

COMMUNITY & ENTERPRISE OVERVIEW & SCRUTINY COMMITTEE
18 FEBRUARY 2019

Minutes of the meeting of the Community & Enterprise Overview & Scrutiny Committee of Flintshire County Council held in the Delyn Committee Room, County Hall, Mold on Wednesday 18 February, 2019

PRESENT: Councillor Ian Dunbar (Chairman)

Councillors: Ron Davies, Rosetta Dolphin, George Hardcastle, Ray Hughes, Dennis Hutchinson, Mike Reece, Paul Shotton and David Wisinger

SUBSTITUTION: Councillor David Hughes (for Ted Palmer)

APOLOGY: Councillor Jean Davies

ALSO PRESENT: Councillors: Helen Brown, Patrick Heesom and Christine Jones attended as observers

CONTRIBUTORS: Councillor Bernie Attridge, Deputy Leader and Cabinet Member for Housing; Chief Officer (Housing & Assets); Team Leader – Income; Revenues Manager and Housing Strategy Manager

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

55. DECLARATIONS OF INTEREST

None were received.

56. MINUTES

The minutes of the meeting held on 23 January 2019 were submitted.

Minute number 51: Housing Revenue Account (HRA) Budget 2019/20 – Councillor Shotton asked if a copy of the area based programme for the Welsh Housing Quality Standard (WHQS) was available for Members and also if arrangements had been made for a drop-in session for Members. The Facilitator explained that she had spoken to the Capital Works Team Manager who was in the process of compiling the information requested by Members at the last meeting.

RESOLVED:

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

57. HOUSING STRATEGY & ACTION PLAN

The Chief Officer (Housing & Assets) introduced a report which outlined the Housing Strategy and draft Action Plan for 2019-2024. The Housing Strategy and draft Action Plan set out the vision for how the Council, with its partners, would deliver

affordable housing needs, provide relevant support to residents and ensured the creation of sustainable homes.

The Chief Officer outlined the number of achievements of the previous Housing Strategy, as detailed within the report and explained that the current Strategy would build on the previous achievements within the context of the current challenges faced, such as, welfare reform, the increase in 'hidden' homelessness and limited resources. The report summarised the 3 priorities identified with key areas for action within each priority.

A workshop was due to be held in February 2019 with key stakeholders, the Council's Housing Association Partners and other groups, to review the action plan, so as to: ensure the actions identified under each of the priorities were comprehensive, deliverable and affordable; identify any gaps in terms of the actions listed and identify outcomes/outputs and lead organisations. The final version of the Housing Strategy and Action Plan would be available in Spring 2019.

Councillor Shotton commended the officers for the report. He commented on the social enterprise in Anglesey which were providing modular buildings and asked whether consideration would be given to building similar homes in order to speed up the house build programme and meet the growing demand. The Chief Officer responded that consideration was being given to a number of different house building concepts currently on the market.

Councillor Wisinger commented on the need to improve access to the private rented sector, and asked how local landlords were being encouraged to rent out their properties. Councillor Attridge recognised the difficulties in engaging with local landlords and outlined his concerns that a greater number of landlords were not accepting applications from people in receipt of Universal Credit. The Housing Strategy Manager advised that a meeting with local landlord was being planned to better understand their concerns and improve the Council's working relationship with them.

John Ennis, Chair of the Tenant's Federation, informed the Committee that he had attended a conference in Cardiff which had discussed alternative building methods and asked if the Council had received any feedback from this conference. The Chief Officer said that Welsh Government were currently considering alternative building options and that the Council were awaiting information on grant funding being made available for this.

Following a suggestion from Councillor Hughes, the Chief Officer agreed to provide the Committee with a report on the concept and options available in using modular homes to increase the supply of Council properties, to a future meeting.

In response to concerns raised by Councillor Hutchinson regarding timber framed housing and increased fire risk, the Chief Officer advised that he did not concur with the views, noting that standards of fire safety were equal to those in traditionally constructed homes and constructed in compliance of current Building Regulations.

RESOLVED:

- (a) That the Committee support the Housing Strategy and draft Action Plan for 2019/2024; and

- (b) That a report on the concept and options available in using modular homes to increase the supply of Council properties be submitted to a future meeting of the Committee.

58. HOUSING RENT INCOME

The Revenues Manager introduced a report which provided a further operational update on the latest position for rent income collection following the recent report to the Committee in November 2018. Despite the ongoing challenges of increasing numbers of tenants migrating away from Housing Benefit to the Universal Credit (UC) system, the latest collection position showed that by implementing measures through increased resources, early intervention and adopting a 'rent first' approach, collection of rent was starting to stabilise with total rent arrears reducing from £2.22m to £2.14m.

To mitigate the financial challenges for the Council, the work of the Housing Intervention Teams continued and additional resources were being deployed to ensure tenants who fell into arrears received help and support at an early stage through a 'fast tracked' approach. A copy of the latest rent arrears position for those tenants in receipt of UC and Housing Benefit was circulated to the Committee.

The Revenues Manager explained that to ensure Council resources were targeted to those tenants who need most help to ensure rent was paid on time, a further initiative was being implemented to improve the supporting software systems that guide the work of Rent Enforcement Officers. Feasibility work had been undertaken with a software supplier whose 'Rent Sense' solution was rapidly becoming the housing industry standard for analysing payment variations, risk and escalating which tenants to contact and when. The software used algorithms to analyse payment patterns, highlight risk and provided predictive intelligence to support a more focused and targeted approach to rent arrears recovery work.

The development of this software would modernise the work in the Rent service and help the service to more intelligently focus on those tenants who were more at risk of falling into arrears, free up internal resource capacity which meant that housing interventions could be put in place quickly and before arrears escalated.

Councillor Hardcastle thanked the Revenues Manager for the report and update. He said that he had recently requested information on current Council Tax arrears which had been provided by the Revenues Manager and which showed current arrears of £3.3m and asked if an increase in Council Tax would have a knock on affect to rent arrears. The Revenues Manager explained that the £3.3m arrears would continually reduce as residents in Flintshire had a number of different days within the month that they could opt to pay their Council Tax. He commented that the Council remained the best performing Council in collecting Council Tax with a collection rate of over 99%, which was above the welsh average of 98%.

Councillor Hardcastle also referred to two emergency cases which he had dealt with within his ward over the weekend and said that the helpline for the out of hour's service was based in London. Whilst the service he received had been very good, he asked if the service could be brought back in house in order to reduce costs for the

Council. Councillor Attridge explained that the organisation had been appointed to take calls following a procurement exercise. He said that he often used the service which he felt was an improvement on the previous service and provided better value for money.

In response to a question from Councillor Hutchinson, the Revenues Manager explained the intervention options available to the Council and that the work undertaken to assist vulnerable residents with complex needs could be intensive. Councillor Hutchinson thanked the officers for the transparent report.

Councillor Shotton commended officers for the assistance and advice given to vulnerable tenants and asked that his thanks be passed to all officers involved. He commented on the recent concessions made by the Secretary of State for Work and Pensions around UC which he felt showed there were problems with the current system.

Councillor Dolphin raised concerns around the length of time tenants had to wait to move to managed payments and the arrears which build up during this time. The Revenues Manager agreed with the concerns and said that he would like to see this time reduced.

In response to a question from Councillor Wisinger, Councillor Attridge explained that the collection of rent was done in-house by the Rent Enforcement Officers and there had been a great improvement in the service which had been previously provided by an external company.

RESOLVED:

- (a) That the latest financial position for rent arrears in 2018-19, which shows collection of rent was starting to stabilise, be noted; and
- (b) That the measures being taken to improve rent collection during 2019-20, through the development of specialised software to support a targeted approach to rent recovery, be endorsed.

59. FORWARD WORK PROGRAMME

The Facilitator presented the current Forward Work Programme for consideration and the following changes were agreed:

- The specialist housing report be moved back from March to the meeting on 1st May.
- That a report on the concept and options available in using modular homes to increase the supply of Council properties be submitted to a future meeting of the Committee

RESOLVED:

- (a) That the Forward Work Programme be noted; and

- (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.

60. MEMBERS OF THE PUBLIC AND PRESS IN ATTENDANCE

There was one member of the press and one member of the public in attendance.

(The meeting started at 10.00 am and ended at 11.17 am)

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Chairman