

SCRUTINY COMMITTEE (COMMUNITY WELLBEING AND SAFETY)

MINUTES of an extraordinary meeting held on 8th November, 2006.

Present: Councillor Mrs. M.E.J. Birch (Chairman); Councillor R.F. Curtis (Vice-Chairman); Councillors R.J. Bertin, Mrs. J.E. Charles, P. Church, J. Clifford, S.C. Egan, Mrs. A.J. Preston, Mrs. M. Randall, A.J. Readman, Mrs. S.I. Sharpe, K.R. Stockdale, W.C. Vaughan and Mrs. M.R. Wilkinson.

Also present:

Councillors Ms. M.E. Alexander, Mrs. A.J. Moore, N. Moore and J. W. Thomas.

505 APOLOGIES FOR ABSENCE -

These were received from Councillors Ms. R.M. Birch, G.C. Kemp, C.L. Osborne and C.J. Williams.

506 DECLARATIONS OF INTEREST -

No declarations were received.

507 A REVIEW OF THE EFFECTIVENESS OF THE COUNCIL'S HOMELESSNESS STRATEGY AND THE IMPACT ON THE COMMUNITY -

Members were advised of the final report of the desk-top review of the effectiveness of the Council's homelessness strategy and the impact on the community. The review of the homelessness strategy formed part of the 2005/06 planned work programme for the Scrutiny Committee. The scope had originally been drawn up to evaluate the effectiveness of the Council's homelessness strategy and the impact on the community which would identify the gap between the Welsh Assembly Government's Homelessness Strategy and the existing Vale of Glamorgan Strategy. However, due to the level of interest in the subject the parameters of the scope had been expanded to enable full Member participation. It was further reported that this had been the first review to be undertaken in the authority which had fully engaged the Scrutiny Members and encouraged them to lead the process and participate in workshops, conduct interviews and attend site visits.

The report had also sought to reflect the concerns and needs of the community by interviewing and consulting with a variety of partner agencies and service users to develop key study examples. A draft report of the review had been distributed to all Scrutiny Members and stakeholders in September 2006. Attached at Appendix A was a summary of the comments received and resultant actions taken by the report writer. An executive summary of the review was attached at Appendix B for the consideration of the members of

the Committee. The report contained 12 recommendations for the Committee to consider and endorse as follows:

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1. That the Executive Member with the housing portfolio adopts the role of a champion for homelessness issues within the Vale of Glamorgan.
 2. That the next issue of the Corporate Plan currently being drafted include homelessness issues and making the relevant links to the Community Strategy.
 3. That the remainder of the Section 180 monies be utilised to undertake an audit of homelessness/rough sleeping in the Vale of Glamorgan by March 2007 as required by the Welsh Assembly and to establish a system for proactive monitoring of homelessness within the county.
 4. That the Housing Service review and reconfigure existing staff resources so that prevention is the initial response to all homelessness enquiries.
 5. That a feasibility study utilising corporate funds, which have been set aside for that purpose be undertaken including capital and revenue costs to develop a multi-agency information website and housing advice centre within existing resources in an accessible location in Barry.
 6. That the Homelessness Forum (with the support of the IDT review team) identify duplications in provision with partners and examine overall resource capacity within the Vale of Glamorgan. The findings from the research of the Homelessness Forum will form the basis of re-commissioning of homelessness services within the Vale.
 7. That the Homelessness Forum develop a mechanism for providing a promotional housing road show/outreach service to cover all parts of the Vale of Glamorgan by September 2007.
 8. That on appointment, the remit of the new Private Sector Co-ordinator include:
 - Shadowing Housing Benefits staff and coordinating improved joint working.
 - Read-only access to Housing Benefits information and identifying and resolving potential problems.
 - Co-ordination of regular liaison meetings between Housing Benefits and Homelessness Prevention Teams.
 - Nomination of lead Housing Benefits officer or the placement of a Housing Officer within Housing Benefits section to liaise with Homelessness Team.
 - Development of Housing Benefits performance indicators for pre-tenancy determinations and clients on indicative rents.
 - Review of discretionary payments.
 - Regulation of quality of landlords in order to increase housing stock

9. That a review of the ANITE Homelessness database be conducted to examine opportunities for further development.
10. That in light of the new suitability order, the Housing department continues to examine alternative accommodation options to increase the level of temporary accommodation in the Vale of Glamorgan.
11. An action plan is developed to tackle the identified gaps between the All Wales Strategy and Vale of Glamorgan Homelessness Strategy and Prevention Plan, as set out in this report.
12. That the Homelessness forum undertake a training needs analysis in order to identify any training needs which may be undertaken within the Council at little or no cost."

RECOMMENDED -

- (1) T H A T the contents of the review be noted.
- (2) T H A T the above recommendations (as contained in the report) and the following three additions be endorsed and referred to Cabinet:
 - (i) Recommendation (8) - add -“ That the temporary WAG funded post of the new Private Sector Co-ordinator be added to the establishment under the terms of the grant and
 - (ii) Recommendation (10) - add - “and that the timescale for turning void properties around be improved in order to ensure that at risk groups are accommodated.”
 - (iii) Recommendation (13) -
“That the Council invests in the production of a video / DVD highlighting the realities for young people leaving home and to be shown at all Vale of Glamorgan schools.
- (3) T H A T all stakeholders and officers be thanked for their support and work undertaken during the review.

Reasons for recommendations

- (1) To apprise Members of the findings of the review and the consultation process.
- (2) To enable the recommendations to be progressed to Cabinet and detailed Action Plans to be developed.
- (3) To acknowledge the work that had been undertaken within the Review.

508 REVENUE AND CAPITAL MONITORING FOR THE PERIOD 1st APRIL, 2006 TO 30TH SEPTEMBER, 2006 -

The report outlined the position in respect of revenue and capital expenditure for the period 1st April, 2006 to 30th September, 2006. The report noted that the projected outturn for 2006/2007 on the revenue budget was shown in comparison to the annual budget at Appendix 1 to the report. The current forecast for the Directorate was for a balanced budget for the Housing Revenue Account but a deficit of £5,367,000 on General Fund Services. The report further highlighted that in respect of public sector housing the reported variance of £31,000 was largely due to staff vacancies currently across the section and rent income being higher than anticipated due to less right to buy sales. In respect of private sector housing it was estimated that the service would outturn on target and the current favourable variance quoted of £72,000 was mainly due to staff vacancies.

For Children's Services the service was currently showing a projected deficit of £2,322,000 due to an overspend of £1,657,000 on current expenditure and £665,000 shortfall on the Social Services reserve. However, it was noted that this was £109,000 less than previously reported due to the fact there had been a reduction in the savings of £46,000 in the commitment for children's placements and £63,000 for underspends on salaries and other general expenses as a result of implementing parts of the Social Services Budget Action Plan.

Under the Community Care and Health budget the probable outturn was showing a deficit of £2,895,000. This was a reduction of £173,000 on the previously reported figure which reflected savings of £100,000 in one-off income generation, £50,000 in community care commitments and £23,000 for salary and other general expenses as a result of implementing parts of the Social Services Budget Action Plan.

It was further highlighted that the fall in the number of meals being supplied within the Catering Service had identified that the service was showing a projected deficit of £150,000 and it was noted that the figure could in fact increase to £175,000 if from September 2006 meal numbers continued to decline. In spite of the projected deficit within Catering Services, it was noted that other local authorities were also facing a shortfall in the number of children purchasing school meals. The Chairman referred to the recent Catering Workshop which had been arranged to provide Members with an overview of the work that was currently being undertaken within the service area and expressed disappointment at the lack of attendance by Members at the Workshop.

Appendix 2 to the report detailed the financial progress on the capital programme as of 30th September, 2006. Cabinet had also requested that the Major Repairs Allowance budget be increased by £20,000 to allow for disabled adaptation works to be undertaken in communal areas. The change however, had not yet been included in Appendix 2.

Appendix 3 to the report provided the Committee with non-financial information on capital schemes.

Members raised concerns in respect of the staff vacancies within the Housing Department and the potential services that were not being able to be delivered as a result. Members were advised that the Housing Options report would be presented to the Housing Sub-Committee shortly and part of the implementation plan associated with the report would consider staffing issues and the current moratorium on posts would cease if the Housing Option Plan has approved.

During consideration of the report, reference was also made to the elements within the Social Services Budget Action Plan which were reported as being implemented and as a result it was

RECOMMENDED -

(1) T H A T the Director of Community Services provide a report on the areas that had been implemented in the Social Services Budget Action Plan and their associated risks to the Scrutiny Committee with copies of the information also being forwarded to all Members of the Council.

(2) T H A T the report be noted.

509 SCRUTINY REVIEW - A REVIEW TO EVALUATE HOW THE COUNCIL CONTRIBUTES TO TACKLING AND PREVENTING DOMESTIC ABUSE IN THE VALE OF GLAMORGAN -

The purpose of the report was to provide Members with the progress to date in relation to the review and enable full engagement in the consultation process and to consider information by Jan Pickles of the Cardiff Domestic Abuse Unit to facilitate the process. The review had been requested by the Committee as part of its 2005/06 work programme. The scope of the review was to evaluate how the Council contributed to tackling and preventing domestic violence in the Vale, the purpose of which was to establish roles and responsibilities of the Council and key agencies in relation to domestic abuse and to identify gaps in service provision and identify areas of good practice. Members of the Scrutiny Committee had participated in the review by attending a multi-agency workshop and visiting the police domestic abuse unit in the Vale and the woman's domestic abuse unit in Pontypridd. It was also felt appropriate that it would be beneficial to the Committee to have an opportunity to meet and question an expert witness who had contributed to the Domestic Abuse Scrutiny Review.

Jan Pickles from the Cardiff Women's Safety Unit had been invited to attend to provide Members with an overview of the Unit. Ms. Pickles advised that the aim of the Unit was to ultimately ensure that people remained in their own homes and that families were kept safe and together. It was essential to ensure that the children lived as normal a "lifestyle" as possible and remained in the schools they had attended prior to the incidents of domestic abuse.

Core funding was received for the Unit from the Welsh Assembly Government and the Home Office amongst other charitable organisations.

It was noted that a significant number of referrals are made in respect of domestic abuse but that statistics had shown that the actual number of charges brought against the abuser was low. Ms. Pickles advised that in order to ensure charges were brought quality evidence was required. A significant amount of work has to be undertaken in the process of obtaining evidence which has to be of a high standard in order to ensure that charges / convictions could be made. Ms. Pickles advised the Committee that she had a considerable amount of graphical evidence that she could have presented to the Members and the Committee requested that in future expert witnesses be afforded the opportunity to present their evidence as they considered appropriate, and requested that any information in respect of this matter be forwarded to all Members of the Scrutiny Committee when available.

It was reported that the Unit had also been externally evaluated by Cardiff University and the outcomes had shown that prior to the establishment of the unit repeat incidences of domestic abuse totalled 35% whereas post establishment of the unit the figure had decreased to 5%.

Ms Pickles also commented that recent statistics had highlighted that 90% of victims of domestic abuse were female and Home Office statistics had identified that domestic abuse affected 1 in 4 women and 1 in 6 men. Although the Women's safety unit had been originally established to assist female victims of domestic abuse it also provided some assistance to male victims and same sex partners. Additional support for male victims was also available via the Dyn project.

Ms. Pickles further highlighted that one of her major concerns in relation to domestic abuse was insufficient funding to undertake developmental work in educating all in respect of domestic abuse and its consequences. It was noted that the Unit at Cardiff was extremely successful and Members agreed that a similar Unit within the Vale would be valuable. However, the funding issues were significant. Ms. Pickles advised that as funding was tight the Authority should consider seconding opportunities i.e. seconding personnel from Social Services in conjunction with the Local Health Board to the Police Unit at Barry Island thereby ensuring a joint working approach for domestic abuse within the Vale.

Members were further advised that the report attached at Appendix 2 highlighted the key findings from the review and Appendix 3 provided a pro-forma for Members and stakeholders to complete in relation to the contents and recommendations within the report. It was envisaged that the final report in respect of the review would be brought before the Scrutiny Committee at its meeting on 15th January, 2007 and all consultees were asked to provide any comments by Friday, 8th December, 2006..

RECOMMENDED -

(1) T H A T the Scrutiny Committee endorses the draft consultation report at Appendix 2 for consultation, noting that all comments are to be received by the Chief Executive's Office by 8th December, 2006.

(2) T H A T the final review report be presented to the Scrutiny Committee in January 2007.