

CITY AND COUNTY OF SWANSEA

MINUTES OF THE COMMUNITIES CABINET ADVISORY COMMITTEE

HELD AT COMMITTEE ROOM 5, GUILDHALL, SWANSEA ON
THURSDAY, 10 DECEMBER 2015 AT 2.00 PM

PRESENT: Councillors R A Clay (Chair) Presided

Councillor(s)

D W Cole

T J Hennegan

Councillor(s)

A M Cook

B Hopkins

Councillor(s)

N J Davies

G J Tanner

Apologies for Absence

Councillor(s): J P Curtice, H M Morris and A S Lewis (Cabinet Member for Next Generation Services)

Officers

Corporate Fraud Manager, Landlord Services Manager, Principal Council Tax & Business Rates Officer, Community Housing Service Manager, Rents Team Manager, Housing Business Manager and Planning Policy Team Leader.

42 **DISCLOSURES OF PERSONAL AND PREJUDICIAL INTERESTS.**

In accordance with the Code of Conduct adopted by the City and County of Swansea, no interests were declared.

43 **MINUTES.**

RESOLVED that the Minutes of the Communities Cabinet Advisory Committee meeting held on 12 November, 2015 be approved as a correct record.

44 **RENT ARREARS RECOVERY AND HOUSING BENEFIT FRAUD.**

Jane Harries, Landlord Services Manager assisted by Sandra White, Rents Team Manager, presented a report which detailed the Rent Arrears Recovery process.

Members noted the background, role of the rents team, process, partnership working and performance monitoring.

Officers detailed the Government's Welfare Reform changes which presented the greatest challenges to Council tenants. These included the removal of the single room subsidy (bedroom tax), the benefit cap and Universal Credit.

It was noted that close monitoring of the arrears of tenants was taking place, and the support tenants receive is intensive.

In response to Member questions, Officers confirmed that:

- The number of tenants in arrears was usually around 4500, with the average arrears of £220 (two weeks' rent);
- The spike between 2013-2014 could be attributed to the single room subsidy (bedroom tax);
- Tenants in arrears received regular letters and constant contact from Officers; and
- Officers work closely with partner agencies both internally and externally (including the Court) in order to offer appropriate support and advice;

Tal Davies, Corporate Fraud Manager, provided an update on Housing Benefit Fraud.

He referred to the significant change in the manner in which the service operated as a result of the introduction of the Single Fraud Investigation Service (SFIS) – national roll-out scheduled for 1 April, 2014 to 30 March, 2016. It was noted that since 1 June, 2015 SFIS have been responsible for investigating all welfare benefit fraud in the Swansea area, including Housing Benefit and Council Tax Benefit.

Members' noted that 51 people had been taken to Court, 59 verbal warnings and 13 Administrative Penalties had been issued. There had been almost £450,000 of Authority overpayments identified. Government Subsidy and an overpayment recovery rate of around 80% resulted in a 'profit' of £89,000 to the Authority to offset against costs.

He referred to the DWP joint working pilot the Authority had been involved with since November 2015 and it was noted that Swansea was the only Welsh Authority to be involved in the pilot scheme. The joint working pilot scheme was intended to streamline processes and ensure that the full extent of all welfare benefit fraud and Council Tax Reduction fraud are considered in a single investigation/prosecution.

He stated that the aim of the Corporate Fraud Team is to become self-funding by May 2017.

Internal and external corporate webpages were being developed to highlight the work of the team.

In response to Member questions, the Officer stated that the Council had always enjoyed a good working relationship DWP, however, their processes and blue print were not easily changed. This had resulted in change taking longer to implement.

The Chair thanked the Officers for their informative presentations.

RESOLVED that the reports be noted.

45 **PROGRESS ON CCOS HOUSE BUILDING PROGRAMME (TARGETS IN LDP; SOCIAL HOUSING).**

David Evans, Housing Business Manager, provided an update in respect of Council House building.

He referred to two key reforms to the way in which Council housing is financed. The exit from the Housing Revenue Account Subsidy (HRAS) system coupled with the new policy for setting rents provided more financial resources to the ring fenced Housing Revenue Account (HRA) over and above that required for identified commitments.

As a result of the reforms, a strategy was being developed to use the resources to increase the supply of affordable housing in Swansea in order to meet current and future needs and for the first time in a generation, the opportunity for the Council to directly provide more homes to help close this deficit.

However, there were limits to what could be supported within the HRA Business Plan and the amounts available would change from year to year. There were also options for the Council to consider in due course in terms of how these resources could be used to best effect.

He referred to the 'More Homes' project which had been initiated to assess current and projected needs, locations for development, the projections of available financial resources and the options for maximising their use. Members noted that two locations had been chosen by Cabinet to pilot schemes of new build, Land at Milford Way – Penderry and Land at Parc Y Helig – Birchgrove.

He stated that post 2020, financial support within the HRA Business Plan is likely to increase as a consequence of completing the required improvements to the existing Council stock to meet the Welsh Quality Housing Standard.

The long term strategy would set out needs, locations and an appraisal of options for facilitating and developing more Council housing. The opportunities were therefore enormous and the aim was to develop a realistic and deliverable programme.

Members discussed the housing crisis and the shortfall in respect of housing targets. The role of developers and the Council's building services section were also discussed.

Paul Meller, Planning Policy Team Leader, referred to the 30% target in respect of delivering affordable housing on new development sites. He stated that the current Unitary Development Plan had fallen short of targets. With potentially 21,000 dwellings to be delivered through the Local Development Plan (LDP) new ways of working have to be developed to attempt to deliver the target numbers. Opportunities existed for the Council to contribute to what is required and there is a need to get the plan and housing sites agreed.

He stated that no specific target existed yet as there are other competing factors such as associated infrastructure provision which will influence the final figure. The timescale for the first draft version of the LDP was January/early February 2016.

Members' discussed the need for political decisions to occur; the changing demographic; management, negotiation with developers to create mutually viable schemes; the need to ensure mixed housing provision (private and social) and affordability.

A discussion ensued regarding incorporating energy efficiency schemes into the new pilot schemes and reference was made to an initiative undertaken by Cambridge Council which linked to their Poverty Strategy.

The Chair thanked the Officers for their informative presentation.

RESOLVED that the reports be noted.

46 **CHANGES TO COUNCIL TAX IN RELATION TO EMPTY PROPERTIES.**

Martin Webborn, Principal Council Tax & Business Rates Officer, provided an update on the proposed changes to Council Tax.

He referred to the Housing Act Wales 2014 which introduced a discretionary power for Local Authorities to charge premiums on certain types of properties. The two specified types of properties were second homes and long term empty properties.

He provided a comprehensive overview of the changes and detailed the exceptions.

He advised that the decision to charge a premium on such properties has to be taken by full Council and a detailed report will be presented to Council in March 2016. A determination must be made before 31st March 2016 in order that a premium could be charged from 1st April 2017 onwards.

Members' congratulated the Principal Council Tax & Business Rates Officer for his informative presentation and requested that a written briefing be circulated.

Mark Wade, Community Housing Service Manager, provided an update on empty properties.

He detailed the work of his Officers in encouraging landlords to bring empty properties back into use.

The Chair thanked the Officers for their informative presentations.

RESOLVED that:

- 1) the report be noted; and
- 2) Martin Webborn provide a briefing note and circulate to Members of the Communities CAC.

47 **PRIVATE RENTED SECTOR LETTINGS TEAM AND CHANGE IN POLICY.**

Mark Wade, Community Housing Service Manager, referred to the Wales Housing Act 2014 and the obligations contained therein regarding homelessness and the duty to take all reasonable steps to prevent homelessness.

He referred to partnership working with the local housing charities such as Wallich who offered support to individuals at risk of becoming homeless. Members noted that

Wallich staff would be moving into Housing Options to assist with accessing private rented housing to prevent homelessness.

He detailed the progress over last 12 months and the establishment of new relationships both internally and externally.

Support had also been provided to landlords and regular meetings and forums had been convened to share information.

Councillor T J Hennegan (Vice Chair) presided.

Members discussed difficulties they had experienced with Housing Associations. The Community Housing Service Manager confirmed that the Council did have a close working relationship with Housing Associations and this has been the subject of a Scrutiny review recently to improve access to housing. This included enhanced information sharing and improved communications with Councillors for example. It was noted that as a result of the new Housing Act, Housing Associations have a duty of care to co-operate with Council in relation to homelessness provision.

The Vice Chair thanked the Community Housing Service Manager for the informative presentation.

RESOLVED that the report be noted.

48 **WORK PLAN 2015-2016.**

The Vice Chair stated that the Chair would discuss future items with the Cabinet Members for Anti-poverty and Next Generation Services.

The meeting ended at 4.05 pm

CHAIR