

EXTRACT OF MINUTES OF CABINET HELD ON 1ST NOVEMBER 2017

4. WALES AUDIT OFFICE REVIEW OF THE WHQS DELIVERY PROGRAMME

Councillor Mrs B. Jones declared an interest in this item (as having benefited from the programme) and left the meeting during consideration of this item.

N. Jenkins and R. Price attended the meeting to present their findings, conclusions and proposals for improvement as detailed within the document. As part of the WAO performance audit plan the report provided a review of the Council's arrangements to deliver the WHQS by 2020.

N. Jenkins highlighted the key issues contained within the report and referred to the scope of the review, the interviews and evidence collated from Officers, tenants and leaseholders, the conclusions drawn and the subsequent statutory recommendations (which will be followed up to ensure that they are being addressed).

The Corporate Director advised that whilst Officers accept the recommendations within the report, they do not agree with the overall conclusion made, as it does not reflect the position of the programme and evidence to justify this view was provided throughout the report and discussed at the meeting. The report also set out the individual recommendations resulting from the review together with Officers' comments on how these recommendations have or will be addressed.

It was confirmed that the programme was based on the stock condition survey and estimated component costs provided by Savill's Consultants following a 15% survey of the housing stock. Since that time, an exercise to establish the full scope of investment needed to meet WHQS by 2020, based on accurate and comprehensive information has been completed. At the time of the audit preparatory work was being undertaken in order to use this data to reprofile the programme using actual costs. This has now been completed and the programme remains financially viable. The information has also been used to compile a more detailed overarching programme but the timescales laid out in the existing programme have not changed.

With regards to the procurement strategy, it was noted that this had been developed to meet Welsh Government's improvements and efficiency targets. Internal works contracts are predicated on a fixed contract basis using the JCT form of contract and national schedule of rates (reviewed annually) and external works have been developed via various procurement routes in accordance with legislation and in order to manage the supply base, ensure capacity and encourage and grow local contractors. This is managed through a series of arrangements which included the use of the small lots exemption, frameworks and more recently a Dynamic Purchasing System (DPS).

In relation to the requirement to provide clear and transparent information to members and tenants about the current position of the programme, Officers have considered the information provided and accept the manner in which information is presented can be improved. As part of the exercise, Officers have reviewed information contained within the programme and have already made amendments to ensure it is clear, accurate and meaningful for all stakeholders.

With regards to programme management, governance and accountability these responsibilities are defined through the WHQS Board, the Caerphilly Homes Task Group, the Repairs and Improvement Group, Corporate Management Team, Policy and Resources Scrutiny Committee and Cabinet. The terms of reference of each of these groups will be reviewed to ensure that the respective groups are clear of their remit and purpose as well as ensuring that any urgent decision making required can be taken at the appropriate level.

The WAO report concluded that because of the fragmented nature of documents setting out the reprofiling programme of works, it did not believe they provide a strategic, comprehensive and integrated approach setting out clearly to tenants, councillors, officers and other stakeholders how it will meet the WHQS by 2020. By way of explanation, R. Price advised that it had been difficult to track through decisions on reprofiling and reprogramming. It was confirmed that information contained within reports has also been reviewed to ensure they are presented in a clear and transparent way and contain all relevant details so that the current position of the overall programme is easily communicated to all stakeholders. The effectiveness of the Tenant Liaison Officers had also been raised and the Chief Housing Officer clarified their role as support Officers.

Reference was also made to recommendation 3 whereby the council should ensure it has sufficient project management capacity to deliver the Council's WHQS programme effectively by 2020. In order to assist with the project management of such a major investment programme, the use of resources is being maximised through improved integration within Caerphilly Homes following changes in the management structure last year and by also utilising the services of other departments within the Council, including Building Consultancy, Grounds Maintenance, Highways Operations Group and Network Contracting Services.

During the course of the ensuing debate, concerns were expressed that the report reflects only those properties that have been completed and does not reflect the community based approach adopted whereby internal and external works are undertaken concurrently in different communities. This decision was taken to ensure that all housing communities benefit from the WHQS works at an earlier stage in the programme rather than focussing on completing all WHQS works in one community at a time. As such the information contained in the report is misleading and the comparable performance data with other authorities, although factual in relation to the number of properties completed, is not an accurate picture of the work completed to date as it is not a single method of measure and does not carry a caveat to explain how works within those authorities are programmed. To date, 85% of properties across the county borough have received either internal or external works.

With regards to views expressed by tenants as detailed in the report, R. Price advised that given the time constraints, interviews has only been undertaken with 6 tenants that sit on the Caerphilly Homes Task Group. They had also expressed concerns about the quality of work undertaken. Cabinet agreed that this was not representative of the number of tenants throughout the borough upon which to base the conclusion and subsequent recommendations and that further research should have been undertaken. Tenant satisfaction survey results show for internal works for the whole contract to date, 89% of tenants were very satisfied or satisfied, 5% neither satisfied nor dissatisfied and 6% dissatisfied or very dissatisfied. As such, the data within WAO report could not be seen as reflecting all views and had not taken into account this information. R. Price advised that this would be taken into account when the follow up report is being prepared with more interviews with stakeholders.

The Interim Chief Executive advised that Officers accept that further improvements need to be made and agree with the recommendations set out by WAO. These identified improvements are being delivered in accordance with the action plan detailed in the appendix to the report and progress on the action plan will be monitored on a monthly basis by Caerphilly Homes Project Board. It is accepted that the recommendations were following the review during March/April 2017, however at that point in time significant changes were already in the process of being made and this is demonstrated within the action plan with many tasks already completed. Officers do not agree with the overall conclusion drawn as it is felt that this statement does not offer a fair assessment of the position of the programme. The report provided information to support this view, details of which were highlighted at the meeting.

Whilst accepting that the completion of the programme by 2020 is challenging based on the current position and anticipated projections, 75% of internal works and 40% of external works are expected to be completed by March 2018. By March 2019, 94% of internal works are expected to be completed and 80% of external works. There is a plan and resources in place to complete the programme by 2020. Officers consider that the measures put in place have resulted in a significantly increased and focused rate of completions and are confident that the programme will be completed by 2020.

Following detailed debate on the content of the Wales Audit Office Report, and in noting that several conclusions had been drawn based on consultation with 6 members of the Caerphilly Homes Task Group and that it does not accurately reflect the position at that time and the way in which internal and external works had been completed, it was moved and seconded that the recommendations contained therein be noted. By show of hands this was unanimously agreed.

RESOLVED that;

- (i) following detailed debate on the content of the Wales Audit Office Report, its content and the recommendations contained therein be noted;
- (ii) as detailed in the Officers report, the response to the Wales Audit Report, which addresses its content, the issues raised and the proposals for improvement as set out therein be endorsed

The Chair thanked both N. Jenkins and R. Price for presenting the report and for responding to issues raised during the course for the debate and welcomed the review in 2019.