



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

**MINUTES OF THE MEETING HELD AT PENALLTA HOUSE, YSTRAD MYNACH
(SIRHOWY ROOM) ON THURSDAY 4TH APRIL 2013 AT 5:00 PM**

PRESENT:

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

TASK GROUP MEMBERS

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

OBSERVING

Councillor C. Durham

Officers: N. Barnett (Acting Chief Executive), P. Davy (Head of Programmes, Housing),
S. Couzens (Head of Housing Services), G. North (Public Sector Housing Manager),
V. Parsons (Supported Housing Manager) and E. Sullivan (Committee Services Officer).

CHAIRMAN'S ANNOUNCEMENT

It was with regret that the Chairman announced the resignation of Mr. L. Lewis from the Task Group. All Members joined the Chair in thanking Mr Lewis for all the time and effort that he had invested on behalf of tenants and requested that a formal letter of thanks be sent to him.

1. APOLOGIES

Apologies for absence were received from N. Scammell and J. Roberts-Waite.

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 21st February 2013 be approved as correct records and signed by the Chairman.

4. PRESENTATION ON SHELTERED HOUSING REVIEW BY RIDGEWAY ASSOCIATES CONSULTING LTD

Mrs Althea Howarth provided a presentation on the review of the Council's Sheltered Housing Service undertaken by Ridgeway Associates Consulting Limited.

The review sought to develop an evidence base and propose an option for service delivery that identified an improved service delivery model for tenants in sheltered housing. The consultancy worked with the Older Persons' Housing Project Group to ensure that the views of tenants were heard and a wide-ranging consultation process was undertaken.

The background of the current service was detailed and key drivers for the review were outlined. A survey of residents aged 50+ had been undertaken and confirmed that tenants were currently satisfied with the service they received, however a significant number also expressed a need for a range of support services. Current provision being traditionally based on visits and calls provided reassurance to tenants but did not incorporate any housing related support or the outcome based support that commissioners required. This coupled with the projected increase in the 65+ and 85+ age groups would mean that the current service model would not be able to meet residents' needs and would not be able to deliver a high quality, sustainable service going forward.

The impact of changes to the Supporting People (SP) funding arrangements were outlined and Members noted that any future funding would be based on the assessed support needs of individual tenants and current SP funding over and above the costs for individual support services would be withdrawn. However the SP team had agreed to assist in creating a Floating Housing Support Service targeted at older people in the wider community who had an assessed need. It was noted that non-sheltered tenants surveyed as part of the 50+ review, also expressed a need for a range of support services. SP funding would also cover the appointment of an Activities Co-ordinator to increase the range of social/wellbeing activities and social interaction.

Members were advised that the current sheltered housing service was operating at a deficit and the importance of ensuring that the service was self-financing was emphasised. It was also vital that all charges be assessed in order to make them as open and transparent as possible.

The four different options for service delivery were listed and it was noted that option 4, introducing a 'cluster' based service delivery model was proposed as the favoured option going forward. The advantages of a 'cluster' based service were outlined and Members noted that this option would provide a consistent and flexible service that also met SP requirements. Services would be provided by the same local team, allowing tenants to become familiar with all the team members and by being based on assessed need would give the service user greater choice. The disadvantages were also detailed and Members were advised that some tenants might consider this to be a reduction in service, as they would no longer have one dedicated Warden per scheme. The model also required substantial amendments to working practices and this would be a big change for staff and tenants.

The vision for the 'cluster' service was confirmed and Members noted that staff would be on site at defined times giving tenants a structured schedule they could have confidence in and would be coupled with the 24 x 7 emergency community alarm response facility. Mrs Howarth advised that the number of 'Wardens' or 'Housing and Support Officers' working in each cluster would be determined by the number of assessed tenants and proposed six possible configurations. These were illustrated in a flow chart and map of the suggested geographical layout. Members also noted the proposed managerial provision and the importance this would have if the service were to achieve national accreditation standards.

Mrs Howarth confirmed that five of the present schemes had been excluded from the proposed 'clusters' and the reasons for this were detailed. The way that support services could be delivered was explained and proposed the introduction of a 'banded' rather than a flat rate service. The Bronze Service would provide an enhanced alarm service; the Silver Service would provide an enhanced alarm service plus a six monthly support planning meeting, up to one face to face visit and intercom calls per week according to assessed need and the Gold Service would provide this with the addition of an assessed package of support, up to 5 visits/intercom calls per week and liaison/meetings with referral agencies updated according to need. It was noted that the Bronze band would become a condition of tenancy for all sheltered housing accommodation.

Possible charges for the banded services were illustrated and the implications these would have for tenants explained. Members noted the potential impact for self-paying tenants and for those not eligible for SP funding. The financial perspective was given and the present income and expenditure budgets confirmed a service charge deficit was in the region of £295,000. This figure included almost £136,000 of legacy funding from SP, which would not be available for this service in the future. Proposed charging arrangements for the new service model were illustrated and Members were advised that further detailed modelling would be required should the proposed changes be introduced.

Finally Members were asked to take into consideration that 79% of sheltered housing tenants were eligible for Housing Benefit, the current service was being subsidised by the Council at the expense of other tenants and the existing service did not meet the needs of the more vulnerable. The new model would provide considerable savings to the SP budget, be more professional, flexible and better targeted on those tenants who needed it, give clarity and transparency on charges and provide additional employment opportunities for frontline staff.

The Chair thanked Mrs Howarth for her presentation and for all the work done throughout the review process and advised Members that the full report by Ridgeway Associates would be circulated at the end of the meeting. Member's questions were welcomed.

Clarification was sought in relation to the configuration of the present Warden service, duties and responsibilities. Mrs Howarth confirmed that more detailed information was included in the main report. Clarification was sought in relation to the level of assistance that would be provided and it was confirmed that service users would be assisted with correspondence, benefit claims, referrals and paying bills as part of the housing support package.

Clarification was sought in relation to the assessment process and who would be responsible for carrying out assessments. Officers confirmed that this would be the Housing Division based on the criteria set out by Supporting People.

In terms of the quality of the service provided and value for money Members sought clarification as to how this would be monitored. Officers confirmed that the quality of service delivery would be measured by the outcomes for the service user based on their support plans and charges would be robustly monitored to ensure they were comparable to other authorities and housing associations.

Members expressed concern that they were being asked to comment without having seen the full report. Officers acknowledged the concerns raised and confirmed that once Member's had a chance to read through the full report any questions or comments could be forwarded at any time to either Phil Davy or Shaun Couzens and would be incorporated into a further report that would be brought back to a future meeting of the Task Group. Reassurances were given that Wardens had been fully consulted throughout the review process and were aware of the contents of the report.

Members welcomed the review as the first step in providing a service for tenants that was fit for purpose and met the needs of its service users, however they emphasised the need to continue the consultation process with both staff and tenants going forward.

Clarification was sought in relation to how tenants would be supported to pay charges. Officer's confirmed that 79% of Sheltered Housing tenants were eligible for housing benefit, and would be supported by Supporting People, however about 20% were self-funding and would be affected by the proposed changes to the charging system.

Members requested that consideration be given to holding an annual meeting for tenants, officers and staff to get together and assess how services have embedded over the last 12 months. Officer's confirmed that this would not be a problem and advised that customer satisfaction would be a priority should the new service be implemented.

In relation to the final report Members were asked to treat its content sensitively, as at this stage in the review they were only being asked to receive the report as part of the consultation process. Due to the nature of the information contained within it and the fact that no decision had been made with regard to the future of the service it was vital that there was no misinterpretation of proposals presented.

Members acknowledged and agreed the sensitive nature of the report but were concerned that tenants and staff needed to be given feedback. Officers provided reassurances that both tenants and staff were aware of the reports findings due to the extent of the consultation that had taken place throughout the whole of the review process and confirmed that this had been done in an open and transparent way, which would continue.

The Task Group having fully considered its content noted the presentation and received the report on the review of the Sheltered Housing Service conducted by Ridgeway Associates.

5. SHELTERED HOUSING SERVICE - GAS AND ELECTRICITY UTILITY CHARGES

The report detailed the current arrangements for the collection of gas and electricity charges in Sheltered Housing accommodation in order to address any anomalies and ensure equitable arrangements across the county borough.

The different categories of schemes were outlined along with the current arrangements for gas and electricity costs and meters. The different types of systems and the associated contributions from tenants were detailed and Members noted the extent of the disparity between schemes and the amounts tenants were paying. Officers confirmed that the Older Persons Housing Group had been a major part of the consultation process and fully supported the changes in order to make charging fair to everyone. Tenants were not happy with the present arrangements and expected to see the change in charges coming forward. Officers confirmed that tenants would be assisted in maximising their income and would also be supported with the payment of bills should the new system be introduced.

Members noted the recommendations and were advised that the income generated by the increased charges would be passed directly onto the gas and electricity suppliers in order to cover the actual costs of the energy used. Officers confirmed that prior to any changes being made tenants would be fully consulted and advice would be sought from Legal Services, as tenants may need to be served with a notice of variation to their tenancy agreement.

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

Concerns were expressed that the increased charges might make older people reluctant to turn the heating on during cold weather. Officer acknowledged the concerns but advised that the heating in the single meter schemes would be controlled centrally safeguarding tenants health and wellbeing. Members were reminded that over 2500 older people lived in accommodation outside the sheltered service and had to cover the full costs of their heating and lighting needs.

Clarification was sought on the different types of heating systems and Officers confirmed the current position. The use of and access to electricity and gas meters was fully discussed and Members were advised that where possible the installation of individual meters had been looked at, however the costs and practicalities of installing individual meters did not make this a viable option in many cases.

Clarification was sought in relation to tariff arrangements and if anything could be done to ensure that the best price possible was negotiated with suppliers. Officers confirmed that those sheltered housing tenants already on a shared meter benefitted from the increased buying power of the local authority in securing the best utility rates possible and this would continue.

Clarification was sought in relation to the use of storage heaters and Officers confirmed that as part of an ongoing programme of improvement and energy efficiency all storage heaters were being replaced.

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 10.1, 10.2, 10.3 and 10.4 of the report:

6. SHELTERED HOUSING SERVICE - WATER RATES

The report detailed the current arrangements for the payment of water rates and proposed a future charging policy in order to address any anomalies and ensure equitable arrangements across the county borough.

The different categories of schemes were outlined along with the current arrangements for the collection of water rates. In order to ensure a consistent and fair approach the report proposed that all tenants on the schedule pay water rates based on the rateable value of the properties. It was noted that those tenants in schemes with single meters would be charged retrospectively based on the previous years charge plus an inflationary increase also being applied in order to bring them up to current cost levels.

Officers confirmed that prior to any changes being made tenants would be fully consulted and advice would be sought from Legal Services, as tenants may need to be served with a notice of variation to their tenancy agreement. A full Equalities Impact Assessment would also be required prior to implementation.

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

Clarification was sought in relation to the installation of individual water meters and Officer's confirmed that an appraisal would be undertaken with Welsh Water in order to determine the practicalities of installing individual meters where feasible.

Clarification was sought with regard to tenants that qualified under the Welsh Water Assist initiative. Officers confirmed that an information leaflet had been sent out to all tenants to ensure that those that needed help and were eligible had sufficient information to request a reduced charge. Members were reassured that support would be provided to those tenants wishing to make an application. Concerns were expressed with regard to tenants on a shared meter and Officers confirmed that this was under discussion with Welsh Water.

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 10.1, 10.2, 10.3, 10.4, 10.5, 10.6, 10.7, 10.8 and 10.9 of the report.

7. SHELTERED HOUSING SERVICE - STOCK APPRAISAL

The report provided an overview of the sheltered housing stock and a detailed appraisal of those schemes where facilities may no longer meet the needs of existing and future tenants.

The different categories of schemes were outlined and the stock appraisal process detailed. The current stock comprising of 1090 sheltered housing units had been built in the 1970's and 1980's, which meant that some buildings were now outdated and no longer able to meet tenants needs. Several had accessibility issues; lacked lifts to higher floors and these problems had been increasing over the years. The layout of certain units made the installation of specialist adaptations impossible and particular reference was made to the size and layout of bedsit accommodation, which were not suitable for assisted transfers to and from the bed area and given the increased care needs of service users this was not acceptable.

As a result of the survey four schemes had been prioritised for the proposed works and the approximately cost and scope of these works was outlined for Members information.

Officers were mindful of the renovation costs involved, the loss of rental revenue as a consequence of the improvement works and the need to ensure that any works being considered were tied into the WHQS programme. However if no action was taken to address the issues the properties would continue to be unfit for purpose and this situation would only worsen with the passage of time.

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

Members noted the three options for consideration in the reports recommendations and fully discussed the implications of each going forward.

Clarification was sought in relation to the lack of demand for the Ty Melin scheme. Officers confirmed that accommodation was provided over four floors with only stair access, the flats themselves were very small and had a bedsit layout and this was probably the primary reason for their unpopularity. However the scheme would be the subject of further investigations in order to assess its future viability. Members discussed the possible reasons for refusing bedsit accommodation further and agreed that if the purpose of the programme of works was to improve quality then retaining the bedsits in their present form was not the best option for the future of the service.

Officers confirmed that although some money had been allocated within the WHQS Business Plan it was not enough to address the conversion requirements as outlined. However all sheltered housing works would need to be looked at in terms of their impact on the WHQS programme.

The Caerphilly Homes Task Group having considered its content fully endorsed the report and recommended that the Cabinet Sub-Committee approve Option 3 as detailed in section 9.1.4 together with recommendations 9.1.5, 9.1.6 and 9.1.7 of the report.

Approved as a correct record subject to any amendments or corrections agreed and recorded in the minutes of the meeting held on Thursday 16th May 2013.

The meeting closed at 7:25pm

CHAIRMAN