

COMMUNITIES, HOMES & REGENERATION SCRUTINY COMMITTEE

THURSDAY, 23 FEBRUARY 2023

PRESENT: Councillor D.M Cundy (Chair) (In Person)

Councillors (In Person):

B.W. Jones

Councillors (Virtually):

W.R.A. Davies

T. Davies

N. Evans

R.E. Evans

H.L. Davies

J.K. Howell

D. Owen

M. Palfreman

R. Sparks

Also in attendance (In Person):

Councillor L. Evans – Cabinet Member for Homes and Deputy Leader

Councillor A. Lenny – Cabinet Member for Resources

Also Present (In Person):

J. Morgan, Head of Homes & Safer Communities

S. Rees, Simultaneous Translator

J. Fearn, Head of Housing Property and Strategic Projects

L. James, Partnership and Engagement Manager

G. Williams, Team Leader

J. Harcourt, Project Support Officer

K. Thomas, Democratic Services Officer

Also Present (Virtually):

S. Hendy, Member Support Officer

M. Runeckles, Members Support Officer

E. Bryer, Democratic Services Officer

Chamber - County Hall, Carmarthen. SA31 1JP and remotely - 10.00 - 11.30 am

1. APOLOGIES FOR ABSENCE

An apology for absence was received from Councillor H. Shepardson.

2. APOLOGIES FOR ABSENCE.

The Committee noted that this item had been included on the agenda in error.

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

There were no declarations of prohibited party whips.

There were no declarations of personal interests.

4. PUBLIC QUESTIONS (NONE RECEIVED)

The Chair advised that no public questions had been received.

5. EMPTY HOMES POLICY- OUR APPROACH TO BRINGING EMPTY HOMES BACK TO USE

The Committee considered a report on the Council's Empty Homes Policy detailing its approach, vision and work programme for the next four years to tackle and bring empty private residential homes within the County back into use. It was noted that since 2017 the Council had reduced the number of private empty homes within the County from 2667 to 1,984 with the aim of the policy being to further reduce that number to 1500 by 2026

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

- Reference was made to following 6 priority bullet points detailed in report, in priority order, focusing on empty homes regardless of the time they had stood empty:-
 - 1) Target empty homes in areas of high housing demand or in the ten towns areas that will also act as a catalyst for wider regeneration.
 - 2) Target empty homes that will be brought back as affordable homes for people on the Housing Choice Register and a key focus on empty homes within our own Council Estates that had been previously sold off through the 'right to buy' scheme.
 - 3) Support bringing empty residential units above commercial business in our town centres back into use for people that will contribute to the town centre economy.
 - 4) Work with the families of empty homeowners that are in care, manage the properties on their behalf and the income could cover part of their care cost.
 - 5) Respond to complaints where empty houses are a nuisance to neighbouring properties or attracting anti-social behaviour.
 - 6) Identify empty houses that are in a poor state of repair and are detrimental to the surrounding area and take appropriate remedial action.

A view was expressed that points 5 and 6 should not be afforded any lesser priority to the others as, whilst not that important in relation to the regeneration of areas they were important to local residents by virtue of their detrimental impact on both the amenity of the area and to their mental health especially, the elderly living next to derelict or long- term empty properties.

It was confirmed the points were not ranked in any order and that each would be afforded equal priority to enable the council to take tailored and

targeted action to bring an empty property back into use, regardless of whether it was located within a town centre or in a rural area.

- With regard to a question on adopting timescales for returning empty properties to use the Committee was advised that sufficient time had to be allowed to enable a property to be returned to use as the majority were only vacant for a short period of time for varying reasons e.g. applying for probate. However, it was important action was taken as soon as possible but, in any event, letters were sent to the owners of such properties annually. Grants of up to £25k were also available to improve the condition of empty homes to bring them back to habitable use for sale as affordable homes or to rent subject to the terms of the grant.
- Reference was made to whether the Council had any powers to make property owners return empty properties back into use for example by increasing the council tax premium on such homes.

It was confirmed that whilst the aim of the policy was to encourage homeowners to return their properties to the housing market, Appendix 3 to the report detailed a number of enforcement options (legislative provision) available to the Council to deal with issues caused by empty properties and to secure their return to use.

In relation to the use of the council tax premium, the Committee was advised the intention was for that to rise annually for empty properties which could be up to 300% resulting in a council tax of £2,000 per annum for example increasing to £8,000 p.a.

- In relation to a question on empty vacant plots of land within town centres, it was confirmed that whilst they did not fall within the policy's remit, that point could be raised with the Council's regeneration division.
- It was confirmed that second or holiday homes did not fall within the policy's remit. However, such properties were being considered by the Council as a separate issue and been subject to a recent consultation exercise which had now closed. The responses received thereto were currently being analysed for subsequent submission and consideration via the council's democratic process. That would also include, for example, the position where homes had been inherited and only occupied for a short period during the year.
- It was confirmed that all empty properties brought back into use via a grant/loan for sale or rent would be classed as affordable homes and be subject to the grant/loan terms and conditions.
- It was confirmed that any safety issues arising from empty properties would fall within the remit of the Council's building control responsibilities.
- Reference was made on the timescale for the policy's implementation being over a four-year period whereas the policy document stipulated the timescale as being from January 2023 to April 26. The Head of Homes and Safer Communities confirmed that would be clarified for the reports' adoption by the Council.

The Committee noted the main points of summary of its debate related to the following and the report would be amended where appropriate for onward to submission to Cabinet /Council for consideration:-

- a. The report to clarify that the 6 priority bullet points were not in ranked any order of priority with each being afforded equal priority to enable the council to take tailored and targeted action to bring an empty property back into use,
- b. The timescales for undertaking enforcement action particularly in relation to Compulsory Purchase Order procedures and Empty Dwelling Management Orders,
- c. Powers to deal with safety issues lay with the council's building control responsibilities in relation to ruinous, dilapidated and dangerous structures,
- d. To link in with the Council's regeneration department with regard to empty land within town centres
- e. The policy timescales on the front cover of the report to be clarified.

UNANIMOUSLY RESOLVED that the Empty Homes Policy be endorsed and referred to the Cabinet subject to the report being amended to incorporate:

- **clarifying that the 6 priority bullet points were not ranked in any order of priority with each being afforded equal priority to enable the council to take tailored and targeted action to bring an empty property back into use,**
- **The policy timescales on the front cover of the report to be clarified.**

6. TENANT COMPENSATION POLICY

The Committee considered a report detailing the Council's approach to when it may be appropriate to compensate its tenants who have suffered loss or inconvenience due to service failure and would also help to guide officers when dealing with tenants ensuring a clarity and consistency of approach when compensation was being considered. It was noted the policy had been prepared in response to the Local Government Ombudsman's expectation for landlords to have a compensation policy to provide guidance on offering compensation and to ensure landlords were protected when claims were made.

UNANIMOUSLY RESOLVED that the Tenant Compensation Policy be endorsed and referred to the Cabinet for its consideration.

7. RECHARGEABLE REPAIRS POLICY

The Committee considered a report detailing proposed criteria for when a council tenant would be recharged for repairs undertaken by the council which were their responsibility under their tenancy agreement.

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

- The Head of Homes and Safer Communities confirmed it would be possible for the policy to be forwarded to the Council's tenants to ensure they were aware of their, and the Council's responsibilities for the maintenance of their homes. Similarly, the tenant compensation policy (Minute 6 above refers) could also be provided to tenants following adoption by the Council. It was anticipated the policies could be provided towards the end of June 2023 both electronically to those tenants who had provided e-mail addresses to the Council and by post to the remainder. He

also advised that whilst a third of tenants had provided electronic contact details, the department would be endeavouring to increase that number over the coming months.

- It was confirmed that where tenants were unable to undertake repairs to their property, under their responsibility, the Council undertake them on their behalf on a rechargeable case-by-case basis depending on individual circumstances.
- In relation to a question on regular inspection of tenants' properties, the department had a team that undertook visits to tenant homes to assess a property's condition. It was hoped those visits could be undertaken on a regular basis possibly, annually.

The Head of Homes and Safer Communities advised that one of the departments key priorities over the next 6 months would be to how to manage the inspection regime for tenant properties, similar to an annual MOT. There were also other trigger points that could alert the department to issues with the condition of properties for example, when responsive repairs were undertaken and when officers undertook visits to provide help and assistance to tenants.

- Reference was made to what measures were available to the Council should tenants repeatedly fail to repay recharges for work undertaken or repeatedly damaged the property. The Head of Homes and Safer Communities confirmed that the authority had a write off policy in respect of bad debt. Ultimately, however, the Council could seek redress through the courts to recover a property.
- With regard to a question on recharging for accidental damage to a property, the Head of Homes and Safer Communities advised the department would consider those on a case-by-case basis.

UNANIMOUSLY RESOLVED that the Rechargeable Repairs Policy be endorsed and referred to the Cabinet for its consideration.

8. EXPLANATION FOR NON-SUBMISSION OF SCRUTINY REPORT

The Committee received an explanation for the non-submission of the following scrutiny report

- Business Plans

RESOLVED that the explanation for the non-submission be noted.

9. FORTHCOMING ITEMS

The Committee received a list of forthcoming items to be considered at its next meeting to be held on the 5th April, 2023.

The Committee's attention was drawn to the Cabinet Forward Work Plan, appended to the report, and to the item therein relating to Conservation Area Appraisals. It was informed a request had been received from the Cabinet for the Committee to review the report and to submit any findings back to the Cabinet for its consideration. The Committee was requested to consider the request and

whether it wished to include the report on the agenda for its next meeting on the 5th April

UNANIMOUSLY RESOLVED that the list of forthcoming items to be considered at the next scheduled meeting on the 5th April, 2023 be noted subject to the inclusion of a report on Conservation Area Appraisals.

10. 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.

11. TO SIGN AS A CORRECT RECORD THE MINUTES OF THE MEETING OF THE COMMITTEE HELD ON THE 26TH JANUARY 2023

UNANIMOUSLY RESOLVED that the minutes of the meeting of the Committee held on the 26th January, 2023 be signed as a correct record.

CHAIR

DATE