

COMMUNITY SCRUTINY COMMITTEE

Tuesday, 19 November 2019

PRESENT: Councillor F. Akhtar (Chair)

Councillors:

C.A. Davies, W.R.A. Davies, H.L. Davies, R.E. Evans, W.T. Evans (In place of D.C. Evans), S.J.G. Gilasbey, B.W. Jones, H.I. Jones, S. Matthews, H.B. Shepardson, G.B. Thomas and A.Vaughan Owen

Also in attendance:-

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

Councillor P. Hughes-Griffiths – Executive Board Member for Culture, Sport and Tourism

The following Officers were in attendance:

I. Jones, Head of Leisure
J. Morgan, Head of Homes & Safer Communities
H. Morgan, Economic Development Manager
J. Edwards, Development & Built Heritage Manager
A. Thomas, Group Accountant
S. Walters, Economic Development Manager
M. Brookfield, Housing Policy Lead
A. Lodwig, Advice and Tenancy Support Manager
K. Thomas, Democratic Services Officer

Chamber, County Hall, Carmarthen. SA31 1JP. - 10.00 am - 12.45 pm

1. APOLOGIES FOR ABSENCE

An apology for absence was received from Councillor C. Campbell – Executive Board Member for Communities and Rural Affairs.

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

There were no declarations of personal interest.

There were no declarations of prohibited party whips.

3. PUBLIC QUESTIONS (NONE RECEIVED)

No public questions had been received.

4. UNIVERSAL CREDIT FULL SERVICE UPDATE FOR CARMARTHENSHIRE

The Committee was reminded that at its meeting held on the 14th February, 2019 (Minute 5 refers) it had, following consideration of a report on the roll-out of Universal Credit within Carmarthenshire, requested an update report be in six months with invitations to attend being extended to the Department for Work and Pensions and Carmarthenshire Citizens Advice. In accordance with that decision

the Chair welcomed to the meeting Adele Lodwig and Maria Brookfield from the Council's Housing Division together with Menna Davies - Department for Work and Pensions and Hayley Price and Suzanne Gainard - Carmarthenshire Citizen's Advice.

The Committee thereupon received an update report on the effect of universal credit on council tenants together with presentations from the above named attendees on the roll-out of Universal Credit within Carmarthenshire from their individual organisation's perspective e.g.:-

- Department of Work and Pensions –introduction and implementation of Universal Credit, including current arrangements for new claimants and the managed migration by December 2023 for all existing claimants receiving legacy payments.
- Carmarthenshire Citizen Advice – providing advice and support for existing legacy benefit claimants moving to universal credit and all new claimants via a variety of avenues e.g. face to face, including office based interviews and home visits, web-chat, national phone service and I.T. support in completing on-line forms. That advice included individual assessments and whether it would be beneficial for existing legacy benefit claimants to remain on those benefits or to transfer to universal credit
- Carmarthenshire's Housing Division-- adoption of a pro-active approach for its tenants by providing early contact and identifying any who could, potentially, be at risk under the new arrangements. A pre-tenancy team had been established to help and support prospective tenants to manage their finances and tenancies. That included the early submission of benefit claims to ensure the commencement of benefit payments coincided with the start of the tenancy, as payments could not be backdated.

Members of the Committee were afforded the opportunity of asking questions on the report/presentations which included the following:-

- Reference was made to the increased use of food banks within Carmarthenshire, as detailed within the report. It was acknowledged that whilst food bank usage had increased, it could not be wholly attributable to the introduction of Universal Credit with. It was however noted that the application process for universal credit was complex, particularly during the early stages when claimants were not receiving payments, with the average time between claim submission and initial payment being 5 weeks, paid in arrears. Claimants facing financial hardship during this period were signposted to food banks and other avenues for assistance. Advance payments of up to 100% were available, repayable over a twelve month period. It was also acknowledged that whilst the initial roll out had not been successful, potentially leading to an increase in the numbers attending food banks, the removal of the initial 7 day waiting period before entitlement to Universal Credit could begin had, hopefully, alleviated the level of need.
- In reference to a question on supporting the Welsh Government's research into the impact of Universal Credit on the Council Tax Reduction Scheme and rent arrears in Wales, that involved all Welsh Local Authorities providing the Government with quarterly rental income figures. Carmarthenshire had also written to all 957 of its tenants receiving U.C (as at the 30th September 2019) seeking their experiences of the new system.

It was acknowledged the level of rent arrears being experienced by the authority following the introduction of Universal Credit had not increased in line with original predictions, with the Council faring better than some other Welsh local authorities. That position could be attributable to the Council's pro-active approach of providing tailored advice and support to its more vulnerable tenants to navigate the new claims system.

- In response to a question on support for veterans, it was confirmed the council, via its pre-tenancy team, provided help and guidance to veterans in need, including accessing funds and budget management. Measures were also in place to help reduce rent arrears / stop the rent arrears process for veterans with mental health issues. The Department for Work and Pensions had trained staff within its job centres to provide advice and support to veterans and, where needed, could call upon the experience of other veterans to provide additional support. Both the County Council and the Department for Work and Pensions were members of the Armed Forces Covenant.
- Reference was made to the potential adverse impact that could be encountered by people on benefits who shared their home with other family members claiming benefits. It was noted the council had arrangements in place to assist such individuals by providing a 'wrap around service' to meet their individual needs.
- Reference was made to the unusual position this year where there were 53 rent payable weeks whilst universal credit was being paid every four calendar weeks resulting in claimants missing a week. The situation had been drawn to the Minister's attention and was currently being examined.
- It was confirmed homeless persons were eligible for universal credit and to receive assistance in providing accommodation.
- It was noted that a recent rough sleeper count had not found any evidence of that occurring. However, if members were aware of rough sleepers or person affected by homelessness they were requested to contact the housing division for the appropriate level of assistance to be provided.
- In response to a question on staffing arrangements within the Tenancy Support Team, it was confirmed Welsh Government funding for two posts was due to cease shortly but bids had been submitted to the Housing Revenue Account to fund their ongoing cost in light of the valuable support they provided.
- In response to a question on support available to the Black, Asian and Minority Ethnic Community, it was confirmed queries received by the Council's housing division from members of that community were signposted to Citizens Advice which had the appropriate provisions/mechanisms in place to assist, including a dedicated language line.
- Reference was made to the three presentations received by the Committee that morning and a suggestion made that a similar presentation be provided to all members of council, via a members seminar, to apprise them on the roll out of Universal Credit within Carmarthenshire

The Chair thanked the representatives for their presentations and in attending the meeting

UNANIMOUSLY RESOLVED that arrangements be made for the convening of a members' seminar on the roll out of Universal Credit within Carmarthenshire.

5. REVENUE & CAPITAL BUDGET MONITORING REPORT 2019/20

The Committee considered the 2019/20 Revenue and Capital Budget Monitoring reports for the Housing, Regeneration, Planning and Leisure and Recreation Services for the period up to the 31st August, 2019. It was noted that the revenue budget was forecasting a £703k overspend, the capital budget a £169k underspend, whilst the Housing Revenue Account was forecasting a £32k underspend.

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

- Reference was made to the site visits undertaken in May, 2019 to the St Clears Leisure Centre, Y Gat and the Pendine Outdoor Education Centre. An update was requested on any progress achieved since that time on their future development.

The Head of Leisure advised that investigations/reports were currently being undertaken on options for the three venues and would be progressed through the Council's democratic process in due course.

With regard to the St Clears Leisure Centre, a new operating model was being examined and it was hoped a partnership arrangement could be entered into with the community council. Work in excess of £600k had been identified as being required to upgrade the facility and a capital bid was being prepared for consideration for inclusion within the Council's five year capital programme. Whilst that bid would, if accepted, fall within year 5 of the programme, it was hoped any variances to the programme could allow it to be brought forward.

The position at Y Gat was that consultations were being undertaken with the Community Council on its future operation. In relation to the Pendine Outdoor Education Centre, several options were being considered and consultations undertaken with schools on the type of facility they would like to see provided.

- Reference was made to the projected £463k overspend within the Planning Division and clarification sought on what measures were being introduced to address that shortfall, which had been a recurring theme over previous years.

The Development and Built Heritage Manager advised that whilst the projected overspend was significant, the division was aware of a number of pending planning applications the fees from which would assist in its reduction. With regard to addressing the recurring overspend, that was being examined on both a national and local basis. Locally, consideration was being given to introducing a discretionary charging policy which could include a charge for pre-planning advice.

On a national level, a change in legislation in 2015 meant that whilst fees for major schemes such as wind farms were payable to the Welsh Government, the work and associated costs incurred in their determination fell on local authorities. The Welsh Government was currently examining the level of planning fees, which could see an across the board increase, and planning charges being determined on a full cost recovery basis. Representations had also been made to the Welsh Government over a number of years for the introduction of increased fees for retrospective planning applications and charges for enforcement action. However, no timescale had been set for any amendments to the planning fee regime within Wales

- In response to a question on the £79k increase in anticipated revenue from the Council's commercial properties that was attributable to higher than anticipated occupation levels countywide with there being a high demand for the units.
- With regard to the City Deal Project, the current position was that of the Deal's 11 projects, 3 had been submitted to the U.K. and Welsh Government's for approval with a further two anticipated to be submitted by the end of the current year.
- In response to a question on the projected £14k overspend on free swimming for the under 16's and over 60's, that related to a reduction in the level of grant received by the authority from Sports Wales. That reduction required the Council to examine the scheme's operation which could result in a reduction in the available times for access to free swimming.
- With regard to a question on the £12k overspend in the Policy-Development Planning budget, that related to consultancy work provided by the Forward Planning Unit to other council departments. However, as the majority of the unit's time was being devoted to the development of the revised Local Development Plan, it did not have the capacity to fulfil its consultancy role resulting in reduced income levels.
- The Head of Homes and Safer Communities in response to a question on the projected £33k underspend on compensation payments advised that related to compensation paid to tenants when work was undertaken on their homes.
- With regard to the £737k variance on the Pendine Iconic International Visitors Destination project that related to its re-profiling and was expected to be delivered on time and within budget.

UNANIMOUSLY RESOLVED that the Revenue and Capital Budget Monitoring Report be received.

6. FORTHCOMING ITEMS

The Committee considered a list of forthcoming items to be considered at its next scheduled meeting to be held in December 2019.

UNANIMOUSLY RESOLVED that the list of forthcoming items for the Committee meeting scheduled to be held in December 2019 be agreed.

7. MINUTES

7.1. 3RD OCTOBER, 2019

UNANIMOUSLY RESOLVED that the minutes of the meeting of the Committee held on the 3rd October, 2019 be signed as a correct record.

7.2. 16TH OCTOBER, 2019

UNANIMOUSLY RESOLVED that the minutes of the meeting of the Committee held on the 16th October, 2019 be signed as a correct record.

CHAIR

DATE