

COMMUNITY SCRUTINY COMMITTEE

Thursday, 30 March 2017

PRESENT: Councillor D.M. Cundy (Chair)

Councillors:

J.M. Charles, W.T. Evans (In place of G.B. Thomas), S.L. Davies, W.R.A. Davies, T. Devichand, H.I. Jones, S. Matthews, H.B. Shepardson, E.G. Thomas, J. Thomas and D. Tomos

Also in attendance:

Councillor L.D. Evans, Executive Board Member for Housing
L.M. Stephens, Executive Board Member for Human Resources, Efficiencies and Collaboration

The following Officers were in attendance:

R. Staines, Head of Housing and Public Protection
I. Jones, Head of Leisure
I.R. Llewelyn, Forward Planning Manager
K. Thomas, Democratic Services Officer
A. Jones, Performance Information Analyst

Chamber, 3 Spilman Street, Carmarthen - 10.00 - 11.40 am

1. APOLOGIES FOR ABSENCE

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

The Chair referred to the meeting that day being the last Community Scrutiny Committee prior to the local government elections and extended his appreciation to elected members and officers for their contribution to the Committee's work over the previous five years. Appreciation was also extended by members to the Chair for the manner in which he had conducted his duties during his tenure.

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 had been received.

5. DRAFT LOCAL DEVELOPMENT ORDER - LLANELLI TOWN CENTRE

The Committee considered the Draft Local Development Order for Llanelli Town Centre, following its approval for public consultation by Council on the 22nd February, 2017.

It was noted the Draft Order sought to reflect corporate regeneration objectives for Llanelli town centre, whilst ensuring the issues of its ongoing vitality and viability were appropriately considered in relation to the provisions of national planning policy. If introduced, the Order would allow a range of planning uses within a defined spatial area without the need for the submission of a formal planning application to the Local Planning Authority, subject to the Authority issuing a 'certificate of conformity'.

The consultation period for the Draft Order would commence in the spring/summer of 2017 for a minimum six week period and members of the Committee could, in addition to any recommendations the Committee may make, submit personal observations on the proposals as part of the consultation. Thereafter, a report on the representations received would be submitted to Council for formal consideration on whether to proceed with the Orders' formal adoption and implementation

The following questions/issues were raised on the report:

- Reference was made to proposals for the conversion of the upper floors of retail units within the town centre to residential usage. Clarification was sought on the potential impact that could have on current car parking facilities, and to whether additional parking provision would be designed into any redevelopment proposals.

The Forward Planning Manager confirmed the Draft Order did not incorporate additional parking as it was considered there was currently sufficient provision within the Town Centre. However, if the plan's aspirations were being met, and it was subsequently deemed appropriate to revisit the issue potential avenues available in that regard could include the introduction of permit schemes or the use of shared facilities.

- With regard to the extent of the C2 Flood Zone in the town centre, the Forward Planning Manager confirmed the flood risk areas, as defined on the plan detailed within the report, related to the potential risk from fluvial water courses. However, the Order would also need to have regard to the potential for flooding as a consequence of both tidal surges and climate change.
- In response to a question on the preparation of the Llanelli Town Centre Masterplan, the Forward Planning Manager confirmed the council's consultants were progressing with the gathering and collation of essential evidence in support thereof and its publication was anticipated in the near future.
- Reference was made to part 1.2 of the report and the potential for any permission granted by a Local Development Order to fall within the provisions of a Community Infrastructure Levy (CIL), should the Council decide to proceed with its adoption for Carmarthenshire. The Forward Planning Manager advised that whilst CIL legislation was currently a non-devolved function, it would shortly be devolved to the Welsh Government which may decide to examine the legislation to ensure its deliverability for Wales.

UNANIMOUSLY RESOLVED that the report be received.

6. COMMUNITIES DEPARTMENTAL BUSINESS PLAN 2017-20

The Committee received for consideration the Communities Departmental Business Plan providing an update on its priorities for the period 2017/20. It was noted whilst the plan enveloped the whole of the Departments' priorities, the Committee's role that day was to scrutinise the Housing and Leisure Services elements. With regard to Leisure Services, the Committee agreed debate thereon could be undertaken as part of its consideration of the Annual Update report on Leisure Services agendaed as a separate item that day.

The following issues were raised on those aspects of the report relating to Housing Services:

- Reference was made to the imminent introduction of Universal Credit and the potential impact it could have on a tenant's ability to pay their rent. A concern was expressed that whilst the Council was bound to initiate proceedings for the recovery of rent arrears, the costs of such action only served to exacerbate a tenant's financial hardship. Accordingly, it was felt consideration should be given to examining ways of assisting tenants to avoid, as far as possible, hardship occurring.

The Head of Housing and Public Protection confirmed the Division, being aware of the legislation's potential financial impact for tenants, was adopting a preventative rather than reactive approach to rent arrears. That included providing assistance to potential tenants, prior to the commencement of a tenancy, to evaluate their ability to sustain a viable tenancy, for example, assessing both rental levels and potential benefit payments.

- Reference was made to the Department's proposal to develop an online portal for tenants to access their rent account, outstanding repairs and transfer applications. A view was expressed the portal should also include reference to service charges for tenants living in housing complexes.

The Head of Housing and Public Protection confirmed the portal could be amended to include service charges.

- In response to a question on the target to return 50 empty homes a year to the overall housing stock as affordable housing, the Head of Housing and Public Protection confirmed that following recent concerns voiced at the approximate 2,000 empty homes within Carmarthenshire, the Division had increased its resources for that element of its work, including doubling staff from one to two officers. That had resulted in the number of homes being returned to the Housing Stock increasing to approximately 110 per annum enabling the Council to achieve its target for at least 50 of those to be affordable homes. With regard to the remaining renovated properties, some would have been sold on the open market and others rented out in the private property market at higher rental levels.
- Reference was made to the proposal for the introduction of a reward scheme for tenants. Clarification was sought on the type of options being considered and their achievability.

The Head of Housing and Public Protection advised that whilst no formal policy had been established, consideration was being given to whether its introduction could benefit both the authority and its tenants. If adopted, the policy could, for example, include reward offers for tenants who did not fall into arrears or those who left their property in good state of repair and

decoration thereby, reducing the level of work undertaken in preparing a property for re-let.

- In response to a question on the frequency of inspections undertaken to the Council's housing stock, the Head of Housing and Public Protection confirmed the intention was for every property to be inspected once per year. Those inspections could be carried out in a number of ways including, for example, as part of the scheduled annual stock survey, during home visits by housing officers and by staff undertaking repairs.
- Reference was made to the potential impact forthcoming legislation could have on the level of homelessness in the under 21 age group in receipt of universal credit who would no longer be eligible for housing benefit to cover their rent.

The Head of Housing and Public Protection confirmed the Department was aware of the legislation's potential impact for both the under 21 and under 35 age categories, and as part of the Council's statutory obligation to have an up to date Homelessness Strategy a review of the existing strategy was being undertaken to include the potential implications of the new legislation, and would be presented to the Council following the local government elections.

- Reference was made to the proposal for the Council to develop a plan the management and procurement of temporary accommodation, and information requested on current expenditure levels together with the average length of stay.

The Head of Housing and Public Protection advised that in 2006, the authority spent in excess of £600k per annum on emergency accommodation. Since that time, the emphasis had changed from a reactive to a pro-active approach resulting in the current position whereby only 3-4 families per annum were placed in emergency accommodation for a few nights at a time at a total cost of several hundred pounds a year. The current approach endeavoured to keep people at threat of being made homeless in their own homes for as long as possible as, quite often, people presenting themselves as homeless were not actually homeless but had been served with a notice to quit by their landlord. In those instances, the authority utilised the four to six week notice period to place families in temporary accommodation either from within the council's own housing stock or, via other social letting agencies.

With regard to the average time people resided in temporary accommodation, that varied according to need and could extend to a number of years. Whilst the Council was happy to sustain that position provided it still met a persons' need, it had to ensure the supply of properties available for temporary accommodation was sufficient to meet demand.

- In response to a question on the proposal for the development of a longer term digital plan, the Head of Housing and Public Protection confirmed its aim was to make as many services as possible available to tenants on line. If successful, it would enable officers to spend time helping people, preventing homelessness and adding value to services. It could also reduce the need for officers to travel to peoples' homes but, where such visits were required officers would be able to undertake work on line, reducing the time spent on administrative duties on their return to the office.

Whilst the emphasis was being placed on increased use of digital services, the Head of Housing and Public Protection assured the Committee tenants would still be able to access services via face to face/ telephone contact.

- Reference was made to the scope and range of services provided by the Communities Department, and a view expressed that scrutiny of the Department should be undertaken by a single scrutiny committee, as opposed to the current position where responsibility was spread between three scrutiny committees. The view was endorsed by the committee.

UNANIMOUSLY RESOLVED that the Communities Departmental Business Plan 2017-20 be received.

7. ANNUAL UPDATE: LEISURE SERVICES

The Committee received for consideration the Leisure Services Annual Update Report for 2016/17 measuring performance against the following seven outcomes:

Outcome 1 – People can access opportunities to be active

Outcome 2 – More Children and Young People are hooked on leisure / cultural activity for life (0-24)

Outcome 3 – More people (25years+) are active in Leisure and Culture

Outcome 4 People are affiliated to clubs / community groups or facilities

Outcome 5 – People are given the skills to become physically and creatively literate for life

Outcome 6 – People achieve their potential

Outcome 7 – Our facilities and services are well managed and efficient

The following issues were raised on the report:-

- Reference was made to the proposals for the development of a masterplan for Parc Howard Museum and to a recent site visit undertaken by the Scrutiny Committee. A view was expressed on the uniqueness of the facility and the need for its marketing to both residents of, and visitors to, Carmarthenshire to enable the site to achieve its full potential.

The Head of Leisure Services concurred with the sentiment and reminded the Committee that when the museum service had been incorporated within Leisure Services several years previously, it had been endured funding reductions for a period of time. Subsequent to that integration, additional resources had been made available and it was hoped improvements thereto would become apparent over the next few years. Those additional resources, had enabled the service to appoint a Museum Development Manager and a vision was now being prepared for the future development and marketing of the service, incorporating a desire for the provision of a new storage facility to house the county's artefacts to replace the current arrangements where they were stored in a number of different venues for example, 70,000 items were stored between the Parc Howard and Abergwili museums. However, those improvements would need time to bear fruition.

The Head of Leisure also advised that as part of the vision, the service was seeking accreditation from the Wales Museum Service which set standards for museum management, collection care and public service

- In response to a question on the provision of the new archives building behind Carmarthen Library, the Head of Leisure advised that discussions on its design were nearing completion and it was hoped the new facility could be operational by early 2019.
- In response to a question on the measurement of performance against the seven key outcomes, the Head of Leisure reminded the Committee that it received quarterly update reports on such performance. Those included reference to participation levels at both the Council's, and private sports facilities, with the Council providing information on its own facilities and Sports Wales on private sports facilities/clubs.
- Reference was made to previous Council consideration on the potential for the externalisation of leisure services, and clarification sought on the current position.

The Head of Leisure confirmed that whilst the Council had previously considered the matter, it was no longer being pursued.

- References were made to the Committee's recent visits to the libraries at Ammanford, Carmarthen and Llanelli where it viewed the refurbishments works. A question was asked on whether there were any proposals to undertake improvements to the community libraries.

The Head of Leisure confirmed whilst it was proposed to undertake improvement works to community libraries, the level of financial resources available to the department were limited with any schemes having to compete for funding amongst other departmental priorities. However, wherever possible, the department actively sought grant aid and funding from alternative sources to facilitate improvements to the library service as a whole.

- References were made to the recent improvements to and marketing of the library service resulting in increased footfall and participation levels. A view was expressed the museum service could benefit from the adoption of a similar approach.

The Head of Leisure reminded the Committee that the improvements to the library service had been achieved, against a backdrop of funding reduction, by prioritising development to the high volume areas. With regard to the museum service, he reminded the Committee of his earlier comments on the appointment of a museum marketing manager and the proposals being formulated for its future development and marketing. He also advised that three additional senior staff had been appointed within the Department's Country Parks Division to oversee the future development and marketing of those facilities.

- In response to a question relating to the provision of the three new mobile library vehicles the Head of Leisure confirmed whilst delays were being encountered in their provision, it was hoped they could become operational by the middle of the year.

UNANIMOUSLY RESOLVED that the report be received.

8. OPERATION OF THE VANGAURD METHOD

In accordance with the decision made at the meeting held on the 20th July 2016, the Committee received a report on the application of the Vanguard Methodology

in relation to the operation and performance of the authority's policies and procedures for the letting and returning of council housing properties to use.

The Head of Housing and Public Protection advised that the Vanguard Method, initially developed for the private sector, was being widely used across the public sector as organisations continually sought ways of responding to the on-going challenges of reducing financial resources against increasing service demands and expectations. It required organisations to think differently about service delivery and usually involved staff participation at all levels. That approach, had been used by the Council across 12 separate service areas resulting in significant improvements in quality and efficiency.

With regard to the operation of the Council's House Letting System (Void's), that had previously involved a 34 step process across three separate departments resulting in an average 70-80 working days to return a void property to the Housing stock for re-letting. The application of the Vanguard methodology had resulted in the process reducing to 4 steps, a reduced spend in void repairs, an increase in tenant satisfaction rates, a reduction from 80 to 20 days in the average time taken to re-let a property, together with a consequential £600k per annum increase in rental incomes. In essence, the methodology had resulted in the void system being upgraded from one that was not fit for purpose to one that incurred less cost, achieved quicker turn around and re-allocation times and improved rental incomes.

The Head of Housing and Public Protection advised that although Vanguard should not be regarded as a panacea, it was an effective tool for examining and improving service delivery, quite often at reduced cost.

The following issues were raised on the report:-

- References were made to the council's allocation policy and the need for local members to be apprised of empty council housing properties in their ward and their allocation as soon as possible. The Head of Housing and Public Protection confirmed that processes were in place for that information to be conveyed to local members, but that he would remind staff of that requirement.

UNANIMOUSLY RESOLVED that the report be received.

9. TO SIGN AS A CORRECT RECORD THE MINUTES OF THE MEETINGS HELD ON THE 30TH JANUARY AND 17TH FEBRUARY, 2017:-

UNANIMOUSLY RESOLVED that the minutes of the meetings held on the 30th January and 17th February, 2017 be signed as correct records.

CHAIR

DATE