

MINUTES OF A MEETING OF THE COMMUNITY, ENVIRONMENT AND LEISURE OVERVIEW AND SCRUTINY COMMITTEE HELD IN COMMITTEE ROOMS 2/3, CIVIC OFFICES ANGEL STREET BRIDGEND CF31 4WB ON TUESDAY, 28 JULY 2015 AT 2.00 PM

Present

Councillor JC Spanswick – Chairperson

DK Edwards	CA Green	RM James	RD Jenkins
CL Jones	DRW Lewis	JR McCarthy	JH Tildesley MBE
KJ Watts	R Williams		

Invitees/Officers:

Angie Bowen	Group Manager - Housing & Community Regeneration
Mark Galvin	Senior Democratic Services Officer - Committees
Satwant Pryce	Head of Regeneration and Planning
Zak Shell	Head of Neighbourhood Services
Mark Shephard	Corporate Director - Communities
Councillor Hywel Williams	Cabinet Member Communities
Kym Barker	Scrutiny Officer

10. APOLOGIES FOR ABSENCE

Apologies for absence were received from the following Member for the reason so stated:-

Councillor G Phillips - Holiday

11. DECLARATIONS OF INTEREST

The following declarations of personal interest were made:-

Councillor J C Spanswick Agenda item 4 – As he was a Board Member of V2 Coast
Councillor C L Jones Agenda item 8 – As reference was made in the report to his employer.

12. APPROVAL OF MINUTES

RESOLVED: That the Minutes of a meeting of the Community, Environment and Leisure Overview and Scrutiny Committee dated 10 June 2015, be approved as a true and accurate record.

13. SOCIAL HOUSING ALLOCATION POLICY UPDATE REPORT - IMPLEMENTATION OF THE COMMON HOUSING REGISTER

The Chairperson welcomed the Invitees to the meeting for this item, including the Registered Social Landlords (RSL's).

The Corporate Director Communities advised that the report was a good example of Overview and Scrutiny looking into an important area of work. He added that the purpose of the report was to update Committee on the factors that led to the implementation and development of the Social Housing Allocation Policy (SHAP) and the Common Housing Register (CHR); what it was intended to achieve and what had been the result.

He added, that the report also advised Members of how the service and its Registered Social Landlords (RSL's) partners had reviewed the SHAP, and how they intend to manage the increased demand for housing solutions services, in a period of budget cuts.

A Member asked if RSL's were reluctant to provide accommodation for people who were on benefits, due to the fact that they may be more likely to get in arrears with their payments for being provided housing accommodation as oppose to individuals who were employed.

The Group Manager Housing and Community Regeneration confirmed that this was the case, as there was a greater risk of unemployed tenants who claimed benefits having more difficulty keeping up with their rental payments than those who were in full time employment. However, there was set-up, a Panel consisting of key Officers from BCBC and each RSL, where cases are discussed, and where possible rent in advance was given via the Housing Solutions team through their homelessness prevention fund (or in the way of a Bond) as an incentive for RSL's to take up tenancies from people who required to be housed, but were unemployed and therefore on a low income.

A Member felt that there was definitely a lack of Social Housing within the BCBC, probably at the cost of there being too much private accommodation. She felt that this could be addressed through the examination of land uses in key schemes and plans, such as for example, the Local Development Plan. She felt that Housing and Planning Officers together with RSL's should look to provide Social Housing where it was most required, and within locations that had sufficient access to public transport..

The Group Manager Housing and Community Regeneration advised Members that there were a number of different approaches to take in order to develop Affordable Housing, for example through a developer perhaps wishing to construct private housing, but as part of these proposals providing monies through a Section 106 Agreement where further land could be utilised for the purpose of providing Social or Affordable Housing thereon.

She added that RSL's could also approach the local authority and discuss and conduct a market analysis of the Housing Register in order to ascertain areas of land where there was a lack of Social Housing, as well as to establish if these and other areas were suitable to accommodate such developments.

A Member referred to Paragraph 4.4 of the report (page 20) and requested further details as to reasons why RSL's terminated tenants' tenancy agreements, over and above the reason for non-payment of rent.

The Chief Executive of V2C confirmed that his Housing Association had to enforce a number of evictions in the past year, but only a third of these were for non-payment of rent. The other two thirds were for issues such as anti-social behaviour and use of drugs in the main.

The Member felt that it would benefit the Committee if more data could be broken down and made available in order that Members could analyse this and understand more the reasons behind evictions.

A Member also referred to Paragraph 4.4 of the report, and noted the number of households in arrears this last year up to February 2015, ie 2,636. He asked if Officers yet knew the total number for the full year.

The Group Manager Housing and Community Regeneration confirmed that data was still in the process of being collated before a final figure for the year could be calculated, though as at February 2015 the figure was 61 households less than at the same period for the previous year.

One of the main reasons for the increase in the number of households in arrears was due to the negative impact Welfare Reform was beginning to have on householders who relied on benefits, and the negative effect of this on issues such as bedroom tax. This negative effect was set to get worse still when Universal Credit came into being.

The RSL's conceded that the impact of arrears was not as yet having such a negative effect that it was jeopardising their businesses, though if the trend continued, or in particular got worse, this would impact on certain ancillary services.

A Member asked the RSL's at what point would a deficit in rent arrears make his Housing Association unviable.

The Chief Executive of V2c stated that this would differ from one Housing Association to another depending on its size and assets etc. V2c's annual rent intake was approximately £24m a year. Rent arrears last year totalled around 1.4% of this gross figure. He added that if this figure reached 5 – 6% it would have detrimental effect on the business.

A Member pointed out, that there were numerous cases where families were living in accommodation that was too small, and cases where individuals or couples living in a property that was too large. He felt that an analysis of this should be undertaken, as well as, more affordable housing accommodation being provided in general..

The Group Manager Housing and Community Regeneration advised that the Housing Allocations Policy took account of tenants preferences when they were seeking accommodation. Wherever possible, consideration was given to housing individuals and families in suitable accommodation in terms of both the size of the property and its location. A precedent had to be taken with regard to providing accommodation for the homeless, though as these were urgent cases, they will be housed in a property of suitable size, but not necessarily in an area of their preference.

She added that in the past, would-be tenants sometimes turn down a multiple of choices with regards to accommodation, in order to wait and get a property that totally suited their needs, and was located in their preferred area of choice. However, due to limited resources being available, this luxury was no longer possible to manage and adequately facilitate.

The Group Manager Housing and Community Regeneration further added that the local authority recognised that there was a need for more 1 and 2 bedroom properties (Affordable Housing), and work was ongoing with RSL's to provide more of these where possible. Extra funding from Welsh Government had been received for this purpose.

The Chairperson asked representatives from each of the RSL's present, if they felt that things were working in relation to the subject of the report, as well as their working relationship with the Housing Department of BCBC.

Each representative in turn advised that the Social Housing Allocation Policy was working fairly well and that their relationship with the Council was generally working well and improving. There was a common problem, in the shape of too many empty properties in existence, 81 with Wales and the West, and now 500 (and increasing) in respect of V2c. This was due to there being too many troubled housing estates where tenants did not wish to be accommodated, and the issue was being compounded by the likes of the introduction of Welfare Reform and Bedroom Tax.

A Member confirmed that benefit cuts proposed in the future, by the removal of Housing Benefit for the 18 – 25 year olds, may as the RSL representatives had confirmed, have a negative impact on the business of Housing Associations, which could possibly result in an increase in individuals seeking and obtaining B & B accommodation which financially drains the local authority. He felt that both the local authority and RSL's should consider the implications of this.

The Chief Executive of V2c reiterated that a bigger concern for RSL's was that under the change in payment procedure for Universal Credit, tenants claiming benefit would now have the total of their entitlement sent directly to them, whereby previously their allocation of rent was taken out of this payment and sent directly to RSL's. Now RSL's had to rely on the tenants themselves making these rental payments to them. Anything up to 70% of their tenants could be affected by this change, which obviously increased the likelihood of them spending all of their benefits before paying their rent. This would increase further the number of household arrears.

In terms of the grant funding being received from Welsh Government, the Chairperson asked if this was a temporary only avenue of funding.

The Group Manager Housing and Community Regeneration advised that the transitional funding for the implementation of the Housing Act was tapering in its format, and would be received for 3 years, but we have not been advised of the level of funding for years 2 and 3.

Conclusions:

The Committee noted the report which provided an update on the implementation of the Common Housing Register.

- Members were pleased to note that there were no longer any families with dependent children placed in Bed and Breakfast accommodation.
- Members asked how the figure for Bed and Breakfast accommodation had reduced significantly since 2008/09. The Officer responded that there was now a more consistent process in place and that a framework had been developed which includes a pricing agreement.
- Members commented on the reduction in the number of applicants on the list and queried where the people who had been on the lists previously had gone. The Officer responded that some of the people removed from the list had no housing need and that in some cases there were duplicate applications which became apparent when the housing lists were merged into one list.
- Members raised concerns about the lack of social housing being developed and that where it is provided it is often in areas where access to services have not been considered or included at the planning stage.

- Members queried the low percentage of successful allocations. The Officer responded that there were some issues with applicants not disclosing their situation accurately and that this sometimes does not become apparent until they are about to be allocated a property. The Officer added that communication between RSLs and BCBC regarding applicants who have previously had issues with rent arrears and ASB should help to improve the situation.
- Members queried the causes for eviction. An RSL responded that approximately one third of evictions were due to rent arrears, the rest were due to other issues, such as anti-social behaviour.
- Members requested that future reports contain more detailed information regarding the reasons for evictions.

Recommendations

- The Committee recommends that access to services is included as part of the wider planning requirement when developing social housing provision.
- The Committee support the proposal for the establishment of a further band on the register which may be for people with no immediate housing need and could include low income families.

Further Information

- There were no requests for further information following the presentation of this report.

14. FORWARD WORK PROGRAMME UPDATE

The Scrutiny Officer presented a report, the purpose of which, was to present the items due to be considered at the Committee meeting scheduled for 8 October 2015, as well as seeking confirmation of the information required for the subsequent scheduled meeting to be held on 1 December 2015..

- RESOLVED:**
- (1) That the Committee noted the report
 - (2) That Members also, should they so wish, give consideration to revising the list of future potential items for its Forward Work Programme, and re-prioritising these should this be felt appropriate.

15. URGENT ITEMS

None

16. EXCLUSION OF THE PUBLIC

- RESOLVED:** That under Section 100A(4) of the Local Government Act 1972 as amended by the Local Government (Access to Information) (Variation) (Wales) Order 2007, the public be excluded from the meeting during consideration of the following item of business as it contains exempt information as defined in Paragraphs 14 and 16 of Part 4, and Paragraph 21 of Part 5 of Schedule 12A of the Act.

Following the application of the public interest test it was resolved that pursuant to the Act referred to above, to consider the item in

private, with the public being excluded from the meeting, as it was considered that in all the circumstances relating to the item, the public interest in maintaining the exemption outweighed the public interest in disclosing the information, because the information is commercially sensitive and it relates to the business and financial affairs of the Council and other parties. In addition the report contains information in respect of which a claim to legal professional privilege could be maintained in legal proceedings.

17. WASTE SERVICES PROVISION