

COMMUNITY HOUSING & ASSETS OVERVIEW & SCRUTINY COMMITTEE
16 JUNE 2021

Minutes of the meeting of the Community, Housing & Assets Overview & Scrutiny Committee of Flintshire County Council held as a remote attendance meeting on Wednesday, 16 June 2021

PRESENT: Councillor Ian Dunbar (Chairman)

Councillors: Geoff Collett, Ron Davies, Adele Davies-Cooke, Mared Eastwood, Veronica Gay, Dennis Hutchinson Kevin Rush, Brian Lloyd and Ray Hughes

APOLOGY:

SUBSTITUTE: Councillor David Wisinger (for David Cox)

ALSO PRESENT: Councillor Patrick Heesom attended as an observer

CONTRIBUTORS: Councillor Dave Hughes, Cabinet Member for Housing; Councillor Billy Mullin, Deputy Leader of the Council (Governance) & Cabinet Member for Corporate Management & Assets; Chief Officer (Housing & Assets), Housing & Assets Senior Manager, Benefits Manager, Housing Manager and Revenues Manager. Principal Accountant and Strategic Performance Advisor.

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

1. APPOINTMENT OF CHAIR

The Facilitator advised that it had been confirmed at the Annual Meeting of the County Council that the Chair of the Committee should come from the Labour Group. As Councillor Ian Dunbar had been appointed to this role by the Group, the Committee was asked to endorse the decision.

RESOLVED:

That the appointment of Councillor Ian Dunbar as Chair of the Committee be noted.

2. APPOINTMENT OF VICE-CHAIR

Councillor Ron Davies nominated Councillor Ray Hughes to be appointed as Vice Chair of the Committee. This was seconded by Councillor David Wisinger.

On being put to the vote Councillor Ray Hughes was appointed Vice-Chair of the Committee.

RESOLVED:

That Councillor Ray Hughes be appointed Vice-Chair of the Committee.

3. DECLARATION OF INTEREST (INCLUDING WHIPPING DECLARATIONS)

None.

4. MINUTES

The minutes of the meeting held on 19 May 2021, were moved as a correct record by Councillor Ron Davies and seconded by Councillor Kevin Rush.

RESOLVED:

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

5. FORWARD WORK PROGRAMME AND ACTION TRACKING

The Facilitator informed the Committee that the future meeting dates had been added to the forward work programme, following approval at the annual County Council meeting. It was suggested that the Facilitator liaise with the Chairman and Chief Officer (Housing & Assets) to populate the forward work programme, which would be presented to the Committee at its next meeting.

There had been one action arising from the previous meeting. The Facilitator had requested information from the relevant officers and would circulate this information once received.

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.

6. 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 spoke of the increased case load to Council Tax reduction and the increased spike from last year which had been recovered from Welsh Government's finance fund, which illustrated the bigger picture of the pandemic and the support packages available.

The Benefits Manager expressed her concern around the end of the Furlough scheme in September, indicating that this would have a negative impact on vulnerable residents. She added that the Pandemic support and isolation payments would remain in place for the £500 payments, but did comment that the number of people that were claiming had diminished. She also added that the next Carers bonus was still in place and the next payment was due to go out again in July.

The Benefits Manager commented that there had been an increase in residents actively seeking support which was positive.

The Chairman congratulated the team on the work they were undertaking. In response to a question around support, the Benefits Manager advised that referrals for support to the Welfare Reform Support Team had significantly increased.

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

RESOLVED:

That the Committee support the ongoing work to manage the impacts that Welfare Reforms have and will continue to have upon Flintshire's most vulnerable households.

7. HOUSING RENT INCOME – YEAR END OUTTURN AND LATEST POSITION FOR 2021/22

The Chief Officer (Housing & Assets) introduced the operational update on 2020/21 year end rent income collection for housing, including the 2021/22 latest collection position.

The Revenues Manager advised that the outturn for 2020/21 resulted in rent arrears of £1.854m compared to £1.815m in the previous year – an increase in arrears of £39k. He said that the data generally made for positive reading when contrasted against earlier predictions for rent arrears for the service throughout the last twelve months, particularly at a time when the pandemic had impacted on the ability of some tenants to pay on time.

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

- Rent Collection: 2020/21 final outturn;
- Rent Collections and Trends over 6 years;
- Arrears Cases (£250+) at March 2021; and
- Rent Collection: 21/22 Latest Position (to week 10)

In response to a question from the Chairman around the deployment of the software, the Revenues Manager added that the software had been successful in targeting those tenants who required support. Unfortunately, tenants who arrears in excess of £5,000 had tended to not engage with the Council, which had resulted in their rent arrears continuing to increase.

Members of the Committee thanked the Revenues Manager for the report. In response to questions around support for residents, their need to access a number of support services and where residents placed on the Housing Register if they were in arrears, the Chief Officer explained that tenants would be placed in Band 4 on the Housing Register until the arrears had been cleared. He also commented on the end of the Furlough scheme as outlined when considering the Welfare Reform update earlier on in the meeting and said that there was concern on the impact this would have on tenants and the support team. He re-confirmed that it was not Flintshire's intention to evict tenants as it was not in the Council interest, but highlighted that there were extreme cases where tenants would not engage and in those cases after much deliberation it was only right that action should and would be taken.

The recommendation outlined within the report was moved by Councillor David Wisinger and seconded by Councillor Dennis Hutchinson.

RESOLVED:

That the £1.854m year-end position for rent arrears in 2020/21, as set out within the report, be noted.

8. WELSH HOUSING QUALITY STANDARD (WHQS) UPDATE

The Housing & Assets Senior Manager introduced a report which provided an update on the delivery of the Welsh Housing Quality Standard (WHQS) the Council was delivering through its Capital Investment Programme. The report focussed on the external work elements of the programme along with achievements to date and maintaining the standard moving forward.

The Fencing and Garden improvement programme that commenced in 2015 had been developed into a more extensive programme, following the majority of internal and envelope works being completed to reach WHQS compliance. The programme would focus mainly on the property boundaries ensuring they were safe, secure and suitable and in line with the Council's agreed specification/requirements. Also included within the programme would be paths, gardens and storage allocation. Details of the work streams were outlined within the report.

In response to a question from Councillor Brian Lloyd, the Housing & Assets Senior Manager agreed to discuss with the senior management team the possibility of walkabout sessions with Councillors in their Ward in order for Members to show issues which in their opinion, needed to be addressed.

In response to concerns raised by Councillor Ray Hughes around fencing replaced within his ward, the Housing & Assets Senior Manager agreed to speak to Councillor Hughes following the meeting and arrange a site visit in his ward.

The recommendation outlined within the report was moved by Councillor Ray Hughes and seconded by Councillor Kevin Rush.

RESOLVED:

That the Committee support the Capital Investment Programme in its final year of major investment, as the Council entered into the maintenance phase of the Welsh Housing Quality Standards.

9. COMMUNAL HEATING CHARGES 2021/22

The Chief Officer (Housing & Assets) introduced the proposed heating charges at Council properties with communal heating schemes which would take effect from 2nd August, 2021.

The proposed recharges for 2021/22, as set out in the report, were pending Cabinet approval. In the majority of cases, the recharge to tenants had reduced for 2021/22, which as in other years, would allow Flintshire to recover the projected costs of the heating charges whilst still passing on the benefit of reduced energy costs to tenants.

The recommendation outlined within the report was moved by Councillor Ron Davies and seconded by Councillor Ray Hughes.

RESOLVED:

That the Committee support the changes to the current heating charges at Council properties with communal heating schemes, as outlined within the report.

10. END OF YEAR PERFORMANCE MONITORING REPORT

The Chief Officer (Housing & Assets) presented the end of year monitoring report to review year-end 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 67% of performance indicators had met or exceeded their targets.

The Chief Officer praised the work of all officers within the portfolio, which was evident by the number of 'Green' performance measures shown within the appendix to the report. He provided an update on the Strategic Housing and Regeneration Programme (SHARP), explaining that whilst the target had not been achieved for this measure, 149 properties had been delivered, with over half of these being family homes. He also provided an update on the Welsh Housing Quality Standard (WHQS) target date, which had been now been extended by one additional year due to the pandemic.

The recommendation outlined within the report was moved by Councillor Geoff Collet and seconded by Councillor Mared Eastwood.

RESOLVED:

That the End of Year Performance Monitoring Report be noted.

11. 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 11.32 a.m.)

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Chairman