



HOUSING AND REGENERATION SCRUTINY COMMITTEE

MINUTES OF THE MULTI-LOCATIONAL MEETING HELD AT PENALLTA HOUSE AND VIA MICROSOFT TEAMS ON TUESDAY, 31ST JANUARY 2023 AT 5.30 P.M.

PRESENT:

Councillor A. Whitcombe – Chair
Councillor P. Cook – Vice Chair

Councillors:

G. Ead, C. Forehead, A. Hussey, L. Jeremiah, A. McConnell, B. Owen, L. Phipps, Mrs D. Price, J. A. Pritchard, S. Williams, W. Williams and J. Winslade.

Cabinet Members:

Councillor S. Cook (Housing) and Councillor J. Pritchard (Prosperity, Regeneration and Climate Change).

Together with:

M. S. Williams (Corporate Director for Economy and Environment), N. Taylor-Williams (Head of Housing), R. Kyte (Head of Regeneration and Planning), H. Munro (Caerphilly Place-Making Programme Manager), A. Dallimore (Regeneration Services Manager), C. Davies (Private Sector Housing Manager), R. Evans-McLean (Principal Housing Officer - Communities), C. Forbes-Thompson (Scrutiny Manager) and S. Hughes (Committee Services Officer).

RECORDING ARRANGEMENTS

The Chair reminded those present that the meeting would be live-streamed and a recording made available to view via the Council's website, except for discussions involving confidential or exempt items - [Click here to view](#). The Committee was advised that voting on decisions would be taken via Microsoft Forms.

1. APOLOGIES FOR ABSENCE

Apologies for absence were received from Councillors D. Cushing and C. Mann.

2. DECLARATIONS OF INTEREST

During the course of debate Councillor J. A. Pritchard declared a personal interest only in

relation to Agenda Item No. 7 – Private Sector Empty Homes Strategy 2023-2028, in that her son is looking to purchase a house in the area. As there was no requirement for her to leave the meeting, she took full part in the debate and vote. Details are also minuted with the respective item.

During the course of debate Councillor G. Ead declared a personal interest only in relation to Agenda Item No. 8 – Caerphilly Town 2035 - Project Overview and Progress Report, in that he lives in close proximity to the town centre. As there was no requirement for him to leave the meeting, he took full part in the debate. Details are also minuted with the respective item.

3. MINUTES – 29TH NOVEMBER 2022

It was moved and seconded that the minutes of the meeting held on 29th November 2022 be approved as a correct record. By way of Microsoft Forms (and in noting there were 12 for, 0 against and 1 abstention) this was agreed by the majority present.

RESOLVED that the minutes of the Housing and Regeneration Scrutiny Committee meeting held on 29th November 2022 (minute nos. 1 - 9) 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

Members were advised that the Housing and Regeneration Scrutiny Committee meeting scheduled for 14th March 2023 will be brought forward to a date to be confirmed.

Following consideration of the report, it was moved and seconded that the recommendations be approved. By way of Microsoft Forms (and in noting there were 13 for, 0 against and 0 abstentions) this was unanimously agreed.

RESOLVED that the Housing and Regeneration Scrutiny Committee Forward Work Programme be published on the Councils' 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. PRIVATE SECTOR EMPTY HOMES STRATEGY 2023-2028

During the course of debate Councillor J. A. Pritchard declared a personal interest only in

that her son is looking to purchase a house in the area. As there was no requirement for her to leave the meeting, she took full part in the debate and vote.

The Cabinet Member for Housing introduced the report to seek the views and agreement of Members regarding the Empty Homes Strategy 2023 -2028 prior to presentation to Cabinet on 8th March 2023.

A Member expressed concerns in that the 6 months definition of an empty house, set by Welsh Government, is a very short period of time. Reference was made to the breakdown of the length of time an empty home has been empty and comparisons were made with the number of properties that had been empty for 6 months or more to the number of properties that have been empty for two years or less. A number of reasons were given as to why a home could be empty for less than two years and the Member asked how certain situations would be dealt with. The Head of Housing assured the Scrutiny Committee that there are exceptions and exclusions and an elongated sales process is one of the exclusions. The Private Sector Housing Manager highlighted that the strategy is a 2-pronged approach, the first is to prevent the properties becoming long term empty properties through education and encouragement and the second is to target those that have been empty for a considerable period, which is ten plus years.

Clarification was sought on the Council's power to use Compulsory Purchase Orders and when these powers should be used. The Scrutiny Committee was advised that Compulsory Purchase Orders is an option and would be case specific, it is however a very long process and time consuming, and often the case will be resolved before the Compulsory Purchase Order is completed. It was highlighted that even though the enforced sale option is a long process, it is quicker than the Compulsory Purchase Order option.

Reference was made to the 457 empty homes that were classified as problematic empty properties and a Member asked what other tools are available to address the issues other than formal enforcement. The Scrutiny Committee was advised that the Empty Property Team will try to build relationships with property owners, understand their issues, and manage them through a process to get the property on the housing market. The Private Sector Housing Manager informed that the Council also offer loans for empty home owners to help bring properties back into use. Members were further informed that the Empty Property Team has developed an empty homes property pack and the team are also in the process of developing a centralised website to provide information for owners. In addition the Authority is hoping to bring on board a Welsh Government National Empty Home Grant Scheme, which will be reported to Cabinet on the 22nd February 2023.

Clarification and further information were sought on the interest-free loans to the value of £35,000 for up to a maximum of 10 years for owner occupation and 5 years for rent. The Private Sector Housing Manager assured Members that the property would be inspected to ensure that it could be repaired and brought back into use. If the property needed more than £35,000 and it isn't financially viable other options would be considered and in extreme cases demolition is an option.

In response to a Members query regarding empty homes which were formerly owned by the Council, the Head of Housing advised the Committee that the Council is looking to bring back into use some of those properties to increase Council housing stock.

Following consideration of the report it was moved and seconded that the recommendations be approved. By way of Microsoft Forms (and in noting there were 12 for, 0 against and 1 abstention) this was agreed by the majority present.

RECOMMENDED to Cabinet: -

1. the 2-pronged strategic approach and associated risk assessment for dealing with private sector empty homes.
2. the comments of the Housing and Regeneration Scrutiny Committee to the strategic approach be noted and the empty homes strategy be approved.
3. the introduction of an empty homes council tax premium to incentivise private sector empty property owners into action be agreed and a further report be drafted and presented to the necessary Committees to agree the detail and bring into force.

8. CAERPHILLY TOWN 2035 - PROJECT OVERVIEW AND PROGRESS REPORT

During the course of debate Councillor G. Ead declared a personal interest only in that he lives in close proximity to the town centre. As there was no requirement for him to leave the meeting, he took full part in the debate.

The Cabinet Member for Prosperity, Regeneration and Climate Change introduced the report to provide the Scrutiny Committee with information in the form of a detailed update on the progress of the projects and initiatives contained in the Caerphilly Town 2035 placemaking plan.

The Caerphilly Place-Making Programme Manager delivered a presentation to give and overview of the major projects in Caerphilly Town Centre which included Pentrebanne Street, the Transport Interchange, the Wellbeing and Leisure Centre, Park Lane Market, Leisure Quarter/Hotel, Caerphilly Castle Quarter and the Ness Tar brownfield site.

Reference was made to the current market which is privately owned and in a poor state of disrepair. A Member sought further information on the vision for the new market and asked what engagement and support has been offered to the current traders in the market. The Committee was informed that the Cabinet Member for Prosperity, Regeneration and Climate Change and Officers have engaged with and worked with the current traders in Caerphilly Market to offer them financial and officer support to relocate to alternative venues in the town.

Further information was also sought on how the business community is being engaged with and the strategy for ensuring existing businesses in the Caerphilly Town Centre are able to benefit from regeneration and activity. The Committee was informed that in terms of engaging with the business community, a Principal Town Centre Manager and support staff have been employed to engage with businesses in Caerphilly's main town centres. In terms of the approach, Business Network meetings have taken place in the principal towns across the borough to engage with the business community and allow businesses from each town centre to meet and express their views and opinions. The Committee was also informed that Town Centre Support Officers are undertaking audits of the major town centres and the Cabinet Member for Prosperity, Regeneration and Climate Change is working with Welsh Ice and businesses on a more regular basis to build relationships further.

It was noted that the Caerphilly Town 2035 plan has over 60 projects identified for implementation and a number of concerns were raised regarding the financial implications, particularly as it is a substantial investment for only one town. The Corporate Director for Economy and Environment responded to the concerns raised, highlighting the long-term

nature of the delivery of the projects set out within the Plan. The Committee was informed that Caerphilly Town has been designated by Welsh Government as a town of regional significance and there is a significant amount of funding that has come as a result of that. The point of a long-term strategy was put into context, and it was highlighted that the projects need to be developed in order to take advantage of funding opportunities as they arise.

A Member sought further clarification and information on the 62 projects, particularly in relation to categorisation, prioritisation and consultation. The Cabinet Member for Prosperity, Regeneration and Climate Change referred the Scrutiny Committee to the Caerphilly Town 2035 website, launched in the early part of 2022, which provides detailed information on the proposals for Caerphilly Town. It was highlighted that some of the projects may not come to fruition, however they will be explored to see whether they are feasible or not in terms of implementation and consultation.

The Head of Regeneration and Planning responded to some of the queries raised during the course of the meeting. An outline was provided in terms of the Place Making Plan and the Committee was advised that a Place Making Plan is required to access the Welsh Government's Transforming Towns Programme funding. Members were informed that the Caerphilly Town 2035 Placemaking Plan was developed in 2018/19 in consultation with stakeholders and members of the public, however due to COVID there was a two-year period where engagement could not take place. Members were further informed that Cowshed has been engaged to effectively develop an engagement strategy to ensure the public can be involved at every stage of the projects. Members were asked to note that not all the projects will be Council led, as some will be private sector led. It was also pointed out that many of the grants available to businesses are county borough wide, so many businesses across the county borough are currently accessing the Caerphilly Enterprise Fund grant which enables them to upgrade their property and premises.

The Caerphilly Place-Making Programme Manager gave assurances that the engagement process will be continuous throughout the life of each project, and he highlighted the importance of the views of local residents, businesses, investors and developers to support and be a part of the implementation of the projects.

In response to a Members query it was confirmed that there would be public toilets in the transport interchange and also in the new market.

The Housing and Regeneration Scrutiny Committee noted the contents of the report and the work being undertaken in delivering key interventions to deliver on the ambitious vision for Caerphilly Town.

The meeting closed at 6.36 pm.

Approved as a correct record and subject to any amendments or corrections agreed and recorded in the minutes of the meeting held on 27th February 2023, they were signed by the Chair.

CHAIR