

COMMUNITY & ENTERPRISE OVERVIEW & SCRUTINY COMMITTEE
7 JULY 2020

Minutes of the virtual meeting of the Community & Enterprise Overview & Scrutiny Committee of Flintshire County Council held on Tuesday, 7 July 2020

PRESENT:

Councillors: Jean Davies, Ron Davies, Rosetta Dolphin, Mared Eastwood, Ray Hughes, Dennis Hutchinson, Brian Lloyd, Ted Palmer, Kevin Rush, Paul Shotton and David Wisinger

SUBSTITUTION: Councillor Paul Johnson (for Ray Hughes)

APOLOGY: Councillors: Sian Braun and Ian Dunbar

CONTRIBUTORS: Councillor Dave Hughes, Cabinet Member for Housing; Chief Officer (Housing and Assets); Revenues Manager; Strategic Finance Manager (Finance & Housing)

IN ATTENDANCE: Community & Enterprise Overview & Scrutiny Facilitator and Electoral Services Officer

51. APPOINTMENT OF CHAIR

The Facilitator explained that Councillor Ian Dunbar had unfortunately been unable to remain virtually at the meeting and Councillor Ray Hughes, the Vice-Chair, had sent apologies for the meeting, therefore she sought nominations for a Chair for the meeting.

RESOLVED:

That Councillor Dennis Hutchinson be appointed Chair for the meeting.

52. DECLARATIONS OF INTEREST

Councillor Ted Palmer declared a personal interest in Agenda item 5 – Housing Rent Income, as a Council tenant.

53. MINUTES

Councillor Paul Shotton asked if a Who's Who of Housing Officers could be provided to the Committee. He also commented on the growing speculation on social media with regards to Aldi in Connah's Quay and asked whether any further information could be provided. The Facilitator said that she would circulate the Who's Who to the Committee when available and also that she would request a response from the Service Manager – Enterprise and Regeneration on the possibility of Aldi in Connah's Quay.

In response to a question from the Chair around the Sheltered Accommodation review, the Chief Officer (Housing and Assets) advised that it was an extensive review with further information to be shared with the Committee later in the year.

Councillor Rosetta Dolphin asked if responses had been received for the following outstanding actions from the last meeting held in March:-

- Had Cabinet made a decision on additional funding for town centre regeneration, as outlined in the report considered by the Committee at the March meeting;
- Further information on the announcement from WG that 7 towns across North Wales would be benefitting from free Wi-Fi;
- Information on air source heat pumps to be circulated to Members so that it could be shared with residents through their newsletters.

The Facilitator would chase up these actions and provide the relevant information to the Committee following the meeting.

Councillor Dolphin proposed that the minutes be approved as a correct record and this was seconded by Councillor Shotton.

RESOLVED:

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

54. COMMUNAL HEATING CHARGES 2020/2021

The Chief Officer (Housing & Assets) introduced the proposed heating charges at Council properties with communal heating schemes which would take effect from 31st August, 2020.

The proposed recharges for 2020/21, as set out in the report, were pending Cabinet approval. In the majority of cases, the recharge to tenants had reduced for 2020/21, which as in other years, would allow Flintshire to recover the projected costs of the heating charges whilst still passing on the benefit of reduced energy costs to tenants.

In response to questions around air source heat pumps and gas fire boilers, the Chief Officer outlined the benefits of air source heat pumps which draw air in to create a source of heat and which could be controlled independently by residents. Gas boilers would be replaced after installation which was in around 15-20 years' time.

Councillor Shotton proposed that the Committee support the recommendation as outlined within the report. This was seconded by Councillor Kevin Rush.

RESOLVED:

That the changes to the current heating charges at Council properties with communal heating schemes, as outlined in Table 1, paragraph 1.07 of the report be noted.

55. HOUSING RENT INCOME

The Revenues Manager presented the operational update on the 2019/20 year end outturn for housing rent collection. He provided a presentation which covered the following areas:-

- Rent Collection: 2019/20 outturn;
- 19/20 - Cases leading to eviction for non-payment;
- Analysis of Rent Arrears by claim type;
- Tenants in Rent Arrears - March 2020; and
- Rent Collection: 20/21 Latest Position (to week 13)

In response to comments from Councillor Ted Palmer around tenants finding themselves in arrears as a result of the COVID-19 pandemic, the Revenues Manager outlined the early engagement with tenants to enable the Council to provide assistance and support early on.

Councillor Rosetta Dolphin asked how many more tenants had found themselves in debt due to the closure of the Connects Offices as a result of the COVID-19 pandemic and why the Connects Office in Holywell was not due to open at the same time as others in Flintshire. She was concerned about this as this office covered a wide geographical area in Flintshire. The Revenues Manager said that there had been challenges with tenants who relied heavily on cash payments and who had been unable to make payments in their usual manner. The Council had been engaging with those tenants, and where possible, encouraging them to make alternative arrangements, with around 100 additional tenants now paying by direct debit. The advice provided to tenants where they wanted to continue to make cash payments, had been to ensure payments were made, when practicable to do so. The Chief Officer (Housing & Assets) explained that prior to the Connects offices being re-opened a risk assessment had to be carried out and he suspected that the reason the Holywell office was opening later, had been due to the level of risk.

Councillor Paul Shotton commented on the positive impact of the 'Spend to Save' initiative but raised concerns around the Universal Credit scheme and the five week wait for payment to recipients. He also commented on the Department for Works and Pensions (DWP) payment of £300k which had been received after the rent accounting year ended and asked if this had been a one-off occurrence or was the annual payment from DWP always received following the accounting year ending. The Revenues Manager explained that more tenants had migrated to Universal Credit due to the COVID-19 pandemic. Those tenants were moved to managed payments but the wait for payments from DWP took some time and it was hoped that there would soon be a change in the length of time that payments were sent from DWP to the Council, as this was currently being reviewed.

In response to a question from Councillor Brian Lloyd around rent arrear hotspots, the Chief Officer explained that identifying hotspots would not be helpful and that within all Communities there were a small amount of tenants who refused to pay and engage with the Council.

Councillor Ron Davies raised concerns around Universal Credit and the negative impact this had had on tenants. He asked whether all tenants could be asked to set up direct debits to make payments to the Council. The Revenues Manager explained that the Council did encourage tenants to pay by direct debit in order to assist them in managing their income.

In response to a question from Councillor Rush, the Revenues Manager outlined the process in dealing with tenants who did not wish to engage with the Council and where their debt levels continued to increase.

The Chief Officer (Housing & Assets) commented on the amount of positive intervention which had been made to assist in reducing the debt levels prior to the COVID-19 pandemic. Councillor Dave Hughes, Cabinet Member for Housing also comments on the significant improvements that had been made and said that the current situation should only be for the short term.

Councillor Palmer proposed that the Committee support the recommendation as outlined within the report. This was seconded by Councillor Shotton.

The Chair thanked Officers for their attendance and for providing the information contained within the reports.

RESOLVED:

That the improvements in rent collections for 2019/20 which showed that collection of rent had resulted in higher level of collection, lower levels of bad debts and a final outturn where total arrears had reduced by £65k be noted.

56. MEMBERS OF THE PUBLIC AND PRESS IN ATTENDANCE

There was one member of the press in attendance.

(The meeting started at 11.00 am and ended at 12.06 p.m.)

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Chairman