

COMMUNITY & HOUSING OVERVIEW & SCRUTINY COMMITTEE
WEDNESDAY 12 JULY 2023

Minutes of the meeting of the Community & Housing Overview & Scrutiny Committee of Flintshire County Council held as a hybrid meeting on Wednesday, 12 July 2023

PRESENT: Councillor Helen Brown (Chair)

Councillors: Gillian Brockley, Tina Claydon, Geoff Collett, Rosetta Dolphin, David Evans, Ray Hughes, Dennis Hutchinson, Kevin Rush and Linda Thew

SUBSTITUTION: Councillors: Marion Bateman (for Dale Selvester) and Chrissy Gee (for Pam Banks)

ALSO PRESENT: Councillors: Bernie Attridge, Dave Hughes and Billy Mullin attended as observers

CONTRIBUTORS: Councillor Sean Bibby (Cabinet Member for Housing and Regeneration); Chief Officer (Housing & Communities); Senior Manager (Housing, Welfare & Communities); Service Manager (Revenues and Procurement) and Service Manager – Housing Assets;

IN ATTENDANCE: Democratic Services Manager and Electoral Services Officer

18. DECLARATIONS OF INTEREST (INCLUDING WHIPPING DECLARATIONS)

None.

19. MINUTES

It was highlighted that Councillor Geoff Collett's name was spelt incorrectly on page 8 of the minutes.

The minutes were moved and seconded by Councillor David Evans and Councillor Linda Thew.

RESOLVED:

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

20. FORWARD WORK PROGRAMME & ACTION TRACKING

The Democratic Services Manager presented the current Forward Work Programme for consideration. A meeting with the Chief Officer & Senior Management Team would take place over the summer and the Facilitator would liaise with the Chair and Vice-Chair to bring a fuller forward work programme to the committee at the meeting in September.

Councillor Rosetta Dolphin referred to the outstanding actions and raised concerns around the length of time it was taking for the Department of Works and Pensions (DWP) to a letter sent to them in February. It was suggested that a letter be sent to all local MPs in order for the issue to be raised with the Minister.

Councillor Dennis Hutchinson requested that an item on parking at Council properties be scheduled for a future meeting.

The recommendations, as outlined within the report, were moved by Councillor David Evans and seconded by Councillor Geoff Collett.

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 Committee notes the progress made in completing the outstanding actions.

21. COST OF LIVING & WELFARE REFORM

The Senior Manager (Housing, Welfare & Communities) provided an update on the impacts that continue with welfare reforms and discussed the ongoing work to mitigate the work that continued to support the Flintshire resident's households. She added that the bedroom tax was still having an effect in Flintshire together with the lack of available smaller properties for residents to downsize too.

She also discussed the following, as outlined in the report: -

- Benefits Cap
- Cost of Living Support Scheme
- Winter Fuel Support Scheme 2022/23
- Energy Bill Support Scheme
- Alternate Fuel Payments
- Universal Primary School Meals
- School Essentials Grant
- Welfare Support
- Discretionary Housing Payments (DHP)

The Senior Manager (Housing, Welfare & Communities) went on to discuss the eligibility and funding for free school meals and how they work with school to publicise the pupil deprivation grant, and also how they would try to automate payments with regards to the School Uniform grant for all school years.

Councillor David Evans referred to the Winter Fuel Scheme and expressed his concerns around some residents missing out on the scheme. He asked how many residents were still not set up with a Direct Debit. The Senior Manager (Housing,

Welfare & Communities) advised that the team provide positive encouragement to households to take up the scheme, with some credited back via their Council Tax accounts. She added that Flintshire had the highest take up of the scheme in Wales and encouraged Councillors to share ways in which to engage with tenants.

In response to questions raised by Councillor Rosetta Dolphin, the Senior Manager (Housing, Welfare & Communities) advised that she did not think it would be possible to track claimants of DHP relating to the bedroom tax over the period of time suggested. With regards to free school meals, she agreed that the claiming process could be difficult and said that awareness needed to be raised on how this affected schools and reiterated the importance of making the claim.

The Chair commented that she fully supported the DHP which she said would be there for the foreseeable future.

Councillor Bernie Attridge added his comments that the report was good but added that the Council should not lose sight of all the vulnerable people throughout Flintshire affected by the cost of living crisis and welfare reform.

The recommendations, as outlined within the report, were moved by Councillor Tina Claydon and seconded by Councillor David Evans.

RESOLVED:

- (a) That the Committee support the ongoing work to manage the impacts that welfare reform had and will continue to have on some of the most vulnerable residents; and
- (b) That the Committee note the support measures implemented via Welsh Government to mitigate the cost-of-living crisis.

22. HOUSING RENT INCOME

The Service Manager (Revenues and Procurement) outlined the quarterly briefing report on Housing Rent. He explained the difficulties experienced during the pandemic, the impacts of the Cost of Living crisis and Inflation.

Rent Arrears collection for 2022/2023 had been a cumulative rent arrears position of just over £2 million. Rent Arrears at the end of the financial year was up by 124k. The Service Manager (Revenues and Procurement) was pleased to report that the year-end outturn arrears figure for 2022/23 was lower than the figure set out in the previous report to scrutiny. It was important to note that 20% of tenants had fallen into arrears, but most did remain up to date with payments.

He added that the number of evictions was significantly down with only 2 evictions taking place, and re-iterated that every possible form of engagement had been made to avoid evictions. He also added that the Council always endeavour to maximise collections whilst remaining fair.

In relation to write offs, the Service Manager (Revenues and Procurement) advised that they were lower than previous years and added that some were unavoidable if that person had passed away and for those who were subject to debt relief orders.

The Service Manager (Revenues and Procurement) also outlined the rent income pilot scheme currently being delivered which provided an alternative way of working in order to gain a closer working relationship with tenants.

Councillor David Evans said whilst the report showed what looked like a lower level of controlled rent arrears, he expressed his concerns with regards to the top end of arrears for those in the bracket of £2500 to £5000 which looked like it had increased. He commented that once they cross an arrears threshold it just seemed to get worse. He also asked what the Council's obligations were after a tenant was evicted, did the Council have a duty to home them, what was their level of debt and was there a breakdown available of the reasons for the eviction. He also commented that the pilot scheme outlined in section 1.09 of the report sounded interesting and would like further information on the scheme.

The Service Manager (Revenues and Procurement) explained that the table of rent arrears was often difficult to explain as tenants quite often move in and out of the different categories, which made it harder to track and reiterated that the Council carried out early engagement. He added that the Council did not track the movements of tenants following eviction but advised that those previous tenants were not currently re-housed with the Council. He suggested that further information on the rent income pilot scheme be reported to the Committee in due course.

The Chair referred to the number of tenants in rent arrears over £5,000 and asked how many of those tenants were subject to court orders and were paying a small amount of the arrears on top of their weekly rent. She also asked if there was a trigger point when tenants were taken to court to re-coup the rent arrears. The Service Manager (Revenues and Procurement) advised that those tenants had been to court and were on a payment plan to recover the debt. He explained that there wasn't an arbitrary figure for when tenants were taken to court with the Council focussing on getting engagement in place. Tenants were taken to court when there was no engagement with the Council to reduce the debt.

The Chair commented on the level of rent arrears and outlined the significant investment that could be made to the Housing Revenue Account (HRA) if rent arrears was reduced. She asked if a summary of those tenants in rent arrears over £5,000, outlining how many were subject to court orders and how many awaiting eviction etc. could be provided in future reports.

Councillor Bernie Attridge commented on the number of tenants in rent arrears above £5,000 and said that whilst the Council was doing more to engage with tenants as soon as they went into arrears to stop the amount increasing, he felt that the number of tenants in high arrears was out of control. He raised concern around the response provided to Councillor Evans that tenants who had been evicted were not tracked and felt that they should be in order to ensure the arrears were collected. He agreed with the comments made by the Chair around the significant investment that could be made

to the HRA and the financial assistance that could be provided to tenants who were struggling financially but continued to pay their rent on time week after week. He felt that the Council should be taking tenants to court if they were not engaging and not paying their rent and commented on the safety net in place for those tenants who could not pay. He asked if information on re-charges could be provided in future reports in order to outline how tenants who had made significant damages to their properties before moving were pursued to re-claim the costs to bring the property back into use.

The Service Manager (Revenues and Procurement) disagreed with the comment that the rent arrears were out of control but said that there were many challenges for the reasons set out in the report. He suggested that a separate report on re-charges be submitted to a future meeting of the Committee and explained that whilst re-charging sat within the HRA for accounting purposes, re-charges were dealt with through an invoicing system, and he provided an assurance that they were robustly pursued and in some cases this would be through a County Court action through a CCJ. He clarified his response to Councillor Evans around tracking evicted tenants and explained that where possible outstanding debt was collected and that tracking arrangements were in place for those tenants.

Councillor Marion Bateman said that no tenant should be owing the Council £5,000 or more and asked at what stage to tenants start paying extra on top of their rent. The Service Manager (Revenues and Procurement) advised that the systems in place tracked tenants rent payment and flagged up when a tenants had missed a payment which enabled contact to be made with that tenants as soon as possible. The Council did what it could to mitigate and stop rent arrear levels moving into the next band, but this was a challenge, especially for those tenants with one off benefits and universal credit, as outlined in the report.

In response to comments by Councillor Bateman around evictions, the Service Manager (Revenues and Procurement) said there was a balance for the Council between its responsibility as a social landlord and to not evict into homelessness.

The recommendations, as outlined within the report, were moved by Councillor Geoff Collett and seconded by Councillor David Evans.

RESOLVED:

That the Committee note the latest financial position for rent collections in 2022-23 as set out in the report.

23. HOUSING MANAGEMENT POLICY

The Senior Manager (Housing, Welfare & Communities) provided an update on the Renting Homes Wales Act and the current changes in the legislation, with the main one being the change in name from being a tenancy agreement to the new term of contract and from tenants to contract holders. Roadshows were still being undertaken to inform contract holders of the changes and would continue throughout the summer, with workshop sessions accessible to contract holders who requested it.

The Committee was informed that the new Policy was still in draft form to simplify the process. The consultation process was underway, and the Senior Manager (Housing, Welfare & Communities) welcomed Member's input. The Policy would be presented to the Committee later in the year for approval.

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

RESOLVED:

That the Committee support the Housing Management policy.

24. ANTI-SOCIAL BEHAVIOUR POLICY

The Senior Manager (Housing, Welfare & Communities) introduced the report to provide an overview of the changes that had been made to the Anti-Social Behaviour Policy.

The Council was committed to tackling anti-social behaviour due to the impact it had on tenants. The Policy reflected best practice and protected the rights of contract holders as well as minimising risk to the Council for not complying with appropriate legislation. The Senior Manager (Housing, Welfare & Communities) outlined that one of the key parts was the correct reporting process by ringing 101 to ensure all evidence could be documented correctly.

The Cabinet Member for Housing & Regeneration commented on the challenges of trying to support those affected and the hardships that they faced. He encouraged residents to report incidents of anti-social behaviour to ensure enforcement action could be taken.

The recommendation, as outlined within the report, was moved by Councillor David Evans and seconded by Councillor Tina Claydon.

RESOLVED:

That the Committee support the Anti-Social Behaviour Policy.

25. VOIDS MANAGEMENT

The Service Manager – Housing Assets presented the key figures and key activities against the void action plan, as outlined in the briefing note.

He outlined the number of new voids and those which had been completed and reported that 30 properties had been completed ready for allocation.

In relation to the key activities against the void action plan and next steps, the Service Manager outlined the following:-

- Allocation of work to newly commissioned contractors in line with their capacity to deliver;

- Progress meetings scheduled over the next 12 months to monitor performance and quality;
- Contractors Performance meetings set up for the next 12 months - to monitor target times, quality of work, capacity, and general performance;
- All meetings would be recorded to evaluate and provide ongoing evidence of performance standards.

The Service Manager – Housing & Assets also reported that the Council had been awarded £585,000 TACP funding to be used towards major void properties.

Councillor David Evans welcomed the number of properties completed ready for allocated which he said was positive. He said that, together with Councillor Ron Davies, he had recently met with residents and asked why smaller properties could not be completed for allocation quicker. The Service Manager - Housing & Assets, reiterated the historic backlog from only having 1 contractor in the past, but confirmed that works at properties should be completed quicker with the number of new contractors on board. He added that for major works Members should expect a 6 – 8 week turn around.

Following a suggestion from Councillor Evans, it was agreed that the void management briefing note be circulated to the Committee during the August recess.

In response to question from Councillor Marion Bateman, the Service Manager – Housing & Assets advised that the quality and standard of work from the new contractors had been good and would continue to be monitored.

In response to a question from Councillor Linda Thew, the Service Manager - Housing & Assets confirmed that the contractors would continue to work through the summer holidays.

Councillor David Evans recommended that the update be noted. This was seconded by Councillor Tina Claydon.

RESOLVED:

That the update be noted.

26. COUNCIL PLAN 2022/2023 YEAR-END PERFORMANCE

The Chief Officer (Housing & Communities) introduced the report to review the levels of progress in the achievement of activities and performance levels identified in the Council Plan. She advised that the Council Plan 2022/23 was adopted by the Council in July 2022. The report presented a summary of performance of progress against the Council Plan priorities identified for 2022/23 at year end (Q4) position relevant to the Community & Housing Overview & Scrutiny Committee.

The Chief Officer (Housing & Communities) reported on the activity that showed a red (RAG) status for current performance against target together with information on the performance indicators (PIs)/measures which showed a red (RAG) status for performance against the target set for 2022/23.

Councillor Bernie Attridge asked the following questions:-

- In relation to the number of applicants on the common housing register, could officers confirm if there were 237 new applicants for 2022/23
- Could more information be provided around the customer satisfaction data for the Housing Register of 52%
- Do the housing partners provide the Council with the level of service expected as part of their contract
- In relation to the plans for the de-carbonisation of Council homes, when would Members be consulted on the draft de-carbonisation strategy
- In relation to ensuring that the Council's housing stock meets the Welsh Housing Quality Standard (WHQS) and achieved a minimum SAP energy efficiency rating of 65, how was the completed target of 100% achieved, given the number of void properties
- What was being done to address the delays in progressing the new Dynamic Procurement System with Denbighshire CC
- In relation to listening to tenants and working with them to improve our services, homes and communities, which tenants was the Council working with
- Which tenants took part in the digital courses delivered by Coleg Cambria
- In relation to working with housing association partners to build new social housing properties and additional affordable properties, do the Cabinet Members for Housing and Social Services take part in these meetings
- Could further information on the digital solutions for Housing Officers be provided

The Chief Officer (Housing & Communities) said that the number of applicants on the common housing register was not static but advised that there had been a small increase in the number for 2022/23. In relation to the customer satisfaction survey, she would ask the Service Manager (Housing & Prevention Services) to provide information on the 52% response to the Committee following the meeting. She confirmed that the Council's housing partners were committed to meeting their requirement, the only issues were around the correlation of stock to match individual cases. She also confirmed that the Cabinet Member for Housing & Regeneration was involved in meetings with housing partners at a regional and national level.

The Service Manager – Housing & Assets advised that a draft de-carbonisation strategy had been developed but the Council was awaiting the release of the WHQS 2 standards from Welsh Government (WG) which would inform the strategy. It was proposed that a workshop for Members would be arranged to outline the draft de-carbonisation strategy when appropriate. He also explained that the Council continued to target properties that did not meet the Standard Assessment Procedure (SAP) 65 rating through various improvement works. The percentage completed was shown as 100% in the report as a small number of properties which did not meet the standards were classed as acceptable fails.

The Senior Manager (Housing, Welfare & Communities) explained that whilst work continued on the Dynamic Procurement System framework with Denbighshire CC, she reassured the Committee that this had not stopped any of the work on adaptations continuing. She referred to the previous Policy reports presented during the meeting

and the engagement carried out with tenants in line with proposed Policy changes. A number of additional engagement sessions had been held with tenants in order to increase engagement and assured the Committee that engagement had moved on considerably since April 2023. She outlined that as part of the Croeso Cynnes project which ran from November 2022 to March 2023 residents enjoyed attending the digital courses delivered by Coleg Cambria. Equipment had also been purchased to provide Wi-Fi access for up to 16 devices in community areas. She also advised that through Total Mobile, this would ensure Housing Officers were better equipped to support tenants by having a greater presence in the ward. This would also assist them in identifying support needs at an earlier stage and referring tenants to support agencies where appropriate.

The recommendations, as outlined within the report, were moved by Councillor Dennis Hutchinson and seconded by Councillor Kevin Rush.

RESOLVED:

- (a) That the Committee support the levels of progress and have confidence in the achievement of priorities as detailed within the Council Plan 2022/23;
- (b) That the Committee support overall performance against Council Plan 2022/23 performance indicators/measures: and
- (c) That the Committee is assured by explanations given for those areas of underperformance.

27. 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 12.08 p.m.)

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Chair