

HOUSING OVERVIEW & SCRUTINY COMMITTEE
7 MARCH 2012

Minutes of the meeting of the Housing Overview & Scrutiny Committee of Flintshire County Council held at County Hall, Mold on Wednesday, 7 March 2012

PRESENT: Councillor G. Hardcastle (Vice-Chairman in the Chair)

Councillors: J.B. Attridge, G.H. Bateman, M. Bateman, J.C. Cattermoul, P.J. Curtis, Q.R.H. Dodd, R. Dolphin, A.M. Halford, S. Jones and H.G. Roberts

ALSO PRESENT: Councillors: Eng. K. Armstrong-Braun and L.A. Sharps

APOLOGIES: Councillors: R.G. Hampson, E.W. Owen and A.P. Shotton

CONTRIBUTORS: Executive Member for Housing, Director of Community Services, Head of Housing, Housing Renewal Manager, Community Support Services Manager and Acting Senior Sheltered Housing Officer

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

82. DECLARATIONS OF INTEREST

No declarations of interest were made.

83. MINUTES

The minutes of the meetings held on 20 January and 1 February 2012 and the joint meeting held on 13 February 2012 had been circulated with the agenda.

Matters Arising - 1 February 2012

Update on the Repair and Maintenance Service - Councillor J.B. Attridge sought an update on the recommendation for £100,000 from the Housing Revenue Account (HRA) to be allocated to reduce the backlog of repairs. The Director of Community Services said it was now intended to transfer a larger amount of £200,000 from the HRA budget to address repairs, subject to Executive approval later in the month. Councillor Attridge proposed that the Executive be made aware that this action had been fully supported by Overview & Scrutiny and this was duly seconded, having been noted by the Executive Member for Housing.

In response to the comments made by Councillor A.M. Halford on the availability of the Wales Audit Office (WAO) report, the Director said it was thought that the report in question had related to the Wales Housing Quality Standard and offered to make copies available if Members wished. Councillor Halford explained that she had raised the matter as it was usual practice for WAO reports to be shared with the Head of Service to which it referred and the Director agreed to follow this up.

Providing Disabled Adaptations in Council Properties and Rent Arrears Update - The Head of Housing circulated a document which addressed the questions raised by Members. Due to an error in the document, she clarified that the cost of officer time to carry out an eviction was £29.30 and therefore the total cost including the warrant was £139.30 assuming that there was no hearing to attend. It was explained that the breakdown of rent versus water charge arrears could not be provided at the present time but that a report could be brought back to the Committee at a later stage. She went on to advise that officers were in discussions with Welsh Water on the current arrangements for collecting water rates and that tenants were given the opportunity to have a water meter. The document also gave details on the number of plasterers employed by the Council and the reasons for an increase in mobile phone costs.

Councillor P.J. Curtis commented on the need for insurance to cover repairs to water pipes between properties and the mains system, and Councillor Halford reiterated her concerns on charges arising from excessive use of water.

RESOLVED:

- (a) That the minutes be approved as a correct record and signed by the Chairman; and
- (b) That the Executive be made aware that the recommendation to utilise £200,000 from the HRA budget to address the backlog of housing repairs had been fully supported by the Housing Overview & Scrutiny Committee.

84. DELIVERY OF HOUSING RENEWAL SERVICES - 6 MONTHLY UPDATE

The Director of Community Services introduced an update report on the delivery of the Council's first Neighbourhood Renewal Area including progress towards the appointment of a loans administrator, up-to-date information on private sector empty homes and the £5M Empty Homes Recyclable Loan Fund recently announced by Welsh Government (WG).

The Director reported on progress on the work programme for the Connah's Quay, Shotton and Queensferry Renewal Area and joint working with Groundwork UK on the Environmental Improvement Programme. The Housing Renewal Manager outlined details of the proposed appointment of Street UK Ltd, who were the largest loans administrator for Councils in the UK, and the allocation of up to £300,000 from the Housing Capital Programme to fund loans to eligible homeowners in 2012/13. It was explained that this was not additional expenditure but was distributing existing expenditure in a different way and that Flintshire's proportion of the fee payable to the loans administrator equated to £9,000 for the first year. An update on the Empty Homes Recyclable Loans Fund reported the allocation of WG funding to help bring long-term vacant homes back to use.

Whilst thanking the Housing Renewal Manager and his team on the work undertaken, Councillor J.B. Attridge said he had received positive feedback from residents in the Connah's Quay Central ward and drew attention to the substantial investment in a play area which had evolved through the environmental scheme.

Councillor A.M. Halford also congratulated officers and commented on the Committee's contribution to progress with the Empty Homes Recyclable Loans Fund.

In response to a query by Councillor J.C. Cattermoul on the loans, the Housing Renewal Manager explained that the role of the loans administrator was to deal with legal and financial aspects and additional conditions could be included in the contract as necessary, however the Council decided how to allocate the money. More detail on the policy would be brought back to the Committee in June 2012.

On the delivery of environmental improvement schemes, Councillor R. Dolphin was pleased to note the work opportunities available to young people.

RESOLVED:

- (a) That the update on the delivery of the Council's first Neighbourhood Renewal Area be noted;
- (b) That the appointment of Street UK Ltd and the proposal to provide £300K from the Housing Capital Programme during 2012/13 so that they can provide this resource as loans be supported in principle; and
- (c) That the announcement of the Empty Homes Recyclable Loans Fund and the work that is ongoing to ensure the efficient delivery of this fund be noted.

85. DEVELOPMENT OF THE COMMUNITY-BASED WARDEN SUPPORT SERVICE

The Head of Housing introduced an update report on the work being progressed to introduce a community based (Warden) support service.

She detailed the background to the development of the improved delivery model which would enable the Council to offer a more flexible service and maximise efficient use of resources. Wardens had been engaging with Council tenants and their families, where appropriate, to undertake objective needs assessments to determine levels of need, agree on frequency of visits and ensure that tenants fully understood any changes to their service levels. The Acting Senior Sheltered Housing Officer reported on the delivery of community based hub models to Council tenants in general needs housing which were currently being piloted in Ewloe and Shotton. The Head of Housing said that the results of the pilot would be known in May 2012 and spoke of the potential to offer the support service to non Council properties at a later stage.

Councillor J.B. Attridge remarked on the "best practice" consultation process which ensured involvement from tenants which he hoped would be taken on board by other Directorates. The Director of Community Services welcomed the comments and said that consultation had been used to inform Supporting People standards and would be shared with corporate colleagues.

Councillor S. Jones took the opportunity to thank the Head of Housing for the progress made since taking up her role. Members also wished to thank other Housing officers, in particular Paul Neave, for their work.

Councillor A.M. Halford referred to difficult issues on sheltered accommodation in previous years and asked how the positive development of the service had come about. The Head of Housing explained that efficiencies had been made over a few years which enabled services to be extended. The Community Support Services Manager spoke of the involvement of the workforce at an early stage with regular meetings and input welcomed to develop a programme for change to benefit tenants and employees. Employees had also helped to formulate job descriptions for the new roles which offered more opportunities for career progression. The Acting Senior Sheltered Housing Officer said that the improvements to the service allowed for Wardens' time to be utilised more productively than previously.

In response to plans to extend the service to the private sector at a later stage, Councillor R. Dolphin asked how this would be funded and whether Overview & Scrutiny could assist in making representations for this. The Head of Housing said that a cost model had been developed and she was confident that the service could be extended to more people without the need for extra funding. Changes in required levels of need would free up capacity for others and the service would gather pace based on interest expressed, however if the demand exceeded the cost model, a report would need to be brought back to Members. The Community Support Services Manager said it should be noted that providing a low level of support in this way could help to reduce the need for more expensive support at a later stage. In answer to a further query by Councillor H.G. Roberts, the Head of Housing said that all users would receive the same service.

Councillor J.C. Cattermoul asked if the proforma of needs assessment could be shared with Members and the Head of Housing agreed to circulate this to the Committee.

The Executive Member for Housing stressed that the changes to the service had always been intended to enhance provision rather than take away. She went on to thank the Committee and members of the Task Force on the Sheltered Housing Improvement Project.

RESOLVED:

That the contents of the report be noted and that further progress reports be received.

86. FORWARD WORK PROGRAMME

The Facilitator introduced the report which gave Members the opportunity to consider and update the Committee's Forward Work Programme.

She gave a reminder to Members that the meeting scheduled for 18 April 2012 had been cancelled and went on to make suggestions on reallocating items. As this was the last meeting of the Committee before the Elections, she pointed out that

these suggestions would be subject to approval of the new Committee and that a workshop would be arranged post May 2012 to help formulate the Committee's Forward Work Programme.

Councillor J.B. Attridge therefore proposed that the Committee note the current Forward Work Programme to acknowledge that the new Committee may agree on different priorities.

Councillor A.M. Halford suggested that an item be included on garage surveys and the Facilitator agreed to add this to the items to be scheduled.

RESOLVED:

That the Forward Work Programme be noted on the basis outlined above.

87. DURATION OF MEETING

The meeting commenced at 10.00am and ended at 11.10am.

88. MEMBERS OF THE PUBLIC AND PRESS IN ATTENDANCE

There were two members of the press in attendance.

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Chairman

SUMMARY OF DECLARATIONS MADE BY MEMBERS
IN ACCORDANCE WITH FLINTSHIRE COUNTY COUNCIL'S
CODE OF CONDUCT

HOUSING OVERVIEW & SCRUTINY COMMITTEE	DATE: 7 MARCH 2012
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MEMBER	ITEM	MIN. NO. REFERS
NO DECLARATIONS WERE MADE		