



SPECIAL HOUSING AND ENVIRONMENT SCRUTINY COMMITTEE

**MINUTES OF THE MULTI-LOCATIONAL MEETING HELD IN PENALLTA HOUSE
AND VIA MICROSOFT TEAMS ON TUESDAY, 21ST NOVEMBER 2023 AT 5.30 P.M.**

PRESENT:

Councillor A. Whitcombe – Chair
Councillor S. Williams – Vice Chair

Councillors:

M. Chacon-Dawson, R. Chapman, C. Cuss, T. Heron, A. Hussey, D. Ingram-Jones, M. James, A. McConnell, B. Owen, H. Pritchard, J. A Pritchard, J. Rao

Cabinet Members:

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

Together with:

Officers: N. Taylor-Williams (Head of Housing), J. Reynolds (Landlord Services Manager), L. Allen (Principal Group Account – Housing), M. Jacques (Scrutiny Officer) and A. Jones (Committee Services Officer).

RECORDING, FILMING AND VOTING ARRANGEMENTS

The Chair reminded those present that the meeting was being live-streamed and recorded and would be made available following the meeting via the Council's website – [Click Here to View](#) Members were advised that voting on decisions would be taken via Microsoft Forms.

1. APOLOGIES FOR ABSENCE

Apologies for absence were received from Councillors C. Bishop, D. Cushing, D. T. Davies, and L. Phipps.

2. DECLARATIONS OF INTEREST

Councillor A. McConnell declared a personal and prejudicial interest on agenda item 4 due to being a Caerphilly County Borough Council Contract Holder. Councillor McConnell was advised to leave the meeting when this item was being discussed.

Councillor R. Chapman declared a personal interest only on agenda item 4, as a close family member is a Caerphilly County Borough Council Contract Holder. Councillor Chapman could remain in the meeting and vote whilst the item was being discussed.

3. HOUSING OFFICES RATIONALISATION.

The Cabinet Member for Housing presented the report, which sought the views of Members on proposals to permanently close the Housing Offices at Gilfach, Lansbury Park, Graig Yr Rhacca and Ty Sign, and replace them with a centralised housing service based at Penallta House as part of a proposal to modernise and improve housing services, prior to submission to Cabinet. Members were advised that Caerphilly Homes wants to transform the housing service to make it easier for Contract Holders to access services.

A Member stated that it was disappointing that more residents were not consulted and sought clarification on what proportion of housing staff would be in Ty Penallta and what percentage would be working from home. The Member also queried when home visits took place would this mean that two officers would need to attend. The Head of Housing confirmed that it was difficult to confirm what proportion would be office based or working from home as this would fluctuate daily because of the Council's agile working policy. Members heard how the aim was to change the service, so officers are visible in the community. In relation to the question on two officers attending home visits, it was confirmed that this was considered best practice and officers would explore this more as the new service evolved.

The Landlord Services Manager advised that the consultation was sent to all Caerphilly Homes 'Households, however the return was extremely low. Members were advised that we have a duty to provide an office location for those Contract Holders who prefer to attend in person and speak to officers, and the officer advised that staff would also be available at Ty Penallta to deal with anyone who attends in person. Also, in relation to home visits Members were advised that Housing staff currently do this with one officer, however officers would visit in pairs if a risk assessment concludes that this is advisable under the corporate employee protection register. Members heard how all officers that work alone have access to a lone working system called SOS Sky guard which has an emergency button and a man down function. Also, all staff have access to a mobile phone and conduct a dynamic risk assessment where required. Officers have received training around conflict management and safety on how to remove themselves from a hostile situation.

A Member requested confirmation as to whether signing contracts and the handover of keys, would be something that could be undertaken by officers out in the community as well as in person at Ty Penallta. Members were advised that Housing staff would look to undertake this service both in the community and the office.

A Member enquired what the plans were for the buildings that are no longer being used. Members were advised that not all the offices are under the control of Housing and decisions would need further consideration for these properties. The meeting heard how Housing officers are currently looking at feasibility options for Graig y Rhacca, Ty Sign and Lansbury Park buildings.

Clarification was sought on who would get the home visits, how would the service be publicised and what checks would be in place to ensure it is working well. Members were advised that the service was being changed to be more flexible and agile and the service would be based around customer preference. Officers advised that they were currently not at the stage to roll this out yet, but when ready the service would be

communicated appropriately and accordingly through tenants' newsletters and other channels. In addition, there would be a trial on the new tenant's portal, and this would be monitored to see how the new system works. Structures would also be looked at to ensure adequate resources are there to deliver good customer service. In terms of offering the service from Ty Penallta, Members were advised that talks had taken place with Reception Services around ensuring that there are safe places for interviews with members of the public.

The Landlord Services Manager added that as part of the consultation process suggestions were gathered on where people would like to meet officers to discuss any issues and give feedback. Options included community centres, leisure centres, and other Third Sector buildings. Members were advised that buildings would need to be considered based on suitability for private conversations and accessibility issues. Following investigation details would be promoted via social media. Following a decision by Cabinet on this matter, a letter would be sent to all Contract Holders confirming what had been decided and would summarise all contact details, the services that are offered, and locations that can be visited to access these services.

A Member asked if there were any other offices other than the ones already mentioned for closing that could be repurposed for social housing. The Member also raised boarded flats in Ty Sign and enquired whether these could be repurposed for social housing. Members were advised that there are no other buildings currently under consideration. In relation to the boarded up flats in the Ty Sign area, Officers advised that they are all being actively repaired and relet and although there may be a backlog, this was being done as quickly as possible, but some properties are leasehold and not council owned.

It was requested that once all contact details have been finalised could they be circulated to Members so that they could advise residents.

The meeting received an example of officers working well in the community when details of officers working in Graig Y Rhacca from the Community Centre and Primary School on a weekly basis were provided to Members.

RECOMMENDED that: -

1. Members comments were sought in relation to the recommendation that the housing offices at Lansbury Park, Graig Yr Rhacca and Gilfach, and the community housing office at Ty Sign be permanently closed.
2. Members comments were sought on the transition of the Landlord Service from a traditional office-based model to a community-based delivery model.
3. Members comments were sought on the relocation of the Landlord Service to Penallta House where the wider Caerphilly Homes Housing Service has recently relocated.

The Chair thanked Members and confirmed that all comments will be forwarded to Cabinet.

4. HOUSING REVENUE ACCOUNT CHARGES

The Cabinet Member for Housing presented the report for Members to consider and give a view on the increased Council housing rent charges proposed in the report, prior to consideration by Cabinet. The charges predominantly focus on council house rents, but also include garages, and are intended to be effective for the Housing Revenue Account (HRA) for the 2024/2025 financial year. Members were advised that The report would be presented to Cabinet Members on 13th December 2023 and would include any comments or recommendations from this Committee.

Two Members queried the potential support available to the 23% of contract holders who were not claiming housing benefit or universal credit. Committee heard about a number of levels of support operated by the Tenancy Support Team as well as the recent increase to the Living Wage of 10% and the potential increase to the State Pension of 8.5%. The Head of Housing also advised that there were no evictions based solely on financial hardship grounds, but this had contributed to an element of rent arrears.

One Member enquired if selling the over 260 empty garages to residents was worth considering as a way of increasing revenue and reducing maintenance costs. The Member also queried how valid the Data Stat Wales figures were for private rents given that the information provided was for 2019/20. The Head of Housing highlighted that a review of garages was about to be undertaken and that some sites could be considered for development. Members also heard how the review would be holistic and a number of options would be considered including possibly selling assets in the right circumstances. The Finance Manager (Housing) acknowledged that the Data Stat Wales figures were outdated which was why in the report data from a well-known estate agent had been used to compare private rents on average throughout the County Borough against Caerphilly Homes average rent for the same property type. It was highlighted to Members that CCBC rent for 1-bed accommodation which had the highest demand, was 64% of that charged by the Private Sector.

A Member asked about the housing benefit limitation scheme and asked if the DWP limit and the current rent policy would be increased to limit the burden on tenants. The Head of Housing outlined how trend analysis showed that Welsh Government thresholds tracked the DWP rate.

One Member wished to know the number of residents currently on the waiting list for a garage across the County Borough and whether or not shortlisting for garages took place on a regular basis. The Head of Housing advised that this information would be provided outside of the meeting. The Chair requested that the information be circulated to the entire Committee.

A Member raised the focus group comments from 25 tenants and questioned the potential negative impact of rent increases on families. The Head of Housing gave assurances on not wanting households to go into arrears and highlighted the role of the Tenancy Support Team. Committee Members were also advised that some members of the focus group may also be receiving help in the form of housing benefit.

One Member questioned the timing of a rent increase when inflation was beginning to go down. The Head of Housing advised that the proposed increase should be viewed in the totality of the Business Plan. Committee heard about reasonable rent increases previously despite record-high levels of inflation, the volatile and uncertain nature of the economic climate was also highlighted. The Member also questioned the procurement process. The Head of Housing gave assurances to Members that the contract negotiated provided value for money.

Having noted the content of the report, it was moved and seconded that the recommendations are supported and should be forwarded to Cabinet for approval. By way of Microsoft Forms and with one verbal vote (and in noting that there were 11 for, 1 against and 0 abstentions) this was agreed by the majority present.

RECOMMENDED TO CABINET that: -

1. The Housing and Environment Scrutiny Committee provided their views on the following recommendations, which will be presented to Cabinet on the 13th of December 2023.
2. The following increases be recommend for consideration from April 2024 based on the options explained in the report which are: -
 - (i) Rent is increased per property to the maximum permitted as per the WG rent policy which is 6.7%. This would increase the current average rent by £6.68 per week from £99.72 to £106.40 per week over 52 weeks.
 - (ii) The level of rent for garages from April 2024 be increased by the same level at 6.7% to £9.44 per week.

The meeting closed at 18:31 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 13th February 2024, they were signed by the Chair.

CHAIR