

No.

HOMES AND SAFE COMMUNITIES SCRUTINY COMMITTEE

Minutes of a remote meeting held on 9th January, 2023.

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

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

Present: Councillor A.M. Collins (Chair); Councillor B. Loveluck-Edwards (Vice-Chair); Councillors J. Aviet, G.M. Ball, I. Buckley, S. Campbell, G.D.D. Carroll, S.M. Hanks, W.A. Hennessy, M.J.G. Morgan and S.D. Perkes.

Also present: C. Ireland (Citizens Advice Cardiff and Vale Representative), G. Doyle, D. Dutch (Representatives from Tenant Working Group / Panel), L. Burnett (Executive Leader and Cabinet Member for Performance and Resources), S.J. Haines, G. John (Cabinet Member for Leisure, Sport and Wellbeing), Dr. I.J. Johnson, E. Williams (Cabinet Member for Social Care and Health) and M. Wilson (Cabinet Member for Neighbourhood and Building Services).

591 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.”

592 APOLOGIES FOR ABSENCE –

These were received from V. John and H. Smith (Representatives from Tenant Working Group / Panel).

593 MINUTES –

RECOMMENDED – T H A T the minutes of the meeting held on 7th December, 2022 be approved as a correct record.

594 DECLARATIONS OF INTEREST –

No declarations of interest were received.

595 STOP LOAN SHARK WALES –

The presentation was outlined by the Client Liaison Officer at the Wales Illegal Money Lending Unit (now known as 'Stop Loan Shark Wales' Unit (SLSW)), who set out the following:

- The background to the unit, its funding by the UK Government to investigate and prosecute illegal money lenders (also known as 'loan sharks') throughout the Wales and its subsequent hosting by Shared Regulatory Services within the Vale of Glamorgan.
- The organisation and structure of the unit, i.e. the investigators who gather the evidence to assist in the prosecution of loan sharks and the client liaison officers, combining victim support, with awareness raising and training.
- The definition of a 'loan shark' (i.e. the lending of money without proper authorisation or regulation by the Financial Conduct Authority) and their links to, and use of, other forms of criminality as part of their activities i.e. assault, criminal damage, blackmail and kidnap as well as illegal money lending.
- The characteristics and 'business models' around loan sharking were described i.e. the targeting of vulnerable individuals (such as those persons with disabilities, minority groups and those persons impacted by the cost of living crisis) through friends or family ('word of mouth') and via other groups with loans at exorbitant interest rates. This tended to be a very 'localised' form of crime, although there were some instances of illegal money lending online. It also involved both male and female persons, as well as the use of 'grooming' potential victims.
- The 'Money Man' case study was referred to, which illustrated the effectiveness of utilising the Proceeds of Crime Act 2002 in recouping substantial monies from these offenders (and potentially back to their victims) versus more traditional forms of sentencing and punishment.
- Figures were also shared regarding the number of incidents reported, investigations and prosecutions undertaken within Wales as a whole, as well as drilling down to incidents specific to Cardiff and the Vale of Glamorgan (i.e. information from the England team regarding illegal online lenders in Cardiff and Llantwit Major).
- The 'relaunch' of this unit and its work, in October 2022, was explained, with its renaming to 'Stop Loan Shark Wales' and moving away from the terminology around 'reporting' to 'tell us about it' in order to make it clearer to the public what their role was and to increase accessibility and engagement with its services. This was done in conjunction with a greater social media presence, the use of its website and the unit's 24 hour 'hotline'.
- Purely Wales wide research on the scale of loan sharking was to be undertaken in 2023 via Welsh Government funding.
- The role of free training provided by the SLSW unit to interested parties, i.e to 21 members of the Council's Housing Team and 48 Cardiff and the Vale Citizens Advice staff.

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

- On Councillor Carroll's query on the geographic 'reach' of loan sharks, i.e. between neighbouring communities in both Cardiff and the Vale, it was explained that usually loan sharks would operate in one specific area and did not tend to extend into neighbouring areas or communities.
- On Councillor Hennessy's query on the number of loan sharks operating within the Vale of Glamorgan, there were no specific numbers on this, due in part to the still largely 'hidden' nature of illegal money lending. This was why, in order to help break the stigma and fear of victims of loan sharks to come forward, the unit was raising awareness and offered training in order that such criminality could be more easily identified in the Vale of Glamorgan and elsewhere. The councillor also asked about training regarding loan shark activities for the Committee, with it subsequently suggested that this should be extended to all Elected Members, in consultation with Democratic Services and the SLSW Unit.
- Councillor Aviet asked whether, as in the case of victims of domestic abuse, those people who had come forward and had been identified as victims of loan sharks could receive house alarms and other safeguarding measures. It was explained that if there was immediate danger, then police assistance would be sought straight away. The SLSW unit would also look to assist with other safeguarding measures where there was no imminent danger i.e. the installation of CCTV, fireproofing letterboxes, relocating families into temporary accommodation, etc.
- The Vice-Chair wished to raise the impact of 'in-work poverty' in terms of making people more vulnerable to loan shark activities and asked if the SLSW Unit was looking to work with Trade Unions and other employee / employer bodies in order to raise the unit's profile and raise awareness of illegal money lending. The unit was currently working with the National Health Service (NHS) in order to address this issue, but it had been more challenging to engage with Trade Unions and other bodies concerning this. The Client Liaison Officer asked Members if they did have contacts with Trade Unions, etc. to share them with her and the unit in order establish better links. Links had also been built with community pantries and food banks in South Wales as well as undertaking training with them in order to help staff at these centres identify clients who may be victims of loan shark activity.
- Councillor Perkes asked about literature, such as posters, leaflets, etc. being placed in public buildings, businesses and at other locations in the Vale concerning SLSW, in order to reach out to residents who could not access social media and whether the unit had a budget for this. The unit did have a small budget and capacity for the production and distribution of hard copies of leaflets and posters, which had been used as part of the recent relaunch and were distributed in areas where loan shark activity was suspected. Locations such as libraries, GP surgeries and social landlord receptions would also be useful for placing leaflets and posters in. Councillor Perkes added that it would be useful to reach out to schools and school governors in order to raise awareness around SLSW. The Client Liaison Officer stated that she was more than happy to engage with

No.

schools, etc, and her and the unit were always keen to raise awareness and train various bodies and community groups within the Vale of Glamorgan.

- On Councillor Buckley's question about the installation of fire proofed letterboxes for victims of loan shark activities, it was confirmed that the Fire Service assisted in the installation of these.

Scrutiny Committee, having considered the presentation, subsequently

RECOMMENDED – T H A T the presentation regarding Stop Loan Shark Wales be noted.

Reason for recommendation

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

596 COST OF LIVING SUPPORT FOR FOOD, WARM SPACES AND OTHER MEANS OF SUPPORT (REF) –

The reference from Cabinet of 15th December, 2022 was presented by the Director of Corporate Resources, which was intended to raise awareness of the range of support that was being undertaken by the Council and its partners around the Cost of Living Crisis, food and fuel poverty, and other areas of need for residents within the Vale of Glamorgan. This reference also responded to the recent Audit Wales 'Time for change – poverty in Wales' report and Members' views were sought on this response.

The current economic and related challenges faced by the Council and other Local Authorities within the UK were outlined, which were also detailed in the Audit Wales National Study, the COVID-era Community Impact Assessments, Economic Impact Assessments and the Public Services Board (PSB) Wellbeing Assessment. These challenges included growing food insecurity and the pressures relating to the increased cost of living.

The various grants and related schemes were outlined, including food support organisations such as Big Bocs Bwyds with 'pay as you can' models in place alongside the Vale Foodbanks who provided crucial crisis support. Also, In the previous financial year the Council received funding of just under £100,000 from Welsh Government (WG) and via the Welsh Local Government Association (WLGA). This went into a number of funding streams, including support for school-based food and other support initiatives such as the Penarth Food Pod (run by the Council Housing Team), as well as Vale Foodbanks. The funding also helped the Council to create and distribute over 1,200 essential food and hygiene support parcels, in collaboration with partners, such as Pobl and Atal y Fro. £100,000 of National Lottery money had also been secured by the Council, in tandem with partners, to expand the range of services on offer at the CF61 Community Centre in Llantwit Major as the More Than Food Hub project.

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The Director also referred to the establishment of a cross departmental Cost of Living Group in order to ensure that the maximum value was being delivered and to strategically shape the Council's response to the crisis.

The work undertaken by the Council concerning the WG's Cost of Living Scheme was highlighted, with 36,000 households having been supported so far by this Scheme. The Winter Fuel Scheme was also being processed via the Council, with almost 9,000 people having been paid at this time.

Additional information on funding streams would be provided to the Committee via the Democratic and Scrutiny Services Officer, although at this time it could be confirmed that in total the Council received £166,000 in terms of additional funds and had committed just under £159,000 of those.

Funding had helped to purchase additional food stock and support food banks at a time of decreasing donations, as well as help establish 'pop up' foodbanks and support community workshops for cooking.

The 'Warm Welcome' Project was outlined, which entailed funding the establishment of a network of 'warm spaces' throughout the Vale of Glamorgan (there were currently 33 such spaces) for people to attend, engage in various activities and access support or advice. The Warm Welcome web page had been launched on the Council's website, which included an interactive map that allowed residents to search for a warm space that was close by and provided information about the operating hours and what activities were available.

The range of other support offered by the Council and partners was mentioned, including the Cost-of-Living webpages, raising the public profile of the Warm Spaces Project, through to providing Council staff with the Real Living Wage.

In response to the Audit Wales report on poverty in Wales and its recommendations, which included that Local Authorities should produce strategies that dealt with, and measured the performance of, addressing poverty in their areas, the Council had drafted a management plan or framework that set out what actions the Council intended to take, allocating both a responsible officer and a due date for delivering these activities.

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

- Both Councillors Campbell and Carroll drew the Committee's attention to those areas of the Vale where there was not necessarily the groups or volunteers available to access this funding in order to provide cost of living support or spaces and which therefore needed additional support in order to set up and access these. The Director of Corporate Resources stated that he would arrange further discussions with both Councillors in order to address their concerns and what could be done to expand the relevant support in their wards. He explained that initially the rationale for setting up warm spaces had been to establish these in areas where there were

No.

existing facilities that could handle them in order to get them up and running quickly.

- On Councillor Perkes' query on having performance data concerning how the various support services were used and their demographics, it was explained that such information would be collected, but this would have to be 'light touch', in order to not create an excessive burden on the volunteers manning the warm spaces, etc. Also, 'case studies; would be collated in order to identify which groups needed support and how best to provide it.
- Councillor Morgan stated the Warm Spaces Project was a tremendous initiative, but it was important that for those older or more vulnerable residents who did not have access to online information or were reluctant to attend, were either made aware of the support available or encouraged to use it via more traditional methods. It was explained that as well using the Council's website and social media in order to raise awareness of cost-of-living support, information leaflets, posters and banners had also been produced and distributed within local community areas around the Vale. On the Councillor's further comment about the use of warm spaces after Winter as spaces for those persons who felt lonely, isolated or vulnerable, in order to have social interaction as well as other support, this was something the Council was considering in order to build on the legacy of warm spaces and cost of living support. At Llantwit Major, a project addressing self-isolation was being undertaken in conjunction with Age Connect and Glamorgan Voluntary Services (GVS).
- The Cabinet Member for Neighbourhood and Building Services added that the warm spaces and other cost of living support were vital projects and much needed in the Vale. As well feeding and keeping residents warm, these spaces would also help to break down social isolation. It was also important that Council tenants got in touch with the Council when faced with issues around their boiler and heating.
- The Chair and Vice-Chair echoed the points made by the Committee and others around the importance of utilising the cost-of-living support and warm spaces to help break down loneliness and improve mental wellbeing, as well as the need to expand these services further within the Vale, and to extend their use after Winter.

Scrutiny Committee, having considered the Cabinet reference and report, subsequently

RECOMMENDED – T H A T the following views of the Homes and Safe Communities Scrutiny Committee be referred with the report to the Governance and Audit Committee for consideration, with the views of the Committee to be also referred back to Cabinet as part of their consideration of the Council's actions in response to Audit Wales's work:

- It was important for the Council to look at raising the awareness, as well as expanding the delivery, of warm spaces and related services throughout the Vale of Glamorgan, and to look at deepening such support, i.e. to provide services that deal with isolation, and support vulnerable residents and communities.

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Reason for recommendation

In order that the Governance and Audit Committee and Cabinet can consider the views of the Committee as part of their consideration of the Council's actions in response to the Audit Wales Report.

597 UPDATE ON THE COMMUNITY SAFETY STRATEGY ACTION PLAN (DEH) –

The report was co-presented by the Head of Housing and Building Services and the Principal Community Safety Officer, the purpose of which was to consider the updates and progress of the Safer Vale Strategy Action Plan.

By way of background, the Community Safety Team (CST) coordinated community safety activity across the Vale of Glamorgan with other statutory partner organisations under the umbrella of the Safer Vale Partnership. Regarding the Community Safety Strategy Action Plan itself, following the Safer Vale Partnership's restructure in 2019, a 3-year Strategy and Action Plan was developed, with 4 key strategic priority areas.

The Partnership, with the CST, maintained a Partnership Delivery Plan, which was reviewed on a regular basis, and kept track of how the Partnership was performing as well as identifying any 'gaps' in its services.

Due to the wide-ranging nature of community safety, the Action Plan was broken down into 4 categories in order to provide a greater focus on the priority areas for the Safer Vale Partnership, which included: 'Prevent and Reduce Crime and Disorder'; 'Engage'; 'Safeguard' and 'Work together'.

The report shared progress from the Safer Vale Strategy Action Plan for the period since the last Scrutiny update in November 2021: 82% of actions outlined in the Partnership's Action Plan received a Green performance rating reflecting the positive progress made during the timeframe. Also, 18% of actions were attributed an Amber performance rating and 0% received a Red performance rating. In part, the Amber ratings were related to less community engagement due to the pandemic / lockdown and the need to redirect resources to the prevention and reduction of crime and disorder during this time. As part of the new Strategy and Action Plan the identity of the Safer Vale Partnership would be strengthened in order to facilitate greater engagement with the community.

The Committee were informed of a number of positive outcomes under the 4 priority areas i.e. under 'Prevent and Reduce Crime and Disorder', the recommissioning of substance misuse services had taken place across the Vale, in order to make it easier for people to access this type of support. The Partnership had successfully processed 1,175 Anti-Social Behaviour (ASB) incidents in the first two quarters of 2022- 2023, with a total of 725 referrals, as well as the successful processing and coordination of 273 standard and medium domestic abuse Public Protection Notice (PPN) referrals. Under 'Engage' the

No.

Community Cohesion Group had been re-established in order to strengthen the agenda and the remit of the group. Under 'Safeguard' a considerable number of Council staff had been trained under the National Training Framework with regard to identifying and successfully referring individuals who came into contact with victims of domestic abuse. With regard to the 'Work Together' priority, there had been significant progress in upgrading CCTV within the Vale, with the aim for the upgrade to be completed by early Spring.

The Safer Vale Partnership Action Plan was a working document and a standing agenda item for the Safer Vale Operational Group. It was therefore kept under constant review and was updated as required. The Safer Vale Partnership had begun work on the draft of the next Safer Vale Partnership Strategy and Delivery Plan that would be launched in April 2023. It was expected that the next Strategy would cover a period of five years, in order to fully develop its aims and to properly monitor / measure outcomes, that would be reviewed on an annual basis.

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

- The Chair stated it was good to see the upgrade of CCTV being rolled out across the Vale at pace, which would help to tackle crime and ASB within the Vale area.
- On Councillor Aviet's query on the PREVENT Programme and instances of far-right activity, hate crime, or terrorism, it was explained that such instances would be referred to the Wales Extremism and Counter Terrorism Unit (WECTU), which the Safer Vale Partnership had a close relationship with. Also, the Partnership maintained a database to help monitor this. On the Councillor's other question regarding domestic abuse and the perpetrator service, this referred to the Drive Project, currently only for high-risk perpetrators of domestic violence, which looked to address their behaviours and linked issues, i.e. tackling alcohol or substance misuse, while protecting and supporting the victims of domestic abuse. The Project had been quite successful, with the hope that funding for this service would be extended to standard and medium level perpetrators in future.
- On Councillor Perkes' query on the prevalence of 'cuckooing' within the Vale (in which the home of a vulnerable person was taken over by criminals for illegal activities), it was explained that this was a relatively small-scale issue within the Vale, but where it was identified, the Partnership would put in measures to protect and support victims of cuckooing. Awareness training had also been undertaken by Council staff in order to identify people who might fall victim to this type of activity, and it was important for community leaders and residents' groups to also be aware and help identify cuckooing and other activities, such as ASB.
- Councillor Hanks look forward to the completion of the CCTV upgrade and asked if the Partnership worked with Network Rail to tackle ASB. It was confirmed that the Partnership worked with British Transport Police (BTP) in tackling ASB at railway stations, as well as BTP attending Safer Vale Partnership meetings.

Scrutiny Committee, having considered the report, subsequently

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RECOMMENDED – T H A T the progress to date on implementing the Safer Vale Strategy Action Plan be noted.

Reason for recommendation

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