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## HOMES AND SAFE COMMUNITIES SCRUTINY COMMITTEE

Minutes of a remote meeting held on 6<sup>th</sup> April, 2022.

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

The Meeting recording is available [here](#).

Present: Councillor A. M. Collins (Chair), Councillor. J. Aviet (Vice-Chair), Councillors C.A. Cave, R. Nugent-Finn, A.C. Parker and L.O. Rowlands.

Also Present: Councillor E. Williams (Cabinet Member for Legal, Regulatory and Planning Services), C. Ireland (Citizens Advice Cardiff and Vale Representative), G. Doyle, W. Hennessy, V. John and H. Smith (Representatives from Tenant Working Group / Panel).

### 1019 ANNOUNCEMENT –

Prior to the commencement of the business of the Committee, the Chair 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”.

### 1020 APOLOGIES FOR ABSENCE –

These were received from Councillors J.C. Bird, B.E. Brooks, S.M. Hanks and S.D. Perkes.

### 1021 MINUTES –

RECOMMENDED – T H A T the minutes of the meeting held on 9<sup>th</sup> March, 2022 be approved as a correct record.

### 1022 DECLARATIONS OF INTEREST –

No declarations of interest were received.

### 1023 HOUSING AND BUILDING SERVICES DIGITAL SOLUTION AND THAT OF C1V –

The presentation was set out by the Business Improvement Partners for the new Oracle Customer Relationship Management (CRM) digital customer experience platform and the related update for the new Housing and Building system.

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The new digital solution to be implemented by the Council was the result of a number of drivers and factors, including:

- The need to meet changing citizen expectations across all contact channels which included increased demand for online services to be provided by the Council. This new system would help to provide a better online experience and to ensure greater accessibility to online services to all residents of the Vale as well as improve services provided by telephone, email and in person.
- The current Oracle CRM system licence would run out in Summer 2022 and would not be renewed. The current system was aging and there was a need to move from the current time-consuming paper-based processes and reduce costs via automation.
- This also tied with the Council's Digital Transformation journey and would help provide end to end digital transactions to increase customer satisfaction, compliance and review, whilst retaining the ability for face to face and telephone transactions which remained important for those residents who could not use, or did not have access to, digital technology.
- The Council would be using the govService online service delivery system, already used by many Local Authorities in the United Kingdom.

The new system was outlined and demonstrated to Members:

- The system would provide a greater seamless customer and staff experience and more efficient streamlined workflows.
- There would be a customer service hub, a customer portal, and smart online forms available, as well as a staff portal, all of which could speak to each other and were integrated in order to provide a 'one stop' experience for customers and staff alike with regular, automated updates to customers on the progress of their requests also available.
- A 'soft launch' of the new system was undertaken on 4<sup>th</sup> December for telephone, face to face and online, with Highways, Parks and Grounds and Waste Management Service Areas going live with the system as part of their day to day work. This service-by-service approach meant that lessons could be learnt, and gradual improvements made as the system was rolled out.
- 42 processes that were available on Oracle were now live, with approximately 93 remaining processes to be made live on govService by the end of summer 2022.
- Approximately a third of customer transactions under the new govService system were self service, which indicated a clear demand for the use of such online services.
- The next phase for the new system included the design, prototype, test and build remaining outstanding processes and service areas (including Housing) and to transfer exactly what was on Oracle, with the same functionality and make it available on govService ('lift and shift'). Also, the need to commence Phase 2 around improving the customer experience as well as integrating Housing and Building Services in order to provide a more seamless platform.

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Focus was then given to the Housing and Building Services platform:

- The current, multiple systems used in order to co-ordinate repair and other services to tenants, were extremely old and had either reached their end of life or were about to reach that stage.
- Following a tendering process, a single provider (NEC) had been appointed, with a provisional start date of 27<sup>th</sup> April and the project would run for 12 to 18 months with staff focus groups commencing in May.
- The new integrated system would be cloud based and on a web-based application which meant it was accessible from any device i.e. a mobile phone, tablet and a computer, as well having a user friendly interface for customers and staff. There would be a customer self-service element as well. Therefore, tenants when they accessed the govService system would be moved seamlessly to the Housing and Building Services online system.
- The software was fully configurable and bilingual; therefore, the Vale of Glamorgan could update it and customize it exactly how it wanted the dashboard to be i.e. the team for housing repairs may want a different dashboard to that of Homes4U.
- The system allowed the Council to both communicate with tenants and clients collectively and individually via text message, email or by letter.
- The benefits of the project were similar to that of the CRM such as improvements to service delivery and increased efficiency under a single, integrated system with one supplier and it allowed staff to manage the whole lifestyle cycle and maintain the 'golden threads' of information. It also had excellent analytics and reporting facility.
- Customers once they had logged a repair, etc. via a telephone call could check online via the new system and see the information they logged appear straight away as well as review their full account history, payments, etc. when they wanted. They could also upload / view documents online and book, rearrange and cancel appointments online. This would help to prevent last minute cancellations and thereby free up staff resources.
- The new system would enable greater mobile working for Housing and Building Services staff i.e. maintenance officers could raise housing repairs onsite from their mobile device or tenancy officers could go through a tenancy agreement or paperwork with a tenant on site via mobile device.

Following the Officer's presentation, the subsequent questions and comments were raised by the Committee:

- Councillor Nugent-Finn asked the following –
  - On the soft launch of the new CRM system, it was confirmed that this had been on 4<sup>th</sup> December, 2021 and had involved 3 services areas.
  - On having a proper full, 'hard' launch of the new system, this would happen once all the services had been migrated from Oracle to govService in conjunction with a communications campaign to promote it and direct residents to the new CRM portal / system.
  - Regarding the volunteers involved with testing the new system, this totalled 50 with a mix of both Vale of Glamorgan Council staff and Councillors involved, who provided valuable feedback and insights into

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changing the processes, on content and how information, etc. was displayed. On whether any service users were involved, it was explained that many Council staff were residents and tenants within the Vale and so this was a quick and easy way of getting service user involvement and feedback. Following on from this in Phase 2, when the process redesign work was undertaken, the Council would be reaching out to tenants and residents asking them what they thought about the services, what they valued, what outcomes they wanted and how they communicated with the Council i.e., via telephone. The Councillor felt that tenant representatives and other community groups could also assist with the testing and transition to the new system. It was also stated that customers of the new system would be asked to rate their experience in order to see what services / processes were doing well and those that needed to be improved upon.

- On whether C1V would be effectively replaced by this system, it was clarified that this would not be the case and if people did not want to self service they could still call C1V and their queries added to the online system that way for resolution by the relevant teams.
- On whether an option could be added to the CRM / Housing systems for reporting domestic violence, abuse or neglect issues, it was outlined that the systems were flexible enough to allow such an option to be added, akin to the internal whistleblowing process added to the govService platform and for the necessary data and legal protections / restrictions to be put in place. However, service users may not feel able to report such matters in this way and that they may prefer advice, signposting to more specialist services and more face to face contact with the relevant practitioners.
- The Head of Housing and Building Services wished to clarify that the Housing and Building System was for tenants, with the contract for the new system to be finalised with the provider by the end of April and with implementation projected to be over a 12-month period, including the option to phase in the system as had been done with govService.
- H. Smith (Tenant Representative) pointed to the experience she had when contacting C1V via telephone, encountering long waiting times and an instance where a request had not been logged. The Operational Manager for Customer Relations stated he would look into her concerns and explained that call 'queuing' at C1V was due to the impact of COVID-19 with staff capacity at 60% from increased staff absences and shortages. Work was being undertaken to support staff back into work and to minimise transmission rates as well as looking at how to fill staff vacancies i.e. the use of school leavers.
- The Chair and Councillor Nugent-Finn emphasised that not all people had access to digital devices or the internet and therefore would not be able to access the new customer system. However, it was reassuring to know that C1V and non-digital means for residents or tenants to contact the Council with their issues would still remain in place.

Committee, having considered the presentation and all the issues and implications contained therein, subsequently

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RECOMMENDED – T H A T the presentation on the Housing and Building Services Digital Solution and that of C1V be noted.

Reason for recommendation

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

1024 IMPACT REPORT ON THE ONE STOP SHOP (DEH) –

The purpose of the report, presented by the Council's Supporting People Co-ordinator (Housing) and the Area Manager for Pobl for the Vale of Glamorgan and Bridgend, was to inform Committee of the impact of the One Stop Shop support service.

The key points raised at the meeting were as follows:

- The Supporting People Team in the Housing Department commissioned out housing related support services to assist people across the Vale with tenancy or other housing issues. This was a grant funded program from Welsh Government (WG) and each Local Authority in Wales had a similar service.
- Prior to the implementation of the One Stop Shop services, there were two methods of delivering support:
  - Floating support, where if someone presented with a housing support need (i.e. risk of homelessness, rent arrears, etc.), they would be assessed and put on a waiting list, which could be lengthy depending on demand and then allocated a floating worker who would go out to see them and develop a support plan.
  - Supported accommodation where people came into specific accommodation that the Council had where support was located on site.
- Following a review of these services, there were found to be a number of 'gaps' such as lengthy waiting lists and some service users not presenting due to the support they required not necessarily falling into either the existing floating support nor supported accommodation model of provision. Due to this, the 'brief Intervention support' model was developed by the Council in tandem with their partners in support provision, which condensed down support for people who just wanted brief support with an urgent housing needs or issues such as Council Tax arrears, benefits issues, etc.
- Following Cabinet approval, this new model was taken further with the commission of a 'One Stop- Shop', the idea being that there would be a building located in a central location within the Vale with trained support staff working there and that members of the public could present with their housing issues and speak to a trained support worker who would provide advice and support. The contract to run the drop-in service was subsequently awarded to Pobl in 2020.
- Due to COVID-19, this new 'drop in' service had to adapt i.e. providing a based telephone service in order to minimise numbers of people presenting at the offices and operating an 'appointments based' service for those who

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still needed to present face to face. Also, in a few cases, staff had gone out to see people in need.

- Support services could now be provided a lot more quickly, efficiently and at the point of need to a lot more service users using the One Stop Shop model, with over 1,700 individuals having been supported by the new service, which also had an indirect but positive impact on those individuals' households / families too.
- The One Stop Shop was now the largest support service currently operating in the Vale, based on total number of service users.
- Support workers at the location, as well as addressing immediate issues and any 'quick wins' that could be achieved for service users, also assessed people for any longer term needs they may have and referred them on to the appropriate support.
- The One Stop Shop had also made a positive impact on the Supporting People waiting list, with the number of people on the list dropping down to 50 and that the people remaining on the list had also been assessed via the One Stop Shop in order for any needs they had that could be done quickly and easily addressed.
- Due to the success of the One Stop Shop service, the impact of COVID-19 and the cost-of-living crisis, the service was now experiencing very high demand for its support, leading to the Supporting People Team to commission Pobl to provide an additional full-time support worker to work in the One Stop Shop.
- In terms of outcomes, the majority of service users were making progression across a range of support areas that were vital for housing support i.e. in Promoting Economic Progress and Financial Control, Managing Accommodation and in Promoting Health and Wellbeing.
- A number of case studies were cited, from assisting on a Homes4U bid and grant for essential white goods through to PIP renewal which illustrated the help and support the One Stop Shop could provide.
- In terms of implementation, the One Stop Shop service had delivered in a number of areas, despite of Covid-19 impacting the service's launch such as:
  - Developing links with local food banks and plans in the 'new normal' to have a 'drop-in' service at these locations to help identify other needs that users of such services have.
  - Working with the Department of Work and Pensions (DWP) to help people with their benefits claims in order to speed up the process for them and to help reduce the pressure and backlog of the DWP.
  - There was a gradual reopening of the One Stop Shop to face to face contact, whilst maintaining remote services.
  - Greater linkage with partners and other agencies for providing services/ surgeries at the One Stop Shop, i.e. Communities for Work, MIND and Shelter, as well as the Council's Housing Solutions Team.
  - Also, there were plans for 'drop-in' services to be provided throughout the Vale of Glamorgan i.e. Palmerston Adult Learning Centre, Barry College as well as the Food Bank and for 'open days' to be held at the One Stop Shop.

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Following the Officer's presentation, the subsequent questions and comments were raised by the Committee:

- The Chair asked about mental health provision and support for users of the One Stop Shop, particularly due to the pressures caused by COVID-19, the cost-of-living crisis, etc., it being explained that originally there had been discussions with MIND to provide this support, but in the interim other Third Sector Services were being looked at to help with this provision and for signposting people to as well as referring to statutory provision i.e. an appointment with a GP. Digital, online services and support could also be provided to service users experiencing mental health issues such as online meetings with a counsellor or social working and providing a soundproof room at the One Stop Shop to help facilitate this. Also, having drop-in sessions at Tadross, where the most complex homeless individuals were at the moment. A welcoming, environment was provided at the One Stop Shop in order to make people comfortable so that they could come in and discuss mental health and other issues and means of support.
- On the Chair's follow up question on statistics on the number of service users of the One Stop shop that had mental health issues, the Supporting People Co-ordinator would update the Committee on these figures as soon as possible after the meeting.
- On Councillor Aviet's query whether there was a person sitting at the front desk or reception should people come into the One Stop Shop and present face to face and if there was a private room for service users to discuss matters discreetly, it was explained that there was reception area manned by support workers, as well as two interview 'pods' and other spaces that could be used for private discussions at the location. Clients could also ask to speak to support workers at other locations as well.
- Councillor Nugent-Finn asked about the provision of essential white goods to service users via the One Stop Shop and who delivered these items to them, as well as asking if this spending was supervised in some way. It was explained that services users were helped to apply for or to access discretionary funding / vouchers (for purchasing items at a specific store) which would be used to then purchase white goods, and which could include delivery costs as well. Such funding would be for the service users to use unsupported, unless they wanted help from the One Stop Shop / other support providers or, as in many cases, they were given vouchers for use in specific stores only.
- G. Doyle (Tenant Representative) asked about how the One Stop Shop went about advertising itself and its services, it was explained that advertising had been impacted by COVID-19 and the need to provide service remotely. However, when the One Stop Shop first opened, there had been some advertising done via Facebook and within local communities. With the easing of COVID-19 restrictions, there would be a relaunch of the service, including further advertising and promotion. The service was also located at a prominent location on Holton Road, Barry.
- The Head of Housing and Building Services added that there was also outreach work that would be undertaken at the food project and resource hub in Penarth as part of an effort to reach out to people who could not or did not want to commute to the Council Offices or One Stop Shop in Barry.

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

RECOMMENDED –

- (1) T H A T the positive impacts to date be noted.
- (2) T H A T the future potential opportunities for expanding the range of services delivered from the One Stop Shop be noted.

Reason for recommendations

(1&2) Having regard to the contents of the report and discussions at the meeting.

1025 UNIVERSAL CREDIT AND COVID-19 – RENTS IMPACTS (DEH) –

The purpose of the report, as presented by the Operational Manager Public Sector Housing, was to set out the impact of COVID-19 and the continued roll out of Universal Credit (UC) on Council tenants and rental income. The key points of which were as follows:

- There had been significant increases in tenant rent arrears following the roll out of Universal Credit and this had been exacerbated further by COVID-19. The situation in the Vale of Glamorgan mirrored the national trend and had seen arrears increase from 1.7% to 3.2% of the total rent roll. In financial terms, this was an increase in arrears from about £380k to £695k.
- The above stemmed from a number of COVID-19 related economic issues i.e. furlough, reduced working hours and redundancies for tenants during the COVID-19 restrictions and lockdowns.
- The impact on rent arrears had been further exacerbated by the increased migration of tenants to UC.
- Tenants in receipt of UC had higher arrears than those in receipt of Housing Benefit (HB) or tenants who were not in receipt of such benefits.
- A high proportion of the money owed in terms of rent arrears were by people in receipt of UC, which amounted to 81% of the total arrears owed by all Council housing tenants.
- There were currently 1,093 Council housing tenants who were UC claimants, with this figure set to rise.
- However, it was explained that when people moved on to UC, arrears would increase for a period of time but then plateau and stabilise as people became used to managing their money and paying their rent on time. Due to this their debt would start to reduce slowly, and that experience was borne out by some of the pilot studies undertaken by Councils who were early adopters of this benefit. This ‘plateauing’ of arrears had already started to be seen within the Vale of Glamorgan.
- Related to this, there had been changes to the Courts / legal processes concerning rent arrears as a result of COVID-19, i.e. the extension of the notice period for landlords before Court applications could be made for



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possession on grounds of non-payment of rent, the closing and subsequent reopening of Courts, as well as the ending of the temporary moratorium on County Court Possession claims by landlords.

- Due to the reopening of Courts, etc. and in a small number of cases where tenants had possibly not paid their rent due to the Courts closure and moratorium on enforcement of rent arrears, these tenants were now starting to pay back these arrears in significant amounts due to the renewed risk of legal action (although such enforcement was only considered as the very last resort in such cases).
- Despite these impacts and challenges, the arrears level for the Vale of Glamorgan Council remained one of the lowest amongst Welsh Local Authorities who retained their social housing stock.
- Also outlined were the various forms of intervention and support that the Council could provide in order to help tenants around rent arrears, etc. For example, the in-house Money Advice service had helped 931 households over the last twelve months to realise £422,429 additional income as a result of claiming additional welfare benefits, moving over to cheaper tariffs or securing grants or payments as well as helping them to manage their money more effectively and to refer where necessary to the Supporting People Team, etc. for additional help. Where tenants faced very high levels of rent arrears and debts, such specialist advice could be offered quickly.
- In terms of other assistance, those tenants in arrears would receive numerous reminders as part of the debt recovery process, which included letters, visits and the use of repayment agreements for people not in a position where they could pay off large amounts of money in one go and based on realistic, affordable, payment instalments. Also, when people first went on to UC, the Council contacted them in order to offer advice and support and sent out automatic payment reminders (i.e. via text messaging). In certain cases, Alternative Payment Arrangements (APA) may need to be used in order to pay housing costs of UC direct to the Council / landlord.
- Eviction was the very last resort for the Council and only once all avenues and options had been exhausted; during COVID-19 the Council had not evicted anyone.
- The future would be challenging, with increased cost of living and in particular rising gas and electric costs, which would place many tenants into financial hardship. However, the Council would endeavour to meet these challenges i.e. the provision of food packs to those tenants in food poverty (via additional grant funding) and in rent arrears. The Income Team and Money Advisors would, therefore, continue to work closely with tenant and to smooth any transition onto UC as well as to assist them to pay their rent.
- The Head of Housing and Building Services wished to add that it was recognised at a corporate level that the impacts described above also affected the wider community and that the Council was co-ordinating all of the activities both in terms of the statutory services as well as Third Sector and community services so that all residents could access such support and services equally, as well as utilising support from bodies such as Vale Heroes, which had been effective during the height of COVID-19.

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Following the presentation of the report, H. Smith (Tenant Representative) queried whether it was still the case that when people made their UC claim they were paid four weeks in arrears after a wait of six weeks and therefore were still missing two weeks in benefits, as this had impacted some of the tenants she had spoken to. It was explained that this waiting time and the two week 'gap' / arrears for UC had now been removed or reduced, but this would be confirmed with the Money Advice Team and the Representative updated further.

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

RECOMMENDED – T H A T the report highlighting the impact of Covid-19 and the Universal Credit roll out on tenants and the Council's rental income be noted.

#### Reason for recommendation

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

#### 1026 HOMELESSNESS PREVENTION STRATEGY 2018-2022 - MONITORING REPORT (DEH) –

The purpose of the report, as outlined by the Head of Housing and Building Services, was to provide the third and final update to Committee on progress in implementing the Homelessness Prevention Strategy and Action Plan for the 2018-22, which was now coming to an end and the next steps in terms of the Council's strategic thinking going forward, post-2022.

The Housing (Wales) Act 2014 Act placed a statutory requirement on Local Authorities to undertake a review of homelessness services and to produce a Homelessness Strategy setting out how each Council, in partnership with other stakeholders, would identify and develop the services required to help and support those in housing need. This also placed a number of new duties on Local Authorities in respect of homelessness, which included the provision of assistance to anyone threatened with homelessness irrespective of priority need or local connection and at an earlier stage, as well as new powers for Councils to discharge their homelessness duty into the private rented sector.

In terms of the related Action Plan, most actions had been achieved despite COVID-19. However, a very small number of actions could not be completed due to various factors, for example:

- Develop Rolling Homes4U Advert: the plan to advertise properties as soon as they became available had stalled (currently advertised weekly), but would be progressed once the new Housing ICT system had been implemented.
- Delivery of tenancy ready training within the Prison system: this action was not being supported by Justice agencies as they felt that it would duplicate the initiatives currently being delivered internally via the Prison system. The Council would keep a watching brief on this and, if it was believed that

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those services were not appropriate and they were not impacting on homelessness, then the Council would reengage.

- Non-Engagement strategy for clients in temporary accommodation: despite delays caused by COVID-19, as well as the complex nature of the client behaviours that needed to be addressed as part of this, the Supporting People Team were looking into best practice from across all of the accommodation providers with the intention that the Council would adopt those practices in order that people in different accommodation settings would have the same response or a similar response in terms of non-engagement.
- Analysis of the support needs of clients in temporary accommodation: this analysis had now been carried out but had not been formally adopted yet.

The report also outlined the significant ongoing pressure on the Housing Solutions Service and support services resulting from COVID-19 and the additional actions that had been taken. There were ongoing challenges that the Housing Solutions Service needed to address, i.e. alleviating the ongoing pressures on temporary accommodation and in particular housing key demographics such as single person households, which had also been addressed by the Committee's recent Task and Finish exercise and whose recommendations both Scrutiny and Cabinet had considered. The Task and Finish recommendations would also help inform the new strategy. There were also the adverse effects of COVID-19 on housing options within the private rented sector which the Council was also working to address and resolve.

Finally, a new, four-year strategy had been developed which was currently in draft and had involved consultation with statutory and non-statutory agencies in developing its key themes and actions. This would be shared with Welsh Government shortly for their consideration. Ultimately, the intention was for this strategy to go back to both Cabinet and Scrutiny for consideration and monitoring. It was also mentioned that this would be a combined strategy, taking up homelessness and supporting people with the acknowledgement that homelessness and vulnerabilities were clearly linked and that funding needed to be aligned in order to tackle both those interlinked issues.

The Chair cited the example of the new and successful temporary accommodation at Court Road and asked whether the Council planned to build similar units elsewhere in the Vale. It was explained that several sites were being looked at for such housing developments, but these were at the very early option appraisal stage i.e. the Council was looking at the feasibility of installing mains electricity and sewage at such sites.

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

**RECOMMENDED –**

(1) T H A T the progress to date in implementing the Homelessness Prevention Strategy and Action Plan be noted.

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(2) T H A T the additional actions included and the significant pressures on the service, its staff and resources as a result of the COVID pandemic be noted.

Reason for recommendations

(1&2) Having regard to the contents of the report and discussions at the meeting.