

COMMUNITY SCRUTINY COMMITTEE

Thursday, 14 February 2019

PRESENT: Councillor S.L. Davies (Chair)

Councillors:

S.M. Allen (In place of H.B. Shepardson), D.M. Cundy, W.R.A. Davies, H.L. Davies, S.J.G. Gilasbey, B.W. Jones, H.I. Jones and A.Vaughan Owen

Also in attendance:

Councillor L.D. Evans, Executive Board Member for Housing

The following Officers were in attendance:

C. Moore, Director of Corporate Services
J. Morgan, Head of Homes & Safer Communities
J. Fearn, Head of Property
J. Willis, Housing Services Manager (Advice & Options)
A Thomas, Benefits and Council Tax Manager
G. Ayers, Corporate Policy and Partnership Manager
J. Jones, Property Maintenance Manager
M. Dunn, Senior Risks and Processes Officer
S. Jones, Senior Accountant
K. Thomas, Democratic Services Officer

Chamber & Ante Room, - 3, Spilman Street, Carmarthen. SA31 1LE. - 10.00 - 10.55 am

1. APOLOGIES FOR ABSENCE

Apologies for absence were received from Councillors A. Davies, H. Shepardson and G.B. Thomas

2. DECLARATIONS OF PERSONAL INTERESTS INCLUDING ANY PARTY WHIPS ISSUED IN RELATION TO ANY AGENDA ITEM

There were no declarations of personal Interest.

There were no declarations of prohibited party whips.

3. PUBLIC QUESTIONS (NONE RECEIVED)

No public questions had been received.

4. HOUSING REVENUE ACCOUNT BUDGET AND HOUSING RENT SETTING FOR 2019/20

The Committee was reminded that at its meeting held on the 23rd January, 2019 [minute 5 refers] it had endorsed for submission to the Executive Board a proposed 2.4% average increase in housing rents for 2019/20. It was advised that subsequent to that decision, the Welsh Government had announced an

amendment to its Interim Social Housing Policy on the 30th January and, as a consequence, a revised proposal had been submitted to the Executive Board to reduce the average rent increase from the recommended 2.4% to 1.92%, with those rents below target rent being progressed by a £1 per week. As the Executive Board had endorsed that proposal for Council's consideration, the Community Scrutiny Committee was being re-consulted thereon prior to its consideration by the Council on the 20th February.

UNANIMOUSLY RESOLVED TO RECOMMEND TO COUNCIL that the amended housing rent increase for 2019/20, as proposed by the Executive Board and detailed below, be endorsed:-

“to increase the average housing rent as per the Welsh Government's Social Housing Rents Policy [amended 30th January, 2019] i.e.:-

- **Properties at target rents to increase by 1.92%;**
- **Those rents above target be frozen until such time as they meet the target rent;**
- **Those rents below target rent be increased by 1.92% and are progressed by a maximum of £1 per week;**

thereby producing an increase on the average housing rent of 2.4% or £2.05 and will provide the Housing Account with the same overall rent collection value.”

5. UNIVERSAL CREDIT FULL PROGRAMME ROLLOUT IN CARMARTHENSHIRE

The Committee received an overview report on the support being provided by the Council, its partners and stakeholders to Carmarthenshire's residents following the introduction of Universal Credit on the 12th December 2018 i.e.:-

- Support for Council Tenants;
- Support for Housing Benefit Claimants;
- From April 2019 the contract for Assisted Digital Support and personal budgeting will transfer to the Citizens Advice Bureau;
- Support against Financial exploitation through Trading Standards;
- Signposting to support through 'Yr Hwb'
- Support for Veterans.

The Committee was advised that, to date, 700 residents within the County had transferred over to Universal Credit, 200 of which were council tenants. Whilst the Government had proposed a mass managed migration over to Universal Credit, that would not now commence until the results were known of a pilot “managed migration” due to start in July 2019, albeit for only 10,000 claimants in English Local Authorities. However, they envisaged the full managed migration programme would still be completed by December 2023.

The following questions/observations were raised on the report:-

- In response to a question on the provision of digital support to benefit claimants, the Benefits and Council Tax Manager advised that whilst it had originally been envisaged that would be provided via the Council's library service, that would not now be the case from the 1st April, 2019 following

the Government's decision to award the Personal Budgeting and Digital Support Contract to the Citizens Advice Bureau. However, should a member of the public seek Digital Support assistance at one of the Council's libraries up until the 31st March, 2019 this would be provided in conjunction with the Benefits Section.

- Reference was made to the award of the Digital Support contract and what impact that may have on the Council's relationship and links with the Department for Work and Pensions.

It was confirmed the DWP had met with the CAB to put in place a plan to provide holistic support to Universal Credit claimants. Whilst the CAB would only provide support up to the first Universal Credit full payment, the Council would continue to provide a range of support for example personal budgeting and Discretionary Housing Payments.

The Council also operated a 'Trusted Landlord Portal' and as soon as notification was received of one of its tenants transferring to Universal Credit they would be contacted by a housing officer offering advice and support. That would take the form of telephone call and a home visit, if required, where digital support could be provided without the need for referral to the CAB.

- The report made reference to 160 council tenants being in receipt of Universal Credit, subsequently increasing to 200. Clarification was sought on whether they had encountered any difficulty with the new system.

It was reported that in anticipation of the transfer date of the 12th December, 2018 the department had targeted and visited over 1,000 people to ascertain if they had the necessary skills and access to I.T. equipment. Generally, people were coping with the new system with the only major issue arising having been delayed payments with some tenants falling into arrears. In those cases, the department had endeavoured to provide assistance where possible via housing benefits.

It was suggested that whilst the operation of Universal Credit within Carmarthenshire was in its early days, it may be beneficial for the Committee to be provided with an update report thereon at a later date. That could also include extending an invitation to both the DWP and CAB to attend the meeting to gain an insight into their experience of the roll out.

- In response to a question on the provision of assistance with the on-line application forms, it was confirmed that could be provided by housing officers when undertaking home visits. Assistance was also available at the Council's area hubs and at Job Centres.
- Reference was made to Food Bank Vouchers and what measures had been put in place to assist people in need following the DWP's decision to cease their issue. It was noted the department would need to address any impact arising from that decision as part of its evaluation of the introduction of Universal Credit, which could be included within the update report to be provided to a future meeting. The Department had also set aside funding to assist the food banks within the county in anticipation of a potential increased demand for their services.
- It was confirmed that if the department became aware of any Council tenants falling into difficulty, following their migration to Universal Credit, it

would undertake follow up visits and monitoring to provide advice and assistance and act as a link with the DWP and Job centres to discuss those concerns. It also had direct access to the DWP's two relationship officers

UNANIMOUSLY RESOLVED

- 5.1 That the report be received.**
- 5.2 That an update report on the rollout of Universal Credit in Carmarthenshire be submitted to the meeting in six months to include an update on food banks**
- 5.3 That an invitation be extended to the Department of Work and Pensions and the Citizen Advice Bureau to attend the meeting when the report in 5.2 was considered.**

6. FIRE SAFETY MANAGEMENT IN SHELTERED HOUSING AND GENERAL NEEDS BLOCKS OF FLATS

The Committee, in accordance with minute 6.1 of its meeting held on the 30th January, 2018 received an overview report on fire safety on the Council's general needs and sheltered housing stock.

The following questions/issues were raised on the report:

- Reference was made to the recent Grenfell Tower Fire and to Fire advice provided at the time for tenants to remain in their flats. Clarification was sought on whether the Council's fire risk assessor had recommended the same strategy for the Council's stock.

The Committee was advised that the Council was currently installing early warning systems in all of its appropriate residential properties to ensure tenants were evacuated at the earliest opportunity. There was a system in place within sheltered housing complexes comprising a mix of evacuation and stay put i.e. evacuate to a place of safety within the premises, usually a lounge and remain there until advised otherwise. In the event that area was to be affected by a fire, evacuation would be direct to the outside.

In respect of blocks of flats, they were designed on the 'stay put' principle that was reliant on the compartmentalisation of the flats. Should that fail, and the fire spread, full evacuation would be necessary.

- It was confirmed the majority of fire alarms within the Council's housing stock were 'Hard Wired' heat, smoke and carbon monoxide detectors. Although a small number of tenants had refused those works, the department was currently liaising with them to insist on their installation.
- It was confirmed work was being undertaken on the publication of a fire information leaflet for tenants and that officers could examine the feasibility of including therein the points raised by members during the meeting e.g. reminding tenants to register electrical appliances with the manufacturers, to purchase contents insurance and to leave keys in a readily accessible place to assist with ease of egress in the event of a fire.
- It was confirmed whilst the Council undertook 'Portable Appliance Testing' on electrical appliances it provided within its sheltered housing/ residential complexes etc, it would not be possible to extend that to include testing for tenants' personal electrical appliances.

UNANIMOUSLY RESOLVED that the report be received.

7. EXPLANATION FOR NON-SUBMISSION OF SCRUTINY REPORT

The Committee considered the explanation provided for the non-submission of a scrutiny report.

UNANIMOUSLY RESOLVED that the non-submission report be received.

8. FORTHCOMING ITEMS

The Committee received a list of forthcoming items to be considered at its next meeting to be held on the 28th March, 2019.

UNANIMOUSLY RESOLVED that the list of forthcoming items for the meeting of the Committee to be held on the 28th March, 2019 be received.

9. TO SIGN AS A CORRECT RECORD THE MINUTES OF THE MEETING HELD ON THE 23RD JANUARY 2019

UNANIMOUSLY RESOLVED that the minutes of the meeting of the Committee held on the 23rd January, 2019 be signed as a correct record.

CHAIR

DATE