

MINUTES OF A MEETING OF THE ECONOMY, RESIDENTS, COMMUNITIES AND GOVERNANCE SCRUTINY COMMITTEE HELD AT COUNCIL CHAMBER, COUNTY HALL - COUNTY HALL ON MONDAY, 14 OCTOBER 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 and D Selby

Cabinet Portfolio Holders In Attendance: County Councillor J Evans

Officers: Nigel Brinn (Corporate Director - Economy and Environment), Wyn Richards (Scrutiny Manager and Head of Democratic Services), Andy Thompson (Service Manager – Tenancy Services), Terry Flynn (Housing Strategy Team Leader) and Greg Langridge-Thomas (Project Officer Events & Civil Contingencies)

1.	APOLOGIES
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Apologies for absence were received from County Councillors M Barnes and R. Harris, and from Nina Davies (Head of Housing and Community Development)

2.	MINUTES OF PREVIOUS MEETINGS
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The Chair was authorised to sign the minutes of the previous meeting held on 20 August, 2019 as a correct record.

3.	DECLARATION OF PARTY WHIPS
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There were no disclosures of prohibited party whips in accordance with Section 78(3) of the Local Government Measure 2011.

4.	DISCLOSURES OF INTEREST
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There were no disclosures of interest from Members relating to items to be considered at the meeting.

5.	TENANT SATISFACTION AND CUSTOMER FIRST ACTION PLAN
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The Committee received the report of the Head of Housing and Community Development. (copy filed with signed minutes)

The Committee was advised that there were four sections to the action plan, namely Contacting the Council; Repairs and Maintenance; Listening to Tenants; and Clients and Keeping Everyone Informed. The action plan had been adopted by and would be monitored by the Housing Management Team. It was noted that some of the items e.g. establishment of a single call centre would take time to complete. The action plan had also been discussed with the Tenants Scrutiny Panel at its last meeting and those comments had been taken into account in finalising the action plan.

The Committee was advised that improvements had already been implemented such as improving the way that messages were distributed from first contact officers to housing officers. With regard to web-chat it was noted that there were

licensing issues which were being discussed with the ICT Service so that this provision could be used more consistently during office hours.

Question / Comment: It has been quoted that there is a lower level of satisfaction by younger tenants – is there evidence of this?

Response: The satisfaction survey gave the stark statistic that new tenants and younger tenants had lower levels of satisfaction.

Question / Comment: Courtesy visits to properties – How often are these visits undertaken and could they be combined with visits to consider improvements?

Response: There are some tenants that officers see more frequently than others. However, there are some tenants who officers do not have contact from at all, and the Service needs to find out why this is the case. It is felt that some of the non-contact may be as officers are office based and there is a need for them to be out meeting people instead.

Question / Comment: How do those tenants who do not contact the service sort out any maintenance issues?

Response: These tenants will undertake these minor maintenance issues themselves and only approach the service for any major improvements.

Question / Comment: The Service is congratulated on the action plan. Officers are in Llanfair Caereinion between 1 to 3 p.m. and accessible to tenants. However, some tenants will still be in work and others may be picking up children, so how can this be addressed. With regard to the regular meetings with HOWPS, how many have occurred since August?

Response: This is being run as a pilot to assess whether there are such issues as have been raised. Some of the engagement sessions will be held on a Saturday. Some also coincide with the Library Van visits. However, the Library Service visits on a routine basis and for short periods, whereby the Housing Service needs longer sessions in areas.

The Service Manager – Tenancy Services advised the Committee that he met with HOWPS monthly with Team Leaders meeting to discuss voids on a weekly basis. He also indicated that he was meeting HOWPS on a weekly basis to deal with repairs and maintenance.

Question / Comment: It is of concern that the Service did not previously understand the needs of tenants, based on the current analysis. The Council also moved services externally (HOWPS) and is there a danger that the Council is now integrating services again to make improvements (single call centre)? With regard to younger tenants, different ways of communication is important. Recreating localism is also good to resolve issues as it can provide solutions based on what estates need.

Response: What the Service is trying to achieve is to reduce the number of links in the chain so that the service is provided quicker to tenants. With regard to localism, area caretakers were introduced and a small office has been opened in Machynlleth. Libraries are being used to provide a more local service. The outreach service should be able to identify more local needs as well as where there is a need for more housing.

Question / Comment: Why does the Council need to “negotiate” with

HOWPS regarding changes as it is a company owned equally by Kier and the Council? There is confusion amongst Members and tenants as to who to contact for repairs and maintenance as well as accountability.

Response: A document was circulated to members recently about how to report repairs. Members are able to report problems on behalf of their tenants. The relationship with HOWPS is a contractual relationship even though the Council owns half of the joint venture.

Question / Comment: What percentage of Council properties have wired in smoke alarms and how many operate on batteries?

Response: All Council properties have hard wired smoke alarms with battery back up. A percentage of alarms are tested annually and alarms are changed every nine years.

A Member commented on difficulties in accessing officers as well as the need to contact local Councillors to discuss issues.

Question / Comment: When will services improve, particularly access and the issue with access to licences for web chat?

Response: A single contact number was implemented for the Service some years ago. Officers have also been advised that when they are working on a Council estate to contact the local Councillor for the area.

Question / Comment: Is it possible for the Service to undertake a “secret shopper” type assessment to just the needs of tenants and expectations? Whilst the Council cannot match all expectations from tenants, by setting standards this should assist in dealing with expectations. Do HOWPS work towards achieving the Powys pound?

Response: Shelter Cymru did undertake a secret shopper approach previously for the Council which was helpful. The quality of accommodation standard is being reviewed which reflects not only expectations but matches that to the resources which the Council has available. HOWPS do undertake smoke alarm checks and the Service can speak to them about picking up other issues which the Service and the Council needs to be aware of such as tenants who were socially isolated or where there might be concerns regarding safeguarding.

The Joint Venture company spends more of its money within the County than the Council e.g. supplies are bought within the county. The Director of Economy and Environment indicated that this information had been made previously and agreed to update the information and circulate it to Members.

A Member commented that it was not only the issue of how much HOWPS spent in the county but also about employing people in the county, and creating the opportunities for apprenticeships. The committee considered that it should review progress with implementing the action plan in 6 months time.

Outcome:

- (i) **The Director of Economy and Environment to update the information regarding the HOWPS spend in the county and circulate it to Members.**

- (ii) **That a request be made to the Co-ordinating Committee that a progress report on implementing the action plan be considered by the Committee in 6 months time.**

6.	POWYS COUNTY COUNCIL BREXIT PREPAREDNESS
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The Council was required to make preparations for Brexit following guidance from Welsh Government and from Westminster. However, the outcome of national discussions are as yet unknown. The preparations which the Council were making was to respond to a no-deal Brexit. The Committee noted that three groups had been established to undertake the planning and co-ordination in preparation for Brexit.

Ninety nine risks had been identified by the Council's Services arising from Brexit, which had been reduced to the eleven most significant risks as included on the Brexit Risk Register. Mitigation had also been identified for these eleven risks.

Question / Comment: Have there been many enquiries from individuals or businesses regarding Brexit?
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Response: There have been some enquiries from businesses with information being sent to them by the regeneration Team as well as from Trading Standards. Information has also been made available on the Council's website which signposts businesses and others to national websites. There have been a number of Freedom of Information requests in relation to Brexit.
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Question / Comment: What will be the impact on the Council?
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Response: This is difficult to know. The Council is planning for the worse case scenario at present.

Question / Comment: European Union nationals living in Powys are being encouraged to seek settled status and a number have done so. Is there more that the Council can do to inform individuals about the need to apply for settled status.
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Response: 330 individuals have applied for settled status. The Council is pushing more information out on social media. The Home Office is due to distribute information packs to Councils which will be distributed to libraries. Welsh Government have also appointed Cohesion Co-ordinators who will identify where pockets of EU nationals live. More work needs to be done to inform people.
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Question / Comment: The Council is at the right point in its planning at present. What more can be done without scaremongering? It is difficult to make plans without definite knowledge of what is going to happen so the Council needs to tread carefully.

Response: It is a difficult position for the Council. However, it is working within the guidance provided by the WLGA and others.
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Question / Comment: The Council is short of resources and more people should not be employed for this purpose. The greatest effect will be on farming in Mid Wales due to policies from Welsh Government rather than

Brexit.
Response: The Council is working with outside bodies to try to understand the issues and the impact on those sectors. However there is little the Council can do about the impacts.

Question / Comment: When were the three co-ordinating and planning groups established?
Response: They were established in late 2018 in advance of the March 2019 deadline. They were restarted once the Brexit deadline was changed.

Question / Comment: Grant Thornton has been doing some research as to the likely impact of Brexit. When are they likely to report? There are two facets which will affect the Powys economy, Brexit and Welsh Government policies post Brexit. There are also threats due to tariffs to the Powys economy. Although these will not have a direct impact on the Council, there will be an indirect impact due to the economic impact.
Response: The work by Grant Thornton has been published on the Welsh Government website. Links would be circulated to Members.

Question / Comment: Supply chains and food shortages. This could have a significant effect on people on lower incomes. What can the Council do to work with the 3 rd sector and in particular food banks? Is there anything the Council can do to lobby the Department for Work and Pensions (DWP) regarding the waiting time for benefits?
Response: Work has already been undertaken with the Trussell Trust and food banks. It was difficult to comment on what could be done to lobby the DWP.

Question / Comment: What evidence was there that there could be food shortages?
Response: The Chair commented that this was included in the risk register. Officers commented that this was raised due to potential delays at ports and had been based on the UK Government / Welsh Government risk registers.

Question / Comment: Are the risks identified by the Council going to be made public? as there is concern about the comment regarding public unrest
Response: It is public through the committee papers and by means of Freedom of Information requests. With regard to civil unrest this is a matter which the UK Government has told local authorities to prepare for.

Outcome:

- (i) **That the link to the Grant Thornton report on the Welsh Government website be circulated to Members.**

7. WORKING GROUPS RECOMMENDATIONS
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The Committee received the recommendations of the following Working Groups together with the cabinet's responses:

- ERCG Scrutiny Working Group – Public Toilets Strategy – April 2019

- Joint Scrutiny Working Group – Vision 2025 – June 2019
- ERCG Scrutiny Working Group – HAMP – July 2019
- ERCG Scrutiny Working Group – Winter Maintenance – July 2019

The Committee noted that it had asked the Portfolio Holder for Highways to write to Welsh Government relating to grants to Town and Community Councils for the provision of toilets on trunk roads. The Committee asked for an update as to whether the letter had been sent.

In relation to a comment regarding the revised salting of roads, the Director of Economy and Environment commented that the Council was adhering to best practice in the revisions it was undertaking. With regard to trunk roads we conformed to the requirements of the Trunk Road Agency for salting of trunk roads. It was within the county roads network that the Council could make economies.

Outcome:

- (i) Scrutiny Manager to ask the Portfolio Holder for Highways whether the letter to Welsh Government had been sent.**

8. SCRUTINY WORK PROGRAMME

The Committee received the Scrutiny Forward Work Programme.

A Member asked if scrutiny was to be undertaken of the Mid Wales Growth Deal and the Scrutiny Manager outlined what was proposed regarding the establishment of a new Joint Scrutiny Committee with Ceredigion County Council for the Mid Wales Growth Deal.

Project Hornby – it was suggested that the Council should consider the scrutiny of the Joint project between the Council, Neath Port Talbot County Council and Welsh Government.

A Member reminded the Committee that he had made a request to the Co-ordinating Committee for the scrutiny of car parking charges. The Committee was reminded that this would be a review of charges across Powys, and the Scrutiny Manager advised the Committee that he would obtain background information in relation to the current scheme of charges, so that a meeting of the Working Group could be arranged.

Outcomes:

- (i) That a request be made to the Co-ordinating Committee to include Project Hornby in the Scrutiny Work Programme.**
- (ii) Scrutiny Manager to obtain background information regarding current car parking charges, prior to calling a meeting of the Scrutiny Working Group.**

County Councillor M J Dorrance (Chair)