

**MINUTES OF A MEETING OF THE ECONOMY, RESIDENTS AND COMMUNITIES  
SCRUTINY COMMITTEE HELD AT BY ZOOM ON MONDAY, 18 MARCH 2024**

**PRESENT**

County Councillors A Davies, B Davies, A Jones, G Mitchell, M J Dorrance, D Selby,  
P James, C Kenyon-Wade, R Devlin and Chloe Masefield

M Dorrance Cabinet Member for a More Prosperous Powys

D Selby Cabinet Member for a More Prosperous Powys

Jenny Ashton – Interim Head of Community Services

Matt Perry – Chief Officer - Place

Andy Thompson – Interim Head of Housing

|           |                  |
|-----------|------------------|
| <b>1.</b> | <b>APOLOGIES</b> |
|-----------|------------------|

Apologies for absence were received from County councillors K Lewis,  
L Rijnenberg.

|           |                                |
|-----------|--------------------------------|
| <b>2.</b> | <b>DISCLOSURES OF INTEREST</b> |
|-----------|--------------------------------|

There were no disclosures of interest by Members relating to items to be considered  
at the meeting

|           |                                   |
|-----------|-----------------------------------|
| <b>3.</b> | <b>DECLARATION OF PARTY WHIPS</b> |
|-----------|-----------------------------------|

The Committee did not receive any 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.

|           |                |
|-----------|----------------|
| <b>4.</b> | <b>MINUTES</b> |
|-----------|----------------|

The Chair was authorised to sign the Minutes of the previous meetings 11.01.2024  
and 30.01.2024 as a correct record.

|           |                |
|-----------|----------------|
| <b>5.</b> | <b>HOUSING</b> |
|-----------|----------------|

**Background:**

- The report set out a summary of Council properties and maintenance requirements. It also covered an overview on garages which included future plans and proposals.
- It highlighted a number of significant issues that the Service were experiencing and how barriers were overcome including the age of the housing stock.
- An all-Wales Star Survey and internal surveys provided evidence of improving performance and how further improvements would be introduced.
- Compliance was a priority to ensure that all Council properties were kept safe for residents.
- The Housing Revenue Account Business Plan would be presented to Cabinet on 19 March 2024 and subject to approval would be shared with the Committee.

| <b>Points raised by the Committee:</b>    | <b>Responses received from Officers or Cabinet Members:</b> |
|---|---|
| Page 21 -Table 3.1.6 clarification of the | The different states of work needed was                     |

|  |   |
|--|---|
| <p>performance table was requested around the aids and adaption delivery times.</p>  | <p>explained:<br/>180 days was a major works<br/>90 days was a medium works<br/>28 days is minor works.</p>   |
| <p>Page 21 -Table 3.1.6 how do voids correlate with the number of days to relet a property.</p>  | <p>The period was calculated from the keys received from the previous tenant to being provided to the new tenant.<br/>The table included a number of properties which had received major refurbishment work along with properties set for demolition and one property marked for disposal.<br/>Pre-allocations had been introduced to speed up the process and a backlog of voids were being concluded.</p>   |
| <p>Page 17 – Table 2.1.4 were those properties of a greater age (60+) in the poorest state of repair.<br/>It was noted how few Council houses were built after the 1980s.</p>                                | <p>Welsh Housing Quality Standards (WHQS) have been met, however larger issues such as roof coverings and retaining walls had begun to fail which was a large cost factor for the service.<br/>A full house condition survey would begin in the Autumn to determine usage and to determine the most effective opportunity.</p>  |
| <p>Concerns were raised around the monitoring of garages and the content held.</p>   | <p>Garages were no longer kept for their intended use; resources were limited, and the service were unable to conduct detailed checks. It was proposed that the Council may seek future opportunities for the garages.</p>  |
| <p>What options were available for residents when work takes place on a property, could they be rehomed temporarily.</p>   | <p>Major works can impact tenants in many ways including health. Alternative accommodation would be sourced. It was noted that the tenant would pay the same rent and costs were covered by the Council in order to provide an incentive for the tenant to temporarily move out.</p>  |
| <p>Were grants available to help with maintenance and to improve homes (renewables).</p>   | <p>WHQS 2023 would begin in April which focuses on decarbonisation, which would be a high cost to every social landlord.<br/>The council received a grant of £103k for 5500 properties in 2023/2024 from the Welsh Government.</p>  |
| <p>Page 23 – 24 Concerns were raised around the Lifting Operations and Lifting Equipment (LOLER) and fire suppression system records and asked if the Compliance 100 Council initiative was still going.</p> | <p>Compliance 100 continued to be in place and to achieve 100% compliance across each aspect of safety. However, for the council to gain access to all properties a robust non-access procedure had been embedded.<br/>A new contract was being development for fire elements and was hoped performance would improve.<br/>LOLER audits had been conducted since the transfer from a previous contractor which had provided a fuller understanding of where and what equipment the Council owned.</p> |

|  |   |
|--|---|
| <p>Page 19 - 2.2 It was noted that garages provide a service and generated an income with very little investment, as they were not being used for the original intention what could be done for future usage.<br/>Future opportunities could be explored and provide a more practical service for communities including modular homes.</p> | <p>Concerns were shared that many older garages contain asbestos which could incur high costs for the Council if disposed, some garage sites did not have security of tenure and notice could be served but could only take place if a purpose was determined beforehand. Planning permission would be needed for sites to have homes or temporary accommodation and different solutions were being explored for different areas and would be considered on a case-by-case basis.</p> |
| <p>It was asked if a map could be provided of where the garages sit in the County.</p>   |   |
| <p>It was asked why only approximately half of the garages were let and rent was being lost.</p>   | <p>The Portfolio Holder stressed that the service was open to explore alternative uses for garages which had to be affordable for the tenants, Housing Revenue Account (HRA) and help towards the commitment of the Fairer, strategic equality plan set out in the Council ambitions.</p>   |
| <p>Could you explain if the current rental income would fund the options being reviewed to repurpose the garages</p>   | <p>Demand was not consistent, and all costs must be considered including demolition. A site review was carried out in 2020 and income was provided to the HRA and used in wider aspects of the service. It was felt that due to the average condition of the garages they could not be offered as storage units due to health and safety issues but remain valuable land asset.</p>   |
| <p>Were there plans to increase the garage stock or keep what the Council currently have.</p>  | <p>It was recommended that the garage stock was not increased and for this area of activity to be gradually disengaged.<br/>It was estimated that to build garages of a suitable size would endure a thirty-year payback period and housing remained the priority of the service.</p>   |
| <p>Would the housing stock for the Council be increased.</p>   | <p>It was explained that there would be a sixty-year payback period for a property which would include all the running costs, which also took into account rent levels.<br/>The Stronger, Fairer, Greener Council target had been set for 350 new homes which was in addition to acquisitions, the Servicer felt confident it would be met.</p>   |
| <p>It was asked if garages were ever abandoned and if so, what the process would be to clear them.</p>   | <p>Misbehaviour, neglect, and purposeful damage to properties was pursued and recharges made to tenants with a recovery of charges approximately 20%. The Housing Service had an incentive to reclaim charges to deter damage and for tenants to rejoin the waiting list.</p>   |
| <p>How many properties were single units,</p>  | <p>The Council do need more single units,</p>   |

|   |  |
|---|--|
| <p>and could current garages be converted into homes.</p>   | <p>however the construction of garages were not appropriate to convert into housing, but an option would be to rebuild on a site if demolished.</p>  |
| <p>The survey results showed responses on satisfaction and the working age tenants were less satisfied.</p>                             | <p>It was difficult for the Service to determine the results in that category and felt that contact was less convenient for those of working age and for tenants to be available to receive services. It was felt appropriate for the Council to consider work life patterns and the standard working week.<br/>Communication channels for tenants were wide and varied including 24/7 phone contact. A new ICT system would be introduced by 2026 and hoped it would improve contact with tenants.</p> <p>The Portfolio Holder added that despite an increase in performance there were still lessons to learn from the data received in the survey. By understanding the needs of communities and residents the Council can explore ways to make services more accessible.</p> |
| <p>It was commented that the tenant magazine was excellent and asked if it was available in a variety of formats.</p>                   | <p>The magazine was sent electronically to the majority of tenants but was also available paper based and posted.<br/>The magazine was very tenant led and played a significant role in the design and content.</p>  |
| <p>Page 21-Table 3.1.6 was C the standard for a rental property under the energy performance certificate ratings.</p>                   | <p>C was acceptable and the interim measure for WHQS for 2023. Some property types would not reach a higher standard.<br/>It was clarified that 84% was the target to improve the energy performance certificate ratings to A or B.</p> <p>It was stressed that the housing stock was ageing and that no homes had been built in thirty years. The WHQS standards were expected to focus hugely on energy efficiency and carbon emissions which would be challenging for the Council.</p>  |
| <p>It was asked if the Committee could contribute and be provided with the new build plan for homes.</p>                                | <p>It was agreed by the Officer and the Portfolio Holder in principle, but further advice would be sought for clarification.</p>   |
| <p>It was commented that Housing was not a statutory duty, however the Council were undisputed that the service would be delivered.</p> | <p>Being a landlord was not a statutory duty, however many of the elements needed including homelessness, housing advice, enforcing standards in privately rented accommodation and taking note of conditions within those areas along with providing aids,</p>  |

|   |  |
|---|--|
|   | adaptations or disabled facilities grants were.  |
| Page 28 - 4.3 showed a major drop in finances and how that would impact the service.  | A lot of repairs had been inherited; the service was becoming more efficient which would be reflected in the near future. The financial element was subject to approval by Cabinet, the Committee were reminded that the repairs figure did not include salaries as they were separated into staffing costs and vehicles also additional programmes included:<br>-Green Powys – focus on planting.<br>-Love Where you Live – improving estates.<br>-Fit for Life – focus on making homes a better place to live for people with disabilities.<br>-WHQS Capital – major works. (kitchens/bathrooms) |
| It was asked if white goods were provided for tenants   | White goods were not provided, good standard safe furniture was reused where possible through the Cleaning Team scheme.<br><br>The Welsh Government provide a discretionary assistance grant which the Housing Team were happy to support tenants to complete if needed.   |
| Page 22 – Table 3.1.6 / Page 18 -Table 2.1.8 Clarification was asked around the void times and key to key figures provided. | Page 22 – Table 3.1.6 provided the formal Stronger, Fairer, Greener service performance indicators which included all planned demolition sites and long-term empty properties.<br>Page 18 -Table 2.1.8 – was an informal summary in which excluded all planned demolition sites and long-term empty properties. Key times had reduced and aimed to be improved.  |
| Had it been considered by the Council to sell the 1960/70's housing stock and build new energy efficient homes.             | The Portfolio Holder stressed that there were no plans to sell the social housing stock under the current Administration and the Council would continue to work with partner landlords through the strategic housing partnership and combination of strategies to build and buy would help to deliver the best outcome for Powys.  |

**Conclusions:**

- The Committee felt that the report reflected very positively on the service.
- The Council were now conducting assessments on assets to provide a comprehensive understanding of building conditions.
- It was pleasing to see timelines being reduced with a clear plan for further improvements to be introduced.

- The Committee look forward to receiving the outcomes of the garage review and how the service will explore opportunities for repurpose.
- Communications with tenants was varied and included a magazine which was a constructive way to engage with tenants.

**Resolved:** The housing maintenance and garage overview be noted.

|                          |
|--------------------------|
| <b>6. WORKING GROUPS</b> |
|--------------------------|

### **Joint Scrutiny – Leisure Review**

- It was important to note that the Working Group reviewed the processes undertaken and not the next steps or the outcomes of the Leisure Review.
- The Working Group ran from May 2023 until January 2024.
- The report was very concise, and officers commended for the provision of very comprehensive data with a deep dive focus on the Ystradgynlais Centre.
- Different models were presented to the Working Group which provided further understanding.
- A recommendation for more financial detail to be provided due to many parents not being aware that schools were paying for the cost of transport for swimming lessons.
- It was confirmed that £82m would be needed to carry out the work to achieve net zero for leisure centres.
- The report and work conducted as part the Leisure Review and would form part of Sustainable Powys to support decision making in the near future.
- Concerns were raised around the tight time periods for the report to be received by all three scrutiny committees and Cabinet on 19.03.24.
- The public consultation proved to be well responded.
- It was important that the next phase as well as the next steps were considered on behalf communities.
- It was felt that further scrutiny could take place around the funding provided to Freedom Leisure for schools usage of centres and to deliver the school curriculum.

### **Economy, Residents and Communities Scrutiny Working Group – Heart of Wales Property Services transition to Powys County Council**

- It was explained to the Committee that the Heart of Wales Property Services joint venture with Powys County Council had concluded and the Working Group focused on the integration of services back to Council function.
- The Working Group were pleased with the quality and quantity of information provided and recognised the challenges and barriers overcome to determine a successful transition.
- Lessons learned had been carried through into further projects for the Council.
- Members of the Working Group took part in site visits to speak with staff directly to gain first hand experiences and would be conducted on an annual basis.
- It was identified that procurement could be more efficient, and stock could be made available to staff, issues would be followed up and suggestions made to the work programme.
- Cross working with the Governance and Audit Working Group took place and both groups found the process helpful and supportive.

**Resolved:**

The Working Group Reports be noted.

|                                   |
|-----------------------------------|
| <b>7. SCRUTINY WORK PROGRAMME</b> |
|-----------------------------------|

It was noted that agenda items may change, and any suggestions were welcomed.

- Potholes and road conditions was suggested for a scrutiny item.
- Procurement was a continued workstream branch from the Heart of Wales Property Services transition to Powys County Council and an update could be considered.

**County Councillor Angela Davies (Chair)**