



POLICY AND RESOURCES SCRUTINY COMMITTEE

**MINUTES OF THE MEETING HELD AT PENALLTA HOUSE, YSTRAD MYNACH ON
TUESDAY, 10TH NOVEMBER 2015 AT 5.30 P.M.**

PRESENT:

Councillor H.W. David - Chair

Councillors:

Mrs P. Cook, C.J. Cuss, Miss E. Forehead, J.E. Fussell, C. Hawker, Ms J.G. Jones, G. Kirby, A. Lewis, C.P. Mann, D. Rees, R. Saralis, J. Simmonds, J. Taylor

Cabinet Members:

D.V. Poole (Housing)

Together with:

N. Scammell (Acting Director of Corporate Services and Section 151 Officer), P. Davy (Head of Programmes), C. Jones (Head of Performance and Property Services), K. Williams (Private Sector Housing Manager), M. Jennings (Housing Strategy Officer), C. Forbes-Thompson (Scrutiny Research Officer) and R. Barrett (Committee Services Officer)

1. APOLOGIES FOR ABSENCE

Apologies for absence were received from Councillors L. Binding and S. Morgan (Vice-Chair), together with Cabinet Members Mrs C. Forehead (HR and Governance/Business Manager), D.T. Hardacre (Performance and Asset Management) and Mrs B. Jones (Corporate Services).

2. DECLARATIONS OF INTEREST

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

3. MINUTES – 30TH SEPTEMBER 2015

Subject to it being noted that Councillor D. Rees had given his apologies for this meeting but they had not been recorded, it was

RESOLVED that the minutes of the Policy and Resources Scrutiny Committee held on

30th September 2015 (minute nos. 1 – 14) be approved as a correct record and signed by the Chair.

4. MINUTES – 22ND OCTOBER 2015

In noting the positive outcomes that had arisen from this meeting held to discuss the use of Bed and Breakfast Accommodation for Emergency Housing, Members

RESOLVED that the minutes of the Special Policy and Resources Scrutiny Committee held on 22nd October 2015 (minute nos. 1 – 8) be approved as a correct record and signed by the Chair.

5. CALL-IN PROCEDURE

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

6. REPORT OF THE CABINET MEMBER

The Scrutiny Committee were informed that Councillor Mrs B. Jones (Cabinet Member for Corporate Services) had given apologies for her absence, and a copy of her report was tabled at the meeting. Members noted its contents, which included an update on the following matters:-

- An update in respect of the closure of Pontllanfraith House and associated office moves;
- News on the Authority's computer replacement programme;
- Progress in respect of the Welsh National Procurement Service;
- Details of consultation sessions relating to the Authority's budget for 2016/17 (including drop-in sessions in local communities, an article in Newline, a Viewpoint Panel budget-themed event, and forthcoming events for users of British Sign Language, the Youth Forum, 50+ Forum and other agencies). The closing date for the consultation is 8th January 2016;
- Information on South Wales Armed Forces Day (Saturday 25th June 2016);
- An update on the Authority's Operation Santa Appeal for 2015;
- Uptake in relation to the "Stay Connected" and "NewsONLine" websites;
- An update in respect of the issuing of disabled parking Blue Badges over the past year;
- Details of the relocation of the Blackwood Customer Services Centre.

There were no queries from the Scrutiny Committee arising from this report.

7. CABINET REPORTS

None of the Cabinet reports listed on the agenda had been called forward for discussion at the meeting.

REPORTS OF OFFICERS

Consideration was given to the following reports.

8. NOTICE OF MOTION – LAND ADJACENT TO CEFN FFOREST LEISURE CENTRE

The report detailed a Notice of Motion received from Councillors Ms J.G. Jones, C. Hawker, N. Dix, Mrs P. Cook, A. Rees, C. Durham, R. Saralis and Mrs J. Summers, in relation to the sale of land adjacent to Cefn Fforest Leisure Centre. The report also contained a response to the Notice of Motion from appropriate Officers and sought the views of Members prior to its presentation to Cabinet.

Councillor Ms J.G. Jones introduced the Notice of Motion, which requested that Members consider the following:-

“That a previous decision of Cabinet to dispose of land that once formed a part of Cefn Fforest Leisure Centre be withdrawn from sale with immediate effect on the basis that such a sale will put this piece of land at a disadvantage under a forthcoming Strategic Review of Leisure Centres”.

Discussion took place regarding the consultation process in respect of the proposed sale, the impact of any sale on parking availability and the benefits in retaining the land for use by the leisure centre. In responding to Members’ queries, Colin Jones (Head of Performance and Property Services) clarified the location of the land and confirmed that a formal offer at market value had been received for its purchase.

Following consideration of the Notice of Motion and the Officer’s report, it was moved and seconded that the Notice of Motion be supported and referred to Cabinet for a decision in accordance with the Council’s Constitution. By a show of hands (and in noting there was 1 abstention) this was agreed by the majority present.

In accordance with Rule of Procedure 15.5, Councillor C.J. Cuss wished it noted that he had abstained from voting on the recommendation.

RECOMMENDED to Cabinet that a decision on the Notice of Motion be reached in accordance with the Council’s Constitution.

9. ADOPTION OF THE COMMON ALLOCATION POLICY

Mark Jennings (Housing Strategy Officer) presented the report, which provided an overview of the process undertaken to develop a common allocation policy as an intended replacement for the Council’s existing allocations policy. The report sought Members’ endorsement of the adoption of the new common allocation policy, prior to its presentation to Cabinet for approval.

Members were informed that the policy has been developed in partnership with local housing associations and will be introduced alongside the common housing register. The policy has been subjected to an extensive consultation process during its development and full details of this process were outlined within the report. Full consideration had been given to examples of good practice, guidance and legislation and a full equality impact assessment was also undertaken against the new policy.

It was explained that the new policy will replace the Council’s existing allocations policy and will also apply to new housing association partners who, upon request of the Council, will sign up to the new policy. The new policy will provide a standardised and consistent way of allocating properties to all those on the common housing register who are seeking social housing within the borough.

The Scrutiny Committee were referred to details of the IT requirements of the project, plans for the implementation of the policy and its monitoring and review, as outlined within the

report. Members were informed that the first large scale review of the policy will be carried out with landlords twelve months after the date of the implementation of the policy and its results reported to Cabinet, to ensure that it remains compliant with legislation and good practice, with further reviews then carried out on a cyclical basis.

During the course of the ensuing discussion, reference was made to one aspect of the public consultation exercise, which involved the Council contacting all applicants who might be potentially affected by the change in policy, with a Member commenting on the low level of response received. It was confirmed that all applicants had been contacted by a standard letter and that if adopted, the new policy would be explained in greater detail when applicants are notified about the reassessment of their housing need that will need to be undertaken in accordance with the new policy.

Discussion took place on the implications of the new policy and Members sought clarification on reasonable preference conditions in awarding housing to applicants. Officers explained that there was a requirement to give preference to those living in certain conditions and that issues raised by Members would be addressed via housing advice supplied by Housing staff. It was also explained that Environmental Health Officers work with landlords to try and improve issues relating to unsatisfactory housing conditions as they arise.

A query was raised regarding the accountability of tenants who leave Council houses in a poor condition and Officers confirmed that criteria was included in the policy to address this matter. It was explained that all applicants undergo a process which takes into consideration tenancy history and any previous issues relating to property damage. Officers gave assurances as to the robustness of the application process in ensuring all tenancy checks are properly completed. Members also queried staffing capacity in respect of the recently introduced property inspection programme for the Council's own stock. It was explained that such inspections would be incorporated as part of home visits undertaken either in conjunction with the WHQS scheme or else as part of other routine housing visits.

Reference was made to a significant difference in the new policy, which would introduce a limit on the number of offers of accommodation and an application being suspended for 12 months on the third unreasonable refusal. Clarification was sought on the meaning of "unreasonable", whether this included offers of housing in terms of unsuitability or inappropriate location, and the appeals process in the event of such an occasion. Officers explained that offers of housing should only be made in accordance with the preferences expressed by the applicant (e.g. landlord, location, property type and size) and explained that there was a process in place within the policy where the applicant would have the opportunity to request a review of a decision by the council to regard an offer as unreasonable. Further information on offers and refusals was contained within the new Common Allocation Policy as appended to the report.

A Member sought clarification on whether a section of the new policy that addressed Joint to Sole Tenancy included bereavement within a household, and also queried the impact of this policy in the event of relationship breakdowns. Officers confirmed that occasions involving bereavement would be handled on a case-by-case basis, and that the Joint to Sole Tenancy clause had been included to address issues related to household size criteria and cases of over-occupancy.

Clarification was sought on a clause within the policy relating to application assessment and tenancy sustainability, which stated that where prospective housing association tenants cannot satisfy their prospective landlord that they can afford the rent, then the landlord will not actively consider them for housing. Officers explained that a degree of flexibility would be exercised in such situations and if the circumstances change, with it found that the applicant can subsequently satisfy the affordability criteria, the restriction on their rehousing will be removed.

A Member sought clarification on the criteria involved within the Priority Banding System and queried whether existing applicants would understand the difference in the criteria between the old and new policies. Officers explained that the new criteria would provide a greater level of transparency, be easier to understand and provide a degree of flexibility to meet changing housing needs. Applicants will be grouped into one of 3 bands, depending on their level of housing need, which should make the new banding system easier to understand.

Arising from discussion during the course of the meeting, Members expressed a need for the results of the first review of the new Common Allocation Policy to be presented to the Policy and Resources Scrutiny Committee prior to its consideration by Cabinet. As such, it was moved and seconded that subject to this being included in the report recommendations to Cabinet, the Common Allocation Policy be formally adopted and that upon its implementation, the Council's existing allocations policy be rescinded. By a show of hands, this was unanimously agreed.

RECOMMENDED to Cabinet that:-

- (i) the Common Allocation Policy be formally adopted and that upon its implementation the Council's existing allocations policy be rescinded;
- (ii) the results of the first review of the policy (12 months after its implementation) be reported to the Policy and Resources Scrutiny Committee and thereafter Cabinet.

10. IMPROVEMENT OBJECTIVE IO5 – INVESTMENT IN COUNCIL HOMES TO TRANSFORM LIVES AND COMMUNITIES

Phil Davy (Head of Programmes) presented the report, which provided a 6-month update of progress made against Improvement Objective 5 for 2015/16 (investment in Council homes to transform lives and communities).

Members were reminded of the significant slippage that arose within the Welsh Housing Quality Standard (WHQS) Programme during 2014/15, which necessitated a review of the investment strategy and the implementation of a number of measures to increase capacity and spread risk to ensure that the target completion date of March 2020 can still be achieved.

Officers explained that for the first 6 months of 2015/16 this Improvement Objective has been assessed as being partially successful. Steady progress has been made with the internal works contracts since April 2015, although only 66% of the original target has been achieved against the number of properties that were profiled for the first 6 months, but re-profiling has increased this result to 73%. Maintaining continuity of work for all internal works contracts has been difficult due to delays with asbestos surveys, a backlog of Occupational Therapy referrals and timescales for meter moves.

The programme of external works in the Eastern Valleys (small lots) has run on from the 2014/15 financial year causing knock-on delays for this year's work programme. The first contract in Markham has now been completed (53 properties) and another six contracts are due for completion during October/November (126 properties). Two further contracts have commenced in the Upper Rhymney Valley (338 properties). Although there is a significant pipeline of external works contracts to follow, the 2015/16 programme is not anticipated to be completed until late in 2016. Absorbing the slippage is challenging due to the knock-on impact this will have on future years. A re-profiling of the programme from 2016/17 through to 2019/20 is currently in preparation and will underpin the capital programme for 2016/17.

Discussion of the report ensued and clarification was sought on the term “re-profiling” and how this will improve success against the Improvement Objective. Officers outlined the structure of works at the start of the WHQS process, whereby the programme was split into three areas across the county borough (Upper Valley, Lower Valley and Eastern Valley) and the sequence of works focused around community areas. As part of the measures to increase capacity arising from slippage in 2014/15, re-profiling of these areas is currently underway, which includes reassessing properties and readjusting the programme of works as needed, categorising properties by contract packages, and re-arranging (or “re-scheduling”) the schedule of works across community areas as the need arises.

In response to a query as to the impact of this re-profiling on Caerphilly Homes tenants, Officers confirmed that this would have an effect in terms of the planned schedule of works across the county borough. Members were informed that a further report would follow in the New Year in respect of re-profiling and the areas/tenants affected, and were advised that as specific dates for the programme of works had not been released, tenants were unlikely to have been aware of exactly when the works were due to be carried out.

Members were reminded of the significant challenges faced in meeting the requirements of the WHQS whilst managing the budget within cost restraints and maintaining affordability, together with unforeseen circumstances that had created delays and additional works (such as extensive damp problems within Rowan Place in Rhymney). Officers gave assurances that all Caerphilly Homes tenants will receive the necessary works to their homes in line with the requirement for the WHQS programme of works to be completed by 2020.

A Member stated that tenants had been made aware of when to expect internal/external works and expressed the importance of tenants being kept informed of the works schedule for their homes. Officers explained that the programme of works had been published through to 2020 but that it had been made clear that it could be subject to change, and also that this schedule had outlined the programme of works on a yearly, not monthly, basis for each area.

In response to a query as to whether such re-profiling and re-sequencing had been anticipated at the commencement of the WHQS programme, Officers confirmed that this had been inevitable due to the huge nature of the programme, the number of contracts and personnel involved and the contrasting timelines in use. Members were referred to modifications to the programme of works that had taken place along the way, such as the decision to outsource works to Sheltered Housing schemes, and Officers advised that decisions would have to be made on how to accommodate a number of further adjustments.

Discussion took place in respect of historical improvements carried out to properties, with Members advised of difficulties that had been subsequently encountered during the WHQS programme of works. A particular example is that of damp caused by saturated cavity wall insulation as a result of defects in the fabric of some buildings. This is now being included as part of the WHQS programme of works but was not identified as part of the original scheme in the Savills housing stock survey of 2008.

A Member queried the potential impact on Welsh Government funding should the Council be deemed to be unsuccessful against too many areas of this Improvement Objective. Officers explained that a failure to meet targets could have potential implications or lead to sanctions in terms of the Major Repairs Allowance grant currently received from Welsh Government.

In response to a Member’s query, Officers summarised the main costings against the WHQS scheme and outlined the methods by which these are calculated. It was explained that there had been some unanticipated costs arising from a shortfall in the original Savills survey but that these costs had been offset in a number of other areas. Officers explained that they were reviewing cost calculations in a number of areas and gave assurances that costs against the WHQS programme were being kept under control. Clarification was also provided on the

limitations in place in respect of the Housing Revenue Allowance (HRA) borrowing cap and Members were advised of the need to be mindful of the financial implications in borrowing more than the recommended amount against the HRA.

Further clarification was sought on the implications against the Major Repair Allowance grant, should the WHQS not be achieved by 2020. Officers explained that borrowing against the HRA relates to the whole programme (and not a specific year) and Members were reminded of the huge challenges entailed in successfully delivering the WHQS programme within this timeframe. Officers advised that resources were at capacity which had led to a number of delays and that it had been acknowledged that the programme schedule needed to quicken in order to pick up the slippage from previous years.

Officers reiterated that the 2020 deadline is achievable and that a number of measures have been put in place to increase the rate of completions, which include outsourcing and consultancy measures previously detailed to Members. Officers advised that it would take time to see the benefits of these measures and that it was currently unclear what sanctions could be applied by the Welsh Government if the deadline was not met. Assurances were given that the Authority have a viable business plan in place in respect of the WHQS programme.

Officers also responded to general queries against a number of the performance indicators listed within the report appendices. Particular reference was made to the number of homes compliant with WHQS in respect of their internal elements (745 homes) and achievement against the target of 2242 homes. Officers explained that this is an annual target and that the true completion rate would not be realised until the financial year end. It was also explained to Members that the number of weekly completions vary and are dependent on a number of extenuating factors.

A Member referred to the partially met performance indicator that outlined a significant backlog in Occupational Therapy referrals (that result in the actioning of household adaptations for those clients in need). Officers explained that this backlog had arisen from a number of performance issues but that additional staff had now been recruited to clear this backlog. Clarification was also sought on the partially completed performance indicator against the appointment of critical front line staff. Officers explained that although a number of these posts had been filled, the recruitment process had only been partially completed in that they were having difficulties in recruiting suitably qualified staff to fill these key roles.

Following consideration of the report and in noting its contents, an amendment to the recommendation was moved and seconded in that whilst Members recognised the progress made at the half-year stage, they would wish to see better progress against this Improvement Objective in the future, and that updates be reported to the Policy and Resources Scrutiny Committee on a quarterly basis. By a show of hands, this was unanimously agreed.

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

There were no requests for reports received.

12. INFORMATION ITEMS

The Committee noted the following items for information, full details of which were included within the Officers reports. There were no items brought forward for review.

- (1) Discretionary Rate Relief Applications;

- (2) Treasury Management and Capital Financing Prudential Indicators Quarter 1 and Quarter 2 Monitoring Report (1st April 2015 to 30th September 2015);
- (3) Review of Charitable Rate Relief Awards;
- (4) Write Off of Debts – 01/04/15 – 30/09/15;
- (5) The Use of Bed and Breakfast Accommodation for Emergency Housing;
- (6) Caerphilly Local Service Board Minutes - 3rd March 2015;
- (7) Caerphilly Local Service Board Minutes - 2nd June 2015;
- (8) Caerphilly Homes Task Group Minutes - 17th September 2015;
- (9) Summary of Members' Attendance - Quarter 2 - 1st July 2015 to 30th September 2015;
- (10) Policy and Resources Scrutiny Committee Forward Work Programme.

The meeting closed at 7.14 pm

Approved as a correct record and subject to any amendments or corrections agreed and recorded in the minutes of the meeting held on 19th January 2016, they were signed by the Chair.

CHAIR