

COMMUNITY SCRUTINY COMMITTEE

Friday, 20 January 2017

PRESENT: Councillor D.M. Cundy (Chair)

Councillors:

J.M. Charles, J.K. Howell, S.L. Davies, T. Devichand, S. Matthews, W.R.A. Davies, H.I. Jones, H.B. Shepardson, D. Tomos and E.G. Thomas

Also in attendance:

Councillor L.D. Evans, Executive Board Member for Housing
D.M. Jenkins, Executive Board Member for Resources (Deputy Leader)
Councillor J.D. James – who addressed the Committee on Minute No. 8

The following Officers were in attendance:

C. Moore, Director of Corporate Services
R. Staines, Head of Housing and Public Protection
I. Jones, Head of Leisure
J. Fearn, Head of Property
J. Morgan, Housing Services Manager - Investment and Support
J. Davies, Senior Cultural Services Manager
L. James, Housing Services Manager
M. Jewell, Library Services Manager
S. Williams, Senior Accountant
K. Thomas, Democratic Services Officer

Chamber, 3 Spilman Street, Carmarthen - 10.00 am - 12.30 pm

1. APOLOGIES FOR ABSENCE.

An apology for absence was received from Councillor G.B. Thomas.

2. DECLARATIONS OF PERSONAL INTEREST

There were no declarations of personal interest.

3. DECLARATIONS OF PROHIBITED PARTY WHIPS

There were no declarations of prohibited party whips.

4. PUBLIC QUESTIONS

No public questions had been received.

5. FORTHCOMING ITEMS

The Committee received a list of forthcoming items to be considered at its meeting to be held on the 30th January, 2017.

UNANIMOUSLY RESOLVED that the report be received.

6. HOUSING REVENUE ACCOUNT BUDGET AND HOUSING RENT SETTING FOR 2017/18

The Committee considered the Housing Revenue Account (HRA) Budget and Housing Rent Setting for 2017/18, being presented as part of the budget consultation process and brought together the latest proposals contained in the revenue and capital budgets for the Housing Revenue Account 2017/18 to be presented to the Executive Board and Council for determination.

The Director of Corporate Services advised that the report had been prepared reflecting the latest proposals contained within the Housing Revenue Account Business Plan, being the primary financial planning tool for delivering the Carmarthenshire Homes Standard *Plus* (CHS+), and also incorporating the Authority's Affordable Homes Commitment and the £79m borrowing requirement arising from the Council's decision, on the 1st April 2015, to exit the Housing Revenue Account Subsidy scheme.

The following issues were raised in relation to the report:

- Reference was made to the Council's Social Housing Rents Policy and to whether factors such as a property's size, quality, location and house prices affected rent levels. In that regard, the Committee's attention was drawn to point 4 within the report, detailing the number of households which would be affected by the proposed rent increase, 36% of which received full Housing Benefit, 28% partial Housing Benefit and 36% receiving no benefit. Clarification was accordingly sought on the impact the increase could have on individual areas within the county.

The Director of Corporate Services advised that the proposed rent increases were in line with the guidance set by the Welsh Government's Social Housing Rent Policy, which commenced in 2015/16 and was fixed for a five year period. He advised that the table on page 16 of the report provided an average breakdown of the number of council properties which would be affected by the proposed increase, with the table on Page 17 detailing the individual target rentals for various house types. He confirmed that details of the impact on individual areas could be provided direct to the Committee members.

- Reference was made to page 16 of the report and the government's proposals for the future payment of Housing benefits whereby tenants who lived alone, claimed benefit and were under 35 would, from the 1st April 2019, move to the Local Housing Allowance Rate for shared accommodation, whilst, from December 2017, most tenants under 21, in receipt of universal credit, would no longer be eligible for housing costs to cover their rent. Concern was expressed at the potential impact those changes could have, especially on the under 21's, resulting in increased homelessness. A view was expressed that the Executive Board should be advised of that potential impact, and the Welsh Government lobbied to identify a way to mitigate against the measure.

The Committee was advised that the Housing Division, together with its Social Housing Partners were aware of the legislation's potential impact and were examining what measures could be introduced to help and inform tenants of the changes. Those included advising tenants that an exception

to the legislation would be applied if they attended training courses or secured employment.

The Head of Housing and Public Protection reminded the Committee that responsibility for Housing Benefit lay with the U.K. Government and was not devolved to Wales. He confirmed that the highest proportion of people on the Council's waiting list were young people and that, in conjunction with the Housing Associations' the Council was examining how best to mitigate/alleviate the legislation's impact on Carmarthenshire Tenants and a report thereon would be presented to a future meeting of the Committee.

- Reference was made to the Council receiving commission for collecting water rates in light of a legal challenge being made against some London Authorities in that regard. The Committee was advised that the Council's legal division was examining the Council's position in light of that challenge, and it had been identified as a potential risk for the Council.
- In response to a question on the non-payment of water and sewerage charges, the Committee was assured that if tenants fell into arrears solely on non-payment of those charges, eviction procedures would not be invoked automatically, and the authority would liaise with the tenants on any financial difficulties they may be experiencing. However, eviction proceedings may occur where tenants had the ability to, but refused to pay their rents/rates.
- In response to a question on water meters, the Head of Housing and Public Protection advised that whilst the Council did not install water meters within its Housing stock, any proposal to do so would need to be thoroughly researched to assess the potential impact on tenants.

RESOLVED

6.1 that the report and following proposals be endorsed for submission to the Executive Board:

- **To increase the rent in line with welsh Government Guidelines i.e:-:**

- 1. Properties at target rent be increased by 2.5% (CPI + 1.5%)**
- 2. Properties where rent was below target rent be increased by 2.5% (CPI +1.5%) plus a maximum progression of £2**
- 3. Those properties where rents were above target be frozen until such time as they met the target:**

thereby producing an average housing rent increase of £2.84 which would produce a sustainable Business Plan, maintain CHS+, and resource the Affordable Homes Programme.

- **to continue with the maximum progression of £2, for rents below target, until target rents were achieved,**
- **to increase garage rents to £9.00 per week (from £8.75 in 2016/17) and garage bases to £2.25 per week (from £2.20 in 2016/17)**
- **to apply the service charge policy to ensure tenants who received the benefit from specific services paid for those services**
- **to increase the charges for using the Council's sewerage treatment works in line with the rent increase**

6.2 that the Committee's concern on the potential impact of the U.K Government's Housing Benefit Legislation, especially for those under 21 years of age, be drawn to the Executive Board's attention.

7. THE CARMARTHENSHIRE HOMES STANDARD PLUS (CHS+) "DELIVERING WHAT MATTERS" BUSINESS PLAN 2017-20

The Committee received for consideration the Carmarthenshire Homes Standards Plus (CHS+) Business Plan 2017-20 the purpose of which was threefold. Firstly, it explained and detailed the Plan's provision over the next three years and what it meant for tenants. Secondly, it confirmed the financial profile, based on current assumptions for delivery of the CHS+ over the plan period and, thirdly, produced a business plan for the annual application to the Welsh Government for Major Repairs Allowance (MRA) for 2017/18 equating to £6.1m.

The Following questions/issues were raised on the report:

- Reference was made to one of the Plan's key principles 'to support our future approach to managing the homes, land and garage areas'. A view was expressed that the principle should be extended to incorporate both anti- social behaviour and garden areas in view of their potential to adversely impact on the amenity of other residents.

The Head of Housing and Public Protection reminded the Committee that, the Council currently had an established Policy with regard to Anti-Social Behaviour, which generally occurred in localised hot spots rather than being a county wide issue. That policy incorporated a number of measures to address ASB catering for both, individual, and wider incidents e.g. liaising with the Police and Local members to produce an action plan which may include the introduction of a Local Lettings Policy.

With regard to the issue of maintenance of garden areas, he advised that whilst it was not considered to be a major issue, the Committee could amend the statement in the policy to facilitate its inclusion. However, where issues did arise, they could normally be dealt with under the tenancy agreement but, where persons continually refused to maintain their gardens, the Council could undertake the works in default and charge the tenant accordingly.

- In response to a question relating to the inspection of homes as part of the Carmarthenshire Homes Standards, the Housing Services Manager confirmed that the majority of homes were visited at least once a year under a number of different guises e.g. repairs visits to approximately 7,000 homes and visits by housing officers to approximately 3,500 homes. The Department was also targeting to undertake a 20% annual survey on stock condition and compliance with the CHS+.
- In response to a question on collaborative working with the City and County of Swansea on energy saving, the Housing Services Manager advised those discussions were being undertaken under the auspices of the Swansea Bay City Deal which incorporated a project for addressing energy efficiency in new homes. The Council was also working with SOLCER House in Bridgend and Cardiff University on the retro fitting of energy efficiency measures to existing homes.

- In response to a question on the establishment of a local housing company, the Housing Services Manager advised that a Business Case was currently being finalised for submission through the Council's political process.

RESOLVED that the Carmarthenshire Homes Standards Plus (CHS+) Delivering What Matters Business Plan 2017-20 be endorsed for submission to the Executive Board subject to the Key Principle under the bullet point investing in homes to maintain standards being amended to read 'to support our future approach to managing the homes, land, garage areas and garden areas'.

8. BURRY PORT HARBOUR - FUTURE MAINTENANCE

The Committee was advised that the Executive Board, at its meeting held on the 13th July 2015 had supported a strategic need to maintain Burry Port Harbour and identified the notional sum of £400k within the Capital Programme to undertake works thereto. Subsequent to that decision, work had been undertaken to investigate the dredging works required to be undertaken, together with a review of the maintenance requirements for the grade II listed harbour walls. The report presented to the Committee provided a summary of the identified issues, risks and costs along with a range of future maintenance options ranging from a 'do nothing approach' to a sustainable planned maintenance schedule that allowed for a reasonable degree of certainty over on-going costs in relation to both dredging and repairs to the harbour wall. However, the 'do nothing' approach did not apply to the harbour walls, in view of their listed status.

The Following questions/issues were raised during consideration of the report:-

- References were made to the Burry Port Regeneration Masterplan and the integral part the Harbour played within those proposals, featuring a new Lifeboat Station, housing development around the harbour periphery (470 homes plus a live/work element), a 330 place new Welsh school, together with a commercial element comprising a mix of retail, hotel and a pub/restaurant. A view was expressed that whilst the above elements would draw in visitors and tourists to the area in the short term, the long term future for the Harbour depended on it receiving the appropriate investment to sustain its future viability thereby, attracting further investors who would play a significant role in the regeneration of the Harbour area. The Committee was requested to endorse the report's recommendations.
- In response to a question relating to the potential for the dredging to be undertaken via the Water Injection Method referred to in the report, the Head of Leisure Services drew the Committee's attention to the costs thereof detailed in the report compared to traditional dredging methods. He advised that, Water Injection was the preferred environmental option in that it involved injecting water into the silt to suspend it in solution which would then be carried away on the ebbing tides. Mechanical dredging (cutter sucking), on the other hand, would require subsequent disposal of the silt to an off site location and a licence from Natural Resources Wales. Regarding the mechanical dredging of sand from the harbour entrance, work was on-going in terms of assessing the potential for the disposal costs to be partly offset from the potential sale value of the dredged material.
- The Head of Leisure referred to earlier comments on the economic benefit of Marina/Harbour facilities like Burry Port on the local economy, and advised that whilst data was available thereon, any potential economic

benefits the Harbour may bring to Burry Port had not been factored into the report which only addressed its future maintenance requirements.

UNANIMOUSLY RESOLVED that it be recommended to the Executive Board that the report on the future maintenance requirements for Burry Port Harbour be endorsed, and that appropriate provision be made within the Council's relevant revenue and capital budgets to sustain the harbour on an ongoing basis.

9. WELSH PUBLIC LIBRARY STANDARDS ANNUAL REPORT 2015-16: CARMARTHENSHIRE

The Committee received a report on the Carmarthenshire Library Service's Annual Assessment 2015/16. It was noted that the Public Libraries and Museums Act 1964 placed a Statutory Duty on all Public Library Authorities 'to provide a comprehensive and efficient library service' and on Welsh Ministers 'to superintend and promote the improvement' of public library services in Wales. In accordance with that requirement, the Welsh Government had completed its assessment of Carmarthenshire's Library Services Annual Return for 2015/16 with Carmarthenshire meeting 17 of the 18 core entitlements in full with one being partially met. That related to Leadership and Development and the publication of a Forward Work Programme. The Committee thereupon received a power-point overview of the draft 2017/2022 programme, due for completion during March 2017.

The Committee was also advised that in a recent Chartered Institute of Public Finance and Accountancy article, Llanelli Library had been identified as being the 3rd highest issuer out of all libraries in England Scotland and Wales with regard to the number of books and other loans to service users totalling 555,712 loans.

The following issues were raised during consideration of the report and power point presentation:-

- References were made to the role of volunteers within the library Service and the committee was assured the service welcomed volunteers, where practical, in all of its libraries and provided appropriate training. The service was also examining the feasibility of making that training accredited in certain areas of work.
- In response to a question on a 40% reduction in audio-visual and electronic issues, the Committee was advised it was attributable to a change in the way those services were accessed by the public in terms of downloading and livestreaming music and films direct to their personal electronic devices.
- In response to a question on the potential for the authority to co-locate its libraries in other centres and publicly owned buildings, the Library Services Manager confirmed that opportunities to co-locate were actively explored in view of the benefits they provided for increasing access to services and reducing costs. Examples of co-location included the new library facility shortly to open in the municipal offices in Llandeilo, Y Gât in St Clears and at Ysgol Y Bedol.
- Reference was made to the new mobile library vehicles shortly to be introduced to the service, and it was confirmed they would be replacing, not adding, to the existing fleet. The new vehicles had been designed to

provide electronic services and installed with dual routers for EE and Vodaphone to maximise electronic coverage and reduce 'not spots' as far as possible by being able to connect to the best of those service providers in any particular area

Arising from the above, the Library Services Manager advised that arrangements could be made for the Committee to view one of the new mobile library vehicles.

UNANIMOUSLY RESOLVED that the Carmarthenshire Library Services Annual Assessment Report 2015/16 be received and the proposed Draft Forward Work Programme 2017/2022 be endorsed

10. EXPLANATION FOR NON SUBMISSION OF SCRUTINY REPORTS

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

UNANIMOUSLY RESOLVED that the non-submission report be noted.

11. TO SIGN AS A CORRECT RECORD THE MINUTES OF THE MEETING HELD ON 5TH DECEMBER 2016

UNANIMOUSLY RESOLVED that the minutes of the meeting of the Committee held on the 5th December, 2016 be signed as a correct record.

12. TO RECEIVE THE MINUTES OF THE JOINT MEETING OF THE COMMUNITY SCRUTINY COMMITTEE AND PLANNING COMMITTEE HELD ON THE 5TH DECEMBER 2016

UNANIMOUSLY RESOLVED that the minutes of the joint meeting of the Community Scrutiny Committee and the Planning Committee held on the 5th December 2016 be received.

CHAIR

DATE