



POLICY AND RESOURCES SCRUTINY COMMITTEE

**MINUTES OF THE MEETING HELD AT PENALLTA HOUSE, YSTRAD MYNACH ON
TUESDAY, 29TH MAY 2018 AT 5.30 P.M.**

PRESENT:

Councillor J. Pritchard – Chair
Councillor G. Kirby – Vice-Chair

Councillors:

M. Adams, Mrs E.M. Aldworth, K. Etheridge, Mrs C. Forehead, Miss E. Forehead, L. Harding, C.P. Mann, Mrs D. Price, J. Ridgewell, Mrs M.E. Sargent, J. Taylor, L.G. Whittle

Cabinet Members:

C. Gordon (Corporate Services), Mrs B. Jones (Finance, Performance and Governance) and Mrs L. Phipps (Homes and Places)

Together with:

S. Couzens (Chief Housing Officer), S. Cousins (Principal Housing Officer - Housing Portfolio) L. Lane (Interim Monitoring Officer), C. Evans (Interim Scrutiny Officer), R. Barrett (Committee Services Officer)

Also present:

A. Clarke and S. Dwyer (Cornerstone Support Services Limited), J. Bibbings and N. Davies (Shelter Cymru)

1. APOLOGIES FOR ABSENCE

Apologies for absence were received from Councillors K. Dawson and R. Saralis.

2. DECLARATIONS OF INTEREST

Councillor Miss E. Forehead declared a personal and prejudicial interest in Agenda Item 8 (Homelessness Strategy and Action Plan 2018). Details are minuted with the respective item.

3. MINUTES – 10TH APRIL 2018

Subject to the correction of a typing error within Report of the Cabinet Members (minute no. 5, paragraph 3, line 5) to read “complete” as opposed to “compete” it was

RESOLVED that the minutes of the Policy and Resources Scrutiny Committee held on 10th April 2018 (minute nos. 1 - 11) be approved as a correct record and signed by the Chair.

4. CALL-IN PROCEDURE

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

5. REPORT OF THE CABINET MEMBERS

The Scrutiny Committee noted the contents of the reports from Councillors C. Gordon, Mrs B. Jones and Mrs L. Phipps, which provided an update on their respective portfolios, and had been circulated to Members in advance of the meeting.

Councillor C. Gordon (Cabinet Member for Corporate Services) updated Members on activities across Procurement Services, including the implementation of the new five year programme for procurement. The Council has also signed up to Welsh Government's Code of Practice for Ethical Employment in Supply Chains, which includes twelve commitments to eliminate modern slavery and support ethical employment practices. Across People Services, a series of staff engagement roadshows were recently held as part of the Council's ongoing drive to improve internal communication and staff. Work is also progressing on the Council's new staff intranet site, which is due to launch at the end of June.

Clarification was sought on how the five year programme for procurement will link in with the National Procurement Strategy and the Cabinet Member confirmed he would relay the query to the relevant Officer. Discussion took place regarding the twelve commitments within the new Code of Practice and a Member queried whether this enforces the payment of minimum wage or living wage from contractors to their staff. Officers confirmed that although the Code has no legal bearing on this, the Council works in partnership with its contractors and suppliers to encourage the payment of the living wage.

The report from Councillor Mrs B Jones (Cabinet Member for Finance, Performance and Governance) referred to the Corporate Finance service area and outlined the work being undertaken on preparing the draft Financial Statements for 2017/18. These will then be subject to a detailed audit and the findings will be presented to the Audit Committee on 24th July 2018, prior to presentation of the Financial Statements to Council on 31st July 2018.

Members were also reminded of the requirement to make anticipated savings of circa £34m for the four year period 2019/20 to 2022/23, with particular emphasis on the 2019/20 financial year, where it is currently anticipated that savings of up to £10.5m will be required. This will be a challenging year for the Authority, and it is inevitable that some very difficult decisions will need to be made in order to achieve these savings. In looking to develop proposals to address the financial challenges going forward, there is a need to examine the way in which resources are used to deliver the services required by communities across the county borough. Members will be kept updated as matters progress and savings proposals will be subject to extensive consultation prior to final decisions being made.

In response to Members' queries, it was confirmed that extensive consultation and discussion would take place before any decisions are made to remove services, and the Cabinet Member emphasised that the Council has to examine how to provide its statutory services in a more strategic way. Members were asked to note that the Council would do everything possible to avoid compulsory redundancies and that proper consultation would be undertaken with the trade unions.

The report from Councillor L. Phipps (Cabinet Member for Homes and Places) outlined the latest developments across Caerphilly Homes, including a further review by the Wales Audit Officer of the Welsh Housing Quality Standard (WHQS) programme. The review is likely to continue through May and June with the outcome report anticipated in the autumn. Members were also advised that the full rollout of Universal Credit across the county borough has been delayed by the Department for Work and Pensions until September 2018. To assist and support council tenants, additional resources will be reviewed, and greater joint working between Caerphilly Homes, Housing Associations, DWP and Job Centres is being established as well as training for front line staff.

Discussion took place regarding the payment of Universal Credit and the Cabinet Member outlined the support available to those who may find themselves in housing arrears. Members expressed the need to have sufficient support in place for tenants during the settling in period. In response to a query on the number of tenants who will be in receipt of Universal Credit, the Cabinet Member confirmed that she would make enquiries with the relevant staff.

A Member referred to the Cross-Party Working Group which was established by the Scrutiny Committee following the outcome of the last WAO review and proposed that the draft findings of the latest review be taken back to the Group for review. Officers made reference to the short timescales in place but confirmed that they would raise this proposal with relevant Officers and the WAO. Members were also reminded that since the last review, the WHQS programme is meeting its targets in readiness for December 2020 completion and that regular progress updates are reported to the Scrutiny Committee.

The Cabinet Members were thanked for their reports.

6. POLICY AND RESOURCES SCRUTINY COMMITTEE FORWARD WORK PROGRAMME

Charlotte Evans (Interim Scrutiny Officer) presented the report, which outlined details of the Policy and Resources Scrutiny Committee Forward Work Programme (FWP) for the period May 2018 to July 2018. Members were asked to consider the FWP alongside the Cabinet Work Programme as appended to the report and to suggest any changes.

The Scrutiny Committee were advised of a forthcoming report on the Annual Information Governance Update and it was agreed that this be included on the Forward Work Programme as an information item for 10th July 2018.

Members were reminded that a workshop to consider and agree the Committee's forward work programme for the year ahead has been arranged for 7th June 2018 and were encouraged to make every effort to attend. It was noted that there would be an opportunity to discuss the inclusion of expert witnesses on the FWP during this workshop

It was unanimously agreed that subject to the foregoing addition, the Policy and Resources Scrutiny Committee Forward Work Programme be published on the Council's website.

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. HOMELESSNESS STRATEGY AND ACTION PLAN 2018

Councillor Miss E. Forehead declared a personal and prejudicial interest in this item (being employed by a company named in the report) and left the meeting during consideration of this item.

The Chair welcomed representatives from Cornerstone Support Services Limited and Shelter Cymru, who were in attendance to speak in relation to the report.

Andrew Clarke and Stephen Dwyer from Cornerstone Support Services led the introductions and explained that Cornerstone work in local communities to deliver a positive support solution for rough sleepers or those at risk of being homeless, and work with key partners to address homelessness within South Wales.

With the aid of a slideshow presentation, Mr Clarke outlined the work that Cornerstone carry out with rough sleepers, together with details of their housing model pilot project and their work with local authorities (including Caerphilly Council) to reduce instances of homelessness across the region.

The Scrutiny Committee were advised that there are currently 80 open cases of rough sleeping in Wales, which include several individuals in Caerphilly county borough who do so on a regular basis. Mr Clarke explained that this is often down to personal choice or because they are unable to cope with the pressures of maintaining a tenancy, and so Cornerstone works with these individuals to assess their needs and progress their options. There are also 66 open cases of sofa surfers currently known to Cornerstone, who are also classed as homeless and require support in order to be properly housed.

Mr Clarke outlined Cornerstone's response to instances of rough sleeping, explaining that staff will respond to any such reports as quickly as possible, and will make contact with the rough sleeper, assess their situation, establish what services they may benefit from (such as healthcare) and assist with practical support to access and link in with these services. He explained that within the Caerphilly county borough, Cornerstone work very closely with the Council's Housing Team to assess all available resources to house rough sleepers as quickly as possible, and gave an example of a case in Blackwood where a tenancy was secured for a person in need within a matter of hours

It was noted that in the last 3.5 years, Cornerstone have built up an extensive network of housing and support contacts across the region and have rehomed over 350 people in Wales. Of these numbers, 90% have maintained their tenancy, and Cornerstone work closely with private sector landlords to create alternative letting solutions. The organisation also works with the Caerphilly Churches Night Shelters voluntary scheme to provide a safe and warm place for rough sleepers to stay overnight during the winter period. Over 100 individuals used this scheme during Winter 2017/18.

Moving forward, Cornerstone are looking to create a housing model to reduce instances of homelessness and rough sleeping, which will include 3-bedroom houses of multiple occupation (HMOs) and link in with private landlords and registered social housing (RSLs). Staff from Cornerstone will be on hand to deal with any instances of anti-social behaviour or tenant issues. As a pilot project for this housing model, a shared living facility is being developed in conjunction with the Council's Housing Team and Charter Housing. This involves a 5-bedroom shared house in Blackwood, which will be available to under-35s in

need of housing and who are ready to work. The project will also link into volunteering opportunities and other agencies to enable these individuals to find work. Once the young person is settled, the project will act as a stepping stone to prepare them for independent living.

The Committee were advised that the project presents huge challenges but is achievable with the support of the Caerphilly Housing Team and it will be the first project of its type for a local authority in Wales. Cornerstone are also liaising with the Housing Team to ascertain if CCBC properties that has been vacant for over 12 months could be used to accommodate rough sleepers, and are seeking the backing of Members in this regard. The Council is also examining its housing stock to determine whether it can be used more flexibly to accommodate homeless persons.

Members were asked to note that Caerphilly county borough has identified gradually reducing numbers of actual rough sleepers over the past three years, compared to a rise in the Welsh average, which is a positive step forwards in regards to tackling the issue of homelessness in the area.

The Scrutiny Committee thanked the Cornerstone representatives for the detailed and informative presentation and discussion took place on its contents

Members expressed concerns regarding proposed HMOs in view of the difficulties that communal living might present for vulnerable individuals and suggested setting a fixed-term period for these arrangements, so that the person has motivation to move towards living in their own home. Officers explained that the Blackwood HMO is very much a pilot project and operates through the premise of employment opportunities, so therefore the individual would need to be actively seeking work and the HMO would not be used as an end solution for homelessness cases. Cornerstone also emphasised that they would have a strong presence and involvement in the HMO in order to counteract any tenant issues that might arise.

A Member expressed the need for the housing model to be effectively marketed and communicated to those in need, and also queried how Cornerstone staff intended to prioritise cases and deliver the project in challenging circumstances. Cornerstone explained that they need to be flexible in dealing with rough sleepers as it is often difficult to contact them (e.g. if they have not been able to charge their mobile telephone), and explained that an increased availability of HMOs would mean that they are able to house those in need more quickly.

Reference was made to the prominence of rough sleeping across larger towns/cities in Wales and the potential for homeless people to migrate from other areas where the cost of living is too high. Cornerstone spoke of the need to establish local connections in order to assess whether there is more need for affordable housing in certain areas and offered to address the Council's Planning Committee in this regard if required. The Committee were reassured that Caerphilly county borough does not have a significant problem in regards to rough sleepers and that the Council were not proposing to open up a host of HMOs. Rather, the Council would prefer to utilise their existing available properties and determine how these can be put to best use to address homelessness.

Officers also outlined the difficulties in engaging private sector landlords regarding the use of their properties to tackle homelessness cases and explained that there is a lack of incentives available in this regard. The representatives from Shelter also voiced their support for a need to bring long-term empty properties back into use. Members asked whether consideration could be given to increasing council tax charges on empty second homes as an incentive to bring them back into beneficial use. It was also suggested that these could be offered up for rent to the Council to tackle homelessness, and it was agreed that this matter

be discussed at the forthcoming Forward Work Programme workshop as a potential item for inclusion at a future date.

In response to a Member's query regarding sofa surfers, Cornerstone explained that there are a very low number of care leavers in this category as the Authority's duty of care extends until the age of 21. Cornerstone are finding that the majority of sofa surfers are under 30 and that there has been an increase in the number of female rough sleepers. A Member also referred to the increase in people suffering from mental health problems and queried how this is addressed by Cornerstone. It was explained that the organisation work very closely with the Housing Team and a number of outreach workers to assess any cases that may be high risk and to establish the best course of action moving forward.

Representatives from Shelter Cymru (Neil Davies and Jennie Bibbing) also addressed the Committee and delivered an overview of how they tackle homelessness across the county borough and throughout Wales. A copy of their Casework Statistical Report for the period 1st April 2017 to 31st March 2018 was tabled at the meeting, which provided a breakdown of the annual Caerphilly caseload. It was noted that during 2017/18, Shelter Cymru's housing advice services assisted 436 households living in the Caerphilly County Borough area. This represented 5% of the total 9,500 households assisted in Wales last year.

Shelter Cymru outlined the economic changes taking place across Wales and the factors that contribute to cases of homelessness or potential homelessness. Particular reference was made to a noticeable rise in the housing problems being experienced by council tenants that may lead to homelessness (including issues such as rent arrears). As a result, Shelter urged the Authority to be fair and flexible in its actions, and to examine court cases and best practice, before taking action against its tenants that could lead to eviction or difficulty in getting onto social housing in the future.

Officers confirmed that the Council's eviction rates had significantly dropped in the past year and that a limit has been placed on outstanding debt arrears. They also confirmed that the Council works flexibly and in accordance with good practice to examine individual circumstances relating to housing arrears before taking action against the tenant.

The Scrutiny Committee were also referred to the contents of the Officer's report on the Homelessness Strategy and Action Plan 2018, which provided an overview of the Council's our homeless services and introduce the emerging areas of focus for inclusion in the forthcoming Homelessness Strategy and Action Plan. The report highlighted the key indicators used to inform the strategy development, the existing local delivery mechanisms and partnerships created to respond to housing need, and also highlighted the areas where more collaboration is needed within existing council services and with external partners and stakeholders.

Having noted the contents of the presentations and the Officer's report, the Scrutiny Committee thanked the representatives from Cornerstone Support Services Limited and Shelter Cymru for their attendance and for responding to the queries received during the course of the debate.

9. FLAT ACCOMMODATION AT RIVER ROAD, PONTLOTTYN AND THE GROVE, FOCHRIW

Shaun Couzens (Chief Housing Officer), presented the report, which had been considered by the Caerphilly Homes Task Group on 17th May 2018. The report sought Members' views on proposals to demolish the block of flats known as 1 to 9, River Road, Pontlottyn and to take 3 to 6, The Grove, Fochriw, out of the Housing stock with a view to demolition of the block in future years, prior to referral of the proposals to Cabinet for approval.

Officers explained that issues associated with lack of demand are being experienced by all partner landlords with housing stock in the Upper Rhymney Valley. Whilst there is unmet need for single person accommodation throughout the county borough, demand for two and three bed flats in the Upper Rhymney Valley is low with waiting lists regularly exhausted.

Members were advised that 1 to 9 River Road comprises a mix of 1, 2 and 3 bed flats, and 1 to 6, The Grove comprises two active shop units at ground floor, trading as a single business, with two 2 bed flats located on each of the upper floors. Both blocks have been affected by high levels of antisocial behaviour, crime and substance misuse. In addition, the flats are very hard to let due to their location and property mix, in recent years have largely been home to transient households, and are not conducive to community cohesion. Both blocks are currently vacant and have been secured, and surveys have identified that significant investment is required due to the external and internal fabric and boundaries in order to bring them up to the Welsh Housing Quality Standard.

The report therefore recommended the demolition of both blocks, but that in recognition of the presence of a successful business operating out of The Grove, the demolition of that block be deferred until such time as the current lease expires or other arrangements transpire. It was noted that consultation had been carried out with the local and neighbouring ward Members and police, who had actively supported the proposal.

Discussion took place on the contents of the report and a Member queried if the Grove flats located above the shop premises could be offered up to Cornerstone as potential accommodation for homeless people. Officers explained that these are 2-bed flats and as the Authority is already experiencing difficulty in letting 2-bedroom houses, it would not be worthwhile to invest in these premises to bring them up to standard. Discussion also took place regarding the use of the Housing Revenue Account to meet the costs of providing a replacement shop facility, and Officers explained that they are looking to utilise alternative grant funding for this purpose if possible.

Following consideration of the report and in taking into account the views of the Caerphilly Homes Task Group, it was moved and seconded that the following recommendations be referred to Cabinet for approval. By a show of hands this was unanimously agreed.

RECOMMENDED to Cabinet that:-

- (i) the block known as 1 to 9 River Road be demolished;
- (ii) the principle to proceed with demolition be agreed in respect of 1 to 6, The Grove, Fochriw, but that the demolition be deferred until the current lease of 1 and 2, The Grove expires, a suitable alternative premises is identified for the business currently operating out of the block or the ongoing liability incurred by the Council in maintaining the mothballed building is no longer considered financially viable.

The meeting closed at 7.05 p.m.

Approved as a correct record and subject to any amendments or corrections agreed and recorded in the minutes of the meeting held on 6th September 2018, they were signed by the Chair.

CHAIR