

MINUTES OF A MEETING OF THE ECONOMY, RESIDENTS, COMMUNITIES AND GOVERNANCE SCRUTINY COMMITTEE HELD AT COUNCIL CHAMBER, COUNTY HALL - COUNTY HALL ON WEDNESDAY, 17 APRIL 2019

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

Cabinet Portfolio Holders In Attendance: County Councillors J Evans and M Weale

Officers: Nigel Brinn (Corporate Director - Economy and Environment), Wyn Richards (Scrutiny Manager and Head of Democratic Services), Dafydd Evans (Service Manager Housing Solutions), Peter Morris (Professional Lead - Planning Policy, Greg Thomas (Project Officer Events & Civil Contingencies) and Terry Flynn (Housing Strategy Team Leader)

1.	APOLOGIES
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Apologies for absence were received from County Councillors L George and D Selby.

2.	HOUSING ASSOCIATION DEVELOPMENT
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The Committee received the report of the Head of Housing and Community Development.

The Committee noted that the Social Housing Grant (SHG) was year to year grant funding from Welsh Government, whilst the Housing Finance Grant (HFG) was a 30 year revenue grant to Registered Social Landlords (RSLs) to support their borrowing. The Rent To Own (RTO) grant scheme did not come under the TAN2 definition of affordable housing i.e. affordable in perpetuity. After 5 years a person could buy a property under the RTO scheme, and after time this would become a market rate property. The current indication was that for 2021/22 Welsh Government funding would be £1.5million.

The Planned Development Programme (PDP) was a 3 year programme. The funding from Welsh Government was provided annually. However, Councils had to provide a 3 year plan with a nominal idea of costs. Powys has eight housing associations operating within its area. The first guide to allocating housing to associations is based on need, the second is deliverability and the availability of land. Two meetings are held annually with housing association development leads to discuss the way forward.

Extra Care Housing – there are currently 2 schemes with a sum or around £13million allocated which is just short of the £13.2million required. However there is an additional year to go in the programme. The Council's own build programme is set out in appendix 1 to the report.

<p>Question – Who decides how many housing associations can operate within any county? Is the county over supplied with housing associations? What is the link between our own developments and housing association developments – are there enough sites?</p>

Response – The number of housing associations used to be determined by Welsh Government who zoned who used to work in each county. The reason that Powys has so many is that 4 zones overlap in Powys. The current affordable housing review is looking at zoning again which is of concern for Councils and Housing Associations. There is a form of agreement between housing associations as to where they will work.

Part of what the Council is doing regarding Extra Care Housing will reduce the funding for housing associations. The Council will balance this with its own houses. The Council can only build Council houses. Housing associations can build other types of accommodation through their development arms and they will require less grant to do this. This will lead to mixed accommodation types in various locations.

With regard to empty sites, the Council programme has a number of sites identified. 6 or 7 sites are being taken forward initially. The Council plan is initially up to 2025 but it is a 30 year plan. As the pot of funding is limited the gap is being filled by the County Council building social housing.

Question – If there were less housing associations, there would be less overheads which would provide more money for building?

Response – There are some benefits to having a number of housing associations and the Council does challenge them on costs.

The Committee commented on whether it might be appropriate to invite housing associations to scrutiny to discuss some of the issues raised by Members. The Portfolio Holder for Governance, Public Protection and Housing commented that the Council can build properties in locations where housing associations might not wish to build.

Question – What are the criteria used to prioritise Ystradgynlais and Welshpool rather than Brecon for Extra Care Housing? When will something happen in Brecon?

Response – There are potential sites available in Welshpool and Ystradgynlais i.e. Neuadd Maldwyn and Pont Aur. There is no identified site in Brecon at present. Also due to the funding streams there is a need to get the other 2 schemes started. Planning will commence when a site becomes available in Brecon, but the issue is land and when a site is identified.

Officers agreed to provide an update to a future meeting on Brecon.

Question – Neuadd Maldwyn in Welshpool will address the over 55 provision. However what is required in Welshpool is one bedroom accommodation which will not be addressed. School sites in Welshpool are becoming redundant – are these being reserved for social housing?

Response – Welshpool has a number of different and diverse needs. The numbers presenting as homeless is one of the highest in the county. The Housing Service has identified these school sites for housing needs. However there are some other services also bidding for these sites. The need for smaller accommodation is recognised and Mid Wales Housing has a £7million allocation with one of the schemes being for single person accommodation in Welshpool.

Question – Land grabbing by developers is an issue which needs to be addressed by Welsh Government?

Response – The Local Development Plan (LDP) has provisions that if a site is not developed then permissions will be lost. This will be picked up more in the next version of the LDP. The Development Bank of Wales has funding for stalled sites with better rates for loans. The LDP also has overprovided to meet development needs as up to 40% of sites are not developed.

The Committee commented that for the Local Authority Schemes set out in Appendix 1, this shows the local authority quarterly development programme. These show the sites currently planned together with reserve sites. The Committee noted that there are 3 categories namely actual and potential sites as well as reserve sites. However some of the dates have slipped, so the table needed to be updated.

Question – Can the Council build in communities which are now limited due to the current LDP?

Response – The Council has a target to build 250 homes by 2023 and so has identified sites to meet this need. The Council does not prefer to build single properties as there is as much work to develop these as would be for multi property sites. The Committee was advised that Self Build Wales would be available from July 2019 which would be a scheme the Council should promote. This is market housing but much more affordable than ordinary housing. £10million would be available from the Wales Development Bank which local authorities could bid for to develop these types of properties. This could assist in driving self build and the economy of Powys. The Council would provide the land and support the individuals to develop the properties.

Question – The main issue is that local builders are used and that there is also the development of apprenticeships. Does the Council have a plan to make this happen?

Response – The new self build programme will help employ local builders. There is also a need for better careers education in schools to get individuals into vocational training such as apprenticeships. As Careers Wales does not exist any longer the Portfolio Holder for Education and the Welsh Language is looking at this in Powys.

Question – Driving the Powys Pound is good, but there are not enough skills available now. There is a need to ensure that we have the infrastructure in place.

Response – Part of this is lobbying Welsh Government as well to get more people into vocational training.

Question – Big builders who have contracts in Powys do not always sub-contract to local businesses which is a problem for local businesses. The vast majority of work may be done by businesses outside Powys

Response – Powys is tied to EU procurement rules. Other Councils are looking at ways of using local businesses.

Question – The Extra Care Housing proposals are quite costly for a small

number of units. How was the assessment undertaken and how does this affect other social housing demand?

Response – Extra Care Housing is for a small group of people and is seen as a priority for social care to provide independence for individuals. The cost of Extra Care Housing is due to the variation of the accommodation needs over time.

Question – Will housing waiting lists increase as a result of Extra Care Housing?

Response – The hope is that Extra Care Housing may release some family homes.

Outcomes:

- **That Housing officers provide an update to the Committee on the Extra Care Housing project in Brecon at a future meeting.**
- **That the information in the list of Council Schemes (Appendix 1) needs to be updated**

3. PUBLIC TOILETS STRATEGY

The Committee received the report of the Portfolio Holder for Economy and Planning together with associated documents used as part of the consultation exercise which ended on 22 April 2019.

Under the Public Health Wales Act 2017 authorities have to prepare a strategy by May 2019. The focus for the Council has been what toilets are operated / used to be operated by the Council. A request was also made as to what other toilets could be used as public toilets and 96 were identified, but there was not much information on each facility. A survey was also issued to local Members which assisted the process. The data included in the report is only part of the data that was submitted to Welsh Government. Welsh Government's aim is to collate the information across Wales and to publish it on the "Lle" website. An app is to be developed for smartphones as well.

The Committee was advised that the Council had no resource for this work initially. Later Welsh Government did provide some funding. However the Council does not have the resource to keep this data up to date. The Council is required to monitor and review the data in time.

The findings of the review undertaken are:

- All locations generally well covered;
- There are gaps in more remote / rural areas;
- Some transport routes are lacking provision;
- There is no provision in railway stations / halts;
- There are only 2 adult changing facilities at present. Welshpool Town Council are looking to provide this facility on the Berriew Street Car Park and there will be a facility at Y Gaer in Brecon;
- More equality of provision is required for baby changing facilities.

The issue for the Council is how to do something about these issues without any additional resource. Welsh Government have made it clear that there is no funding available for the direct provision of toilets.

The actions arising from the review were included in the draft strategy issued for consultation. Some of the proposed actions included:

- Use of blue toilet stickers by local businesses to indicate where toilets could be used by the public;
- Adult and children changing places – look to implement such facilities when the Council is redeveloping its own buildings, as well as working with Town and Community councils and partners;
- Business Improvement Districts – seek an increase in toilet provision within these areas;
- Making facilities available to the public when buildings are leased by the Council;
- Use of the Planning system;
- Section 106 agreements;
- Use of regulation;
- Events – issue of guidance to organisers;
- Transport Hubs – no railway stations have toilet facilities but toilets are available on trains. The Council needs to make sure that toilets are kept open on the main transport network;
- Cleanliness of facilities – this is not something that the Council can control;
- Cost – people might not have the specific coins required for set charges but would be willing to make a donation;

The actions are to be reviewed by the Council every 2 years.

Question – How easy is it for the public to find toilets? Are there signposts, not everyone has a smartphone to access the app, there is also a lack of wifi in areas. Signposting is something Powys can do something about. Does the app also show if there is a cost to use the toilet or not? Welsh Government have asked for this information, will they ask for it again?

Response – The need for increased signage can be included or expanded in the strategy and the location of toilets can be included on information such as bus timetables. The data held by Welsh Government does include information about charges. Welsh Government are likely to ask for this data again and the Council has to review the strategy again in 2 years. How the Council will gather the information without the resource to do so will be an issue. With regard to signage, if the Council is leasing a property, a checklist could be provided which includes signage to the facilities.

The Committee noted that changing facilities were important and that the National Trust were looking to implement such a facility at Storey Arms.

Question – Why was this information not held by tourism services? Antur Gwy – is this an open facility? Are sports centres and government buildings included and listed?

Response – No idea why this information was not available by tourism service

The Committee noted the suggestion that if Welsh Government believed that the toilets strategy was a priority then it should provide additional funding to Councils.

Question – Llanfair Caereinion is on the trunk road. Grants were provided to Town and Community Councils to keep toilets open on the trunk road. Will these grants continue?

Response – The grant comes in via the transport grant to the Council annually. It was suggested that the Portfolio Holder for Highways be asked to write to Welsh Government seeking assurances about the continuation of the grant in future. It was suggested that this position was unlikely to change but it needed to be confirmed.

Question – The Council provided a grant for 5 years to Town and Community Councils to keep toilets open. The likelihood was that if the grant ceased then toilets would be closed. Has the Council done anything to review the toilets currently closed which are still in the Council's ownership?

Response – 5 conveniences were closed, 56 transferred (49 to Town and Community Councils). Some facilities which have been closed are being used for other purposes and the Strategic Asset Board are looking at current vacant properties.

Question – Is the issue of toilets potentially being closed if grants cease included on a risk register? If some individuals are unlikely to go out if they are elderly or infirm due to a lack of toilets, is there a cost for social inclusion / care due to isolation?

Response – the older persons forum was engaged in the consultation, but it was uncertain if officers have spoken to the service.

It was suggested that this is a preventative service and that this issue should be referred to Adult Services and the Portfolio Holder for Adults. There is also a need to ensure that facilities are available for transgender residents. The need for facilities for tourists and commuters was highlighted.

Outcomes:

- That to enable the Council to update the strategy in two years time that adequate resources be identified;
- That the strategy include the need for signage / signposting of toilet facilities open to the public;
- That the Portfolio Holder for Highways be asked to write to Welsh Government to seek assurances regarding the continuation of the grant to Town and Community Councils for the provision of toilets on the trunk road, currently within the transport grant;
- That the Highways Service include as a risk on its Service risk register, the possible closure of public toilets operated by Town and Community Councils should the grant from the Council be withdrawn;
- That the issue of social isolation for the elderly / infirm due to a lack of public toilets be raised as a concern with the Portfolio Holder for Adults and Adult services.

4. PERFORMANCE AND FINANCE REPORTS

The Committee received the Performance and Finance Reports considered at the Cabinet on 26th March, 2019. The Committee also noted that the Finance Report showed the position at 28 February 2019.

The Scrutiny Manager advised the Committee that its role in considering these reports was to try and make the links between the objectives set in Vision 2025 and how the budget (both revenue and capital) was being used to achieve those objectives.

The Committee considered those elements of the Performance, Finance and Capital Reports which were within the remit of the Committee. The following comments were provided:

- Page 196 – Overspend on Public Transport due to a loss of income on the T4 bus route. The Committee noted that an operator has the ability to declare a route commercial at any point and the Council would then have to step away. However most routes in Powys are subsidised.
- There is a need to unpick issues within services. Most services seem to be operating within their budgets except Highways, Transport and Recycling.
- Savings – there needs to be assurances that savings targets will be met. Councillors did not enjoy putting Council Tax up by 9.5%, therefore services need to stay within their budgets. There is also no sense of a recovery plan to achieve savings.
- It is difficult for Members to understand the budget without looking at “Making It Happen”. It was questioned why the spend on “Making IT Happen” increased from £24 million (2018/19) to £47million (2022/23) (Page 163) when services are only allowed to spend at or near inflation rates.
- It would be useful if Finance Officers and the Leader could attend the next meeting when the budget was being discussed.
- Do we have sufficient information to scrutinise this subject? Why is the Council hiring equipment when it has that equipment in stock? The Chair suggested that this could be a suggestion to the Co-ordinating Committee for an item for scrutiny.
- Need for this information to be in a far simpler format e.g. pie charts. It was suggested that there is also a need to get the budget out in the next 4 months so that discussions could start with the public. The Council also needs a longer term plan. The Scrutiny Manager indicated that he would speak to the Head of Finance about the issue of the simplification of the information.
- The Council would benefit from an earlier indication as to where we are likely to be in terms of the budget for next year. The Portfolio Holder for Finance to be requested to ask Welsh Government for an earlier position statement.
- Highways, Transport and Recycling (HTR) – is the overspend shown in the services’ risk register and what are the plans to turn this around. The Corporate Director (Economy and Environment) indicated that HTRs turnover was around £100million last year and at year end the deficit was around £200k.

Outcomes:

- **There is a need for assurances that either savings targets will be met by services or that a recovery plan is in place;**
- **Need for an explanation for the increased budget for “Making It Happen” from 2018/19 to 2022/23;**
- **Finance Officers and the Leader to be invited to the next meeting when the Committee is discussing the budget;**

- **There is a need for simplification of the financial information e.g. using pie charts;**
- **The Portfolio Holder for Finance to be asked to contact Welsh Government for an earlier indication of the budget position for 2020/21.**

5. SCRUTINY WORK PROGRAMME

The Committee received a copy of the Scrutiny Forward Work Programme and was asked for any suggestions for items to be added or deleted for consideration by the Co-ordinating Committee.

- Powys Pound – the Committee would be considering the annual report on the Vision 2025 objectives in May. This may be as part of a joint working group arrangement with the other two scrutiny committees.
- 21st Century Schools – there are issues with the schools already built in that there should be a template model developed for both primary and secondary schools which it was suggested would save cost in building. There were also issues with no solar panels in recent schools and therefore no reduction in carbon costs and the costs of heating were too high.
- Mid Wales Growth Deal. The Scrutiny Manager indicated that discussions were already ongoing as to how this would be scrutinised and it was to be discussed at the Co-ordinating Committee at the end of April. The Corporate Director (Economy and Environment) indicated that he could provide a briefing to the Committee on the current position.

Recommendation to the Co-ordinating Committee:

- **Item for scrutiny – 21st Century Schools.**

County Councillor M J Dorrance (Chair)