



POLICY AND RESOURCES SCRUTINY COMMITTEE

MINUTES OF THE MEETING HELD AT PENALLTA HOUSE, YSTRAD MYNACH ON TUESDAY, 4TH MARCH 2014 AT 5.00 P.M.

PRESENT:

Councillor H.W. David - Chairman
Councillor Mrs J. Summers - Vice Chairman

Councillors:

L. Binding, C.J. Cuss, J.E. Fussell, C. Hawker, Ms J.G. Jones, G. Kirby, A. Lewis, C.P Mann, S. Morgan, D. Rees, J. Taylor.

Cabinet Members:

Mrs C. Forehead (HR & Governance/Business Manager), K.V. Reynolds (Corporate Services).

Together with:

N. Scammell (Acting Director of Corporate Services and Section 151 Officer), S. Harris (Acting Head of Corporate Finance), N. Akhtar (Group Accountant - Financial Advice and Support), S. Couzens (Head of Housing Services), S. Isaacs (Rents Manager), A. Main (Acting Benefits Manager), A. Veronese (Programme Manager/E. Gov Team Leader), S. Pugh (Communications Manager), E. Sharma (Consultation and Engagement Officer), C. Forbes-Thompson (Scrutiny Research Officer), S.M. Kauczok (Committee Services Officer).

1. APOLOGIES FOR ABSENCE

Apologies for absence had been received from Councillors D.G. Carter, Mrs E. Forehead and G. Jones.

2. DECLARATIONS OF INTEREST

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

3. MINUTES

RESOLVED that the minutes of the Policy and Resources Scrutiny Committee meeting held on 21st January 2014 (minute nos. 1 - 20, page nos. 1 - 11) be approved as a correct record and signed by the Chairman.

4. CALL-IN PROCEDURE

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

5. CABINET REPORTS

There had been no requests for any of the Cabinet reports to be brought forward for discussion at the meeting.

6. REPORT OF THE CABINET MEMBERS

Councillor Mrs C. Forehead, Cabinet Member for HR and Governance/Business Manager, presented her report to the Scrutiny Committee.

Councillor Forehead was pleased to inform Members that as part of the budget setting process, approval had been granted to uplift the Living Wage to the new rate of £7.65 per hour with effect from 1st November 2013. Arrangements had been made for the back payment of the arrears to be included in the March salary run. Not only did this allow the Council to maintain its Living Wage Employer status but it also provided a significant boost to the lowest paid in the organisation.

Councillor Forehead then gave an update on the 2014 Pay Award. The National Employers side had completed its regional briefings and negotiations with the Trade Unions had commenced. However, the Joint Trade Unions had lodged a dispute on the basis that the Employers side has yet to be able to table an offer. There had been a reference in the National Press to the National Employers linking pay to the minimum wage. Whilst this was not the case, there is no doubt that any increase in the national minimum wage will have an impact on the Authority's pay and grading structure and therefore, the pay negotiations. There will be no impact in Caerphilly as the Authority is already paying employees on spinal column point 5-10 a supplement to achieve the Living Wage. Councillor Forehead gave assurances that she would keep Members updated as the national negotiations continue.

The Scrutiny Committee then received an update on the budget situation from Councillor K.V. Reynolds who informed Members that the Authority is in a better position than many of its neighbouring authorities due to sound financial management.

The Council's IT Team is currently working on a major project which will see a revamp of the CCBC website. The new look site will be responsive and better focused on the needs of the end user. The Council is working in line with the 'Empowering Communities' agenda so that people are able to help themselves when accessing our online services. It was anticipated that the new site would be launched in the Autumn.

The parade in Risca on St David's Day, to help honour the 203 Welsh Field Hospital and mark their homecoming following deployment in Afghanistan, went extremely well. Thousands of local people had turned out to show their support and the event was featured extensively on TV and in the press. Members placed on record their thanks to all those who had been involved in organising such a successful day.

A Member queried the cost to re-develop the Council's website and was advised that the Council will use its own resources where possible. It was agreed that a report detailing the costs involved would be added to the forward work programme and presented to a future meeting of the scrutiny committee.

REPORTS OF OFFICERS

Consideration was given to the following reports.

7. WELFARE REFORM PROGRAMME UPDATE

The report provides an update of the progress of the Welfare Reform Programme. A Programme Board of senior officers and a steering group of officers from key service areas was established in July 2012 to oversee projects that would prepare the Authority and its residents for the changes. Progress on each of the seven projects included in the programme is set out in paragraphs 4.4 to 4.10 of the report. Information relating to Discretionary Housing Payments (DHP) is also provided.

Members discussed the report in detail and information was sought on how members of the public are being made aware of the information. Officers referred to the report dated 24th July 2013 (attached as Appendix 1), which contains detailed information of the numerous initiatives that have been undertaken to raise awareness of the wide-ranging changes to the welfare system.

Reference was made to Project 5 - Universal Credit Local Authority Led Pilot, which was delivered as part of the Welfare Reform Programme in the County Borough. The project was extended to December 2013 and the Final Evaluation Report submitted to DWP. The DWP is collating all the information and intends to publish a report on all the 12 pilots in May. In response to a query raised by a Member in relation to the resources allocated to the project, it was noted that the dedicated Project Manager who had been engaged to oversee the project, would be retained by the Authority for another 2 years as there is still a lot of work to cover in this area and around debt management. The Project Manager also sits on a Board that meets to discuss matters relating to Welfare Reform. Officers suggested that a seminar be held to give Members an opportunity to raise any issues they might have on the pilot activities and its outcomes. However, following discussion, it was agreed that it would be more appropriate for a report to be prepared for consideration at a meeting of the Policy and Resources Scrutiny Committee possibly in May.

Members asked whether they would receive feedback on the WAO Improvement Study on the impact of welfare reform specifically in housing. They were advised that the study, which would identify good practice in terms of Welfare Reform and assess the impact that the changes have had in Wales, is expected to be published in June and would be reported to the WG Public Accounts Committee.

Reference was then made to the employment options support, which is delivered in partnership with JCP. It was reported that the number of residents referred to the fast track employment access support has exceeded 200 and the outcomes have been very positive. In particular, thirty residents have found employment and 45 have accessed training.

The Scrutiny Committee noted the report.

8. UPDATE - HOUSING BENEFITS UNDER OCCUPATION RULES

The Chair welcomed Mr R. Davies representing Caerphilly and District Against the Bedroom Tax.

The report provides an update on the impact of the introduction of the Housing Benefits under occupation rules. In April 2013 there were 2181 Council tenants affected by the under-occupation changes. This figure had reduced to 2063 by the end of December 2013. The average loss in benefits for claimants was calculated as £10 a week for tenants under occupying by 1 bedroom and £20 a week for tenants under occupying by 2 bedrooms.

A number of recommendations were approved by Council on 19th November 2013 to mitigate the impact of the welfare reform changes. Two support staff were appointed in September 2012 to develop action plans and to assist council tenants. Two further officers were appointed to the same role in April 2013. As well as appointing four new members of staff to the rents team, a number of activities have been undertaken to ensure that frontline staff are aware of the reforms and are able to offer advice to tenants.

The DWP has recently announced that if a tenant has been occupying their home since 1996, has not moved house in this time and has been in receipt of Housing Benefit continuously, except for short breaks of less than 4 weeks, they will not be affected by the spare room subsidy from 1st April 2013. As at 14th February, 270 such cases had been identified and £86k had been refunded to those affected.

As at the end of January 2014, 1754 tenants had been visited in their homes and provided with relevant support. Considerable savings for tenants had been identified and other support eg. debt advice had been provided and evidenced. Caerphilly Homes works in partnership with the Caerphilly County CAB in delivering money and debt advice to tenants. A review undertaken of the debt advice service for a three month period last year indicated that the 65 tenants that attended the appointments had a total debt value between them of £595k. This level of debt was very worrying and the majority could not be attributed to the introduction of the under occupancy rules. It was noted that as a result of positive partnership working CCBC had recently been ranked 3rd best in Wales for family homelessness prevention.

Following the officer's presentation of the report, the Chairman invited Mr Roy Davies, representing Caerphilly and District Against the Bedroom Tax, to address the Scrutiny Committee. Mr Davies presented his case and questioned in particular, what the Local Authority is doing to encourage tenants to appeal against decisions and to mitigate legal action.

Officers outlined how they offer support to tenants who wish to appeal against decisions. There is information regarding the appeals process on the Council's website and Appeal Packs are available. Officers also work in partnership with Shelter who hold surgeries at the Council offices. Tenancy Support Officers offer face to face support to Caerphilly Homes tenants in their own homes. A detailed contact form is completed with tenants and support and appropriate signposting is offered relevant to each tenant's circumstances.

A full discussion ensued and in response to Members' queries, officers advised that there had been no change in the guidance from the DWP with regard to the storage of equipment in bedrooms. The Authority is however, reviewing some of its stock where there are adaptations and is looking to increase its accommodation for single people and shared accommodation. Caerphilly Homes rents staff have a close working relationship with local food banks and 55 food parcels were delivered to tenants who were recognised as in need. From analysis undertaken it would appear that the highest number of recipients in the County Borough were those who had experienced changes in benefits or sanctions.

In response to concerns raised by Members, Officers advised that a review was undertaken of the debt advice service for a three month period last year and headline figures indicated that the 65 tenants who attended appointments in that period had a total debt value between them of £595k. Officers were working hard to encourage tenants to engage with them and were collating information on how they can be helped before their debt spirals out of control.

It was noted that Council had agreed to introduce a Tenancy Review Panel to scrutinise proposed evictions prior to progressing cases to Court and making recommendations to the Chief Housing Officer. The impact of the Act would continue to be monitored and reported back to the Task Group and Scrutiny Committee on a regular basis.

The Chair thanked all parties present for their contributions to the meeting.

The Scrutiny Committee noted the report.

9. CITIZEN ENGAGEMENT STRATEGY AND HOUSEHOLD SURVEY UPDATE

Members received an update on the Council's Citizen Engagement Strategy, together with details of progress against the targets set out in the Action Plan, which supports the Strategy. The draft citizen engagement strategy was approved in April 2013 to enable CCBC to effectively inform, engage and involve its citizens.

Officers reported that the results of the Household Survey were on the whole very positive with satisfaction levels in Council services reaching 82%. Lower levels of satisfaction were apparent in the Upper Rhymney Valley area however. Following analysis of the results, a report was provided to all Directors and Heads of Service in September 2013. Details of the feedback received are set out in the report.

A cross directorate Citizen Engagement Strategy Group was established in 2013 to better co-ordinate engagement activity across the organisation and deliver the outcomes contained in the action plan. The group meets regularly to discuss forthcoming engagement activities, share best practice and review recent engagement activity. An online consultation database 'Caerphilly Asks, Caerphilly Listens' was launched in 2013 to record all engagement activity taking place across the organisation. Key consultations undertaken in 2013 are set out in paragraph 4.2.4 of the report.

Members acknowledged the good work being undertaken by officers and that engagement needs to be supported at every level within the organisation and given the right resources to be effective.

It was moved and seconded that the recommendations in the report be approved as follows. By a show of hands they were unanimously endorsed.

1. The content of the report be noted.
2. The Communications Unit continue to lead on the implementation of the Citizen Engagement Strategy and Action Plan.
3. The Action Plan be reviewed and measured in April 2015.

10. TREASURY MANAGEMENT - POTENTIAL TO INCREASE INVESTMENT INCOME

The report responded to a request made at the Policy and Resources Scrutiny Committee on 21st January 2014, for a report on the additional income that could be generated on investment balances by lending to high credit quality institutions.

Appendix 1 to the report details the income that could be generated by lending £10m to high credit quality banks and investment funds including AAA rated money market funds, UK Government backed banks or other high credit quality UK banks. A number of high credit quality international banks which serve the local authority market, have also been included for comparison purposes. Appendix 2 sets out the risks associated with each counterparty.

Members were asked to consider whether or not it was in the best interests of the Council to lend to high credit quality counterparties to generate additional investment income.

The Acting Director of Corporate Services and S.151 Officer summarised the options available and informed Members that the Council's Treasury Management Advisors could be invited to attend a meeting of the Scrutiny Committee to offer guidance and respond to Members' questions and concerns.

Following a full discussion on the issues raised, Members unanimously endorsed the recommendation that the Council's Treasury Management Advisors be invited to attend a meeting of the Policy and Resources Scrutiny Committee.

11. REQUESTS FOR AN ITEM TO BE INCLUDED ON THE NEXT AVAILABLE AGENDA

The Scrutiny Research Officer requested that Members forward any requests for items to be included on the forward work programme for the Policy and Resources Scrutiny Committee to her.

12. INFORMATION ITEMS

The following items were received and noted without discussion: -

1. Council Tax and Business Rate: Changes To Recovery Procedures Used By Enforcement Agents (Formerly Bailiffs);
2. Welsh Government Procurement Fitness Check;
3. Treasury Management and Capital Financing Prudential Indicators Monitoring Report – 1st April 2013 to 31st December 2013;
4. Discretionary Rate Relief Applications;
5. Summary of Members' Attendance – Quarter 3 – 1st October 2013 to 31st December 2013;
6. Caerphilly Local Service Board Minutes – 16th October 2013;
7. Special Caerphilly Homes Task Group Minutes – 9th January 2014;
8. Caerphilly Homes Task Group Minutes – 23rd January 2014;
9. Policy and Resources Scrutiny Committee Forward Work Programme.

The meeting closed at 7.11 pm.

Approved as a correct record, and subject to any amendments or corrections agreed and recorded in the minutes of the meeting held on 15th April 2014, they were signed by the Chairman.

CHAIRMAN