



**CAERPHILLY HOMES TASK GROUP
(WELSH QUALITY HOUSING STANDARD)**

**MINUTES OF THE MEETING HELD AT PENALLTA HOUSE, YSTRAD MYNACH
(RHYMNEY ROOM)
ON THURSDAY 21ST FEBRUARY 2013 AT 5:00PM**

PRESENT:

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

TASK GROUP MEMBERS

Ms. L. Ackerman, C. Davies, K. James, G. Jones, Mrs S. Jones, L. Lewis, Mrs A. McConnell, C.P. Mann, 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), J. Roberts-Waite (Strategic Coordination Manager), G. North (Public Sector Housing Manager), S. Isaacs (Senior Rents Officer), L. Allen (Principal Accountant) and E. Sullivan (Committee Services Officer).

1. APOLOGIES

Apologies for absence were received from Mr. B. Hoskins and Mrs D. Price.

2. DECLARATIONS OF INTEREST

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

3. MINUTES

RESOLVED that the minutes of the meeting held on the 6th December 2013 be approved as correct records and signed by the Chairman.

4. MATTERS ARISING

Minute No. 6 - Welfare Reform Act

Members were advised that since the last meeting Welsh Government had agreed to meet the shortfall in terms of Council Tax Support and Caerphilly residents would remain unaffected during this forthcoming financial year. Although it was unclear whether this funding would

continue into future years, Members welcomed the news, as this had been an issue of concern for residents.

4. PROGRESS REPORT - SHELTERED HOUSING REVIEW

The report provided Members with an update on the progress made in respect of the Sheltered House Review, in order to develop improved services for sheltered housing tenants and other older tenants.

Officers confirmed that the review process had been completed within the approved timescale and full details, together with proposals would be presented at the next Task Group meeting on the 4th April 2013.

Members noted the extensive consultation process undertaken and were pleased to see the level of response achieved.

The Task Group thanked the Officer for his report and having fully considered its content noted the report.

5. EMPTY PROPERTY MANAGEMENT

The report updated and clarified the re-let standard, decoration allowances, tenant satisfaction rates, refusal rates and empty property void periods.

The data presented on tenant satisfaction and refusal rates was detailed and Members noted the number and reasons for refusal between the 1st May 2012 and the 31st December 2012 against the number of offers made during the same period. Officers confirmed that this gave a 37% rate of refusals to offers, which equated to 1 out of every 3 properties offered being refused.

The void property performance management data was outlined and the average void period was noted to be 37 days.

The Chair thanked the Officer for his report and Members questions were welcomed.

Members were mindful that the Lettings Standard had not been reviewed since 2009 and felt it would be a good idea to review the document at this time. Officer's confirmed that they would be happy to meet with tenants and discuss standards. It was agreed that a further report detailing the outcome of those discussions be brought back to a future Task Group meeting.

Members referred to the reasons for refusal table and noted that the greatest number of refusals fell into the 'other reason' category but gave no further detail. Clarification was sought as to the possibility of creating an additional category that would provide a clearer picture of the reasons e.g. if access was an issue. Officer's confirmed that they would be looking at changing codes in order to capture more information and better define the reasons for refusal.

Clarification was sought in relation to the average void period. Officer's confirmed the target to be 40 days and advised that Caerphilly operated below that figure with 37 calendar days as the average. Members were advised that the void period depended heavily on the standard of the re-let and how much work was required in order to get a tenant into the property. The importance of getting the correct balance between achieving a good standard of re-let against the loss of rental income was noted.

Reference was made to the Fair Start Scheme and clarification was sought as to the qualifying criteria. Officer's confirmed that this was the responsibility of Area Housing Officers and they would, depending on the circumstances decide whether 1 room or the whole house would be redecorated under the scheme. It was noted that the budget for this facility was limited and contractors tendered for the work.

Clarification was sought as to whether tenants would be asked to occupy a property whilst repair work was still required. Officer's confirmed that they would try not to do so, but this would depend on the nature of the works required, if it was just a matter of very minor work that would not have a detrimental impact on the tenant, then it might be considered to be acceptable.

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

6. HOUSING REVENUE ACCOUNT AND CAPITAL BUDGET MONITORING 2012-2013

The report provided information on the Housing Revenue Account including the Capital expenditure for 2012/2013 and informed Members of the pending merger of the Building Maintenance DLO into the HRA from April 2013.

Members noted the anticipated final outturn for the HRA (including Capital), within the Deputy Chief Executives Directorate, based on the expenditure and income trends for the first seven months of the financial year.

Members' attention was drawn to Appendix 1 and 2 of the report and the financial implications noted in section 6 of the report were summarised for information.

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

7. HOUSING REVENUE ACCOUNT CHARGES - 2013-2014

The report informed Members of the increased charges which were to be effective for the Housing Revenue Account in 2013-2014.

Officers confirmed that Welsh Government determines the annual guideline rent increases and noted that final figures were yet to be confirmed but in order to ensure the Council's business plan remains viable an increase of 4% was necessary.

Service charges at sheltered complexes were detailed and Members noted the proposed increases referenced in section 4.2 of the report. The utility charges at sheltered complexes were fully explained and Officers confirmed that providers had suggested that there would be large increases in energy costs from January 2013, typically 8.8% for gas and 9.1% for electricity. The proposed increase would generate additional income of some £36K although this would be passed direct to the utility providers.

Members were asked to note the reports recommendations and any questions in relation to the revenue account charges were welcomed.

Clarification was sought in relation to the percentage increase and number of units that would be affected by the increase in utility charges. Officers confirmed that this would be 4% in total with 400 units charged in this way.

Concerns were expressed in relation to the rent increase and the impact that this would have on pensioners that were not eligible for housing benefit. Officers confirmed that Welsh Government set the rent increases and reminded Members that the Business Plan for WHQS

was based on rent income, the proposed increase was necessary in order to ensure the programme of investment going forward.

Members were advised any residents with concerns about benefit eligibility contact the Rents Department on 01495 235600 to access the services of the Income Maximisation Officer, who would assist them in identifying any benefits that they may be entitled to claim and provide assistance in completing the necessary forms.

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

8. HOUSING ALLOCATIONS SCHEME - WELFARE REFORM IMPLICATIONS

The report sought to inform Members of the aspects of the Welfare Reform Act that impacted upon the Council's Housing Allocations Scheme.

Officers' confirmed that an analysis of the impact of the Welfare Reform Act had been conducted on a ward-by-ward basis and this had identified that 22% of tenants were under-occupying their homes. The rules of the allocation scheme were outlined and Members noted that the points awarded to prioritise applications included under-occupation for existing tenants, affordability and penalty points for housing debts. Reference was made to the table detailed in section 3.9 of the report, which highlighted the specific parts of the allocations scheme affected.

The impact of the Act on the different points of the policy was outlined and possible actions to mitigate the impact were proposed.

In terms of 'Housing Debts' it was noted that tenants in arrears had their points reduced and this worsens the tenants' prospects of a transfer. Unfortunately it could prove to be the case that some tenants' arrears may be as a direct consequence of benefit cuts under the bedroom tax rules. Discretion would need to be used under such circumstances to ensure that transfer delays were not experienced and as a result the accumulation of further debts.

The impact on 'Housing Offers' was explained and it was noted that there might be instances where the Council would be offering properties to tenants that met their criteria but would also leave them under occupying. Officers confirmed that new tenants would be advised prior to sign up, of the implications of under occupancy. Reference was made to in the introduction of an 'Affordability Test', an option already being introduced by some Housing Associations. Officers advised that at the moment this Council would not be making any judgements with regard to affordability when making an offer of housing. Should a tenant feel that they would be able to afford to live in the proposed property then the offer would be made. Officer's confirmed that additional bad debt tolerances had been built into the budget with regard to under occupancy but this would need to be closely monitored.

Members noted that current 2-bed provision was not adequate to meet the expected level of need and there were very few 1-bed properties available outside older persons provision. Officers confirmed that a review of smaller accommodation provision would be required going forward. Mutual exchanges were explained and the opportunities for tenants utilising the Homeswapper scheme noted. Officers confirmed that there had been an increase in take-up with a lot more people registering on the scheme.

The impact of the Act on performance monitoring was fully explained and Officers confirmed that although the current target for transfers of between 15%-18% of all lettings was being met, this was unlikely to continue due to the expected increase in tenants requesting transfer.

The age for children sharing a room had also been amended from age 8 to age 10 in order to comply with the Welfare Reform Act. The points awarded in terms of social factors were detailed and reference was made to the Discretionary Housing Payment, which provided

tenants experiencing difficulties, a temporary financial contribution to their rent payments.

The impact on single persons with access was noted and Officer's confirmed that they would not receive housing benefit under the WRA for a child's bedroom. Members were advised that this situation would be monitored and if necessary a policy amendment would be considered. The award of discretionary points in exceptional circumstances was fully explained and the changes to the local lettings rules were confirmed.

Officers confirmed that the purpose of the amendments was to try and assist tenants affected by the Welfare Reform Act to move home should they choose to do so and further update reports would be brought back to the Task Group to ensure that Members were fully informed of the outcomes of the changes once implemented.

The Chair thanked the Officer for his report and Members questions were welcomed.

Members noted the action being taken in order to mitigate the impact of the WRA on tenants and welcomed the proposed changes.

Discussion around the taking in of lodgers in order to offset under occupancy was discussed and Members expressed concern with regard to the safety of inviting a stranger to share your home. Consideration was given to implementing a vetting scheme and reference was made to the 'House Share Wales' model.

The 'Homeswapper' scheme was commended and options to encourage tenants to move or exchange properties, including incentive schemes were fully discussed. Officer's were mindful of the equalities implications that could arise and emphasised the importance of ensuring that all tenants were treated equally.

Members expressed concern that some tenants, particularly older people, may want to move into smaller properties but were prohibited by the costs of moving and returning the property to a condition suitable for re-let. Officers acknowledged the concerns raised and confirmed that in exceptional circumstances, consideration could be given to providing financial assistance.

The Task Group having fully considered the contents noted the report.

9. WHQS PROGRAMME - CHARTER FOR TRUST

The report informed Members of the content and purpose of the WHQS Programme Charter for Trust and sought their recommendation to the Cabinet Sub-Committee (WHQS) for the approval of the Charter for Trust Working Arrangements and Protocols.

The protocols document set out the expected standards that would be observed by the workforce and tenants while the working arrangement document set out the general information that would be particularly pertinent to contractors. Members were advised that emphasis would be placed on the role of the Tenant Liaison Officer as the main point of contact for tenants and leaseholders before, during and after any works.

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

All Members of the Task Group agreed that the Charter for Trust was an excellent step forward and thanked the tenants for all their hard work during the consultation process.

The Task Group having considered its content, fully endorsed the report and recommended that the Cabinet Sub Committee approve the Charter for Trust Protocols and Working Arrangements as detailed in Appendix 1 and 2.

10. COMMUNITY IMPROVEMENT FUND

The report detailed the criteria and mechanics for the operation of the Community Improvement Fund and sought recommendation to the Cabinet Sub Committee (WHQS) for the approval of the scheme.

The establishment of a Community Improvement Fund was intended to foster community development by enabling community and tenant groups to bid for funding to support local initiatives and projects. An annual budget of £50,000 had been set-aside over a period of 5 years and would provide a maximum grant of up to £5,00 per project proposal.

Applications would be initially assessed for their suitability and then submitted to the Caerphilly Homes Task Group for a decision. Officers confirmed that the fund would come into operation from April 2013 and would be administered on a first come first served basis.

The Chair thanked the Officer for this report and Members questions were welcomed.

Members referred to the comments made during the consultation process with regard to the 'first come first served' approach and the issues raised in this regard. Officers confirmed that this approach had been advocated to encourage spend against the fund. Members fully discussed the advantages and disadvantages in awarding on a 'first come, first served basis' and felt that in order to ensure that the fund was operating to its fullest potential it should be reviewed after its first twelve months of operation.

The Task Group having considered its content, fully endorsed the report and recommended that the Cabinet Sub Committee (WHQS) approve the Community Improvement Fund grant scheme subject to a review after the first 12 months of the schemes operation.

Approved as a correct record subject to any amendments or corrections agreed and recorded in the minutes of the meeting held on Thursday 4th April 2013.

The meeting closed at 6:50 pm.

CHAIRMAN