



CAERPHILLY HOMES TASK GROUP (WELSH QUALITY HOUSING STANDARD)

**MINUTES OF THE MEETING HELD AT PENALLTA HOUSE, YSTRAD MYNACH
(SIRHOWY ROOM)
ON THURSDAY 6TH DECEMBER 2012 AT 5:00PM**

PRESENT:

R.T. Davies - Chair
A. Lewis - Vice Chair

TASK GROUP MEMBERS:

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

Officers: N. Barnett (Deputy Chief Executive), P. Davy (Head of Programmes, Housing), S. Couzens (Head of Housing Services), G. North (Public Sector Housing Manager), R. Lewis (Systems and Performance Manager) S. Isaacs (Rents Manager/Housing Leader Welfare Reform Team), D. Regan (Lead Officer Benefits and Finance Welfare Reform Team) and E. Sullivan (Committee Services Officer).

1. APOLOGIES

An apology for absence was received from Councillor R.T. Davies, due to a previous commitment he had to leave the meeting early.

In the absence of the Chair, Mrs A. Lewis (Vice Chair) presided as Chairman for this meeting.

2. DECLARATIONS OF INTEREST

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

3. MINUTES

RESOLVED that the minutes of the meeting held on 25th October 2012 be approved as a correct record and signed by the Vice Chair.

4. KITCHEN DESIGN SOFTWARE PRESENTATION

The presentation demonstrated the new design software and its operation and capabilities were detailed for Members information.

It was noted that prior to the software purchase the design team would visit a tenant, take measurements and then return to the office where they would prepare the plans. Surveyors would now be able to take the new system out to the tenant, allowing them to design their kitchens in their own homes. Photo-realistic diagrams would be instantly available to view and would allow the tenant to change colours, handles and finishes at the touch of a button and see the changes simultaneously. Once completed a 3-dimensional plan would be provided for them to keep. Officer's confirmed that all kitchen finishes and units would available to tenants would be incorporated in the software and all options were also available to those tenant's in sheltered accommodation.

Officers were confident that the new software would help to sell the improvements to tenants whilst improving the process for surveyors.

Members thanked the Officer for the presentation and were impressed by the design capabilities of the software.

The reasons for refusal were discussed at length and it was noted that many tenants simply do not want the mess and disruption caused by the improvement work, but with the encouragement and support of the Tenant Liaison Officers it was hoped that fewer refusals would arise.

Members requested that the software be publicised in the next edition of the Caerphilly Newsline in order to increase tenant interest. The use of 'show homes' was discussed as a method of engaging tenants and it was noted that certain void properties had been renovated and opened for view.

Clarification was sought as to whether redecoration work would be undertaken as part of the main bathroom and kitchen improvements. Officers confirmed that this was currently under discussion.

Concerns were expressed that elderly tenants may be more apprehensive about change particularly if it means moving out of their homes to enable the work to be done. Officers confirmed that the Tenant Liaison Officer would work with elderly tenants offering advice and support and would be their first point of contact regarding the improvement works.

It was noted that some tenant's might initially refuse the improvements and then change their minds after seeing the finished product in another tenants home and Members sought clarification as to how this would be accommodated. Officer's confirmed that they could be picked up on an individual basis.

The Task Group noted and approved the new kitchen design software.

5. PROGRESS REPORT SHELTERED HOUSING REVIEW

The report updated Members on the progress of the Sheltered Housing Review and the role of the Older Persons Housing Group.

Members were advised that the introduction of the Supporting People Strategy would have a significant impact on the funding available for the provision of warden support services and the Council's Supporting People Team were working with the Housing Department to ensure that services were fit for purpose and met the needs of the most vulnerable tenants.

In order to ensure independent focus on the review process an external consultant, Ridgeway Associates, was appointed and were heavily involved with tenants throughout the consultation process. Face to face consultation meetings in each of the Sheltered Accommodation Schemes were organised and presentations were made with the support and assistance of a Tenant Representative and Tenant and Community Involvement Team Officers.

The response from tenants following the presentations had been very positive, and they welcomed the opportunity to be involved in discussions at such an early stage. Questionnaires were sent out to over 5000 people, as part of the consultation process and regular newsletters would ensure that tenants are kept up to date as the process progresses.

Officers confirmed that a sheltered housing toolkit had been developed in partnership with WLGA to assist organisations undertaking reviews of their sheltered housing provision and Caerphilly would be part of this pilot. Member's attention was drawn to a copy of the presentation and handouts given to tenants during the consultation process as detailed in Appendix 1 and Appendix 2 of the report.

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

A Member raised concerns that tenants were still feeling apprehensive and unsure of the review process despite receiving the presentation and handouts and were concerned with regard to the changes to the supporting people team and the forthcoming assessment process.

Officer's confirmed that all tenants had been met face-to-face, along with family, friends and local ward members and feedback had been very positive. Particular care had been taken to ensure that tenants understood the consultation process and to reassure and support them throughout.

A Member acknowledged the positive feedback that she had received from tenants and felt that everyone had understood the information as it had been presented in plain terms and fully explained. It was also noted that all questions had been recorded and had demonstrated that tenants had fully understood the process.

Reassurances were given that every effort was being made to listen to tenants and to design a package that would best meet their needs.

Clarification was sought in relation to the assessment of sheltered accommodation tenants and whether Wardens would be participating in the process. Officer's confirmed that no decisions had been made in this regard, however it was noted that specialist training would be provided to those carrying out the assessments to ensure they had all the skills necessary. It was noted there were a lot of options going forward but they would be dependent on the outcome of the consultation process.

The Task Group noted the progress of the Sheltered Housing Review.

6. WELFARE REFORM ACT

The report provided an update on the impact of the welfare reform changes and the actions taken to support tenants and residents within the Caerphilly County borough.

Members noted that the UK Government was reducing the amount of housing benefit some people can claim based on the size of the rented property and the number of people who live there. These new rules applied to tenants of working age and introduced strict criteria on the number of bedrooms allowed. It was noted that 2397 tenants would be affected under the occupation benefit changes and 564 were under occupying by 2 rooms or more and 1833 under occupying by 1 room. Based on average rent levels a tenant under occupying by one room would have to pay an additional £10.00 per week and those by two rooms £20.00 per week.

It was noted that the Authority might not have a sufficient supply of 1 and 2 bedroom properties to cope with demand for downsizing. If tenants wished to consider down-sizing it might not be possible for them to stay within the same area.

Members were also updated on the Benefit's Cap and new Council Tax Support Scheme. The Benefit Cap comes into force from April 2013 and would mean that households where no one is in work should not get more in benefits than the average wage paid to people in work. It was noted that the actual amount of the cap had not yet been set. Officers confirmed that Council Tax Support replaces Council Tax Benefit and the responsibility for helping people with their Council tax bills was being transferred to Welsh Government.

The key communication and support activities to raise awareness of the changes were detailed for Members information. It was noted that the website had been updated with detailed information on the changes and direct contact had been made with tenants who were over-occupying. The Benefits section had sent letters to housing benefit claimants renting in the social sector and Officers had been working with Caerphilly CAB to provide basic budgeting and financial management skills to tenants.

Officers confirmed that although the full extent of the Welfare Reform changes were unclear at present it could result in tenants having to contribute an additional £1.4M each year. In relation to the Benefits Cap indications show that 90 households in Caerphilly were likely to be affected with each household receiving an average weekly loss of £77.00. In terms of Council Tax Support it was estimated that 20,600 Council Benefit claimants of whom 16,500 pay nothing towards their council tax, would now have to pay something.

The Chair thanked the Officers for their report and full discussion ensued.

Concerns were expressed with regard to change over to on-line/digital benefit applications and the skills and technology required to make an application. Officers confirmed that every effort was being made to assist claimants and they were working with partners at Community First in order to develop the skills required to make a claim. Members were reminded that Caerphilly Libraries offered the highest number of accessible pc's and were part of the project going forward, staff there would also be trained to provide support and guidance.

Members were updated on Caerphilly's part in the Universal Credit Task Group and the work they would be doing over the next three year. It was noted that Caerphilly were leading the way in terms of engaging with residents and supporting them through this period of change. The role of Digital Champions and the importance of community involvement was acknowledged and Members applauded the efforts made by the Welfare Reform Team.

The social disruption caused by the reforms was discussed at length and concerns were expressed with regard to tenants having to move in order to avoid the under-occupancy. Members were also concerned that tenants and residents who do not wish to move may find they have no choice and may also be faced with moving away from an area in which they have lived for many years. Officers acknowledged the difficulties facing tenants and residents and advised Members that every effort would be made to support them to stay in their homes if this was their choice. Members were urged to advise any one with concerns to contact the Welfare Reform Team and confirmed that in most cases they were able to identify additional savings. Members were advised of the work being done with regard to energy issues and noted that energy efficiencies could be secured through the Healthy Homes project.

Clarification was sought with regard to the Discretionary Housing Payment. Officers confirmed that final guidance had not been received from DWP but the payment would only be a temporary solution in order to support the most vulnerable.

Members expressed concerns with regard to the impact the reforms would have on the individual and the community. Officer's confirmed that they would continue to work with tenants and residents to raise awareness and offer support and assistance.

The Task Group having fully considered its content noted the report.

7. COMMUNICATION STRATEGY FOR HOUSING SERVICE

The Deputy Chief Executive advised that since the production of the report, Mrs Rosemary Matthews, Communication Manager had left the Authority. Members of the Task Group joined with the Deputy Chief Executive in thanking Mrs Matthews for all her hard work to date and wished her well in her future endeavours.

The report outlined the comprehensive communication strategy and brand identity for the Housing Service. The purpose of the strategy was detailed and Members noted that its aim would be to ensure that the public, professionals, partner organisations and all key stakeholders were informed and engaged with the WHQS programme going forward.

Members noted the action plan as detailed in section 4.4 of the report and the key areas of work were confirmed. Officers confirmed that tenants involvement in the process would be vital to its success and further engagement activities would be scheduled as the programme progressed.

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

The role of contractors was discussed and Members agreed that their cooperation and participation in the programme would be key to its success, as contractors they would have to understand and deliver the same standard of customer care as the in-house work force.

The Task Group having full considered the contents of the report noted the Communication Strategy for the Housing Service.

8. WHQS PROGRAMME MONITORING REPORT

The report informed Members of the proposed monitoring arrangements to ensure that all necessary actions were being taken to deliver the investment on time and fulfil the commitments made in the offer document.

Officers detailed the use of the Keystone Asset Management System and how it would be used to generate regular progress reports and provide a performance framework that would monitor budgets and timescales to ensure good outcomes for tenants. Examples of the types of data generated were presented for Members information and graphical representations of the key indicators were illustrated. Officers confirmed how they would be used to identify target areas and provide a quick a reference guide for Managers. The use of a traffic light system (red, amber, green) to provide a clear and easy marker on how a particular project was progressing and flag up any issues was noted.

Officers confirmed that the system would also allow Managers to drill down for more detailed information if required.

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

Members were concerned that actual figures were not being quoted on the diagrams shown and Officers confirmed that the models presented were examples of how the data coming forward could be presented and used to highlight any areas of slippage against the programme timetable, however they would be happy to add the detail requested.

Clarification was sought with regard to the recording of quality issues and the Officer confirmed now qualitative information would be collected and then incorporated into the data coming forward. Members noted the positive response rates to post reply paid survey cards.

The Task Group having fully considered its content noted the report.

9. HRA GARAGES

The report outlined the review of HRA garages and the proposals for the repair and rationalisation of the stock.

Officers confirmed that there were currently 1263 garages within the Housing Revenue Account of which 30% were void and only 20% were rented by Council tenants. The condition of the garage stock varied dramatically with some in a very poor condition, attracting anti-social behaviour whilst others were in a very good condition and had been very well maintained.

The review provided a complete picture of the garages sites and formed the basis for the site-specific proposals detailed in Appendix 1 of the report. Members noted that the portfolio generates an income to the HRA of around £440,000 but the high level of voids showed a loss of around £130,000 income per annum. The different options for consideration given the mixed picture of the stock were outlined and Officers confirmed that as the garages formed an integral part of the housing estates, ownership should remain with the Council. There was however a need to rationalise the portfolio and reduce the size of the stock through selective demolition of poor condition garages on low demand sites, repair and improve the stock which is to be retained and consider piloting the provision of some new garages built to a larger size that was more suited to a modern vehicle.

Members noted that the garages in the Risca area were to be given priority, as 30% of the total stock was located here with a low occupancy level. Financial provision for the rationalisation programme had been incorporated into the WHQS Business Plan with £582,000 relating to demolition and clearance costs. Officers confirmed that high costs for demolition were associated with the asbestos content of the roofing materials used on some garages.

Officers confirmed that the programme of works would be undertaken by the Council's in-house workforce supplemented where necessary with contractors for the demolition, removal and disposal of the asbestos. Members were advised that all Local Ward Members had been contacted, as part of the consultation process, to which there had only been a limited response.

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

The difference between garage plots and garage sites was discussed and Members requested that a report on garage plots be presented as a future agenda item.

Members agreed that this was an ideal opportunity to invest in garage stock and revitalise garage sites as part of the WHQS environmental improvements.

The Caerphilly Homes Task Group having considered its content fully endorsed the report and recommended that the Cabinet Sub-Committee approve the recommendations as detailed in section 8.1 of the report:

- (1) A comprehensive programme for the HRA Garages be approved and recommendations set out in the appendix for individual sites be adopted.

- (2) That a rolling programme commences in 2013/14 with priority being given to the garages in Risca as 30% of the stock is located here with a low occupancy level.

Approved as a correct record subject to any amendments or corrections agreed and recorded in the minutes of the Caerphilly Homes Task Group Meeting held on Thursday 21st February 2013

The meeting closed at 7:25 pm.

CHAIRMAN