

Public Document Pack

MINUTES OF A MEETING OF THE HEALTH, CARE AND HOUSING SCRUTINY COMMITTEE HELD AT COUNCIL CHAMBER - COUNTY HALL, LLANDRINDOD WELLS, POWYS ON WEDNESDAY, 3 OCTOBER 2018

PRESENT: County Councillor G I S Williams (Chair)
County Councillors J Charlton, S C Davies, D E Davies, J Gibson-Watt, H Hulme, A Jenner, E Jones, P C Pritchard, D Rowlands, E Vaughan, A Williams, J Williams, J M Williams and S L Williams

Cabinet Portfolio Holders In Attendance: County Councillor J Evans

Officers: Wyn Richards (Scrutiny Manager and Head of Democratic Services), R Powell (Homelessness Prevention & Housing Options Lead), Dafydd Evans (Service Manager Housing Solutions), Simon Inkson (Head of Housing) and A Thompson (Service Manager - Tenancy Services)

1.	APOLOGIES
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Apologies for absence were received from County Councillors Claire Mills and Gareth Morgan and from County Councillor Kath Roberts-Jones who was on other Council business.

County Councillor Sarah Williams presented her apologies for the meeting on 15th October. Councillor Williams also outlined the difficulties for Members who were employed in attending meetings as the days on which the committee was held were different each time.

2.	DECLARATIONS OF INTEREST
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There were no declarations of interest from Members.

3.	DECLARATIONS OF PARTY WHIPS
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There were no disclosures of prohibited party whips which a Member had been given in relation to the meeting in accordance with Section 78(3) of the Local Government Measure 2011.

4.	HOMELESSNESS STRATEGY
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The Committee received a presentation from the Head of Housing. The Housing (Wales) Act 2014 placed an emphasis on prevention as did the Social Services and Well-Being Act. The Council has a duty to provide free advice, an assessment and to take steps to avoid a person becoming homeless.

Section 50 of the Act required that the Council undertook a review of its homelessness service every 4 years and to publish a strategy. A recent Wales Audit Office (WAO) study of homelessness services across Wales indicated that the Councils deals with crisis and should place more of an emphasis on prevention.

The current review of homelessness started in 2017 with meetings with other services and partners. However, these were not successful and a consultant was engaged to undertake the review. A series of workshops had been undertaken

and the engagement had been far more successful. The review had identified a number of key findings as set out in paragraph 1.3 of the report.

The housing market in Powys is difficult in terms of providing sufficient affordable housing solutions. There is a need for partners to engage with the Council to provide support. In addition, the Council needs to work with the Department for Work and Pensions (DWP) and others to ensure that the roll out of Universal Credit (UC) does not increase homelessness. The strategy sets out the steps to move to the new style of service which it is intended to be provided.

Question:

What is the timescale where the Council has to act if someone is in danger of becoming homeless?

Response:

Under previous provisions the Council could work with a person if there was a threat to that person becoming homeless within the next 28 days. This timescale has now been extended to 56 days under the 2014 Act. The Council then has to respond if there is a threat of homelessness. In Quarter 1 (2018/19) there were 114 presentations of people under threat of becoming homeless. The total figure for 2017-18 was around 400. There are higher numbers of people presenting as under threat of homelessness in the north (Welshpool and Newtown) than in the south of the county. It is a 70 / 30 split.

Question:

How many open premises are kept for families on a day to day basis? How are people moved on to other premises?

Response:

There are 58 units of temporary accommodation at present run by the Council and others. The Council is seeking to extend this number, but also trying to keep people for a shorter time in temporary accommodation. However there are times where a stay can be longer for individuals due to their previous circumstances.

Question:

How does the Council deal with rent arrears?

Response:

The Council has procedures for dealing with the non-payment of rent including the possession of properties. Generally, the Council wants to work with families to get them through rent arrears. 3 Tenancy Support Officers have been appointed by the Council. Powys also has Housing Management and Options Officers who undertake a dual role of managing properties as well as preventing homelessness and rent arrears. The 2014 Act removed the right to social housing tenancy i.e. local authority or social housing and there is a duty which allows the Council to use the private rented sector.

Question:

How many evictions have there been this year?

Response:

The response is to be provided by the Service. (The response provided by the Service following the meeting is:
2015/16 – 8;
2016/17 – 12;

Question:

People renting from the private sector who might be losing their homes due to the end of their tenancy are being told that they have to become homeless before the Council will deal with them. Universal Credit (UC) is already causing problems for people due to the move from one system to another leading to a loss of benefits. How is partnership working going to be managed?

Response:

Officers can work with individuals within 56 days of their being threatened with homelessness. However, officers will also give advice before the 56 day timescale to avoid people triggering statutory services. Since the 2014 Act came into force there has been a 36% increase in people presenting to the Council in Year 1. The duty on the Council means that officers have a greater involvement in individual cases. The new system is far more bureaucratic and demands more from Council officers.

The Council has always worked in partnership but the review has drawn out other partners that the Council would not have been involved with previously e.g. Dyfed Powys Police in identifying those individuals sleeping on the street. The Service has yet to consider how partnership working is to be managed, possibly a group needs to be established to consider this.

Question:

Internal partnerships – who are these and how will we move forward with external partners? Universal Credit (UC) – how will this be dealt with as it will probably increase workload? With the move to staff working in Job Centres, will this put people off approaching the service? People living in caravans and permanently on caravan sites – how do we deal with this?

Response:

The initial work undertaken in the review led to poor levels of engagement across the Council. The workshops which were subsequently undertaken was a far better approach. Therefore, it was the initial approach by Housing to the review that was the issue. There is a need to establish a group to manage partnerships as well as a problem sleeper group.

Caravans – the service are aware of people living in caravans. However, individuals do not approach the service so there's not much data available. If individuals are not living in suitable accommodation they should be encouraged to approach the service.

DWP and benefits – social housing tenants will receive their rent payments as part of their benefits so hopefully there will not be a great increase in demand on the housing service. There is also an ability for the DWP to make assisted benefits payments direct to the Council which includes rent arrears. Housing Officers are currently shadowing officers in the DWP to understand about the process for claimants for UC. Assisted payments are only temporary arrangements as individuals are responsible for their own money. There is an expectation that rent arrears will go up initially but then reduce. A streamlined arrears process is being developed which emphasises the importance of personal contact with tenants in arrears at an early stage. Tenant Support Officers can also give advice on benefits to

individuals. UC is only accessible online and the housing service is looking at where drop in centres could be located as well as mobile working for staff to assist individuals. The difficulty for individuals is if they put in a claim they could be without money for 5 weeks as payments are made monthly. However rents are due weekly.

Question:

Will it be the local authority leading the group?

Response:

It will be the housing service who would take a lead on this.

Question:

UC may have an impact on tenants. Where are the 3 support workers based? The Council is working with DWP, will it also work with Citizens' Advice and independent advice bureaux in the county?

Response:

Shelter produced its report in March 2017. The housing service has made improvements since that time as issues were identified and steps taken to deal with them e.g. duty officers to take calls and making of offices more public facing. The changes also include individuals able to go to libraries to contact the housing service.

Due to the higher demand 1 officer is located in Welshpool, 1 in Newtown and 1 covering the Brecknockshire and Radnorshire areas. A small drop in centre is to be opened in Machynlleth. The service also works closely with the Council's Money and Advice Service.

Question:

Caravan sites – some people live in static caravans. However, they have to vacate these for a few months in a year and then they are housed by the Council. However there are instances where they have homes elsewhere in the country.

Response:

The Council's housing allocation scheme is being reviewed. This will include a review of caravan accommodation as well as local connection criteria. It is the intention for scrutiny to consider this.

Question:

What is the relationship with The Wallich (homelessness charity) and how is this managed?

Response:

The Wallich manages a property in Newtown. There are regular meetings with the organisation about residents and how they can be moved on to other accommodation. The Wallich is also a floating support provider.

Question:

What is the service doing about County Lines and Cuckooing? There is a good project in Wrexham which the Council should explore relating to vulnerable young people and accommodation.

Response:

The service is aware of these issues and is working with the police

Question:

In terms of local strategic context and the Dyfi Valley being a predominantly Welsh Language area, housing officers need a better understanding of these areas and Welsh Language speaking families not being able to access housing. Is the support officer to be based at Machynlleth Welsh speaking?

Response:

No.

Question:

Page 27 – Section 60 duty – access to free advice – Shelter identified that individuals had to spend money by using their mobile phones to contact the service.

Response:

The service accepted that there was no Freephone number. Once contact had been made the Council will ring the individual back. The Portfolio Holder reported that the Council is looking to phase out its telephone numbers where there is a cost and to provide more Freephone numbers.

Question:

What are the numbers of individuals made homeless from the private rented sector?

Response:

The 2014 Act allows the Council to place individuals in the private rented sector. The Council is looking at whether to establish a social lettings agency where the Council would manage properties for landlords. This could lead to higher standards. Two Social Lettings Officers have been appointed to look at this covering north and south Powys. The Council is doing more work with the private sector but accept that this can lead to more people presenting. It will take time to develop this type of service as it would mean that landlords would have to pay the Council to manage these properties in the long run.

Question:

Redesign of low demand older persons' accommodation and develop more single persons' accommodation. This might not work if younger people move into areas with more elderly persons.

Response:

Some older persons' accommodation is undesignated and these will be let sensitively. Young people's accommodation is challenging for the Council. Building patterns are focussed on family houses, but the pattern in Powys is showing the need for smaller houses and more single accommodation. The Council is therefore looking at the provision of single person accommodation.

Question:

Food banks and partnerships. Food banks can provide good intelligence to the Council about people in need and food banks should be included in partnership arrangements. Under UC, money goes into one household bank account. How do we deal with this in terms of women's and men's refugees where people have been subject to domestic abuse?

Response:

The rules for UC are set nationally. A case can be made to the DWP but unlikely to be successful. If a person turns up at a refuge hopefully the managing partner will assist them with their benefits so that they can receive their benefits rather than their abusive partner. Refugees are supported tenancies so support providers will work with individuals.

Question:

In the statistics the numbers threatened with homelessness has gone down but the number of cases has gone up – why is this?

Response:

The 2014 Act gives the Council various duties. Section 66 (prevention of homelessness), Section 73 (new assessment), Section 75 (final duty). Individuals can go out of the system and come back in at various points in the higher sections. There is a need to drill down into the figures so that they can be understood. Also the statistics from the former procedures and the new act are not directly comparable.

Question:

Are there specific trends in Powys?

Response:

Relationship breakdowns and the loss of private rented accommodation are the two main reasons for homelessness. However prevention work is working and there are fewer individuals that the Council is having to provide a full homelessness duty for.

Question:

If a person cannot pay their rent, can a claim be made to the DWP for a short period to pay rent to the landlord directly?

Response:

In the private rented sector, if a landlord goes to court for possession the court must grant it. In addition, a private tenancy is only safe for 6 months. The housing market in Powys does show a significant difference between house prices and rents in the county.

Question:

Where will the Support Officer be placed in Welshpool

Response:

The officer will be located at the housing service office.

Question:

UC will cause an explosion in the number of evictions. People are vulnerable and managed payments are only for the short term.

Response:

Staff have been well trained in dealing with managed payments. Work is being undertaken with DWP to ensure that managed payments are paid for as long as possible but they are hampered by the rules within which they

have to work.

Question:

Some people just cannot get a bank account which is needed for UC. Where do they go?

Response:

The Housing Service is working with credit unions and building societies to try and resolve these issues. It will also mean that officers will need more intense working with individuals.

Question:

Voids are not being put back on the market quickly enough due to problems with HOWPS

Response:

Work is being undertaken with HOWPS to get voids sorted out more quickly.

Question:

Drugs problems on estates and evictions from Council properties for selling drugs. Is the department going to work within regulations and the law in future?

Response:

The Service always works within regulations and the law.

Question:

UC pays individuals monthly. Why does the Council not change from weekly rents to monthly rents?

Response:

Charging of weekly rents is part of the tenancy agreement at present. The council charges for 48 out of 52 weeks with 4 "rent free" weeks. However, the rent levied is for 52 weeks but it is paid over 48 weeks rather than 52. The Housing Service is considering ending the practice of providing "rent free" weeks. It is an interesting idea to charge monthly in advance and the service will consider this. Individuals do have the option currently to pay weekly or monthly. Some individuals still get paid weekly. It will be considered for inclusion in the rent charges report in February 2019.

Question:

The needs to use computer systems for UC is causing difficulties for individuals who have difficulty reading and writing let alone having any IT skills. What is being done with bad landlords especially where there are problems in accommodation such as damp, poor heating. Food banks are good points of contact for housing officers. There is a block of flats in Ystradgynlais with a number of empty units due to the "bedroom tax".

Response:

Poor landlords – the private sector team work to convince landlords to improve the properties otherwise court action can be taken. Fuel poverty – the Council did use the NEST and ECOFLEX schemes but is now moving to the ECO2 system to assist with fuel poverty. A consultation will be undertaken with the community regarding the best use for the block of flats in Ystradgynlais. Currently they are 2 bedroom flats and it may be better to have single person accommodation.

Question:

People with learning difficulties or literacy problems cannot use IT systems. Individuals can be contacted by the service within 4 days – is this the maximum, especially if individuals are desperate for support? Does the Service work with just Powys Teaching Local Health Board or other Health Boards as well?

Response:

Learning difficulties / literacy problems – individuals could be placed on managed payments which are renewed. The 5 officers mentioned earlier are funded from a mixture of the Housing Revenue Account and from the General Account with specific funding having come from Welsh Government. A contract for a new IT system has been signed which should be in place by April 2019. It is the intention to improve the information available to the public on the Council's website. In relation to the 4 days this came from the Shelter report. A 4 day response would be for general advice and not emergencies.

Question:

With the school modernisation programme is the Housing Service considering the land where these redundant buildings are located for housing.

Response:

The service is looking at such land for possible projects.

Question:

Can more detailed timescales be included in the action plan rather than short term / long term outcomes.

Response:

Yes.

Scrutiny Observations to the Cabinet:

- Managing Partnership Working – the Service needs to consider the process for how partnership working will be managed;
- Housing staff working in Job Centres – concern expressed by the Committee in case this deters some people from approaching the service for assistance;
- Consideration should have been given to the need for the Tenant Support Officer covering Machynlleth to be Welsh Speaking;
- Numbers living long term in caravans and static caravans – need for better data on numbers affected;
- Revisions to housing allocations policy welcomed. There is a need to review / inclusion in the revised policy the issue of individuals living in caravans and static caravans who because they have to vacate those caravans and static caravans during the year are being housed by the Council, especially as there is anecdotal evidence that many own properties elsewhere in the country. In addition, this will mean a need to review the local connections criteria;
- The fact that the means to access information and application forms for Universal Credit is only online is of concern. The Council needs to consider how it can assist people to access this information particularly those who are vulnerable, have learning difficulties or literacy problems;

- A Member identified a project in Wrexham regarding vulnerable young people and accommodation which may be of interest to the Cabinet Member and Housing Service;
- Access to Free Advice is a duty under the 2014 Housing Act – the Committee is supportive of the Council considering more freephone access to Council services;
- Food banks – these should be included under the Housing Service's partnership arrangements as it could be a valuable source of intelligence for the service;
- Individuals accommodated in Refuges – concern by the Committee that enough support was provided to individuals to ensure that they could access their benefits rather than them being paid to an abusive partner;
- Homelessness Statistics – need for a greater breakdown of the statistics to show at which stage individuals were receiving a service as the current statistics are unclear (e.g. numbers threatened with homelessness decreasing but numbers of cases increasing as individuals coming back into the system at various points)
- Committee supportive of work being undertaken by Service with credit unions and building societies, where individuals cannot get access to a bank account which is required for Universal Credit payments;
- Voids – the Committee supported the need for pressure on HOWPS to improve its performance to bring voids back on the market more quickly;
- With Universal Credit payments being made monthly, the Council should consider changing from a weekly to a monthly rent collection process;
- Committee supportive of the use of redundant school property for housing projects;

5.	LOVE WHERE YOU LIVE STRATEGY
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The Committee received a presentation from the Head of Housing. The strategy was due to be considered by the Cabinet in November but now more likely to be January / February 2019. The strategy is about improving the quality of the Council's estates, the lives of the residents on those estates and help tenants maintain their tenancies. The Council is working to achieve WHQS by the end of 2018. Part of that is about improving the fabric of homes. The strategy is about improving the fabric of estates, what customers think about the estates and how to improve services and support for tenants and residents.

There are 3 themes:

- Understanding – how the Council engages with tenants, managing areas and services offered;
- Place – new approach to grounds maintenance (working with the Highways Service) and delivery of improvements on estates. There is also a need to consider a play strategy and play areas, and improving and rationalising garage provision;
- People – encouraging people to make the best of their area, rewarding tenants for taking part in activities.

Question:
Garages – parking is a major issue on some estates. Action was to be undertaken on an estate in Knighton – is there an update?
Response:

The Head of Service agreed to review where the service was with garage clearances and will provide a Garage Improvement / Clearance Programme in early November.

Question:

Garages in Machynlleth – some in a poor state. There needs to be a decision to remove poor ones and repair others. Could some areas be turned into hard standing areas instead to take cars off estate roads rather than a need for parking restrictions.

Response:

There are parking problems throughout the county. There is a need for estate events to consider these issues as there were few or no cars when estates were developed from the 1940's to the 1980's. The cost of improvements to estates will come from rent income not from private individuals. The Head of Service agreed to publish a garage action plan once estate events had been undertaken.

Question:

Are garages sold with houses? There are a variety of arrangements in place – in some places the Council rents out garages, in other places they have leasehold tenancies. Parking is an issue and how is this to be funded? Has the service discussed improvement with local regeneration groups who could assist with improvements? There are also some poorly maintained private homes on estates which reflect badly on the remainder of the community.

Response:

Garages not sold with properties. The service would be happy to work with regeneration groups.

Question:

Parking and garages – do not agree with removing green spaces as putting in more tarmac can lead to more flooding. Energy efficiency in homes is not covered in the document.

Response:

The Wales Audit Office had inspected the service during the summer looking at WHQS. There were 3 recommendations around hard to heat homes. The service is therefore developing a separate strategy which is why it is not included in this document.

Question:

There is a need to engage with vulnerable individuals / people with disabilities who may not otherwise engage at main estate events. There are issues around tenant relationships – how does the Council resolve these issues? Understanding of relationships is important as some tenants will not engage. The title of the report is very engaging. The Sub-letting of garages by tenants is leading to complaints.

Response:

One of the key themes of the strategy is to get people to come together, this is why the Council is considering a rewards scheme. There are different types of schemes in place throughout the country. Loneliness is also an issue on estates and the question is how do you encourage a community spirit. This could also assist the service work collaboratively with other services.

Question:

Garages – does the Council sell them? Why is there a service charge imposed for services such as grass cutting?

Response:

The 2014 Housing Act meant that local housing authorities had to introduce service charges. Housing will look at bespoke options for each community in terms of garages.

Question:

Will the estate action events reach other estates?

Response:

Yes the intention is to hold events on all of the estates.

Question:

Parking is an issue on a particular estate in Ystradgynlais as well as the encroachment of ground – what happens in relation to this as there are licences for people to use this land.

Response:

Officers will speak directly to the Member about this specific issue.

Question:

Like the document and name. The rewards scheme is a good idea. Play areas are vital for children and getting them active and engaging with other children. Hopefully facilities will be enhanced rather than removed. There is also a need for the service to work with Town and Community Councils on such provision.

Response:

The issue for the housing service is how do you invest in play areas – is it appropriate for the tenants to provide these facilities where 50% or more of the houses have been sold or should there be provision on some of the smaller estates. Proposals will be brought forward in a draft strategy. With regards to the rewards scheme, the gardening scheme has ended but now nominations will be sought for tenants' contributions to their area.

Question:

Is there anything the Council can do with regard to private landlords and the state of their properties?

Response:

The council has no general powers but can act where private landlords break the law.

Question:

With regard to tarmacadam on parking areas, there are other solutions which could alleviate potential flooding issues. There are examples in Powys where garages have been demolished and car parking spaces provided which have been successful (Welshpool). Is there a legal requirement for the numbers of population in an area before a children's play area is required?

Response:

The Head of Service agreed to research whether there is a requirement.

Question:

The paving and roads on estates – who is responsible for this? as there is an estate in Knighton where a number of disabled people live and the road is broken in places. Why do we not place solar panels on our houses where there is electric heating?

Response:

Roads and pavements - It varies. With regard to solar panels it is not straightforward. It can depend on the orientation of the house and also whether there is capacity in the local grid network to take the additional power generated. However, with new battery technology this is less of an issue. The service will consider this as part of the new strategy. It could also be a planning issue as to whether solar panels would be allowed.

Question:

Could the Council work with wind farm developers to gain benefits such as installation of solar panels on Council properties?

Response:

The community benefits from wind farm development tend to go to communities rather than the County Council but there is a Community Benefits Scheme. However whether to engage in this scheme is a matter for individual developers.

Question:

Will the development on Newtown Bowling Green have some form of renewable energy?

Response:

Work is being undertaken with the company to provide a high energy efficiency rating for these properties. The new properties at Sarn will be passive houses.

A Member commented that the new schools in Ystradgynlais were not using the renewable heating elements installed as part of the build as it was cheaper to use gas.

Scrutiny Observations to Cabinet:

- Committee supportive of the name of the strategy and the draft strategy;
- Garages – need for an urgent policy on Council owned garages together with local determination of options following estate events. The implementation plan following local reviews to be circulated to Members for information;
- Consideration should be given to the removal of garages where appropriate and replacement with car parking provision to resolve car parking issues which are common on Council estates;
- Estate events - Need for specific engagement with those who are more vulnerable or have disabilities as they may not otherwise engage in those estate events;
- Committee supportive of rewards schemes;
- Committee supportive of the provision of play areas. The Head of Service agreed to research whether there is a minimum number of residents required before a play area can be considered in an area, in response to a question;
- Play areas – there is a need for closer working with Town and Community Councils in the provision of such play areas;

- Estate Improvements – consideration should be given to working with local regeneration groups who may be able to assist the Council;
- Committee look forward to a separate strategy for fuel efficiency in Council properties and ask that consideration be given to the use of Section 106 funding or money achieved under community benefits from wind farm developments being used to fund energy efficiency schemes such as solar panels (where appropriate) on council properties;
- Concern expressed at a comment by an Ystradgynlais Member that the new / refurbished schools in Ystradgynlais were not utilising the renewable energy heating systems installed as they were too expensive to operate;

6.	WORK PROGRAMME
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The Scrutiny Work Programme was noted.

County Councillor GIS Williams, Chair

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