

FLINTSHIRE COUNTY COUNCIL

REPORT TO: **COMMUNITY & ENTERPRISE OVERVIEW & SCRUTINY COMMITTEE**

DATE: **WEDNESDAY, 20 MAY 2015**

REPORT BY: **CHIEF OFFICER (COMMUNITY AND ENTERPRISE)**

SUBJECT: **DELIVERY OF THE HOUSING REGENERATION & STRATEGY SERVICE**

1.00 PURPOSE OF REPORT

1.01 To gain Scrutiny Committee views on the activity of the Housing Regeneration & Strategy Service during 2014/15.

2.00 BACKGROUND

2.01 The main driver for this Service is the Welsh Government's National Housing Strategy called 'Improving Lives and Communities', principally the sections titled 'More Housing, More Choice and Improving Homes and Communities.'

2.02 The current year has also seen the introduction of the Housing (Wales) Act 2014. This is the first opportunity the Welsh Government had to legislate in the area of housing, following the devolution of further powers from Westminster. In doing so the Act has raised the priority and profile of the strategic housing function in Wales and also brought with it further funding, duties and responsibilities.

2.03 It will increasingly become a challenge to meet all the aspirations of Welsh Government policy and legislation moving forward, considering the financial situation locally and nationally. There will be a need for more emphasis on sub regional and regional working. This is an area where Flintshire and the Service has been leading proactively, an example of this is the administration of empty property loan funding.

2.04 The Service, not uncommon with others, has lost staff members over the last 12 months. This has caused pressure in some areas, most notably in the provision of disabled facilities grant and affordable housing. The main body of the report will discuss performance in these areas in greater depth.

2.05 Despite the above, the Service has achieved great success this year, completing repairs, improvements and adaptations to 1077 homes. In addition it has brought 30 long term vacant homes back in to use and supported the development of 56 housing association homes, through

the Social Housing Grant (SHG) programme. The Service therefore has a significant positive impact on the sustainability of local communities.

- 2.06 In recent years the Service has become increasingly reliant on external funding; principally grant funding from Welsh Government and private sector funding from utility companies. This has seen the service move from being 100% council funded in 2009 to approximately 30% council funded and 70% from external sources in the last financial year.
- 2.07 This funding is welcome and has allowed the Service to significantly expand its activity, particularly in the areas of empty homes and energy efficiency. However, bidding for external resources and subsequent reporting back to the funders is highly intensive work and the Service needs to consider how it will resource this to ensure it does not miss out on future external funding.
- 2.08 The Service has also retained its Customer Service Excellence accreditation, following an external assessment visit during September 2014. The assessor met with both staff and partners, in addition to conducting visits to customers at home. Feedback was positive and the Service remains the only one in the council to hold the accreditation.

3.00 CONSIDERATIONS

- 3.01 The council has a statutory duty to provide Disabled Facilities Grants if the applicant meets the eligibility criteria and means test. The Service has completed 232 disabled adaptations in this reporting period.
- 3.02 Delivery of private sector disabled adaptations is the subject of a national performance indicator and is monitored from the date of assessment to the date of completion of the works on site. The outturn of this PI in 2013/14 was 246 days. Unfortunately the outturn of the PI in 2014/15 is 307 days.
- 3.03 Performance in this area will be a key focus for the current financial year. Filling vacant posts and/or greater collaborative working with our third sector partner Care & Repair North East Wales will be undertaken to restore timescales to the levels seen in 2013/14, which exceeded the Wales average.
- 3.04 Despite the deterioration in the timescales, customer satisfaction levels remain high with positive feedback consistently in 95%+ of cases. This is testament to the emphasis placed on good customer service and formed part of the evidence to retain the Customer Service Excellence award.

- 3.05 As part of the commitment within the Council's Improvement Plan for 2013/14 to reduce fuel poverty, the Service has delivered a significant energy efficiency retrofit programme. This continues to be a priority as it is estimated that up to 18,000 households in the county are currently in fuel poverty. Energy efficiency interventions have been provided in 839 homes, consisting of external wall insulation, gas infill, heating upgrades and solar PV.
- 3.06 This work has been delivered to both council and private homes. In terms of council properties the Welsh Housing Quality Standard sets a minimum energy rating of SAP 65. In council homes which have received external wall insulation, heating upgrades and solar PV their energy ratings have reached between SAP 80 to SAP 90. This has resulted in significant energy savings for tenants.
- 3.07 In September 2014 the energy team was recognised for its achievements as a finalist in APSE's UK annual service awards held in Nottingham. The submission was based on the overall service provided by the team rather than a focus on a particular project, with the aim of the submission to benchmark performance against other Local Authorities delivering similar services across the UK.
- 3.08 The Welsh Government (WG) continues to place significant focus and resources on the return of long term vacant properties in to use. The council's allocation of Houses into Homes funding continues to be recycled and a further £185,000 of new loans were provided in the current year with a further £100,000 committed to existing projects in progress.
- 3.09 A further allocation of £570,000 has been provided for Houses into Homes loans in 2014-16. This includes an additional £90,000 provided from another local authority that was not able to take up the allocation and this was offered to Flintshire on the basis of confidence in delivery.
- 3.10 The Service continues to manage the original Houses into Homes funding for the North Wales Region, acting as regional banker. The additional resource discussed in the previous paragraph has been distributed to individual local authorities. Whilst there are benefits to holding this resource for the region, in terms of a small amount of interest accrued on the balance, ensuring the proper accounting treatment for monies for the entire region is labour intensive. Therefore, with the support of the Houses into Homes Regional Group a request is to be made to WG to distribute all recycled sums held for each local authority as per their original allocation and end the banker role for Flintshire.
- 3.11 Alongside the additional Houses into Homes funding the Service has been allocated £570,000 by WG for Home Improvement Loans, which again includes an additional £90,000 from another council's allocation.

The resource will allow the Service to significantly upscale its Home Loans service, with a complimentary loan product to the existing offer. The council's resource will continue to be allocated to the most vulnerable (those in receipt of an income based means tested benefit.)

- 3.12 However, the new WG product is available to any property owner who can demonstrate that they would have difficulty in accessing a loan from a mainstream lender at reasonable rates. This loan is also available to private landlords and is designed to complement the new opportunity the council has to discharge its homelessness duty in to suitable accommodation in the private rented sector.
- 3.13 A total of 7 loans were completed in the 2014/15 financial year. A further 21 approved loans, with a total value of £450,000, are now progressing to work on site and will complete within the current financial year. As additional WG resources have been provided, the Service is intending to run a publicity campaign to ensure all external resources are appropriately expended.
- 3.14 The Service also continues to deliver the Group Repair Scheme across Connah's Quay, Shotton and Queensferry. A total of 53 properties were completed as part of the Scheme in 2014/15. The scheme value was a total of £960,000 as a combination of WG Specific Capital Grant for Renewal Areas, Vibrant & Viable Places funding, owner contributions and council funding.
- 3.15 Group repair work included roofing, new windows, doors, pointing, damp proofing, boundary walls and fencing. In addition the scheme also included for the first time external wall insulation to previously rendered properties and gable ends of terraced streets.
- 3.16 The decision to engage two local contractors to deliver the scheme, rather than a larger principal contractor from outside the area, has seen customer satisfaction increase. It has also delivered community benefits. There is an expectation placed on the council around local labour, supply chain along with employees and apprentices for any WG funded Scheme.
- 3.17 The community benefits reported for the Scheme are as follows: -
- Number of traineeships on the project – 1 No Apprentice
 - Number of traineeship leavers progressing to further learning (at a higher level) on the project – 1 progressed from Level 2 to Level 3
 - Number of traineeship leavers progressing to employment on the project – 0 however the Apprentice will complete his studies in June 2015 and become a permanent member of staff
 - Number of jobs accommodated (created or enabled through regeneration investment) – 3
 - Number of jobs created in the construction sector as a result of

Welsh Government regeneration investment – 3 as above

- Gross jobs created – 3 with 37 jobs safeguarded

- 3.18 In addition to the directly delivered capital schemes, the Service also manages the WG Social Housing Grant Programme (SHG). The council currently has a 3 year programme of £1,577,000 per year and can provide up to a maximum of 58% grant to housing associations. During the last financial year the council was successful in obtaining an additional £860,000 in Social Housing Grant, as other council's were not in a position to take up their full allocation.
- 3.19 The success of Flintshire lies with the design of the three year programme and the confidence and ability of housing associations to invest in Flintshire. This funding supported the development of 56 new homes across Flintshire in 2014/15.
- 3.20 In addition the Service supports the development of affordable housing through the administration of monies provided through Panning contributions in the form of Section 106 contributions. This contribution is the subject of a legal agreement between the developer and the council when permission has granted.
- 3.21 A payment is required where the development comprises of more than 25 dwellings, or is in an area which has already met its perceived need for growth. The council will accept contributions in the form of gifted units, equity shares, or if a need for on site provision can not be demonstrated, a commuted sum. There is currently £500,000 held in the form of a commuted sum for affordable housing and a new policy is under development for their use in the communities from which they were derived. This will be the subject of a report to Cabinet in June.
- 3.22 As part of the development of new ways of working the service retains an Occupational Therapist. The role works closely with clients where there is a direct housing need arising out of their disability. The OT is required to work closely with the council's housing access team, housing associations and private accommodation providers to find solutions to the most difficult cases. Two case studies are appended to this report as an example of activity and the positive outcomes achieved.
- 3.23 Finally the team has appointed a temporary Environmental Health Officer, utilising resources provided for implementation of the new homelessness duties contained within the Housing Act. This Officer has started piloting a new approach known as Healthy Homes. The aim of the initiative is to take a holistic approach to improvements in the private rented sector.
- 3.24 Whilst the Council has a statutory duty to respond to complaints regarding poor living conditions, Flintshire Healthy Homes will look at a more holistic response to the full range of home based hazards.

- 3.25 The scheme will rely on effective inter-agency working and by using a simple single assessment form which refers to services such as fire safety, home improvements, energy efficiency measures/assistance, adaptations, debt advice, tenancy support and full housing inspections where serious hazards are identified.
- 3.26 The main areas that will be covered by this pilot are:
- Those tenants living in private rented accommodation which have disrepair issues
 - Those tenants who are on the housing waiting list and living in private rented properties with disrepair issues
 - Those tenants who are living in temporary accommodation.
 - Those tenants experiencing difficulties maintaining their tenancy or having landlord -tenant relationship breakdown.
- 3.27 A number of 'Healthy Homes' visits have already been carried out and have resulted in the tenants benefitting from additional support on energy efficiencies measures, tariff advice and some have had their fuel bills reduced.
- 3.28 All of the support mechanisms current exist through the council and its partners; and is provided on a daily basis, but delivering it via Healthy Homes and the new EHO highlights need, coordinates activity and will ensure that the most vulnerable residents within Flintshire can access it.

4.00 RECOMMENDATIONS

- 4.01 That Members review and provide feedback on the activity of the Housing Regeneration & Strategy Service during 2014/15.

5.00 FINANCIAL IMPLICATIONS

- 5.01 The Housing Regeneration & Strategy Service receives funding in the form of Council Fund Capital, Welsh Government Grants including Vibrant & Viable Places, Specific Capital Grant for Renewal Areas, Arbed.
- 5.02 Private sector funding sources include utility companies and Section 106 contributions from property developers.

6.00 ANTI POVERTY IMPACT

- 6.01 The Service supports an anti poverty impact through providing financial assistance to repair, improve and adapt homes. It also support the building of social homes and affordable homes. It also supports a reduction in fuel poverty.

7.00 ENVIRONMENTAL IMPACT

7.01 The Service supports a reduction in carbon emissions through its energy efficiency retrofit work.

8.00 EQUALITIES IMPACT

8.01 The Service is provided on an equitable basis to and equality impact assessments are undertaken as and when appropriate.

9.00 PERSONNEL IMPLICATIONS

9.01 There are no personnel implications as a direct result of this report.

10.00 CONSULTATION REQUIRED

10.01 There is no consultation required as a direct result of this report.

11.00 CONSULTATION UNDERTAKEN

11.00 No consultation has been undertaken as a direct result of this report.

12.00 APPENDICES

12.01 Case Study 1

12.02 Case Study 2

**LOCAL GOVERNMENT (ACCESS TO INFORMATION ACT) 1985
BACKGROUND DOCUMENTS**

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