



HOUSING AND REGENERATION SCRUTINY COMMITTEE

**MINUTES OF THE MEETING HELD AT PENALLTA HOUSE, YSTRAD MYNACH ON
TUESDAY, 11TH JUNE 2019 AT 5.30 P.M.**

PRESENT:

Councillor J. Ridgewell – Chair
Councillor Mrs C. Forehead – Vice Chair

Councillors:

J. Bevan, C. Elsbury, L. Harding, A.G. Higgs, , Mrs P. Leonard, B. Owen, Mrs D. Price, Mrs M.E. Sargent, W. Williams and B. Zaplatynski.

Cabinet Members:

S. Morgan (Economy, Infrastructure and Sustainability) and L. Phipps (Homes and Places)

Together with:

M.S. Williams (Corporate Director Communities), S. Couzens (Chief Housing Officer), A. Dallimore (Regeneration Services Manager), P. Rossiter (Energy and Water Officer), P. Cooke (Senior Policy Officer), S. Isaacs (Rents Manager), C. Forbes-Thompson (Interim Head of Democratic Services), M. Jacques (Scrutiny Officer), E. Sullivan (Senior Committee Services Officer).

1. CHAIR'S ANNOUNCEMENT

The Chair opened the meeting and welcomed those in attendance to the first meeting of the Housing and Regeneration Scrutiny Committee.

2. APOLOGIES FOR ABSENCE

Apologies for absence were received from Councillors D. Cushing, R.W. Gough, G. Kirby and Mrs G.D. Oliver.

3. DECLARATIONS OF INTEREST

Declarations of interest were received from Councillor A.G. Higgs, Agenda Item No. 6 and Councillor W. Williams, Agenda Item No. 7. Details are minuted with the respective item.

4. CALL-IN PROCEDURE

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

5. HOUSING AND REGENERATION SCRUTINY COMMITTEE FORWARD WORK PROGRAMME

The report outlined details of the Housing and Regeneration Committee Forward Work Programme (FWP) for the period June 2019 to July 2020. It was noted that items from the Policy and Resources Scrutiny Committee in relation to Housing matters had been combined with Regeneration matters from the former Regeneration and Environment Scrutiny Committee to make up the programme presented for approval.

Members were advised that except for a minor amendment to 23rd July 2019 meeting to change the witnesses listed from Tina McMahon to Rhian Kyte there were no further changes to the forward work programme.

Following consideration and discussion, it was moved and seconded that subject to the aforementioned amendment the recommendation in the report be approved. By a show of hands this was unanimously agreed.

RESOLVED that the work programme be approved.

6. 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 report.

7. UNIVERSAL CREDIT – HOUSING UPDATE

Councillor A.G. Higgs declared a personal interest as a Council Tenant.

Members noted that the report had been previously considered by the Caerphilly Homes Task Group and would be subsequently considered by Cabinet. The comments of the Caerphilly Homes Task Group were noted.

Consideration was given to the report which focused on the impact of Universal Credit (UC) on both Council tenants and Caerphilly County Borough Council and explained how the roll out operated and the issues it created resulting in an increase in rent arrears.

Clarification was sought in relation to the composition of Universal Credit and Members were advised that it combined 6 legacy benefits but this report was only concerned with the housing benefit element. Members were reminded that UC applied to people of working age only, for elderly people in residential care, support was provided through Social Services, primarily Rachel Morris and her team who worked to ensure income maximisation. The application and award process was explained and it was noted that it would be 5 weeks from the date of the claim for the first UC payment to be received; although the housing benefit element could be paid earlier it still left tenants facing a 3 week deficit. The impact of this on tenants who now had to be able to budget effectively from a single lump sum was outlined. Members noted the difficult position that tenants were facing in terms of financial choices, such as rent or food and that this coupled with the fact that rent is paid a month in arrears and could no longer be taken out at source were acknowledged as the biggest contributing factors to the arrears position.

Members complimented Mrs Isaacs and her team for the excellent response to tenants during this initial roll out.

The Scrutiny Committee having noted the impact on tenants and resulting increase in rent arrears caused by the changeover queried how this loss of income was being managed. Officers confirmed that the Business Plan had been adjusted accordingly and the service had also responded by looking at different ways of working particularly around how they worked with tenants. An example of this was the introduction of UC Surgeries which were currently being held in Rhymney and other areas on a weekly basis, rather than conducting individual home visits. It was noted that the cost of providing this support was being closely monitored along with the increase in voids and homelessness which could potentially result from the impact of UC. Members fully supported the Surgeries and requested that information on them be circulated to all Councillors following the meeting.

The digital aspects of the application process were detailed and it was noted that not only did the initial application need to be completed on line but any change to circumstances also had to be logged via the individuals own UC Journal. Officers confirmed that previously they had been able to submit rent increase updates on-block; unfortunately they now have to be completed by each tenant which meant 933 individual submissions. This required a level of digital awareness and access to systems that were challenging for many tenants.

Clarification was sought in relation to Welsh Government input into the issue and Members were advised that WG had commissioned a year long review on the impact of Universal Credit in Wales with the results available next year.

Members noted the resource intensive nature of the support being provided and queried if there was sufficient staffing numbers to continue in this vein.

Officers confirmed that two additional members of staff had been appointed this week; however these costs were covered from the HRA which is generated by rents paid so the costs of continuing to provide this level of support was a fine balancing act that is being carefully monitored.

Following consideration and discussion, it was moved and seconded that the recommendation in the report be approved. By a show of hands this was unanimously agreed.

RECOMMENDED to Cabinet that: -

- (i) a regular update to take place on the roll out of UC and its impact be agreed;
- (ii) the approach being taken to manage the roll out of UC and the support being offered to tenants be ratified.

8. ENERGY AND CARBON REPORT

Councillor W. Williams declared a personal interest in that he is a Member of Argoed Community Council and they are looking at a Community Energy Project.

Consideration was given to the report which detailed the progress made in respect of energy conservation and carbon reduction and outlined the need for a new overarching plan which would assist the Council in meeting its green energy ambitions. It was noted that as the current Carbon Reduction Strategy ends in 2019 there is a need to develop a new Energy Plan which would set out the overarching objectives of being a carbon neutral council. The Plan would also identify a number of projects that the Council can take forward over the short, medium and long term.

The Scrutiny Committee supported the existing initiatives outlined in section 5.6 to 5.17 of the Officer's report and recognised that further work needed to be done to reduce our carbon footprint and become a net carbon neutral local authority by 2030.

With regard to the key opportunities and projects going forward Members supported the principle of an Energy Plan and then sought clarification on the identification of possible Council sites for solar and wind power generation. Officers confirmed that Property Services were looking at a number of land assets where there may be opportunities for both. Reference was made to the potential for hydroelectric generation and it was noted that this was very limited due to fall and volume limitations. However a feasibility study had identified the potential of the stream adjacent to the visitor centre at Cwmcarn Forest Drive but its viability required further investigation.

The Scrutiny Committee also supported the principle of woodland development and again queried any identified sites. Members were advised that similar to sites for wind and solar farms, location identification was at a very early stage but there was definite potential for development. Members were then updated on the possible impact that the Ash Tree die-back programme across Wales could have on woodlands and Officers confirmed that further reports would be brought forward on this issue.

In terms of the Electric Vehicle Strategy and Action Plan assurance were sought that the charging infrastructure would be spread throughout the county borough. Officers confirmed that there would be 8-9 sites developed in order to ensure county wide coverage.

Members noted the wider economic benefits but concerns were expressed in relation to the capital spends required in order to take projects forward and the length of payback periods. Officers outlined how the Salix invest to save scheme operated and confirmed that a 10 year payback was standard and assurances given that the payback timeframe would always be aligned to ensure that it never exceeded the lifespan of the technology.

The Scrutiny Committee welcomed opportunities that would reduce fuel poverty and would also welcome projects that would increase PV roof installations on Council housing/buildings.

Having fully considered its content the Housing and Regeneration Scrutiny Committee unanimously supported the principle of a Draft Energy Plan and the recommendations contained within the Officer's report and

RECOMMENDED that Cabinet: -

- (i) acknowledge the volume and diversity of work on carbon conservation that has already been undertaken as outlined in Appendix 1: Summary Report on initiatives to date.
- (ii) note the views of Scrutiny regarding the proposed overarching aims of the new Energy Plan to make us a carbon neutral council, and the associated proposed projects that will assist in delivering that aim.
- (iii) consider the next steps in the development of the Energy Plan and offer Scrutiny consideration once a draft is developed.

The meeting closed at 18.59 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 23rd July 2019, they were signed by the Chair.

CHAIR