

COMMUNITY AND ENTERPRISE OVERVIEW & SCRUTINY COMMITTEE
10 FEBRUARY 2016

Minutes of the meeting of the Community and Enterprise Overview & Scrutiny Committee of Flintshire County Council held in the Delyn Committee Room, County Hall, Mold on Wednesday, 10 February 2016

PRESENT: Councillor Ron Hampson (Chairman)

Councillors: Paul Cunningham, Peter Curtis, Ron Davies, Alison Halford, George Hardcastle, Ray Hughes, Brian Lloyd, Mike Reece, and Gareth Roberts

SUBSTITUTION: Councillor: Paul Shotton (for Ian Dunbar)

APOLOGIES: Councillors: Derek Butler, Cabinet Member for Economic Development, Billy Mullin, Cabinet Member for Corporate Management, David Cox, Rosetta Dolphin, and Jim Falshaw

ALSO PRESENT: Councillors Bernie Attridge and Kevin Jones

CONTRIBUTORS: Councillor Aaron Shotton, Leader and Cabinet Member for Finance; Councillor Helen Brown, Cabinet Member for Housing; Chief Officer, Community & Enterprise; Revenues Manager, Housing Programmes Manager, and Customer Support Manager

IN ATTENDANCE: Community and Enterprise Overview & Scrutiny Facilitator and Committee Officer

70. DECLARATIONS OF INTEREST

Councillors Helen Brown, Paul Cunningham and George Hardcastle declared a personal interest in the following item:

Item 5 – Council Tax and Business Rate Statutory Policies

71. MINUTES

The minutes of the meeting held on 12 January 2016 were submitted.

RESOLVED:

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

72. INTRODUCTION OF COUNCIL TAX PREMIUM FOR LONG TERM EMPTY AND SECOND HOMES

The Chief Officer (Community and Enterprise) introduced a report to seek the introduction of a local scheme to charge council tax premiums for long term empty property and second homes. She commented on the need to bring long term empty property and second homes back into use to address local housing need by increasing the supply of housing in the County. She reported that Council records indicated that there were currently 888 properties identified as being long term empty or second homes in Flintshire. The Chief Officer advised that if the proposal to introduce the Council Tax Premium from April 2017 was approved at Council, an effective communication strategy would need to be developed to communicate more widely with taxpayers throughout 2016, particularly with those who might be affected from April 2017. She explained that full information would also be provided to all homeowners to signpost them to the services available from the Council to assist them to bring their properties back into use and minimise the impact of the introduction of the premium.

The Chief Officer invited the Revenues Manager to give an overview of the proposals to introduce the Council Tax Premium. The Revenues Manager explained that the introduction of the Housing (Wales) Act 2014 gave local authorities in Wales the discretion to charge a council tax premium of up to a 100% on long term empty properties and properties that were second homes/holiday homes from April 2017. The proposal was to adopt a 50% premium for the first year of implementation which would be consistent with other local authorities across the region. The Revenues Manager reported on the key considerations as detailed in the report and advised that the earliest a premium may be charged was from 1 April 2017. In the case of long term empty homes the premium may only be imposed after the property had been empty and substantially unfurnished continuously for a period of 12 months or longer. The Council Tax system already provided a number of specific exemptions for unoccupied properties which were not impacted by the introduction of the premium so not all empty homes would be automatically subject to a premium. In addition the Council Tax (Exceptions to Higher Amounts Wales) Regulations also sets out the circumstances where it is not possible for local authorities to charge a premium on long term empty property or second homes.

Councillor Aaron Shotton commented on the need to do everything possible to increase the level of affordable homes within the County. He referred to the number of applicants on the social housing waiting list and the high number of long term empty properties within Flintshire and said it was appropriate for the Authority to undertake the interventions available to it to encourage homeowners to bring those empty properties back into use to fulfil the need for affordable housing within the County. He referred to the continuing exemptions in place to safeguard homeowners who had genuine reasons for retaining an empty property. Councillor Shotton also referred to the linkages with other strategies within the County, citing North East Wales Homes as an example, to address the impact of the possible introduction of a premium and provide practical help to owners of long term empty homes.

Councillor Paul Shotton supported the proposal which he said would help address the housing shortage in Flintshire and was consistent with the stance adopted by other local authorities.

In response to a question from Councillor Alison Halford concerning the additional safeguards and resources to be put in place to mitigate tax avoidance or evasion, the Revenues Manager explained that the intention was to utilise a person from within the existing workforce.

Councillor Peter Curtis asked if the proposal could be extended to include commercial properties to regenerate economic growth in local communities.

Councillor Gareth Roberts also spoke in support of the proposals and commented on the blight and nuisance caused to neighbouring properties by empty properties in the community.

RESOLVED:

That the Committee supports the proposals to introduce the Council Tax Premium set at a level of 50%.

73. COUNCIL TAX & BUSINESS RATE STATUTORY POLICIES 2016-17

The Chief Officer introduced a report to consider annual policies for the financial year 2016-17 that determined discount schemes and administrative arrangements. She invited the Revenues Manager to give an overview of the main considerations.

The Revenues Manager provided background information and reported on the key considerations, as detailed in the report, around council tax on second and long term empty homes, council tax discretionary discounts, and business rates discretionary rate relief and business rates 'top up' discretionary rate reliefs to small businesses.

During discussion the Revenues Manager responded to the concerns raised by Councillor Gareth Roberts concerning the variation in business rates between the large out-of-town shopping parks and local high street small businesses.

Councillor Ray Hughes referred to the discretionary relief for charitable, voluntary and 'not for profit' organisations and asked if checks were carried out to determine how much income such organisations received. The Revenues Manager referred to the Charity Commission and the automatic discount of 80% Mandatory Rate Relief for Registered Charities provided in law to such organisations. It was agreed that an item to outline proposals for the discretionary relief for charitable, voluntary and not for profit organisation policy for 2017/18 be added to the Forward Work Programme.

RESOLVED:

- (a) The Committee recommends to Cabinet the continuation of all existing policies prior to final approval in February 2016; and
- (b) That a further report, outlining proposals for the discretionary relief for charitable, voluntary and not for profit organisation policy for 2017/18 be submitted to a future meeting of the Committee.

74. FLINTSHIRE SOCIAL AND AFFORDABLE HOUSING DELIVERY

The Housing Programmes Manager introduced a report to provide an update on the provision of new social and affordable housing schemes in Flintshire. He provided background information and referred to the key considerations in the report around policy framework including the Flintshire Unitary Development Plan (FUDP), Local Housing Market Assessment, Single Access Route to Housing (SARTH) and Flintshire Affordable Housing Register. He also reported on the primary mechanisms for delivering new social and affordable housing in Flintshire including the Council's Strategic Housing and Regeneration Programme (SHARP), Social Housing Grant (SHG) Programme and affordable housing secured through Section 106 Planning Agreements with private developers. The Housing Programmes Manager commented on future policy development and initiatives to maximise the number of affordable units secured by the Council for Flintshire residents.

The Chairman thanked the Housing Programmes Manager for a detailed and informative report and invited Members to raise questions.

Councillor Paul Shotton commented on the need for affordable home ownership and referred to Grwp Cynefin and sought further information around the equity share scheme. The Housing Programmes Manager explained that the scheme helps first time buyers into home ownership. The subsidy is not a loan that needs to be repaid and there is no rent payable. The Council owns an equity share in the property and when the purchaser decides to sell it the Council gets back its equity share and recycles it to the next household eligible on the register to buy a home.

Councillor Alison Halford asked how many 'hits' did the Council get on its website with regard to social and affordable housing. The Housing Programmes Manager explained that he would provide this information to Councillor Halford following the meeting.

Referring to Appendix 1 of the report Councillor Ron Davies advised that Clarence Street and Nelson Street were located in Shotton not Connah's Quay. The Housing Programmes Manager agreed to amend this.

RESOLVED:

That the Committee supports the overall approach in the delivery of new social and affordable housing in Flintshire, including:

- Flintshire's Social Housing Grant (SHG) Programme for the delivery of 277 new social and affordable new homes during the period 2015/16 to 2018/19
- Proposals for the projected delivery of 132 new homes through Section 106 Planning Agreements agreed to date for the period 2015/16 to 2017/18
- Supports the development of policy initiatives to increase supply of local affordable housing provision

75. FLINTSHIRE SUPPORTING PEOPLE COMMISSIONING PLAN

The Customer Support Manager presented a report on the Supporting People Local Commissioning Plan 2016-18. She provided background information and referred to the strategic priorities. She also reported on the key considerations as detailed in the report and advised that the programme had been subject to significant reductions in the last three years but that the grant had been protected in 2016/17. The Customer Support Manager advised that it was proposed to move ahead with planned reductions to services that are not deemed a priority to fund and that any savings would be used to provide short term support emerging pressures as a result of the Housing (Wales) Act 2014 and Social Services & Well Being (Wales) Act 2014.

Councillor Alison Halford commented on the identified gap in provision for males fleeing domestic abuse across the North Wales region. The Customer Support Manager explained that whilst the majority of cases of domestic abuse reported were concerning females there was an increasing number of male cases occurring and the nearest refuge centre was based in Monmouthshire.

Councillor Paul Shotton wished to thank the Supporting People Team for their hard work and support in assisting two vulnerable people who had approached him.

Following a suggestion from Councillor George Hardcastle, the Committee asked the Chief Officer (Community & Enterprise) and Councillor Helen Brown to thank the team who had worked tirelessly to resolve a case in Sealand.

RESOLVED:

- (a) That the Committee supports the Local Commissioning Plan 2016-18 for the Support People Programme Grant; and
- (b) That the Committee supports the spend plan for 2016-17.

76. FORWARD WORK PROGRAMME

In presenting the current Forward Work Programme for consideration, the Facilitator reminded Members of the additional meeting to be held on 1 March 2016.

The Committee agreed that the following item listed under 'items to be scheduled' be incorporated into the Welsh Housing Quality Standard report scheduled for 16th March meeting:-

- Update on the suggestion for WHQS improvements to be delayed for tenants with long-term rent arrears.

RESOLVED:

- (a) That the Forward Work Programme be noted;
- (b) That the Facilitator, in consultation with the Chair and Vice-Chair be authorised to vary the Forward Work Programme between meetings, as the need arises.

77. 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 11.25 am)

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Chairman