



HOUSING AND REGENERATION SCRUTINY COMMITTEE

**MINUTES OF THE MEETING HELD AT PENALLTA HOUSE, YSTRAD MYNACH ON
TUESDAY, 15TH OCTOBER 2019 AT 5.30 P.M.**

PRESENT:

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

Councillors:

J. Bevan, L. Harding, A.G. Higgs, G. Kirby, Ms P. Leonard, Mrs G.D. Oliver, Mrs M.E. Sargent, W. Williams, B. Zaplatynski

Cabinet Members:

Mrs L. Phipps (Homes and Places), S. Morgan (Economy, Infrastructure and Sustainability & Wellbeing of Future Generations Champion)

Together with:

M.S. Williams (Interim Corporate Director, Communities), S. Couzens (Chief Housing Officer), F. Wilkins (Housing Services Manager), L. Allen (Principal Group Accountant - Housing), M. Eedy (Finance Manager - Communities Directorate), C. Forbes-Thompson (Scrutiny Manager), R. Barrett (Committee Services Officer)

1. APOLOGIES FOR ABSENCE

Apologies for absence were received from Councillors D. Cushing, C. Elsbury, R.W. Gough, B. Owen and Mrs D. Price, together with Cabinet Member Mrs E. Stenner (Environment and Public Protection).

2. DECLARATIONS OF INTEREST

Councillors J. Bevan and A.G. Higgs declared a personal interest in Agenda Items 8 (Complaints, Representations and Compliments - Caerphilly Homes) and 9 (Housing Revenue Account Budget Monitoring – Period 4 2019/20). Details are minuted with the respective items.

3. MINUTES – 3RD SEPTEMBER 2019

RESOLVED that the minutes of the Housing and Regeneration Scrutiny Committee meeting held on 3rd September 2019 (minute nos. 1 - 6) 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. HOUSING AND REGENERATION SCRUTINY COMMITTEE FORWARD WORK PROGRAMME

Cath Forbes-Thompson (Scrutiny Manager) presented the report, which outlined details of the Housing and Regeneration Scrutiny Committee Forward Work Programme (FWP) for the period October 2019 to July 2020, and included all reports that were identified at the Scrutiny Committee meeting on 3rd September 2019.

Members were advised of a Conservation Strategy being prepared for Cabinet consideration, and agreed that it be added to the Scrutiny Committee FWP under date to be confirmed. Members also agreed that an information item on the Tenancy Enforcement Section scheduled for 26th November 2019 be moved to the list of main agenda items.

The Scrutiny Committee were also reminded that the Heads of the Valley Masterplan report has been scheduled for 28th January 2019 and that a Member's workshop on the item has been arranged for 30th October 2019.

Subject to the foregoing amendments, it was unanimously agreed that the Housing and Regeneration Scrutiny Committee Forward Work Programme be published on the Council's website.

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 reports.

7. BUDGET MONITORING REPORT 2019/2020

The Cabinet Member for Economy, Infrastructure and Sustainability presented the report, which informed Members of the most recent budget monitoring position for 2019/2020 for the Communities Directorate, including Regeneration & Planning Division, Infrastructure Services Division, Public Protection Division and Community & Leisure Services Division.

Members were asked to note the details of the budget monitoring position for the Regeneration and Planning Division relevant to the Scrutiny Committee, which overall has a small projected underspend of £1.9k. Members were also referred to key underspends and overspends across this service area.

It was noted that there are a number of underspends across Planning due to the delayed filling of vacant posts, which are offset by overspends arising from reduced income associated with planning applications. There is a projected overspend in relation to industrial properties as a result of under-occupancy, which is being addressed. Tourism venues are reporting a combined small underspend of £1k, although some venues are experiencing overspends due to a drop in income which can be weather dependent. Tourism events saw an underspend of £28k which is primarily due to underspend for the Big Cheese event as a result of excellent

weather and a move towards a self-financing model.

The report also included an update in respect of the targeted MTFP savings of £5.213m for the Communities Directorate for 2019/20. It is expected that most of the savings applied in 2019/20 have or will be achieved or will be achieved by the end of the financial year. However, a number of MTFP savings are not being fully achieved and the position on these will be monitored closely.

During the course of discussion on the item, reference was made to the underspend across Town Centre Management due to the delayed filling of the vacant Town Centre Manager post, and Members were pleased to learn that the Head Of Regeneration and Planning is implementing her management restructure and that a new role which includes support for town centre and other businesses has been created, and the new position has been filled by an internal member of staff.

Following consideration of the report, Members noted its contents and the details of the budget monitoring position for the Regeneration and Planning Division contained in the appendices.

8. COMPLAINTS, REPRESENTATIONS AND COMPLIMENTS – CAERPHILLY HOMES

Councillor J. Bevan and A.G. Higgs declared a personal interest in this item as Council tenants and remained in the room during consideration of the report.

The Cabinet Member for Homes and Places presented the report, which had been considered by the Caerphilly Homes Task Group on 10th September 2019. The report provided Members with information on the contacts in relation to complaints and representations received by the Authority's Housing Customer Services Section between 1st April 2018 and 31st March 2019.

Members were advised that the monitoring of complaints and representations is carried out to provide information on the level of satisfaction with the service provided by Caerphilly Homes. The results enable Managers to focus on areas of concern and positive feedback, with the aim of improving services and monitoring performance and ensuring that where issues are identified similar problems are avoided in the future. The corporate complaints procedure places an emphasis on learning from complaints. Examples of complaints which led to changes in policies and procedures were highlighted within the report.

The Scrutiny Committee were referred to the complexity of the functions carried out by the Caerphilly Homes service as detailed in the report and were asked to note that complaints will be inevitable across a service of this size. The service saw a reduction in Stage 1 complaints but also experienced a reduction in the expressions of praise during 2018/2019. There was an increase in the number of Stage 2 complaints and the Council is continuing to learn from complaints and implement changes in existing policies and procedures where necessary.

During the course of the ensuing debate, Members discussed the data set out at 5.2.3 of the report which detailed the number of complaints/contacts made to the Chief Executive and the number of service requests received by function area. A Member queried the reason for the increase in representations made during 2018/19 in relation to allocations. Officers explained that this is due to an increased housing waiting list and that some tenants may feel that they have been offered properties not suitable to their needs, which has contributed to an increase in complaints and representations. Clarification was also sought on the increase in contacts/service requests in relation to antisocial behaviour. Officers explained that the Chief Executive Office has seen an increase in the number of direct contacts but that the number of referrals to the Complaints team has reduced. Members were advised that further detail will

be included in the report on the Tenancy Enforcement Section being presented to the next meeting of the Scrutiny Committee.

A Member asked what percentage of work the contacts equated to in terms of the total work carried out by Caerphilly Homes. Officers explained that this is difficult to gauge as sometimes the representations can apply to more than one department and so are recorded against all relevant function areas. Clarification was also sought on the definition of “business as usual” when dealing with service requests as set out in Section 5.2.1. of the report, It was explained that requests are dealt with under business as usual and if this comes back as a reoccurring issue (e.g. in the case of repairs) then this will be recorded as a complaint.

Following consideration of the report, the Scrutiny Committee noted its contents.

9. HOUSING REVENUE ACCOUNT BUDGET MONITORING – PERIOD 4 2019/20

Councillor J. Bevan and A.G. Higgs declared a personal interest in this item as Council tenants and remained in the room during consideration of the report.

The Cabinet Member for Homes and Places presented the report, which informed Members of projected revenue expenditure for the Housing Revenue Account (HRA) for the 2019/20 financial year, and detailed the HRA capital programme which is predominantly funded by the HRA.

The report highlighted the distinction between the HRA, which is funded by rental income received from council tenants, and General Fund Housing activities, which fall under the General Fund and are funded by the Council taxpayer. Although there is a clear separation of these funds, the majority of council tenants rent is funded from housing benefits which are derived from the tax payers purse and therefore value for money must always be sought. The report outlined the projected outturn for the HRA based upon the expenditure and income for the first four months of the year.

The Scrutiny Committee noted the HRA budget for 2018/19 of £51.7m with its main components consisting of £11m of salaries (net of WHQS funding), £9.5m of capital financing charges, £9.3m of response repairs, and £17m of revenue contributions to fund the WHQS programme. The spend on the HRA is self-financed mainly by the rental income collected from Council Tenants, of which around 71% is funded by Housing Benefits. The underspend at period 4 is projected to be £2.3m, with the reasons for this underspend set out at Sections 5.2 to 5.7 of the report.

During the course of the debate, and in relation to Housing Supply and Housing Allocations costs (as detailed in the summary of expenditure appended to the report), concerns were expressed regarding increased demand for Council housing and a Member asked if it would be of benefit to review the allocations process. The Scrutiny Committee were reminded of the Common Allocation Policy in place and were provided with examples of the qualifying criteria that is used to award priority to applicants with a defined housing need. Discussion took place regarding under-occupancy in Council properties and assurances were given that property size is matched to household size wherever feasible. Officers explained that there are exceptions in areas of lower demand where it is more beneficial to allow a property to be under-occupied than for it to remain vacant. It was confirmed that in such instances, a financial assessment is carried out with the prospective tenant to ensure that they can afford the higher rental costs. The Committee also discussed the benefits of community living housing models, as well as succession rights across sole and joint tenancies.

Member asked if Response Repair costs associated with WHQS remedial works carried out by the in-house team are recouped from the contractor. Officers explained that costs are

recouped wherever possible. The WHQS team aim to ensure that any repairs within a 12 month period are undertaken by the contractor, and confirmed that some products are covered under the manufacturer's warranty period of up to 7 years. The Council also retain a contractual sum known as retention which is held for a period of 12 months. Any defects identified within this 12 months defect liability period are undertaken by the contractor as there is a financial incentive for them to do so. If the contractor fails to respond (which is rare) then the repairs can be undertaken by the in-house team or an alternative contractor with costs recovered from the retention monies held.

Discussion also took place regarding the proportion of tenants receiving Housing Benefit and WG targets in respect of council housing. Officers confirmed that this level of detail would be included in the Caerphilly Homes - #Building Together report being presented to the next meeting of the Scrutiny Committee.

Having considered and discussed the report, the Scrutiny Committee noted its contents and the projected financial position of the Housing Revenue Account for 2019/20.

The meeting closed at 6.30 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 26th November 2019, they were signed by the Chair.

CHAIR