

COMMUNITY SCRUTINY COMMITTEE

Wednesday, 20 July 2016

PRESENT: Councillor D.M. Cundy (Chair)

Councillors:

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

Also Present:

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

Councillor P.A. Palmer – Executive Board Member for Communities

The following Officers were in attendance:

I. Jones, Head of Leisure
R. Staines, Head of Housing and Public Protection
D. Eldred, Group Accountant
H. Morgan, Interim Economic Development Manager
S. Walters, Interim Economic Development Manager
J. Willis, Housing Services Manager (Advice & Options)
K. Thomas, Democratic Services Officer
A. Maynard, Community and Safeguarding Manager
L. Quelch, Head of Planning
C. Daniels, Senior Sports and Leisure Manager

Chamber, 3 Spilman Street, Carmarthen - 10.00 am - 1.15 pm

1. APOLOGIES FOR ABSENCE

An apology for absence was received from Councillor W.R.A. Davies

2. DECLARATIONS OF PERSONAL INTERESTS

There were no declarations of personal interests.

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. FORTHCOMING ITEMS

The Committee received a list of forthcoming items to be considered at its meeting to be held on the 29th September, 2016.

UNANIMOUSLY RESOLVED that the list of forthcoming items be received.

6. COMMUNITY SCRUTINY COMMITTEE TASK & FINISH REVIEW OF EMPTY PROPERTIES IN CARMARTHENSHIRE - ACTION PLAN MONITORING

The Committee received for consideration a progress report, and associated action plan, in relation to the recommendations of its Task and Finish Group on the review undertaken of empty properties within Carmarthenshire during 2014/15.

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

Reference was made to the numbers of empty homes within the county that were subject to a mortgage and to whether there was any action available to the Authority to facilitate their return to habitable use. The Housing Services Manager advised that whilst it was unusual for such homes to be mortgaged, or to have no equity, with the vast majority being owned outright, there were a number of options available to facilitate their return to habitable use. Those included, providing owners with loans, taking enforcement action under Environmental Health legislation and acquiring the property via compulsory purchase.

Reference was made to the issue of long term empty Council owned houses requiring extensive costly renovation works to bring them back into habitable use. Clarification was sought on whether it would be more cost effective and beneficial to undertake those works rather than leave the properties empty. The Committee was reminded that the Task and Finish Group had previously considered that aspect as part of its investigations, and had been advised that when renovation works were required to be undertaken to a council owned property those were evaluated on the basis of merit and housing need in a particular area. If a property requiring works was situated within an area of low need, undertaking extensive renovation works thereto may not be the best course of action, given limited financial resources, whereas, greater emphasis was placed on returning a property to use in areas of high need.

The Head of Housing and Public Protection reminded the Committee that in letting and returning Council properties to use, the Department used the Vanguard operating system to evaluate its performance. That system was achieving significant savings for the authority with the current average void period having reduced from the previous 80 to 20 days. The number of long term voids in June 2016 was 56, set against a housing stock in excess of 9,000, some of which were hard to let or, situated in areas of low housing need, whilst others required extensive investment. The Department, in evaluating long term voids, considered the most satisfactory course of action for their future, including whether there was a need for a property's retention within the housing portfolio. If, following that evaluation, the best course of action was considered to be retention, the property would be placed within a waiting list to compete for limited resources against the Council's target to create up to a 1,000 new affordable homes and for undertaking repairs to the housing stock.

The Head of Housing and Public Protection referred to the use of the Vanguard system and suggested there would be merit in the Committee receiving a presentation thereon at a future meeting.

Reference was made to the position relating to long term empty neglected properties where efforts to identify the owner(s) had been unsuccessful and to what action was available to the Council to take control of those properties. The Housing Services Manager advised that the Department had appointed a dedicated empty homes officer to assess such properties and to formulate an

action plan for their return to habitable use. The Department had also recognised the volume of work being generated in that regard and would be appointing an additional officer to support that work.

The Head of Housing and Public Protection in referring to the above stated that he would arrange for all members to be provided with a short briefing note providing key contact points and information on how they could access the service to facilitate bringing empty homes back into use. The Committee was also reminded that the Task and Finish Group had recommended a seminar be held to brief all members on the Council's approach, challenges and achievements in bringing empty properties back into use and to raise awareness amongst members on that work. That seminar had now been arranged for the 22nd September 2016.

UNANIMOUSLY RESOLVED

- 6.1 That the progress report, and action plan, on the Task and Finish review of empty properties within Carmarthenshire be received.**
- 6.2 That a presentation be made to a future meeting of the Committee on the operation of the Vangaurd system.**

7. ACTIF FITNESS PROVISION

The Committee received a power point presentation providing an update on the upgraded fitness provision within the Authority's leisure centres at Llanelli, Carmarthen and Ammanford and incorporating details of the following performance themed areas:-

- Placement of Actif Fitness within the Sport and Leisure Portfolio
- Historical Performance – The need for Change
- Impact of Upgrade to date
- Surrounding strategies for success: promotion and service improvement
- Performance Management
- Future Actions.

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

In response to a question relating to the installation of new fitness equipment and capacity issues within the three leisure centres referred to, the Committee was advised that in relation to the equipment recently installed at the Llanelli Leisure Centre that involved the direct replacement of the old equipment with no additional works being required. For Carmarthen, capacity was being increased by 20%. With regard to Ammanford, reconfiguration works would be undertaken in two phases via the removal of the changing rooms and extending the gym and by relocating the first floor dance studio to the ground floor.

Reference was made to the investment being made to the above leisure centres and clarification sought on whether the cost thereof could be to the detriment of other Council owned leisure facilities in terms of their potential closure over the long term in order to concentrate provision within the three main population centres. The Head of Leisure confirmed that the Council had no such policy at the current time and such facilities outside of the main population centres provided an important role in the community. In that regard, the authority was providing enhanced facilities at those centres including, the relocation of some facilities from

Carmarthen Leisure Centre to Newcastle Emlyn, and the installation of new fitness equipment at St Clear's leisure centre financed from S106 planning receipts. Additionally, the Council was continually exploring every opportunity to improve facilities at all of its leisure centres.

Reference was made to the Council's charging policy at its leisure centres and specifically, its impact upon two clubs within the Newcastle Emlyn area that had resulted in them having to identify alternative training venues. The Head of Leisure reminded the Committee that in setting charging levels, the Council had to have consistency across its leisure portfolio, whilst also recognising the impact of competition from both the private sector and neighbouring local authorities.

In response to a question on collaborative working, it was confirmed that the authority worked closely with the Health Board thereon and participated in the patient referral scheme. To date, the authority provided for 1200 referrals, mainly from G.P's, and was actively examining alternative ways of increasing patronage at its leisure centres to promote fitness and well-being which included exercise classes for pre and post baby mothers. With regard to the numbers of referrals, an exercise was currently being undertaken to ascertain the percentage of those who continued to use the council's facilities following completion of their 16 week programme.

The Head of Leisure referred to the National Exercise Referral scheme introduced by the Welsh Government, and reminded the Committee that whilst it reflected increased leisure income for the authority it also had an impact on crime prevention and ill health levels thereby reducing long term costs to society.

Reference was made to the Net Promoter Score index and to the fact that Carmarthen's Leisure Facilities were providing a world class service. A view was expressed that it would be interesting to ascertain what score the council's other services could achieve under the index. The Head of Housing and Public Protection in response advised that the index had been developed by the private competitive market as an important tool in determining customer satisfaction and to whether those customers would be prepared to recommend their services to others. With regard to other council services, application of the index would not always achieve positive outcomes, for example, a person facing enforcement / eviction proceedings would not necessarily provide a positive score. The Housing Division did, however, operate performance measures but, in a different way, for example asking tenants what the authority could do for them to make their homes/lives better. That approach was achieving improved satisfaction scores and he suggested a report on those measures could be submitted to a future meeting of the Committee.

Reference was made to the cost of heating swimming pools and whether that cost could be offset by extending pool opening hours. The Senior Sports and Leisure Officer confirmed that current use of the pools was high with day time use by schools and by the public outside school times, with some larger pools being able to offer a mix of classes. Any extension of the current opening hours would need to be evaluated against potential increased costs and usage. With regard to cost, the Authority was conscious of the high energy usage required for heating a swimming pool and had invested £100k in installing pool covers, with the savings achieved anticipated to recoup that cost over a three year period.

Reference was made to the number of private companies operating within the county with large numbers of employees, including multi nationals, and to whether the council operated a reduced membership fee/discount rate to those employees. The Committee was advised that the Council operated a variety of schemes to encourage participation at all of its leisure and recreation facilities which was available to large companies and various age groups etc. It was agreed that a copy of those schemes would be provided to all members of the Council. It was further reported that the Council would shortly be appointing a Health and Well-Being Co-ordinator with the aim of encouraging its staff to improve their health and fitness. There was also the potential to extend that practice to large private organisations.

In response to a question on reduced participation by schools in swimming programmes, it was confirmed that the introduction of a £2.07 charge per pupil had resulted in a 25% reduction in participation levels. The Head of Leisure advised that previously, schools had been utilising the facility free of charge and the authority had to levy a charge to offset its costs in providing the service.

The Head of Leisure in response to a question on Child Hood obesity levels in Carmarthen, advised that the Public Service Board had established a Task Group to examine those levels and to identify measures to reduce the current 30% rate which, exceeded the Wales average of 26%. The Council was also exploring what measures it could introduce to assist in reducing that percentage for example, ensuring all vending machines on its properties contained healthy foods.

In response to a question on the Welsh Government's free swimming initiative for the under 16's and over sixties, the Committee was advised that its operational times was set by the Government, with the Council receiving £157k a year to fund its operation. Whilst the Council could extend the period of operation by introducing free swimming all year, the Government would not fund any increased costs arising from that decision and the full cost would fall upon the council.

UNANIMOUSLY RESOLVED that the report be received.

8. REVENUE AND CAPITAL BUDGET MONITORING REPORT 2015/16

The Committee considered the Revenue and Capital Budget Monitoring Reports relating to Housing, Planning and Leisure and Recreation Services in relation to the 2015/16 end of year position.

The following issues were raised during consideration of the report:-

The Head of Leisure in response to a question relating to the combined £70k overspend on Burry Port Harbour and Pembrey Ski Slope advised that they related to increased dredging costs at the harbour together with a reduction in the value of stock at the ski slope shop. With regard to the harbour, he reminded the Committee that it was council policy to retain and manage the facility, and that dredging works were an integral element of its management. With regard to the ski slope, that involved a reduction in the value and level of stock held at the shop as the council's emphasis was to provide ski facilities and not clothing sales.

In response to a question on overspends within the Leisure and Recreation Budget being offset against staff vacancies, the Head of Leisure confirmed that the

Division did not have any staff on zero hour contracts. However, the service had a large number of casual posts that were necessary to provide service flexibility with those being allocated set hours where possible, with some staff preferring to operate on minimum hours.

In response to a question on the overspend within the Non HRA - Housing Account, the Committee was advised that it primarily related to a £125k overspend on Supporting People Services, whereby previously, a portion of the Development Fund had been utilised to fund salary costs within that service. However, following the Welsh Government's decision to amend the fund criteria and claw back some of the funding, use of the fund to finance salary costs was no longer permitted. Consequently, the reduced income had to be met from elsewhere within the Division's budget and a reconfiguration of the service would enable those costs to be built into future budgets.

In response to the above, reference was made to the fact the Supporting People scheme was operated by a board and a question asked on whether it would be possible for the Committee to receive a report on its service provision and future proposals. The Head of Housing and Public Protection advised that whilst the scheme fell within the remit of the Health and Social Care Scrutiny Committee, he would enquire on the possibility of providing the committee with the requested report.

In response to a question on reconfiguration of service delivery, the Head of Housing and Public Protection advised that a number of avenues were being implemented/ explored in that regard which, included reducing the number of contracts issued by the council, reducing the numbers of commissioning officers, working collaboratively with Pembrokeshire County Council on regional commissioning and a reduction in back office staff thereby increasing the level of resources available for service provision.

Reference was made to the recent referendum decision for the United Kingdom to leave the European Union and clarification sought on the potential impact that may have on the Council's capital budget. The Interim Economic Development Manager advised that currently both the Wales European Office and Welsh Government were stating that the status quo would be retained for the near future. However, there was uncertainty on whether the current capital programme would be funded until 2018 or 2020. With regard to the decision's impact on the West Wales European Centre at Nantyci, that still had an important role over the next 2-4 years implementing new projects, audit compliance and project closure which could take 2 years. The Rural Development Programme was continuing until 2020, and staff would be required until 2022 to oversee its closure.

The Head of Leisure in response to the £76k underspend on Countryside Access and Recreation advised that it related to an underspend on match funding from the Welsh Government on capital maintenance works to the Right of Way Network. Whilst the Council had utilised all of the grant money, it had not fully spent its match funding contribution and accordingly, that underspend would be rolled forward into the 2016/17 financial year.

UNANIMOUSLY RESOLVED that the report be received.

9. END OF YEAR PERFORMANCE MANAGEMENT REPORT – 1ST APRIL 2015 TO 31ST MARCH 2016

The Committee received for consideration the End of Year Performance Management Report for the services within its remit for the period 1st April, 2015 to 31st March, 2016. The report included an overview of performance by Heads of Service, the approach to measuring performance, Improvement Plan Monitoring – Actions and Performance Measures together with information appertaining to compliments and complaints.

The following issues were discussed during consideration of the report.

The Head of Housing and Public Protection in response to a request for an update on the current position relating to the review undertaken of the Access to Social Housing Policy, reminded the Committee that a number of issues/concerns on the proposals had been raised at a recent member seminar. As a consequence, arrangements were being made for presentations on the proposals to be made to each of the Council's political groups. Thereafter, the report would be represented to Council in the Autumn for consideration via the normal political process.

In response to a question on Social Lets and the Council operating a scheme to manage private sector homes for landlords, the Head of Housing and Public Protection advised that the Council currently managed 135 homes which it used to re-house homeless households or those under imminent threat of homelessness. Management Agreements regarding fee charges and maintenance arrangements were negotiated with each landlord with maintenance works being undertaken either by the Council or, the landlord depending upon each landlord's requirements.

In response to a question on the operation of the Pilot scheme in Glanymor and the establishment of a Joint housing and Property team, the Head of Housing and Public Protection advised that 20% of the estate had been checked and initial results were proving encouraging with the intention being to roll the scheme out to the rest of Llanelli and Carmarthen. Whilst 20% of the estate had been checked, it may be necessary, due to delays caused by an initial change of personnel, to increase the numbers of staff undertaking the checks by using properly trained housing officers.

Reference was made to the Council's contractor framework and to what measures were in place to monitor the quality of works undertaken by sub-contractors. The Head of Housing and Public Protection advised that quality control checks, under the framework, were the responsibility of the contractor. However, a review would shortly be undertaken of the framework to ascertain if there were areas that could be improved upon in light of experience and the need to obtain value for money on the Council's annual £20m housing maintenance bill.

In response to a question on proposals for the provision of an alternative delivery model to increase the numbers of affordable homes within the County, the Head of Housing and Public Protection stated that it involved the establishment of a Local Authority Housing Company to examine ways of raising additional capital to support the Council's Affordable Homes Commitment via different procurement and construction methods/specifications to deliver more for less. That company would be wholly owned by the County Council and would provide the opportunity

and freedom, not available under the HRA, to increase inward investment and provide a new innovative service delivery model.

Arising from the above, reference was made to the U.K Government's proposals to extend the right to buy to private social housing and clarification sought on any potential impact that could have on the proposals to establish a Local Authority Housing Company. The Head of Housing and Public Protection reminded the Committee that the Welsh Government was currently introducing legislation to abolish the Right To Buy Provisions within Wales. The Council had also temporarily suspended those provisions within Carmarthenshire which would continue for the next three and a half years, by which time the new Act would be on the Statute Books. The governance arrangements for the new company would also need to ensure the retention of the housing stock.

Reference was made to the use of Section 106 monies to fund the provision of affordable homes within the County and the Committee was advised that a Steering Group had been established to examine how the current £400k pot of money would be allocated. The Head of Planning advised that one of the current issues being considered was how to utilise small amounts of S106 money generated where it was insufficient to facilitate the provision of an affordable home within the ward area from which the monies had been derived. In those cases, it could result in the monies accrued from several developments in a number of wards being pooled to provide an affordable home. The Group had also agreed to produce for members' information a six monthly report detailing the level of S106 funds and where they would be spent.

In response to a question relating to the provision of catering facilities at Pembrey Country Park, the Head of Leisure outlined the arrangements put in place for the current year. Those included the provision of hot snacks and coffee at the ski facility, improvements to the ski facility's kitchen, mobile catering providing ice creams/ hot burgers etc. With regard to future provision, a report was to be considered by the Executive Board on a masterplan for the park's future development. That would include for the provision of new shower and toilet blocks in the caravan park, a new café and visitor centre and improved entrance arrangements.

In response to a question on planning fees, the Head of Planning advised that the Welsh Government had introduced legislation requiring local planning authorities to levy a charge for pre-planning advice on major developments. For small scale developments, planning authorities could offer informal advice at no charge, however, a charge had to be levied for the provision of formal planning advice.

UNANIMOUSLY RESOLVED that the report be received.

10. DURATION OF MEETING

At 1.00 p.m. during consideration of Minute 9 above, the Committee's attention was drawn to Corporate Procedure Rule 9.1 "Duration of Meeting" and CPR 23.1 "Suspension". As the meeting had been underway for three hours, it was,

UNANIMOUSLY RESOLVED to suspend the Council Procedure Rules to enable the remaining business on the agenda to be considered.

11. COMMUNITY SCRUTINY COMMITTEE ANNUAL REPORT 2015/16

The Committee received an Annual Report for its work during the 2015/16 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, Task & Finish review, development sessions held for members as well as their attendance at committee meetings.

UNANIMOUSLY RESOLVED that the report be received.

12. COMMUNITY SCRUTINY COMMITTEE ACTIONS & REFERRALS UPDATE

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

UNANIMOUSLY RESOLVED that the report be received.

CHAIR

DATE