



POLICY AND RESOURCES SCRUTINY COMMITTEE

**MINUTES OF THE MEETING HELD AT PENALLTA HOUSE, YSTRAD MYNACH ON
TUESDAY, 12TH MARCH 2019 AT 5.30 P.M.**

PRESENT:

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

Councillors:

M. Adams, K. Etheridge, L. Harding, G. Johnston, C.P. Mann, J. Ridgewell, R. Saralis,
Mrs M.E. Sargent

Cabinet Members:

C. Gordon (Corporate Services), Mrs B. Jones (Finance, Performance and Governance),

Together with:

R. Edmunds (Corporate Director for Education and Corporate Services), S. Couzens (Chief Housing Officer), S. Cousins (Housing Solutions Manager), P. Smythe (Housing Technical Manager), F. Wilkins (Housing Services Manager), M. Williams (Interim Head of Property Services), C. Forbes-Thompson (Interim Head of Democratic Services), M. Jacques (Scrutiny Officer), R. Barrett (Committee Services Officer)

Also present:

N. Jenkins (Wales Audit Office)

1. WELCOME

The Chair welcomed Mark Jacques (Scrutiny Officer) to his first meeting of the Policy and Resources Scrutiny Committee.

2. APOLOGIES FOR ABSENCE

Apologies for absence were received from Councillors Mrs E.M. Aldworth, Mrs C. Forehead, Miss E. Forehead, Mrs D. Price, J. Taylor, L.G. Whittle and Cabinet Member Mrs L. Phipps (Homes and Places).

3. DECLARATIONS OF INTEREST

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

4. MINUTES – 3RD DECEMBER 2018

RESOLVED that the minutes of the Special Policy and Resources Scrutiny Committee held on 3rd December 2018 (minute nos. 1 - 4) be approved as a correct record and signed by the Chair.

5. MINUTES – 15TH JANUARY 2019

RESOLVED that the minutes of the Policy and Resources Scrutiny Committee held on 15th January 2019 (minute nos. 1 - 11) be approved as a correct record and signed by the Chair.

6. CALL-IN PROCEDURE

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

7. 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 and, which provided an update on their respective portfolios, and had been circulated to Members in advance of the meeting.

In respect of the update from Councillor C. Gordon (Cabinet Member for Corporate Services), Members discussed the Plastic Challenge initiative and ways in which this can be maximised. The Scrutiny Committee were please to note the update in respect of the Apprenticeship scheme and placed on record their thanks for the allocation to Customer Services. It was noted that the scheme may have potential to link in with the proposed Caerphilly 2022 operating model, which will place an emphasis on training and development in order to upskill and fulfil roles in the future.

Arising from the update from Councillor Mrs B. Jones (Cabinet Member for Finance, Performance and Governance), discussion took place regarding the new performance dashboards being drafted for each Directorate and how these will drive improvement forward.

As Councillor Mrs L. Phipps (Cabinet Member for Homes and Places) had given apologies for the meeting, the Scrutiny Committee noted the contents of her report without discussion.

The Cabinet Members were thanked for their reports.

8. 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 March 2019, and included all reports that were identified at the Scrutiny Committee meeting on 15th January 2019. It was noted that a workshop to consider and agree the Committee's forward work programme for the year ahead had taken place immediately prior to the main meeting, and that Members had provisionally agreed items for inclusion.

It was unanimously agreed that the draft version of the Forward Work Programme for the coming year be circulated to the Scrutiny Committee for comment, with an updated version being brought to the next meeting for approval prior to publication on the Council's website.

9. 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.

10. PROGRESS REPORT – RESIDENTIAL REDEVELOPMENT OF THE SITE OF THE FORMER CIVIC CENTRE, PONTLLANFRAITH

Mark Williams (Interim Head of Property Services) and Shaun Couzens (Chief Housing Officer) presented the report, which provided a progress update on the proposed residential redevelopment of the site of the former Civic Centre in Pontllanfraith. The report sought Member's views on the involvement of Caerphilly Homes in the Social Housing element, prior to its consideration by Cabinet.

Members were advised that following the decision taken by Cabinet on 3rd October 2018, master planning for a residential development on the site of the former Civic Centre in Pontllanfraith has been progressed in conjunction with Registered Social Landlord Pobl. The outline proposals adheres to the Cabinet decision insofar as they are based on the Garden Village model and comprise broadly equal proportions of social rented, affordable housing and market sale, and approximately two thirds of the development will be classed as 'affordable'. Whilst the master planning to date is work in progress it gives assurance that the project is being developed in accordance with the direction given by Cabinet.

Members noted the details of the masterplan presentation appended to the report, which outlined details of the collaboration between the Council and Pobl, the vision for this development (Chartist Gardens), examples of similar schemes elsewhere, and target programme milestones and the overview for the scheme.

The Scrutiny Committee were pleased to note the progress made and the quality of the proposed scheme, and welcomed the benefits this would bring to the local area. During the course of the debate, Members sought clarity on the definition and criteria of affordable housing and the type of pricing structure involved. Officers explained that the definition is set in accordance with WG guidelines, in particular Technical Advice Note (TAN) 2 relating to planning and affordable housing, and that there are a number of different elements involved in regards to affordable housing. Further information will become available as the scheme develops. Members expressed concerns that the scale of affordability might be more achievable for those individuals living outside the county borough and looking to relocate in order to commute. They also enquired as to whether the new properties could be ring-fenced to existing residents of the county borough. Officers confirmed that if the social housing element is transferred to Caerphilly Homes, these particular properties would be allocated to those on the Common Housing Register.

In response to Members' queries, Officers outlined the process by which the Council would

purchase the houses which fall under the social housing element, including the use of a Section 106 agreement. The specifics of these will be brought back to Cabinet at a later date.

A Member sought further information on a number of sections across the report and agreed to email his queries to Officers. He highlighted concerns regarding the amount of residential development in the Blackwood area, the impact of the development on the war memorial and encroachment on the neighbouring park. He also suggested that there is a covenant in place to protect use of this area. Officers confirmed that the planning process would address any concerns regarding over-development. They explained that no covenant exists and development would anyway be confined to the civic site itself. The war memorial will remain in its current location but the Sir Harold Finch memorial plaque and adjacent buried time capsule will be relocated in consultation and agreement with family representatives.

Following consideration of the report and in noting its contents, 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 contents of the report be noted;
- (ii) the proposal to transfer the social element of this development to Caerphilly Homes, with the purchase cost being covered from the Housing Revenue Account, be approved.

11. WALES AUDIT OFFICE WHQS REVIEW

Consideration was given to the report detailing the follow up review by the Wales Audit Office (WAO) on the Welsh Housing Quality Standard (WHQS) delivery programme, which had been considered by Cabinet on 30th January 2019, and thereafter presented to the Caerphilly Homes Task Group on 12th February 2019 as an information item which was noted without discussion.

The Scrutiny Committee were reminded of the WAO Review in 2017 which reviewed the Council's arrangements to deliver the WHQS by 2020, and concluded that the *"majority of tenants' homes remain below the WHQS standard due to longstanding inefficient and ineffective programme management and the Council is unlikely to achieve the standard by 2020"*. A WAO follow up review undertaken between April and October 2018 has now concluded that *"the Council has responded positively to our June 2017 WHQS report and statutory recommendations by making significant improvements and as a result we now conclude that it is likely to meet the WHQS by December 2020"*.

Ms Non Jenkins (Wales Audit Office) was welcomed to the meeting and provided a detailed summary of the report to the Scrutiny Committee. Ms Jenkins confirmed that the follow up review has been undertaken in two parts, namely a Service User Perspective Review, which focussed on the views from 489 tenants and 25 leaseholders in relation to the delivery of the WHQS programme, and a Follow Up Review to determine whether the Council is meeting its commitments and making satisfactory progress to meet the WHQS by WG's deadline of December 2020. The follow up reports provided by the WAO provide a far more positive picture on the current position of the WHQS programme and also provides independent confidence that Caerphilly Homes are on track to deliver the full

programme by December 2020. A copy of these follow up documents were appended to the Officer's report.

The Service User Perspective Review refers to 3 proposals for improvement, and the report set out details of how the Council will address these moving forward. It was accepted that improvements and consistency are required in the way performance information is presented, which have been addressed within the report. In addition, the Local Housing Strategy will be developed during 2019 and EIAs on key policy reports will be carried out at the appropriate time. Ms Jenkins also highlighted the importance of consistent and proactive tenant engagement and communication, and how issues identified and tenant feedback can be used to strengthen performance moving forward.

In responding to the presentation from Ms Jenkins, the Chief Housing Officer referred to the positive nature of the report and the WAO's acknowledgement of the progress that had been made. He expressed his thanks to relevant Officers, the Scrutiny Committee and the Cross Party Working Group for their work surrounding the WAO review, and highlighted the need to continue momentum in order to achieve the Welsh Quality Housing Standard by the anticipated date of June 2020, rather than the WG deadline of December 2020.

During the course of discussion on the item, queries were received on how the Council planned to strengthen its communication approaches with tenants and leaseholders, and how complaints about the WHQS programme are analysed to strengthen processes. Officers outlined the ways in which information on the WHQS programme is made available, via the Council's website, newsletters, consultation events, social media, working groups, press releases and marketing events. Work is currently ongoing with the Caerphilly Homes Task Group to review the communications process and Officers welcomed suggestions from the Scrutiny Committee. Complaints are dealt with through the Corporate Complaints Policy and the Council responds proactively to any improvements that are needed as a result. A report on Complaints and Representations is also presented to the Task Group on an annual basis.

The Chief Housing Officer highlighted an aspect raised by the Repairs and Improvement Group in that satisfaction surveys should allow for a greater level of tenant feedback in order to manage expectations. Ms Jenkins expressed the importance of knowing the reasons behind feedback and also in gathering geographical locations of the respondents so that improvements can be targeted to areas in need. The Chief Housing Officer confirmed that satisfaction surveys are now undertaken by telephone to allow staff to drill down to any areas that need addressing. The Scrutiny Committee were asked to note however that satisfaction levels are comparable with that of other local authorities in Wales. It was also confirmed that at the time of the meeting, 76% of tenants/leaseholders are now reporting that they are satisfied with the external works, which is an increase from the 71% rate in the WAO survey.

A Member referred to the WAO finding that the Council could better explain to leaseholders and tenants why WHQS works are needed and queried this finding given the continuous promotion of the WHQS programme over the last 6 years. Officers explained that this can sometimes relate to planned maintenance over and above the WHQS requirements, and Ms Jenkins highlighted the importance of giving a timeline and keeping tenant expectations in mind

The Chief Housing Officer also responded to general queries from Members regarding the level of complaints surrounding improvement works, the challenges that can be faced when accessing homes to carry out these works, and of the types of installations used, such as double glazing, draft proofing, and suitable boiler systems.

The Scrutiny Committee thanked Ms Jenkins for her report and it was noted the WAO would continue to monitor progress moving forward. Ms Jenkins did however suggest that the Policy and Resources Scrutiny Committee also needed to ensure that the delivery of the WHQS programme was closely monitored in order for Members to satisfy themselves and provide confidence that compliance by the stated deadline continued to be achievable. Members also extended their thanks to the Chief Housing Officer and his staff for all their work in relation to the WAO Review.

Following consideration of the report, and in recognising the progress made to date, the Policy and Resources Scrutiny Committee unanimously agreed that the attached WAO reports and the Officers responses to the reports and the proposals for improvement be noted.

12. RE-PROFILING OF WHQS PROGRAMME AND HRA CAPITAL PROGRAMME 2019/2020

Paul Smythe (Housing Technical Manager) presented the report, which had previously been considered by the Caerphilly Homes Task Group on 14th February 2019, and outlined proposals for re-profiling the final stages of the WHQS programme with the aim of ensuring full compliance by 2020. The views of the Scrutiny Committee were sought on the content of the report ahead of its presentation to Cabinet.

It was noted that whilst good progress has been maintained on the delivery of the programme during 2018/19, it has been necessary to review and re-align the programme to take account of changing circumstances to ensure that full compliance is achieved by 2020. Based on current and projected performance, the achievement of full compliance is achievable prior to the deadline of December 2020. The separate programme of works for the sheltered housing schemes is also on course, but there has been a need to re-profile a number of schemes as a result of additional external works, along with ecological surveys which have delayed some contracts by a number of months. One sheltered housing scheme (Ty Isaf Risca) has been suspended from the programme due to health and safety grounds, and will be accounted for as an acceptable fail in line with WG guidance pending a feasibility study to determine the future viability of the scheme.

Members also noted the borrowing requirement necessary to complete the programme (currently £43m) which has seen a revision to the HRA Capital Programme budget. Where surveys have yet to be finalised, average costs have been used based on rates from most recent tender submissions. This data has replaced the previous Savill's estimates and demonstrates that the housing business plan and the WHQS programme remains financially viable.

The Scrutiny Committee discussed the contents of the report, and in response to a query regarding the additional costs of the programme, Officers outlined the details of the previous Savills survey and the comprehensive survey work undertaken since to provide a more complete picture of the costs required. A Member referred to the assumptions made in re-profiling the programme to achieve compliance by December 2020. Officers explained that there is confidence that the programme will be achieved before this time, with the aim being March 2020. Although the programme is continuing to experience challenges, such as the recent loss of the second contractor delivering part of the internal works, there are contingencies in place to ensure continuation of the works. Officers outlined the details of the contractor tender process and discussion took place regarding the specifics of the DPS procurement system in this regard and the minimum tender size for internal and external contracts.

Having considered and noted the contents of the report, and in taking into account the comments 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 contents of the report be noted;
- (ii) the revised WHQS programme and projected increased investment totalling £250m be endorsed;
- (iii) the borrowing requirement necessary to complete the programme (currently £43m) be agreed, with the proviso that the borrowing amount remains affordable within the Business Plan and the HRA.

13. ALLOCATION OF NEW HOMES AND THE ROLE OF THE TENANCY ENFORCEMENT SECTION

Consideration was given to the report, which had been produced following a Member's request, and had previously been presented to the Caerphilly Homes Task Group on 6th December 2018 as an information item, where it was noted without discussion.

Fiona Wilkins (Housing Services Manager) and Sue Cousins (Housing Solutions Manager) summarised the report, which outlined the relevant legislative provisions and associated guidance associated with allocations and provided information on the Council's Common Allocation Policy. It included information on when an applicant can be considered as ineligible for an allocation or suspended from the Common Housing Register, how low demand older persons accommodation is allocated, the role and workload of the Tenancy Enforcement Section (TES) with some comparison with that of a number of local Registered Social landlords, and the obligations of tenants to manage their tenancies in accordance with their tenancy agreement.

During the course of the ensuing debate, a Member expressed concerns regarding the increased workload for TES staff arising from the significant increase in the number of referrals during 2018 and asked if the department has sufficient equipment in stock to handle this increase. The Member moved a motion to request that the Committee consider making a recommendation to Cabinet to allocate additional resources to deal with this increase in referrals. The Member also expressed his thanks to the Tenancy Enforcement Section staff for their hard work during this period.

In response, Officers explained that there had been an exceptionally high level of complaints made to the TES during 2018, particularly during periods of hot weather, and other social landlords within Gwent have also experienced similar increases in reporting levels. The TES are seeing an increasing number of complex cases and multi-agency working is proving effective. It was emphasised that the TES deal with all referrals proactively and the overriding aim is to assist in the prevention of eviction and homelessness. It was also explained that the TES works very closely with the Public Protection team and so can readily access additional noise-monitoring equipment on a temporary basis if required.

In response to a query on the remit of the TES, it was explained that TES investigate complaints of anti social behaviour made against Council tenants, and complaints about non-Council tenants are investigated by Public Protection. The processes within TES

have recently been reviewed with stricter criteria for investigation being introduced. The Scrutiny Committee also discussed the garden monitoring procedure used by staff in the local housing offices for breaches of tenancy including the number of NOSPs (notice of seeking possession) and actual possessions as a result, and it was noted that 194 NOSPs have been served in the last three years and 21 possession orders obtained with no possessions to date. An additional step has very recently been introduced as a further attempt to engage with the tenant in resolving the breach prior to seeking legal intervention. This involves a referral to a Homeless Prevention Officer who will also try to engage with the tenant and provide relevant support, and has proven to be successful in a number of instances.

Officers responded to queries in respect of the Common Allocation Policy and confirmed that they work closely with tenants to allocate housing based on specific need. It was explained that Caerphilly Homes places an increased focus on supporting independent living to allow residents to remain in their own homes for as long as possible. Discussion also took place regarding sheltered housing criteria and Officers provided clarification on the health and safety rationale surrounding restrictions on pets in certain types of sheltered housing complexes.

Having discussed the report and noted its contents, the Committee considered the earlier motion in respect of a potential recommendation to Cabinet to seek additional staff resources for the TES, and this motion was seconded. The Chief Housing Officer addressed the Scrutiny Committee, and explained that although there had been an increasing trend in referrals to the TES during 2018, the situation was being closely monitored and there was no guarantee that the increased workload would continue during 2019. He therefore suggested that it might be more conducive to see whether the pattern continues before considering a need for additional resources.

A further motion was moved and seconded in that a progress report be instead presented to the Scrutiny Committee in six months time. Another Member then proposed an amendment to the earlier motion in that it be recommended to Cabinet that an apprentice position be allocated to the TES. The mover of the original motion confirmed he accepted this amendment, but following further debate, withdrew his motion in full.

The Scrutiny Committee then voted on the substantive motion and by a show of hands, it was unanimously agreed that a progress report in respect of the role and workload of the Tenancy Enforcement Section be presented to the Committee in six months' time.

The meeting closed at 7.35 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 28th May 2019, they were signed by the Chair.

CHAIR