

**COMMUNITY & HOUSING OVERVIEW & SCRUTINY COMMITTEE**  
**WEDNESDAY 7 FEBRUARY 2024**

Minutes of the meeting of the Community & Housing Overview & Scrutiny Committee of Flintshire County Council held as a hybrid meeting on Wednesday, 7 February 2024

**PRESENT: Councillor Helen Brown (Chair)**

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

**APOLOGY:** Councillor Ray Hughes

**ALSO PRESENT:** Councillors: Rob Davies, Mared Eastwood, Chrissy Gee, Allan Marshall and Andrew Parkhurst attended as observers

**CONTRIBUTORS:** Councillor Dave Hughes (Deputy Leader of the Council and Cabinet Member for Streetscene and the Regional Transport Strategy); 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); Housing & Prevention Service Manager; Service Manager (Housing Assets) and Housing Programmes Service Manager

Strategic Finance Manager and Principal Accountant (For minute number 71)

**IN ATTENDANCE:** Community & Education Overview & Scrutiny Facilitator

**68. DECLARATIONS OF INTEREST (INCLUDING WHIPPING DECLARATIONS)**

No declarations were made.

**69. MINUTES**

The minutes of the meeting held on 10<sup>th</sup> January 2024 were submitted for approval.

The minutes of the previous meeting were approved as a correct record, as moved and seconded by Councillor Geoff Collett and Councillor Kevin Rush.

**RESOLVED:**

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

**70. FORWARD WORK PROGRAMME & ACTION TRACKING**

The Facilitator presented the current Forward Work Programme for consideration and advised on the following amendment which had been made since the last meeting:-

- Audit Wales report: Homelessness services – Flintshire County Council report added to the Forward Work Programme for 6<sup>th</sup> March meeting.

In relation to the action tracking document, shown at Appendix 2 of the report, the Facilitator reported that a letter outlining the Committee's concerns around funding pressures for homelessness had been approved by the Chair and sent to Welsh Government (WG) and a copy of the reply would be circulated when received. The financial information requested around Out of County Placements had also been received and circulated to Members of the Committee.

In relation to outstanding actions, the Facilitator advised that a letter to WG around the promotion of Free School Meals had been drafted and would be shared with the Chair following the meeting. Also, a copy of the Pet Policy had been received and would be circulated to Members of the Committee following the meeting.

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

**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.

**71. COUNCIL FUND BUDGET 2024/25**

The Strategic Finance Manager presented a report to provide details of additional proposals for the Housing and Communities portfolio.

Following receipt of the disappointing Local Government Provisional Settlement, all portfolios had been tasked with reviewing their cost base to identify potential ways of reducing budgets or removing cost pressure to contribute more to meeting the remaining gap. Comments from Overview & Scrutiny committees on their respective areas would be collated for the final budget-setting reports to Cabinet and County Council on 20 February.

The Chief Officer (Housing & Communities) presented the proposed budget reductions for the Housing and Communities Portfolio, as outlined within the report and the committee was invited to review and comment on the Portfolio's options to reduce budgets.

Councillor Geoff Collett asked it was sensible to take money from reserves when Officers and Members know that next year's budget would be substantially worse and asked whether the proposals were not making things worse for the future. The Strategic Finance Manager said that options to address the issue of homelessness had

been approved and it was being suggested that an amount of reserves be ringfenced to give time for some of those options to come to fruition and address the issue. This would be more of a concern if no solutions were in place.

The Chair asked how confident Officers were that the solutions identified to address homelessness would work. The Chief Officer (Housing and Communities) said that some of the options previously considered by the Committee could be costed, for example, the refurbishment of properties for house share and she was confident that options would have an impact, but demand continued to increase. The Housing & Prevention Service Manager advised that projections had been developed but that a lot of homeless presentations were people who were homeless on the day. All that could be done as a crisis management service was to respond to what happens day to day.

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

**RESOLVED:**

That the Housing and Communities portfolio's options to reduce budgets be noted.

**72. COMMON HOUSING REGISTER (SINGLE ACCESS ROUTE TO HOUSING) SARTH**

The Chief Officer (Housing and Communities) introduced a report to outline the current levels of housing need across the County and the disparity with the availability of social housing which was not increasing at the same rate as the levels of housing needs that are prevalent within our communities.

The Housing & Prevention Service Manager reported that the Single Access Route to Housing (SARTH) was a partnership between all the major providers of social housing in North Wales, covering the local authority areas of Conwy, Denbighshire and Flintshire. The service to applicants included the housing triage assessment, housing solutions triage, for those who present as homeless or at risk of homelessness, and a wide range of housing options advice. The service also managed all the applicants accepted onto the Common Housing Register once a clearly evidenced housing need had been identified. Only those applicants with a housing need were accepted onto the Housing Register, but all applicants benefited from housing options advice.

The Housing & Prevention Service Manager outlined future Policy direction for Social Housing allocations, as detailed within the report, and advised that Consultation on a White Paper on Ending Homelessness in Wales had recently closed. When specifically looking at allocations and social housing application the White Paper had considered a piece of research '*Allocations: Understanding more, in the context of homelessness in Wales*' which sought to understand the performance of social housing allocations in relation to the prevention and relief of homelessness.

The Housing & Prevention Service Manager referred to Housing Needs, as detailed in the report, and reported that the social housing register was increasing and as such waiting times for properties were becoming longer. There were 1,816 households on the Common Housing Register at the end of Q1 in the 2020/2021 period. And as evidenced in the chart within the report, below demand had grown in

the following years and the current number of eligible households on the Common Housing Register at the end of Q3 2023/2024 was 1,983 as at December 2023. The breakdown of data was found at Appendix 1 of the report.

An annual satisfaction survey was now completed for the Common Housing Register Service and attached at Appendix 2 of the report were the headline findings of the survey. All applicants were invited to engage in the survey and a total of 210 responses were received. Headline satisfaction data confirmed that when first approaching the Housing Register & Advice Team 51% of applicants felt the service offered was excellent (17%) or good (34%).

In response to a question from Councillor Rosetta Dolphin on what housing stock there was across the Council, including Housing Association partners, the Housing and Prevention Senior Manager agreed to circulate this information following the meeting.

Councillor Dale Selvester asked, in regard to cleansing the register, how often this was carried out throughout the year. He referred to the specialist housing needs, as detailed in the report, and asked if there was a specialist Occupational Therapist (OT) who worked with the Housing Portfolio to help find appropriate accommodation and also whether realistic feedback was provided to applicants wanting larger properties, given the lack of 5-bed properties across the County. He asked if people living in adapted properties, who no longer required the adaptations were contacted to see if they wanted to move, to help with the specialist housing need register and also whether the duplicate applications found was a training need when putting people on the register.

The Housing and Prevention Senior Manager responded that the register was not reviewed annually as a review as carried out throughout the year, with Band 1 applicants being reviewed as frequently as possible. There was a specialist OT who worked with the housing register team and any housing partners to consider major adaptations to avoid people needing to be added to the specialist housing need register and also to match people to the appropriate vacant properties. With regards to larger properties, the team try to manage expectations as best as they could and there was a mapping tool available to applicants on the website to show families where the limited number of social homes for larger families were across the County. He advised that the team do prioritise applicants wishing to downsize if the property was beneficial to the Council and do also carry out targeted work. He also advised that the duplications of applicants on the register was a training issue that was being addressed.

Councillor Selvester referred to the applications by property type in the report, which stated that 30 people were waiting for a 5-bed property but questioned why this figure was shown as 17 at section 1.08 of the report. The Housing and Prevention Senior Manager agreed to clarify this with the Committee following the meeting.

Cllr Dave Evans asked in what scenario would the Council allow someone onto the register in Band 4 if they were intentionally homeless or had no local connection. Following a response from the Housing and Prevention Senior Manager, the Chair suggested that a case study for each of the Bandings 1-4 to better explain the criteria for each banding be circulated to the Committee following the meeting.

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

**RESOLVED:**

- (a) That the current levels of housing need across the County and the growing pressures regarding social housing which was not aligned with the supply of available homes locally be noted; and
- (b) That the applicant feedback following the annual Customer Satisfaction Survey results for the Common Housing Register.

**73. VOID 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 33 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 increased slightly to 237
- The performance of the current contractors
- Top reasons for terminations

Councillor David Evans commented on the reasons for terminations listed within the briefing note and suggested that all of the reasons for termination be listed in order to match the number shown within the table. He said that he was reassured by the comments around the additional contractor but did not feel positive around the total number of void properties and said that he wanted to see this figure reduce drastically over the coming months.

Councillor Rosetta Dolphin asked how quickly were void properties which required no improvement works returned for allocation to a new tenant. The Service Manager responded that those properties would be classed as properties requiring minor works and would be allocated to the Council's internal team. The target for minor improvements was 20 working days and this target was being met. He added that 70% of properties required major works and that was the biggest cause of delays due to legacy issues.

Councillor Kevin Rush supported the comments made by Councillor Evans and raised concern that if the number of void properties returned followed the average over the last 8 months, it would take a number of years to bring down the number of void properties to a manageable level.

In response to a question from Councillor Dennis Hutchinson, the Service Manager advised that the Council work with a company to recycle furniture and in line with the Council's Policy, void properties should be returned in a clean and tidy condition and that anything left at the property could be a chargeable cost to the

Council. He said he would pick up Councillor Hutchinson's specific concern following the meeting.

The recommendation to note the update was moved by Councillor Geoff Collett and seconded by Councillor David Evans.

**RESOLVED:**

That the update be noted.

**LOCAL GOVERNMENT (ACCESS TO INFORMATION) ACT 1985 – TO CONSIDER THE EXCLUSION OF THE PRESS AND PUBLIC**

**RESOLVED:**

That the press and public be excluded for the remainder of the meeting for the following item by virtue of exempt information under paragraph(s) 14 of Part 4 of Schedule 12A of the Local Government Act 1972 (as amended).

**74. NORTH EAST WALES (NEW) HOMES BUSINESS PLAN**

The Housing Programmes Service Manager introduced the North East Wales (NEW) Homes Business Plan which set out key elements of the company's proposed development strategy. The Business Plan was approved by NEW Homes Board as a strategic planning document at its meeting on the 11<sup>th</sup> January 2024.

The Housing Programmes Service Manager responded to questions from Members around the Canton Depot site and Welsh Government (WG) funding and grants.

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

**RESOLVED:**

That the Committee approve the NEW Homes Business Plan 2024-2053.

**75. 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 11.17am)

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**Chair**