



POLICY AND RESOURCES SCRUTINY COMMITTEE

**MINUTES OF THE MEETING HELD AT PENALLTA HOUSE, YSTRAD MYNACH ON
TUESDAY, 2ND OCTOBER 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, J. Ridgewell, R. Saralis, Mrs M.E. Sargent, J. Taylor, L.G. Whittle

Cabinet Members:

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

Together with:

R. Edmunds (Corporate Director for Education and Corporate Services), S. Couzens (Chief Housing Officer), L. Lucas (Head of Head of Customer and Digital Services), N. Scammell (Head of Corporate Finance and Section 151 Officer), M. Williams (Interim Head of Property Services), C. Davies (Private Sector Housing Manager), F. Wilkins (Housing Services Manager), L. Lane (Interim Deputy Monitoring Officer), C. Forbes-Thompson (Interim Head of Democratic Services), R. Barrett (Committee Services Officer)

1. APOLOGIES FOR ABSENCE

Apologies for absence were received from Councillors K. Dawson and Mrs D. Price.

2. DECLARATIONS OF INTEREST

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

3. MINUTES - 6TH SEPTEMBER 2018

RESOLVED that the minutes of the Policy and Resources Scrutiny Committee held on 6th September 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 L. Phipps and Mrs B. Jones, 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 the situation regarding workforce planning applications. Over 500 expressions of interest have been received and are being considered in detail by the relevant Senior Management Team, CMT, HR and the Cabinet Member to establish whether the business case is viable. The intention is to advise employees by the end of October 2018 as to whether their expression of interest can be supported.

The Scrutiny Committee were advised that the Council has been commended for their support of a special employment charter to support terminally ill employees in the workplace, which is part of the TUC's wider Dying to Work campaign. Members were also updated on the recent Volunteer Achievement Awards at Blackwood Miners Institute, a Digital Showcase held at Penallta House, Health and Safety successes, and work being carried out by the Procurement and Information Governance Teams.

Members sought further information on how the viability of business cases for workforce planning applications would be determined. The Cabinet Member explained that he was unable to comment further at this time due to ongoing discussions with HR and reiterated that applicants would be advised by the end of October. Assurances were given that any viable applications would be scrutinised and challenged by the relevant bodies in the correct and proper manner. A Member sought information on the numbers of starters replacing leavers across the Authority and the Corporate Director confirmed that he would arrange to circulate details to Members following the meeting.

Councillor L. Phipps (Cabinet Member for Homes and Places) provided an update on the recent introduction of Universal Credit across the county borough, the successful, Caerphilly Homes Celebration Event at Llancaiach Fawr and the latest progress across the WHQS programme. Members queried whether there had been an impact on staff workloads or to recipients arising from the changes to Universal Credit. The Cabinet Member confirmed that she would make further enquiries on the numbers affected by the changes, and explained that resources are being focused on supporting new claims and providing support/guidance to residents on the new processes.

Councillor Mrs B. Jones (Cabinet Member for Finance, Performance and Governance) provided an update on developments across Legal and Democratic Services, including the recent appointment of the Council's Head of Legal Services and Monitoring Officer, and the lay member vacancy on the Standards Committee. The Scrutiny Self-Evaluation questionnaire will be circulated to all Members shortly and the results will be reported to Members. The Electoral Services annual canvass is underway and 63.25% of residential properties have replied to date. Every effort (including door to door canvassing) will be made to achieve the highest response rate possible. The Electoral Services Team are then due to commence work on a review of Polling Places within the county borough.

A Member referred to the large number of households that have not yet responded to the canvass and suggested that consideration be given to collecting this information by other means (such as Council Tax records). A query was received on the number of canvass

visits made to each non-responsive property. Discussion also took place on whether polling district boundaries could be examined, given that there are occasions where a street can span two districts. The Cabinet Member confirmed that she would relay the queries and comments to the Electoral Services Manager.

The Cabinet Members were thanked for their reports.

6. POLICY AND RESOURCES SCRUTINY COMMITTEE FORWARD WORK PROGRAMME

Cath Forbes-Thompson (Interim Head of Democratic Services) presented the report, which outlined details of the Policy and Resources Scrutiny Committee Forward Work Programme (FWP) for the period October 2018 to April 2019. Members were asked to consider the FWP alongside the Cabinet Work Programme as appended to the report and to suggest any changes to its content.

It was noted that there had been no report requests since the publication of the agenda papers. Members were advised that they would be contacted in due course regarding the five reports listed for 13th November 2018, in order to determine which report could be deferred to a later date or distributed as an information item.

Following discussion on its contents, it was unanimously agreed that 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. YEAR END PERFORMANCE REPORT FOR CORPORATE SERVICES 2017/18

Members welcomed Ed Edmunds (Corporate Director for Education and Corporate Services) to his first meeting of the Policy and Resources Scrutiny Committee.

Mr Edmunds introduced the report, which provided Members with a performance update of the Corporate Services Directorate. The report reviewed performance against objectives within each service area over the last 12 months, highlighted the exceptions, set out key objectives/priorities for the next twelve months (including any future challenges) and identified areas for improvement. The Committee were referred to performance against each service area as set out in the report (Corporate Finance, People Services, Property Services, Procurement Services, Corporate Customer Services, and Legal and Democratic Services) and were invited to ask questions of the relevant Heads of Service in attendance. It was noted that Property Services have now moved to the Communities Directorate and that future performance will be reported to the Regeneration and Environment Scrutiny Committee.

Discussion took place regarding the levels of sickness absence across Corporate Services for 2017/18. A Member expressed the need for improvement and sought assurances that all instances of sickness absence are proactively managed through return to work

interviews, trade union support, and monitoring of sickness levels. It was explained that the Cabinet Member for Corporate Services is now holding quarterly meetings with Heads of Service to identify whether any processes require review, ascertain that relevant procedures have been followed, and highlight any underlying reasons for absences. Members were reminded of the need to follow the appropriate processes for the management of sickness absence but were given assurances that the situation is being kept under review in order to bring about an improvement for 2018/19.

In response to a Member's query, it was confirmed that the Council are examining the feasibility of introducing a scheme for rewarding/recognising good attendance. Clarification was also sought on the reasons for sickness absence across Customer Services. Officers confirmed that the short-term absences mainly relate to ailments such as coughs and colds but are not stress-related, and that long-term sickness absence related to more serious illnesses.

A Member referred to future challenges within Procurement Services and queried why the Council had been unable to recruit for 2 fixed term positions covering the WHQS programme. It was explained that there is generally a shortage of professionals with the specific knowledge requirements for procurement within the EU sector and therefore the Council will now look to develop trainees at a lesser grade in order to cover these positions.

Discussion took place regarding the Contact Centre's telephone answer times and call handling system and a Member queried whether call duration could be reduced by way of providing menu options for a preferred language when callers hear the automated greeting. Officers explained that legislation requires this greeting to be bi-lingual but that the system is being upgraded in December 2018 which, together with the recruitment of 6 apprentices, should see an improvement in call handling times. In response to a query regarding apprenticeships, Members were reminded that Cabinet recently approved the allocation of £530k of savings in order to provide apprenticeship opportunities across a range of Councils services that had been identified as in need of additional resources in order to meet demand.

Concerns were raised regarding the low number of redeployments in 2017/18 (10 staff) given the number of staff in the redeployment pool (110 staff) and a Member suggested that cross-directorate secondments could help to improve this position. He indicated that he would be satisfied to receive a more detailed response in writing following the meeting. Officers explained that many vacancies require a particular skillset which may not be met by staff in the redeployment pool, and that in addition a number of the posts are grant-funded. At the present time there are 88 employees in the pool. It was confirmed that further information would be circulated to Members following the meeting.

The Scrutiny Committee discussed the Council Tax collection rate for 2017/18 of 96.9% collected in full. Officers explained that this relates to in-year collection and that the team proactively pursues arrears, which increases the collection rate to 99.5% over a typical 3 year period. It was noted that no authorities have a 100% collection rate and that non-payments are mainly due to bankruptcy, death or absconders. In addition, the Council over-exceeds its income targets and is ranked the 6th best in Wales for Council Tax collections.

A Member referred to future challenges within Property Services and expressed a need for changes to be made in terms of service delivery moving forward, given the likely resource pressures that have been identified from 2020 onwards as a result of the 21st Century Schools Band B programme. Officers explained that careful workforce planning has commenced to identify how the project team will take this forward and the resources that will be required. It was noted that a report on 21st Century Schools Match Funding Proposals is scheduled for Cabinet consideration which will outline the funding required to take the next stage of the programme forward. In addition, Officers also referred to the

Council's Business Improvement Portfolio' (BIP) Board which will lead a portfolio of change across the organisation to transform a range of areas and ensure that services are delivered as efficiently and effectively as possible.

In referring to the overview of People Services as set out in the report, Members sought clarification on the reasons for a reduction in payroll payments for 2017/18, and requested specifics of the compulsory redundancies during 2017/18. Officers confirmed that they would arrange to circulate this information to Members following the meeting.

Having fully considered the report, the Scrutiny Committee noted its contents and the progress made against performance objectives within the Corporate Services Directorate for 2017/18. Members thanked the Heads of Service for their updates and for responding to the queries raised during consideration of the report.

9. WELLBEING OBJECTIVE 5: INVESTMENT IN COUNCIL HOMES TO TRANSFORM LIVES AND COMMUNITIES – END OF YEAR REPORT (2017/18)

Shaun Couzens (Chief Housing Officer) presented the report, which provided an update on performance made through Wellbeing Objective (WO5) for 2017/18 (Investment in Council Homes to Transform Lives and Communities), and had also been considered by the Caerphilly Homes Task Group on 20th September 2018.

Officers highlighted the significant investment in the WHQS programme (over £150m to date) and the achievements made towards meeting the Wellbeing Objective. These included the creation of jobs, apprenticeships and training opportunities, progress made towards the realisation of 'whole home compliance' via internal and external works, energy efficiency and physical environmental improvements, and the increased provision of accommodation adapted to meet tenants with specific housing needs. It was noted that although some slippage has been experienced with the external works element, achievement of the WHQS standard is on target to be delivered by the 2020 deadline. At the end of March 2018, 73% of properties were compliant in relation to internal work and 46% for external work, with overall compliance being 35%. Full details of the progress made in respect of this Wellbeing Objective were appended to the report.

Tenant satisfaction levels continue to be monitored, with tenants generally happy with internal works (86%) and to a lesser extent for external works (70%). It was noted that the delivery of the WHQS programme remains challenging but is clearly making a significant contribution towards the successful achievement of the Wellbeing Objective. The programme continues to be financially viable, with the possibility of some additional borrowing being required towards the end of the programme. New arrangements introduced during 2017/18 means that the Council is well placed to deliver the WHQS programme in full by the 2020 deadline, with the substantial investment made helping to transform lives and communities. Therefore the report recommended that the Wellbeing Objective be deemed as being "partially successful" for 2017/18.

Discussion took place regarding the WHQS Environmental Programme, which will see circa £10.6m of investment for environmental improvements across council estates in the county borough. A 'Shape Your Place' consultation is being held for communities to give ideas on how to improve their local area, and Officers explained that this will be managed by a series of events and online surveys to seek the views of residents regarding environmental improvements. The Scrutiny Committee were advised that the £10.6m budget spend will be allocated based on the priorities that are identified in each area, and in response to a Member's query on whether the budget would extend to surrounding areas, it was confirmed that the focus would be on improvements within council estates themselves.

A Member commented on a lack of visible environmental improvement works to date in his

ward and Officers explained that there had been some delays in commencing the Environmental Programme (in that it began several years after the main WHQS programme of works had commenced) but that it is now gathering momentum. Members were advised that once the priorities have been identified from the consultation events, then they should start to see improvement works being carried out across their communities. Discussion also took place regarding the tenant survey process carried out upon completion of works and the proposal to conduct telephone surveys as a means of increasing feedback.

Following consideration of the report and in noting its contents, Members unanimously agreed that the Wellbeing Objective WO5 (Investment in Council Homes to Transform Lives and Communities) be judged as partially successful for 2017/18.

10. YEAR END PERFORMANCE REPORT FOR CAERPHILLY HOMES

Shaun Couzens (Chief Housing Officer) presented the report, which had previously been considered by the Caerphilly Homes Task Group on 20th September 2018. The report provided an overview of the performance of the services provided by Caerphilly Homes during 2017/18, set out the key service objectives for 2018 to 2023 and highlighted any potential challenges that may affect the delivery of these priorities.

Details of performance within each Caerphilly Homes section (Housing Repair Operations, Private Sector Housing, Public Sector Housing and Welsh Housing Quality Standard) together with areas for improvement, key objectives and priorities for the year ahead, and the main risks identified, were summarised within the report.

The Scrutiny Committee were advised that overall the performance of Caerphilly Homes for 2017/18 is considered to be good and continues to build on performance from previous years. Aspects of the service requiring improvement have been identified, and the section will work closely with stakeholders to introduce changes that will result in improved services and performance. Particular reference was made to the key priorities for the period 2018 to 2023 as set out in Section 4.19 of the report, which will aim to deliver further service improvements and will ensure that Caerphilly Homes are able to respond proactively to the needs and aspirations of those who use these services. In addition, a number of challenges have been identified that may affect the ability to implement these service improvements successfully. However, the service is currently regarded by the Housing Management Team to be well placed to respond to these challenges.

During the course of the ensuing debate, a Member queried whether legal costs incurred by the Authority in relation to rent arrears are recovered from tenants. Officers explained that these costs are added to the rent account if the amount does not exceed renegotiation terms, and that in the majority of cases, the costs are successfully negotiated and recovered from tenants. It was emphasised that the Council will actively seek alternatives to eviction for rent arrears, such as working with the homelessness prevention team to seek a recovery solution.

A Member expressed a need to reduce the days taken to let accommodation (69 days target and 84.52 days actual in 2017/18). Officers explained that an increasing number of voids are being refurbished with additional work being undertaken to bring the internal elements of the property up to WHQS, which is contributing towards longer voids period. Members were advised that the void period takes effect from the point that the property first becomes vacant. In some cases this period can be reduced if the tenant allows pre-inspection access before the end of their tenancy. Officers also explained that work has been carried out to promote hard to let number of properties, or those with an extended void period. A number of these properties were successfully re-let during 2016/17, which had an adverse impact on the overall number of void days. Discussion also took place regarding low demand properties and the work being carried out to manage these

properties in line with tenant expectations.

Further information was sought in respect of the priority to introduce a new management charge schedule for leaseholders. Officers explained that this had come about as a result of costs not being recovered for repair works in some buildings and that the new process would standardise the arrangements already in place.

Discussion took place regarding the percentage of empty Council Housing properties across the Authority (1.76%) and a Member queried whether this was also representative of the number of empty private sector properties and whether it is possible to compare like for like. Officers explained that it is difficult to measure the two owing to different parameters and circumstances for the two letting types, and also because the number of empty Council Housing properties represent a point in time figure. Officers also provided further details of the Right to Move pilot scheme to market a number of hard to let properties, explaining that the Council acts as the contact/liaison point between the property landlord and potential tenants who meet the relevant eligibility criteria.

A Member queried how Caerphilly Homes will contribute to the 'Coalition for Change' to drive forward housing improvements across the Lansbury Park estate. Officers confirmed that an additional funding application has recently been submitted to Welsh Government in this regard and that a decision is expected in the near future.

In response to a query on an increased target for fuel use in 2017/18, Officers explained that this was because they had anticipated greater use of the fleet due to increased momentum across the WHQS programme. However, there was an increase in shared vehicle arrangements, together with the acquisition of new fuel-efficient vehicles, which led to actual fuel costs being less than anticipated. Reference was made to the continued use of bed and breakfast accommodation and Officers explained that this is due to an increase in homelessness cases but that they are continually looking to use alternatives wherever possible. The Committee were also pleased to note the details of Caerphilly Homes' nomination for "Best Performing Authority in the UK for Building Maintenance" at the 2017 APSE Performance Networks Awards and congratulated all staff involved.

Following consideration of the report, Members noted its contents and progress made against performance objectives within Caerphilly Homes for 2017/18.

11. PERFORMANCE REPORT FOR DELIVERY OF DISABLED FACILITIES GRANT

Fiona Wilkins (Housing Services Manager) presented the report, which provided an update on performance in relation to the delivery of mandatory Disabled Facilities Grants (DFGs), and also highlighted the challenges that have affected the delivery of these adaptations during 2017/18.

The Scrutiny Committee were advised that performance of the Private Sector Housing Adaptations Team in delivery of DFGs during 2017/18 has shown continuous improvement, although there are some aspects of the service which would benefit from further improvement. The main challenge moving forward relates to the continued ability to provide a high quality service that meets the needs and aspirations of service users, while satisfying medium term financial plan priorities, and the Housing Adaptations Team is well placed to respond to this challenge.

It was noted that in 2017/18 Caerphilly Council was ranked 21st out of the 22 local authorities in relation to the time taken to deliver a Disabled Facilities Grant, but that the Council delivered the 6th highest number of DFGs with limited staff resources. Due to concerns regarding how the performance indicator data is gathered nationally, Welsh Government have now withdrawn this as a mandatory national performance indicator, and

are developing a new suite of performance indicators linked to the ENABLE system, which consider delivery of all types of adaptations (not just DFGs).

When reviewing performance in 2017/18 across Caerphilly Council, the picture is one of improvement. Following the introduction of improvements as set out in the report, the average number of days to deliver a DFG has decreased each quarter, meeting the target in quarter 3 and exceeding the target in quarter 4. This improvement has continued into quarter 1 of 2018/19 (266 days). It is hoped that continued improvements will be achieved in 2018/19, following the consideration of matters as detailed in Section 4.17 of the report which related to client or performance focused service.

During the course of the ensuing debate, Officers outlined the detailed and lengthy multi-agency process in place to deliver the DFG, which includes involvement by Social Services, the Occupation Therapy (OT) service, and the Adaptations Team. Members were advised that clients' financial circumstances and individual needs can change throughout the process, and these can lead to complications which can extend the overall delivery period. It was noted that Social Services prioritise assessments to ensure resources are targeted to those in the greatest need and at greatest risk.

A Member queried whether the length of time to deliver a DFG can result in delays to hospital discharge times. Officers explained that small adaptation works will be prioritised and that the section encourages early engagement with relevant agencies in order to get the application moving as quickly as possible. Officers also provided an outlined of the criteria required in order to meet the DFG. All clients are assessed on their individual circumstances but are required to complete a financial assessment form in all cases.

In response to a Member's query on whether additional staffing resources would improve delivery times for the DFG, Officers outlined budgetary limitations, previous significant difficulties in recruiting suitably qualified/trained, and highlighted the other competing priorities and workloads within the team. The provision of Disabled Facilities Grants has been reviewed from a procedural point of view within Private Sector Housing and a number of items addressed to improve delivery times for adaptations. These were set out in Section 4.16 of the report, and it was emphasised to the Committee that a balance needs to be met between the number of available staff and the service on offer.

Officers responded to queries on how difficulties in maintaining sufficient contractors to undertake adaptation works will be addressed, by explaining that they are examining the potential for a procurement framework to deliver Disabled Facilities Grant. However, further investigation is required as such arrangements may be contrary to tender requirements specified in relevant grant legislation. There are also difficulties in obtaining timely start dates from successful contractors, due to competing pressures linked in part to their workloads external to Private Sector Housing (which may include WHQS, Housing Repair Operations and private contracts)

Following consideration of the report, Members agreed that the current level of performance against delivery of Disabled Facilities Grants be deemed as acceptable, and noted the details of the improvements made to date.

The meeting closed at 8.04 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 13th November 2018, they were signed by the Chair.

CHAIR