

MINUTES OF A MEETING OF THE ECONOMY, RESIDENTS, COMMUNITIES AND GOVERNANCE SCRUTINY COMMITTEE HELD AT COUNCIL CHAMBER, COUNTY HALL - COUNTY HALL ON TUESDAY, 20 AUGUST 2019

PRESENT: County Councillor M J Dorrance (Chair)
County Councillors D O Evans, L George, J Gibson-Watt, E M Jones, G Jones, I McIntosh, P C Pritchard, J Pugh, D Selby and M Barnes

Cabinet Portfolio Holders In Attendance: J Evans (Portfolio Holder for Corporate Governance, Housing and Public Protection)

Officers: Nina Davies (Head of Housing and Community Development), Wyn Richards (Scrutiny Manager and Head of Democratic Services), Andy Thompson (Service Manager - Tenancy Services) and Terry Flynn (Housing Strategy Team Leader)

1. APOLOGIES

An apology for absence was received from County Councillor K Curry.

2. MINUTES OF PREVIOUS MEETINGS

The Chair was authorised to sign the minutes of the last meeting held on 24th June 2019 as a correct record.

3. DECLARATION OF PARTY WHIPS

The Committee noted that there were no disclosures of prohibited party whips which a Member has been given in relation to the meeting in accordance with Section 78(3) of the Local Government Measure 2011.

4. DISCLOSURES OF INTEREST

The Committee noted that there were no disclosures of interests from Members relating to items to be considered at the meeting.

5. TENANT SATISFACTION

Welsh Government requires that local authorities and housing associations undertakes a tenant satisfaction survey every 2 years. In relation to the current survey Welsh Government had mandated seven questions so that comparisons could be made between authorities. The Council had added three questions of its own to the survey. In addition, the Service undertook a survey of those who had contacted the Housing Service. The results of the survey were set out in the report.

Question / Comment: the Council is mandated to undertake the survey there is no comparative information in the report. In addition there is no action plan attached to the report.

Response: The Committee received a presentation regarding previous surveys. However this was the first time that the Star Survey had been used, and therefore the previous information is not compatible. Members requested that a copy of the presentation be circulated to the Committee.

It was reported that there had been a steady decline in satisfaction levels in the surveys undertaken between 2008 and 2019. Whilst the satisfaction level relating to the question regarding the neighbourhood had improved there had been a decrease in how safe individuals felt in their home. The satisfaction level in relation to the question regarding their home had been fairly consistent with a slight improvement this year. It was repairs and maintenance where there had been consistent dissatisfaction in the surveys.

Question / Comment: In the key comparators the Council has got worse. There is a need for speed in delivering the action plan as this is a service that people pay for. What would be classed as a good service?

Response: 100% would be the ideal. However there has been much disruption to tenants over the last few years for example in work being undertaken to properties to achieve WHQS (Welsh Housing Quality Standard)

Question / Comment: The level of dissatisfaction will increase as the funding available to the Council decreases.

Response: The HRA (Housing Revenue Account) is a separate account and so satisfaction levels are not tied to Council funding but to rents.

The Committee noted that Community Safety Partnership funding had been reduced and that has caused dissatisfaction as people feel less safe in their communities.

Question / Comment: The standard of work that has been undertaken to Council properties is generally poor. The Council is also not protecting the Powys pound, and work should be undertaken by local rather than contractors external to Powys. The Council should engage more with local businesses. Has the position worsened with HOWPS.

Response: The Portfolio Holder advised that Powys is required to use the Sell to Wales framework. The Council is also engaging with businesses, trying to encourage them to become a framework contractor.

The Chair asked if there is any evidence of Powys businesses not confident to work with the Council? A Member responded that during recent business breakfasts that this was the response he had received from businesses.

Question / Comment: The quality of work undertaken under WHQS is poor and officers were not inspecting during the installation but at the end.

Response: The satisfaction levels with repairs and maintenance is low and the Housing Service is keen to address this. The Work is undertaken by HOWPS who do sub-contract some of the work to others. However most work is undertaken by HOWPS itself.

Communications and repairs and maintenance have poor satisfaction levels with people waiting a long time for repairs to be undertaken. There were 1800 calls from the Housing Service to HOWPS in the last month, indicating a need to streamline communications. HOWPS' own surveys have a high level of satisfaction but these only relate to the repair itself and cover just 15% of all repairs completed. The Housing Service will now be surveying 35% of the work ordered from HOWPS.

Void times need to be reduced. WHQS contracts were generally undertaken by local contractors but the Council invites bids for work and are not able to favour local contractors. The key issues for the Housing Service are tenants being able to get hold of the right person and getting repairs undertaken. There is also the issue of the existing stock being dominated by older properties.

Question / Comment: every year the results get worse and the Council needs to react and make improvements. The Council should focus on what it can improve most i.e. HOWPS. This issue was raised by Members twelve months ago and things are still not improving. The problem is the disorganisation of the contractor employed by the Council rather than the time taken. It would be interesting to compare the costs of the repairs and maintenance service prior to HOWPS with the costs now. The Service should also engage with local Members to find out what is going on in estates.

Response: The Service would look at improving Member engagement. Contract management is also being reviewed with additional officers in place to manage the contract with HOWPS. In response to the question regarding the contract with HOWPS, break clauses etc, the Chair indicated that this could be considered by the Working Group being established to consider this matter.

Question / Comment: In relation to contract management what the Council lacks is housing surveyors. Why cannot the Council manage more in estates by the use of caretakers and local contractors? On other estates local contractors are undertaking grass cutting and this could be an improvement.

Response: With hedge cutting and grass cutting, this is what the local estate teams are doing. With the introduction of these teams the number of complaint calls to the Housing Service are already falling. There are currently five caretakers operating in the County, but this number could be increased. There are also now eight surveyors in place to manage the contract with HOWPS with two of these being senior surveyors overseeing the day to day service.

Question / Comment: With regard to the level of dissatisfaction with service charges, why are service charges listed on tenants' rents which just adds to the level of dissatisfaction. Will the questions to tenants be the same in two years' time?

Response: Yes the questions will be the same subject to no changes from Welsh Government. The position with regard to service charges needs to be clarified. The figures of satisfaction from those who pay service charges reflect there being only a relatively small number of people who do pay these charges.

Service charges depend on individual areas. For example, service charges also do not include grass cutting in most cases. The services that have to be considered for service charges is influenced by the rules regarding housing benefit. With regard to Care Line, a report is to be presented to Cabinet regarding whether charges for these should be optional or not. Whilst service charges are not popular there is currently no consistent approach to what is and is not charged for across the County. This is

because the way homes are managed reflects the historic factors relating to the policies and service charge agreements, and the way homes were developed previously. Service charge policy therefore does need to be reviewed.

Question / Comment: Can the Committee comment on this report before being considered by the Cabinet?

Response: This report could be considered by the Committee as a pre-decision scrutiny item.

Question / Comment: With dissatisfaction levels, is work being undertaken to properties that the tenants do not want? What proportion of that is causing the dissatisfaction levels? Why is the Council doing this?

Response: If people do not want work to be undertaken then this is an acceptable fail under WHQS and so tenants are not compelled or forced to have such work done. Tenants can and do refuse to have work done. Some dissatisfaction levels are also because the Council under its own policies cannot always provide what people want. There are also a number of links in the chain between the tenant and HOWPS which needs to be reduced. WHQS was driven by Welsh Government's drive to improve the housing stock.

Question / Comment: Sell to Wales is not fit for purpose. Many local businesses are unable to tender for work due to the way that the tenders are packaged e.g. a business could not tender for work which includes a requirement for other skills which as a business it would not have. Therefore these contracts go to the larger companies who then sub-contract the work.

Response: The Chair suggested that the Committee write to the Cabinet Member with responsibility for procurement regarding this matter and how Sell to Wales does not assist in retaining the Powys pound.

Question / Comment: Do tenancies include those on the agricultural estate?

Response: No.

Question / Comment: Are local Members informed when complaints are made to the Housing Service so that the local Member might be able to assist their resident in resolving the issue?

Response: There would be a need for the tenant to be asked if information could be passed to the local Councillor due to data protection issues. The new contact system will include a question if a person making a complaint has been in contact with their local councillor.

Question / Comment: The staff who formerly worked for Green Fingers who provided grass cutting services to the Council are now employed by the Council and the level of satisfaction has improved. Could this example be used elsewhere?

Response: This is what the estate management teams have been set up for.

Members suggested that the Committee should receive a report in 12 months time about how the estate management service was progressing. The Chair suggested that the Committee should receive the action and delivery plan in response to the survey.

Question / Comment: The Council seems to have the same discussions on a recurring basis. How can we ensure that performance is tracked and that improvement are being made.

Response: Performance is tracked quarterly and scrutiny can access these documents. The Scrutiny Manager indicated that with the move to outcome based budgeting the aim is to be able to link the outcomes of Vision 2025, the budget and performance. It was suggested that the programming of performance reports by the committee should be recommended to the Co-ordinating Committee for inclusion in the work programme.

Question / Comment: A concern was raised that smoke alarms are not being serviced and there are a number which are out of date.

Response: The Council is undertaking the Compliance One Hundred project to ensure that future compliance policy and process will at all times make sure that the Council is compliant across all housing services. Alarms are checked annually. Anything which is out of date / not working are replaced. Where the Service cannot get access to properties following repeated attempts, then legal action will be taken to gain entry to the property. Smoke alarm checks are up to date. An audit of the smoke alarm work is also being undertaken.

Question / Comment: When will the action plan be available and what are the priorities?

Response: Actions have been taken since the survey results were received. The action plan can be considered at the October meeting of the Committee and this would be recommended to the Co-ordinating Committee.

6. SCRUTINY WORK PROGRAMME

The Committee noted the Scrutiny Committees Forward Work Programme. The Chair asked the Committee if there were any items which should be suggested to the Co-ordinating Committee for inclusion in the Work Programme.

Green Waste Bins – the Committee should receive an update on the implementation of Green Waste Bins.

It was suggested whether there should be a Sub-Committee to deal with Housing matters. However it was noted that the issue was resourcing additional requirements so this was not pursued.

The Chair advised the Committee that the Co-ordinating Committee had approved the establishment of a Working Group led by the Committee to look at HOWPS.

RESOLVED that the Chair together with County Councillors D Selby, P Pritchard, J Pugh and M Barnes be appointed to the Working Group.

The Working Group would need to consider the HOWPS annual report and key performance indicators, as well as contract information such as what was HOWPS set up to do.

County Councillor M J Dorrance (Chair)