



JOINT SCRUTINY COMMITTEE

MINUTES OF THE MEETING HELD VIA MICROSOFT TEAMS ON THURSDAY, 21ST OCTOBER 2021 AT 5.00 P.M.

PRESENT:

Councillor J. Ridgewell - Chair
Councillor M. Adams - Vice Chair

Councillors:

E.M. Aldworth, A. Angel, C. Bezzina, A. Collis, D. Cushing, C. Cuss, K. Etheridge, A. Farina-Childs, A. Gair, L. Harding, G. Kirby, P. Leonard, C. Mann, B. Miles, S. Morgan, B. Owen, T. Parry, J. Roberts, R. Saralis, S. Skivens, L.G. Whittle, W. Williams, B. Zaplatynski

Co-opted Member (Education Scrutiny Committee): Mr M. Western

Non-Scrutiny Committee Member: Councillor M. Davies

Cabinet Members:

Councillors P. Marsden (Leader of Council), S. Cook (Social Care), N. George (Waste, Public Protection and Street Scene), C. Gordon (Corporate Services), L. Phipps (Housing), J. Pritchard (Deputy Leader and Infrastructure and Property), E. Stenner (Performance, Economy and Enterprise), A. Whitcombe (Sustainability, Planning and Fleet), R. Whiting (Learning and Leisure)

Together with:

D. Street (Acting Chief Executive), K. Denman (Housing Solutions Manager), M. Jennings (Principal Housing Strategy Officer), J. Roberts-Waite (Strategic Coordination Manager), C. Forbes-Thompson (Scrutiny Manager), R. Barrett (Committee Services Officer), S. Hughes (Committee Services Officer)

RECORDING AND VOTING ARRANGEMENTS

Councillor M. Adams (Vice Chair) opened the meeting as the Chair was experiencing technical difficulties. He reminded those present that the meeting was being filmed and would be available following the meeting via the Council's website – [Click Here to View](#). Members were advised that voting on decisions would take place via Microsoft Forms.

1. APOLOGIES FOR ABSENCE

Apologies for absence were received from Councillors C. Andrews, J. Bevan, P.J. Bevan, C. Bishop, W. David, D.T. Davies, C. Elsbury, M. Evans, C. Forehead, E. Forehead, J. Gale, R. Gough, D. Hardacre, D. Harse, D. Havard, A. Higgs, A. Hussey, M. James, V. James, L. Jeremiah, G. Johnston, B. Jones, S. Kent, A. Leonard, G. Oliver, D.W.R. Preece, Mrs D.

Price, M.E. Sargent, J. Scriven, G. Simmonds, J. Simmonds, J. Taylor, C. Thomas and T.J. Williams, together with Mrs M. Jones (Co-opted Member - Social Services Scrutiny Committee)

2. DECLARATIONS OF INTEREST

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

During the course of debate on Agenda Item No. 4 (Homeless Project Plan), Councillor S. Skivens declared a personal interest as a long-term trustee of Caerphilly Citizens' Advice Bureau, and remained in the meeting during consideration of the item.

3. MINUTES – 22ND FEBRUARY 2021

Subject to it being recorded that Councillor M. Adams had been in attendance at the meeting, it was moved and seconded that the minutes of the meeting held on 22nd February 2021 be approved as a correct record and by way of Microsoft Forms and verbal confirmation (and in noting there were 19 for, 1 against and 2 abstentions) this was agreed by the majority present.

RESOLVED that the minutes of the Joint Scrutiny Committee held on 22nd February 2021 (minute nos. 1 – 5) be approved as a correct record.

Arising from the minutes, a Member referred to the discussion minuted at Page 4 in relation to Park and Ride provision at Llanbradach, and was reminded that the specifics of the debate around this particular item are available to view through the meeting recording.

Councillor M. Adams then handed over to Councillor J. Ridgewell (Chair) as he had connected to the meeting.

REPORTS OF OFFICERS

Consideration was given to the following reports.

4. HOMELESS PROJECT PLAN

During the course of debate on this item, Councillor S. Skivens declared a personal interest as a long-term trustee of Caerphilly Citizens' Advice Bureau, and remained in the meeting during consideration of the item.

The Cabinet Member for Housing introduced the report, which informed the Scrutiny Committee of the Homeless Project Plan that has been set for the Housing Solutions team for the period 2021/2022 based on the current identified key service area priorities to enhance the service. The report sought the views of Members prior to its presentation to Cabinet on 10th November 2021.

Members were advised that the Housing Solutions team have been working to deliver the service in line with the Housing Wales Act 2015 and the Gwent Homeless Strategy 2018-2022, which has historically focused on the prevention of Homelessness rather than it being Crisis-led. As a direct result of the Covid-19 pandemic in March 2020 the service moved to a Crisis-led model in order to meet the increase in demand for assistance. The Homeless Project Plan now sets out the service area priorities that will allow the Housing Solutions

Service to review and refocus on the prevention of Homelessness. Members were referred to the Homeless Project Plan Objectives set out at Sections 5.6 to 5.12 of the report and were asked to note the content of the report and the Homeless Project Plan.

Kerry Denman (Housing Solutions Manager) gave a comprehensive overview of the Homeless Project Plan appended to the report and the objectives it will set out to achieve. Members noted that the Plan will place an emphasis on prevention, with the key aim being to refocus and realign WG pathways and examine measures to prevent people becoming homeless. This will include working with agencies such as Citizens' Advice Bureau to maximise and support people with debt arrears, particularly as the WG financial support available through the pandemic has now ended, and working with health, police and probation services to support those vulnerable people being released from custody into accommodation. Staff training is also being updated to ensure they are aware of accommodation pathways and preventive measures, and WG have also introduced a Tenancy Hardship Grant to help those people in private sector accommodation to sustain tenancies that have been impacted financially by Covid-19. This long-term objective will tie into Welsh Government's requirement for the Council to develop a Rapid Rehousing Transitional plan to be submitted in draft by June 2022, which will clearly outline the proposals being taken forward to address this for Caerphilly Council.

Aside from prevention, one main issue for the Housing Solutions team is that of rough sleeping, which is becoming more apparent across all local authorities. The Homeless Project Plan will look at the root cause of these issues and consider future delivery, although it is recognised that some individuals need specialised support, and the creation of a new Housing Solutions Officer post will support the Outreach Team to examine how this pressing issue in the borough can be addressed. The Homeless Project Plan will also review emergency accommodation provision, with it recognised that the move to emergency bed and breakfast use as a result of the Covid-19 pandemic is not suitable and sustainable in the long term, and an analysis will be carried out to look at individual needs and work with the Supporting People and Strategy Teams moving forward.

The Homeless Project Plan also places an emphasis on maximising access into private sector accommodation, with it noted that this can be a viable option as under its Homelessness Duties, the Council have a statutory ability to discharge this duty into the private sector. The Scrutiny Committee were also provided with an overview of the Caerphilly Keys project, which offers access to accommodation for those who are homeless or threatened with homelessness. The project already has a portfolio of 100 properties and recently increased this by a further 5 units. A website has recently been launched to enhance the profile of the scheme and attract additional landlords.

Mrs Denman was thanked for her detailed report and Members' questions were welcomed. The Scrutiny Committee were pleased to note the actions being taken to tackle homelessness in the Caerphilly borough, together with the improvements to the existing strategy, and individual Members voiced their support for the Homeless Project Plan.

Clarification was sought on the number of homeless people in the county borough and whether these numbers are increasing. Mrs Denman confirmed that these figures are reported to Welsh Government on a quarterly basis and she offered to send this information to Members following the meeting. In response to concerns around under-reporting, Mrs Denman explained that there are challenges around the "hidden homeless" (such as sofa-surfers) and that individuals need to present themselves as homeless in order to be counted by the local authority. Members were advised that there needs to be a greater emphasis on prevention and referral pathways, including an awareness of home circumstances and earlier intervention to prevent people getting to the homelessness stage. Members discussed the number of individuals in B&B accommodation, and Mrs Denman confirmed that as of September 2021, there were 281 households in this type of temporary

accommodation and that she would circulate updated figures to the Committee following the meeting.

The Committee discussed at length the issue of rough sleepers and sought clarification on the reason for increasing numbers. Ms Denman explained that some individuals have had to leave other accommodation due to high risk, but there are 9 known rough sleepers who do not want to engage with support workers or only sporadically engage with the Outreach Team. Officers are working hard to understand the barriers around why these people are reluctant to engage, with it explained that such individuals often require specialised support in managing alcohol or substance addiction and that the Council and other agencies are looking to provide this support as a wrap-around service if required.

The Committee were advised that there are normally around 6-9 rough sleepers in CCBC per month, which increased to 15 in October 2021. The Council report these numbers to WG on a regular basis and clearly stipulate how many refuse to engage with the Council, and also report the reasons where these individuals have been asked to leave other accommodation. It was noted that there has been an increase in rough sleepers from other local authorities and Members were advised that where possible, the Council will try and repatriate those individuals back to that local authority. Members sought clarification on the reasons for the increase in rough sleepers from other areas and it was explained that it is often the case that the individual has exhausted all the options available with their own local authority before moving onto Caerphilly.

One Member highlighted the need to provide appropriate support to those rough sleepers with mental health issues and Mrs Denman outlined the needs analysis and full service review of floating support that will be carried out in this area, together with an overview of the avenues that are available to those individuals requiring support with their mental health. It was emphasised that the Housing Team takes a holistic approach towards examining and establishing what accommodation types are suitable for those individuals with these particular needs.

One Member expressed the need for a review of emergency accommodation, with the view that the use of private sector B&B accommodation is not always positive, and for the Council to set out their aspirations in terms for future accommodation. Mrs Denman emphasised that if it were not for the private sector, then the Council would not have been able to deliver and meet the needs and safety of individuals during the Covid-19 pandemic. She acknowledged that moving forward, there needs to be a clearer structure in place and more engagement work with staff in these accommodation units. The Council are considering how they can bring some emergency accommodation in-house, and the starting point for this links to the needs analysis that will be carried out to allow the Council to consider where in the borough they are best placed to deliver this accommodation. The Council are also working with supported living and RSL partners in this regard and looking at specialist factors such as substance addiction support, whether there needs to be single-sex units, and how the Council meets the need for immediate Crisis-led accommodation.

A query was received regarding the use of night shelters, and Mrs Denman explained that while these shelters are not supported by Welsh Government as a means of emergency accommodation, the Council is currently engaging with night shelters to see if they are able to provide other facilities such as breakfast clubs and shower access (subject to Covid safety measures).

A Member enquired about the proportion of male-female individuals presenting as homeless and it was confirmed that there is generally an 80/20 male-female split, although the number of female presentations is increasing. The Member also asked about the support available to those presenting as homeless who already have a pet. Mrs Denman confirmed that although the Council works with agencies such as Dogs Trust and have offered to pay for

kennel placement, there are currently no providers in place that can accommodate pets, and this has been recognised as a massive barrier that needs to be addressed, as it is acknowledged that people do not wish to be separated from their pet who has been a constant source of support to them. This is a huge challenge for all local authorities who have recognised the need to take this type of situation into account as part of their Homelessness management strategies.

In response to a Member's query, Mrs Denman provided an overview of the service review that will be undertaken by Crisis, which is due to conclude in December 2021, and outlined some of the potential changes and improvements that could be made to the service to overcome existing barriers, address a bottleneck around temporary accommodation and refocus the Housing Support service into a preventative model of delivery.

The Scrutiny Committee discussed the incentives and WG funding available to private sector landlords and Mrs Denman provided further details of the Caerphilly Keys scheme and the mechanisms that will be put in place to support tenant/landlord relationships that may have broken down due to rent arrears incurred by the Covid-19 pandemic. A Member asked if there would be enhanced budgets in place to deliver the Homeless Project Plan and also asked who has responsibility for tenants in bed and breakfast accommodation. Mrs Denman explained that the Council is expected to deliver the Homeless Project Plan with whatever budgets are already provided through Welsh Government, although additional funding has been provided by WG that ends in March 2022, but there is uncertainty around whether further funding will be provided. It has been recognised that the Homeless Project Plan will require a 3 year period of implementation in order to see the effects, and all local authorities are lobbying WG to emphasise the need for additional funding to deliver their homelessness management strategies. In terms of responsibility around B&B accommodation, Mrs Denman explained that the Council has support workers on site and they hold multi-agency meetings to discuss any offending behaviour and make a decision whether to alter or end the placement, and that the Council is also in daily contact with its emergency accommodation providers.

The Scrutiny Committee enquired about the use of custom-built pods for those people who feel unsafe in standard emergency accommodation or those individuals who have pets. Mrs Denman explained that the Council have looked into the use of pods but that there are varying styles on the market, and that those authorities who have bought into the pod model are experiencing a higher level of safety/security and wellbeing issues amongst its users. The Council are looking at more modern methods such as construction of smaller studio-flat model units where individuals can bring along their pets, as it is felt that the pod model is not a long-term solution and is not financially viable, and that the Council would be better directed towards acquiring more sustainable accommodation.

In closing, the Scrutiny Committee acknowledged the complexity and demands of the work undertaken by the Housing Solutions Team, particularly given the challenges around WG funding, and thanked Mrs Denman for her interesting and insightful report.

Following consideration and discussion, Members noted the contents of the report and the Homeless Project Plan ahead of its presentation to Cabinet on 10th November 2021.

5. LOCAL HOUSING STRATEGY 2021-26

The Cabinet Member for Housing introduced the report, which sought the views of the Joint Scrutiny Committee on the new Local Housing Strategy, '*An Agenda for Change 2021-26*' prior to its presentation to Cabinet on 27th October 2021.

Members were advised that the Local Housing Strategy sets out the Council's plans to build successful lives, create sharing and resilient communities, invest in a local and vibrant

economy, and promote healthy lives across the county borough over the next 5 years. The Strategy provides a clear vision of how the Council can achieve a shared aspiration in providing good quality housing and services in communities which are safe, sustainable and healthy. The vision not only focuses on the provision of new housing and the maintenance of existing homes, but also focuses on those services which support people to access housing and maintain independence to live in their homes for longer. The vision also focuses on the wider community, environment and maximising community benefits that can be derived from the investment in housing that will take place over the period of the strategy.

The Cabinet Member placed on record her thanks to Jane Roberts-Waite and Mark Jennings in Housing for all their efforts in bringing the Strategy together, together with Arc4 Ltd who assisted in producing the Strategy.

Jane Roberts-Waite (Strategic Coordination Manager) then presented a detailed overview of the Local Housing Strategy 2021-26 appended to the report. Members were advised that in Summer 2020 the Council appointed Arc4 Ltd to assist in developing an ambitious new Local Housing Strategy to replace the previous strategy that expired in 2013. A robust methodology was agreed with Arc4 to complete the various stages of development and a plan was put in place to effectively manage the project.

At various stages of the project, consultation took place with key stakeholders, both internal and external. This included the production of a Concept Document which outlined the principles, sections and key messages underpinning the draft Local Housing Strategy and was updated following responses received from 27 stakeholders in April 2021. In order to gain the views of residents and stakeholders on the contents of the draft Strategy, a 9-week online consultation exercise was undertaken between Monday 12th July 2021 and Friday 3rd September 2021. The consultation was extensively promoted in advance via an A5 poster delivered to every household in the county borough, displayed in the Council's leisure centres and libraries, and advertised online through the Council's website. The draft Strategy was also translated into an Easy Read version and a British Sign Language (BSL) video. Individuals were invited to submit responses online, although alternative methods were made available for people unable to use or access the internet, and a prize draw incentive was also offered to residents completing the survey. Full details of the consultation exercise and responses were set out in Sections 5.4 to 5.16 of the report.

In total, 76 consultation responses were received. A document summarising the responses was produced by Arc4, who revised the draft Strategy in light of some of the responses. These amendments, together with the summary document, were sent to key leads across the Council to ensure that all responses were adequately considered and the Strategy was updated appropriately. As part of the consultation, respondents were asked to pick a preferred name for the Local Housing Strategy. The highest response (39%) suggested, '*The Caerphilly County Borough Housing Strategy: An Agenda for Change.*'

It was acknowledged that although the overall consultation response had been disappointing, some key messages which had emerged were fed into the draft Strategy, including the need for any new developments to be supported by appropriate infrastructure such as GPs/schools, the need to tackle climate change, rebalance the housing market and enable access to home-buying through initiatives such as shared equity schemes. The draft Strategy aims to take all these messages into account and is a very ambitious document which focuses not only on the provision of new housing but also on those services which support people to access housing and maintain independence to live in their homes for longer, the wider community, and the environment and maximising community benefits that can be derived from the investment in housing that will take place over the period of the Strategy.

The Strategy will be underpinned by 5 strategic priorities as set out in Section 5.19 of the report and 3 strategic themes (Sustainable development, Health and wellbeing and Equality,

diversity and inclusion) which will cut across everything the Council and its partners will do over the period of the Strategy. Additionally, the Local Housing Strategy will be accompanied by a Delivery Plan to breathe life into the strategy and to outline the range of actions which the Council and/or its partners will undertake to realise the 5 objectives set out in the Strategy. This Delivery Plan will in turn be underpinned by an Investment Plan to detail which resources will be allocated or sought and from where they will be acquired. The Delivery Plan will be monitored on a biannual basis by the Affordable Homes Partnership and reported periodically to the Housing and Regeneration Scrutiny Committee.

Mrs Roberts-Waite was thanked for her detailed report and Members' questions were welcomed.

A Member raised several queries in connection with the report and Mrs Roberts-Waite responded to these in turn. It was confirmed that a full procurement and tender process had been undertaken. With regards to Officer involvement in the Strategy, Officers and Members across the Council were repeatedly consulted at all stages of the process. In relation to the Concept Document, stakeholders included Housing Associations, local developers, private sector partners, landlords, a whole range of housing providers, and the general community. With regards to a query around virtual consultation events, it was explained that these had been advertised and promoted on the Council's website and Facebook, but the response had been very poor, and so some of the events had subsequently been cancelled. It was also confirmed that a BSL-version of the Strategy was available to view on the Council's website.

In response to concerns around the low number of responses and the advertisement of the consultation, Members were advised that the Council had pursued extensive methods to target residents and engage them in conversation around the Strategy, including the use of social media, but it was felt that homeowners in general were less inclined to participate in the consultation. Regarding a query around the "Person Centred Solution" in the Strategy, it was explained that this relates to the Council and its partners providing services and a bespoke level of support in the way that people need them, in the way that they want to receive them, rather than an assumption being made around what services are required. In relation to a query around Zero Carbon Targets, it was explained that this is set by Welsh Government and is very much on the agenda in terms of the Council's development programme by providing energy efficient homes and lower energy costs for tenants.

A Member asked if there is a need to include gypsy and traveller sites in the draft Strategy, and it was confirmed the Council is currently in the process of carrying out a new Gypsy, Roma and Traveller Accommodation Assessment which will be completed in early 2022 and that Officers have been engaging with the Gypsy, Roma and Traveller community to inform this assessment which will be fed into the draft LDP. The Member referred to the last page of the Draft Strategy which stated that the replacement LDP will continue to include a criteria-based policy to address any applications for Gypsy, Roma and Traveller sites, and he expressed a need for this criteria needs to be fair and equal in approach. Mrs Roberts-Waite explained that she was unable to comment on Planning policy but would relay the Member's comments to the relevant Officers.

A Member referred to the need for smaller (1 bedroom) and larger (4 bedroom) homes as identified by the Council and Welsh Government projections and gave examples of families in his ward who were in desperate need of 3-bedroom homes. The Scrutiny Committee were advised that the Council are in the process of updating the Local Housing Market Assessment which has identified an overwhelming need for additional 1 person/1 bedroom accommodation, and which is not being met as developers do not want to build that particular type of housing. Mrs Roberts-Waite emphasised that the Council has recognised the need to build according to need but wants to build blended communities and does not want to build 1-bedroom accommodation all in one single location.

The Scrutiny Committee were advised that the Strategy places a focus on increasing choice and benefits and recognises that there are possible cost implications to residents where properties are over/underoccupied. Members were advised that should residents be experiencing difficulties in securing sufficient housing for their family needs, then they should contact the Council who can put them in touch with the relevant support. It was explained that the Strategy also places an emphasis on balance, with it recognised that there are a number of 3-bedroom voids that cannot be let due to lack of demand and so the Strategy will examine whether these can be converted to 1 or 2-bedroom properties. In response to a query around whether bedroom tax was still in operation, Mrs Roberts-Waite confirmed that she would raise the query with colleagues in Finance and respond to the Member directly.

A Member queried the proportionality of housing development and expressed a need to ensure that residents are not priced out of their local area. It was explained that Caerphilly Homes are now a developer in their own right and have a number of projects coming forward, and that the Council have the ability to look at what they can do to intervene in the market and deliver housing according to need. Members were advised that although development is duty-bound by WG planning policy, the Council will work closely with landowners and developers to encourage them to test the market and develop outside of their usual schemes.

Discussion also took place regarding the lack of affordable housing in the borough and the difficulties in getting onto the housing ladder, and Mrs Roberts-Waite outlined the efforts that are being made by the Council to address this issue, such as the acquirement of two low-cost home ownership properties in the near future, work being carried out on the Common Housing Register and Common Allocations Policy, and work with Housing Association partners. A Member sought an update on the Rent To Buy scheme, and Mrs Roberts-Waite confirmed she would circulate this information to Members following the meeting. Discussion also took place regarding void property turnaround and the need to engage the private sector and landlords to address this matter.

The Scrutiny Committee responded positively to the draft Strategy and thanked Mrs Roberts-Waite for attending the meeting and responding to Members' queries.

Following consideration and discussion of the report, and in noting there were no amendments or clarifications raised in relation to the draft Local Housing Strategy, Members noted the contents of the report and the Local Housing Strategy 2021-26 ahead of its presentation to Cabinet on 27th October 2021.

Approved as a correct record and subject to any amendments or corrections agreed and recorded in the minutes of the meeting held on 24th January 2022.

CHAIR