



CAERPHILLY HOMES TASK GROUP (WELSH HOUSING QUALITY STANDARD)

**MINUTES OF THE MEETING HELD AT PENALLTA HOUSE, YSTRAD MYNACH
(SIRHOWY ROOM) ON THURSDAY, 19TH FEBRUARY 2015 AT 5.00 P.M.**

PRESENT:

C. Davies- Vice Chair (Presiding)

Task Group Members:

Ms L. Ackerman, R.T. Davies, Mrs G. Green, K. James, Mrs S. Jones, Miss A. Lewis, C. Mann, M. McDermott, Mrs D. Moore, J. Moore.

S. Couzens (Chief Housing Officer), P. Davy (Head of Programmes), E. Lucas (Head of Procurement), R. Thornett (Tenancy Enforcement Manager) and C. Evans (Democratic Services Officer).

1. APOLOGIES

Apologies for absence were received from Councillors Mrs B.A. Jones and Mrs D. Price.

2. DECLARATIONS OF INTEREST

Miss A. Lewis, Mr C. Davies, Ms G. Green, Mrs S. Jones, Mr M. McDermott, Mrs D. Moore and Mr J. Moore as Council Tenants declared a personal but not prejudicial interest in all agenda items.

Councillor L. Ackerman and G. Jones declared an interest in item 5, relating to the Community Safety Fund. Details are minuted with the respective item.

3. MINUTES – 11TH DECEMBER 2014

RESOLVED that the minutes of the meeting held on the 11th December 2014 be approved as a correct record and signed by the Chair.

Councillor L. Ackerman and C. Mann requested it be noted that both had conflicting commitments at the time of the previous Task Group Meeting and had tendered their apologies.

4. LOCAL EMPLOYMENT FUND – SUPPORTING LIFT.

The report, which was presented by P. Davy (Head of Programmes – WHQS), sought the views of the CHTG on the virement of the allocation of the 2014/15 Local Employment Fund budget to Communities First in order to add value and enhance the Welsh Government's LIFT programme, which is aimed at supporting people in workless households into employment within the Upper Rhymney Valley and Caerphilly Basin Communities First Clusters.

The programme is aimed at supporting people who have spent more than 6 months out of work and who face the greatest barriers to becoming employable.

Originally, the Welsh Government advised that in Caerphilly county borough the LIFT programme would only be piloted in the Caerphilly Basin Cluster (including Lansbury Park) however, they have recently approved an expansion of the project to the Upper Rhymney Valley Cluster area (including the Twyn Carno ward) hence the proposal to allocate the fund for 2014/15 to enhance and support the delivery of the recently announced wider programme.

The geographical focus of the project was discussed and concerns raised that the Eastern Valleys Area of the county borough was not included in the project. Officers highlighted that LIFT is a targeted programme, specifically aimed at workless households and assisting to mitigate deprivation.

The Task Group sought further information on the support staff that would be allocated to the project, cost of the scheme and the outcomes and qualifications expected from the project. Officers highlighted that a LIFT Support Officer would be allocated to the project and progress and outcomes would be reported to the Task Group.

The Task Group, having fully discussed and considered the report, recommended that the item be deferred to the next available agenda, in order that the Author could be in attendance to answer detailed questions. By a show of hands, this was unanimously agreed.

RESOLVED that the report be deferred to the next available agenda for consideration.

5. COMMUNITY SAFETY FUND – TARGET HARDENING AND SUPPORT FOR VICTIMS OF ANTI SOCIAL BEHAVIOUR AND DOMESTIC VIOLENCE.

Councillor G. Jones declared an interest as member of the Care and Repair Board and Councillor L. Ackerman declared an interest in this item as a Co-opted Member of the Care and Repair Committee and Director of the Arms Length Company of Care and Repair (non-profit) and both left the meeting during its consideration.

The report advised Members of proposals to utilise £20,000 of the Council's WHQS Community Safety budget, to enhance the target hardening provision available to support victims of anti social behaviour and domestic violence.

The Community Safety Fund was created to support projects that aim to address community safety issues and help create a safer community environment.

During 2014/15 a number of discussions have taken place with representatives from the Caerphilly Community Safety Partnership, Gwent Police, Llamau, Communities First, Flying Start and Tenancy Enforcement regarding how the Fund could be best utilised. The discussions were assisted by the findings highlighted in the Safer Caerphilly Strategic Assessment, which suggested that whilst the overall crime rate in Caerphilly had reduced, the incidents of some types of crime had increased, notably violent crime, criminal damage and theft. Anti social behaviour had increased in a number of areas including Penyrheol, Risca and St James.

The Task Group noted the proposal to utilise £20,000 of the Council's WHQS Community Safety Fund 2014/15 to add value to existing work underway by the members of the Caerphilly Community Safety Partnership to help address the key community safety concerns highlighted in the Safer Caerphilly Strategic Assessment.

The Task Group thanked the Officer for the report and sought further information on the consultation undertaken with tenants during the process. Officer advised that indirect consultation was conducted with tenants, through feedback from organisations operating in the key areas.

Members queried where the work would be undertaken and whether any had been implemented to date. Officers confirmed that the support would be targeted at communities with local authority housing estates but the specific areas would be dependent on the feedback from Police and Community Safety Partnership. The additional funding would enable existing initiatives to be extended.

Having fully considered the report, the Task Group unanimously supported proposal prior to a decision by the Head of Programmes, under delegated powers.

6. CODE OF CONDUCT FOR TENANT REPRESENTATIVES ON THE CAERPHILLY HOMES TASK GROUP

P. Davy (Head of Programmes – WHQS) provided an overview of the report, which outlined the Code of Conduct for the tenant representatives on the Caerphilly Homes Task Group (CHTG).

It was noted that as the Caerphilly Homes Task Group was not defined in the Council's Constitution as a committee of the Council, and Tenant Representatives were neither members of the Council or co opted members and the Members Code of Conduct did not apply. However, it was considered to be good practice for the tenant representatives to sign and abide by a Code of Conduct, which was specifically drafted for the tenant representatives on the CHTG as a consultative body.

The Task Group thanked the Officer for the report and Code of Conduct and discussion ensued. Members raised concerns that their views and comments, voiced during the consultation process, had not been considered or incorporated and sought further information. Officers explained that there are limits to the number of Scrutiny Committees and following a review of the Constitution the role of the CHTG had been confirmed as a consultative body with the public housing scrutiny function being the responsibility of the Policy and Resources Scrutiny Committee.

A Task Group Member highlighted that a Code of Conduct has been implemented at each of the groups and meetings they take part in and can be intimidating. Members have reservations about expressing their views, for fear of breaching the Code. Officers assured the Task Group that the Code of Conduct is intended to protect tenants and provide guidance and a mechanism to deal with complaints or misconduct.

The Task Group discussed the Complaints and Appeals process and expressed concerns for transparency within the process. Discussions ensued and it was felt that appeals should be conducted by an officer independent from the housing service. Officers agreed to consider that any final appeal should be dealt with by the Head of Legal Services.

7. DECISION FOR THE AUTHORITY TO BUY OUT OF HOUSING REVENUE ACCOUNT (HRA) SUBSIDY ARRANGEMENTS

The report, which was considered and approved by Special Council on the 17th December 2014, provided the financial business case and background for Caerphilly County Borough Council (CCBC) to borrow funds from the Public Works Loan Board (PWLB), to buy itself out of the HRA Subsidy arrangements.

The Task Group noted that after lengthy negotiations, the Welsh Government and HM Treasury have reached an agreement that would allow the eleven Authorities in Wales with Council housing stock to exit from the Housing Revenue Account (HRA) subsidy system and become self-financing from April 2015. The negotiations have been undertaken on the basis of the completion of individual voluntary agreements with the 11 landlord Authorities rather than waiting for the primary legislation to be enacted.

Local Authorities would be required to buy their way out of the current HRA subsidy system with payment of a one off settlement figure to HM Treasury, and would be subject to a cap on HRA borrowing.

The new self-financing arrangements are planned to be in place from April 2015 and would increase revenue year on year for the eleven landlord Authorities.

The Task Group thanked the Officer for the detailed report and consideration and discussion ensued.

Members sought details on the direct benefits the HRA Buy Out would have for the Authority and tenants. Officers highlighted that the sale of any land and income from rentals would be retained by the Local Authority. However, Members were asked to note that the buy out would have an impact on the overall borrowing cap.

Members noted that, at the time of Cabinet approval, all 11 Local Authorities had committed to the plan, however, due to movement in interest rates, the level of borrowing may change. Officers advised that an update would be provided to the Task Group in due course.

8. PROCUREMENT UPDATE REPORT.

E. Lucas (Head of Procurement) updated the Task Group on the current position and delivery of Procurements in relation to the WHQS Programme.

There is an extensive range of procurement activity associated with the WHQS Programme. The major contract arrangements are in place in accordance with the contract structure agreed in September 2012 and there is on going activity associated with mini competitions and the small lots. Circumstances on the ground have also led to many ad hoc additional requirements and it is anticipated that these will continue to be a feature as the programme is progressed to 2020.

The Task Group thanked the Officer for the report and discussion ensued around the capacity to manage the contracts. Officers highlighted that additional staff have been assigned to WHQS in order to manage the procurement process.

Questions were raised about the legality of limiting some contracts to contractors with a base in the Caerphilly county borough. It was noted that the legal advice had been fully considered when stipulating the specifications and it was confirmed that it was lawful to award on this basis.

The Task Group expressed their gratitude to the Procurement Team undertaking the extensive work for WHQS and were pleased to note the progress report.

9. HRA STAFF TURNOVER REPORT 2013/14.

S. Couzens (Chief Housing Officer), presented the Task Group with the report, which was requested by Cllr L. Ackerman at the CHTG meeting of the 18th September 2014. The report provided a breakdown of the salary savings that was reported in the Housing Revenue Account (HRA) Outturn Report 2013/14.

Members noted that the Housing Revenue Account Outturn Report had provided details of the final outturn for the HRA for the 2013/14 financial year. As part of the overall underspends it was noted from the report that £597k represented salary savings. The report also noted that 'There are a variety of reasons for this given the volume of staff, but the main causes are staff turnover £400k, and other savings such as long term sickness, opted out pension savings and vacant posts. There was also a reduction in expenditure on agency workers which was off-set by increased overtime costs. A detailed breakdown of the salary underspend achieved in 2013/14 was provided.

The Task Group considered the report and queried the overtime paid to staff. Officers highlighted that there was an overspend on the Overtime budget as a result of addressing service delivery with the current staff resources. It was noted that Overtime working is used in order to address increases in demand and the winter months of 2013/14 were the wettest recorded for many years which resulted in an increased number of repairs reported.

10. PAN GWENT DOMESTIC ABUSE PROJECT

R. Thornett (Tenancy Enforcement Manager), provided an overview of the report which detailed a proposed pan Gwent social landlord's domestic abuse project and the financial cost of the project.

A group of social housing providers in Gwent have joined together to tackle the issue of domestic abuse. The group members are: Bron Afon Community Housing, Caerphilly County Borough Council, Charter Housing including Derwen, Melin Homes, Monmouthshire Housing, Newport City Homes and Tai Calon. Charter Housing is the lead organisation.

The pan Gwent group have agreed that in order to better tackle domestic abuse, a study needs to be undertaken to identify how social landlords can respond more effectively.

An 8 month project was proposed to undertake the necessary research and analysis and to develop a toolkit for use by social landlords. A project officer would be recruited to undertake the work as prescribed by the pan Gwent social landlord's domestic abuse group.

The Task Group noted that a bid was submitted to Welsh Government, which was not successful, however, the group members have agreed to use their own funding (£3.5k per member) to support the project.

Members expressed their support for the project and discussed the report. A Member proposed that research also be conducted from the perspective of the victim, which could be included in the policies. Officers thanked the Task Group Member and agreed to feedback the suggestion to the group.

11. CYD CYMRU COLLECTIVE ENERGY SWITCHING SCHEME

S. Couzens (Chief Housing Officer) presented the information report, which was considered and approved by Cabinet on the 21st January 2015.

Fuel poverty is high on the council's agenda. Domestic energy prices have been dramatically rising over recent years. The Energy Saving Trust highlights that energy prices have risen by 28% between 2008 and 2013.

Cyd Cymru is a collective energy-switching scheme developed to offer people in Wales an opportunity to save money by coming together to buy fuel "in bulk".

The scheme has been developed by Cardiff Council and the Vale of Glamorgan Council, with support from the Welsh Governments "Regional Collaboration Fund.

The Task Group noted that two switches have taken place between January and March 2014. A total of 6800 households across Wales have registered for the scheme and over 1500 households switched saving an average of £185 per household.

The Task Group thanked the Officer for the report and sought further details of customer support during and after the switch process. Officers highlighted that Energy Advice would be provided to customers at the beginning of the process but were not aware of any further support provided.

In noting that there was no financial support required from Local Authorities, a Member sought details on the running of the scheme. Officers confirmed that the scheme is in receipt of funding from the Energy Savings Trust.

The Caerphilly Homes Task Group noted the report.

TO RECEIVE ANY REQUESTS FOR AN ITEM TO BE INCLUDED ON THE NEXT AVAILABLE AGENDA

The following requests were received:-

1. Councillor L. Ackerman requested a follow up report on the changes made in Sheltered Housing Service and user satisfaction.
2. A. Lewis requested a further report on the Code of Conduct and whether complaints could be referred to the Standards Committee.
3. A. Lewis requested a report on the outcomes from use of the LEF to support the Passport Programme and the White rose project.
4. A Lewis requested a report on the impact and effectiveness of CHTG on P&R and Cabinet decisions.

Task Group Members sought an update on mobile phones for the new Task Group Members. Officers confirmed that this matter is being progressed.

The meeting closed at 6.47 p.m.

Approved as a correct record subject to any amendments or corrections agreed and recorded in the minutes of the meeting held on 2nd April 2015.

CHAIRMAN