

COMMUNITIES, HOMES & REGENERATION SCRUTINY COMMITTEE

WEDNESDAY, 13 DECEMBER 2023

PRESENT: Councillor D.M. Cundy (Chair)

Councillors (In Person):

B.W. Jones J.K. Howell D. Owen M. Palfreman

Councillors (Virtually):

W.R.A. Davies T. Davies H.L. Davies H.B. Shepardson
R. Sparks M. Thomas M.J.A. Lewis

Also in attendance:

Councillor L.D. Evans – Deputy Leader and Cabinet Member for Housing
Councillor H.A.L. Evans – Cabinet Member for Regeneration, Leisure, Culture and Tourism
Councillor A. Lenny – Cabinet Member for Resources

Also Present (In Person):

C. Moore, Director of Corporate Services
J. Fearn, Head of Housing Property and Strategic Projects
J. Morgan, Head of Housing and Public Protection
H. Morgan, Economic Development Manager
R. Parkinson, Team Leader - Housing Advice
G. Williams, Team Leader
S. Williams, Senior Accountant
G. Dennis, Senior Housing Options Advisor
N. Hartley, Innovation Partnership Surveyor - Energy Specialist
M. Runeckles, Members Support Officer
K. Thomas, Democratic Services Officer
S. Rees, Simultaneous Translator

Also Present (Virtually):

I. Jones, Head of Leisure
E. Evans, Principal Democratic Services Officer
D. Hall-Jones, Member Support Officer

Chamber - County Hall, Carmarthen. SA31 1JP and remotely - 2.00 - 3.20 pm

1. APOLOGIES FOR ABSENCE

Apologies for absence were received from Councillors B. Davies and R. Evans.

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

Note: These minutes are subject to confirmation at the next meeting.

Councillor	Minute No (s)	Nature of Interest
R. Sparks	7 – 2023/24 quarter 2 – Performance Report (01/04/23 – 30/09/23) Relevant to this Scrutiny	Has a swimming business and has dispensation from the Standards Committee to speak and make written representations on leisure matters but not vote

3. PUBLIC QUESTIONS (NONE RECEIVED)

The Chair advised that no public questions had been received.

4. HOUSING REVENUE ACCOUNT AND HOUSING RENT SETTING 2024/25

The Committee considered a report on the Housing Revenue Account (HRA) Budget and Housing Rent Setting for 2024/25, being presented as part of the budget consultation process, that brought together the latest proposals for the Revenue and Capital budgets for the Housing Revenue Account to be presented to the Cabinet and Council for determination.

The Committee was advised that the report had been prepared reflecting the latest proposals contained within the Housing Revenue Account (HRA) Business Plan, being the primary financial planning tool for delivering and maintaining the Carmarthenshire Homes Standard *Plus* (CHS+) for the future. The proposed investment within the current business plan delivered the CHS by 2015 (to those homes where the tenants agreed to have work undertaken) provided investment to maintain CHS+ and continued investment for the Housing Regeneration and Development Delivery Plan.

The report also detailed how rents would increase for 2024/25 with the HRA budget being set to reflect:-

- Social Housing Rent Policy (set by Welsh Government)
- Proposals contained in the Carmarthenshire Housing Revenue Account Business Plan
- Housing Regeneration and Development Delivery Plan

The Committee was reminded that with regard to the setting of the Housing Rents, the Authority on the 24th February 2015 had adopted the Welsh Government's Social Housing Rent Policy for the four year period ending in 2018/19 providing consistency over that period. For 2019/20, the Welsh Government had provided an interim policy while it awaited the results of the Affordable Housing Supply Review. Following that review, the Welsh Government had decided to retain the policy for a further 5year period from 2020/21 with some additional/amended requirements, as detailed within the report.

Note: These minutes are subject to confirmation at the next meeting.

This policy allowed local authorities to uplift the total rent envelope by CPI + 1% for each of the 5 years running from 2020/21 to 2024/25. It also allowed for the level of rent for individual tenants to rise by up to an additional £2 over and above CPI+1% for the rent harmonisation, on condition that the total rental income collected by the social landlord increased by no more than CPI+1%.

However, should CPI fall outside the range of 0% to 3%, the policy provides for the Minister with responsibility for Housing to determine the appropriate change to rent levels to be applied for that year only. As CPI was 6.7% in September 2023, that clause had been activated this year and the Welsh Government Minister for Climate Change had instructed the maximum increase in the rent envelope for any local authority should not exceed 6.7%

Having regard to the above, the report recommended an average housing rent increase of 6.5% (£6.47) per dwelling per week. If the Committee endorsed that increase, it would result in a £293k surplus on the Housing Revenue Account. However, that had been accommodated for within the long-term plan leaving £12.6m in balances at the end of 2024/25. It was also noted that, as Detailed in Appendix A, balances were required to support the current strategy of funding capital expenditure and continuing to make the business plan affordable over a 30year period.

The following issues / questions were raised on the report:

- Reference was made to the potential affect the proposed increases could have on some tenants in the current economic climate.

The Committee was advised that had been recognised as part of the budget preparations. Currently 34% of tenants were in receipt of Universal Credit, 24% received full housing benefit, 15% partial Housing Benefit and 27% received no benefits. It was also acknowledged that the levels of benefits would increase in April 2024 but that the UK Government had yet to announce the level of increase. However, that normally increased by the rate of CPI in the pre-ceding September which had stood at 6.7%

The Committee was further advised that the Council had processes and procedures in place to assist tenants facing financial difficulties from a range of different grant regimes to helping them access benefits payment to which they were entitled but not claiming. In that regard, the housing department's pre-accommodation team had assisted over 1,000 tenants' access over £800k of benefits. It was stressed though that the Council had a no eviction policy in respect of tenants who were unable to pay their rent. The department would also be employing estate managers who would be able to provide help and assistance to tenants. Most importantly, if tenants were facing financial difficulties, they should contact the department at an early stage to access the help and advice available to them.

UNANIMOUSLY RESOLVED THAT IT BE RECOMMENDED TO THE CABINET/COUNCIL:

Note: These minutes are subject to confirmation at the next meeting.

- 5.1 to increase the average housing rent by 6.5% (£6.47) per dwelling per week as per the Welsh Government's Social Housing Rents Policy ie:**
- **Properties at target rents will increase by 6.39%**
 - **Properties where rent is below target rent will increase by 6.39% plus a maximum progression of £1.00**
 - **Those rents above target are frozen until such time as they meet the target.**
- thereby producing a sustainable Business Plan, maintain CHS+ and resource the Housing Regeneration and Development Delivery Plan, as supported by the Housing and Regeneration Strategic Team;**
- 5.2 To increase garage rents by 6.5% from £9.00 to £9.60 and garage bases from £2.25 to £2.40;**
- 5.3 To apply the service charge policy to ensure tenants who received the benefit from specific services paid for those services;**
- 5.4 To increase charges for using the Council's sewerage treatment works in line with the rent increase;**
- 5.5 To approve the Housing Revenue Account Budget for 2024/27 (2025/26 & 2026/27 being soft budgets) as detailed in Appendix A;**
- 5.6 To approve the proposed Capital Programme and applicable funding for 2024/25 and the indicative spends for 2025/26 to 2026/27, as set out in Appendix B to the report.**

5. HOUSING REVENUE ACCOUNT BUSINESS PLAN 2024-27 CARMARTHENSHIRE'S HOUSING INVESTMENT PROGRAMME

The Committee received a report on the Housing Revenue Account Business Plan 2024-27 Carmarthenshire Housing Investment Programme which highlighted the importance of the Council supporting its tenants and residents in everything it did, with the following five key themes having been identified as driving the business forward over the next three years:-

- Theme 1 – Our Estate and Tenancy Management Offer.
- Theme 2 – Investing in Homes.
- Theme 3 – Promoting affordable warmth and decarbonising our housing stock.
- Theme 4 – Delivering more homes.
- Theme 5 – The Local Economy, Community Benefits and Procurement

Those five themes were supported by the following actions:

- Introduce a new estate and tenancy management “offer” that will ensure housing officers are more visible and accessible on our estates. This “offer” will balance support for our tenants with enforcement activity where it is appropriate to do so. This will also be aligned to the implementation of

Note: These minutes are subject to confirmation at the next meeting.

a new pilot “handyperson” scheme on priority estates in Carmarthen, Ammanford, Llanelli and rural areas.

- Continue to keep the number of void properties at a low level and reduce the current back-log of day to day repairs. We plan to increase our in-house provision around day to day repairs and re-balance the current split between internal and external contractors.
- Continue to invest in making sure homes are cheaper to run for our tenants and in addition to installing solar panels as we replace roofs, we will develop a business case for the introduction of a wider programme of rooftop solar panels on estates.
- Due to the significant demand for new build homes, we will proactively acquire more land. This will include larger sites where there will be exclusive use for Council housing. This will put further pace and scale into our development programme;
- Further invest in specialist type housing (e.g. learning disability, older people and young person supported housing) to ensure needs are met in the most appropriate way. This will include smaller, more dispersed accommodation in different wards. This investment will also ensure a move away from expensive and inappropriate out of county placements for certain client groups; and
- Procure a new minor works framework for day-to-day repairs and wider improvement projects to ensure a quicker response and to support smaller local contractors across the County.

The Committee noted that income received from tenants’ rents and other sources enabled the building of an investment programme exceeding £277m (Capital - £113m and Revenue - £164m) to run services over the plan period. To maintain that level of investment, through careful financial planning, the level of projected rent increase for 2024/25 was 6.5%. which was below the September inflation rate of 6.7% and the maximum rental increase specified by the Housing Minister for 2024/25. The plan also incorporated £330k of revenue efficiencies over the next three years together with an application to the Welsh Government for a Major Repair Allowance (MRA) grant of £6.2m.

The Following questions/issues were raised on the report:

- In response to questions raised relating to the backlog of repairs and voids the Committee was apprised of the various measures being taking by the department to reduce those issues. Those included increasing the workforce within the in-house team and reletting the Property Works Framework to enable smaller local contractors to apply to be included in the framework and undertake repair work. Currently with regard to void levels, they had reduced to 187, representing 2% of the housing stock, with 100 of those having been assigned to contractors.
- The proposal to appoint estate managers was welcomed and the Committee was advised each manager would be responsible for approximately 500 homes.
- The pilot ‘handyperson’ scheme was welcomed, and the Committee was apprised of its aims and aspirations to keep estates tidy and in good condition which, it was hoped, would help encourage tenants to take pride

Note: These minutes are subject to confirmation at the next meeting.

in their estate and, in turn, result in the housing stock condition improving over time.

- With regard to the £616k of funding received from the Swansea Bay City Deal – Homes as Power Stations fund, it was confirmed that £300k of that had been allocated to supplement the Council's new build programme to include the installation of air source heat pumps, solar photovoltaic panels and the batteries required to store the generated power.

RESOLVED THAT IT BE RECOMMENDED TO THE CABINET/COUNCIL TO:-

- 5.1 Confirm the vision of the Housing Investment Programme over the next three years;**
 - 5.2 Agree the 2024/25 Business Plan can be submitted to the Welsh Government**
 - 5.3 Note the new estate and tenancy management offer that will ensure our housing officers are more visible and accessible, balancing the support required by tenants and the need to take enforcement action when required;**
 - 5.4 Agree the implementation of a new pilot “handyperson” scheme on priority estates.**
 - 5.5 Note our commitment to keeping the number of void properties as low as possible.**
 - 5.6 Confirm our commitment to reduce the number of back-logged day to day repairs by rebalancing the split between internal and external contractors and developing a new small works framework.**
 - 5.7 Confirm our priority to purchase additional land and develop large sites exclusively for Council housing and to note the contribution this plan makes to increasing the supply of affordable homes.**
 - 5.8 Note our commitment to make all our homes more energy efficient for tenants, achieving a minimum Band C energy performance rating (EPC C), installing rooftop solar panels as part of our re-roofing programme and developing a business case for the wider installation of solar panels to tenants’ homes and supporting the Council’s net zero carbon principles.**
 - 5.9 Confirm our commitment to continue to increase the supply of specialist housing in the county.**
 - 5.10 Note the importance of the investment included in this plan and its role in stimulating the local economy and creating local jobs and training opportunities.**
- 6. EMERGENCY SOCIAL HOUSING ALLOCATION UPDATE REPORT ON THE OPERATION OF THE NEW ALLOCATION POLICY (MONITORING)**

The Committee, in accordance with the decision made at its meeting on the 26th January 2023, received a monitoring report on the effectiveness of the new Emergency Social Housing Allocation Policy developed by its Task and Finish

Note: These minutes are subject to confirmation at the next meeting.

Group. It was noted the content of the report included data for the previous period relating to:

1. Proportion of properties directly matched and those advertised,
2. Banding of clients directly matched,
3. Number of properties directly matched and advertised by each community area, type of property and landlord,
4. Proportion of direct matches that were successful,
5. Number of direct matches where the client requested a review of the allocation and the outcome of those reviews,
6. Number of direct matches where the client refused the allocation but didn't request a review.

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

- It was confirmed that as the Council moved from the emergency allocations policy to a formal new policy, the qualitative intelligence and experience gained from the emergency policy would be analysed and used to inform that new policy.

UNANIMOUSLY RESOLVED that the monitoring report be received.

**7. 2023/24 QUARTER 2 - PERFORMANCE REPORT (01/04/23 - 30/09/23)
RELEVANT TO THIS SCRUTINY**

(NOTE: Councillor R Sparks having earlier declared an interest in this item, re-declared the interest and remained in the meeting for its consideration)

The Committee received the 2023/24 Quarter 2 Performance Report for the period 1st April to 30th September 2023 in respect of the areas falling within its remit detailing the progress made against the actions and measures within the Corporate Strategy and on the delivery of the Well-Being Objectives.

The following questions / issues were raised on the report:

- In response to a question raised on the feasibility of the report format being amended to a Themed divisional format to facilitate easier scrutiny of performance, it was noted the matter would be raised with the Council's Performance Management Section.

UNANIMOUSLY RESOLVED that the report be received.

8. SCRUTINY ACTION UPDATE

The Committee received a report detailing the progress achieved in relation to requests or referrals emerging from previous meetings.

UNANIMOUSLY RESOLVED that the report be received.

9. FORTHCOMING ITEMS

Note: These minutes are subject to confirmation at the next meeting.

The Committee received a list of forthcoming items to be considered at its next meeting to be held on the 26th January, 2024.

UNANIMOUSLY RESOLVED that the list of forthcoming items to be considered at the next scheduled meeting on the 26th January 2024 be approved.

10. TO SIGN AS A CORRECT RECORD THE MINUTES OF THE MEETING OF THE COMMITTEE HELD ON THE 15TH NOVEMBER, 2023

UNANIMOUSLY RESOLVED that the minutes of the meeting of the Committee held on the 15th November, 2023 be signed as a correct record.

CHAIR

DATE

Note: These minutes are subject to confirmation at the next meeting.