

COMMUNITY SCRUTINY COMMITTEE

12th FEBRUARY 2016

Present: Councillor D.M. Cundy (Chair)

Councillors: J.M. Charles, S.L. Davies, W.R.A. Davies, T. Devichand, J.K. Howell, H.I. Jones, S. Matthews, J. Owen, H.B. Shepardson, E.G. Thomas (Vice-Chair), G.B. Thomas

Also present:

Councillor L.D. Evans – Executive Board Member (Housing)

Councillor D.M. Jenkins – Executive Board Member (Resources)

The following officers were in attendance:

Mr. R. Staines – Head of Housing and Public Protection

Mr. M. Hughes – Assistant Consultant

Venue: Chamber, County Hall, Carmarthen (10:00am – 12:00pm)

1. APOLOGIES FOR ABSENCE

An apology for absence was received from Councillor J. Thomas and from Councillor M. Gravell (Executive Board Member for Regeneration & Leisure).

2. DECLARATIONS OF PERSONAL INTERESTS

There were no declarations of personal interest.

3. DECLARATION OF PROHIBITED PARTY WHIPS

There were no declarations of prohibited party whips.

4. PUBLIC QUESTIONS (NONE RECEIVED)

No public questions were received.

5. FORTHCOMING ITEMS

The Committee was provided with a list of forthcoming items to be considered at its next meeting scheduled for the 24th March 2016.

UNANIMOUSLY RESOLVED that the list of forthcoming items be noted.

6. THE CARMARTHENSHIRE HOMES STANDARD PLUS (CHS+) 'DELIVERING WHAT MATTERS'

The Committee considered the Carmarthenshire Homes Standard Plus (CHS+) Programme Plan for 2016-2019. Members were advised that the CHS+ programme was grounded in the work of the previous Carmarthenshire Home Standard programme, completed in 2015, in order to maintain and improve on the work already undertaken. Three key aspects of the Plan were to:

- Support tenants and residents with issues such as Welfare Reform, getting services right, saving tenants money in the home, digital inclusion and active ageing
- Investing in homes to maintain standards
- Provide more homes to increase supply of affordable housing

The Committee welcomed the Plan and thanked the Head of Housing & Public Protection and his staff for the excellent work that had already been achieved and the continued support provided by officers to the Council's tenants.

The following issues were raised in relation to the report:

Reference was made to the programme of housing repairs and reference was made to certain houses in the same estates being repaired or re-rendered whilst others were not. The Head of Housing & Public Protection informed the Committee that the re-rendering programme was undertaken on the basis of need which would suggest why some houses had been completed and not others. He informed the Committee that a review of the rendering / painting programme was being carried out by the Environment Department and that communication with local members on such matters was essential.

In response to a question on investing in existing housing stock, the Head of Housing & Public Protection reminded the Committee that the Authority had a legal duty to maintain the houses upgraded under the former CHS programme at this level as well as improving the 'affordability' of the homes by making them cheaper to run by installing energy efficient light bulbs for instance. Any improvements or replacements identified by officers during the annual 'home checks' would be included on an on-going work programme. The Authority was also seeking to change or convert homes that were not suitable for current needs as well as improving the appearance of the estates themselves.

It was asked how often Carbon Monoxide monitors were checked. The Head of Housing & Public Protection reminded the Committee that Carmarthenshire County Council had been the first Authority to include Carbon Monoxide monitors as standard, which was above the national requirements. He informed the Committee that these monitors along with smoke alarms and appliances such as boilers and fires were checked on an annual basis.

Clarification was sought as to the reason for increasing the provision to write-off bad debts as the report also stated that rent arrears had reduced during the past twelve months. The Head of Housing & Public Protection informed the Committee that this write-off provision was available in order to assist tenants who might be struggling to pay their rent and to stay in their homes. The intention was to prevent

potential eviction by working more flexibly with tenants to manage their debts. He reassured the Committee that for those who could pay but refused to, the Authority did undertake approximately 20 evictions per year.

In response to a comment on the decisions of some tenants to turn down improvements to their properties, the Head of Housing & Public Protection acknowledged that there was provision within the programme to accommodate requests from these tenants, should they wish to do so. Properties that had not been upgraded to the CHS were typically upgraded when they became vacant.

A question was asked as to the involvement of tenants in the new programme. The Head of Housing & Public Protection stated that the success of the initial CHS programme was due to the tenant involvement in the process. However, now that the programme had drawn to a close, officers would be looking at new ways of engaging with tenants, especially as traditional methods such as community meetings were not so well attended. New methods of engagement such as the use of social media would be explored further.

Further detail of the plan to provide more homes was sought. The Head of Housing & Public Protection informed the Committee that the Authority was seeking opportunities to utilise Housing Revenue Account (HRA) funding to increase the number of tenancies managed by the Authority's own Social Lettings Agency, bring empty homes back into use, buy back private homes.

Reference was made to garage sites and it was asked whether these could be better utilised, to provide additional parking for instance. The Head of Housing & Public Protection reminded the Committee that there were approximately 1,500 garages/garage plots across the county and their status (e.g. whether they were rented through separate tenancy agreements or privately owned) also varied greatly from site to site. To date, the service's approach had been to work on a site-by-site basis rather than implement an authority-wide approach, as it was the local tenants and elected members that knew what was best for each site. He added that whilst there was no maintenance programme in place for garages, there were some funds available to assist local communities to transform garage sites. However, the final decision for what to do with specific sites had to be made by the local communities. The Head of Housing & Public Protection also suggested that officers present a comprehensive report on garage sites to the Committee at a future date.

Reference was made to the appearance of many estates and it was suggested that one option for improvement would be to collect grass cuttings, rather than letting them rot on the newly mowed grass. The Head of Housing & Public Protection informed the Committee that there was currently some work underway in conjunction with the Environment Department to extend the grass cutting programme as the growing season appeared to be increasing due to the variable climatic conditions of recent years. However, he added that the Authority did not collect cuttings as this added approximately £300,000 to the cost of cutting.

Additional suggestions were made regarding the appearance of the Authority's housing estates including using smaller grassed areas for additional parking as well as planting wild flowers to assist with biodiversity. The Head of Housing & Public Protection acknowledged the suggestions and added that estates had not been built to accommodate 2 or more vehicles per household. If a community

approached the Authority with such proposals, officers would consider it as part of an environmental improvement scheme but there would need to be strong community backing and a business case made via the HRA business process. He added that for other improvement projects such as planting flowers, this was again an activity that could be proposed by local tenants and he referred to a recent project through which a home improvement store had donated flowers and bedding plants to a particular estate as part of the time credits programme. In response to a further query on time credits, he advised the Committee that the programme was not fully operational across the county as yet but to date, approximately 10,000 hours of additional voluntary activity had been recorded. He agreed to circulate further details of the programme to the Committee.

Clarification was sought as to the links with the Swansea Bay City Region. The Head of Housing & Public Protection suggested that the CHS programme had arguably been the largest regeneration project undertaken in the county to date and it was felt that the benefits of the housing improvements realised should be catalogued. Officers were currently preparing a paper in conjunction with other housing practitioners which linked in with previous research work with Cardiff and Swansea Universities which had focussed on the health and well-being of tenants and the link with housing standards.

In response to a question on the installation of Wi-Fi facilities in sheltered schemes, the Head of Housing & Public Protection stated that this was available in the communal areas only as individual tenants often had their own private telephone lines and internet access in their own rooms.

UNANIMOUSLY RESOLVED that:

- 6.1 The report be received.
- 6.2 It be recommended to the Executive Board that it confirm the vision of CHS+ and the financial and delivery programme over the next three years.
- 6.3 It be recommended to the Executive Board that it confirm submission of the plan to the Welsh Government.

7. AFFORDABLE HOMES DELIVERY PLAN

The Committee considered the draft Affordable Homes Delivery Plan which provided details as to how the Authority intended to deliver more homes. It also outlined what resources would be used. The Committee noted that the initial programme aimed to deliver over a 1,000 additional affordable homes during the next five years, with a total investment exceeding £60m.

The following issues were raised in relation to the report and its appendices:

It was suggested that there was a difference between the 'needs' and 'wants' of the county's residents and that proposals to provide affordable housing should be carefully assessed for different areas. The Head of Housing & Public Protection stated that there was simply not enough resources available to fund everyone's wishes but that targeting help where the need was highest, in both urban and rural areas, would be the Authority's approach. However, he suggested that whilst the

expressed need matched the population figures in some areas, officers felt that there was an under-reporting of need in other areas and that further work was needed to ensure that the data was as accurate as possible.

It was asked what impact the different affordable home delivery models would have on tenants. The Head of Housing & Public Protection reminded the committee that following recent changes, tenants of local authorities and social housing associations had the same type of contract but that this didn't apply to those renting in the private sector. He stated that the Local Authority could provide genuinely affordable homes for rent if the properties were under its control, regardless of how they were built or procured. However, the Welsh Government would soon be requiring that local authority rents be brought into line with those of social housing associations and this would mean some difficult conversations with housing tenants in the near future.

It was suggested that the ideal delivery model would be for the Local Authority to build new homes on Council-owned land. The Executive Board Member for Housing agreed but that in order to make the available resources stretch further, utilisation of different models and 'thinking outside the box' provided the Authority with different opportunities to make the best use of its money. Building in-house gave the Authority very limited scope for further borrowing due to financial constraints imposed on it by the Welsh Government. She made reference to a recent visit to Flintshire to view an example of a local trading company model and noted that additional visits to Birmingham and Ealing were planned in the near future.

Concern was expressed that tenants of social housing associations might not be afforded the same support as the Council's tenants, especially in relation to managing rent arrears and so on. The Head of Housing & Public Protection reminded the Committee that Social Housing Associations were regulated by the Welsh Government but that ultimately, their rents were higher than those of local authorities. He noted that some agencies had a twin-track rent policy which included 'normal' and 'affordable' rents. However, whilst the definition of 'affordable' was open to interpretation, its level was set by the Welsh Government. The Head of Housing & Public Protection also noted that the Social Lettings Agency initiative was a highly successful and cost effective way of getting more families into affordable homes by treating privately owned property as part of the county's affordable housing stock. However, he reassured the Committee that with regards to this Plan, all Local Authority stock would be subject to its own rents.

In response to a question about the resources to support the work of returning empty properties to use, the Head of Housing & Public Protection informed the Committee that plans were in place to increase the support for the officer undertaking this work.

In response to a query regarding the Selective Licensing Scheme in Llanelli, the Head of Housing & Public Protection reminded the Committee that this was a Council scheme aimed at reducing anti-social behaviour in a particular area of the town and to date, about 50% of the landlords had registered. He was uncertain as to how many of these had passed on the management of their properties to the Authority's Social Lettings Agency but he agreed to clarify this for committee members.

It was asked whether there was room for flexibility in terms of rent setting for properties offered through the Authority's Social Lettings Agency. The Head of Housing & Public Protection stated that this was the case but that the Agency in operating outside the confines of the Housing Revenue Account (HRA), was influenced by the local housing allowance limits. However, should members agree to utilise the HRA to bring more properties on board, there would be more scope to negotiate the amount of rent based on commercial rents in the local area.

It was asked whether other delivery models would be proposed. The Head of Housing & Public Protection suggested that there might well be other models for members to consider but that these would be presented to the Committee in due course and that ultimately, this would be a decision for the County Council.

It was suggested that £60m might not be sufficient in order to achieve the target of a 1,000 new affordable homes and it was asked whether the Planning Division was supporting Housing & Public Protection Services in ensuring that affordable homes were made available through the planning process. The Head of Housing & Public Protection reminded the Committee that the planning process was out of his officers' control but that officers from his division along with representatives from Corporate Property and Planning were now working together to ensure that the Authority was getting the most out of all planning applications as possible in terms of affordable homes and other community benefits.

Reference was made to the time it appeared to take to get empty properties back into use. The Executive Board Member for Housing acknowledged that all elected members had empty properties in their respective wards but it didn't necessarily mean that they were in areas of greatest need. Officers needed to be careful in not refurbishing properties which in turn would become hard to let due to their location in an extremely rural area.

Concern was expressed that new affordable housing might be built in action areas lacking infrastructure such as regular bus services and other local amenities, or that planning constraints might also impact on the viability of certain sites, especially in rural areas. It was proposed that when preparing future proposals for the action areas, due consideration be given to their deliverability and sustainability, including matters such as the suitability of the existing local infrastructure (e.g. local amenities) and potential planning constraints. The Committee agreed to this proposal.

Asked if it was the intention of officers to consult local elected members on what might be built in their wards, the Head of Housing & Public Protection reassured the Committee that elected members' local knowledge was essential when proposing sites for affordable homes.

UNANIMOUSLY RESOLVED that:

- 7.1 The report be received.
- 7.2 It be recommended to the Executive Board that it confirm the strategy to utilise our existing options to maximise the supply of affordable homes over the next five years.
- 7.3 It be recommended to the Executive Board that it look at options to

maximise the number of new build homes that could be delivered and provide recommendations by September 2016.

- 7.4 It be recommended to the Executive Board that it confirm the action area approach for delivering more affordable homes in different parts of the County.
- 7.5 It be recommended to the Executive Board that when preparing future proposals for the action areas, due consideration be given to their deliverability and sustainability, including matters such as the suitability of the existing local infrastructure (e.g. local amenities) and potential planning constraints.

8. EXPLANATIONS FOR NON-SUBMISSION OF SCRUTINY REPORTS

The Committee considered the explanation for the non-submission of a report on EU and externally funded programmes.

RESOLVED that the explanation for the non-submission be noted.

9. COMMUNITY SCRUTINY COMMITTEE ACTIONS AND REFERRALS UPDATE

RESOLVED that the update detailing progress in relation to actions, requests or referrals emerging from previous scrutiny meetings, be received.

10. TO SIGN AS A CORRECT RECORD THE MINUTES OF THE MEETING HELD ON THE 15TH JANUARY 2016

RESOLVED that the minutes of the meeting held on Friday 15th January 2016 be signed as a correct record.

CHAIR

DATE