

COMMUNITIES, HOMES & REGENERATION SCRUTINY COMMITTEE

MONDAY, 19 DECEMBER 2022

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

Councillors (In Person):

B. Davies B.W. Jones M. Palfreman

Councillors (Virtually):

W.R.A. Davies T. Davies N. Evans R.E. Evans
J.K. Howell H.B. Shepardson R. Sparks

Also in attendance (In Person):

Councillor L. Evans Cabinet Member for Homes and Deputy Leader
Councillor A. Davies – Cabinet Member for Rural Affairs and Planning Policy
Councillor A. Lenny – Cabinet Member for Resources
Councillor G. John – Cabinet Member for Regeneration, Leisure, Culture and Tourism
Councillor P. Hughes – Cabinet Member for Organisation and Workforce

Also Present (In Person):

C. Moore, Director of Corporate Services
J. Morgan, Director of Community Services
J. Jones, Head of Regeneration
R. Griffiths, Head of Place and Sustainability
J. Fearn, Head of Housing Property and Strategic Projects
J. Morgan, Head of Homes & Safer Communities
R.M. Davies, Strategic Housing Delivery Manager
R. Phillips, Economic Development Area Manager
S. Williams, Senior Accountant
S. Rees, Simultaneous Translator
K. Thomas, Democratic Services Officer

Also Present (Virtually):

I. Jones, Head of Leisure
I.R. Llewelyn, Forward Planning Manager
J. Owen, Democratic Services Officer

Chamber - County Hall, Carmarthen. SA31 1JP and remotely - 10.00 am - 1.15 pm

1. APOLOGIES FOR ABSENCE

Apologies for absence were received from Councillors H. Davies and D. Owen.

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

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Councillor	Minute No (s)	Nature of Interest
R. Sparks	6 – An alternative Outdoor Education Offer For Carmarthenshire. 7 - Carmarthenshire County Council's Annual Report 8 - 2022/23 Quarter 2 – Performance Report (01/07/22 t- 30/09/22 – Relevant to this scrutiny 9 - Update on the Ten Towns Initiative	Has a swimming business and has dispensation from the Standards Committee to speak and make written representations but not vote relating to the provision of leisure services in the county but not in relation to Carmarthen Leisure Centre swimming pool or the provisions of swimming lessons at that pool

There were no declarations of prohibited party whips.

3. PUBLIC QUESTIONS (NONE RECEIVED)

The Chair advised that no public questions had been received.

4. HOUSING REVENUE ACCOUNT BUDGET AND HOUSING RENT SETTING FOR 2023/24

The Committee considered a report on the Housing Revenue Account (HRA) Budget and Housing Rent Setting for 2023/24, 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 and Regeneration Delivery Plan.

The report also detailed how rents would increase for 2023/24 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 – 2024/25 with some additional/amended requirements, as detailed within the report.

This policy allowed local authorities to uplift the total rent envelope by CPI + 1% for each of the 5 years running 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 10.1% in September 2022, 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 6.5%

Having regard to the above, the report recommended an average housing rent increase of 5.5% (£5.18) per dwelling. If the Committee endorsed that increase, it would result in a £4.6m deficit on the Housing Revenue Account. However, that had been accommodated for within the long-term plan leaving £13.9m in balances at the end of 2023/24. 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 role of individual stakeholders in relation to Target Rent Bands. It was confirmed the Council was undertaking an affordability survey as part of its tenant engagement on the proposals and the responses received to date would be reported back as part of the consultation process
- With regard to the levying of services charges for tenants, it related to communal charges within sheltered accommodation for example energy costs, with the cost being based on the usage within each home. Presently, the charge was £3 per week, however, due to the recent increase in fuel charges, the authority was incurring a £600k loss on that provision.
- Appendix B to the report indicated a doubling of external borrowing to fund capital expenditure and clarification was sought on whether any associated risks had been mitigated. The Director of Corporate Resources confirmed that as the Council's borrowing was over the long term e.g. 40 - 50 years, any rate rises should not prove to be a risk over that period. As the Housing Business Plan was over a 30year period, short term

variances could be managed within the plan. However, it was important rents were set at the right level to maintain its integrity.

- In relation to the proposal that garage rents be maintained at the current levels, it was confirmed that was due to a review being undertaken and there were no investments plans for the service.

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

- 5.1 to increase the average housing rent by 5.5% (£5.18) per dwelling as per the Welsh Government's Social Housing Rents Policy 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 maintain garage rents at £9.00 per week and garage bases at £2.25 per week;**
- 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 2023/26 (2024/25 t& 2025/26 being soft budgets) as detailed in Appendix A;**
- 5.6 To approve the proposed Capital Programme and applicable funding for 2023/24 and the indicative spends for 2024/25 to 2025/26, as set out in Appendix B to the report.**

**5. HOUSING REVENUE ACCOUNT BUSINESS PLAN 2023-26
CARMARTHENSHIRE'S HOUSING INVESTMENT PROGRAMME**

The Committee received a report on the Housing Revenue Account Business Plan 2023-26 Carmarthenshire Housing Investment Programme which:

- explained the vision and detail of the housing investment programme over the next three years, including housing stock improvement plans, the new build programme, net zero carbon plans and what they meant for tenants.
- recognised the effect of the cost of living crisis on the Councils' tenants.
- confirmed the income that would be received from tenants' rents and other funding sources over the next three years and how that enabled the development of a capital programme exceeding £103m,
- confirmed the financial profile, based on current assumptions for the delivery of the housing investment and council new build programme over the next three years
- produced a business plan for the annual application to the Welsh Government for Major Repairs Allowance (MRA) Grant for 2023/24 equating to £6.2m.

The report 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 for the next three years:-

- Theme 1 – Supporting Tenants and Residents;
- Theme 2 – Investing in Homes and our Estates;
- Theme 3 - Providing more Homes;
- Theme 4 – Providing Affordable Warmth and Decarbonising the Housing Stock;
- Theme 5 – The Local Economy, Community Benefits and Procurement

The Following questions/issues were raised on the report:

- Reference was made to the condition of several properties at Dan y Banc, Felinfoel, Llanelli. It was confirmed investigations were being undertaken in relation to drainage issues within the area and investment was planned to bring the properties back into use.
- In relation to voids, it was confirmed issues within the construction industry, post covid, such as contractor availability and material price rises were adversely impacting on the time scales facilitating the return of voids to the housing stock. The Council had undertaken several measures to reduce the levels over recent months that had resulted in a 25% reduction in void levels and, while there were currently approximately 300 voids, the aim was to reduce that to around 200. However, it should be accepted there would always be an element of voids as properties would need upgrading/ maintenance prior to re-letting. Other measures to be introduced to achieve the reduction would include developing a new minor works framework to include small local contractors and the development of an in-house team to undertake void work.
- With regard to Theme 1 and supporting tenants, the council had introduced smaller areas for housing officers to manage to provide advice and assistance to tenants in need of help. The Rapid Rehousing Service would also provide wrap around care for those in need and the proposals for its development were currently with the Welsh Government for approval
- Reference was made to Theme 4 and the proposals to provide an additional 2,000 homes over the next five years and to how that increase would be managed. The Head of Homes and Safer Communities advised the department was investing in its front line provision and, in the new year, it would be examining future resource and investment requirements

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

- 6.1 Confirm the vision of the Housing Investment Programme over the next three years;**
- 6.2 Agree the 2023/24 Business Plan be submitted to the Welsh Government**
- 6.3 Note the contribution the Plan made to the Housing Regeneration and Development Delivery Plan in supporting the delivery of over 2,000 new homes**
- 6.4 Note the importance of the investment included in the Plan and its role in stimulating the local economy and creating local jobs and training opportunities.**

6. AN ALTERNATIVE OUTDOOR EDUCATION OFFER FOR CARMARTHENSHIRE

(NOTE: Councillor R Sparks, having earlier declared an interest in this item re-declared that interest)

The Committee was asked to feed into a forthcoming Cabinet report reviewing the Council's current Outdoor Education Offer and to explore options for an alternative delivery model to be delivered from within existing resources. It was noted that as the existing outdoor education facility at Pendine had reached the end of its life, and the Council had no capital funding available for its replacement, an alternative delivery model was being explored with a new purpose being proposed and re-defined following consultation with schools and other key stakeholders, as follows:

- To deliver high quality, challenging, outdoor education opportunities, primarily to Carmarthenshire pupils, aligned to the new curriculum.
- To provide a range of residential opportunities for children to develop their social and emotional intelligence skills whilst experiencing being away from home.
- To deliver high quality outdoor education opportunities at a range of outdoor recreation sites and settings, including at schools.
- To consider wider, possibly commercial opportunities that will help grow and sustain the Outdoor Education offer across the County of Carmarthenshire.

The review report would examine a menu / range of alternative options, that included making best use of existing alternative resources/facilities/ providers, an online offer, a mobile offer, a fixed base offer combining an education offer with a commercial offer to maximise usage year-round and to reduce net costs and /or a combination of these types of offer. An alternative, least favoured option, would be the cessation of the service and the loss of the residential outdoor activity for young people across Carmarthenshire.

The following issues/ questions were raised by members:-

- The Committee unanimously agreed on the value of the existing outdoor education offer to the whole of the County and, in particular, the residential experience it provided for school children. It wholeheartedly supported the need for the continued operation of outdoor education provision
- References and suggestions were made including exploring opportunities for the possibility of grant aid, considering a camping/glamping experience, utilising the new hostel facility at Pendine and retaining part of the offer locally, sale of the existing site and using the receipts to fund a possible relocation to a new facility and commercial partnering
- It was confirmed that as part of the review, a range of options would be presented to the Cabinet for its consideration with a view to implementation in September 2024.

RESOLVED that the report be received

7. CARMARTHENSHIRE COUNTY COUNCIL'S ANNUAL REPORT FOR 2021/22

(NOTE: Councillor R Sparks, having earlier declared an interest in this item re-declared that interest)

The Committee received a report on the Council's Annual Report for 2021/22, produced in accordance with the requirements of both the Well-being of Future Generations (Wales) Act 2015 and the Local Government and Elections Act (Wales) 2021 which required the Council to produce an Annual report on its Well Being objectives and to report on performance, based on a self-assessment approach

The report referenced, in turn, each of the Council's 13 Well Being Objectives and assessed the progress and adaptations made during the year. The Committee focussed on the following sections within the document relevant to its remit:

- **WBO 2** - Help children live healthy lifestyles
- **WBO 4** – Tackling poverty
- **WBO 5** - Creating more jobs and growth throughout the county
- **WBO 6** - Increase the availability of rented and affordable homes
- **WBO 7** - Help people live healthy lives (tackling risky behaviour and obesity)
- **WBO 10** – Looking after the Environment (Re: Planning Policy)
- **WBO 12** - Promoting Welsh language and Culture
- Appendices

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

- Reference was made to the recorded 4% increase in childhood obesity with 30.4% of children aged 3-4 being obese within Carmarthenshire, representing the 5th worst level in Wales. The Head of Leisure advised that whilst the increase was disappointing, there was no clear definable explanation for the increase, and leisure services was working with the Education Department and other partners, like Sports Wales and the Welsh Government in an endeavour to reduce those rates.
- With regard to Objective 4 and tackling poverty, the importance was stressed of providing advice and assistance to those facing poverty including sign posting them to other agencies to assist them apply for the benefits to which they were entitled.
- With regard to assistance for food banks, it was confirmed that since the start of the Covid pandemic the council had provided assistance to 13 banks and it continued to provide to 8 of those through the Household Poverty Fund.
- The Head of Regeneration confirmed the Economic Recovery Plan outcomes detailed in the report were on target representing the first 9 months of the 2year plan.

UNANIMOUSLY RESOLVED that Carmarthenshire County Council's Draft Annual Report for 2021/22 be received.

**8. 2022/23 QUARTER 2 - PERFORMANCE REPORT (01/07/22-30/09/22)
RELEVANT TO THIS SCRUTINY**

(NOTE: Councillor R Sparks, having earlier declared an interest in this item re-declared that interest)

The Committee received the 2022/23 Quarter 2 Performance Report for the period 1st July to 30th September 2022 in respect of the areas falling within its remit.

The report detailed the progress made against the actions and measures within the Corporate Strategy and on the delivery of the 13 Well-Being Objectives. The Committee noted the Council would continue reporting on the objectives throughout 2022/23 until they were superseded by the new Corporate Strategy.

The following issues were raised on the report:-

- Reference was made to performance Indicator PAM/013 - the percentage of empty private properties brought back into use. The Committee was advised that whilst there would always be empty properties, work was being undertaken on the development of an Empty Property Policy that would shortly be submitted for consideration through the Council's Democratic Process
- With regard to Action 15532- the renewable energy grants of a maximum £10,000, the Head of Regeneration advised that was a council initiative established as part of the covid recovery plan to help small business. It was hoped a higher grant threshold of funding could be made available, through the Shared Prosperity Fund, subject to council approval

9. UPDATE ON THE TEN TOWNS INITIATIVE

(NOTE: Councillor R Sparks, having earlier declared an interest in this item re-declared that interest)

The Committee received an update report on the work of the Council's Ten Towns Initiative outlining the support which had been secured to progress initiatives at a local level.

The Committee was reminded that the Ten Towns initiative had been established as a direct response to the County's Moving Rural Carmarthenshire Forward Plan, which had identified a need to increase the resilience and future growth of Carmarthenshire's rural market towns and their surrounding areas. The scheme was officially launched in October 2019 and a key part of the programme was the development of Economic growth plans to drive forward an agenda for change for Ten rural towns across the County. Funding for the initiative had been secured via the Rural Development Plan to commission external consultants to

develop plans for each of the respective towns i.e. Cwmaman, Cross Hands, Kidwelly, Llandeilo, Llandovery, Llanybydder, St Clears, Whitland, Laugharne and Newcastle Emlyn.

The following questions / issues were raised on the report:

- In response to a question to support provided to rural areas not part of the Ten Towns Initiative, the committee was advised that if any local community wished to undertake a project within their area, they should contact the Council's Community Bureau which could provide advice and guidance on accessing funds and external grants to support those projects.
- With regard to community involvement with the Ten Towns Initiative, it was confirmed local teams had been established to progress the initiative and invitations were sent to the local Town and Community Councils, and other organisations to participate in, and contribute to their delivery.
- It was confirmed the Whitland Town Hall – Digital grant to improve the building's connectivity, and IT equipment to support community activity, was similar to the actif leisure programme to improve digital connectivity in village halls etc to live stream activities to communities.
- The Head of Regeneration confirmed the purpose of the initiative was to increased vibrancy within the Towns with the assistance of £1m investment by the Council acting as a catalyst to further investment. It was hoped more funding could be made available in the future via the Shared Prosperity Fund

UNANIMOUSLY RESOLVED that the report be received.

10. PLANNING OBLIGATION (SECTION 106) - UPDATE

(NOTE: At 12.45 p.m. the Committee's attention was drawn to Council Procedure Rule (CPR) 9 – Duration of Meeting and, as the meeting had been underway for nearly three hours, it was resolved to suspend standing orders, in accordance with CPR 23.1, to enable the Committee to complete the remaining business on the agenda.)

The Committee received an update report providing an overview of the developer contributions received through planning obligations (also known as Section 106 Agreements) during the 2021/22 financial year.

The Committee noted the report outlined background information relating to planning obligations, the process of applying for developer contributions together with a overview of the income and expenditure during 2021/22 as well as providing an update on the position for the 2022/23 financial year.

The following questions / issues were raised on the report:

- In response to concerns on Local Member involvement in the development of Section 106 Agreements, the Head of Place and Sustainability expressed the importance of members making representations as early as possible after receiving notification of a planning application in their wards. The planning department was also working with Town and Community Councils on how they could contribute to the process. He advised that, if

necessary, he could provide additional training for elected members on s106 Agreements. He could also examine how the process could be made clearer and to how members could contribute earlier.

The importance of early local member / community involvement was stressed as once a Section 106 Agreement had been agreed and signed, it was very difficult to change and divert funding to other areas not identified within the Agreement.

- With regard to drawing down funding, it was confirmed responsibility for the allocation and award of funding lay with the Council's Community Bureau and members should contact the bureau if they had identified a project within their wards which could benefit from Section 106 funding
- It was confirmed it was a requirement of the Welsh Government for a portion of S106 funding to be allocated for the provision of affordable housing.

UNANIMOUSLY RESOLVED that the report be received.

11. FORTHCOMING ITEMS

The Committee received a list of forthcoming items to be considered at its next meeting to be held on the 26th January, 2023.

RESOLVED that the list of forthcoming items to be considered at the next scheduled meeting on the 26th January, 2023 be noted.

12. TO SIGN AS A CORRECT RECORD THE MINUTES OF THE MEETING OF THE COMMITTEE HELD ON THE 16TH NOVEMBER, 2022

UNANIMOUSLY RESOLVED that the minutes of the meeting of the Committee held on the 16th November, 2022 be signed as a correct record.

CHAIR

DATE