

COMMUNITY & HOUSING OVERVIEW & SCRUTINY COMMITTEE
WEDNESDAY 11 OCTOBER 2023

Minutes of the meeting of the Community & Housing Overview & Scrutiny Committee of Flintshire County Council held as a hybrid meeting on Wednesday, 11 October 2023

PRESENT: Councillor Helen Brown (Chair)

Councillors: Pam Banks, Gillian Brockley, Geoff Collett, Rosetta Dolphin, David Evans, Dennis Hutchinson, Kevin Rush, Dale Selvester and Linda Thew

SUBSTITUTION: Councillor Ted Palmer (for Councillor Tina Claydon)

ALSO PRESENT:

Councillors: David Coggins-Cogan, Dave Hughes, Paul Johnson and Billy Mullin attended as observers

CONTRIBUTORS: Councillor Sean Bibby (Cabinet Member for Housing and Regeneration); Councillor Paul Johnson (Cabinet Member for Finance, Inclusion, Resilient Communities including Social Value and Procurement); Chief Executive; Chief Officer (Housing and Communities); Service Manager – Housing Assets; Service Manager – Housing & Prevention; Strategic Finance Manager - Financial Strategy and Insurance; Strategic Finance Manager - Management Accounting and Principal Accountant

IN ATTENDANCE: Community & Education Overview & Scrutiny Facilitator & Electoral Services Officer

37. DECLARATIONS OF INTEREST (INCLUDING WHIPPING DECLARATIONS)

Councillor Ted Palmer declared a personal interest as a Council tenant.

38. FORWARD WORK PROGRAMME & ACTION TRACKING

The Facilitator presented the current Forward Work Programme for consideration and advised that a meeting between the Chair, Vice-Chair and Senior Officers within the Housing & Communities Portfolio would take place following the Committee meeting, and that an updated Forward Work Programme would be presented to the Committee at the next meeting. There were no proposed changes to the Forward Work Programme as presented in the agenda.

In relation to the actions arising from the last meeting, the Facilitator reported that a response from the Department of Works and Pensions (DWP) had been received via Mark Tami MP and had been circulated to all Committee Members. Information on the number of Occupational Health Therapists had also been received and circulated to the Committee via e-mail.

In relation to the request from Councillor Dale Selvester around the total loss of Council Tax for void properties which had been empty over 6 months, this information was being collated and would be circulated when available.

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

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.

38. BUDGET 2024/2025 STAGE 2

The Strategic Finance Manager – Financial Strategy and Insurance introduced the report to review and comment on the budget pressures and cost reductions under the remit of the Committee. She gave a presentation on the Medium Term Financial Strategy and Budget Setting 2024/25 which covered the following points:

- purpose and background
- additional budget requirements of the Council 2024/25
- additional budget requirement – ongoing risks
- overall position after initial solutions
- summary and conclusions
- next steps for the budget setting process 2024/25
- budget process Stage 2
- budget process Stage 3 – (Final)

The Chief Officer (Housing and Communities) gave a presentation on the Cost Pressures which covered the following points:

- Homelessness demand
- Benefits – Council Tax Reduction Scheme.

Councillor David Evans in referring to the report commented that whilst there was a proposed budget reduction option for the Council Tax Reduction Scheme, there were no options to reduce the cost pressures associated with the Homelessness demand. He suggested that since the Minister at UK Government had said that there were no plans to house migrants at the Northop Hall Country House Hotel, could consideration be given to contacting them to house people presenting as homeless in order to reduce the budget pressure. The Chief Officer (Housing and Communities) explained that there would be a report outlining options to reduce the Homelessness cost pressures presented to the next meeting of the Committee. A number of avenues were being explored, including how to make better use of the current housing stock and all options would be presented to the Committee as part of the report.

In response to the suggestion made by Councillor Evans, Councillor Linda Thew advised the Committee that the Northop Hall Country House Hotel only had 37 hotel rooms and that the proposals to house migrants included additional containers being placed in the grounds of the hotel. She also explained that the hotel was currently continuing to function as a hotel and said that she would not want to see people presenting as homeless placed in housing containers. Councillor Evans explained that he was not suggesting people being placed in housing containers.

Councillor Rosetta Dolphin supported the comments made by Councillor Evans and said that the Council must consider all options in order to reduce the cost pressure on homelessness, and that all Members must be aware of properties within their own ward that could be considered for use. She also referred to the cost pressures associated with Out of County Placements and asked if information on the Out of County placements for the previous year could be provided. The Strategic Finance Manager suggested that this information be circulated following the meeting.

Councillor Dennis Hutchinson sought clarification on whether discussions had been held between the Council and owners of the Northop Hall Country House Hotel. He was concerned around possible liability for the hotel and whether this would fall to the Council if people presenting as homeless were housed there and also the cost to do so. He felt that any proposals should be considered by the Committee ahead of any decisions being made.

The Service Manager – Housing & Prevention advised that the Council was not in any discussion with the owners of the Hotel at this present time.

Councillor Dale Selvester asked if the Council had considered all options in relation to alternative accommodation for people presenting as homeless. He suggested accommodation in Broughton & Bretton, which was close to amenities and had been used previously and asked if public houses with accommodation or Airbnb's would be considered. The Chair asked if information on the accommodation/properties used to house homeless people could be provided to the Committee.

The Service Manager – Housing & Prevention said that this information could be provided to the Committee following the meeting but explained that it was confidential due to the vulnerability of the people being housed and would not want this information in the public domain. In response to the questions from Councillor Selvester, he advised that all avenues for accommodation were being exhausted but explained that the Council were not just looking for bed spaces but for good quality accommodation. The report to be presented to the Committee at the next meeting will outline all options being considered to ease the budget pressure and also how to help people exit homelessness.

The Chair said that whilst the Welsh Government Policy to ensure all people presenting as homeless were given accommodation was to be applauded, there needed to be financial resources provided in order to implement this Policy. She commented that careful consideration needed to be given to re-designating sheltered housing stock to assist with this budget pressure as this could have a negative impact on communities.

Councillor Selvester reiterated his previous comments and said that public houses cost less than hotels due to not having to pay for additional amenities that were not required and asked if the Council had approached any owners of public houses across Flintshire. The Service Manager – Housing & Prevention asked that if Councillor Selvester had any contacts to contact him and he would follow them up.

Councillor Pam Banks asked whether consideration was given to housing people at Caravan Sites. The Service Manager – Housing & Prevention said that this considered but the Council often found that caravan accommodation was booked intermittently, and it was important to consider continuity of placement as well as cost.

Councillor Evans welcomed the comments around the support provided to people presenting as homeless in finding a forever home which he felt was supported by all Members. He referred to the agenda item on void properties and the need to complete work on void properties quicker in order to assist with reducing the cost pressures around homelessness.

The Cabinet Member for Finance, Inclusion, Resilient Communities including Social Value and Procurement asked if the Committee felt that the £2.7m overspend could be dealt with. He explained that the scale of the issues being faced were significant and asked for the Committee's views on the budget reduction options. The Chair said that it was difficult for the Committee to provide feedback as there were no options to reduce the homelessness budget pressure and was concerned that the proposed budget reduction option for the Council Tax Reduction Scheme created a budget pressure for next year.

Councillor Dolphin, in referring to the recommendations outlined within the report, did not feel that the Committee had been given enough information and moved that the cost pressures and options to reduce budgets be noted. This was seconded by Councillor Ted Palmer.

RESOLVED:

- (a) That the Housing and Communities portfolio cost pressures be noted; and
- (b) That the Housing and Communities portfolio options to reduce budgets be noted.

39. TEMPORARY ACCOMMODATION HOMELESSNESS AUDIT – ACTION PLAN UPDATE

The Service Manager – Housing & Prevention introduced the report which provided an update on progress with the Temporary Accommodation Audit Action Plan.

The audit was presented to the Committee in February 2022 and the Audit Committee in March 2022 and was categorised as a red audit report and highlighted areas of improvement. An action plan was developed in response to the internal audit and the Council's Audit Team would be commencing a follow up review of the service to assess progress against the action plan.

The Service Manager – Housing & Prevention advised that a detailed service improvement plan was developed to pick up on all the actions required to deliver on the audit recommendation with a stronger focus placed on the core principles of housing management, support for those in interim housing and move on options in line with the principles of Rapid Rehousing.

A copy of the audit action plan as updated at the end of September 2023, was attached at Appendix 1 of the report. Whilst progress had been made on all actions, there had been significant challenges impacting on the delivery of the action plan, with some completions dated being pushed back. The reasons for this were listed within the resource section of the report but all actions would be completed by March 2024.

The Service Manager – Housing & Prevention advised that Senior management had met with the Council's Internal Audit Team in recent weeks and those actions that were completed would soon be tested and evidence of completion reviewed. The Committee would continue to receive further updates.

Councillor David Evans referenced how he felt that the issues faced with people presenting to homelessness linked to void properties, which would be considered later in the meeting. He referred to the number of households in comparison to the number of void properties and whilst acknowledging that this may be a simplistic view asked how many of the people currently placed in temporary accommodation had been allocated a void property. The Service Manager – Housing & Prevention said that he estimated this to be around 30/35 but would provide the exact figure to the Committee following the meeting. He referred to the work that had been carried out by the Service Manager – Housing Assets in bringing void properties back into use which had seen positive results, but it was important to also consider whether they were the right type of property for the person in temporary accommodation. He reported that 183 of these people were single, with a significant number under the age of 55 and that the majority of void properties were sheltered accommodation. The options to ease the budget pressures around homelessness, to be presented to the Committee at the next meeting would include the review of sheltered housing, but this wouldn't alleviate all of the pressures. The Council wanted to create stable, sustainable communities with all residents suitably housed and feel safe in their communities.

The Chair asked if the high rise flats in Flint would be included as part of the sheltered housing review. The Chief Officer (Housing and Communities) confirmed that all schemes across Flintshire would be included in the review.

Councillor Linda Thew spoke in support of the comments made by Councillor Evans. She commented on the number of landlords leaving the market due to the volatility of the market and rising cost of mortgages. She also commented on the landlords not being registered with Rent Smart Wales and thanked the Service Manager for his assistance in a recent case within her ward. She asked what action was taken where the Council was aware that a private landlord was not registered with Rent Smart Wales and whether the introduction of a rogue landlords task force, considered at a recent Council meeting would assist with this and would it be cost neutral.

The Service Manager – Housing & Prevention provide an explanation of how the team worked with local landlords across Flintshire, including the undertaking of a suitability and discharge assessment. He explained that where the Council lease accommodation, it takes on the role of the landlord and where accommodation was used as temporary accommodation, the Council always check to ensure the property is registered with Rent Smart Wales. In relation to tackling rogue landlords, this function sat within the remit of the Public Protection Service who were the enforcing body around poor conduct of housing management within the private sector.

Councillor Ted Palmer commented on the pending sheltered housing review and said that not all integration had been successful and had led to instances of anti-social behaviour due to the different age brackets. He asked that this be taken into account when carrying out the sheltered accommodation review. The Chair supported Councillor Palmer's comments and said that they would be taken on board as part of the work of the Sheltered Housing Review Task & Finish Group.

The recommendation, as outlined within the report, was moved by Councillor Ted Palmer and seconded by Councillor Kevin Rush.

RESOLVED:

That the contents of the report, ahead of the follow up audit work to be completed by the Councils Audit Team, be noted.

40. PERFORMANCE OF THE WHQS CAPITAL PROGRAMME - ASSURANCE REPORT

The Service Manager – Housing Assets introduced a report to provide an update on the Council's delivery of the Welsh Housing Quality Standard (WHQS) through the Capital Investment Programme.

The Council were successful in delivering the WHQS programme of works to all Council stock, a major capital investment of over £100m and were now in the maintenance phase of the programme, delivering further investment works to those components within properties where required. The report detailed what had been delivered to date and outlined the focus of the next phase of the Councils WHQS investment programme.

The Service Manager – Housing Assets reported that the Council achieved compliance with WHQS in December 2021. Having achieved compliance with WHQS it was important that the Council ensured the standard was maintained and investment was planned accordingly. There was an ongoing investment programme to maintain the standard and enable the scheduled replacement of components when needed. An updated version of the existing WHQS guidance was due to go live in late 2023 and the Council would need to prepare itself for the changes that would be required to remain compliant.

Councillor Ted Palmer commented on roofs and windows needed to be replaced and asked if this work should have been carried out as part of the previous scheme and asked if there was a plan to replace them as soon as possible. The Service Manager - Housing Assets outlined the number of factors on why all roofs and windows were not

replaced prior to 2020 which included, not all roofs and windows needing to be replaced which had been identified as part of the stock condition survey. He outlined the need to protect any Council investment and said that if components could be repaired to prolong their lifespan, then this would be more efficient.

Councillor Palmer asked how repairing roofs and windows sat within the need to ensure that they were energy efficient. The Service Manager - Housing Assets advised that a whole approach was now being taken to ensure that homes were as thermally efficient as possible with the technology available.

Councillor David Evans referred to the statistic that for the last 3 years the Council had been 100% compliant with the WHQS and asked whether the Service Manager was finding that there was a reduction in the number of void properties requiring major works due to the work carried out to meet the WHQS. The Service Manager - Housing Assets confirmed that this was the case and that more void properties were being returned and found to be WHQS compliant. The major investment works required were around electrical and plastering works which were disruptive to tenants when they were in the homes. In the main, properties were being returned in better condition due to the investment over the last 5 years.

Councillor Sean Bibby (Cabinet Member for Housing & Regeneration) reiterated the comments of the Service Manager around the major works in void properties being electrical and plastering works. He said that he was encouraged to see within the report the percentage of local labour and apprentices which he felt was a considerable achievement.

In response to a question from Councillor Selvester around acceptable fails and whether the Housing Management Team engage with tenants which in turn would assist with the work being undertaken on void properties, the Service Manager - Housing Assets advised that WG would only allow an acceptable fail on a secondary item, which was a non health and safety item. If a tenant refused works on a secondary item, the property would still need to be accessed to ensure that the item was safe. The Housing Management Team engaged early with tenants to ensure access was provided.

Councillor Selvester asked if a list of acceptable fails could be provided to the Committee. The Service Manager - Housing Assets agreed to provide information on the number of acceptable fails to the Committee following the meeting.

The recommendation, as outlined within the report, was moved by Councillor Rosetta Dolphin and seconded by Councillor Ted Palmer.

RESOLVED:

That the Capital Investment Programme, in its next phase of compliance as it moves toward the updated Welsh Housing Quality Standards (WHQS 2023) and its requirements, be noted.

41. VOIDS UPDATE

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 28 properties had been completed ready for allocation. He also outlined the following, as presented in the briefing note:-

- The number of major voids
- Total overall number of void properties which had reduced to 232
- The performance of the current contractors
- Top reasons for terminations

Councillor Dale Selvester commented on the number of void properties completed by capital district area and said that he had been asked to ask on behalf of a resident within his ward whether more properties had been completed in the Mold, Holywell and Flint areas due to the Members representing those areas. The Service Manager – Housing Assets said that he could categorically confirm that properties were not priorities by ward but by whether those properties were more desirable, required less work or that the Housing Management Team had tenants waiting for the property. He said that he would like Members to focus on the total number of void properties as presented in the briefing note and said that he would be happy to meet with any Members individually to discuss the number of voids properties within their ward, outside of the meeting.

Councillor David Evans asked if officers had an internal target in terms of the number of void properties to be reduced and asked if an aim for 100 or less by October 2024 was felt to be realistic. He also commented on the allocated budget for the year of £4.6m and asked how many voids that would bring back into use and was the budget sufficient to complete works on all of the current void properties. The Service Manager – Housing Assets said that there wasn't currently a target and that this would be considered once an accurate assessment of all contractor's performance had taken place in order to assess their work allocation. In relation to the budget allocated to void properties the Council was able to access grant funding and another bid had been submitted to access further grant funding. The budget was monitored monthly to ensure adequate funding to bring voids back into use and was set based on the average cost of void properties over the last 10 years.

In response to comments made by the Chair around hard to let properties, the Service Manager – Housing Assets agreed to provide a list of 'hard to let' properties across the County to the Committee following the meeting.

Councillor Ted Palmer asked whether consideration was being given to prioritising 1-bed void priorities which would assist people currently in temporary accommodation. He also asked what areas were included in the capital district area of Holywell. The Service Manager – Housing Assets advised that the majority of 1-bed properties were within sheltered accommodation and would be considered as part of the sheltered housing review. He also advised that the district area of Holywell, listed in the briefing note, included Mostyn, Caerwys, Whitford and Brynford.

In response to a question from the announcement of the Transitional Accommodation Capital Programme (TACP) grant funding, the Service Manager – Housing Assets explained that this had been delayed by WG and an announcement on whether the Council had been successful in receiving additional grant funding was expected at any time.

Councillor Sean Bibby (Cabinet Member for Housing & Regeneration) responded to the comments made by Members and reiterated the comments made by the Service Manager around how work on void properties was prioritised and commented on the professionalism of officers and senior Members. He said that the housing stock built up by the Council over a number of years did not now meet demand but he was confident that the right framework was in place in order to significant improvements to be seen.

Councillor Rosetta Dolphin moved that the update be noted. This was seconded by Councillor Pam Banks.

RESOLVED:

That the update be noted.

42. 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 11.54 p.m.)

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Chair