



CAERPHILLY HOMES TASK GROUP (WELSH HOUSING QUALITY STANDARD)

**MINUTES OF THE MEETING HELD AT PENALLTA HOUSE, YSTRAD MYNACH
(SIRHOWY ROOM) ON THURSDAY, 10TH DECEMBER 2015 AT 5.00 P.M.**

PRESENT:

C. Davies - Chair
E. Forehead - Vice Chair

Task Group Members:

Ms L. Ackerman, K. James, S. Jones, J. Moore and D.V. Poole

P. Davy (Head of Programmes), S. Couzens (Chief Housing Officer), J. Roberts-Waite (Strategic Co-ordination Manager), C. Evans (Committee Services Officer)

1. APOLOGIES

Apologies for absence were received from Mrs G. Atkins, Miss A. Lewis, C. Mann and M. McDermott.

2. DECLARATIONS OF INTEREST

Mr C. Davies, S. Jones and J. Moore as Council Tenants declared a personal but not prejudicial interest in all agenda items.

3. MINUTES – 29TH OCTOBER 2015

RESOLVED that, subject to it being noted that Miss A. Lewis, Mrs G. Green and Mr C. Jones were present at the meeting, the minutes of the meeting held on the 29th October 2015 be approved as a correct record and signed by the Chair.

4. ROWAN PLACE – PROGRESS REPORT AND SENSITIVE LETTING POLICY

The report provided an update on the progress made in relation to delivering a targeted regeneration programme in Rowan Place, Rhymney; and sought the views of the Task Group on the adoption of a sensitive lettings policy and introductory tenancies, (specifically in relation to the Rowan Place flats) prior to its consideration at Policy and Resources Scrutiny Committee and thereafter, Cabinet.

Rowan Place, which comprises of 82 properties and is located within the Twyn Carno ward, is part of the Lower Super Output Area (LSOA) known as Twyn Carno 1.

For many years the area of Rowan Place in which the flats are located has been regarded locally as a 'no go zone' and largely been home to transient single people and families with particular challenges including drug and alcohol issues, criminal records and anti social behaviour issues.

Following the identification of severe damp and external defects to the fabric of the properties in Rowan Place, the Council approved a budget totalling £4.2m to undertake a comprehensive refurbishment of the 72 council owned properties. The programme underway in Rowan Place has been enhanced by a further £720,000 from the Welsh Government as part of its Vibrant and Viable Places programme which will facilitate enhancements to the environment within Rowan Place.

The Task Group noted that, in previous years, Rowan Place has been plagued by high levels of anti social behaviour, crime and drug and alcohol abuse. As a consequence and for the benefit of existing tenants, the Council proposes to introduce introductory tenancies for new allocations within Rowan Place. Introductory tenancies would give all new tenants a 12 month trial period before they would be eligible to be awarded a secure tenancy and the tenancy could be brought to an end, during the introductory period, if the tenant fails to adhere to the requirements. This will ensure that anyone behaving inappropriately can be removed from the tenancy quickly.

In addition, the Task Group were asked to note that the existing tenants will not be affected.

The sensitive lettings policy covers all 2 bedroom flats in Rowan Place, Rhymney. Caerphilly Homes Allocations Scheme allows for the allocation of families with 1 or 2 children and childless couples. Due to the size of the second bedroom only families with 1 child, or families with access will be considered and to reduce excessive child density in the area, childless couples may take precedence over families with one child.

A strict set of criteria has been devised and any applicant that meets one of the criteria would not be offered a tenancy of one of the 2 bedroom flats in Rowan Place, for a period of at least 2 years. The criteria includes an applicant having any involvement in anti-social behaviour in the last 2 years and an ability to sustain a tenancy for a minimum period of 12 months or has an unspent or criminal convictions, including convictions for drug dealing, criminal damage or arson.

In addition, prospective tenants will be required to satisfy an income/expenditure assessment of their affordability of the tenancy and where two or more applicants have equal priority, preference would be giving to applicants who are in employment or training.

The Task Group thanked the Officers for the report and, in noting the criteria, sought further information on eligibility of those applicants with Mental Health Issues. Officers confirmed that, provided there was sufficient support in place and the risks were assessed; consideration would be given to those applicants.

A Task Group Member queried the current issue with voids within the area and whether the implementation of the Sensitive Lettings Policy would compound the issue. Officers highlighted that that the policy is to be implemented in an attempt to improve the area and peoples perspective. It is unclear, until the Policy is in place, whether the number of voids would increase, however a review would be conducted 12 months following completion to determine its effectiveness.

Following consideration and discussion, it was moved and seconded that the recommendations in the report be approved. By a show of hands this was unanimously agreed.

RESOLVED that for the reasons contained in the Officers report the Caerphilly Homes Task Group recommend to the Policy and Resources Scrutiny Committee and Cabinet, the adoption of the sensitive lettings policy, including introductory tenancies for new tenants in Rowan Place, as set out in the Appendix to the report.

5. RE-PROFILING OF WHQS PROGRAMME AND HRA CAPITAL PROGRAMME 2016/17

The report highlighted the changes to the WHQS Programme and set out the HRA Capital Programme budget for 2016/17. In addition, the report sought the views of the CHTG prior to its presentation to Policy and Resources Scrutiny Committee and Cabinet.

It was noted that major slippage during the 2014/15 financial year necessitated a review of the investment strategy. A revised strategy was approved by Cabinet in February 2015, together with the Capital Programme for the 2015/16 financial year. The new programme was front loaded in an attempt to catch up on the slippage. However, this has led to resourcing issues, particularly in the Eastern-Valleys and has caused problems for the WHQS team due to the number of properties being worked on across the County Borough.

The number of properties in the internal works programme reduces in the later years of the programme and a further re-profiling was advocated to have a more consistent number of properties each year. This has some benefit to those community areas that will be pulled forward, however others will slip back. Some of the changes are also to avoid gaps arising on the larger estates and enable continuity of phasing of works.

The Task Group noted that it would not be possible to catch up on the external works programme within 2015/16. Most of the current financial year planned programme is expected to run into 2016/17. There are a number of sequence changes to the external works to take account of the change in approach in the Lower Rhymney Valley and to minimise, as far as is practical, conflicts between the internal and external works. Where overlaps arise, these will need to be managed on the ground.

The HRA Capital Programme budget allocates the necessary resources based on the Savills cost plan to deliver the programme during 2016/17. It was noted that, as per experience, significant variances may arise once the properties have been surveyed and works specification prepared. A large contingency has therefore been included within the budget proposal.

Following consideration and discussion, it was moved and seconded that the recommendations in the report be approved. By a show of hands this was unanimously agreed:-

RESOLVED that for the reasons contained in the Officers report:

- (i) The Caerphilly Homes Task Group recommend to the Policy and Resources Scrutiny Committee and Cabinet the adoption of the reprofiling of the WHQS Programme and the Capital Programme for 2016/17 that flows from the reprofiling.
- (ii) A further report be presented when sufficient information is available to update the Savills cost plan based on an analysis of actual costs being incurred for internal and external works.

6. SMALL LOTS - REVIEW OF CONTRACT ARRANGEMENTS

The report proposed changes to the contract arrangements for external works in the Eastern Valleys and sought the views of the Task Group prior to consideration by Policy and Resources Scrutiny Committee.

It was noted that the external works within the Eastern Valleys are being undertaken through a series of small lots contracts. Experience over the last 2 years has given rise to concerns that if continued reliance is placed on this method alone, there are significant risks that this part of the WHQS programme will not be delivered by 2020. A review of the contract arrangements has concluded that the external works on 2 large estates (Cefn Fforest and Ty Sign) should be undertaken by alternative means and there is an opportunity to link this with the procurement of new contract arrangements for external works in the Lower Rhymney Valley.

The Task Group thanked the Officer for the report and sought reassurance that sufficient contingency plans would be implemented to ensure consistency and the continuation of the programme, in the event that contractors withdraw from the tender process.

A Task Group Member sought further information on the satisfaction rates and feedback from tenants in respect of the small lots contracts. It was noted that there is currently no data available on the external works satisfaction as only one contract has been completed. Feedback from tenants has not raised any major concerns with the standard of work completed, but issues have been raised with the time taken to complete the works, which was impacted greatly due to weather conditions.

Following consideration and discussion, it was moved and seconded that the recommendations in the report be approved. By a show of hands this was agreed by the majority present:-

RESOLVED that for the reasons contained in the Officers report:

- (i) the Caerphilly Homes Task Group recommend to the Policy and Resources Scrutiny Committee and Cabinet, a reduction in the amount of work to be procured via small lots over the remaining period of the programme in view of the risks of not completing this by 2020.
- (ii) the external works on the Ty Sign and Cefn Fforest estates be incorporated within the procurement of new contract arrangements for external works in the Lower Rhymney Valley.
- (iii) the adoption of 2 value bands be supported for small lots contract packages over the remainder of the programme period, subject to review in light of tender returns.
- (iv) the Project Board continue to endorse the award of any small lot contract with a final tendered sum that exceeds the upper limit of either value band range where appropriate.

7. WHQS COMPLIANCE POLICY

The report sought the views of the Caerphilly Homes Task Group on the draft WHQS Compliance Policy, which is a Welsh Government requirement, prior to its consideration at Policy and Resources Scrutiny Committee and Cabinet.

The Task Group noted that Social housing landlords are required to put in place a Compliance Policy by 1st April 2016, which would be subject to annual review. The Compliance Policy is intended to provide the Welsh Government, tenants and the Council with assurance that WHQS will be achieved and maintained and must set out the arrangements for independent verification.

The Task Group thanked the Officer for the report and discussion ensued.

A Task Group Member, in noting that there was only a brief mention of the Environmental Programme within the Policy, sought further information on this. Officers clarified that the Environmental Programme was an integral part of the programme and has to be delivered to achieve WHQS. It was agreed that officers would add some additional narrative on the Environmental Programme prior to the report being considered by Policy and Resources Scrutiny Committee and Cabinet.

The Task Group considered all aspects of the Policy and discussion ensued around Party Walls. It was noted that a number of properties throughout the borough had undergone works to provide a fire retardant curtain, however there may still be properties where party walls are absent within the attic spaces. The Policy proposed that these would be identified as "acceptable fails" and would be addressed when it was necessary to re-roof the properties.

The Task Group were asked to note that, whilst progress is being made on the surveys, additional resources are required, in order to increase the number of surveys completed in advance of works commencing.

The Keystone system was discussed and a Task Group Member queried the errors within the system. Officers highlighted that there are errors within the system, both human and within the construction of dashboards, however there are a number of internal audit checks which have been built into the system in order to minimise the impact of errors on the data. IN addition, it was noted that the programme relies on Keystone and Capita (Housing Management Information System) sharing information and comparative data, this would always be subject to data entry within both systems being both timely and accurate.

Following consideration and discussion, it was moved and seconded that the recommendation in the report be approved. By a show of hands this was unanimously agreed:-

RESOLVED that for the reasons contained in the report, The Caerphilly Homes Task Group recommend the adoption of the WHQS Compliance Policy to the Policy and Resources Scrutiny Committee and Cabinet.

8. INFORMATION ITEMS

The Committee received and noted the following information item:-

- (1) Procurement Update Report.

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

A Task Group Member sought further information on recruitment within the WHQS Programme, with particular reference to staff turnover. Officers highlighted that this is an ongoing situation which is constantly changing. The lack of stability within the WHQS team is highlighted as a risk area which is kept under review by the WHQS Project Board.

The Vice Chair highlighted that the report provided at the last meeting, whilst it provided the relevant fire safety information for three storey flats, the original request was in relation to 3 storey Council houses. It was agreed that further discussion and clarification would be sought outside of the meeting.

The Chair and Vice Chair wished everyone a very merry Christmas and a Happy New Year, and the meeting closed at 6.20 p.m.

Approved as a correct record subject to any amendments or corrections agreed and recorded in the minutes of the meeting held on 18th February 2016.

CHAIR