

HOMES AND SAFE COMMUNITIES SCRUTINY COMMITTEE

Minutes of a Remote meeting held on 9th June, 2021.

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

The recording of the meeting is available [here](#).

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

Also present: Mrs. G. Doyle and Ms. H. Smith (Representatives from Tenant Working Group / Panel) and Ms. C. Ireland (Citizens Advice Cardiff and Vale Representative).

89 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 live streamed as well as recorded via the internet and this recording archived for future viewing.”

The Democratic and Scrutiny Services Officer, with the Chairman’s permission, also reminded Committee Members of the Council’s ‘Cabinet Decision Call-In’ and ‘Request for Consideration at a Scrutiny Committee’ procedures and that the forms for both procedures were available to Elected Members via the Council’s Intranet under the MemberNet section. The Chairman also asked the Officer to share the relevant links to Members by way of a reminder.

90 APOLOGIES FOR ABSENCE –

These were received from Mrs. W. Davies and Mr. A. Raybould (Tenant Working Group / Panel Representatives).

91 MINUTES –

RECOMMENDED – T H A T the minutes of the meeting held on 12th May, 2021 be approved as a correct record.

92 DECLARATIONS OF INTEREST –

No declarations of interest were received.

93 PRESENTATION: DIGITAL INCLUSION –

The presentation on Digital Inclusion was given by the Operational Manager for Customer Relations, which provided an update on the work around digital inclusion within the Vale of Glamorgan by the Council and partners over the last 16 months (since the pandemic) as well as developments going forward. The pandemic had been a challenging time for this service in terms of supporting residents to improve their digital skills but, as the Council moved into a recovery phase, it was hoped that this would provide an excellent opportunity to look at what was needed to help residents in developing their digital skills going forward based:

- On the core objective of the Council around digital inclusion, namely “equipping residents with the digital skills and technologies they need to enhance their lives”;
- On enabling residents to take advantage of products, training, services and jobs that can be accessed digitally; and
- On helping to address social isolation.

Other takeaways from the presentation were:

- The pandemic had increased the need for residents to use and access digital technology, such as school children and the most vulnerable in order to access learning, food and medication;
- Conversely, the pandemic had also hampered digital inclusion by preventing face to face training, digital device lending schemes and diverting resources to other areas in order to deal with the pandemic;
- The current situation was complex, with multiple stakeholders involved offering support to residents around digital services (such as Welsh Government (WG), various Council services and third sector – and private sector – organisations i.e. a major network provider looking to support vulnerable residents with discounted broadband) as well as overlapping services and projects. This had caused duplication, dilution of impact, competition for limited resources, lack of co-ordination (such as some services or groups having a surplus of digital devices and volunteers, with others having a lack of these) and limitations on analysis / reporting;
- The Council had responded to the above issues and were attempting to remove such barriers by:
 - Re-establishing the Get The Vale Online Partnership (GTVO) with an updated focus and structure, as well as regular meetings which would help to co-ordinate and maximise resources for Digital Inclusion much more effectively;
 - Setting up an Internal Delivery Group, merging the Vale Heroes, Digital Inclusion and Armed Forces Covenant groups and expanding the services they provide such as utilising Digital Inclusion to help residents with mental health, financial and employability issues as well increasing skills and access to digital technology. An Action Plan would be produced to help deliver each group’s objectives, share resources, grants and experiences more effectively as part of a ‘holistic’ approach to supporting residents as well as better reporting of outcomes;

- To develop better 'customer insight' in conjunction with a WG funded research project into resident use (or not) of digital services and their skills in order to identify gaps within this area;
- The Council were looking to now:
 - Review its Digital Strategy to see if it remains valid;
 - Re-start lending of digital devices to residents;
 - Work with Digital Communities Wales to deliver digital training to veterans (including a grant for 80 tablets in order to assist with this);
 - Look at how to include support for digital inclusion via Vale Heroes through both the website and call handling support;
 - Implement a new digital platform for the Council to help residents remain updated on the progress of their requests as well as maintaining face to face and telephony services too; and
 - Reintroduce face to face training to communities who would benefit from this type of training.

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

- The Chairman and the Committee wished to thank staff involved with Digital Inclusion for their efforts, despite the ongoing pressures around the pandemic, while still receiving positive feedback;
- Ms. Smith (Tenant Representative), explained that she was involved in running a local community centre and had helped to provide digital devices to local residents and children wishing to access schoolwork. However, many children / residents did not have internet access and attempts to install broadband at the community centre had been so far unsuccessful due to, for example, the estimated high cost of doing this as given by broadband providers. The Operational Manager for Customer Relations replied that he would speak to a broadband supplier currently in talks with the Council around residential broadband provision to see if they could assist. Another option would be to provide sim cards with data in order that residents could use their devices via the mobile network;
- Councillor Bird added that local communities could also look at obtaining 4G routers, which normally came with generous data bundles and with minimum installation. The Operational Manager for Customer Relations agreed that this could be an option he could look into for Ms. Smith;
- Councillor Mrs. Cave asked if there was a 'digital needs hotline' that could deal with the issues raised by Ms. Smith around communities accessing digital services. The Operational Manager for Customer Relations replied that the Vale Heroes hotline could be contacted in order to advance the enquiry and there was an email address that could be used for such enquires as well, which he would share with Members. The Councillor asked if this email address had been publicised and promoted as this could have helped Ms. Smith in her efforts. The Operational Manager for Customer Relations stated that primarily the email address had been for internal developments but going forward this could be used for external enquiries. Such support was being reviewed in conjunction with GTVO. Both the Councillor and other Members felt that it was important to promote and utilise the Vale Heroes telephone number and the digital services email address as well as ultimately having a 'one stop shop' contact or hotline that Councillors can signpost

residents to. The Operational Manager for Customer Relations would take these suggestions forward and report back to the Committee on what that service would look like.

- Councillor Mrs. Nugent-Finn wished to echo the need for digital support from the Council to be more accessible to residents, citing the example of the COVID-19 Group a voluntary group primarily run through Facebook. They were extremely communicative and had been good in signposting access to support for residents, including digital matters. She felt that the Council should be linking up with this group as they could share the group's best practice, etc. with the Council. The Operational Manager for Customer Relations agreed and would get in contact with the COVID-19 Group.
- The Vice-Chairman stated that she was looking to set up an 'intergenerational' scheme in order to get school children to help older people gain greater digital skills and knowledge. The Operational Manager for Customer Relations replied that this approach had been successful elsewhere within the UK in terms of both digital training and wider social benefits and he would take this suggestion back to the GTVO and the Internal Group.

Having considered the presentation, the Scrutiny Committee subsequently

RECOMMENDED –

- (1) T H A T the presentation on the work undertaken around Digital Inclusion be noted.
- (2) T H A T the Scrutiny Committee receive a further update on Digital Inclusion at a later date.

Reasons for recommendations

- (1) Having regard to the contents of the presentation and discussions at the meeting.
- (2) To keep the Committee informed of the work being undertaken around Digital Inclusion within the Vale of Glamorgan by the Council and its partners.

94 SHARED REGULATORY SERVICES BUSINESS PLAN (DEH) –

The report was presented by the Head of Shared Regulatory Services and set out the process by which the draft Shared Regulatory Services (SRS) Business Plan for 2021/22 had been developed. The draft Plan required ratification by the Joint Committee and formed a part of the SRS Annual reporting process set out in the Joint Working Agreement. The report offered the opportunity for pre-decision scrutiny of the Business Plan prior to submission to the SRS Joint Committee.

Key takeaways from the report were as follows:

- SRS was a fully integrated Regulatory Services function delivering Environmental Health, Trading Standards and Licensing across Bridgend,

Cardiff, and the Vale of Glamorgan. This was the only type of integrated service of its kind in Wales, with only a handful of similar organisations elsewhere within the UK. It offered a single management structure and a strong and sustainable service in collaboration with the other Authorities involved since 2015;

- The Business Plan described how SRS would deliver each Council's statutory requirements and corporate aspirations including safeguarding and general wellbeing;
- The Plan's priorities (as laid out and monitored within the Plan) had been originally set in 2015 in conjunction with Scrutiny Members including improving health and wellbeing, protecting the environment, supporting the local economy and safeguarding the vulnerable. This was underpinned by the need to maximise resources in a climate of ongoing service cuts and savings, which had been done successfully and sensibly by the service;
- The Head of Shared Regulatory Services stated he was extremely proud of the SRS staff who had risen to the challenges that the service had faced due to the pandemic, adding that SRS continued to provide the member Authorities with value for money, whilst keeping its 'relevance' and usefulness to each Council involved and their elected members as well as being generally well regarded by the communities SRS served;
- In terms of performance and successes:
 - SRS staff attendance levels remained high (compared to all three Council partners' averages for all staff attendance);
 - Performance against the established measures continued to improve; and
 - SRS had delivered significant savings, over and above those expected by the partner authorities. The SRS authorities had also allowed some of these savings to be put into a reserve which could be used to invest back into the service.
- SRS staff (with the help of Vale ICT) had been able to work remotely during the pandemic effectively, with staff being able to work from any location and this had also been replicated in each of the other partner Authorities as well;
- The pandemic had dominated SRS' focus (such as enforcement of pandemic restrictions on businesses), but other priorities still remained or had remerged, for example, monitoring hygiene for food outlets now reopening, dealing with complaints around overgrown and abandoned buildings, pests (such as rats), animal welfare issues, air quality, housing conditions and emerging public health legislation.

Following the report, Members raised the following comments and questions:

- Councillor Ms. Brooks asked how the Joint Scrutiny of SRS was progressing. The Head of Shared Regulatory Services explained that scrutiny of SRS was still divided between the various member Councils, with the Head of Shared Regulatory Services and his colleagues attending each of these. As yet, Joint Scrutiny between the authorities of SRS remained unrealised (due in part to the scale and complexity of undertaking this) but it was still an aspiration for the longer term.

- Councillor Mrs. Perkes asked around the Wales Illegal Money Lending Unit (WIMLU) and the scale of this issue within the Vale of Glamorgan. The Head of Shared Regulatory Services replied that WIMLU had been part of SRS since 2015. After a peak in illegal money lending activity in the 2012-2017 period, things had gone quiet, but it was expected that due to the money pressures wrought by the pandemic, there would be a rise again in such activity. Links had been formed between SRS, Citizens Advice and Credit Unions in order to address this issue. There was also an investigation currently ongoing within the SRS region concerning illegal money lending. It was expected that more of this type of illegal activity would be seen over the next eighteen months. The key to dealing with this issue was encouraging the public to come forward to admit they had been victims of illegal money lending and this would also require cooperation with voluntary organisations in order to get the relevant intelligence. The Head of Shared Regulatory Services added that he would share some case studies with Members in order to illustrate the scale and severity of this problem.
- The Vice-Chairman asked about coloured contact lenses which had been banned from being purchased at shops and could only be prescribed by an optician. However, these could still be purchased online and she asked if SRS could intervene with such purchases. The Head of Shared Regulatory Services replied that test online purchases could be made by SRS and they could subsequently challenge the online retailer if they were based within the UK. However, if these lenses were supplied from outside the UK (such as China or Europe) then no such enforcement action could be made. SRS had worked closely with opticians previously in order to flag up anyone who had eye problems as a result of using such lenses during the Halloween period. In 2019, there were 100 such people within the SRS region who had reported problems due to using poorly made coloured lenses. The SRS had successfully worked with retailers within the SRS region to totally eliminate sales of coloured lenses from such outlets.
- Councillor Mrs. Nugent-Finn asked where SRS Officers were based in order that they could be contacted and receive walk-ins by Elected Members and the public. The Head of Shared Regulatory Services replied that SRS staff still had a presence within the Civic Offices in Barry, City Hall and County Hall, Cardiff, two locations within Bridgend as well as being on Facebook and Twitter. SRS also had its own dedicated telephone number based at C1V. He also encouraged his staff to leave their contact details on emails sent to recipients in order to be as accessible as possible to the public and others.
- The Head of Shared Regulatory Services also informed the Committee that the SRS Business Plan would be going to the SRS Joint Committee on 22nd June. The Vale of Glamorgan Council would be represented by the relevant Cabinet Member (Councillor Williams) and the Chairman for Licensing / Public Protection (Councillor Thomas) and any queries or issues on the Plan from Members could be raised with them also.

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

RECOMMENDED – T H A T the Shared Regulatory Services Business Plan for 2021/22 be noted.

Reason for recommendation

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

95 UPDATE ON THE TASK AND FINISH GROUP FOR HOUSING AND HOMELESSNESS (DEH) –

The report, presented by the Democratic and Scrutiny Services Officer, asked the Homes and Safe Communities Scrutiny Committee to consider the progress made so far by the Task and Finish Group for Housing and Homelessness Provision within the Vale of Glamorgan.

There had been two meetings of the Group so far, with the following areas covered:

- At the first meeting of the Group in April, as well as administrative tasks being completed (such as the appointment of the Chairman and Vice-Chairman), it was also agreed that the scope and timetable of review for the Group should be more focused on the current, immediate, priorities faced within housing and homelessness provision (regarding allocation, legislation and finance;
- At the second meeting (on 1st June), various matters were considered, including Allocation Priorities, the Legal Overview and the Current Budgetary Situation for Housing and Homelessness Provision;
- A third meeting was scheduled for Tuesday, 13th July which would look at the provision of help and support for vulnerable and similar groups in order to aid them with permanent accommodation.

Following the report, Members raised the following comments and questions:

- Councillor Mrs. Perkes (Chairman of the Task and Finish Group) wished to add that the second meeting had been extremely useful for the Group in raising their knowledge levels on these issues, as well as providing the framework for the Task and Finish Group to formulate their ideas and recommendations on how to address housing and homelessness provision in order to come back to the Scrutiny Committee. The Committee Chairman (and a Member of the Group) agreed that the meetings so far had been very constructive and a good introduction to the issues involved.
- The Vice-Chairman raised the issue of negative comments on social media about the development and provision of additional social and other forms of housing within the Vale of Glamorgan. She added that all citizens within the Vale deserved to have adequate housing and such negative messaging on social media needed to be counteracted by the Council by outlining the clear need for further housing within the Vale. The Head of Housing and Building Services replied that the Council had been trying to challenge negative public perceptions around the development of social housing and indeed development of private sector housing generally. The published Housing Market Assessment and other data available clearly showed a pressing need for housing (900 plus persons in need of housing annually and 6,000 persons on the Homes4U scheme) plus those individuals who needed to be housed

during the pandemic. As part of the Task and Finish Group, Members would be looking at these issues within their remit. The Council would also need to keep monitoring the situation around six-month notices and the moratorium on evictions which could change in the future (as in England), leading to an increase in demand for housing and temporary accommodation. The Head of Housing and Building Services also stated that a report would be going to Cabinet shortly concerning the Local Housing Strategy which would outline the current housing situation within the Vale. He would also liaise with the Communications team in order to publicise the key priorities within the Strategy which would help to challenge inaccurate information being shared online and through social media.

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

RECOMMENDED – T H A T the progress made and work undertaken by the Task and Finish Group for Housing and Homelessness Provision within the Vale of Glamorgan so far be noted.

Reason for recommendation

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