



HOUSING AND REGENERATION SCRUTINY COMMITTEE – 19TH OCTOBER 2021

SUBJECT: GEORGE STREET REAR WALLS, CWMCARN

**REPORT BY: CORPORATE DIRECTOR FOR SOCIAL SERVICES AND
HOUSING**

1. PURPOSE OF REPORT

- 1.1 To seek approval to deploy Private Sector Housing Capital monies to assist private sector homeowners at George Street, Cwmcarn to fully participate in a priority retaining wall and steps replacement programme planned for council owned properties during 2021/22 and 2022/23. The scheme will not be able to proceed without inclusion of the privately owned properties.

2. SUMMARY

- 2.1 The rear retaining walls of properties at 1 to 46 George Street, Cwmcarn, are in an advanced state of structural disrepair. Caerphilly Homes is due to undertake a retaining wall replacement programme to the council owned properties at George Street in order to achieve compliance with WHQS as most of these properties are currently designated as 'acceptable fails due to timing and remedy'.
- 2.2 Officers, having studied the defective walls and associated party structure steps consider that, due to the design and construction of the existing structures, the programme to the 30 Council owned properties can only be achieved if the walls and steps to the 16 privately owned properties are undertaken at the same time. Realistically, however, to encourage full participation by private owners would inevitably require the offer of financial assistance in the form of grant aid.
- 2.3 This report looks at the reasons for the renewal programme being undertaken and for proposing to offer support to the private owners in the form of 100% grant aid. The report also outlines potential funding sources to facilitate such an offer.

3. RECOMMENDATIONS

- 3.1 It is recommended that, in addition to the Housing Revenue Account funding the works required to the Council properties:

- Financial support be offered to homeowners at 1 to 46, George Street for the renewal of the rear retaining walls and steps and associated works in the form of a 100% grant.
- Funding for the inclusion of private sector properties in the scheme should be made available from existing Private Sector Housing Capital balances.
- That Members endorse the recommendation prior to Cabinet approval

4. REASONS FOR THE RECOMMENDATIONS

- 4.1 To facilitate the improvement of Council properties in George Street, Cwmcarn in order to achieve the Welsh Housing Quality Standard and to address the significant structural disrepair of the retaining walls and steps in George Street, by adoption of an holistic, tenure blind strategic approach to the physical regeneration of George Street by way of a Group Repair scheme.

5. THE REPORT

- 5.1 1 to 46 George Street, Cwmcarn comprise pre 1919 traditionally constructed terraced properties constructed along the contours of the valley. The properties are two storey to the front elevation. three storey to the rear, with basements accessed externally. The rear door into the properties is at first floor level, accessed first via shared party steps to the garden then jointly constructed steps up to the rear door.
- 5.2 All are large 4 bed houses, 16 of which are now privately owned, although it is likely that all would have originally been within Council ownership. Historically a small number were proactively marketed for sale when void due to high maintenance costs and low demand and others were sold through the Right to Buy. Caerphilly Homes have a limited number of 4 bed homes with most in high demand for families with 3 or more children. However, the George Street properties are low demand, primarily due to the tiered and steeply sloping gardens.
- 5.3 In order to improve the rear gardens the levels of many have been raised in an ad hoc manner by various tenants and owners, and some Council properties have been let in a condition that has not allowed the ingoing tenant to start their tenancy with a readily useable garden space. The design and condition of the rear of the properties means that many families with very young children are not able to use the rear gardens at all.
- 5.4 Most of the Council owned walls are likely to have been pointed under a planned maintenance contract some 15 to 20 years ago. Most walls are heavily overgrown with a covering of vegetation. Whilst generally the walls are upright there is evidence of disrupted pointing, missing stonework, some movement and bulging within them to varying degrees with some overloaded by ad hoc structures constructed above.
- 5.5 The issue of the rear walls has been raised over many years and in 2015 routine repairs were placed on hold pending WHQS, due to the scale and difficulty of the project. The rear walls to numbers 33 & 34 collapsed in January 2015 and the rear lane was temporarily closed for safety reasons. Surveys of the retaining walls were undertaken by colleagues in Property Services and Building Control with the rear wall to number 18 identified as dangerous and taken down by Caerphilly Homes in

February 2015. Emergency powers were used by Building Control to demolish the retaining wall of a private property in June 2016.

- 5.6 It has not been possible to adequately enforce tenancy conditions as the gardens have become increasingly inaccessible for residents. Whilst it was initially anticipated that the issues to the rear retaining walls and steps would be addressed by the WHQS programme in 2019/20 the sheer scale and complexity of the required scheme of works and the perceived inability to address the Council properties in isolation from those that were privately owned rendered this impossible and, whilst significant external works were undertaken to the houses and upper steps, only minimal works were undertaken to most rear gardens. When cleared, it was identified that many had been contaminated with sewage due to fractures along the length of the main sewer which had not been noticed because the areas were so overgrown. Remedial works were undertaken by Welsh Water in late 2019.
- 5.7 For WHQS purposes the Council properties have been classified as 'acceptable fails due to timing and remedy' but it is considered that these walls now need to be rebuilt as a matter of some urgency. Walls to two adjoining Council owned properties (5 & 6) have now deteriorated to such an extent that they have just had to be taken down for safety reasons and the gardens battened back as a temporary measure pending the outcome of this report. Colleagues in Property Services have undertaken topographical surveys and produced construction drawings and anticipated costings for the renewal of the walls and steps in the street, and the creation of safe, useable gardens, and have confirmed that, from a practical perspective, due to the design and construction of the existing walls and steps the scheme cannot be undertaken without inclusion of the private sector properties.
- 5.8 It is recognised that the ultimate responsibility for maintenance of the private sector properties falls to the owner and, in most other planned maintenance schemes, owners having exercised their right to buy are not afforded financial assistance to repair their homes in line with the planned maintenance ambitions of the council in respect of its own stock. There is though merit in making an exception in respect of George Street for the reasons stated above. In addition, strategically planned renewal has enormous benefits in respect of economies of scale, quality control and a finished product that is both aesthetically pleasing and represents value for money.
- 5.9 A 'tenure blind' approach such as this has been taken on a number of occasions previously by way of Housing Action Area initiatives, Priority Neighbourhood schemes and Renewal Area activity. Whilst funding for such schemes has, in the main, come from Welsh Government, we have on occasions used corporate capital funding for work programmes, including at Graig Y Rhacca and Lansbury Park.
- 5.10 It is estimated that the rebuilding of the walls and steps will cost around £44,000 per pair of properties, although this may be reduced if agreement can be reached with residents on providing a single continuous wall rather than renewing the lower rear steps, which would also improve and increase the size of the gardens. Whilst the cost of the works to the Council properties can be funded from the Housing Revenue Account, this funding stream cannot be utilised for the private sector properties. Using the cost estimates, full participation by the homeowners would require budget provision of £352,000. To maximise participation 100% grants would need to be awarded without applying a means test or post grant ownership conditions, by way of a Group Repair scheme.
- 5.11 There is funding available to assist owners at George Street using underspends in the Private Sector Housing Capital Programme, with Covid restrictions significantly

affecting private sector housing programmes in 20/21. There are also capital monies available from improvement grant deposit balances.

Conclusion

- 5.12 The rear retaining walls and party steps to the 30 Council and 16 privately owned properties at 1 to 46 George Street are in an advanced state of disrepair and are required to be renewed as soon as possible in order to ensure the safety of residents and the wider community, and the integrity of the housing stock. A comprehensive reconstruction scheme has been developed and funding has been identified for the works required to the Council owned homes, however these walls and steps cannot be renewed in isolation from the walls and steps of the adjoining private sector properties. Approval is being sought to deploy approximately £352,000 of available Private Sector Housing Capital monies for the cost of reconstruction works to the private sector properties by way of a Group Repair Scheme.

6. ASSUMPTIONS

- 6.1 The projected costs are estimated to reflect the prepared reconstruction proposal but will be subject to a full tender process in line with Standing Orders. Current contractor and material shortages make it difficult to provide accurate estimates at this time.

7. SUMMARY OF INTEGRATED IMPACT ASSESSMENT

- 7.1 As the report proposes that 100% grant assistance be offered to the private owners of properties at 1 to 46, George Street and that no post completion grant conditions would be imposed requiring that the grants be repaid an Integrated Impact Assessment is not required.
- 7.2 If the proposal is approved a comprehensive engagement exercise would be undertaken with the residents of 1 to 46, George Street regarding the proposals, and to seek consent from the individual private owners to proceed with the proposed scheme of works.

8. FINANCIAL IMPLICATIONS

- 8.1 The total cost of the scheme is approximately £1m, of which the HRA will be responsible for £660k, in relation to the proportion of council tenanted properties. The remainder of the scheme relates to the proportion of private owners and will be approximately £352k. Officers are satisfied that funding for the private sector element of this initiative can be made available from within the existing Private Sector Housing Capital Budget allocation and balances, and funding is available from the Housing Revenue Account Capital Programme for the works required to the Council owned properties.

9. PERSONNEL IMPLICATIONS

- 9.1 There are no personnel implications arising from this report.

10. CONSULTATIONS

10.1 There are no consultation responses that have not been reflected in this report

11. STATUTORY POWER

11.1 N/A

Author: Fiona Wilkins, Housing Services Manager
Tel: 01443 811407, Email: wilkife@caerphilly.gov.uk

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| Consultees: | Cllr John Ridgewell | - Chair Housing & Regeneration Scrutiny Committee |
| | Cllr Mike Adams | - Vice Chair Housing & Regeneration Scrutiny Committee |
| | Cllr Lisa Phipps | - Cabinet Member for Housing |
| | Cllr Denver Preece | - Local Ward Member, Abercarn |
| | Cllr Andrew Whitcombe | - Local Ward Member, Abercarn |
| | Dave Street | - Corporate Director Social Services & Housing |
| | Stephen R Harris | - Head of Corporate Finance & S151 Officer |
| | Lesley Allen | - Principal Group Accountant, Housing |
| | Alan Edmunds | - WHQS Implementation Project Manager |
| | Jason Fellows | - Housing Repair Operations Manager |
| | Claire Davies | - Private Sector Housing Manager |
| | Neil Challenger | - Principal Housing Officer (Technical) |
| | Julie Reynolds | - Landlord Services Manager |
| | Elizabeth Willington | - Area Housing Manager |
| | Tracy Lundy | - Housing Manager |

Appendix 1 - Photographs of George Street

Appendix 2 – Street plan