



CAERPHILLY HOMES TASK GROUP (WELSH HOUSING QUALITY STANDARD)

**MINUTES OF THE MEETING HELD IN THE SIRHOWY ROOM, PENALLTA HOUSE, ON
THURSDAY, 16TH MAY 2019 AT 5.00 P.M.**

PRESENT:

Mr C. Davies - Vice-Chair

Task Group Members:

M. Davies, L. Harding, A. Hussey, S. Jones, L. Pewtner, L. Phipps and L.G. Whittle

Officers:

F. Wilkins (Housing Services Manager), S. Isaacs (Rent Manager), S. Cousins (Principal Housing Officer) and C. Evans (Committee Services Officer)

1. APOLOGIES

Apologies for absence were received from Councillor B. Jones and D. Price and Tenant Representatives Y. Bryant, M. James, D. Moore and R. Thompson.

2. DECLARATIONS OF INTEREST

Tenant Representatives C. Davies, S. Jones and L. Pewtner declared a personal but not prejudicial interest in all agenda items as they are Council Tenants.

3. MINUTES – 28TH MARCH 2019

It was moved and seconded that the minutes of the meeting held on the 28th March 2019 be agreed as a correct record and by a show of hands was unanimously agreed.

RESOLVED that the minutes of the meeting held on 28th March 2019 (minute no. 1-6) be approved as a correct record and signed by the Chair.

4. UNIVERSAL CREDIT – HOUSING UPDATE

The report sought the views of Members prior to its presentation to Housing and Regeneration Scrutiny Committee and thereafter Cabinet.

The purpose of the report was to recommend to Members that Cabinet agree to receive regular updates on the roll out of Universal Credit and its impacts, ratifies the approach being taken to manage the roll out of Universal Credit (UC) and the support being offered to tenants of Caerphilly Homes.

The report outlined the impact of UC on both Council tenants and Caerphilly Borough Council and explained how the roll out of UC operates and the issues this creates, resulting in an increase in rent arrears. The levels of rent arrears are significantly higher than that of tenants not in receipt of UC and it is quite clear that many tenants struggle with the complexity of UC and are at risk of not receiving their full benefit entitlement.

In recognition of the issues being experienced as a consequence of the roll out of the UC the report also explained the additional resource implications for Caerphilly Homes in delivering the extensive support mechanisms that are considered necessary for tenants to sustain tenancies, maximise incomes, improve living conditions and also maintain our rental income.

In addition, the Task Group were asked to note an amendment in the report at 10.2 and 10.3 in which 10.2 should read "Despite the positive impact of this increase in support provision over the last 3 years the level of tenant *arrears has increased by 7.5% in 2018/19*. 10.3 should read "Furthermore, due to the increase of tenants' arrears, it is necessary to ensure sufficient Bad Debt Provision is accounted for within the HRA. This is a reserve for future recognition of certain accounts being uncollectable and is an accounting requirement within the HRA. This level of provision has *also risen over the past 3 years by 10.73% in 2018/19*.

The Caerphilly Homes Task Group (the Task Group) thanked the Officer for the report and discussion ensued.

A Member, having received a number of complaints about the Universal Credit system and having less income, sought further information on UC and the allocation of benefits. Officers explained that there are some people who are worse off as a result of the system; however, there is an issue with budgeting as the system has moved to monthly and not fortnightly payments. In addition, during the assessment process, often people are without money for 5 weeks or more. However, claimants can apply for fortnightly payments on a short term basis to assist with budgeting where possible.

The Task Group raised a number of concerns around the arrears as a result of waiting period and the process and the additional financial difficulty UC is leaving people in. Officers explained that there is an option for people to apply for an advance payment, which acts as a loan and has to be repaid over 12 months, to bridge the gap during the assessment process. It was noted however that the process can take 5 weeks or more, depending on completion of the online applications and identification checks, which also need to be completed online with a Driving Licence or Passport. If tenants don't have either, they can book an appointment with DWP to action.

Discussions took place around the support provided to tenants by the Tenant Support Officers (TSO's) and it was noted that an average of 15 tenants a week are moving over to UC and a number of new ways of working have been implemented, for example Surgeries have been implemented in some areas in which residents can drop in and have the support they need, and TSO's are provided with Wi-Fi enabled tablets to help tenants with applications where needed. It was noted that the level of support currently being provided to tenants may not be sustainable for future tenants moving to UC and as a result, all Customer Services Staff and Housing Benefit staff have been provided with relevant training and an advert has been posted for additional TSO's.

A Member sought further information into the levels of arrears as mentioned in the report. Officers explained that whilst UC has had an impact on the number of tenants in arrears, additional pressures such as a crisis in the family, Christmas period or change to direct payments also impact on the levels of rent arrears.

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 Officer's Report:

- i) Cabinet agree to a regular update on the roll out of UC and its impact;
- ii) Cabinet ratifies the approach being taken to manage the roll out of UC and the support being offered to tenants.

5. HOMELESSNESS UPDATE

The report provided Caerphilly Homes Task Group (CHTG) with a progress report on the initial actions set out in the Gwent Homelessness Strategy 2018-2022 Action Plan and provided a summary of homeless causes and homeless prevention activities 2018/19, compared to 2017/18.

It was noted that the Gwent Homelessness Strategy 2018-2022 was approved by Cabinet on 12th December 2018. The strategic priorities and actions are contained in a regional action plan; however, each of the five Gwent authorities has specific local actions to deliver alongside the regional tasks. The report provided an update on the progress towards delivery of the action plan and demonstrated that whilst good progress has been made locally, more progress needs to be made regionally.

When comparing performance for 2017/18 against 2018/19, the report shows that despite an increase in homelessness presentations, success in preventing homelessness has only slightly reduced in 2018/19. The main reasons for households being threatened with homelessness were also detailed within the report.

The Task Group noted that actions taken to date to mitigate the increase in homelessness have also been provided, which include use of the private rented sector, churches night shelter project, emergency temporary accommodation and bed and breakfast facilities. There has been a slight increase in the use of B&B facilities during 2018/19 and action is currently being considered to address this.

Caerphilly's homeless prevention service is being used as a benchmark standard against which other Gwent neighbouring authorities will compare their performance.

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

A Task Group Member expressed their concerns that there are Registered Social Landlords (RSL's), who receive a significant amount of public funds and are refusing to house people due to concerns such as previous rent arrears or non-payment and affordability. It was requested that the Chief Executives be contacted to explain the reasons behind these decisions.

Discussions took place around the work undertaken across Gwent as part of the Regional Working Group. It was noted that due to the changes in legislation and requirements placed upon Local Authorities, Lead Officer suggested working in partnership to share best practice and deliver joint and collaborative projects and share resources, ultimately providing a better service to users. The Task Group noted that it is currently in the early stages of the project, however, if the Task Group were minded to, an updated progress report can be provided next year.

Following attendance at a recent Housing Conference, a Task Group Member queried the work of Housing First and whether this could benefit Caerphilly. Officers explained that this has been considered and a joint project with Pobl to provide youth homelessness services has been considered, and a bid has been submitted, but a response has not yet been received.

Discussions took place around the use of Bed and Breakfast (B&B) facilities. Officers explained that the Council has a Family Hostel, as well as a number of other properties that are designated for temporary and emergency accommodation for those entering into the Homelessness System, however, on occasions, these may be full, or not suitable, and as a result, as a last resort, B&B accommodation is used, however it was stressed this is only as emergency accommodation.

The Task Group discussed the number of Council owned and Private Rental void properties across the Authority. It was noted that there are approximately 200 Council owned properties currently long-term vacant, however, some properties have been allocated as decant properties during Shelter Scheme remodelling. It was noted however that there is also work underway to convert a number of vacant 3 bedroom properties to 2 bedroom properties, in order to meet demand. In respect of the vacant Private Rental void properties there are approximately 900 vacant properties.

A Task Group Member sought further information around the number of rough sleepers within the borough and the areas. Officers explained that there are very low numbers of rough sleepers across the borough, and work is undertaken to house them as soon as possible. It was noted that there is a waiting list of over 5,000, some of which are homeless and allocations are offered to those in most need at the time.

The Caerphilly Homes Task Group noted the report.

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

The Task Group requested that the following items be presented to the next meeting:

- Communications – Communication systems between WHQS and other Housing departments.
- Registered Social Landlords (RSL's) be invited to a future meeting to discuss their Housing Allocation Policies and contribution to Homelessness.

Officers agreed to seek further clarification around the Communications Report. In addition, the Task Group noted that the request to invite RSL's to a future meeting may be outside the remit of the Caerphilly Homes Task Group.

The meeting closed at 6:06pm.

Approved as a correct record subject to any amendments or corrections agreed and recorded in the minutes of the meeting held on 27th June 2019.

CHAIR