

No.

HOMES AND SAFE COMMUNITIES SCRUTINY COMMITTEE

Minutes of a remote meeting held on 14th October, 2020.

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

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

Also present: Councillors L. Burnett (Cabinet Member for Education and Regeneration) and E. Williams (Cabinet Member for Legal, Regulatory and Planning Services), Ms. B. Hunt (Citizens Advice Cardiff and Vale Representative) and Ms. H. Smith (Tenant Working Group Representative).

119 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.”

120 APOLOGIES FOR ABSENCE –

These were received from Councillor Miss. A.M. Collins, Mrs. W. Davies, Mrs. G. Doyle and Mr. A. Raybould (Tenant Working Group Representatives).

121 MINUTES –

RECOMMENDED – T H A T the minutes of the meeting held on 16th September, 2020 be approved as a correct record.

122 DECLARATIONS OF INTEREST –

No declarations were received.

123 CORONAVIRUS RECOVERY STRATEGY (REF) –

The Head of Housing and Building Services, with support from the Head of Regeneration and Planning, presented the reference from Cabinet which set out the Council’s management of the pandemic via a three phased Coronavirus Strategy: response, transition and recovery. The Head of Housing and Building

No.

Services highlighted the appendix to the reference, the Coronavirus Recovery Strategy itself, as being of particular relevance and importance to the Committee.

The Head of Housing and Building Services added that although this was a three phased approach, these often operated in parallel with each other, which had been seen particularly during the summer period. He outlined examples of the different work undertaken in the various phases:

- Response – dealing with the initial phases of the pandemic (keeping the R rate down whilst providing essential services) which included reflective learning exercises with Councillors, Chief Officers and the public as well as staff around how to use their shared experiences of this situation in order to help form some of the responses within the Strategy.
- Transition – moved from immediate response and as part of this established cross-directorate working groups in order to understand the issues that the Council were being presented with and the opportunities and learning that had emerged through this.
- Recovery – this would not be a return to the pre-Covid-19 situation but rather looking at the learning, opportunities and threats that had arisen and using these to change how the Council delivered its services, which could be seen in the report's Recovery Action Plan.

The Strategy was also informed by a number of external pieces of work, for example, the Community Impact Assessment and the Economic Impact Assessment. The Recovery Action Plan also linked in with the Council's four Wellbeing Objectives.

In pursuing the recovery priorities, decisions on resourcing would need to be considered, for example, with larger numbers of staff working from home (possibly long-term) there was an opportunity to look at the Council's estate and how other efficiencies could be made in light of these circumstances.

The report indicated the importance of engaging and consulting with residents, staff and partners moving forward in this process. It was also acknowledged that Autumn and Winter would be a difficult period of time, impacting the Recovery Strategy as well as being affected by a range of external influences, such as the potential move by the Local Authority back into the 'response' phase due to a resurgence of Covid-19 cases.

It was recommended that the report be referred to all Scrutiny Committees for monitoring and scrutiny of the nineteen priorities within the Strategy and to inform their work programmes going forward.

The Head of Housing and Building Services then highlighted those Strategic Recovery Priorities that were of particular relevance to this Committee and could be used to inform the reporting undertaken for its Work Programme:

- Take action to promote a 'green' recovery and re-focus the Capital Programme to support economic growth. For example, the Council currently had an ambitious house building programme using sustainable material and

No.

technology as well as utilising Modern Methods of Construction (MMC). Also, the Council would be piloting the use of alternative methods of heating homes. The Council had bid for WG capital funding to install ground source heat pumps in a small number of council properties and to monitor how residents used this technology and to look at issues around fuel poverty.

- Work with key businesses to support employment and skills development. For example, with the Housing investment Programme and Housing Business Plan together with new build and regeneration activity there would be significant investment and expenditure on stock which could act as a driver to recruit contractors with the relevant skills and to financially support local Small and Medium Enterprises (SMEs) in undertaking this work on housing stock.
- To support people at home and in their community – this was the main ‘bread and butter’ for the Committee, in particular homelessness and the impact of Covid-19 on this. The ongoing driver for the Council was to eradicate homelessness and Covid-19 had shown that the Council could provide the majority of homelessness within the locality with accommodation during the pandemic. However, this consisted mainly of temporary accommodation and coupled with the WG stating that the gains made around accommodating the homeless needed to be maintained, meant that the Council would need to deal with this as part of a longer-term strategy of moving these people to permanent homes. This would include ongoing collaboration with health, social care, housing associations and third sector partners. The Council would need to also look at the background to why people had become homeless and seek preventative measures including transforming the Council’s homelessness service and mitigating the ‘revolving door’ of homelessness that had been going on over some time.
- Support residents whose physical or mental health had been negatively impacted by Coronavirus. The Council in its role as a landlord and as a support to local communities (such as those in sheltered accommodation, elderly residents shielding and so on), could help to address those physical and mental health issues – such as through volunteering services.
- Work with partners and the community to address issues of social cohesion. Due to Covid-19 and the restrictions in place around it, there had been issues around cohesion and rising anti-social behaviour. To meet this challenge, the Council with Safer Vale had coordinated activity with partners in order to encourage cohesion and reduce anti-social behaviour, thus bringing communities back together at a block, or estate level or even wider.
- Work with people to address issues arising from the temporary suspension of preventative, early intervention and support services by safely restarting or putting in place new service models. For example, the opening of the ‘Drop in Hub’ earlier on in the year, where, due to Covid-19, the traditional face to face model of contact needed to be re thought with a ‘blending’ of digital services and support together with a ‘safer’ version of face to face contact.
- Tackle the financial impact that Coronavirus would continue to have on the Council’s finances. The closure of various businesses and services would have a tremendous impact on Council tenants with a large number of these in low wage jobs or in ‘zero-hours’ contracts as well as relying on income related benefit (approximately 70%). Also, there was the challenge around employment opportunities for younger residents and ‘NEETS’ (young people

No.

not in education, employment or training) that would need to be addressed as well.

- Redefine the Council's approach to digital service delivery.
- Harness the power of volunteering and working with third sector partners and community groups to build a legacy for Vale Heroes. This was a key area of oversight for the Committee and it would be important for Members to look at Social Enterprise and its impact going forward.
- Involve, engage and consult our residents and other stakeholders in redesigning services. Housing Services was due to engage in a consultation exercise with tenants. Through the work carried out under 'Vale Heroes' a substantial number of tenants had been identified as just falling below the threshold for statutory intervention, but could go above this in future. It was therefore important to understand the needs of tenants in order to redefine how the Council provided Housing and Supporting People Services. This consultation would be undertaken via telephone interview rather than questionnaire because this method encouraged a conversation with tenants around those issues and which they would normally be reluctant to detail in a questionnaire. As part of this, reassurance would be given to those surveyed that their information would be handled confidentially.

Following the presentation and subsequent Committee questions, the Head of Housing and Building Services, with support from the Head of Regeneration and Planning, advised Members of the following:

- On the question(s) raised over the Council's experience in using alternative methods for heating homes, the provision of guidance to Council Tenants in order to use these correctly and about adequate levels of insulation being in place within these properties to support the alternative forms of heating, funding had been received from WG and it would be far easier to build in this increased insulation and intuitive heating systems into the new housing constructed by the Council. The challenge would be that much of the social housing stock in the Vale of Glamorgan was quite old and it would be a lot more difficult to achieve significant gains in terms of using these alternative methods of heating with them. The Council had been working with WG in order to identify certain types of properties in order to try out different forms of heating technology and to monitor their performance. This would also involve upskilling and providing Housing and Building Services with the experience in utilising this technology, in conjunction with external partners. Subsequently, this would provide the Council with a 'template' for the improvement of all social housing stock within the Vale. It would also involve training tenants in using these new forms of heating effectively. However, it was stressed that this was not a 'one size fits all approach'. The pilot in the Vale and across Wales would look at different technologies and which ones best suited the various types of housing. The Housing Associations and Registered Social Landlords (RSLs) were also involved in this move to other forms of heating, such as using electric and photovoltaic heating.
- Contingency and forward planning for homelessness and those in temporary accommodation during a 'second wave' of Covid-19: it was suggested that the Committee look at having a report on the Council's response on these issues. The Council needed to look at its response to these issues through the

No.

provision of new builds, review the allocation policy, the provision of the Phase 2 response and the WG capital funding for MMC, as well as the use of existing housing stock. Even with the building of new homes by RSLs over the last decade, this had not kept pace with the number of single persons who needed housing. The majority of accommodation still consisted of family and older person's types of housing. This would mean looking at the designation of housing and the need to 'de-designate' some of these, for example reducing the access age on some of the single units in order to house the majority of persons in need of accommodation, whose ages ranged from 20 to late 30s. These were being looked at by Housing Services and it was suggested that the Committee may wish to think about undertaking a task and finish exercise around homelessness provision and response as part of its Work Programme.

- The impact on those self-isolating or shielding and social cohesion during a 'second wave' of Covid-19: it was only in the initial phase of the pandemic that the Council could identify the numbers of people who were shielding through the work of the Vale Heroes Team, community agencies and third sector. These included both tenants in the social housing sector and in the wider population who needed help and support. From a housing perspective, the Council needed to look at how it used its Supporting People service and funding in order to adapt to support people with various housing related issues, including alcohol and drug dependency as well as those who suffered from social isolation and cohesion issues. Through the tenant profiling work being undertaken it could be necessary to review the structure and services provided by Housing Services by identifying what tenants want and move to providing services which would not fall within the traditional remit of a landlord. An example given was greater coordination between the Money Advice and Supporting People Teams in order to support vulnerable and potentially socially isolated people.
- Regarding the most recent Staff Wellbeing survey and the response rate to it (44%), this compared favourably with the previous staff surveys that usually fell within the 50% response rate. However, the majority of replies came from office-based staff and the challenge was to engage more with front line staff such as builders, cleaners and waste management staff. Work had started on improving the support given to staff and dealing with their anxieties and pressures in the workplace and with the impact of Covid-19. Also, the issues raised around IT from the survey had started to be addressed, for example there had been significant investment in the Council's IT infrastructure and an improvement in remote working. Around digital transformation, the Housing Team would be re-starting the search for a new housing management system and had engaged a specialist to start work on this over the coming months, subject to the ongoing demands from Covid-19. In terms of accessibility for the public to the Council through digital technology and the technology required for agile working, there was still a lot of work needed to be done in these areas. The money was available in the business plan for the measures but these had to take a back seat while more pressing issues were dealt with during the pandemic.
- On the current status of the 'Care First' service (a counselling and telephone support service for staff with issues around wellbeing), this support, led by the Head of Human Resources, had been expanded over the last few months and was offering additional sessions to staff who may be suffering with anxiety or

No.

depression during the pandemic. Staff wellbeing was regularly discussed at the Corporate Management Team, particularly now with talk of a further lockdown and about what could be done to ensure that staff, Councillors and the public were supported during this time.

- Around the emergence of 'digital housing', the Council (lead by Social Services) were using the Integrated Care Fund to develop a 'smart house', providing assistance to those with learning needs and helping to improve their quality of life. It would be beneficial for the Committee to visit this property as part of their scrutiny work.
- Regarding the proposed consultation/survey with tenants and concerns around speaking to 'hard to reach groups', the explanation given was that the telephone survey would consist of a one to one engagement session and any further ideas from Members on how to best to carry out the consultation and reach all tenants were most welcome. It was also important to reach out to the community and resident working groups in order to re-establish meetings and have direct contact etc. via technology. Through the Tenant Engagement Team and funding diverted from the cancelled 'FestiVale', the Council were looking to provide equipment to these working groups in order to access remote meetings and so on. A follow up report on the Tenant Engagement Strategy and new approaches for it would be coming to the Committee and Members were asked for their input.
- In terms of investment and support for local businesses/communities, the Council had been awarded funding from Welsh Government (WG) in order to look at the 'Foundational Economy', with a dedicated member of staff now looking into this, for example, to review how the Council awarded contracts and the process around this, in order to encourage local businesses to bid for contracts as currently many local businesses were unwilling to bid for these, such as with housing renewal and repairs, due to the perceived complexity of the process. Also, the Council aimed to encourage community groups or social enterprises to bid for contracts as well. The Cabinet Member for Education and Regeneration also spoke to the Committee, referring to the work currently being done around the 'Foundational Economy' which although a small project funded by WG, was building on the colossal work already undertaken around 21st Century schools where the Council had trebled or quadrupled community benefit targets and were now looking to take the good practice from this and use it for areas such as housing. As part of this, the Council would look at how it could increase the number of local contractors and sub-contractors working with it such as through supporting them to make successful tenders and to enlarge the procurement spend that went into the Vale economy, the example given was Pencoedtre High School's allocation of 80% of its work contracts to local businesses. It was suggested that a report or presentation would be provided to the Committee around these areas.
- The Council was working with local business to ensure that residents were comfortable in entering town centres for example by 'de-cluttering' pavements through the removal of non-essential bicycle ranks or bins and hospitality businesses to have sufficient space to operate safely. This required consultation with the town centre Councillors, with the money needing to be spent by March 2021.
- Business grants were now being awarded again, with £28 million worth of funding over the last few months having been allocated to businesses via the

No.

Council Tax and Regeneration Teams. This programme would be run again in the near future, with the WG making £1,000-£1,500 available to businesses that could show they had been affected by Covid-19.

- Regarding the 'Kickstart' scheme (aimed at providing work placements for younger people) and community development/employment opportunities, this was the 'bread and butter' of the Community Development Team and it was suggested the Committee may wish to see a report on the work currently being done by the team and what will happen going forward. The 'Kickstart' scheme had been fully adopted by the Council with over 66 placements being identified internally, across various service lines. The Council was also looking externally to get a minimum of 30 placements within local businesses. The Cabinet Member for Education and Regeneration also wished to say how the Council was committed to creating worthwhile positions as part of this job creation scheme, that could lead to more permanent jobs for those placed in them. This was of particular importance now, with approximately 1,800 16-24 year olds relying on Universal Credit within the Vale.
- Concerning Universal Credit (UC) and the current pressures on it, although there were some delays still for applicants receiving this benefit within 4-5 weeks, the processes had improved, with the Government investing large amounts of money into UC due to the pandemic and applicants could apply for an advanced payment if required. In terms of rent income, tenants would be impacted by a lack of employment due to Covid-19 with increases in rent arrears. As a result, tenants were having to deal with numerous financial pressures at this time and so could not prioritise payment of rent through their UC. This could be helped by offering direct payments to pay off the rent arrears, but some of these were longstanding and they would take time to clear. However, the Housing Business and Investment plans continued to remain sustainable. Furthermore, Housing Services and the Money Advice Team continued to offer support in terms of financial advice, employment and training opportunities to tenants, as well as the work that Citizens Advice carried out with residents of the Vale. It was suggested that the Committee receive a report at some point around the financial impact on Council tenants, the impact on Housing Services, as well as the work undertaken to ensure tenants can pay their rent and receive help with employment opportunities during this pandemic.
- Regarding evictions, although these were now permissible again, tenants would be given six months' notice and the Council, with RSLs, were clear in their determination to not carry out evictions at this time, except for instances of anti-social behaviour.

RECOMMENDED –

- (1) T H A T the Cabinet reference, appended report and Strategy be noted.
- (2) T H A T after consideration of the report and the Coronavirus Recovery Strategy, the Committee identified the following reports and presentations to be added to its forward work programme:
 - The Capital Programme pilot and its use of alternative sources of heating.

No.

- The Housing Investment Programme.
- Homelessness provision and response during Covid-19.
- Vulnerable communities, anti-social behaviour and social cohesion.
- The work undertaken by the Community Development Team and what it will be doing going forward for younger people and other members of the community.
- Early intervention and support services and how they can safely restart or put in place new service models (such as the 'Hub' on Holton Road).
- Social Enterprise and its impact going forward.
- Presentation - 'Foundational Economy' and the work undertaken around the 21st Century schools project.
- Universal Credit: the financial impact on Council tenants, the impact on Housing Services, and the work to recover rent and help with employment opportunities for tenants.
- Visit to the pilot 'Smart House'.

(3) T H A T following consideration of a future report on Homelessness Provision and Response during Covid-19, the Committee gives consideration to the setting up of a Task and Finish Working Group.

Reasons for recommendations

- (1) To provide the Committee with an overview of the work undertaken in response, transition and recovery from the Coronavirus pandemic.
- (2) The identification of particular area(s) of focus for scrutiny activity.
- (3) To provide the Committee with the opportunity to scrutinise in more depth the issues and solutions regarding the Council's Homelessness provision if required.