



CAERPHILLY HOMES TASK GROUP (WELSH HOUSING QUALITY STANDARD)

**MINUTES OF THE MEETING HELD AT PENALLTA HOUSE, YSTRAD MYNACH
(SIRHOWY ROOM) ON WEDNESDAY, 7TH SEPTEMBER 2016 AT 5.00 P.M.**

PRESENT:

E. Forehead – Chair
A. Lewis – Vice Chair

Task Group Members:

Mrs Y. Bryant, C. Davies, Ms J. Gale, K. James, Mrs B. Jones, Mrs S. Jones and D.V. Poole.

S. Couzens (Chief Housing Officer), L. Allen (Principal Accountant - Environmental Finance Group), F. Wilkins (Public Sector Housing Manager) and C. Evans (Committee Services Officer).

1. TO APPOINT THE CHAIR AND VICE-CHAIR FOR THE ENSUING YEAR.

It was moved and seconded that Ms E Forehead be appointed as Chair of the Caerphilly Homes Task Group for the ensuing year and by a show of hands this was unanimously agreed.

RESOLVED that Ms E. Forehead be appointed Chair of the Caerphilly Homes Task Group for the ensuing year.

It was moved and seconded that Ms A. Lewis be appointed as Vice Chair of the Caerphilly Homes Task Group for the ensuing year and by a show of hands this was unanimously agreed.

RESOLVED that Ms A Lewis be appointed as Vice Chair of the Caerphilly Homes Task Group for the ensuing year.

ANNOUNCEMENTS

Mr C. Davies thanked the Task Group for their support during his term as Chair and expressed special thanks to Mr P. Davy for his advice and support and wished him a long and happy retirement.

Councillor D. Poole also wished to extend his appreciation to Mr Davies, on behalf of the Task Group for his work on the Task Group and additional groups he participates in as a tenant and thanked him for his involvement and feedback to the programme.

2. APOLOGIES

Apologies for absence were received from L. Ackerman, C. Mann, D. Moore and J. Moore.

3. DECLARATIONS OF INTEREST

Mrs Y. Bryant, C. Davies, Mrs B. Jones, Mrs S. Jones and Miss A. Lewis, as Council Tenants declared a personal but not prejudicial interest in all agenda items.

4. MINUTES – 30TH JUNE 2016

RESOLVED that the minutes of the meeting held on the 30th June 2016 be approved as a correct record and signed by the Chair.

5. ANNUAL REVIEW OF THE TENANCY REVIEW PANEL

Mr C. Davies, Caerphilly Homes Task Group Member called the information item forward for discussion at the meeting.

The report informed the Caerphilly Homes Task Group (Task Group) of the outcomes of cases presented to the Tenancy Review Panel, which was set up in June 2014.

The report provided details of the cases presented to the panel from June 2015 to May 2016, during which, 68 cases were considered by the Panel. Of the 68, 63 were recommended to the Chief Housing Officer and an eviction order applied for; the remaining 5 were adjourned pending further enquiries. The Task Group noted that eviction dates were obtained on the 63 cases however only 32 evictions actually progressed and the properties taken back. When an eviction date is received tenants have the right to apply to the County Court to have the eviction warrant set aside and officers continue to try to work with the tenants to avoid progressing to eviction. The 31 cases that did not progress to eviction were due to a number of reasons such as, in cases of no access the tenant can allow access which would result in the eviction being set aside or in cases of rent arrears tenants may pay the debt in full or a lump sum to reduce the balance which would result in the eviction being set aside.

The Task Group thanked the Officer for the report and discussion ensued.

Clarification was sought on the role of the Tenancy Review Panel and the Council's duty of care to those presenting as Homeless. The Officers confirmed that the Council is not required to house those deemed to be intentionally homeless, however, they will be provided with support through the Homelessness Prevention team, if they are not already in receipt of these services.

A Member, having considered the report, queried the increase in rent arrears. Officers explained that the reasons are dependent on individual cases, however it was noted that a great deal of intervention services would have been provided to the tenant/tenants. Welfare Reform has had an impact on the affordability of tenants, as has Universal Credits; however a number of cases have been ongoing for a considerable time and therefore all support services have been exhausted and have been referred to the Panel.

The Panel discussed the reasons for eviction and sought further information on the issues pertaining to access. It was noted that a Tenant is required to provide access to the property for a number of reasons such as Asbestos assessments, gas service, maintenance/repairs, etc., which are requirements under Health and Safety Legislation. Where access to the premises is denied, this is often an indication of other underlying problems, which could include rent arrears, the property in a poor state of repair etc. In such cases, third sector agencies are often required to assist and provide support services to help prevent eviction.

The Task Group discussed eviction arrears and it was confirmed that 24 of the 68 recommended for eviction were for rent arrears, of which £3,500 was the highest amount owed. Officers highlighted that, whilst it is not clear how much has been recovered, all steps available are undertaken to track down and try to reclaim the money. If the tenant later applies for a tenancy, the arrears are also included on the new tenancy. It was confirmed that the debts are not written off. However, the Task Group was assured that Court proceedings and evictions are always a last resort and that there is ample support available to tenants who are struggling with arrears. The majority of evictions were served to tenants who had vacated the property.

It was noted that the Tenancy Review Panel conducts investigations into the circumstances of the arrears and evictions prior to the recommendation being approved by the Chief Housing Officer. As a result of these investigations, it was found that a number of properties were allocated to more vulnerable tenants, who often were reluctant to engage with support services and as a result have vacated the properties. As a result, the Council have worked with Supporting People in order to improve contacts with support providers and improve connections with an aim to reducing vacant properties and rent arrears.

A Task Group Member sought further information on the Council's Policy where a family has been deemed to be intentionally homeless but there are children within the family. Officers explained that there would be a number of support and prevention services offered to the family in order to prevent homelessness and cases in which there are children, checks are undertaken with Social Services. However, once a family has been deemed to be Intentionally Homeless, the Council has no obligation to re-house them. There is an element of protection for the children and Social Services will be required to provide support also.

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

6. HOUSING REVENUE ACCOUNT OUTTURN 2015/16

Ms A. Lewis, Caerphilly Homes Task Group Member called the information item forward for discussion at the meeting.

The report provided the Task Group Members with information on the outturn expenditure for the Housing Revenue Account (HRA) for the 2015/16 financial year.

The Task Group were reminded of the distinction between the HRA, which is funded by rental income received from council tenants, and General Fund Housing and Private Housing, which fall under the General Fund and is funded via the Council taxpayer. Although there is a clear separation of these funds, the majority of council tenants rent is funded from housing benefits which is derived from the tax payers purse and therefore value for money must always be sought.

The Task Group noted that there was a total of £6.8m underspend during the period 2015/16 in the Housing Revenue Account (HRA), which represents 15% of the total HRA budget. The Officer outlined that the underspends included Salaries and Mileage, CFR Charges, Service Specific Related and Office Related and Building Maintenance. The Task Group were asked to note that there was a nil variance on the Revenue Contribution to Capital.

It was noted that the total expenditure on the WHQS capital programme was £28.6m against a budget of £36.3m. The HRA RCCO was therefore fully utilised to fund this spend in addition to the £7.3m Major Repairs Allowance (MRA) from Welsh Government and £7.9m from HRA balances earmarked for WHQS. The remaining balance was the funding of the delivery team fees from the HRA of £1.6m. Working balances at the end of 2014/15 stood at £21m. This has been reduced by the £7.9m funding required for the WHQS programme but has increased by the £6.8m underspend from the HRA this year. The total working balances as at the 1st

April 2016 (unaudited) is therefore £19.8m. The majority of this funding is earmarked to fund the WHQS programme. To date no borrowing has been undertaken to fund the WHQS programme.

A Task Group Member sought clarification on the variance between the actual spend and the estimate. Officers explained that there is always some difficulty estimating the spend, the underspends are as a result of slippage in the programme, income in other areas and underspend on salaries, due to the high turnover. As a result, the underspends are incorporated into the Business Plan to take forward into the next financial year and should therefore reduce the required borrowing amount.

The Task Group were offered additional sessions to consider the HRA account and budget setting processes, on a one to one basis should they be required. The Task Group thanked the Officer for the detailed report and agreed to make arrangements with the Officer, should they wish further information.

7. SHELTERED HOUSING SCHEMES

Mr C. Davies, Caerphilly Homes Task Group Member called the information item forward for discussion at the meeting.

The report provided the Task Group with an update in relation to the Welsh Housing Quality Standard (WHQS) investment programme to the sheltered housing schemes.

It was noted that a report was presented to the Task Group on 19th May 2016, which advised members that the WHQS work to sheltered housing schemes will be managed internally.

The internal workforce will undertake the WHQS improvement works, both internally and externally to the majority of the sheltered housing schemes, supported as necessary by subcontractors. The feasibility/design studies for the six sheltered schemes identified for possible remodelling proposals is being taken forward by the Council's Building Consultancy Team.

The report provided further update on progress and outlined the scheduled programme for the delivery of schemes being undertaken by the in-house workforce. Further reports will be submitted in the future in relation to the schemes identified for remodelling purposes.

The Task Group thanked the Officer for the report and discussion ensued. A Task Group Member noted that there was a reference to the Savills Survey, which is outdated and queries the timescales and procurement process for the Sheltered Schemes. Officer explained that the Savills Survey was conducted on 15% of the stock and provided an indication on the works required, but not a complete survey, which would be undertaken following consultation with the tenants. In terms of the procurement process, it has now been agreed that the works will be conducted by the in-house services, with the exception of some specialist service requirements, and thus reducing the procurement process.

A Tenant Representative expressed their deep disappointment that, to date, there has been no communication with the tenants within the Sheltered Schemes under discussion. It was also queried why some bungalows and communal areas are not included in the Programme. The Officer explained that, as previously discussed, it was difficult to consult with Tenants when it was unclear on what the programme of works was to be, however, the Task Group was assured that consultation exercises are a priority following this meeting of the CHTG. In addition, the Task Group noted that all communal areas that are within a sheltered scheme and under one roof would be covered, as would residential bungalows. However the communal areas that are a separate block to the residential buildings have had some refurbishments carried out, but there is no requirement under WHQS to consider these. Following discussions, further clarification was sought on when a programme would be in

place that could be communicated to the Sheltered Schemes and tenants. Officers outlined that, provided the CHTG agree the programme, communication was to be the number one priority and it was anticipated that the main focus would be the schemes to be looked at next year. However, it was advised that communication would be undertaken when surveys had been completed on the schemes. Task Group Members felt that tenants should be provided with communications prior to this about the proposed programme and surveys to be completed, with more details consultations undertaken post survey completion.

Following consideration and discussion, it was moved and seconded that the recommendation to communicate with tenants within Sheltered Schemes, about the proposed programme of works to be conducted, with detailed consultations undertaken post survey; be approved. By a show of hands this was unanimously agreed.

RESOLVED that for the reasons outlined at the meeting, communications be conducted with tenants about the proposed programme of works within Sheltered Schemes and further, detailed consultations to be undertaken post surveys.

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

The following requests were received:-

1. S. Jones requested an update on the Consultation with Tenants within Sheltered Housing Schemes.

The meeting closed at 6.09pm

Approved as a correct record subject to any amendments or corrections agreed and recorded in the minutes of the meeting held on 3rd November 2016.

CHAIR