

COMMUNITY, HOUSING & ASSETS OVERVIEW & SCRUTINY COMMITTEE
8 DECEMBER 2021

Minutes of the meeting of the Community, Housing & Assets Overview & Scrutiny Committee of Flintshire County Council held remotely on Wednesday, 8 December 2021.

PRESENT:

Councillors: Helen Brown, Geoff Collett, Ron Davies, Adele Davies-Cooke, Mared Eastwood, Veronica Gay, Patrick Heesom, Dennis Hutchinson Brian Lloyd and Kevin Rush

APOLOGIES:

Councillors Ian Dunbar and Ray Hughes

SUBSTITUTES:

Councillors: David Wisinger (for Councillor David Cox)

CONTRIBUTORS:

Councillor Billy Mullin (Deputy Leader - Governance - and Cabinet Member for Corporate Management and Assets), Councillor Dave Hughes (Cabinet Member for Housing), Chief Executive, Benefits Manager (for agenda item 5), Revenues Manager (for agenda Item 6), Business Performance Team Manager, Housing and Assets Senior Manager and Housing Programmes Service Manager

IN ATTENDANCE:

Community & Enterprise Overview & Scrutiny Facilitator and Democratic Services Officer

27. APPOINTMENT OF CHAIR FOR THE MEETING

The Facilitator explained that both the Chairman and Vice-Chairman had given their apologies for the meeting. She sought nominations for a Chair for the meeting.

RESOLVED:

That Councillor Helen Brown be appointed as Chair for the meeting

28. DECLARATIONS OF INTEREST

None.

29. MINUTES

The minutes of the meeting held on 10 November 2021 were approved, as moved and seconded by Councillor David Wisinger and Councillor Kevin Rush.

RESOLVED:

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

30. FORWARD WORK PROGRAMME AND ACTION TRACKING

The Overview & Scrutiny Facilitator presented the current Forward Work Programme for consideration. She referred to the January meeting and reported that the Developing Flintshire's Housing Support Programme Strategy 2022-26 would be added to the list of items to be considered at the meeting. On the action tracking report she confirmed that both actions had been completed.

The recommendations outlined within the report were moved and seconded by Councillor Ron Davies and Councillor David Wisinger.

RESOLVED:

- (a) That the Forward Work Programme be noted;
- (b) That the Facilitator, in consultation with the Chair of the Committee, be authorised to vary the Forward Work Programme between meetings, as the need arises; and
- (c) That the progress made in completing the outstanding actions be noted.

31. WELFARE REFORM UPDATE

The Benefits Manager introduced an update on the impacts that welfare reforms continued to have on Flintshire residents and the work that was ongoing to mitigate this and support these households. Vulnerable households had also been significantly impacted by the pandemic, and the report also provided information around the range of measures that had been developed to help those affected by the current pandemic and the support provided to residents to help mitigate the negative impacts.

The Benefits Manager provided a detailed update on the following areas, as highlighted within the report:

- The removal of the £20 Universal Credit uplift. A case study had been provided which highlighted concerns and choices residents would have to make. There had not been a huge demand for support at present but it was available should it be required;
- There had been an increase in demand for budgeting support as residents had to stretch their budgets;
- Council Tax Reduction Scheme. Despite the huge demand during the pandemic, there had been a slow uptake at present. Work had been

undertaken to understand when support would be required to support people in difficulty;

- Ending of the furlough scheme. At present there had not been a huge demand for requests for support. It could be that people were juggling their finances, and this would continue to be monitored and all of the processes were in place to provide assistance;
- Isolation payments were still on going with a high volume of applications being submitted; and
- Discretionary Housing Payments (DHP) were continuing to increase steadily. There had been a reduction in funding from the Department of Work & Pensions (DWP) but Welsh Government (WG) had committed £126,000 in addition to the DWP payments to enable that support.

The Benefits Manager also provided a verbal update on the Winter Fuel Support Allowance. The Scheme was subject to WG final approval and would be opened on Monday 13th December, 2021. All Local Authorities in Wales were adopting the same approach and it was anticipated that there would be 9,000 claimants in Flintshire. There were benefit entitlement conditions attached and conditions with regard to energy providers. Eligible residents were able to claim £100 off their fuel bills. She confirmed that this would be published once approved via social media, websites etc. In January following data analysis those eligible households who had not claimed would be approached to encourage them to claim.

The Chair thanked the Benefits Manager for a detailed update. The recommendation, as outlined within the report, was moved and seconded by Councillor David Wisinger and Councillor Ron Davies.

RESOLVED:

That the Committee support the ongoing work to manage the impacts that welfare reform has and will continue to have upon some of the most vulnerable residents in Flintshire.

32. HOUSING RENT INCOME

The Chief Officer (Housing & Assets) introduced the operational update for 2021/22 housing rent collection.

The Revenues Manager advised total rent arrears for current tenants, as at week 28 (up to mid-October 2021) was £2.40m, compared to £2.35m at the same point in 2020/21 and £2.40m at the same point in 2019/20 pre-pandemic. The Rent Income Service continued to support tenants and ensure interventions were provided to tenants to prevent further legal action and to ensure tenants met their payments.

The Revenues Manager provided a detailed presentation which covered the following areas:-

- Rent Collections – Latest position (to week 35)
- National Benchmarking forecasts for 2021-22
- Trends with service demands/contacts
- Latest Position – Banded Arrears
- Latest Position – Tenants in Arrears
- A granular review at £5k + arrears

In response to comments made by Councillor David Wisinger around whether both National and Welsh Governments should be doing more and the further negative impacts the pandemic could have, the Chief Executive assured Members that the Housing Portfolio was prepared to assist tenants and had been working and modifying their processes for a number of years. Some things were unable to be controlled but the Council had resourced teams to assist tenants providing support to keep them in their homes and not to be evicted. He agreed that the pandemic could have further negative impacts but wanted to reassure the Committee that the Housing Service would be doing all it could to assist tenants in this very difficult time.

The Revenue Manager agreed with the comments made by the Chief Executive and added that several months ago a business case was made to increase the level of resources in the business plan for the Housing Revenue Account. This was to provide additional support as the service could see that there were more challenges ahead and resources would need to be put in place to provide that support.

Councillor Brian Lloyd asked if the significant arrears, as outlined within the report, could be re-claimed or whether this would have to be written off. The Revenues Manager explained that large arrears were not automatically written off. If tenants were required to be evicted and there were opportunities to pursue those rent arrears then this would be done. It was challenging and if all the processes had been carried out without success and then the debt had to be written off.

The Cabinet Member for Housing reassured members that everything was being done to avoid evictions. If the Council had not invested in the Mobysoft 'Rent Sense' software he felt that the situation would have been worse. He felt the changes being made within the Housing portfolio would provide that support to tenants.

Councillor Dennis Hutchinson congratulated the Revenues Manager and the team for doing all they could in difficult circumstances. He added that when tenants were £5k arrears it was very difficult to get back on track but wanted to thank the team for all their work.

The Chair congratulated the team. She said the 6 month lead in time to evictions was very difficult but appreciated why WG put these measures in place. There were also peaks when children returned to school, due to costs of school uniforms and at Christmas time and the general cost of living.

Councillor Ron Davies commented that the update had been very well presented and felt that universal credit should be scrapped in order to support tenants.

The recommendation, as outlined within the report, was moved and seconded by Councillor Brian Lloyd and Councillor Mared Eastwood.

RESOLVED:

That the latest financial position for rent collection in 2021/22, as set out in the report and presentation, be noted.

33. MID-YEAR PERFORMANCE INDICATORS FOR RECOVERY, PORTFOLIO AND PUBLIC ACCOUNTABILITY MEASURES

The Chief Executive presented the mid-year monitoring report to review progress against their respective priorities set out in the Council's Reporting Measures 2020/21 under the remit of the Committee. It was reported that 73% of performance indicators had met or exceeded their targets.

The report was an exception-based report and concentrated on under-performance against target. There was one area within the remit of the Committee as outlined in section 1.07 of the report. The Chief Executive advised that there was a list of properties in the system which were yet to be delivered. These had been delayed because of economic situations and planning conditions which had slowed the programme down. There were schemes behind these which would be brought to Committee to highlight what was happening with regard to the new build programme.

Councillor Veronica Gay asked if it was possible for the coloured asterisks to be removed and replaced with the words Red Amber and Green in the appendix for future report as it was difficult to distinguish between the different colours in the Agenda packs. The Facilitator agreed to feed this back to the Performance Team.

The recommendation, as outlined within the report, was moved and seconded by Councillor Geoff Collett and Councillor Ron Davies.

RESOLVED:

That the report be noted.

Prior to the close of the meeting the Chief Executive reported that the Housing and Assets Senior Manager was leaving the service. He thanked him for the huge amount of work he had undertaken and the contribution he had made to

the Housing Service. The Committee added their good wishes to the Housing and Assets Senior Manager for the future.

The Housing and Assets Senior Manager thanked the Chief Executive and Committee for the comments. He said he valued the discussions and relationship with Members and colleagues which had been excellent and felt that Flintshire was in a fantastic place to move forward and to continue to improve.

34. MEMBERS OF THE PRESS IN ATTENDANCE

There were no members of the press in attendance.

(The meeting started at 10.00 am and ended at 11.02 am)

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Chairman