector Housing Renewal and Community Infrastructure Levy to be deferred to an additional meeting to be arranged for May 2015.

Following a request from Councillor Mike Reece, the Chief Officer (Community & Enterprise) agreed to include information on solid brick houses within the report on Private Sector Housing Renewal.

RESOLVED:

That the Forward Work Programme be updated accordingly.

62. 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