



## HOUSING AND REGENERATION SCRUTINY COMMITTEE

### MINUTES OF THE MULTI-LOCATIONAL MEETING HELD AT PENALLTA HOUSE AND VIA MICROSOFT TEAMS ON MONDAY, 27<sup>TH</sup> FEBRUARY 2023 AT 5.30 P.M.

#### PRESENT:

Councillor P. Cook – Vice Chair (Presiding)

#### Councillors:

G. Ead, A. Hussey, L. Jeremiah, C. Mann, A. McConnell, B. Owen, L. Phipps, J. A. Pritchard, S. Williams and W. Williams.

#### Cabinet Members:

Councillor S. Cook (Housing), Councillor P. Leonard (Planning and Public Protection) and Councillor J. Pritchard (Prosperity, Regeneration and Climate Change).

#### Together with:

N. Taylor-Williams (Head of Housing), L. Allen (Principal Group Accountant - Housing), M. Betts (Tenant and Community Involvement Manager), C. Forbes-Thompson (Scrutiny Manager) and S. Hughes (Committee Services Officer).

### RECORDING ARRANGEMENTS

The Chair reminded those present that the meeting would be live-streamed and a recording made available to view via the Council's website, except for discussions involving confidential or exempt items - [Click here to view](#). The Committee was advised that voting on decisions would be taken via Microsoft Forms.

#### 1. APOLOGIES FOR ABSENCE

Apologies for absence were received from Councillors D. Cushing, C. Forehead, D. Price, A. Whitcombe (Chair) and J. Winslade.

#### 2. DECLARATIONS OF INTEREST

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

### **3. MINUTES – 31<sup>ST</sup> JANUARY 2023**

It was moved and seconded that the minutes of the meeting held on 31<sup>st</sup> January 2023 be approved as a correct record. By way of Microsoft Forms voting (and in noting there were 10 for, 0 against and 0 abstentions) this was unanimously agreed.

RESOLVED that the minutes of the Housing and Regeneration Scrutiny Committee meeting held on 31<sup>st</sup> January 2023 (minute nos. 1 - 8) be approved as a correct record and signed by the Chair.

### **4. CALL-IN PROCEDURE**

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

### **5. HOUSING AND REGENERATION SCRUTINY COMMITTEE FORWARD WORK PROGRAMME**

The Scrutiny Manager presented the report which outlined details of the Housing and Regeneration Scrutiny Committee Forward Work Programme for the period February 2023 to March 2023 and included all reports that were identified at the Housing and Regeneration Scrutiny Committee meeting held on Tuesday 31<sup>st</sup> January 2023.

Members were asked to consider the Forward Work Programme, alongside the Cabinet Forward Work Programme, prior to publication on the Council's website.

It was proposed that the final reports for the Oakdale and Ty-Darren re-developments be scheduled for the meeting to be held on 12<sup>th</sup> September 2023.

Following consideration of the report, and subject to the additional reports proposed, it was moved and seconded that the recommendations be approved. By way of Microsoft Forms voting (and in noting there were 10 for, 0 against and 0 abstentions) this was unanimously agreed.

RESOLVED that the Housing and Regeneration Scrutiny Committee Forward Work Programme be published on the Councils' website.

### **6. 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.

### **7. HOUSING REVENUE ACCOUNT BUSINESS PLAN 2023/24**

The Cabinet Member for Housing presented the report for Members to consider and take a view on the Housing Revenue Account (HRA) Business Plan 2023/24 prior to approval at Cabinet on 8<sup>th</sup> March 2023, and to also recommend that Cabinet submit this report to Council to request an extension to the borrowing cap, which forms part of the

recommendations on the report. The HRA Business Plan is an annual requirement from Welsh Government (WG) as part of the annual submission of the Major Repairs Allowance (MRA) grant application.

The Scrutiny Committee sought clarification and further information on the Major Repairs Allowance, particularly in relation as to what it can be used for. The Head of Housing advised Members that the Major Repairs Allowance is given to all stock owning local authorities, on an annual basis, which can be used on a number of areas for general repairs and is allocated accordingly. The Principal Group Accountant for Housing highlighted that the Major Repairs Allowance cannot be used for anything other than HRA assets and is essentially to maintain the WHQS programme.

A query was raised as to what controls have been put in place following the completion of the WHQS Programme. In response, the Scrutiny Committee was advised of the Planned Asset Management Programme which looks at the life expectancy of a number of areas of work, including roofs, doors and windows and a planned programme of works that is developed to address each area. The Committee was assured that an area will be reviewed where there is a significant issue. Reference was made to the new WHQS 2023 which will dictate the Planned Asset Management Strategy going forward, with a focus on decarbonisation and affordable warmth. In response to a further query, Members were assured that the WHQS works were subject to a programme of checks. All works were signed off throughout the programme, and in addition a percentage of works received a post completion inspection. It was highlighted that all properties are part of the long-term maintenance programme.

Reference was made to the report detailing the level of bad debts and voids and a concern was raised regarding properties that are empty for long periods of time without any ongoing works taking place. The Head of Housing acknowledged that this is a core issue in terms of the level of properties that need to be brought back into circulation as quickly as possible. It was highlighted that Officers are keen to improve the standard of works carried out, so this is taking longer to complete. Members were informed that there are around 100 void properties out of nearly 10,700, so the number is reasonable but is under review with the aim to improve the turnaround. In response to the Members request for information on the average length of voids, the Principal Group Accountant for Housing advised that it would depend on the type of void, however a breakdown could be provided subsequent to the meeting. Information was sought on the length of time to buyback properties and if they have to be brought up to WHQS standards before they can be used as part of housing stock. In response, the Scrutiny Committee was advised that these properties have to go through the conveyancing process and then there are varying amounts of works required, so it is difficult to provide a timescale. However, Members were assured that resources are being redirected from other areas to ensure they are brought into supply as soon as possible.

Reference was made to the assumptions in the report, particularly in relation to rent increases, and a question was raised regarding the forecast to increase at CPI plus 1% for the next 5 years. The Head of Housing informed the Scrutiny Committee that the HRA Business Plan is produced on an annual basis and the rent increase is governed by Welsh Government, who are currently reviewing their five-year strategy. Members were advised that a forecast has been undertaken with the information currently held as it is prudent to have a sustainable business plan. It was explained that any future changes will need to be addressed in future iterations of the business plan. The plan seeks to predict CPI plus 1% which is technically the maximum allowed for a rent increase, although there is an allowance for an extra £2.00 if trying to merge or converge rents – which is not happening at the moment. In conclusion it was confirmed that there is a 30-year plan, however it is updated every year as and when new information is available.

Following consideration of the report it was moved and seconded that the recommendations be approved. By way of Microsoft Forms voting (and in noting there were 9 for, 0 against and 2 abstentions) this was agreed by the majority present.

Members of the Committee acknowledged and considered the 2023/24 Housing Business Plan prior to its approval by Cabinet on the 8<sup>th</sup> March 2023, and its submission to WG by the 31<sup>st</sup> March 2023.

RECOMMENDED that Cabinet: -

1. Approve the submission of the report to Council to request an extension of the HRA borrowing cap to £100m as a result of higher than anticipated inflation to maintain services and to progress with the new build programme. A provisional date for Council has been set for 23<sup>rd</sup> May 2023.

## **8. FUTURE OF CAERPHILLY HOMES TASK GROUP**

The Cabinet Member for Housing presented the report for Members to consider and agree the future of Caerphilly Homes Task Group (CHTG) due to the completion of the Welsh Housing Quality Standard (WHQS) Programme and future work of Caerphilly Homes, prior to presentation at Cabinet on the 8<sup>th</sup> March 2023 and thereafter Council on the 23<sup>rd</sup> May 2023. The Cabinet Member for Housing placed on record his thanks to the Caerphilly Homes Task Group who have contributed to the success and completion of the WHQS programme.

A Member of the Scrutiny Committee noted the ways of engaging with tenants/contract holders which are currently in place or will be in the next financial year and a question was raised as to how Councillors will be involved. Members were advised that although the report focusses on tenant/contract holder engagement there will be significant consultation taking place, for example WHQS 2023, where Councillors will be involved. The Committee was further advised of an area of involvement with the Head of Housing and Cabinet Member for Housing in the tenant information exchange groups, where tenants will have a direct link which can then be reported back to the Scrutiny Committee. In response to the Members query regarding a co-opted position on the Scrutiny Committee for a tenant or contract holder representative, Members were advised that this is not something proposed.

Assurance was sought that the Communication Strategy will allow for consultation with tenants who do not have access to the internet or social media. The Head of Housing advised Members that the Council will use a variety of communication methods including newsletters, surveys and day surgeries. It was highlighted that communication is not just reliant on e-mail, although this method is the most efficient.

Further details were requested in relation to various existing and potential new methods to be explored by Caerphilly Homes for engagement with tenant/contract holders now and in the future. The Housing Officer referred the Committee to the section of the report which detailed ways of engaging with tenants /contract holders which are currently in place or will be in the next financial year and shows a significant level of involvement with more to come as plans for WHQS 2023 are developed. The Committee was advised that a special meeting of Caerphilly Homes Task Group was held in July 2022 following the completion of the WHQS programme to review the achievements and challenges, whilst also celebrating its successful conclusion. The Cabinet Member for Housing stated that all Councillors regularly speak to tenants and the housing issues reported are fed back to the Housing Department.

A Member commented on the ongoing WHQS works for a sheltered accommodation complex in his ward and asked if there are any other complexes in the borough where WHQS works have not been completed. The Head of Housing advised the Scrutiny Committee that there were exclusions for works that were over and above the WHQS criteria, and this applied to five sheltered housing complexes which required longer term programmes of work. Reference was made to a previous question and Members were asked to note that they do have an impact on void figures and have to be excluded from true voids to get an accurate figure.

In response to a Members query, the Head of Housing advised the Committee that there are no plans to have a Task Group for WHQS 2023 and that the consultation process will be outlined and specified by Welsh Government. Tenant representation will be sought in any discussion on the new consultation framework that will need to be developed for WHQS 2023. This will start later in the next financial year as Welsh Government announce plans.

Clarification was sought regarding the timescale for WHQS 2023, and the Head of Housing advised the Scrutiny Committee that as the original timeline from Welsh Government indicated that WHQS 2023 would have been launched last month, which was not the case, it is understood Welsh Government will announce their plans imminently.

Following consideration of the report it was moved and seconded that the recommendations be approved. By way of Microsoft Forms voting (and in noting there were 10 for, 0 against and 0 abstentions) this was unanimously agreed.

RECOMMENDED that Cabinet: -

1. Approve the discontinuation of CHTG, for the reasons stated within the report. A special meeting was held in July 22 with the Repairs and Improvement Group and tenant members of CHTG following the completion of the WHQS programme to review the achievements and challenges, whilst also celebrating its successful conclusion.
2. Commend the CHTG for the contribution it has made towards achieving the Welsh Housing Quality Standard.
3. Acknowledge and approve the various existing and potential new methods to be explored by Caerphilly Homes for engagement with tenant/contract holders now and in the future. The proposals for effective and meaningful engagement will enable more tenants/contract holders to have an opportunity to express views and be consulted on the future direction of Caerphilly Homes.

The meeting closed at 6.20 pm.

Approved as a correct record and subject to any amendments or corrections agreed and recorded in the minutes of the meeting held on 18<sup>th</sup> July 2023, they were signed by the Chair.

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CHAIR