

No.

HOMES AND SAFE COMMUNITIES SCRUTINY COMMITTEE

Minutes of a remote meeting held on 10th February, 2021.

The Committee agenda is available [here](#).

Present: Councillor Mrs. S.D. Perkes (Chairman); Councillor Ms. J. Aviet (Vice-Chairman); Councillors Ms. B.E. Brooks, Mrs. C.A. Cave, Miss. A.M. Collins, Mrs. S.M. Hanks, Mrs. R. Nugent-Finn and L.O. Rowlands.

Also present: Councillor E. Williams (Cabinet Member for Legal, Regulatory and Planning Services) and Ms. B. Hunt (Citizens Advice Cardiff and Vale Representative).

404 ANNOUNCEMENT –

Prior to the commencement of the business of the Committee, the Chairman read the following statement:

“May I remind everyone present that the meeting will be recorded via the internet and this recording archived for future viewing.”

405 APOLOGIES FOR ABSENCE –

These were received from Councillors J.C. Bird, A.C. Parker; and Mrs. W. Davies, Mrs. G. Doyle, Mr. A. Raybould and Ms. H. Smith (Tenant Working Group Representatives).

406 MINUTES –

RECOMMENDED – T H A T the minutes of the meeting held on 13th January, 2021 be approved as a correct record.

407 DECLARATIONS OF INTEREST –

Councillor Ms. J. Aviet declared an interest in relation to Agenda Item No. 5 - Universal Credit - Impact on Council Housing Tenants and the Council. The nature of the interest was that the Councillor was a Council tenant of the Vale of Glamorgan Council. Due to this being a personal interest only, the Councillor could stay and speak on the presentation.

408 PRESENTATION: HOMELESSNESS PHASE 2 PROJECT UPDATE –
COURT ROAD, BARRY –

The presentation was delivered by the Operational Manager, Public Housing Services in conjunction with the Housing Development Programme Manager in order to apprise the Committee of the following:

- Prior to the pandemic under the Housing Wales Act 2014, despite someone presenting as homeless and their application being processed and support provided, unless they fell under the priority need group (such as those who were pregnant, 16-17-year olds, households with children or those with a serious medical condition) there was no requirement or duty to offer temporary accommodation to them;
- In April 2020 the Welsh Housing Minister announced a change that any persons roofless or sofa surfing should be deemed a priority need for temporary accommodation as they were especially vulnerable to COVID-19, resulting in a huge increase in the numbers requiring such housing;
- 116 rooms in 3 hotels were 'blocked' booked in order to alleviate this demand for temporary accommodation. Since April 2020 to date 411 clients have been accommodated in these rooms with 93 still housed at the hotels. The cost of the hotel accommodation was met by Welsh Government (WG) Phase 1 funding, less any Housing Benefit entitlement paid to each individual. The current low numbers of clients in hotel accommodation reflected the hard work undertaken by the Housing Solutions Team in sourcing and moving clients into other forms of temporary accommodation or permanent housing when it became available. The Council continued to look at acquiring other innovative housing solutions and to reduce the need for hotel-based accommodation as at any time the hotels may want these rooms back;
- In June 2020, the second phase of Homelessness Funding from WG was launched, consisting of £20m in capital and revenue funding. The capital funding was for the upgrade of existing temporary accommodation as well as for developing additional units for temporary residence, leading to the Council submitting a bid to deliver 11 units of temporary accommodation, with the WG encouraging the Council to build these using Modern Methods of Construction (MMC) and Off-Site Manufacturing techniques (OSM), at Court Road as they could be put up much faster than homes constructed using more traditional methods;
- The modular units cost over £900,000, with the WG providing capital of £197,212 towards these and the rest being made up through the Council's Housing Business Account. A revenue grant was also submitted and approved by the WG to fund three key staffing posts (one additional Housing Solutions Officer and two clerks of works), to help complete these works and move people in, up until 31st March, 2021 (which was also the deadline for completion of this project);
- In terms of ongoing management and support, these units would house people until more permanent accommodation could be found. The units would be let furnished, with residents also receiving ongoing contact and support from the Temporary Accommodation Officer. CCTV would be installed on the site and linked to the existing 24-hour security presence at the depot. Wrap around support would be available through an individual support

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- plan for each resident in order to help them to sustain their home, identify permanent accommodation and to integrate them into the community;
- Changes around the legislation and procurement policy at the beginning of the pandemic meant that it was far easier to procure temporary accommodation at pace and circumvent some of the usual development processes that a standard Council housing build would involve such as planning, sustainable urban drainage schemes and procurement via Permitted Development Rights (PDR). The PDR had a duration of 12 months, after which a full planning application could be submitted for the site or it could be returned to its previous state, up to 31st March, 2022. Also, the Council was able to legally procure works without the need for competition;
- Work on the Court Road site (from December 2020) had moved apace including enabling work, the establishment of site boundaries, the laying down of foundations and the demolition of the previous structure;
- The site consisted of 9 x 1 person units and 2 x 2 persons units within a screened perimeter with other key features such as a secure gated entrance, on-site CCTV, public amenity space and landscaping;
- The units would utilise Structurally Insulated Panels (SIPs), as well as energy efficient heating and hot water systems offering residents a low-cost means of heating and supplying their homes;
- The development was on course for completion by 31st March, 2021.

Following the presentation, several Committee Members raised the following comments and questions:

- Councillor Mrs. Hanks stated that this was an exciting project for the Vale of Glamorgan and asked what the life span of the units would be. The Housing Development Programme Manager replied that the units were extremely adaptable and resilient; they were in fact 'demountable' and could be moved to an alternative site. The unit lifespan was considerable at sixty years plus and accredited by BOPAS (Build Offsite Property Assurance scheme).
- Councillor Ms. Aviet asked about those residents at the development who may be working and therefore not in receipt of Universal Credit and what would happen with their payment of rent and Council Tax as well as how they would pay for internet and other utility bills. Regarding service charges, the Housing Development Programme Manager stated that due to the likely occupants being on the site on a temporary basis only, the services and supplies would be provided on a metered basis. The Operational Manager, Public Housing Services explained that rent would be charged at the usual temporary accommodation rate and residents would be able to apply for various means tested benefits such as Housing Benefit, Universal Credit or Council Tax Reduction Scheme, if they were on a low income, in order to help with paying rent and Council Tax. Money advice and support would also be given in order to help residents with such issues in readiness to move into the units.
- Councillor Ms. Aviet also asked about residents' pets, with the Operational Manager, Public Housing Services stating they would be looking into whether pets could be allowed to reside at the units with their owners.
- Councillor Miss. Collins asked about a recent news article on the increase in calls to Shelter Cymru and Llamau by the 'hidden homeless' such as those

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sofa surfing and if this trend had also been seen in the Vale with increased calls to Homes4U and whether there were plans to build similar temporary accommodation elsewhere in Barry or to convert existing buildings for this purpose. The Operational Manager, Public Housing Services replied that in the longer term there were already plans in place to increase affordable housing through Council building and in partnership with Housing Associations. In terms of persons presenting as homeless, there had been a large increase in people contacting the Housing Solutions team. Council staff were also going out to persons identified as homeless in order to offer temporary accommodation as well as dealing with referrals from Shelter Cymru and Llamau. The Head of Housing and Building Services added that the long-term ambition of WG and the Council was eradicating homelessness wherever possible, with the emergency legislation around this staying in place for the short and medium term at least. Going forward, the long-term aim would have to be the development of more permanent Council accommodation. He added that more one-bedroom accommodation either had or would be coming on stream in the near future in order to catch up on the demand for single/one-bedroom units and for affordable housing – such as the development at Subway Road in Barry. This would need to be done in conjunction with helping those persons who were homeless or in temporary accommodation with education or employment opportunities also.

- Councillor Ms. Brooks asked about the Council's communications around the new site in order to help it integrate into the wider community and would the Council still be keeping the hotel and Bed & Breakfast (B&B) accommodation in order to keep various options on the table for temporary housing. The Head of Housing and Building Services replied that there had been communications with residents in the nearby area to Court Road, in order to deal with their questions and concerns, as well as offering nearby residents the opportunity to have a look at the site prior to people moving in (social distancing allowing). The Operational Manager, Public Housing Services added that those tenants with complex needs would not be housed at the new site and that hotel and B&B accommodation would be kept as an option for temporary housing, albeit reducing this need over time as other options became available.
- Councillor Mrs. Nugent Finn asked about the third sector support for residents at the development, if this was Supporting People and if so, would this be choice based. The Operational Manager, Public Housing Services replied this was indeed Supporting People funded services but only the Homes4U allocations Scheme was choice based. Pobl were currently providing support to individuals at hotels. It had been found that residents did better when they kept their existing support worker when moving from one type of temporary accommodation to another, so they would continue to be supported by Pobl when they moved into the new development.
- The Councillor also asked the Housing Development Programme Manager on how the site could be 'blended' with the existing use of the Court Road depot site. He replied that it depended on the Local Development Plan (LDP) allocation for the depot on the permanency of the development. Therefore, it would be prudent to not rely on the PDR but to extend their usage until such time as there is a realisation of the Court Road site in terms of the LDP. As

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previously stated, these units were demountable and could be moved at any time.

- Councillor Mrs. Nugent-Finn queried if the units counted towards the LDP, to which the Head of Regeneration and Planning replied that they did contribute to the LDP as they counted as 'C3' housing.
- Councillor Mrs. Nugent Finn queried how big the decked area was for each unit and whether there was any communal play area on the site. The Housing Development Programme Manager replied that the decked area was 4 x 2 metres. He added there was no dedicated play area on the site due to it primarily being single resident housing on the site but there was plenty of amenity space for children to play in if required.
- Finally, Councillor Mrs. Nugent Finn cited the example of modular housing in Cardiff that focused on residents who had substance misuse issues. The Head of Housing and Building Services replied that the Council was trying to create a distinct 'template' for modular housing within the Vale, but the Council was also collaborating with other Local Authorities on a standard specification for Modern Methods of Construction (MMC) in order to help supply chains and to drive down costs. The Housing Development Programme Manager added that the house building programme going forward would use MMC and in the longer term utilise alternative forms of energy.
- The Chairman suggested that a site visit to the Court Road development could be useful for Members of the Committee as well as local residents once it was completed and asked what additional help residents would get through the Third Sector and others. On the latter, the Head of Housing and Building Services explained this would entail combined support from the Third Sector, the Community Development Team and departments within the Council in order to create a sustainable move on. He added that an extra £1.2m was awarded to the Council for the Housing Support Grant in order to develop additional services in 2021/22.

There being no further questions, the Scrutiny Committee, having considered the presentation, subsequently

RECOMMENDED – T H A T the presentation on the Homelessness Phase 2 Project Update at Court Road, Barry be noted.

Reason for recommendation

Having regard to the contents of the presentation and discussions at the meeting.

409 UNIVERSAL CREDIT – IMPACT ON COUNCIL HOUSING TENANTS AND THE COUNCIL (DEH) –

The report was presented by the Head of Housing and Building Services in conjunction with the Housing and Strategic Projects Team Leader. The report was requested by the Committee at a previous meeting and set out the impact of Universal Credit (UC) on Council tenants and the Council as well as detailing the work undertaken to mitigate any adverse impacts.

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Key points raised by Officers from the report were:

- The Welfare Reform Act introduced a wide-ranging programme of welfare reforms – including UC – which were regularly reported through Corporate Performance and Resources Scrutiny Committee (by the Head of Finance) as well as this update to the Homes and Safe Communities Scrutiny Committee;
- The impacts of the welfare reforms had been heightened by the outbreak of Covid-19 in 2020;
- Changes in legislation and regulations due to COVID-19 meant that landlords (such as the Council) must give tenants six months' notice before court applications for possession could be considered by the Court. Also, there was a moratorium (except in certain extreme circumstances) on County Court Possession claims by landlords as well;
- The introduction of UC and the direct payment of this to tenants (other than in exceptional circumstances) and the payment of this benefit in arrears rather than in advance had created an issue – particularly with the increase in tenants in receipt of UC – meaning that the 862 tenants in receipt of UC had a combined rent arrears of over £442,000. This equated to 76% of the Council's total rent arrears. To put this in context, the average arrear per tenant on UC was £513 whereas those tenants who were in receipt of Housing Benefit (HB) only had arrears of £150 on average;
- The Council had anticipated these issues following on from the piloting of UC by other Local Authorities, who saw arrears eventually reaching a peak and then plateauing, by accounting for this through using business planning and setting the bad debt figures to a suitable level. However, the scale of these arrears over the last 12 months had still been a surprise;
- Income raised through rent was important for funding new Council housing, as well as investment and environmental improvements to existing housing stock;
- The Council placed a strong emphasis on supporting tenants regarding debt and providing an early, preventative approach;
- Since the lockdown and the COVID-19 pandemic, there were now 300 additional tenants who were behind with their rent and rent arrears had increased to just over £580,000 which equated to 2.8% of the total rent roll. However, the Council's level of arrears still compared favourably with other Welsh Local Authorities with social housing stock;
- Due to the requirement for UC claimants to utilise digital services and the internet in order to access their benefits, respond to email, and complete online journals, a lot of work had been done in the background between the Council, local libraries, community buildings and Job Centre Plus in order to give claimants access to digital devices and improve digital literacy. The increasing use of smartphones and tablets – particularly due to COVID-19 and the lockdown – had also helped to mitigate the worst effects of moving over to an online benefits system with UC;
- The waiting period for UC claims had now been discontinued and it was possible for all claimants to request 'advance' payments. This however, was a 'double-edged sword' in that the advanced payment had to be recouped through subsequent payments (up to 30% from these payments over a twelve-month repayment period) and that direct payments would be a big step

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for tenants not used to paying rent directly and with other conflicting priorities or debts. Similarly, there were concerns around the need for tenants to have a bank account for the UC to be paid into; but these had subsequently been mitigated by the high street banks making these accounts far more accessible;

- The Money Advice Team had been vital in helping to deal with this issue, by helping tenants to secure just under £400,000 in additional income such as from written-off debts, loans, grants and back dated benefits in order to reduce their debt burdens. The Council had strengthened its processes meaning that any new tenants moving onto UC were offered money advice appointments from the start. The Income Officers were prompting tenants regularly around the payment of rent and would refer tenants to Money Advisors and housing related support if needed;
- Analysis of rent arrears had been undertaken to understand what was driving the increases in arrears in the Vale and in particular pre- and post- COVID-19. For example, for those tenants whose employment had been affected by Covid-19, there had been a 24% increase in such tenants being in receipt of UC since the start of March 2020. Also, some of the older tenants, shielding or reluctant to go out during COVID-19 and who did not have access to online banking, had also fallen into rent arrears. There also existed a very small group of tenants who were not engaging with the Council regarding payment of rent and had accrued significant arrears as a result (£4,000 plus);
- The rise in arrears had also impacted the staff working at the Housing Income Team, who historically had worked hard to keep rent arrears low and helped to make the Council be seen as one of the best social landlords in Wales. The team had been keeping in constant touch with tenants through telephone, email and so on in order to provide money advice and referrals in order to help deal with rent arrears, on average contacting 700 tenants each week;
- The Council had maximised the use of Alternative Payments Arrangements (APAs) – managed payments requested for tenants who were vulnerable or at risk, who had fallen behind with their rent and this could be paid directly to the Council as the landlord via the Department of Work and Pensions (DWP);
- Overall, the roll out of UC had been challenging, impacting both tenants and Council staff but the Council had worked hard to mitigate the impacts and levels of arrears which remained lower than its peers. Also, over the last year, no tenant had been evicted.

Following the report, a number of Members raised the following comments and questions:

- Councillor Mrs. Hanks asked if there were any grants for tenants claiming UC to access tablets during lockdown. The Housing and Strategic Projects Team Leader replied that the Money Advice Team could offer help and advice to tenants on a case by case basis on various funding and grants but was not aware of anything specifically for tablets. However, the Community Investment Team had been pro-active in getting devices and support for people to get online.
- Councillor Mrs. Hanks also commented on the section of the report covering the pilot and plans undertaken by the DWP to change the way the managed payments were made so monthly payments were sent to the landlord at the

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same time as the tenant received their money. The Housing and Strategic Projects Team Leader replied that the process had already started for new claimants (legacy claimants remained under the old process at this time), with the Council receiving the money the same time as the tenants.

- The Chairman asked what the impact on the Council was in terms of being able to fund house building and so on with the increase in rent arrears. The Head of Housing and Building Services replied that the current Business Plan (and next year's) had been predicated on 6% bad debt provision; current levels of bad debt were 2.7% and so the impact had been mitigated for the time being on areas such as Welsh Housing Quality Standards, new building work and other priority work. Currently there was enough tolerance within the Business Plan to meet the Council's housing and building priorities.
- The Chairman also enquired about those tenants who were not engaging with the Council regarding the payment of their rent and whether they could have their rent paid directly to the Council instead. The Head of Housing and Building Services explained that all Local Authorities and Registered Social Landlords had signed up to not evict people into homelessness during the pandemic in conjunction with using APAs for those tenants willing to engage and eligible for this. However, there were no sanctions currently for the small number of tenants who did not engage and did not pay their rent from their UC benefit. The use of eviction in such cases was a last resort and ultimately could be seen as a failure for all sides if implemented. Additional funding was now available for the Housing Support Grant in order to expand services and to help provide additional support and mitigation for this issue.
- The Chairman also raised what the average cost would be to tenants to pay an advance UC payment back. The Housing and Strategic Projects Team Leader replied that it was difficult to estimate this due to the varying costs for each claimant, but the amount claimed back each month was significant. The Head of Housing and Building Services also added that UC claimants had been receiving additional payments due to COVID-19 but this may come to an end as the situation improved. The Chairman responded if there had been any discussion with the DWP to extend the repayment period of the UC advance to more than a year. The Housing and Strategic Projects Team Leader replied he had not heard of any specific lobbying on extending the repayment period, although bodies such as Crisis and Shelter had lobbied successfully in discontinuing the waiting time for UC and getting greater flexibility on advances for this benefit.

Scrutiny Committee, having carefully considered the report and all the issues and implications contained therein subsequently

RECOMMENDED – T H A T the report be noted.

Reason for recommendation

Having regard to the contents of the report and discussions at the meeting.

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410 HOUSING AND HOMELESSNESS PROVISION WITHIN THE VALE OF GLAMORGAN – TASK AND FINISH GROUP – SCOPE (MD) –

The Homes and Safe Communities Scrutiny Committee had, on 14th October, 2020, identified that housing and homelessness provision as part of the recovery from COVID-19 should be reviewed by the Committee and consideration be given to setting up a Task and Finish Group in order to achieve this.

The report asked the Scrutiny Committee to confirm the membership of the proposed Task and Finish Group and approve the proposed Scope, meetings / sessions required and timescale for the review.

The subsequent report(s) produced by the Task and Finish Group would be referred back to the Scrutiny Committee for consideration and any recommendations or comments approved then be referred on to Cabinet.

Several Members of the Committee confirmed they would be part of the Task and Finish Group, with the Chairman and the Committee also agreeing to the invitation being re-circulated thereby ensuring that all Members (both elected and co-opted) were given a final opportunity to join the Group (if they had not done so already). Once the final details on membership had been agreed, the Committee would be notified via Democratic Services accordingly.

Scrutiny Committee, having carefully considered the report and all the issues and implications contained therein subsequently

RECOMMENDED –

(1) T H A T the final details on the membership of the Task and Finish Group be confirmed as soon as possible, to comprise of at least 6 Members (from Labour, Conservative, Plaid Cymru, Llantwit First Independent and Vale Independents political groups, as well as co-opted members on the Scrutiny Committee) and that the Committee be advised of such names at a later date. Also, that the first meeting of the Group be undertaken as soon as practicable following its establishment.

(2) T H A T the proposed Scope and timescale for the review as attached at Appendix 1 to the report be approved.

(3) T H A T reports of the Task and Finish Group be referred to the Homes and Safe Communities Scrutiny Committee for consideration.

Reasons for recommendations

(1&2) To progress the review.

(3) To seek comments / approval on any recommendations of the Task and Finish Group prior to referral to Cabinet.