

PARTNERSHIPS AND GOVERNANCE OVERVIEW AND SCRUTINY COMMITTEE - MONDAY, 10 OCTOBER 2016

MINUTES OF A MEETING OF THE PARTNERSHIPS AND GOVERNANCE OVERVIEW AND SCRUTINY COMMITTEE HELD IN COMMITTEE ROOMS 2/3, CIVIC OFFICES ANGEL STREET BRIDGEND CF31 4WB ON MONDAY, 10 OCTOBER 2016 AT 2.00 PM

Present

Councillor N Clarke – Chairperson

E Dodd
RL Thomas

EM Hughes
C Westwood

AD Owen

M Thomas

Officers:

Angie Bowen	Group Manager - Housing & Community Regeneration
Julie Cooper	Emergency Planning & Electoral Services Team Manager
Gary Ennis	Group Manager Business Support
Gail Jewell	Democratic Services Officer - Scrutiny
Andrew Jolley	Corporate Director Operational & Partnership Services
Kevin Mulcahy	Group Manager - Highways Services
Andrew Rees	Senior Democratic Services Officer - Committees
Mark Shephard	Corporate Director - Communities

53. APOLOGIES FOR ABSENCE

Apologies for absence were received from the following Members:

Councillor M Jones
Councillor JR McCarthy
Councillor D Patel
Councillor KJ Watts
Councillor C Reeves – Cabinet Member Communities

54. DECLARATIONS OF INTEREST

Councillor AD Owen declared a personal interest in agenda item 4 – the Council's Critical Incident Policy and Procedure as he is employed by the South Wales Fire & Rescue Service which is mentioned briefly in the report.

55. APPROVAL OF MINUTES

RESOLVED: That the minutes of the Partnerships & Governance Overview and Scrutiny Committee of 4 July 2016 be approved as a true and accurate record.

56. THE COUNCIL'S CRITICAL INCIDENT POLICY AND PROCEDURE

The Scrutiny Officer introduced a report on the Council's Critical incident Policy and Procedure which outlined the current Emergency Planning documents in place which support the planning and response to a major incident, including the Strategic, Tactical and Operational Command structure. She stated that the report also looked at the

collaborative arrangements in place and how the emergency services and other agencies work together. It also explained how the Council plans for specific events such as inclement weather and biomass fire.

The Corporate Director Communities gave an overview of the Council's responsibilities and the role of Emergency Planning where the Council is prepared to respond to any major emergency it is faced with. He informed the Committee that the Council has a very strong focus in relation to communications and social care in emergency planning maintaining public services and assisting residents. He stated that the Council's role in responding to a major emergency is to support the emergency services and it will later take the lead for restoration and rehabilitation during the "Recovery" stage.

The Committee referred to emergency planning being available on a 24/7 basis and questioned what services are available out of hours to respond to incidents such as flooding and snowfalls and which can be contacted by Members. The Group Manager Highways informed the Committee that the Council provides out of hours cover, usually with two members of staff on standby. Generally, the Council would have advance warnings of severe weather conditions and the potential for flooding and in those circumstances the Council would increase the number of staff on standby. He stated that the Council has gritting teams at its disposal during the winter months.

The Committee questioned the resources available for the delivery of sandbags in the event of flooding at night and weekends. The Group Manager Highways informed the Committee that the Council would assist households faced with the threat of flooding by dispatching sandbags at short notice and also confirmed that they offer the public the ability to collect sandbags from the Council's depot. The Group Manager Business Support informed the Committee of the arrangements it has in place in dealing with major flooding incidents with the fire service and Highways Duty Officer. If the need arises, the Council would set up a centre where residents could evacuate to and there are support arrangements in place with the WRVS to provide supplies of food and drink. However, most residents would self-evacuate their homes and stay with relatives and friends.

The Committee questioned the arrangements available for Members to notify of incidents which happen out of hours. The Corporate Director Communities informed the Committee that Members should make contact with out of hours service at the Bryncethin depot. He stated that it had been necessary due to budget constraints to rationalise the number of staff on call but the Council continues to have resilience out of hours.

In response to a question from the Committee, the Scrutiny Officer stated that she would contact the Group Manager Housing and Community Regeneration to establish the progress made for the Committee to meet with representatives of the CHANNEL Panel to discuss the pilot.

The Committee questioned whether the Council had participated in any counter terrorism measures due to heightened security measures. The Group Manager Business Support informed the Committee that the Emergency Planning Officers from the Council had participated in a recent training exercise with Cardiff Council relating to terrorist attacks in both areas.

The Committee questioned where the funding would come from in the event of an incident and whether the Emergency Planning was sufficiently resourced. The Group Manager Business Support informed the Committee that expenditure incurred for a Major Incident, which was over an allocated amount of money, could be reclaimed

through the Bellwin Scheme. He stated that the costs of recovery after a flooding incident which was not on the scale of a Major Incident would have to be met from the Council's resources. The Corporate Director Communities informed the Committee that an Emergency Planning Officer is on call 24/7 in addition to standby staff, but incidents involving Emergency Planning occur infrequently.

The Committee questioned what steps would be taken in relation to marine protection. The Corporate Director Communities informed the Committee that such action would be taken by the Coastguard and the Police; however the Council would have responsibility in relation to any clearing up action which needed to be taken on the coastline.

The Committee questioned whether the Council felt constrained by matters which are the responsibility of other organisations and similarly is the Council unfairly blamed for matters which is not its responsibility affecting the Council's reputation. The Corporate Director Communities informed the Committee that there was often little the local authority could do in relation to matters it was not responsible for and sometimes public expectations were too great. He shared the Committee's concern around the co-ordination of public agencies, but there was now better communication between the Council, Natural Resources Wales and the emergency services. The Corporate Director Communities informed the Committee that in the event of a fire escalating to the point where residents needed to evacuate their homes, the Emergency Planning function would manage this process and inform residents of what was happening.

The Committee commented on the prevalence of fires particularly in schools and asked whether some fires were the cause of arson. The Committee also questioned whether some call out were incorrectly logged. The Corporate Director Communities stated that the service relied on CCSU to deal with calls and occasionally the wrong person is allocated to a call. In cases of fire, Emergency Planning will be notified. It is the role of Emergency Planning to determine whether there is a need for an area to be evacuated and to provide advice.

The Committee questioned the steps taken to check structures and appliances following fire. The Group Manager Highways informed the Committee that following a fire, the authority is involved in carrying out structural checks with the Fire Service, closing roads and erecting fencing. He stated that all appliances are PAT tested. The Group Manager Business Support informed the Committee that the person responsible for the premises is responsible for ensuring all testing of appliances is undertaken.

In response to a question from the Committee in relation to a fire at the Princess of Wales Hospital, the Group Manager Business Support informed the Committee that the hospital re-arranged its facilities once the fire had been dealt with.

In response to a question from the Committee, the Emergency Planning & Electoral Services Team Manager stated that the FOI request for contact information by a private defence company related to whether Emergency Planning had been involved.

The Committee questioned the reason for there being no financial implications relating to the report. The Group Manager Business Support confirmed there were no financial implications associated with the report; however the cost of the Emergency Planning is significant. The Group Manager Business Support informed the Committee that in terms of resources the authority has one Emergency Planning Officer, however all Directorates are geared up to respond to emergencies and that six duty officers are on duty each night. He assured the Committee that the authority was not at risk.

The Chairperson thanked the invitees for their contribution.

Conclusions

The Committee welcomed the report and commended the Emergency Planning Service on collaborating effectively with other partner agencies to ensure the Boroughs safety when and if a major incident should arise.

Members suggest that if a major incident should arise that the budgetary costs should be dealt with corporately rather than by the Directorate.

57. SOCIAL HOUSING - PARTNERSHIP WORKING WITH RESIDENTIAL SOCIAL LANDLORDS

The Scrutiny Officer introduced a report on Social Housing which gave an overview of how the Council is working in partnership with Registered Social Landlords (RSLs), including advising of the Welsh Government's responsibilities and governance arrangements for RSLs.

The Group Manager Housing and Community Regeneration reported on partnership working with RSLs, on an update on the Social Housing Programme and advised how services provided under the Supporting People Programme contribute to homeless prevention and better outcomes for service users and the wider community.

The Committee questioned how the Council is notified of V2C dwellings which are vacant. The Group Manager Housing and Community Regeneration informed the Committee that the Council is only notified of vacant dwellings when they are available for possession. This is to avoid incurring costs of providing temporary housing costs to nominees whilst the accommodation underwent repairs or improvements by V2C. She stated that RSLs had responsibility for ensuring that Welsh Government targets on void properties are met.

In response to a question from the Committee, the Group Manager Housing and Community Regeneration confirmed that families who refuse an offer of accommodation must give reasons for doing so. The Committee questioned the reason why a RSL had recently been granted planning consent without outside amenity space which appeared to be at variance with the Council's own standards. The Group Manager Housing and Community Regeneration informed the Committee that this would be due to families with older children not necessarily requiring outdoor amenity space whereas families with younger children would require such amenity space to play. She stated that increasingly children continued to live at home longer with their parents as opposed to finding their own accommodation. The social housing scheme being developed in Bridgend town centre would be aimed at being let to adults without young children due to its proximity to night time economy establishments.

The Committee welcomed the change in focus by the Council and its RSL partners in developing smaller units of accommodation as part of the Social Housing Programme. The Committee referred to a BBC News report of today which reported that 900 families had been made homeless by RSLs in Wales, with 500 of those families having children and questioned the steps being taken by the local authority to reduce these levels. The Group Manager Housing and Community Regeneration informed the Committee that the authority actively worked with RSLs to reduce the homelessness numbers, particularly since the introduction of Welfare Reform where campaigns had been run. Work was undertaken with families with children to avoid eviction action being taken. She stated that some families leave it critically too late in the eviction process before approaching

the authority for advice and assistance. She also informed the Committee that the authority did not place families with children who were homeless into B&B accommodation. She stated that many families are reluctant to accept the financial hardship they find themselves in and are also often reluctant to declare the extent of their indebtedness with all agencies, which is the focus of the authority's intervention.

The Committee questioned the part the authority plays in ensuring families are made aware of changes under Welfare Reform and benefits that could be made available to them. The Group Manager Housing and Community Regeneration informed the Committee that the authority works proactively with the Benefits Team and RSLs in relation to any Welfare Reform changes that are taking place. She stated that a Financial Inclusion Service which is funded by the Communities First programme focuses on assisting households with debts to other lenders, such as door step lenders within C1st Cluster areas, and that a new financial advice service commissioned by Supporting People is due to commence in November working with the Housing Solutions Team. The Group Manager Housing and Community Regeneration informed the Committee that under the Housing (Wales) Act 2014 the authority was able to widen its advice to citizens to include advice and nominations to the private rented sector. There was now a requirement on the authority for early intervention and prevention to help citizens maintain their tenancies and prevent homelessness and that Housing Solutions was now available to all.

The Committee questioned the support given from the Supporting People programme to prisoners on release. The Group Manager Housing and Community Regeneration explained there had been a change in legislation and Prisoners were now no longer a priority need category under the Housing (Wales) Act 2014. However, transitional funding was available for prisoners to be eligible for temporary accommodation following their release.

A member of the Committee referred to the quality of responses to referrals received from RSLs and asked whether a clearer pathway for submitting referrals could be made available to Members. The Corporate Director Operational and Partnership Services stated that this matter would be raised with RSLs but added that he would not want to have an additional stage inserted into the referrals process. He informed the Committee that RSLs are not responsible to Councillors.

The Committee requested that a case study be undertaken of vulnerable people who had received the support of the Supporting People programme in developing their independence. The Group Manager Housing and Community Regeneration confirmed that she would provide case studies. She informed the Committee of the early intervention support from the Supporting People programme which was available for 12 weeks which is to assist individuals in being less reliant on health and social services. She stated that hubs are available where individuals can self-refer for early access to services.

The Committee questioned whether individuals would retain their place on the waiting list if they refused an offer of accommodation. The Group Manager Housing and Community Regeneration informed the Committee of the process for individuals being placed on the waiting list in that they are placed on the waiting lists of all areas in the County Borough if they were homeless with the exception of if they were fleeing from domestic violence or excluded from living in certain areas. She stated that if an individual rejected an offer of accommodation for circumstances which the Council deemed to be unreasonable, they would lose their homelessness status and not necessarily be removed from the waiting list, but reduced to a lower band. If they

subsequently refused another offer without reasonable grounds they would be removed from the waiting list.

The Committee requested an explanation of the number of challenges facing the Council and its RSL partners. The Group Manager Housing and Community Regeneration informed the Committee that the challenges are primarily in relation to the introduction of Welfare Reform and in meeting the need and demands for different types of accommodation and with having 800 households on the register waiting for single persons accommodation. Further challenges related to the Supporting People programme and the rent payable by individuals living in supported accommodation such as Sheltered or Extra Care Housing. She stated that the Government was looking at bringing rent levels for accommodation offered by RSLs in line with rent charged by local authorities.

The Committee questioned the financial standing of RSLs. The Group Manager Housing and Community Regeneration informed the Committee that the responsibility for ensuring the financial standing of RSLs lay with the Welsh Government who would intervene should an RSL get into financial difficulty.

The Chairperson thanked the invitees for their contribution.

Conclusions

The Committee welcomed the introduction of the Local Housing Strategy 2016-18 and the fact that the Authority are responding to the housing needs of the County Borough when working with partners to make best use of existing homes and to deliver the right type of new housing.

As part of the new financial advice service that will be available from November 2016, Members suggest that the Council monitor the take-up of these services and if there was capacity look at appropriate ways to approach all tenants, to advertise the new service and to encourage residents to make contact to help deal with financial pressures prior to issues escalating.

While Members understand that the Council are unable to hold RSLs to account, the Committee would appreciate if any referrals made could be responded to in a timely manner with a detailed response, to ensure they are able to update the tenant appropriately.

The Committee requested the following additional information:

In relation to the Supporting People programme, Members have asked to receive a case study showing how the programme helps vulnerable people live as independently as possible as referred to at 3.18 of the report.

58. FORWARD WORK PROGRAMME UPDATE

The Scrutiny Officer presented a report which detailed the items to be considered at the next meeting of the Committee on 21 November 2016 and presented a list of further potential items for prioritisation by the Committee.

Conclusions

The Committee noted the items to be considered at its meeting on 21 November 2016 and scheduled the Domestic Abuse Strategy item for the meeting of 6 December 2016 and Community Cohesion – Local Delivery Plan for the meeting of 6 February 2017.

59. URGENT ITEMS

There were no urgent items.

The meeting closed at 4.38 pm