



CAERPHILLY HOMES TASK GROUP (WELSH HOUSING QUALITY STANDARD)

**MINUTES OF THE MEETING HELD AT PENALLTA HOUSE, YSTRAD MYNACH
(SIRHOWY ROOM) ON THURSDAY, 2ND JULY 2015 AT 5.00 P.M.**

PRESENT:

C. Davies- Vice Chair (Presiding)

Task Group Members:

Ms L. Ackerman, Mrs G. Atkins, Ms E. Forehead, K. James, Mrs S. Jones, Miss A. Lewis, M. McDermott, and D.V. Poole.

R. Beasley (Project Manager & Co-ordinator), P. Davy (Head of Programmes), S. Isaacs (Senior Rents Officer), M. Lloyd (Deputy Head of Programmes), K. Watkins (Communications & Tenant Engagement Officer) and C. Evans (Committee Services Officer).

1. APOLOGIES

Apologies for absence were received from Mrs B. Jones, C. Mann, J. Moore, Mrs D. Moore and Mrs D. Price.

2. DECLARATIONS OF INTEREST

Mrs G. Atkins, Mr C. Davies, Mrs S. Jones, Miss A. Lewis and Mr M. McDermott as Council Tenants declared a personal but not prejudicial interest in all agenda items.

3. MINUTES – 21ST MAY 2015

RESOLVED that the minutes of the meeting held on the 21st May 2015 be approved as a correct record and signed by the Chair.

4. TENANT SUPPORT FOR UNIVERSAL CREDIT - PRESENTATION

R. Beasley and S. Isaacs provided the Caerphilly Homes Task Group with a presentation on Tenant Support for Universal Credit, following a Task Group Member request.

Universal Credits was introduced in Caerphilly Job Centres from May 2015, with a few claimants being transferred. Universal Credit combines 6 benefits/ tax credits into one single monthly payment and it is anticipated that through gradual movement, all claimants will be transferred to Universal Credits by 2019.

The Task Group noted that Universal Credits can be applied for online and would be paid to a household on a calendar monthly basis in arrears. There are concerns that the impact of payment changes could result in rent arrears for tenants, issues with online resources, budgeting skills, increase in existing debts through late payments and an increase in the use of loan sharks and pay day loans.

It was noted that Caerphilly are looking into Alternative Payment Arrangements for vulnerable Tenants, in which Housing Benefit would be paid directly to the Local Authority to ensure rent and arrears are paid. After a set period of time, the Department for Works and Pensions (DWP) would contact the landlord/ Local Authority to confirm whether direct payments can be reinstated.

Discussions took place around Trusted Landlord Status, which would initially be awarded to Local Authorities and Social Landlords, however, extension is being considered to Private Landlords.

In preparation for the change, Caerphilly has implemented a number of changes such as Digital Support, Job Clubs with Caerphilly First, staff training and learning from previous welfare reforms.

Tenants can expect a number of new services to assist with the process, for example, tenants will be contacted and offered support as soon as they are notified about the changes, text reminders, direct debit for rent, facilities made available to pay cash and referrals to specialists for assistance.

A Task Group Member requested further information on the changes and impacts to Housing Benefit payments and Sanctioning of Job Seekers Allowance under Universal Credits. The Officers explained that Sanctions are still possible for certain elements of Universal Credits, however, Housing Benefit would still be paid to the claimant.

The Task Group thanked the Officers for the presentation and requested that it be forwarded to all Councillors for information.

5. CAERPHILLY HOMES COMMUNICATION STRATEGY AND IMPLEMENTATION PLAN

The report sought the views of the Caerphilly Homes Task Group on a new communications strategy and action plan for implementation prior to its consideration at Policy and Resources Scrutiny Committee and Cabinet.

Effective communications is essential to ensuring all stakeholders have an awareness of the Caerphilly Homes brand and are kept up to date on progress across the housing service. Key to effective communications is the delivery of timely messages, using a range of methods appropriate for specific target audiences. But more than simply sending messages out, effective communication also relies upon creating opportunities for open and transparent two way dialogue with stakeholders.

The draft strategy and action plan would replace the former 'Housing and WHQS Communications Strategy' which lapsed in 2015. The new draft strategy strongly advocates a 'one housing service' approach to communications in order to more effectively embed the Caerphilly Homes ethos throughout the division.

The Caerphilly Homes Task Group provided positive comments and feedback on the report and following consideration and discussion, it was moved and seconded that the recommendation in the report be approved. By a show of hands this was unanimously agreed.

RESOLVED that for the reasons contained in the officer's report, the Caerphilly Homes Task Group support a recommendation to the Policy and Resources Scrutiny Committee and Cabinet to adopt the communications strategy and action plan.

6. WHQS POSITION STATEMENT

The report provided an overview of the current position within the WHQS Programme and the challenges facing the Council to achieve the standard by 2020.

The Task Group noted that, following stock transfer ballot in 2012, an investment strategy, implementation plan and staffing structure was agreed and, with consideration for the transition period for transferring contracts from the former planned maintenance to the new WHQS arrangements, the new programme commenced in 2013/14. During 2013, a series of procurements were conducted to appoint the supply partner, and internal and external works contractors. However, a number of setbacks were experienced resulting in significant slippage and therefore, it has been necessary to implement a number of additional measures to increase capacity and spread the risks.

In addition, changing circumstances, including increased costs above the Savills budget estimates, unanticipated stock condition deterioration, and the HRAS buy out (Which resulted in a borrowing cap) pose constraints and challenges. The report outlined the current position and measures being taken to ensure that the objective of meeting WHQS by 2020 can still be achieved.

A Task Group Member wished it noted that, whilst there are significant challenges ahead, the programme is monitored and the Task Group is kept well informed on progress and developments, Good quality standards have been met, which has resulted in high levels of tenant satisfaction.

Discussions took place around the extensive works at Rowan Place and the impact on the remainder of the programme. The Task Group raised concerns around the communication and planning to of the programme. The Officer confirmed that, in addition to a number of other factors, Rowan Place has contributed to the slippage in the programme, due to the amount of work that was required, which was not anticipated based on the Savills survey.

The Keystone system was discussed and the Task Group sought further information on implementation delays. The Officer explained that the system required a great deal of populating in order to be fit for purpose and there was some reluctance from staff, however, with sufficient training and a clear understanding of the functionality of the system, the process has improved. In addition, it was noted that tablet technology has been procured, which enables staff to conduct surveys and complete forms, and upload that information electronically to Keystone.

Further information was sought on the works process, the length of notice given to tenants before works commence and notification of anticipated completion times. The Officer explained that a Charter for Trust was agreed between the Local Authority and Tenants and therefore a minimum of 10 days notice was to be provided to tenants prior to work commencing on site. Project Managers are required to ensure that deadlines are met by contractors and appropriate notice provided to tenants.

The Caerphilly Homes Task Group noted the report.

7. WHQS PERFORMANCE MONITORING 2014-15 (FULL YEAR)

The Caerphilly Homes Task Group considered a report which outlined the arrangements in place to monitor and manage the performance of the WHQS programme for 2014-15.

Performance is monitored and managed formally via the WHQS Management Delivery Team meetings, which occur every month.

The Task Group noted that the WHQS internal works programme for 2014-15 included 889 properties. Within this programme 52 properties were surveyed and found to require no works. Of the remaining 837 properties, work on 556 was undertaken by the in-house workforce, supported by specialist sub-contractors. The remaining 281 properties were planned to be undertaken by the three main contractors; Keepmoat (Eastern Valleys); Contract Services (Lower Rhymney Valley); and Vinci (Upper Rhymney Valley). As of 5th June 2015, 439 properties within the in-house contractor programme were compliant in respect of their internal elements (73%). Details of compliance levels for each of the 31 contracts in the internal works programme 2014-15 are included in the report.

Customer surveys for measuring tenant satisfaction levels and compliance with service standards have been implemented for the internal works contracts. Results from the 104 surveys received demonstrated an overall satisfaction level for internal works of 90%. They also reveal that 93% of the standards measured within the Charter for Trust documents were achieved. An external works survey has been designed and will be implemented in 2015-16.

The Task Group were asked to note that whilst work continues to produce a performance dashboard for external works, details of works completed on the external works programme 2014-15 have not been entered into the Keystone system, therefore, performance information is currently not available.

A Member sought clarification on the number of properties within their ward which were identified for external works. Officers agreed to check the information and provide email feedback to the Task Group.

The Task Group discussed the outcome of the satisfaction surveys. A Member sought further information on the low level of satisfaction in one particular area. Officers highlighted that there was a concern with the clarity of how information is analysed as the questionnaire allows tenants to select "neither satisfied or dissatisfied". The number selecting this option will be reported in future.

Members discussed the issues that were highlighted within the report with some of the contactors and sought further information. Officers explained a number of issues have arisen with various contractors, which are dealt with on an ongoing basis. Contract Management is a critical role for the WHQS team to ensure that performance is managed in order to meet targets and quality standards.

A Task Group member requested further information on the work conducted with contractors and vulnerable tenants. Officers explained that there is no requirement for contractors to undertake a DBS check and it is the role Tenant Liaison Officer (TLO) to identify any vulnerable tenants and mitigate any issues in conjunction with the contractors.

The Caerphilly Homes Task Group thanked the Officer for the report and noted its contents.

8. TO RECEIVE ANY REQUESTS FOR AN ITEM TO BE INCLUDED ON THE NEXT AVAILABLE AGENDA

The following requests were received: -

1. Miss A. Lewis queried when an update would be reported on the Common Housing Register and Common Housing Allocations Policy.
2. Miss A. Lewis queried when an update would be reported on the Housing Improvement Partnership (HIP).

3. Councillor E. Forehead requested a report on the number of Council House properties within the WHQS Programme which are 7.5 Meters in height or above (3-storey).

The meeting closed at 6.57 p.m.

Approved as a correct record subject to any amendments or corrections agreed and recorded in the minutes of the meeting held on 17th September 2015.

CHAIR