

## **COMMUNITIES SCRUTINY COMMITTEE**

Minutes of a meeting of the Communities Scrutiny Committee held in the Council Chamber, County Hall, Ruthin and by video conference on Thursday, 9 May 2024 at 10.00 am.

### **PRESENT**

Councillors Michelle Blakeley-Walker, Karen Edwards (Vice-Chair), James Elson, Jon Harland, Carol Holliday, Alan James, Brian Jones, Delyth Jones, Merfyn Parry, Cheryl Williams and Huw Williams (Chair)

The Lead Member for Housing and Communities (Councillor Rhys Thomas) for agenda item 5

**Observer** – Councillor Andrea Tomlin

### **ALSO PRESENT**

Director: Economy and Environment (TW), Head of Housing and Communities Service (LG), Lead Officer Housing Property (MC), Scrutiny Co-ordinator (KE) Business Co-ordinator - Leader's Office/Minutes (RP-J) and Senior Committee Administrator/Host (KJ).

#### **1 APOLOGIES**

There were no apologies.

#### **2 DECLARATION OF INTERESTS**

Councillor Merfyn Parry declared a personal interest in agenda item 5 – Housing Maintenance Voids Process because his son worked for the Housing Department in Denbighshire County Council.

Councillor Cheryl Williams declared a personal interest in agenda item 5 – Housing Maintenance Voids Process because she was a tenant of Denbighshire County Council social housing.

#### **3 URGENT MATTERS AS AGREED BY THE CHAIR**

There were no urgent matters.

#### **4 MINUTES**

The minutes of the Communities Scrutiny Committee meeting held on 14 March 2024 were submitted.

Matters arising – Councillor Brian Jones asked if the Rhyl Regeneration Project would be included on the Forward Work Programme as raised at the previous

meeting. The question would be addressed under the Forward Work Programme item.

Councillor Jon Harland raised a typographical error on page 6 of the Minutes under the Public Conveniences Proposal item.

**RESOLVED** that, subject to the above, the minutes of the Communities Scrutiny Committee meeting held on 14 March 2024 be approved as a true and correct record of the proceedings.

## **5 HOUSING MAINTENANCE VOIDS PROCESS**

The Lead Member for Housing and Communities, along with Mark Cassidy Lead Officer Housing Property and Liz Grieve Head of Housing and Communities Service were in attendance to present the report on Housing Maintenance Voids Process.

Lead Member Councillor Rhys Thomas introduced the report explaining there were two recommendations, one that the Committee notes the report contents and that the Committee challenge and share its views on this report and the voids process. Councillor Rhys Thomas explained that when a tenant left a property it was classed as void, sometimes there could be major works required to the property for the council to carry out before it could be re-let.

The Lead Member, Councillor Rhys Thomas explained it was vital when dealing with the management process for void properties that it was an efficient and effective process in order to reduce turnaround times to a minimum, so that potential tenants could access properties quickly. The aims were to maximise rental income by reducing rental loss (by minimising void periods through good management) and to ensure void works were of a high quality, whilst driving cost down wherever possible.

Liz Grieve Head of Housing and Communities Service advised that the Void Framework was presented to Cabinet earlier in the year, explaining how the department was contracting out work on void properties and detailed this report today is to go over the process and contentions on voids, summarising:

- Looking for alternative way of working with tenant before they leave in order to minimise the work needed upon vacation.
- Undertaking maintenance work as soon as property was empty.
- Some properties, once empty, were in high demand compared to other properties, other properties needed to be parked whilst work was completed on in-demand voids.
- Some properties required more funding to bring them up to standard. If the Services could upgrade three properties for the same budget as a costlier one it would 'park' the more expensive property.

Councillors had concerns that there was no secondary heating source and enquired that in extreme emergencies, during a bad winter, what provisions were in place? Mark Cassidy Lead Officer Housing Property advised:

- That under building regulations there was no mandate to provide a secondary heating source.
- The fabric of the building was checked against air source heating.
- Community heating schemes were provided for in case of emergencies, they differed according to property type, tenant and area. The Service could provide a report to present to a future scrutiny committee.
- Problems relating to extreme weather and loss of power would apply to the county as a whole – not just the Authority's tenants.

Councillors had concerns regarding long term empty properties and how much it was costing the council, including rates payable on empty properties and the time taken to list properties identified for disposal onto the market. Officers advised:

- Going forward the team would inform the Ward Member of properties that had been parked
- Council tax on empty properties was paid for out of the Housing Revenue Account.
- An information report would be provided on how much council tax was being paid on empty properties and to detail how many houses had been empty for over a year.
- Frustrations on how long properties took to be placed on the market were shared by officers - they explained it was a capacity issue. It was agreed that a report specifically on that issue would be presented to Communities Scrutiny Committee at a later date.

Councillors had concerns regarding the Welsh Housing Quality Standard 2023, and whether some of the requirements within those standards were delaying houses being occupied and queried the processes for engaging contractors, Mark Cassidy summarised:

- Contractors' Framework was due for tender end of May 2024. It went out to tender every three to four years.
- Contractors had strict Key Performance Indicators, if ever over schedule, the Council claimed back the loss of rental income.
- Contractor quotes were comparable with the National Standard.
- More work was required and had started on in-house staff carrying out some of the smaller tasks to save on additional costs.
- Smart Meters was a requirement within the Welsh Housing Quality Standards, however on-going talks with Welsh Government on those requirements. The Authority could not force a tenant to have a smart meter or chose which supplier to go with.
- Bathrooms and Kitchens were paid for out of the Capital Account, minor works from the Revenue Account.
- Flooring and Carpets had to be provided, consideration was being given to provide a voucher for it instead, the Authority were providing vouchers for decorating materials instead of undertaking the work themselves.
- If existing carpets were in good condition, they would be professionally cleaned rather than replaced - Standards stated the requirement for new

flooring for each tenant, there would be ongoing discussions with Welsh Government regarding that.

- Not all the standards had to be met before a tenant moved in – for example external works such as provision of bike sheds could be completed after the tenant moved in.

The Committee suggested that a deposit could be built into the rent of the first few occupied months or year to act as an incentive to leaving properties in a decent condition, similar to the private sector. The deposit returnable if the property was deemed suitable condition upon vacating. Officers agreed to look into that option.

**RESOLVED** that the Committee:

- I. notes the report contents,
- II. confirms that it has read, understood and taken account of the Well-being Impact Assessment (Appendix 1J) as part of its consideration,
- III. requests an information report on how many properties have been empty for over a year and their associated council tax costs incurred and
- IV. requests a report on the disposal process for ex council houses be presented to a future Communities Scrutiny Committee.

## 6 SCRUTINY WORK PROGRAMME

The Scrutiny Co-ordinator guided members through the Communities Scrutiny Committee Forward Work Programme.

Referring to Councillor Brian Jones' query regarding the Rhyl Regeneration Programme Board and Governance item earlier she acknowledged it should have been on the Committee's October agenda and would update it accordingly.

The Public Conveniences Proposal discussed at the last meeting had been added to the Committee's September agenda prior to it going to Cabinet for decision.

The Committee requested an information report prior to the September meeting to cover what consultations had been carried out on the proposals and the timeline for responses together with the feedback received. The Corporate Director: Economy and Environment (TW) agreed to provide the information report.

Noting the Tree Maintenance and Management item on September's meeting agenda, the Committee asked if information could be included on the management of trees deemed to be dangerous but not on Denbighshire's property.

**RESOLVED** that subject to the inclusion onto future Communities Scrutiny Committee of:

- I. The Rhyl Regeneration Programme Board and Governance,
- II. Keeping Tenants Safe and Warm and
- III. The process of disposal of ex council homes,

that the Communities Scrutiny Committee forward work programme be agreed.

## 7 FEEDBACK FROM COMMITTEE REPRESENTATIVES

There was no feedback received.

Meeting concluded 11:10am.