

MINUTES OF A MEETING OF THE COMMUNITY, ENVIRONMENT AND LEISURE OVERVIEW AND SCRUTINY COMMITTEE HELD IN COMMITTEE ROOMS 1/2/3, CIVIC OFFICES ANGEL STREET BRIDGEND CF31 4WB ON WEDNESDAY, 23 MARCH 2016 AT 2.00 PM

Present

Councillor JC Spanswick – Chairperson

CA Green
DRW Lewis
R Williams

RM James
JR McCarthy

RD Jenkins
G Phillips

CL Jones
JH Tildesley MBE

Officers:

Kym Barker
Mark Galvin

Scrutiny Officer
Senior Democratic Services Officer - Committees

Invitees:

| | |
|----------------------|---|
| Stephen Cook | Chief Executive, Valleys 2 Coast |
| Joanne Ginn | Housing Solutions Team Leader |
| Richard Hughes | Chief Executive, Awen Trust |
| Julie McKim | New Homes Team Leader, Valleys 2 Coast |
| Alun Morgan | Chairman of Board of Trustees of Awen Trust |
| Scott Pickrell | Day Services Manager |
| Mark Wilkinson | Group Manager - Learning Disability |
| Jenny Williams | Housing Manager, Wales and West |
| Elizabeth Willington | Housing Manager, Valleys to Coast |

41. APOLOGIES FOR ABSENCE

Apologies for absence were received from Councillor KJ Watts

42. DECLARATIONS OF INTEREST

None

43. APPROVAL OF MINUTES

RESOLVED: That the Minutes of the following meetings of the Community, Environment & Leisure O&SC be approved as a true and accurate record:-

18 January 2016
27 January 2016

44. FORWARD WORK PROGRAMME UPDATE

The Assistant Chief Executive Legal and Regulatory Services submitted a report, the purpose of which, was to present the items due to be considered at the Committee's next meeting to be held following the Annual meeting of Council.

The Scrutiny Officer referred to paragraph 4.1 of the report that detailed in tabular format, the potential items to be considered at the next scheduled meeting and the Invitees due to attend.

Paragraph 4.2 of the report also contained a table listing potential items as yet to be decided for the 2016-17 Forward Work Programme. The prioritisation and timings of these would be agreed at the Committee meeting following the Annual meeting of Council.

RESOLVED: That the Committee noted the list of potential items for the 2016-17 Forward Work Programme, the prioritisation and timings of which would be agreed at the Committee meeting following the Annual meeting of Council.

45. **AWEN CULTURAL TRUST**

The Chairperson on behalf of the Committee, welcomed the Invitees to the meeting.

The Corporate Director Communities submitted a report, the purpose of which was to update the O&S Committee on the progress made by Awen Cultural Trust (the Trust) since it was established to manage a range of cultural services and facilities on behalf of the Council, with effect from 1 October 2015, including an update on the Wood B and B Leaf programmes.

He advised Members that the Trust was obviously still in its infancy stages, however, a considerable amount of work had been committed to the continuation of the provision of cultural services. As an independent organisation the Trust is governed by a voluntary board of trustees who have a duty to ensure it is viable and fit for purpose. He confirmed that attached to the report at Appendix 1 was a Service Plan for 2015/17, which included the partnership outcomes framework. The Service Plan would focus in particular, on organisational culture, developing values and behaviours that will underpin the Trust's commitment to its customers.

He added that he also has regular meetings with the Chief Executive of the Trust, in order that the Trust and BCBC succeed in supporting each other as the programme moves forward.

He concluded his introduction by advising that Wood B and B Leaf were also developing further under the auspices of the venture.

In terms of Wood B and B Leaf, a Member asked if their viability would be sustained under the Trust.

The Chief Executive of the Trust, confirmed that both Wood B and B Leaf had integrated well since being transferred to the Trust, with both time and investment having been committed to these initiatives since they had been transferred from BCBC.

He confirmed that the cost in terms of budget for the operation of both of these initiatives was the same as had been with the local authority, ie £250k per annum in total for the operation of both entities. Both Wood B and B Leaf were progressing well and starting to generate increased income as a result of operating in a social enterprise environment - things were looking positive for the future. Progression it was anticipated would be incremental rather than accelerated with the needs of the services users always at the heart of what they do.

Both Wood-B and B-leaf support the wider functions of the trust – an ethos that works across the organisation. They particularly support Bryngarw Country Park, as well as produce their own products for retail. The Trust were presently looking to increase hours of business for both these projects, in order to promote business further.

The Corporate Director Communities reiterated that there had been a very smooth transition of services being transferred from BCBC to the Trust, and relationships with the Trust were very good. Plans were now being looked at to move services forward to the next level in order to increase profit margins etc. He reiterated that budget levels in terms of the support of these two work related projects were similar to that before the transfer had taken place. There was some commercial potential relating to the viability of Wood B and B Leaf, and the Trust are looking to engage specialist advice to do an analysis of this, and felt that there was a good strong base and platform within which products produced by both project groups could be promoted further. Therefore there was some optimism of the future of these going forward he added.

A Member confirmed that he had visited B Leaf and had looked at the products they were making, though he was also aware, that there had previously been limited engagement and advertising of these products with/to the public. He was pleased to see now that steps were being taken to promote these work related projects further under the Trust. He was concerned however over the budget reductions planned for Wood B and B Leaf under the latest round of the MTFs.

The Chief Executive of Awen Trust confirmed that whilst there were savings earmarked under the MTFs as the Members had correctly stated, these savings would likely be offset from other areas and efficiency across the Trust. This will include developing external funding strategy, gift aid opportunities, as well as generating income elsewhere. Though there may be a small budget reduction in these areas, this would be less than if services such as these had been maintained by the Council.

A Member asked if any staff from BCBC had been transferred to Bryngarw House as part of the Trust proposals and were there library staff based at the House.

The Chief Executive of the Trust confirmed over 130 individuals transferred to the Trust and its registered office was at Bryngarw House. However, the House is predominantly used, and is increasingly successful, as a weddings venue.

The Chairperson referred to page 20 of the report and paragraph 4.7 of the report, where it stated that the Trust was a separate independent organisation with a charitable status. He noted that due to the significant amount of public funds invested in the new venture, Internal Audit had audited the assessment of controls, in order to provide the Council and the Trust with reasonable assurance that they are adequate. Paragraph 4.9, also referred to issues regarding strengthening client arrangements between both organisations. He asked how the above intended to be monitored.

The Corporate Director Communities advised that the undertaking of an audit was agreed between the Finance Department and himself, due to the organisation being in its infancy. It was particularly necessary to complete an audit, so as to ensure that there were sound financial processes and procedures in place, and the result of the audit confirmed that there were. In terms of monitoring the business going forward, the Corporate Director Communities confirmed that the Authority were acting as a Strategic Commissioner for Awen, and therefore, the Council's Corporate Priorities were being aligned against the Trust's Draft Service Plan. He confirmed that the relationship between the Trust and the Council, operated in a similar manner to that of Halo and the Authority.

A Member referred to page 30 of the report, and the paragraph headed Performance Indicators and Targets, and that as an approach to measuring the Trust's success against the Outcomes Framework, Awen were proposing adopting elements of their Performance Scorecard. This had been developed to consider their charitable/outcome objectives, whilst also delivering a user friendly overview of the organisation's overall health and performance. The scorecard was shown at Appendix C to the report. He asked if this Scorecard adequately catered for and reflected all the different services that the Trust supported, for example library services, the Grand Pavilion and other theatre venues, and Bryngarw House/Park, all of which offered something different. He also made reference to the fact that the outcome measures were developed using the logic basis where longitudinal and academic evidence supports that participation has benefit, eg that children who use libraries perform better at school and have better literacy skills. The Chief Executive of the Trust, confirmed that the above outcome measure had been introduced on the assumption of there being evidence to suggest that if a child regularly visits a library, then their literacy should improve. Similarly, if young people attend dancing classes then they eventually obtain specific dance as well as transferable skills and confidence.

The suggested indicators included in the draft Service Plan, reflect that if the Trust examine ways to encourage people to visit libraries, hence in turn, increasing the number of visitors there, this would fit in with the Authority's School Improvement Agenda for pupil attainment for literacy. If an advertising campaign was undertaken with regard to get more visitors to visit Bryngarw House and Park, then this would have a positive effect on the economy and bring inward investment to the Trust etc. He added that any surplus that the business accrued would be used to secure the viability of the Trust and then invested back into the Trust and the services it delivered. The Trust was a Charity and was governed by charity law, and therefore investment made was committed to the delivery of its charitable purposes.

He further added that the Trust were obliged to deliver on the Contract for the Council, including the aims and objectives contained within this. However, he also explained that it had to operate as a business and to make an improvement in people's lives through the provision of cultural changes and improvements. The more sustainable the organisation was, then the better services it would provide.

The Chairperson of the Trust confirmed that obviously the organisation had to make a surplus in order to maintain its existence, the main thrust of the Trust was meet cultural demands. So it was a combination of making both a financial return and cultural return to benefit the inhabitants of the County Borough. The Board that supported the Trust was made up of individuals with a wide range of skills and were interested in seeing service provision grow within the business. A balance would be struck he reiterated, between securing profit within the business and offering in due course as the Trust developed a range of different cultural services.

A Member was aware that the likes of Wood B and B Leaf were supported by individuals who were being trained purposely to develop their skills, as opposed to being paid employees. She asked if these initiatives became more successful in terms of making and being able to sell-on more products that they developed, then could the service users supporting these ventures possibly be paid/receive an allowance.

The Chief Executive of the Trust confirmed that it was an ambition of the Trust to realise this, as the people supporting Wood B and B Leaf were seen more as colleagues than service users. The cost of this could not be supported formerly through the Council, due to financial restraints associated with the MTFs, but would be looked at as the Trust

developed. These colleagues were however developing training opportunities which in turn, would develop their skills, which would in turn, enhance their prospects of seeking paid employment elsewhere. He added that Wood B and B Leaf were being campaigned more via the web site and through the avenues of social media in order to encourage the sale of the products they produced, particularly with regard to B Leaf.

A Member noted that on average Bryngarw Park received about 200,000 visitors per year. He was pleased to note that last Christmas, B Leaf produced some clever and extremely well made Christmas reindeers that sold well and brought in income. He felt that it was a shame that more of these weren't made due to there only being a few trainees working there as they generated income for the Trust, that could be re-invested in Projects.

The Chief Executive of the Trust advised that the service users were very proud due to producing these, and the income generated from the sale of the product exceeded £1k, which was a fine example of a social enterprise working effectively. This project would be repeated next Christmas. The wood used to make these also came from Bryngarw Park he added.

The Day Services Manager concurred with the above, adding that this project had been positive for the Trust. He added that Wood B and B Leaf had now been in existence for two decades, with both these originating from Day Care Centres. He confirmed that the new Social Services and Wellbeing (Wales) Act 2014 would help support both these initiatives further, and more work was planned in consultation with people with learning disabilities, to develop their skills further through expanding them by providing extra training for services users (for example in carpentry and joinery), in order that they could make not just more products, but different ones also.

The Cabinet Member Regeneration and Economic Development added that the marketing and sale of products were more achievable through a Social Enterprise like Awen Cultural Trust than they would be through the local authority. They were in a better and more viable position than BCBC he confirmed, to both market and allow for the sale of any products that they made.

A Member referred to page 36 of the report, and the current charges for the hiring of Awen Community Centres, and he was pleased to note, that not for profit organisations get a reduced rate for the hire of these buildings. He noted that there was no mention in this section of the report to the Grand Pavilion, Porthcawl or the Maesteg Town Hall, and asked for information regarding the charges for the hiring of these buildings.

The Chief Executive of the Trust advised that Community Centres were protected, in that there was no increase to the hire of these beyond a cost of inflation. The Trust had been gifted with the capacity to use discretion in the hire charging of other buildings. There were both commercial and not for profit rates applicable, and these had to be competitive, in order to attract customers. He confirmed that he would provide further information on this matter over and above that included in the report to the Member outside of the meeting, including information regarding rates of hire charges for both the Grand Pavilion and Maesteg Town Hall.

Conclusions:

The Committee noted the report, which provided Members with an update on the work of the Trust since it was established, including specific information on the Wood B and B Leaf projects.

- Members asked how well Wood B and B Leaf had been integrated into the Trust and asked how much it cost to run the projects. The Officer responded that it had been a positive experience, that the overall budget is currently the same as when the services were run by the Council and that there was potential for reducing costs using the Social Enterprise Model.
- Members raised concerns regarding the lack of public awareness of the projects. The Officer responded that the new arrangements include identifying opportunities to promote the projects.
- Members asked how the performance of the Trust was being monitored. The Officer responded that the expectation is that the Trust would be responsible for the monitoring framework and that there is a potential to put other monitoring in place, as necessary.
- Members asked for clarification regarding the methodology used to develop outcome measures; in particular they referred to the term 'longitudinal and academic evidence'. The Officer responded that this methodology would enable the service to ensure that commercial success can be balanced with the achievement of priorities for local communities.
- Members asked for clarification where figures in the draft balanced scorecard were expressed as actuals rather than percentages. The Officer responded that the figures in the final version of the scorecard would show percentage values.
- Members queried whether there could be an allowance, either monetary or otherwise, for trainees contributing to the work and output of Wood B and B Leaf. The Officer responded that this was a possibility in future.
- Members requested that this item remain on the Forward Work Programme to enable them to monitor the work of the Trust.

Further Information requested

- The Committee requested benchmarking information to enable them to compare performance in context with performance information from Local Authorities.
- The Committee requested a breakdown of figures relating to the Pavilion and Maesteg Town Hall to show charges before and after they were moved to the Trust.

46. **SOCIAL HOUSING ALLOCATION POLICY AND COMMON HOUSING REGISTER UPDATE REPORT - HOUSING SOLUTION INTERVIEW, HOUSING REGISTRATION AND NOMINATION PROCESSES**

The Chairperson explained that in relation to this item, each of the Invitees from the different organisations would be invited to the meeting in turn to respond to questions from Members, in relation to the above topic.

The first representative to be invited to the meeting was the Housing Solutions Team Leader from BCBC.

The Chairperson advised that there was some concern regarding the way the different organisations followed the processes and procedures of the Common Housing Register, developed by BCBC in partnership with the 4 local Registered Landlords, ie Valleys to Coast (V2C), Linc Cymru, Hafod and Wales and West Housing Association.

The report confirmed that V2C were able to allocate up to 25% of their vacancies through their own allocation policy, as set out in the Deed of Stock Transfer. For all other RSL's, they offer 100% nomination rights to the Council.

He added that he also had some concerns over how RSL's were monitored and scrutinised in relation to the criteria that should be followed in respect of the allocation of RSL housing accommodation up to the percentages agreed upon. If this was not being achieved, he added that people hoping to secure housing association accommodation, were then left with the option of taking up accommodation from a Private Landlord.

A Member confirmed that he was concerned that the Council were not having their full agreed nomination rights with regard to Social Housing Allocation under an agreement with V2C, ie that the local authority would have 75% of these rights with V2C having 25%. With all other RSL's the Council had 100% nomination rights. He was particularly concerned that this was not taking place in his Ward, where there seemed to be a considerable number of empty properties. He estimated that V2C controlled approximately 7,000 dwellings, and therefore, he asked how many of these were empty and an explanation as to the reasons why they were unoccupied.

The Housing Solutions Team Leader confirmed that there seemed to be a common theme in relation to 'voids' under the Common Housing Register, though she could not give a specific answer to the Members question in respect of how many properties were empty and the reasons for this, adding that V2C would probably be able to comment on this when their representatives join the meeting. Mostly it was due to the fact that the properties required some work, i.e. re-decorating or something of a more structural nature, which often took longer so inevitably due to this, there would always be a case of some properties being empty at any given time

Monthly housing meetings were convened with V2C, and the 4 other RSL's attended these meetings also.

The Chairperson referred to paragraph 4.13 on page 51 of the report, and asked the Invitee what was the definition of a void property.

The Housing Solutions Team Leader advised that in terms of Social Housing controlled by the Council through RSL's, the Council viewed a void property as a property that was empty and ready to let through the Common Housing Register. However, V2C classed a void property as a property that required some work to be carried out on it, prior to it being allocated under the Social Housing Allocation Policy, with such accommodation being allocated in accordance with the procedures set out Common Housing Register.

A Member asked about the process regarding nominations from the Council to V2C for persons on the Common Housing Register applying for accommodation. He asked for further clarification as to the process that was followed in instances such as this.

The Housing Solutions Team Leader advised that if there were three failed nominations due to the fact that the would-be tenants did not satisfy the criteria of V2C so as to be allocated housing accommodation by them, then V2C take the property back, with a view to then letting the property to someone else who does satisfy their criteria to obtain housing through them as the RSL, under their My Choice scheme.

A Member referred to page 47 of the report, and the terms under which individuals had been assessed as having an urgent housing need, and the last bullet point where a person looking for accommodation was under occupying social housing, and in view of this, wanting to transfer to a smaller property in order to avoid financial hardship. In light of the rental of larger properties increasing through the introduction of the criteria relating to bedroom tax, he asked if individuals who wished to be transferred to alternative accommodation were reducing.

The Housing Solutions Team Leader responded by confirming that there was no recognisable reduction in cases of transfer requests under the above criteria, though it was true that tenants were looking for smaller (and more affordable) accommodation as a result of the coming into being of bedroom tax. Though there were other reasons for such a request taking place, such as couples separating and tenants being made redundant, and therefore requiring a smaller property that would be less costly to run in terms of the paying of utility bills, etc.

A Member asked if individuals that were under 25 years of age and were formerly in but then came out of care, were classed as a priority for accommodation under Band A or Band B of the Social Housing Allocation Policy/Common Housing Register.

The Housing Solutions Team Leader advised that 18 – 21 year olds who were previously a looked after child, were a priority need category under homelessness and if owed the final housing duty would come under band A

If the young person was in supported housing and was needing to move on they would be in band A

She added that, if however, the young person was over 21 leaving care and homeless and had no vulnerability, they would likely end in Band B.

The Housing Solutions Team Leader then stated that in homelessness, there were a number of duties owed to applicants as follows:-

Prevention duty – where someone is at risk of homelessness there is a duty to help the applicant from becoming homeless by retaining their current accommodation or help in securing alternative accommodation

Relief duty – where someone is actually homeless there is a duty to help the applicant secure accommodation

Final duty - If we fail to prevent and then fail to relieve the homelessness, the last duty to consider is the final duty. This duty is only granted to those who are in a priority need category and are unintentionally homeless. There was other criteria such as eligibility and local connection she added. The duty here was to secure accommodation for the applicant.

A Member referred to page 48 of the report, and the criteria for would-be tenants being classed in Band B category on the accommodation waiting list. He asked if an applicant lived in the area, but then for argument sake moved to somewhere in England, then moved back into the County Borough, would they be deemed to have no local connection with the area or not.

The Housing Solutions Team Leader advised that the definition of the term 'local connection' applied to having family members also, ie immediate family members such as mothers, fathers, brothers and sisters.

A Member referred to page 48 of the report, and the issue of damp being experienced in a rented property provided by a Registered Social Landlord. He asked that if the landlord of the property refused to make good this problem, then could the Council take enforcement action against them to do so.

The Housing Solutions Team Leader confirmed that the above could be pursued through the Council's Public Protection Department, and it was incumbent upon the Registered

Social Landlord to undertake any works that may be necessary, particularly if not to do so, would be to the detriment of the health of the tenant. If a condition affecting the property such as damp was considered that bad after the completion of a survey of the property, then the Council could shut the property down and under the relevant tenancy agreement, the RSL would have a certain amount time to make the property once more fit for habitation.

A Member asked if the local authority had ever taken a RSL to court over failing to carry out any works that were urgently needed to one of their properties, particularly of the nature that not do so, would compromise the health of the tenant(s).

The Housing Solutions Team Leader confirmed that she was not fully aware of the answer to this, but she would find out and in turn contact the Member outside of the meeting. She added however, that a Prohibition Order could be served if the condition of the property was severe, rather than the property being 'shut down'.

A Member raised a query in respect of V2C and their option to veto nominations, which equated to this RSL seemingly having over and above the agreed 25% of allocation of tenants to housing vacancies under their own allocation policy rather than the Council's (i.e. agreed 75% to 25% in favour of the local authority).

The Housing Solutions Team Leader advised that she was not aware of this shrinkage, over and above any reference and explanation to this being made in the report.

The Member responded by making the point, that assurance was needed by the local authority from V2C, that they were ensuring that Social Housing was being made available to those that most needed it, i.e. people who were homeless or unemployed and receiving benefits, and not just to families who were in regular employment.

The Housing Solutions Team Leader recognised there was a balance that needed to be struck in terms of allocating individuals to properties under the terms of the Social Housing Allocation Policy. From her experience in the majority of cases, most individuals or families who occupied social housing were not working and receiving Unemployment or Housing Benefit. She added that there was a balance required to be struck in terms of Social Housing, in that if all tenants on the same housing estate were unemployed and/or receiving benefits, the location could then be classed as a socially deprived area. One of the caveats of Social Housing was that it was provided for those that most needed it, similarly to Affordable Housing and there was a considerable need for more of the latter.

The Housing Solutions Team Leader then left the meeting, and the Chairperson on behalf of Members invited to the meeting the Housing Manager from Wales and the West Housing Association.

She advised that a considerable amount of the work she was responsible for, related to the management of the Common Housing Register and associated work regarding the allocation of housing accommodation to tenants.

She confirmed that Wales and the West Housing Association were involved in the management of no less than 7 Common Housing Registers of local authorities across Wales, all of which differed in some way or another. The Manager, Wales and West confirmed that BCBC did have one of the better Common Housing Register's, in that it had been devised in such a way, that applicant's looking for rented housing accommodation could easily understand it.

She explained that as at the end of Quarter 4 last year, 17 properties had been let under the Common Housing Register, and 21 offers had been made under these letting arrangements (82%).

The success rate of housing tenants at the first time of asking, had not been as good in the current year as it was last year she added, however, pre-tenancy works organised by the Housing Options team, including their advice and assistance to tenants had shown a considerable improvement in the above period.

The Housing Manager, Wales and West Housing Association advised that some problems were being experienced in securing tenants for properties in certain difficult to let areas, and therefore, as well as using the Council's website for this purpose, Gumtree was also being used as there seemed to be more success in this through using their website.

A Member asked the Invitee what the main reasons were for individuals declining a property offered to them.

The Housing Manager, Wales and West Housing Association advised that the reasons for this were that the area within which they had been offered accommodation wasn't suitable, or if it was situated within a preferred area it may not be the right size property or not suitable for them internally speaking.

The Chairperson asked if any people refused taking up a tenancy due to a lack of support needs of one kind or another.

The Housing Manager, Wales and West Housing Association confirmed that this was something that was examined at pre-tenancy stage i.e. if a tenant was able to sustain their tenancy without any assistance, including financial support. If this was not the case, then there were elements of support that were made available, including for people who maybe had drug/alcohol dependency, those that required mental health support. Some of these problems often required long term rather than short term support.

People on the waiting list for accommodation should not refuse the offer of housing she considered, if they had any problems such as those mentioned above, as there were adequate support mechanisms in place to help support these types of problems.

The Chairperson referred to page 52 of the report, Table 2, and noted that in terms of failed nominations due to an applicant's circumstances, the percentage rate for Wales and West was good. He asked if this was because they were more flexible than other RSL's in terms of who they allowed to take up tenancy agreements.

The Housing Manager, Wales and West Housing Association advised that there were no real restrictions in relation to their properties. They did not however, tolerate the use of drugs at properties by tenants. With regard to older persons accommodation there was also a limited restriction here also.

Though the Common Housing Register was an effective system, Wales and West only had a limited view of this, and she felt that Wales and West should have increased access to this. They did not though, due to there being in place a database system restriction.

The Housing Manager, Wales and West Housing Association in conclusion, explained that relationships between BCBC and the partner RSL's was generally good, in that they

all had the same common aims and objectives, and were working more effectively as the partnership was developing.

The Chairperson thanked the Invitee for attending, and then invited to the meeting the representatives from V2C Housing Association.

The New Homes Team Leader V2C, confirmed that relationships between BCBC, V2C and the other RSL's was effective and had improved with time, with the relationship being professional, whereby all organisations were working towards a common goal and looking to make a commitment that would prove beneficial to customers.

All partners she felt were looking to provide sustainable communities that would be partly based upon housing the right people in areas that were suitable for their needs, and that the Housing Allocations and Inclusions Panel of BCBC/V2C, to which representatives of the other RSL's were invited to, ensured that all cases of nominations were properly looked at, so that processes and procedures that were followed in relation to the Social Housing Allocation Policy and the allocation of suitable housing to individuals and families included on the Common Housing Register were applied both correctly and impartially.

She added that there were areas for improvement, for example, V2C would like to have full rather than limited access to the Common Housing Register, in order to obtain as much information as possible regarding a customer, in order to help ensure that they were offered suitable accommodation that would help sustain their tenancy. V2C also felt that there was room for improvement by which nomination processes could be better discharged. A discussion had taken place with the local authority regarding this, though to help achieve this, it would mean that V2C staff would need to come to BCBC to use the system, as opposed to it being adapted and made directly accessible by V2C in their own offices.

The Chairperson enquired whether V2C were not able to fully utilise the system due to issues regarding data protection.

The New Homes Team Leader V2C confirmed that she was unsure of the reasons for this, though V2C had offered to purchase additional licences to overcome any security element and have full access to the Common Housing Register directly from their office.

A Member felt that relationships between BCBC and RSL's were in the main very good. He did however, have a recent experience with a constituent who came to see him explaining that she had 3 children, and was working in Porthcawl but looking for Social Housing accommodation in the area. She was subsequently offered accommodation though in the area of Garth, which would have proved to be very difficult for the above reasons should she have accepted this. She therefore appealed against this offer due to it not being suitable, and is now awaiting the outcome of the appeal.

The Chief Executive of V2C advised that he was not personally aware of this particular case, but with regard to normal process, he confirmed that in the main, nominations for housing for individuals and families usually came to V2C from the Housing Department of the local authority, including preferred areas within which to house applicants. If people were homeless, BCBC directed V2C to allocate accommodation to these individuals as a matter of urgency. If applicants were not homeless, they would indicate their area of preference. If they advised that they would be happy to be housed anywhere in the County Borough, then they would obviously have an opportunity of securing accommodation quicker than if they only wished to be housed for example in Porthcawl or Maesteg. He added that a certain amount of pressure was applied to V2C

by BCBC to allocate properties to tenants sometimes in an area which was not their preferred choice. However, V2C then sometimes responded to the local authority advising that if the nomination was delayed for a week or so, then a suitable property may become available in the preferred area as indicated on the application form.

The Chief Executive V2C felt that it was better to adopt this course of action, as if a tenant was placed in a suitable property for them in one of their preferred areas of choice, there was an increased likelihood that they would settle and be happy in the property resulting in a sustained tenancy which everybody would obviously prefer.

A Member noted that the local authority had 75% nomination rights in respect of the Social Housing Allocation Policy, whilst V2C had 25%. He was under the impression that this percentage had in recent months swayed significantly in favour of V2C, and he asked the Invitees if this was the case.

The Chief Executive of V2C confirmed that this was not the case, and that annually, this was reflected in the Social Housing Allocation Policy.

The Chief Executive V2C added that in 2015 there had been a total of 400 properties vacant, 372 of which the Council had nomination rights to (as oppose to V2C).

He reiterated that if the Council did fail to house a person or family after three attempts of doing so, then V2C would have an opportunity to do so, which may slant the 75% / 25% ratio, but this was the only criteria under which these percentages would alter.

The Member asked a supplementary question, namely if V2C ever refused applications for tenancy under the Social Housing Allocations Policy.

The New Homes Team Leader V2C advised that they did have their own allocations policy that differed from that of the Council. Applicants were interviewed and V2C then undertook a financial assessment of the individual to ensure that they could afford the accommodation they were intending to be the tenant of. She added this was important to V2C, as if they were in a position where they would struggle to keep up the tenancy payments going forward, then this would result in them accruing debt. In cases such as this, V2C were in all likelihood going to refuse their application for tenancy. The same situation would apply to applications from persons who had a previous record of housing related debt.

A Member asked if the RSL made the necessary checks in order to ensure that the applicant was being truthful in their application about their personal circumstances and health etc.

The Chief Executive V2C advised that checks were made regarding the contents of the form and the validity of the information contained therein, with the local authority and other key agencies. The applicant also had to sign the form declaring that the information they have put in this is correct.

He stressed however, that applications for Social Housing were only refused from the outset in very accentuating circumstances.

A Member pointed out that the local authority has a statutory obligation to make every attempt possible to find accommodation for the homeless or someone who has come out of prison.

The Chief Executive V2C confirmed that he was aware of this, and that V2C were happy to work with the local authority and other RSL's to ensure that this was achieved. The most important issue was ensuring that tenants were in the right property to suit their personal needs, and this applied in terms of their financial status, their preferred location and the right size property, whether this be smaller accommodation for single persons, or larger accommodation to cater for families. As mentioned previously, this often resulted in the tenants remaining in the property and providing a sustainable tenancy.

He added that page 52, Table 2, reflected that there had been between the period 01/01/15 – 31/12/15 a total of 25% failed nominations due to lettings criteria, and 27% failed nominations due to applicant's circumstances. He was happy to report to Members however, that since this period both these percentages had improved/reduced.

The Chairperson referred to page 53 of the report and paragraph 4.21 that made reference to void properties, and stated that with the exception of V2C, the remaining RSL partners will accept several nominations for a void property until a suitable match of tenant can be found. He asked if it was custom and practice for V2C to just accept one nomination, whilst other RSL's were willing to receive more.

The Chief Executive confirmed that V2C took 3 nominations, and if the first failed under their policy/criteria, they would similarly consider a 2nd and 3rd nomination. However, he added if the Council requested V2C to consider a 4th nomination, then they would do so.

The Chairperson of the Committee followed - up, by asking the Chief Executive, V2C what their definition was of a void property.

He confirmed that it meant that the house was empty, and waiting to be let for whatever reason. An assessment was then undertaken, in order to establish when it would be in an appropriate and acceptable condition to be re-let, after whatever work was required to be carried out to it. The Council were informed and updated when situations such as this took place.

V2C were obviously keen on repairing or re-furbishing properties so that they lost their void status, as empty properties equated to losing business as well as a loss of money.

He added that V2C presently had currently a total of 120 empty properties, around 10 of which required some major work in order for them to be made habitable once more. Of the remainder around 30 – 35 properties were almost ready for occupation, whilst others were having a small amount of work done to them. The aim he advised, was to reduce the amount of void properties from around 110 to 75 as soon as was possible.

He further added that since the new Social Housing Allocation Policy had been introduced under the revised Common Housing Register, the waiting list for housing accommodation had reduced significantly from around 4,000 to 1,000. This register was also now under the governance of the local authority only, whereas the previous register had been a combined register including all other relevant RSL's. Under the new Social Housing Allocation Policy, only persons considered as having a 'housing need' were placed on the waiting list, and therefore this had resulted in a smaller pool of applicants to allocate properties to. The Chief Executive V2C, felt that this often did not help with data matching, in terms of placing people who applied for social housing in appropriate accommodation that was entirely suitable for their needs. He confirmed that this situation was compounded by not enough smaller sized affordable accommodation that would suit single people, a couple, or perhaps a single parent with one child. All of the above factors contributed to tenants being placed in unsuitable accommodation that was

often as a result of this, for a short term rather than a longer term tenancy. He further added that 67% of the CHR were single people.

The Chief Executive, V2C proceeded by advising that he felt that adopting a housing waiting list was too prescriptive, whereas a choice system for tenants was far more flexible. He felt that wherever possible, the customer's needs regarding preferred choice of area and type/size of property should be considered.

A Member pointed out, that in Bryntirion there were instances whereby tenants were paying a service charge for maintenance work on green areas fronting their properties. However, as there were also private dwellings within the vicinity of these areas, they were enjoying the benefits of this also without having to pay for them.

The Chief Executive, V2C noted this point, adding that there had previously been a High Court ruling on this, where the case had been lost. He added however, that if there was a situation such as the above, and for example there were 10 properties fronting an area of open space that required maintaining, 5 of which were privately owned and 5 of which were owned by V2C, with the maintenance costs for grass cutting per annum being £100, then the tenants in the V2C dwellings would only pay £10 each (per property) with the remaining £50 being funded by the RSL, as the occupiers of the private dwellings could not be charged for the maintenance work.

As this concluded debate on this item, the Chairperson thanked the Invitees following which, they left the meeting.

Conclusions:

The Committee noted the report, which provided Members with an update on the Housing Solutions Service.

- Members requested that the BCBC Officer and RSL invitees join the meeting separately to enable them to discuss any issues or concerns.
- Members queried the criteria under Band A which refers to where there is an issue of under occupation and whether the 'bedroom tax' had meant an increase in numbers under this criteria. The Officer responded that there had not been a peak in numbers when the reform happened.
- Members asked about working relationships between BCBC Housing Officers and RSL staff, the BCBC officer responded that there was some frustration regarding, for example, information sharing where requests by BCBC Officers for information on voids had not been addressed. There were also concerns raised regarding the option for V2C to veto nominations, resulting in them having the over and above the agreed 25% control.
- Members asked whether BCBC can require that landlords action repairs where these may have been outstanding for some time, the Officer said that Landlords would be contacted in the first instance but that they could be required to carry out repairs if necessary.
- Both RSL representatives commented that working relationships were, in the main, working well.
- Both RSL representatives commented that there was some frustration regarding the limited access they have to the system and said that there were changes which could easily be made to the system enable improved access.
- Members were concerned that 'support needs' was cited as an example of criteria for turning down a nomination. The RSL representative responded that there had been some improvement in this regard lately in that the approach when considering people who may fit these criteria had been relaxed.

- Members requested clarification regarding instances where no one had been nominated for vacant properties. The RSL representative gave examples of situations where this may occur, for instance where rentals would not be sustainable due to the circumstances of the prospective tenant.
- Members requested information and examples where the option to veto nominations has been used. The RSL representative V2C gave an example where a nomination sent to V2C from BCBC had been rejected due to a £5.00 shortfall in the finances of the nominee. Members were concerned that this meant that the person nominated was not then given V2C social housing/accommodation because of this veto.
- Members queried whether the current situation could be improved to ensure that opportunities to nominate people for V2C properties are not missed in future. The RSL representative V2C responded that it would be helpful to add another band to address this issue.
- Members requested clarification regarding service charges to tenants. The RSL representative explained contingencies to address issues wherein tenants would be paying service charges which would benefit other residents living nearby.

Recommendations

- The Committee recommend that there should be consensus regarding the meaning of the term 'void'.
- The Committee recommend that the wording for the criteria in Band B which states 'You are homeless and housing will relieve your homelessness' is reworded to clarify what this means.
- The Committee supports the development of a common financial assessment tool.
- Members support the development of another band to ensure that opportunities to nominate people for properties are not missed in future.

Further Information requested

- The Committee requests further information regarding the number and nature of instances where BCBC had required landlords to carry out repairs.
- The Committee requests further information on whether/how allocation figures have changed over time.
- The Committee requests clarification regarding Looked After Children and whether and how they are prioritised for accommodation on leaving care.
- The Committee requests more detail on the BCBC and V2C partnership, specifically regarding how processes and working relationships concerning SHAP can be improved.

47. URGENT ITEMS

None

48. NOMINATION TO STANDING BUDGET RESEARCH AND EVALUATION PANEL

The Assistant Chief Executive Legal and Regulatory Services submitted a report, requesting Committee to nominate the Chairperson and one other Member of the Committee onto the standing Budget Research & Evaluation Panel and to nominate a further Member as a reserve.

RESOLVED: That Councillor JC Spanswick and Councillor CA Green be appointed on to the Budget Research and Evaluation Panel, with Councillor RM James (Reserve) being appointed as the Reserve Member.

49. 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 contained exempt information as defined in Paragraph 14 of Part 4 and Paragraph 21 of Part 5 of Schedule 12A of the Local Government Act 1972, as amended by the Local Government (Access to Information) (Variation) (Wales) Order 2007.

50. APPROVAL OF EXEMPT MINUTES

RESOLVED: That the exempt Minutes of the meeting of the Community, Environment & Leisure O&SC of 17 January 2016 be approved as a true and accurate record.

The meeting closed at 5.15 pm