



CAERPHILLY HOMES TASK GROUP (WELSH HOUSING QUALITY STANDARD)

**MINUTES OF THE MEETING HELD AT PENALLTA HOUSE, YSTRAD MYNACH
(SIRHOWY ROOM)
ON THURSDAY 13TH MARCH 2014 AT 5:00PM**

PRESENT:

Ms. A. Lewis - Chairman
Mrs D. Price - Vice Chairman

TASK GROUP MEMBERS:

Ms. L. Ackerman, C. Davies, R.T. Davies, G. Henderson, K. James, G. Jones, Mrs S. Jones, Ms. A. Lewis, Mrs A. McConnell, C.P. Mann, J. Moore and K.V. Reynolds.

Officers: P. Davy (Head of Programmes), S. Couzens (Chief Housing Officer), G. North (Public Sector Housing Manager), M. Betts (Tenant and Community Involvement Manager), E. Bayliss (Tenant Participation Officer), G. Taylor (Tenant Participation Officer), A. Veronese (E-Government Team Leader), S. Isaacs (Rents Manager), K. Williams (Private Sector Housing Manager) and K. Watkins (Communications and Tenant Engagement Officer) and E. Sullivan (Democratic Services Officer).

TOGETHER WITH:

G. Jones (Central Consultancy and Training)

1. APOLOGIES

There were no apologies for absence received.

2. DECLARATIONS OF INTEREST

Ms. A. Lewis, Mr C. Davies, Ms. G. Henderson, Mrs S. Jones, Mrs A. McConnell and Mr J. Moore as Council Tenants declared a personal but not prejudicial interest in all agenda items.

3. MINUTES - 9TH JANUARY 2014 AND 23RD JANUARY 2014

RESOLVED that the minutes of the meeting held on the 9th January 2014 (minute nos. 1-3 on page nos. 1-5) be approved as a correct record and signed by the Chairman.

RESOLVED that the minutes of the meeting held on the 23rd January 2014 (minute nos.1-10 on page nos. 1-5) be approved as a correct record and signed by the Chairman.

4. FORMER CASH OFFICE - 29A/29 HIGH STREET, NEWBRIDGE.

The report sought the endorsement of the Caerphilly Homes Task Group on the possible conversion into flats of the former cash office in High Street, Newbridge.

Members were advised that the building is currently vacant and would be suitable for conversion into flats. It was noted that the building is in joint ownership between Housing and Corporate Property Services and an agreement had been reached to allow Housing to acquire the whole building.

Detailed estimates of the costs would be prepared going forward, however an initial guide price for the purchase and refurbishment would be in the region of £75,000.

Members were advised that an issue had arisen during the consultation process for the report which had unfortunately omitted Local Ward Members. This consultation had now taken place and the comments received had highlighted a possible car parking issue. Officers confirmed that these comments had been taken into consideration and provision would be made for car parking at the rear of the development as part of refurbishment works.

The Chair thanked the Officer for his report and full discussion ensued.

Members welcomed the report and the proposed conversion of the property. The parking issues were noted and clarification was sought as to any additional costs associated with the provision of on site car parking. The Officer confirmed that as this would be provided by means of a hard-standing to the rear of the building it would incur only a minimal additional cost which could be met from the existing budget.

It was moved and seconded that the recommendation contained in the Officer report be approved and the Cabinet Sub Committee (WHQS) be informed of the endorsement of the Caerphilly Homes Task Group and by a show of hands this was unanimously agreed.

RESOLVED that the Cabinet Sub Committee (WHQS) be informed of the endorsement of the Caerphilly Homes Task Group for the conversion of 29A and 29 High Street, Newbridge into flats.

5. HOUSING IMPROVEMENT PARTNERSHIP

Ms Gaynor Jones of Central Consultancy and Training gave a presentation on the implementation of the Local Tenant Participation Strategy and the introduction of the Housing Improvement Partnership.

The background and purpose of tenant participation was outlined and the four key strategic objectives agreed in May 2013 were detailed for Members information. The structure and mechanisms for participation were illustrated and were noted to contain both formal work groups and informal interest groups. The use of social media including Facebook and Twitter was highlighted as a positive step forward.

The role of the Housing Services Improvement Partnership (HIP) and how it would fit into the existing participation structure was detailed. The HIP would focus on improving services by reflecting tenant priorities and the tenant experience when dealing with the housing management service. It would identify the purpose of the service, the value tenants expect to see at each stage and their actual experience at each stage. This evidence base would aid

housing services to reconfigure their provision with tenants at its centre. The HIP would report and produce recommendations based on listening to tenants' experiences. From this a handbook would be developed, which would be used by staff to improve services. The HIP would use real service contacts and responses would be mapped in order to judge the success of the contact from a tenant perspective. Members were advised that further guidance and training would be provided in order to support and manage the programme and facilitate the production of the handbook.

In conclusion Ms Jones confirmed that the HIP would be used to compliment existing tenant participation decision making protocols whilst adopting a more independent and informal format.

The Tenant and Community Involvement Manager introduced the report which informed Members of the introduction and operation of the Housing Improvement Partnership (HIP) the Caerphilly approach.

Members were referred to Section 2 of the report and the responsibilities and composition of the HIP were confirmed. It was noted that the HIP would ideally consist of 15 tenants with its own defined terms of reference and code of conduct and would be independent of the other established tenant participation structures. The Officer acknowledged that recruiting 15 tenants to the HIP would be a challenge but hoped that at least 6 tenants could be encouraged to come forward. The informal nature of the group would attract individuals who wanted to engage in participation but were unable to commit to any regular demands on their time.

It was noted that the HIP would be independent of the already established groups in order to ensure the integrity of the group and avoid any conflict of interest. Members would be supported throughout the evaluation process and training provided to assist them in structuring and managing their work. It was noted that the HIP would have no direct interface with tenants as sessions would be provided with recordings of the service contacts. Officers assured the Task Group that there would no duplication of effort as the HIP approach had been designed to support current service improvement activities.

The information and outcomes drawn out of the sessions would be collated into a 'handbook' and used to inform service improvement decision making going forward. The handbooks would then be tested by focus groups in order to validate their findings. The Officer confirmed that the HIP project would be evaluated following its first service review.

Members were advised that consultation with Tenant Information Exchange would be the next step in the process.

The Chair thanked Ms Jones and the Officer for the presentation and report and full discussion ensued.

Tenant Members expressed their concern and disappointment in the report and the proposed introduction of the Housing Improvement Partnership. They viewed the proposal as an unnecessary duplication of effort given the remit of the already established Caerphilly Service Improvement Monitors (CSIMs) which could easily be utilised for just such a programme. Furthermore given the commitment and investment already made to CSIMs in terms of training and support the establishment of the HIP, they felt was also an unnecessary additional expense. Concerns were also expressed at the lack of consultation with tenants on the HIP.

Officers reassured Members that the HIP would not duplicate or take away from the work of the CSIMs but was a complimentary service improvement tool that would offer tenants a more informal way to become involved. It would provide a new pool of people who would view housing services from a fresh and independent perspective. The HIP would be used to ensure that services were tenant focused and would work in conjunction with other groups

that measured how services have performed. CSIMs would for example examine the statutory targets for complaints whereas the HIP would look at the tenant reaction to the complaints service and review how the tenant had been dealt with throughout the process.

Tenant Members disputed the necessity of having two separate groups to undertake what was essentially the same function and asked that consideration be given instead to expanding the remit of the CSIMs and encouraging new membership to that group. The inference that existing tenant representatives could not retain their independence when assessing the service contacts was refuted by the Tenant Members.

Clarification was sought as to how the HIP could be considered an informal group when it required formal terms of reference and a code of conduct. Clarification was also sought as to how the real experience of the tenants during a service contact could be gauged without any interaction with tenants themselves.

Officers acknowledged the formal structure of the HIP itself, however the set up of the sessions would be on a far more informal basis without the requirement for its Members to meet on a regular basis. Hopefully this would allow tenants unable to make a regular time commitment to participate. In terms of assessing the real tenant experience, Officers confirmed that the HIP would listen to first hand evidence of tenants making routine requests and then review the tenant experience.

Reassurances were given that as the HIP was a pilot project it could be adjusted and developed overtime and the information presented to Members was very much a starting off point.

Clarification was sought as to the actual costs involved in establishing the HIP and Officers confirmed this to be between £12,000 and £15,000. Reference was made to Appendix 1 of the report and current capabilities and reassurance were sought that the programme would continue to be fit for purpose during times of change. Officers confirmed that by concentrating on 'how' things are done rather than 'what' things are done the HIP should continue to be fit for purpose.

A Member agreed the need to provide as many different forums as possible to encourage tenant engagement and felt that the HIP provided an ideal opportunity for short term informal participation. However the concerns raised with regard to duplication would need to be addressed as the pilot moved forward.

It was suggested that representation from the Caerphilly Homes Task Group in the project management of the HIP might provide a solution to the concerns raised and allow the success of the initiative to be reviewed. The need to move forward and expand tenant participation was acknowledged and progressing the pilot programme would provide the first step to achieving this.

Officers emphasised the need for the HIP to be independent but a Member agreed that Task Group representation in the project management arrangements to evaluate the success of the programme would be very beneficial.

Clarification was sought as to where the reporting mechanisms for the HIP would lie and whether its recommendations would take preference over the CSIMs. Officers confirmed that the other groups would not be overtaken by the HIP and its recommendations would only be taken forward where appropriate and this would include reporting to the Caerphilly Homes Task Group.

A Member expressed the concern that new tenants could find the initial process intimidating and given that the HIP was a one year pilot, it would not give them enough time to properly take on board the training and become confident in their role. Without this bedding in time the analysis and outcomes generated might not accurately reflect what was happening.

The Officer accepted that taking on a new role could be daunting however specific training and support would be provided throughout the process to ensure that members were not overwhelmed.

A Member agreed that they want to see more tenants come forward and become involved in the different boards and groups but this should be done by expanding the CSIMs. This already established group would the Member felt provide the ideal platform to take this programme forward. The Member also questioned the prudence of spending between £12,000-£15,000 on a pilot that may or may not work.

Officers accepted that whilst the experience of the current tenant representatives was invaluable, this knowledge could also bring with it preconceived ideas of the housing service and a possible conflict of interest. For this reason Officers stood by the proposal that HIP members be independent of the other groups as this would ensure its impartiality and objectivity.

A Member proposed that the pilot move forward but given that the Tenant Members had expressed such deep rooted concerns regarding duplication of effort that this be closely monitored. Furthermore that representation from the Caerphilly Homes Task Group be included in the project management arrangements in order to review the progress being made.

Tenant Members agreed the need to review the pilot and that the Task Group be represented on the Project Management Board however they still felt that the pilot should be moved forward through the CSIMs rather than the HIP.

A Member also proposed that given the strength of the debate and the nature of the concerns raised that a meeting between Ms Jones, the Tenant and Community Involvement Manager and the Tenant Members of the Task Group be organised in order fully explore the issues and the outcome of those discussion be reported back to the next appropriate Task Group meeting. It was suggested that the outcome of the consultation with the Tenant Information Exchange should also be included within this report.

Officers reminded the Task Group that the Tenant Participation Strategy had been agreed in principal in May 2013 and the report before Members sought to provide further detail for their consideration and noting.

It was moved and seconded that: -

- (i) the Task Group accept the principal of the HIP and note the report but given the strength of debate and concerns raised that a separate meeting be held with tenant representatives from the CHTG to further address the issues raised.
- (ii) a report on the outcome of those discussions together with the consultation responses received from the Tenant Information Exchange be brought back to the next appropriate meeting of the Caerphilly Homes Task Group.
- (iii) a representative from the Caerphilly Homes Task Group be included in the project management arrangements of the HIP Project.

And by a show of hands this was agreed by the majority of those present.

Having fully considered its content the Caerphilly Homes Task Group noted the report.

6. PILOT SCHEME: ESTATE WALKABOUTS

The report introduced Members to the Estate Walkabouts pilot scheme.

The Tenant and Community Involvement Manager confirmed that this was a new initiative for Caerphilly and would provide an opportunity for local residents to work together and identify specific areas and priorities for improvement on their estates. A list would then be compiled of all the issues identified and an action plan formulated.

Members were advised that any works that required additional financial resources would need to be carefully managed as these could incorporate other service areas and have implications for other service area budgets. This information would be made clear to tenants at the start of the process in order to manage expectations. Potential improvement projects, ideas and suggestions would be 'banked' and taken forward as appropriate and if the relevant budget allowed.

The pilot would initially be co-ordinated by the Tenant and Community Involvement Team and would include local Ward Members and Officers. Invitations to the walkabouts would be targeted to ensure that an over attendance of Officers was avoided.

The Chair thanked the Officer for her report and full discussion ensued.

Members welcomed the pilot scheme as an outstanding idea and noted that this was already operating on an informal basis in some areas.

Clarification was sought as to the financial implications of the pilot and the Officer confirmed that this would primarily be advertising costs, flyers etc. other cost would be dependent upon the issues identified, the nature of the works involved and budgetary capacity.

Reassurances were given that the walkabouts would not detract from the work already being done by the Estate Management Officer but would provide an opportunity for tenants to be actively involved in the environmental issues on their estates.

Reference was made to section 4.4 of the report which noted local Councillors as other interested parties, Members considered local Councillor involvement to be essential to the pilot and sought reassurances that they would always be included in the walkabouts.

Officers confirmed that local Councillors would be advised of routes, times and dates.

Having fully considered its content the Task Group noted the report.

7. UPDATE ON THE TACKLING OF ANTI-SOCIAL BEHAVIOUR WORK STREAM

The report provided an update on the progress of the Tackling Anti-Social Behaviour work stream over the past 12 months.

The anti-social behaviour work stream was noted to follow the 3-strand approach recommended by Welsh Government of prevention, support and enforcement. Proposals and updates on the work currently being undertaken were detailed for Members information.

The introduction of 'Starter Tenancies' was noted to be on hold pending the proposed tenancy reform planned by Welsh Government and would be revisited once the requirements of the new legislation were known. Members were also advised that the Good Neighbour Scheme had been reallocated to the Transforming Lives and Communities work stream.

The progress made in partnership working was detailed in section 4.5 of the report and Members were advised of the different partnerships in place and the meetings facilitated were

listed. The Officer confirmed that work would continue on enhancing and improving existing relationships and where possible forming new ones.

The work done to strengthen the Anti-Social Behaviour Service was outlined and was noted to have been allocated an additional budget of £50,000 per annum to reinforce the current service provided by the Tenancy Enforcement Section. The progress made was detailed and included an additional Tenancy Enforcement Officer with a commitment to help reduce the number of domestic violence incidents. Additional domestic CCTV systems had been purchased under the work stream along with a second MATRON 225 noise monitor.

The Tenancy Enforcement Section had also purchased a variety of items that were combined into target-hardening packs providing reassurance and support for individuals and families experiencing criminal and anti-social behaviour or are victims of domestic abuse.

Cognitive Therapy session had also be introduced for both complainants and perpetrators and feedback from the sessions had been very positive.

Finally Members were advised that a GPS tracking system for lone workers had been introduced and would be used to complement the existing Lone Worker and Employee Protection Register systems already used by the Council.

The financial implications were detailed for Members information in section 6.1 of the Officer's report with an estimated total spend of £46,900 against the budget of £50,000.

The Chair thanked the Officer for his report and full discussion ensued.

Members requested that the Good Neighbour Scheme be highlighted to the Mayors Awards in order to raise awareness of the scheme and heighten the profile of the award recipients.

Clarification was sought in relation to the use of the MATRON noise monitoring systems and what waiting lists were in operation. Officers confirmed that MATRON monitors would be used within the Council Housing sector although Environmental Health Services also had monitors. Waiting lists were in place but the waiting time had been reduced and would be reduced even further as a result of the additional monitor.

Reference was made to the cognitive therapy treatment and clarification sought on the service provider. Melin Homes was confirmed as the provider and it was noted that they delivered a number of therapies in association with health services.

Having fully considered its content the Task Group noted the report.

8. TRANSFORMING LIVES AND COMMUNITIES AWARDS SCHEME

The report provided information on the establishment of the annual Transforming Lives and Communities Awards.

The Communication and Tenant Engagement Officer introduced the report which outlined the categories and selection process for the Transforming Lives and Communities Awards. It was proposed that these awards would stand on their own and be specific to Caerphilly Homes.

The composition of the judging panel was outlined and the four award categories were confirmed as the Transforming Live Award - Individual, Transforming Communities Award - Group, Young Person of the Year and The Extra Mile Award - Caerphilly Homes Employee.

The awards would celebrate those making a difference in the community as well as offering an opportunity to raise the profile and develop the reputation of Caerphilly Homes.

The Chair thanked the Officer for her report and full discussion ensued.

Reference was made to the judging panel and the position held by the Chair of the Caerphilly Homes Task Group. It was noted that as the position of Chair alternated between Tenant and Councillor representative in certain years tenants would not be represented on the panel. The Member requested that consideration be given to altering the panel membership to include the Chair and Vice Chair of the Task Group as this would ensure continual tenant representation on the Panel. It was also felt that a tenant representative on the panel was very important and should be represented as a matter of course.

The Officer advised that the proposals before Members were not set in stone and could be easily amended to incorporate any changes they considered to be appropriate including tenant representation on the panel.

Having fully considered its content the Task Group noted the report.

9 EMPTY HOMES PUBLIC AND PRIVATE

The report outlined the Authorities activities in dealing with empty homes within the county borough and related specifically to those properties that have been or have become empty for 6 months or more in the Private and Public sector.

The Private Sector Housing Manager presented the report and highlighted the extent and areas of the long term empty properties in the Public and Private sectors. The activities and performance of the Authority to assist in bringing empty homes back into beneficial use was confirmed for Members information.

The targets and outcomes achieved were detailed and the performance over the last four years noted. Members were referred to the figures for 2012/13 and the dip in performance referenced. Officers acknowledged the poor performance but advised that this was not typical of the service and figures have improved.

It was noted that the level of success in respect of bringing long term empty properties back into use was very much dependent on available staff resources due to extremely time consuming process of engagement with the owners of empty homes. Staff resources continued to be severely overstretched and without the deployment of further staff resources any significantly higher performance targets would not be achievable.

Officers confirmed that partnership working with United Welsh Housing Association had enjoyed a degree of success . However a recent initiative that saw a flyer being sent to over 200 empty property owners in an effort to raise awareness of the types of assistance available had not yielded a single response.

Members were referred to section 4.29 of the report and the targets for turnaround were noted.

The Chair thanked the Officer for his report and full discussion ensued.

Members noted the efforts being made to bring empty properties back into use and discussed factors that could be employed to encourage empty properties owners. Officers confirmed that low demand areas were advertised as widely as possible in order to try and generate interest. Reference was made to increased Council Tax charges on empty properties currently being levied in England. Officers agreed that owners did not like to pay on empty properties so an increase in Council Tax could be of assistance in this instance.

Having fully considered its content the Task Group noted the report.

INFORMATION ITEMS

10. WELFARE REFORM PROGRAMME UPDATE

The report on the Welfare Reform Programme Update was considered at the Policy and Resources Scrutiny Committee on the 4th March 2014 and was presented to the Caerphilly Homes Task Group for information.

A Member who attended the meeting expressed her disappointment in the presentation made by Mr Roy Davies. The Member felt that the representations he made did not accurately reflect what was happening within Communities and confirmed her intention to contact the Chair of the Scrutiny Committee in this regard. The Member wanted to formally note the outstanding work being done by Caerphilly Council staff with regard to Welfare Reform and also wanted to commend and give some well deserved recognition to them for all the assistance they have provided to tenants.

This sentiment was shared by other Members who felt that a previous presentation given at Scrutiny by Mr Steven Crabb which contained real life examples of the work being undertaken was a far more accurate depiction of the present situation.

The Rents Manager thanked Members for their support and advised that if Members wished arrangements could be made for the Task Group to receive the presentation made by Mr Crabb in partnership with CAB.

Members agreed that the presentation would be useful and asked that the necessary arrangements be made for its inclusion on the next appropriate agenda.

The Task Group noted the information item.

11. UPDATE - HOUSING BENEFITS UNDER-OCCUPATION RULES

The report on the Housing Benefits Under-Occupation Rules was considered at the Policy and Resources Scrutiny Committee on the 4th March 2014 and was presented to the Caerphilly Homes Task Group for information.

Clarification was sought in relation to 1996 continuous Housing Benefit exemption and whether there would be any leeway granted for tenants that had been decanted from their properties. In instances where they have had no choice but to move but no choice on the size of property to which they were moved, for example due to the flooding or demolition of the initial property. Officers confirmed that this scenario was not covered within the DWP guidance and their advice would be to appeal. Should Members be aware of a tenant in this position they should encourage them to contact the Housing Services team who would provide support and advice on how to appeal. It was noted that since the announcement of the exemption 270 cases had been identified and £86,000 refunded to affected tenants.

Members commended Officers for acting so quickly on the exemption and for the proactive way this information was taken out to tenants.

The Task Group noted the information item.

12. TO RECEIVE ANY REQUESTS FOR AN ITEM TO BE INCLUDED ON THE NEXT AVAILABLE AGENDA

Requests for items to be included on the next available agenda were received as follows: -

- (1) Tenant Training Current Position and Future Provision.
- (2) Progress Made On The Common Housing Register.
- (3) Consultation Responses on the Housing Improvement Partnership (HIP).

The meeting closed at 19:50pm

Approved as a correct record subject to any amendments or corrections agreed and recorded in the minutes of the meeting held on 16th April 2014.

CHAIRMAN