

MINUTES OF A MEETING OF THE HEALTH, CARE AND HOUSING SCRUTINY COMMITTEE HELD AT COUNCIL CHAMBER - COUNTY HALL, LLANDRINDOD WELLS, POWYS ON WEDNESDAY, 23 JANUARY 2019

PRESENT: County Councillor G I S Williams (Chair)
County Councillors H Hulme, A Jenner, E Jones, G Morgan, P C Pritchard,
K M Roberts-Jones, J Williams, J M Williams and R Williams

Officers: S Inkson (Head of Housing), A Thompson (Service Manager – Tenancy Services) and W Richards (Scrutiny Manager and Head of Democratic Services)

1.	APOLOGIES
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Apologies for absence were received from County Councillors J Gibson-Watt, D Rowlands, and E Vaughan.

2.	DECLARATIONS OF INTEREST
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County Councillor Roger Williams disclosed a Personal and Prejudicial Interest in relation to Item 6 – Proposition for the Adoption of ECO3 and left the room when the matter was considered.

3.	DECLARATIONS OF PARTY WHIPS
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There were no disclosures of prohibited party whips by Members.

4.	MINUTES
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The Chair was authorised to sign the minutes of the meetings held on 8 November, 22 November and 10 December as correct records.

5.	COMMON ALLOCATIONS SCHEME REVIEW AND AMENDMENTS
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The Committee considered the report of the Portfolio Holder for Corporate Governance, Housing and Public Protection. (Copy filed with signed minutes)

The Head of Housing made a presentation to the Committee outlining changes to the scheme which the Housing Service and its housing partners will be working to. The 1996 Act gives the Council a duty to publish the allocations scheme and keep it updated. In 2014 the Common Allocations Scheme and Register was established for the Council and its housing association partners, with all working to the same system of allocating social housing.

Although the legislation is very prescriptive in how houses are allocated, the Council does have some discretion. Housing Associations had raised concerns regarding the way the Common Housing Register was being operated. Independent Consultants were commissioned to undertake a review of the system which concluded that customers required better information as to the housing stock available, there should be a better routing of phone calls, and an improvement to the way that individuals access the Register by looking at the IT system used. As a consequence, a new IT system needed to be implemented, where individuals did not need to phone in, but could access the system using

the internet. The Council was also looking at choice based letting rather than the current system of date order / priority bands for allocating housing.

A new IT system was being rolled out for the Common Housing Register and this would also contain a register for homelessness which would assist the efficiency of that service as well. The homelessness system would be going live in early February with the Common Housing Register system live by the end of April 2019.

The review also identified a need to review the policy in light of new challenges for the Council and practice. Definitions had been clarified and a new wizard would assist individuals with the application process and provide them with options. The new policy would also lead to an assessment of properties into 5 bands. Individuals would also need to be assessed so that if there were any health needs, the individuals could be matched with suitable properties. Additional priorities can be given to individuals e.g. if there was an economic need in an area or if there was a need to get a person living on the streets who was vulnerable into accommodation. Social registered landlords could also lose priority if their properties did not come up to the required standard.

The head of Housing was thanked for taking on board the views of housing associations in reviewing the policy.

Question:

Turning properties over quickly may not always be possible due to the state of properties. What can be done to expedite repairs being carried out as properties could be empty for up to 9 months?

Response:

The Heart of Wales Property Service (HOWPS) were now close to achieving the level of service required. HOPWS turnaround is set at 17 days in year 2 of the contract. Long voids should therefore be an exception.

Question:

Will housing be working with partner organisations to help people who do not have internet access e.g. Assembly Members. Tenants also could be losing priority if they do not meet conditions and there could be a risk to an individual coming back into the system as homeless. In addition if there is a safeguarding issue there is a need for other departments to work with housing and give support to individuals such as Powys People Direct (PPD)

Response:

Training is being provided to housing officers on how to use the new system. This training could be broadened to AMs and Councillors who could then assist individuals. Issues in relation to PPD and safeguarding would be taken up with the service.

Question:

Are vacant properties only due to maintenance or are they in the wrong place. If in the wrong place what do we do about these?

Response:

Properties are vacant for numerous reasons. Some require significant work to bring them to standard i.e. WHQS or lettable standard, or work is required to make the property safe. There are also difficult to let properties,

and if there is no-one suitable on the waiting list it will be publicised to a wider group of applicants by means of Facebook or the Council's website. Some properties are difficult to let due to DWP rules on benefits. Some of these properties are being considered for demolition with new, more suitable properties being built e.g. family friendly properties. The Housing Service is seeking to introduce visits to tenants every 3 years to try and overcome some of the issues before the properties become voids. For difficult to let properties, there might be a need to re-profile those properties or create more suitable housing.

Question:

There was a property in an area which took 12 weeks to bring back into use but it required much work. Does the Register include sheltered accommodation?

Response:

Yes the register is made up of 600 / 700 different waiting lists of various types of properties which include sheltered accommodation. There is a separate waiting list for sheltered accommodation. In Newtown there is an extra care scheme and it is hoped to have more of these in the county. A number of properties are identified as extra care light properties for use by the frail or elderly or can be allocated by housing in consultation with the health service.

Question:

What is the number on the waiting list at present?

Response:

There are around 2200 households on the waiting list currently. The new policy will include an annual review and renewal of applications. These are households not just individuals. Around 16 out of every 100 persons in Powys lives in social care housing and 10 out of every 100 person in Powys lives in a Powys County Council property.

Question:

Is there a link to planning in terms of house building?

Response:

Every 5 years the Housing Service has to undertake a housing market assessment and this feeds directly into the Local Development Plan and the numbers of affordable housing needed in the county. This assessment will also look at the economic and other housing needs in the county.

Question:

With regard to difficult to let properties could a notification be sent out to local members first as they may know of someone in need.

Response:

Yes the Housing Service would implement this.

Question:

Members do not know which properties in their area are now classed as sheltered housing. Could Members be advised of the different classes of properties in their area.

Response:

The new system will show per area the types of properties that are

available. An assessment was undertaken of properties classed as older persons accommodation as not all of these were suitable and therefore reclassified. The Service would look to circulate a list of property types per area to members.

Question:

HOWPS and the 17 day turnaround – have not seen any properties filled in less than a month. Is this due to the system we operate where one trade at a time goes into a property rather than multiple trades working on a property together. This is likely to increase cost and time as well as losing income for the Council. Applicants are also not being kept informed of what is going on.

Response:

The Council is seeking to improve the policy and also the way that it works with HOWPS. It's the way that the Council has set up the framework agreement is what is causing the problem. This means that local traders are given the opportunity to tender for work, but also means that only one trade at a time can operate in a property.

Question:

What is the age criteria for sheltered accommodation? How long is a property allowed to be kept by a family following the death of a tenant?

Response:

The Service would provide the age criteria to the Member. There is also a provision in the policy that if a person is vulnerable they could be placed in an older person's complex but this may not always be appropriate. With regard to the timescale following the death of a tenant, this can vary tremendously.

Question:

What can be done about properties which are empty where a person has gone into a residential home, but is hoping to come back to their original property?

Response:

The tenant has a secure tenancy until they decide to give it up. If they are in a residential home and as long as they continue to pay the rent on their other home, this is not a breach of their tenancy. However these cases are infrequent.

Question:

If a person dies intestate, this can delay a property being relet – how long does this take?

Response:

There is a process where the Council serves notice on the official Solicitor and therefore the Council is in the hands of the Solicitor as to how long the process takes.

Question:

If the tenancy ends, can the Council claim against the former tenant if the property is a mess? Also what if that person is receiving Tax Credits?

Response:

The Council has a recharge policy. Tenants can also be asked to put matters right or the Council could go to court to make a claim against the

former tenant. This is the same position for a person on Tax Credits and the Council would take people to court to get the message out that properties should be treated correctly.

Question:

There is a need for more ground floor accommodation for elderly persons. Can we use vacant areas or demolish garages and replace them with accommodation?

Response:

This is why there is an assessment of the needs of individuals. This is also why the Housing revenue Account will be purchasing land from the Council or using land where garages have been demolished. The Service is also looking at empty spaces on existing estates to provide such accommodation.

Question:

Some properties are left in a poor state following a tenancy. Has the Housing Service considered a bond before a person is issued with a property?

Response:

Landlords have looked at this but the client groups being accommodated cannot afford a bond. This is also why the Council is looking at more regular visits to properties.

Question:

New schools are being built in Welshpool. 3 old school sites will become available – can these be considered for development of housing as they are in the Council's ownership, by either the Council or by others?

Response:

The Housing Service will be the first in line for these sites when they become vacant as there is a need for housing identified in Welshpool.

Question:

Cleaning Services clear vacant properties. What happens to the furniture?

Response:

The furniture is stored and offered to new tenants.

Observations to the Cabinet:

- **Will Housing work with partner agencies and others to help people who do not have internet access e.g. MPs / AMs / Councillors – this will require training for these individuals.**
- **Issue where safeguarding issues not being raised with housing by other services – issues with PPD to be taken up with the service.**
- **Difficult to let properties – send out alert to local members first as they may know of someone in need of accommodation.**
- **Designation of properties classed as sheltered housing – list to be circulated to Members of properties identified as sheltered housing in their areas.**
- **Need for more ground floor accommodation for elderly people.**
- **Use of surplus properties in Welshpool i.e. former school sites for new social housing.**

6.	PROPOSITION FOR THE ADOPTION OF ECO 3
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The Committee received the report of the Portfolio Holder for Corporate Governance, Housing and Public Protection. (Copy filed with signed minutes)

County Councillor Roger Williams disclosed a Personal and Prejudicial Interest in this matter as a boiler had been installed in his property under the previous ECO2 Scheme. He withdrew from / left the meeting at 11.30 a.m.

The Committee was advised that a letter of concern regarding the ECO3 scheme had been emailed to all Members. The Scrutiny Manager and Head of Democratic Services advised that it would be inappropriate to consider the contents of the letter until the matter had been considered by the Council. Members asked that the Scrutiny Manager and Head of Democratic Services advise all Members that they should not respond individually to the letter and that a Council response would be issued in due course.

Members considered that due to the advice it would be more appropriate if the matter be deferred until clarification had been provided regarding the email.

RESOLVED that the matter be deferred.

7.	IMPROVEMENT AND ASSURANCE BOARD - NOTES
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The Committee received the minutes of the Improvement and Assurance Board held on 31 October, 2018.

County Councillor G I S Williams (Chair)