

COMMUNITY SCRUTINY COMMITTEE

22nd JUNE 2015

(NOTE: THESE MINUTES ARE SUBJECT TO CONFIRMATION BY THE COMMITTEE AT ITS NEXT MEETING)

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. Shepardson, E.G. Thomas (Vice-Chair), G.B. Thomas.

Councillor E. Williams – Substitute for Councillor , J. Thomas

Also present:

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

The following officers were in attendance:

Mr. E. Bowen – Head of Planning
Mr. I. Jones – Head of Sports & Leisure
Mr. R. Staines – Head of Housing & Public Protection
Mrs. H.L. Morgan – Interim Economic Development Manager (HLM)
Mr. M.V. Davies – Building/Operations Manager
Mr. J. Morgan – Housing Services Manager (South)
Mr. S. Walters – Interim Economic Development Manager (SW)
Mr. J. Willis – Housing Services Manager (Advice & Options)
Mr. D. Eldred – Group Accountant
Mr. R.J. Evans – Principal Officer (Home Improvement)
Mr. L. Evans – Empty Property Advisor
Ms. B. Dolan – Senior Consultant

Venue: Spilman Street Chamber, Carmarthen (10:00am – 11:45am)

1. APOLOGIES FOR ABSENCE AND OTHER MATTERS

Apologies were received from Councillors J. Thomas, H.E. Evans (Executive Board Member for Environment) and M. Gravell (Executive Board Member for Regeneration & Leisure).

Apologies were also received from Mrs. W. Walters (Interim Assistant Chief Executive, Regeneration & Policy).

The Chair welcomed Councillor T. Devichand to her first meeting as a member of the Committee.

2. DECLARATIONS OF PERSONAL INTEREST

There were no declarations of personal interest.

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3. DECLARATION OF PROHIBITED PARTY WHIPS

There were no declarations of prohibited party whips.

4. COMMUNITY SCRUTINY COMMITTEE TASK & FINISH GROUP 201/15 – EMPTY PROPERTIES IN CARMARTHENSHIRE

The Committee considered the final report of its Task & Finish Group review of Empty Properties in Carmarthenshire. It was informed that the 11 recommendations contained within the report had been formulated by the Group following the consideration of a range of evidence over a series of meetings held between November 2014 and June 2015. The Chair expressed his gratitude to the Group Members and all participants for their contribution to the review. He noted that performance was excellent as 511 properties had been brought back into use over the last 5 years, with 135 during the last year. The scale of the problem had however increased significantly over the same period, with 2,671 empty properties in the county at the 1st of April, 2015.

The following issues were discussed during consideration of the report:

It was noted that many empty properties in areas like Ty-isha were not in a poor condition. It was asked what approach was taken to owners of such properties. The Housing Services Manager (Advice & Options) advised that owners in areas such as Llanelli and Carmarthen were written to regularly offering advice and support such as loans to encourage them to bring their empty properties back into use. Enforcement activity was targeted at the worst properties that posed a major risk to public health and neighbourhoods. The Head of Planning added that sections 77-79 of the Building Act 1984 referred to in recommendation 5, allowed owners to remedy any danger to the public which was not necessarily an overall solution.

The Committee praised the work of the small team dealing with empty properties, particularly the work of the Empty Property Advisor which was key to the innovative approaches such as the use of Empty Dwelling Management Orders and excellent performance.

The Head of Housing & Public Protection noted the results of the public consultation which highlighted a strong feeling that empty properties were a wasted housing resource and blight on the landscape.

UNANIMOUSLY RESOLVED to endorse the Task & Finish Report and recommendations for consideration by the Executive Board.

5. WELSH GOVERNMENT'S HOME IMPROVEMENT LOAN SCHEME

The Committee considered a report in relation to the Welsh Government's (WG) Home Improvement Loan (HIL) scheme in Carmarthenshire. It was informed that the Loan Scheme provided a new opportunity for the Authority to access funding to

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offer recyclable loans to improve private sector homes. It was also advised that Carmarthenshire had been the first local authority in Wales to offer loans and therefore had considerable experience in administering such schemes.

The following issues were discussed during consideration of the report:

It was asked if the new scheme could be targeted at empty properties. The Housing Services Manager (Advice & Options) advised that the WG Houses into Homes scheme was targeted at bringing empty properties back into use for rent or sale. The HIL scheme was aimed at owner occupiers of properties in poor condition.

A question was asked about how the scheme would be marketed. The Housing Services Manager (Advice & Options) stated that WG had launched the scheme a couple of months ago however adopting the scheme had to be signed off by the Executive Board before it could be promoted locally. The case load was however already building up as people were waiting for financial assistance.

UNANIMOUSLY RESOLVED

5.1 To endorse the report.

5.2 To recommend to the Executive Board that it accept the loan offer from Welsh Government and to amend the Private Sector Housing Renewal Policy to offer loans in accordance with the national scheme.

6. CARMARTHENSHIRE COUNTY COUNCIL'S ANNUAL REPORT 2014/15 AND IMPROVEMENT PLAN 2015/16 – RELEVANT EXTRACTS FOR THE COMMUNITY SCRUTINY COMMITTEE

The Committee received for consideration, extracts relevant to the services within its remit from the Council's draft Annual Report 2014/15 and Improvement Plan for 2015/16. The following issues were discussed during consideration of the report:

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The comparative graph showing all Wales performance in bringing empty properties back into use was referred to. The validity of its inclusion was challenged as it showed percentages without any context and was therefore not considered to give a true picture. The Head of Housing & Public Protection confirmed that local authorities across Wales had widely varying numbers of empty properties which affected performance when expressed as a percentage. He agreed to advise corporate colleagues of the Committee's views.

A question was asked about the location of the 7,500 applicants on the Housing Choice Register (HCR) across the county. The Housing Services Manager (South) advised that the majority were located in the main towns however demand was spread across the county. Approximately 30%-40% of applicants were aged between 16 and 34 years and asking for single person accommodation however the majority of these had no significant housing need. Approximately 1,500 – 2,000

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applicants were in bands A and B with the highest housing need. There were however only 1,000 vacant Council properties per annum.

The local lettings policy in Ty-isha ward was referred to and it was asked if this was contributing to the number of empty properties in the area. The Housing Services Manager (South) agreed that the local policy meant that single young people did not meet the criteria. There were two issues to consider; were the criteria for the local policy right for the area and were the right properties located in the right area to meet demand and need.

Further details were requested in relation to the use of bed and breakfast as temporary accommodation for homeless families. The Housing Services Manager (Advice & Options) advised that the use of bed and breakfast had reduced significantly over recent years and was kept to a minimum. He agreed to circulate a graph showing the reduction in both usage and costs over recent years.

An update on the LEADER programme for rural Carmarthenshire was requested. The Interim Economic Development Manager (HLM) stated that the LEADER Strategy was currently with WG for signing off and a new LEADER team would be recruited prior to the launch of the programme in September. Projects are also currently being developed.

Progress on the Cross Hands East Strategic Employment Site was requested. The Interim Economic Development Manager (SW) advised that work on the site would be completed shortly. The site would then be promoted and marketed

Additional information was requested in relation to the Un Sir Gâr Hub in Llanelli. The Interim Economic Development Manager (SW) stated that the Customer Service Centre had re-located to the Hub. He agreed to ensure that notices of the re-location were promoted locally. In response to an additional question, the Housing Services Manager (Advice & Options) confirmed that that Housing Officers were available by phone to respond to any housing queries at the Hub.

The status of the study into rural poverty in the county was requested. The Interim Economic Development Manager (HLM) advised that the study had been commissioned under the Rural Development Plan through Corporate Policy. She anticipated that the initial results would be ready in July.

UNANIMOUSLY RESOLVED to endorse the Annual Report 2014/15 Improvement Plan 2015/16.

7. END OF YEAR PERFORMANCE MANAGEMENT REPORT – 1ST APRIL 2014 TO 31ST MARCH 2015

The Committee received, for consideration, the End of Year Performance Management Report for the services within its remit, for the period 1st April 2014 to 31st March 2015. The report included an overview of performance by Heads of Service, progress on Improvement Plan actions and performance measures as well as information relating to complaints and compliments.

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The following issues were discussed during consideration of the report:

The statement on legal challenges to planning permissions for wind turbines was referred to and further information requested. The Head of Planning advised that one application had been withdrawn. Permission given on a second application for a wind turbine at Wern was being challenged on the same basis as the challenge on the first application. There were also challenges to developments in Newcastle Emlyn. This was a growing trend.

Further information was requested in relation to current Council tenant rent arrears. The Housing Services Manager (South) stated that these had reduced significantly since January 2015 however arrears had increased generally over the last year. This was not all attributable to the welfare reform and the service's approach had been reviewed. Approximately 55% or 5,000 tenants had started the year with arrears and this was now less than 4,000. The average arrears per tenant had however increased which indicated a need for earlier interventions as appropriate. The service was being re-aligned to focus more on enforcement activity. Some tenants wanted to pay but were having difficulties whereas there was a cohort who would not pay. The Head of Housing & Public Protection noted that there had been a Wales Audit Office study across Wales which showed an increase of 23% in arrears generally. This was within the context of the welfare reform and an increase in child poverty and use of food-banks. This was likely to be a continuing challenge as Universal Credit was implemented and the further £12bn cuts to the welfare system recently announced by Westminster.

It was asked how many evictions there had been. The Housing Services Manager (South) advised that 29 had been made which was the same level as the previous year. 11 of those tenants had had some issues relating to the "bedroom tax" however the level of their arrears far outweighed this. The remaining tenants had been 9 couples without children. The Head of Housing & Public Protection added that evicted tenants then have to make their own housing arrangements however cases involving children raised child protection issues which required liaison with colleagues in Children's services.

An update on the Archives service was requested. The Head of Sports & Leisure advised that the situation was complicated as the current premises were not environmentally suitable. He was working with National Archives and Cymal towards a solution. Some material had been removed for specialist cleaning and temporary storage in Cardiff and Swansea. 70% of visitors were interested in family history which had mostly been transferred to the branch libraries. The cost of environmental improvement at Parc Myrddin was prohibitive therefore he was looking for an alternative site.

Progress with the Swansea Bay City Region was requested. The Interim Economic Development Manager (HLM) advised that two meetings had been held since the last report and support structures for the Board were being put in place. The Regional Engagement Team (RET) function is being led by Carmarthenshire

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County Council and European funding is currently being applied for from WEFO to operate this new team.

UNANIMOUSLY RESOLVED that the report be received.

8. REVENUE AND CAPITAL BUDGET MONITORING REPORT 2014/15

The Committee considered the Revenue & Capital Budget Monitoring Reports relating to the Regeneration & Leisure and Housing Services, in relation to the end of year position for the 2014/15 financial year. The following issues were raised in relation to the report:

The following issues were discussed during consideration of the report:

Additional information was requested regarding the £135k loss at Llanelli Leisure Centre. The Head of Sports & Leisure confirmed that the storm damage to the roof, whilst it had been quickly remedied in terms of repair and insurance claim, had had a significant impact on the business.

A question was asked about the provision for sites for travellers going forward. The Housing Services Manager (South) advised that the Authority had a legal obligation to undertake a needs assessment across the county. The results were due towards the end of the year. Different groups of travellers were being consulted with as part of the process to see if additional provision was needed in areas of the county. The Head of Planning added that the commitment to provide additional sites based on the needs assessment was included in the Local Development Plan. The Head of Housing & Public Protection confirmed that the Housing Act 2014 included this as a statutory obligation.

Additional information was requested in relation to the Brynaman renewal area. The Housing Services Manager (Advice & Options) stated that a Council decision had been taken 10 years ago to declare it as a renewal area based on an assessment of need and stock condition. An application for WG funding had been successful however such funding had been ceased by WG.

UNANIMOUSLY RESOLVED that the report be received.

9. COMMUNITY SCRUTINY COMMITTEE – ANNUAL REPORT 2014/15

The Committee received an Annual Report for its work during the 2014/15 municipal year, noting that it had been prepared in accordance with Article 6.2 of the County Council's Constitution.

The report provided an overview of the work programme and the key issues considered by the Committee. It also detailed the issues referred to or from the Executive Board, development sessions which have been held for members as well as their attendance at committee meetings. The Chair welcomed the new format.

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UNANIMOUSLY RESOLVED that the report be received.

10. **COMMUNITY SCRUTINY COMMITTEE FORWARD WORK PROGRAMME FOR 2015/16**

The Committee considered its Forward Work Programme for 2015/16 which had been developed following the Committee's informal planning session held in April 2015.

RESOLVED that the Forward Work Programme for 2015/16 be endorsed.

11. **COMMUNITY SCRUTINY COMMITTEE ACTIONS AND REFERRALS UPDATE**

The Committee considered a report detailing progress in relation to actions, requests or referrals emerging from previous scrutiny meetings.

The Committee agreed to visit Burry Port Harbour to discuss the problems there with the relevant officers prior to consideration of the options report going forward.

RESOLVED that the report be noted.

12. **FORTHCOMING ITEMS**

The Committee was provided with a list of forthcoming items to be considered at its next meeting with the Social Care & Health Scrutiny Committee scheduled for the 23rd July 2015.

RESOLVED that the list of forthcoming items be noted.

13. **TO SIGN AS A CORRECT RECORD THE MINUTES OF THE MEETING OF THE COMMITTEE HELD ON THE 2nd APRIL 2015**

RESOLVED that the minutes of the meeting held on 2nd April 2015, be signed as a correct record.

SIGNED: _____ (Chair)

DATE: _____