



POLICY AND RESOURCES SCRUTINY COMMITTEE

MINUTES OF THE MEETING HELD AT PENALLTA HOUSE, YSTRAD MYNACH ON TUESDAY, 14TH JULY 2015 AT 5.30 P.M.

PRESENT:

Councillor H.W. David - Chair
Councillor S. Morgan - Vice Chair

Councillors:

L. Binding, Mrs P. Cook, C.J. Cuss, Miss E. Forehead, J.E. Fussell, C.J. Gordon, C. Hawker, Ms J.G. Jones, G. Kirby, A. Lewis, C.P. Mann, R. Saralis, J. Taylor

Cabinet Members:

Mrs C. Forehead (HR and Governance/Business Manager), D.T. Hardacre (Performance and Asset Management), Mrs B. Jones (Corporate Services), D.V. Poole (Housing)

Together with:

N. Scammell (Acting Director of Corporate Services and Section 151 Officer), S. Couzens (Chief Housing Officer), P. Davy (Head of Programmes), R. Ballantine (Personnel Manager), S. Cousins (Principal Housing Officer), K. Williams (Private Sector Housing Manager), L. Lane (Solicitor), C. Forbes-Thompson (Scrutiny Research Officer) and R. Barrett (Committee Services Officer)

Also present:

Mr C. Davies and Mrs S. Jones (Caerphilly Homes Task Group), G. Enright (Unison Branch Secretary)

1. CHAIR'S WELCOME

The Chair welcomed Mr Clive Davies and Mrs Sandra Jones from Caerphilly Homes Task Group, who were in attendance to speak in relation to Agenda Item 9 (Proposed Inspection Programme for Council Properties).

It was noted that Mr Gary Enright, Unison Branch Secretary, was also in attendance to provide the Trade Unions' response to a number of the reports on the meeting agenda.

2. APOLOGIES FOR ABSENCE

An apology for absence was received from Councillor D. Rees.

3. DECLARATIONS OF INTEREST

There were no declarations of interest received at the commencement or during the course of the meeting.

4. MINUTES – 2ND JUNE 2015

Subject to it being noted that Councillor J.E. Fussell had not been recorded as being in attendance, together with Councillor L.J. Binding's confirmation that he would clarify the details of his report request with the relevant Officer (minute no. 11 refers), it was

RESOLVED that the minutes of the Policy and Resources Scrutiny Committee meeting held on 2nd June 2015 (minute nos. 1 – 12) be approved as a correct record and signed by the Chair.

5. CALL-IN PROCEDURE

There had been no matters referred to the Scrutiny Committee in accordance with the call-in procedure.

6. REPORTS OF THE CABINET MEMBERS

The Scrutiny Committee received verbal reports from Cabinet Members Mrs B. Jones and D.V. Poole.

Councillor Mrs B. Jones, Cabinet Member for Corporate Services, advised the Scrutiny Committee of several recent achievements within the Corporate Services Directorate. The Corporate Information Governance Unit were highly commended in the Information and Records Management Team of the Year 2015 category by the Information and Records Management Society (IRMS). The Team achieved this award through its ground-breaking work on information sharing and by becoming one of the first local authorities to achieve the British Standard BS10008 on legal admissibility of electronic information. The Team was also one of the first local authorities in Wales to implement the central government role of Senior Information Risk Owner in a local government context alongside managing daily demands of increasing numbers of information requests.

ICT Services recently received a Gold Performance Award for Address Data and a Gold Achievement Award for Street Data at the Geoplace Data and Quality Awards 2015. Geoplace is a local government improvement and development organisation operating in England and Wales in conjunction with Ordnance Survey. There are many benefits of ensuring this type of information is kept up to date and accurate, such as the ability to share information in an efficient manner in our own organisation, and between local and central government, reducing costs, saving time and also helping to improve response times for blue light services.

Members were informed that the annual Household Survey ran from 1st – 30th June 2015, and in addition to being made available on the Council's website, was also included in Newsline for the first time to allow every household in the county borough to have their say on Council services. The Household Survey is a key part of the council's Public Engagement Strategy and allows for key feedback to be gathered from the community.

The Cabinet Member also referred to the success of the recent National Urdd Eisteddfod 2015, with approximately 89,000 visitors attending the event at Llancaiach Fawr. The organisers were very pleased with the outcome of the event and the Cabinet Member placed on record her thanks to those involved in hosting the event.

Councillor D.V. Poole presented his first report in his capacity as Cabinet Member for Housing. The Scrutiny Committee were advised that the Housing Solutions Team is currently being re-structured in order to meet new legislation as part of the Housing (Wales) Act 2014. Welsh Government additional funding has been provided to assist local authorities with this transition and will be used for additional staff, support agency and new IT requirements.

Members were informed that a group of Caerphilly tenants with visual and/or hearing impairments recently took part in a national consultation exercise to share their experiences on the difficulties they encounter in relation to housing and related services. A National Practice Guidance document has subsequently been launched and Housing Services will now be looking to take forward many of its recommendations.

The Cabinet Member updated the Committee on the impact of the new Universal Credit benefit system, which was introduced in May 2015. At present this only affects new single person applicants for Job Seekers Allowance. Tenant Support Officers within Housing will work with those tenants affected to offer financial assistance and advice, and to ensure that the Housing Benefit element of the Universal Credit payment is used to cover rent and thereby sustain tenancies.

Members were updated on the challenges involved in delivering the Welsh Housing Quality Standard (WHQS) Programme by 2020. In addition to the slippage previously reported to Members, there are some emerging budgetary pressures arising from recent tender prices, together with the borrowing cap on the Housing Revenue Account. Overall performance across all contract arrangements for internal improvement works has achieved just under 70% for the first quarter of financial year 2015/16. Officers are implementing a number of measures to assist with the delivery of the programme, including recruitment of additional posts, outsourcing in a number of areas, and procurement of a contingency contract. A number of procedural changes are also being introduced to maximise the effective use of existing resources, and a key change will be to refocus the Tenant Liaison Officers on the works stage.

The Cabinet Member explained that it would be a while before the full benefits of these measures will be realised but in the meantime, progress is being closely monitored. Work on the refurbishment of Hafod Deg in Rhymney as a community resource hub is nearing completion, and good progress is being made with the refurbishment of properties in Rowan Place, Rhymney. Despite the setbacks, tenant satisfaction remains high once the improvement works have been completed.

Members were also informed that nominations have recently been invited for the 2015 Transforming Lives and Communities Awards which will be held in September 2015 and celebrate the work being undertaken with Council tenants.

The Cabinet Members were thanked for their reports and the Chair invited questions from the Scrutiny Committee. It was noted that the WHQS programme was due to be discussed later in the meeting, under consideration of Agenda Item No.11 (Performance Management IO5 – Investment in Council homes to transform lives and communities) and the Chair asked Members to withhold any related queries until the report was discussed.

It was suggested that a Members' seminar be arranged regarding the new Housing (Wales) Act and the Cabinet Member confirmed that that he would liaise with Officers to make the appropriate arrangements.

7. CABINET REPORTS

None of the Cabinet reports listed on the agenda had been called forward for discussion at the meeting.

REPORTS OF OFFICERS

Consideration was given to the following reports.

8. DRAFT DISCIPLINARY POLICY AND PROCEDURE

Richard Ballantine, Personnel Manager, presented the report, which sought the views of Members on proposed amendments to the Disciplinary Policy and Procedure for employees of Caerphilly County Borough Council, prior to its presentation to Cabinet.

The key changes to the Policy (which was last revised in 2010) were outlined, and included the introduction of a verbal warning as a means of dealing with less serious cases of misconduct, the removal of references to attendance issues (as this is now addressed via the Managing Sickness Absence Policy), the time limit to submit an appeal to be set as 10 days for all appeal types, and the introduction of a fast track process to deal with less serious matters of misconduct.

Officers advised that the duration of disciplinary sanctions for a verbal, written and final warning would be set at 6, 12 and 18 months respectively. During the consultation process, it had been suggested that the sanction duration could be harmonised in line with those applied to teaching staff (3, 6 and 12 months), but had not been subsequently incorporated into the revised Policy and Procedure (attached at Appendix 1 to the report).

The revised Policy will apply to all Caerphilly employees and will also apply to non-teaching school-based staff where the Scheme is adopted by the School Governing Body. The revised Policy does not cover the Chief Executive, the Council's Monitoring Officer or the Council's Section 151 Officer as separate disciplinary procedures apply to these posts.

Gary Enright, Unison Branch Secretary, was invited to provide the Trade Unions' response to the proposed amendments. Mr Enright explained that the Trade Unions supported the revised Policy, with the exception of the duration of disciplinary sanctions. It was their view that these should be harmonised in line with the sanctions applied to teaching staff and Mr Enright explained that they would be seeking a review of this matter. Officers advised that 12 months was deemed appropriate for a written warning following instances of serious misconduct.

Discussion of the report ensued and Members raised concerns regarding the introduction and interpretation of a verbal warning. They expressed a need for managers to make clear to employees, that when utilising the procedure, that the first stage of the disciplinary procedure was being invoked. Officers confirmed that if the matter could not be resolved informally and the disciplinary procedure was invoked, employees would receive written confirmation of this verbal warning, which would be retained on file for a period of 6 months.

Following consideration of the report, it was moved and seconded that the following recommendation be referred to Cabinet for approval. By a show of hands, this was unanimously agreed.

RECOMMENDED to Cabinet that the revised Draft Disciplinary Policy and Procedure be adopted.

9. DRAFT SOCIAL MEDIA POLICY

Richard Ballantine presented the report, which sought the views of Members on the introduction of a Social Media Policy, prior to its presentation to Cabinet.

It was explained that the Council's Disciplinary Procedure has been increasingly used to address alleged instances of online misconduct by employees. The Social Media Policy has therefore been developed to provide guidelines to employees on using social media in both their private and professional lives. This Policy is intended to clarify the responsibilities of employees both inside and outside of work when using social media, having regard to the high standards of conduct expected of Local Government Officers, and to protect Officers from potential misunderstandings and confusion. The final draft of the Policy was appended to the report.

Mr Enright was invited to respond to the report and confirmed that the Trade Unions had been involved in the consultation process regarding the draft Policy. He explained that the Trade Unions felt there was a pressing need for guidance to be provided to the Council's workforce in respect of social media matters and thus supported the introduction of this Policy.

Discussion of the report ensued and in response to a Member's query, Officers provided clarification on the protocol for those employees who wished to start a social network or blog for Council purposes. Members and Officers also outlined examples of the types of social networks and blogs in use by Council departments (including the "Your Caerphilly Homes" Facebook page).

During the course of the debate, Members expressed a need for the Social Media Policy to be clearly communicated to all Council employees. As such, it was moved and seconded that subject to consideration being given as to how this Policy will be communicated to employees, the Policy be adopted. By a show of hands this was unanimously agreed.

RECOMMENDED to Cabinet that:-

- (i) the Draft Social Media Policy as appended to the report be adopted;
- (ii) consideration be given as to how the Draft Social Media Policy will be communicated to all Council employees.

10. PROPOSED INSPECTION PROGRAMME FOR COUNCIL PROPERTIES

Shaun Couzens, Chief Housing Officer, presented the report, which proposed the introduction of regular property and tenancy inspections for Caerphilly Homes, prior to its presentation to Caerphilly Homes Task Group and thereafter Cabinet.

The report outlined the existing inspection arrangements and considered the option of introducing more formal arrangements for regular property and tenancy inspections for Caerphilly Homes. The report highlighted the potential benefits of a regular inspection programme to both tenants and Caerphilly Homes, the need for a structured approach and the proposed procedure to be implemented. Full details of the proposals were appended to the report.

Mr Clive Davies and Mrs Sandra Jones, representatives of Caerphilly Homes Task Group, were invited to summarise their views arising from the proposed inspection arrangements. They expressed concerns that the new programme could lead to an invasion of privacy and result in added cost pressures for tenants in respect of them carrying out repairs prior to an inspection. Representatives cited the additional resources that would be needed to inspect all Caerphilly Homes and the possible duplication of work (in that they had already been inspected as part of the WHQS programme). They suggested that instead of regular

inspections, tenants who did not leave their homes in acceptable condition at the end of the tenancy should be charged for remedial works.

Officers gave assurances that they were not proposing a brand new inspection process but were seeking to make better use of the existing arrangements in place, and provided examples of how the process would be conducted. Officers explained that formal arrangements would assist in early intervention measures and allow the Council to carry out their duty of care to tenants. During the course of the debate, a Member raised a concern regarding the impact of these proposals on existing staff resources and it was confirmed that Officers would provide a progress update in 12 months' time.

Following consideration of the report, and in taking into account the views of the Caerphilly Homes Task Group representatives, it was moved and seconded that the following recommendations be referred to Caerphilly Homes Task Group (and thereafter Cabinet) for approval. By a show of hands, this was unanimously agreed.

RECOMMENDED to Caerphilly Homes Task Group (and thereafter Cabinet) that:-

- (i) consideration be given to pursue the introduction of regular property inspections for all Caerphilly Homes tenants as per the proposed procedure outlined in Section 4.4 of the Officer's report;
- (ii) implementation of the proposal be reviewed and further annual reports be submitted to Caerphilly Homes Task Group in order to monitor progress and evaluate the success of the procedure.

11. YEAR END PROGRESS UPDATE OF IMPROVEMENT OBJECTIVE IO2 – IMPROVE JOB OPPORTUNITIES SO PEOPLE CAN LIVE BETTER LIVES – CAERPHILLY PASSPORT PROGRAMME

Nicole Scammell, Acting Director of Corporate Services and Section 151 Officer, presented the report, which provided an update of the Improvement Objective for 2014/15 relating to the Caerphilly Passport Programme.

Members were informed that the Passport Programme came to a close on 31st March 2015 and that it had met the set Improvement Objectives. Therefore Cabinet have chosen not to carry this Improvement Objective forward for 2015-2016. Three of the performance measures are in line with the European Social Fund (ESF) objectives set for the programme and two are additional measures looking at the impact of the programme on those participating and the percentage of positive outcomes achieved.

The Passport Programme was recently selected for an ESF National Team Evaluation and full details of the outcome were contained within Appendix 1 of the report. A reporting dashboard (Appendix 2) outlined the progress of a number of key performance indicators against this Improvement Objective. Wavehill also undertook an independent evaluation of the Programme and the outcome was generally very positive. Performance against this Improvement Objective was therefore judged as successful, as explained by progress of the key elements of the Programme contained within the report.

During the course of the ensuing debate, a query was raised regarding the Wavehill Evaluation Report, which stated in its findings that around half of all referrals have not engaged with the programme, in part because of their lack of suitability but also because Passport staff have been unable to make contact with referrals. Officers confirmed that they would seek further information from Passport staff regarding these reasons for non-engagement and respond to Members accordingly.

A query was raised regarding the total amount of agency fees savings as a result of the Passport Programme. Officers confirmed that they would check to see if this information was held on record, and they also outlined to Members the details of the Council's vacancy management process.

In response to a Member's query regarding the future of the Passport Programme, Officers explained that although it has now ended, there is some potential for future ESF funding and for a smaller version of the Passport scheme to be established as a pilot via Communities First. A Member queried the feasibility of using the £485,000 budget allocation for the direct funding of apprenticeships and trainees to continue the Passport Programme. Officers outlined the significant infrastructure and running costs surrounding the expired Passport Programme and explained how it was separate from the Authority's apprenticeship and trainee scheme.

Officers further explained that a phased reduction of this budget to £150,000 per annum by 2017/18 would take place (as per the savings agreed at the Special Policy and Resources Scrutiny Committee meeting of 17th June 2014). The reserves of £697,000 would be used to maintain current provision in respect of supporting existing apprenticeship and trainee placements. Members were advised that a review of the reduced scheme would be undertaken as part of proposed Medium Term Financial Plan savings for 2016/17.

A query was raised as to whether the Welsh Government are in a position to continue with the Passport Programme at a national level. Officers confirmed that they would check with relevant staff and report back to Members.

Following consideration of the report, Members noted the progress made against the Improvement Objective for 2014/15, and unanimously agreed that it be judged as successful.

12. PERFORMANCE MANAGEMENT IO5 – INVESTMENT IN COUNCIL HOMES TO TRANSFORM LIVES AND COMMUNITIES – YEAR END

Phil Davy, Head of Programmes, presented the report, which provided an update in respect of Improvement Objective 5 for 2014/15 (investment in Council homes to transform lives and communities).

Members were reminded of the significant slippage that has arisen within the WHQS Programme during 2014/15. This has necessitated a review of the investment strategy and the implementation of a number of measures to increase capacity and spread risk to ensure that the target completion date of March 2020 can still be achieved. Full details of these measures were detailed within the report.

The original target for 2014/15 had been to complete either internal or external works to 3713 properties but in view of the setback was revised to 1683 properties. Unfortunately the outturn has only achieved 702 properties (42% of the revised programme). Overall tenant satisfaction remains high at 90% and service standards have achieved 93%, which are both above target. Full details of the progress made in respect of this Improvement Objective were appended to the report. It was explained that the Improvement Objective for 2014/15 was therefore regarded by Officers as being only partially successful.

The Head of Programmes was thanked for his detailed report and in referring to the report recommendation, the Chair explained to the Scrutiny Committee that they needed to consider whether "partially successful" was the correct term to use in respect of this Improvement Objective.

A query was raised regarding the measures taken to accelerate the programme and reduce the pressure on the WHQS Team. The Head of Programmes explained that a number of additional staff had already been recruited and it was intended that further staff would also be

recruited. He outlined the procurement and contractor arrangements implemented over the past two years and explained that the timescales involved in awarding such contracts had contributed to the slippage of internal and external works programmes. A number of other actions have been taken to accelerate the programme, including the strengthening of senior management, restructuring of teams around contract arrangements to provide greater clarity in respect of accountabilities, and outsourcing of works for part of the Council's Housing portfolio. Officers explained that a large portion of these measures had now been implemented and it was therefore anticipated that the benefits would be seen via an acceleration of works.

The Cabinet Member outlined a number of improvements to the programme, including the allocation of IT support staff to the WHQS Team and the refining of survey works associated with the programme. Members were also advised of the improvements that had been made to work processes and the Cabinet Member gave details of the kitchen designs being outsourced to the manufacturer.

Discussion took place in respect of the report recommendation and whether the Improvement Objective could be judged as being "partially successful". A Member suggested that the Improvement Objective had not been met and that substantial work was needed for it to be achieved, and therefore the recommendation should be amended accordingly. The Cabinet Member explained that the majority of works and associated contract arrangements had already been implemented and suggested an alternative amendment to the recommendation to reflect that further work was needed to achieve this Improvement Objective.

Members were reminded that if the Council were deemed to be unsuccessful in too many areas in respect of Improvement Objectives, the associated funding they receive from the Welsh Government could be withdrawn. Officers explained that the required works to Council housing had been identified and a number of properties had already been brought up to standard, and therefore there had been some success against this Improvement Objective. Members made reference to the shortcomings of the original Savills stock survey and acknowledged the amount of work completed in respect of the WHQS Programme to date.

An amendment to the recommendation within the report was moved and seconded to state that "the Improvement Objective has not been met and substantial work is needed to achieve this objective". By a show of hands (and in noting there were 2 in support of the motion and 11 against), the motion was declared lost.

It was moved and seconded that the original recommendation within the report be endorsed, in that Members agree that the Improvement Objective be judged as partially successful for 2014/15. By a show of hands (and in noting there was 1 against and 1 abstention), this was agreed by the majority present.

13. ADJOURNMENT

Following consideration of this item, it was agreed at 7.08 pm that the meeting adjourn for a short recess. The meeting reconvened at 7.15 pm.

14. END OF YEAR UPDATE ON IMPROVEMENT OBJECTIVE 6 (2014/15) – IMPROVE THE AVAILABILITY OF PRIVATE AND PUBLIC SECTOR HOUSING TO REDUCE THE NUMBER OF RESIDENTS WHO MAY BECOME HOMELESS

Kenyon Williams, Private Sector Housing Manager, together with Suzanne Cousins, Principal Housing Officer, presented the report, which updated Members on the progress made in 2015/16 against Improvement Objective 6 (improve the number of private and public sector housing to reduce the number of residents who may become homeless).

A number of achievements have been made against this Improvement Objective, including the strengthening of the homelessness prevention service to respond to the challenges presented by the change in legislation, the provision of advice and support to prevent people from becoming homeless and the provision of accommodation to those made homeless, the hosting of a specialist officer to support domestic abuse victims threatened with homelessness, and assistance to landlords to comply with the relevant tenancy and equality legislation by producing guidance and providing training.

In terms of actions that had been unsuccessful, Members were advised that at a local level, a review was not fully developed for the existing pre-release prison protocols with the prison service, due to the complexity of the matter. It had been determined that this would instead be progressed at a national level, and the Housing Team are therefore actively working at a national level to achieve this. Full details of progress made against this Improvement Objective were appended to the report. It was explained that for the reasons outlined in the report, performance against this Improvement Objective was therefore regarded by Officers as partially successful.

Although the prevention of homelessness remains a priority for the Council, this Improvement Objective has not been re-selected for 2015/16 and therefore this would be the final update report in respect of this area. However, homelessness will be a key priority in the divisional service plan, with one of the aims being to reduce the use of bed and breakfast accommodation for the placement of homeless persons, and such use has already reduced significantly.

Discussion of the report ensued and a Member queried the reasons why the Improvement Objective had not been reselected for 2015/16, in view of it only being partially successful. The Cabinet Member for Housing explained that it was difficult to determine which Improvement Objectives should be selected from the numerous options available, but that those that had been selected for 2015/16 had been deemed to be the ones more in need of attention by the Council. The Cabinet Member also referred to the difficulties entailed in using success as a measure in that it was a subjective assessment of the Improvement Objective.

Officers gave examples of improved working practices between the Council and the Probation Service and explained that a consultation document had recently been released which outlined the framework and pathway for pre-release prison protocols throughout Wales.

Members noted the contents of the report and unanimously agreed that the Improvement Objective be judged as partially successful.

15. REQUESTS FOR REPORTS TO BE INCLUDED ON THE NEXT AVAILABLE AGENDA

There were no requests for reports received.

16. INFORMATION ITEMS

The Committee noted the following items for information, full details of which were included within the Officers reports. There were no items brought forward for review.

- (1) Handling of Damp and Condensation Complaints – Update Report;
- (2) Discretionary Rate Relief Applications;
- (3) Time Off For Reservists Policy;
- (4) Caerphilly Homes Task Group Minutes – 21st May 2015;
- (5) Corporate Health and Safety Committee Minutes – 24th February 2015;
- (6) Pensions/Compensation Committee Minutes – 9th June 2015.

The meeting closed at 7.25 pm

Approved as a correct record and subject to any amendments or corrections agreed and recorded in the minutes of the meeting held on 30th September 2015, they were signed by the Chair.

CHAIR