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MINUTES OF A MEETING OF THE HEALTH, CARE AND HOUSING SCRUTINY COMMITTEE HELD AT COUNCIL CHAMBER - COUNTY HALL, LLANDRINDOD WELLS, POWYS ON THURSDAY, 8 NOVEMBER 2018

PRESENT: County Councillor G I S Williams
County Councillors J Charlton, S C Davies, D E Davies, J Gibson-Watt, H Hulme, A Jenner, E Jones, G Morgan, K M Roberts-Jones, D Rowlands, E Vaughan, R Williams and S L Williams

Cabinet Portfolio Holders In Attendance: County Councillor J Evans

Officers: P Dark (Service Manager - Asset Management), A Thompson (Service Manager – Tenancy Services) and W Richards (Scrutiny Manager and Head of Democratic Services)

1.	APOLOGIES
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Apologies for absence were received from County Councillors C Mills, P C Pritchard, A Williams and J Williams

Apologies for absence were received from County Councillors S Williams and H Hulme and from A Jenner (on other Council business) for the next meeting on 22nd November, 2018.

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 declarations of protected 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.	MINUTES
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The Chair was authorised to sign the minutes of the last meetings held on 12th September, 26th September, 3rd October and 15th October, 2018 as correct records.

The Committee noted the thanks of the Portfolio Holder for Housing for the comments received at the last meeting relating to the Homelessness Strategy which had been approved by the Cabinet on 7th November.

5.	WALES AUDIT OFFICE REPORT - WHQS
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The representative of the Wales Audit Office (WAO) presented the report on the implementation of the Welsh Housing Quality Standards (WHQS) in Powys. The report made 3 recommendations.

In relation to damp problems, it was noted that this would be a problem in Wales as Wales was subject to wet and windy weather conditions. In addition, damp problems arose due to the historic location of houses when they were built. The

implementation of WHQS has raised other challenges such as with the implementation of double glazing this has caused issues with condensation. Damp can be a complicated and sensitive problem for residents as it can either be a building related issue or a people issue. The Housing Service makes sure that buildings are the best that they can be and also provides advice to tenants on living styles.

Members suggested that whilst some of the figures reported in the report indicated that the service may be doing well e.g. 67% advised about leaseholder responsibilities, if you considered the opposite number 33% then this did not appear to be as positive. The WAO reported that it had undertaken 7 reports across Wales and the Powys survey results were good by comparison to other authorities. Members suggested that the thresholds set for WHQS were low, and whilst engagement had been good, it could have been better. It was also suggested that the WAO survey may be flawed, and that councillors could have been used to assist the engagement process as well.

The Housing Service advised the Committee that it was seeking to undertake fewer but more effective engagement sessions, more ad-hoc and subject specific. It was intended to undertake a sample survey of tenants in 2019 including what are their perceptions of the Council as a landlord. A group of 100 tenants is being used to consult about policies. A disused shop is being reopened in Machynlleth as a drop in centre for Housing and other officers.

Question:

Every Powys house has to achieve the WHQS by 2020 which means that 23% need to be improved in just over a year. Is £500k sufficient to achieve this?

Response:

Housing has been allocated funding for the various elements of WHQS going forward. The £500k funding is sufficient. Other provision is also available for other elements such as ventilation, heating etc.

Question:

Are some of these issues due to a bad design of the property?

Response:

Yes, this is the case. Also true where properties are built at the same time and have common issues. There may be some properties that are uneconomical to repair or update. Members suggested that the installation of fans in some bathrooms might alleviate some of the condensation issues.

Question:

Page 39 – point 13 – “*The Council recognises its system for recording which homes meet the WHQS standard for warmth is inaccurate and incomplete*” – why is this the case?

Response:

The 2012 and 2015 surveys were undertaken by consultants and an audit of the results highlighted that this did not reflect the true picture accurately. The inaccuracies were taken up with the consultants and they have corrected the data which gave an updated profile for the Council's properties of 1% in energy rating. The Housing Service was now content that the information is accurate. Where the information could not be updated these properties would be prioritised in the stock condition surveys

over the next 5 years. The Committee received assurance that the company undertook the updating of the information at no cost to the Council.

Page 42 – Paragraph 23 – the Housing website was to be changed imminently in line with changes to the corporate website. Housing was also reviewing the language used on the website to improve its clarity. Housing were reviewing whether additional resource could be made available to assist with amending the website, but at present children's services were the priority for web development.

Question:

Does the Council look at other websites to learn from those examples.

Response:

Yes, the Council does look at other websites. However resources is the issue.

Question:

Defects in properties – if a tenant has bought their own property and defects come to light, where does this leave the Council as the former landlord?

Response:

If the Council sells a property, then any defects should be picked up in the buyers property surveys undertaken before purchase. The Council does also have support processes for owner occupied properties.

Question:

The report states that 73% of tenants are happy with the environment outside their properties. However, this is the most common issue raised with Councillors. Is this figure accurate?

Response:

People have great concerns about the state of estates. A forthcoming budget proposal is to establish dedicated estate teams north and south to undertake grass cutting etc in line with the Love Where You Live Strategy.

Question:

Does the Council give advice to tenants on how to manage damp and condensation?

Response:

Yes, by means of DVDs and leaflets. There is also a need to look at more innovative solutions where there is a medical need.

Question:

Renewable energy solutions – are these going to be targeted at people on low incomes?

Response:

Yes, this is part of the strategy. Criteria would need to be established so that there is clarity as to who qualifies for these additional facilities.

Question:

Many properties on estates are now private. How will this work for the estate teams? With regard to voids, some of these are long term because the Council cannot bring them up to WHQS standards. When will these be completed?

Response:

With the Right to Buy legislation there are now mixed estates. The Council

can only spend funding on houses or estates. Private gardens can only be looked at by the Council if there are Health and Safety issues usually by enforcement action or the Council can undertake the work and then charge the owners.

Long term voids are for a number of reasons e.g. damp, structural issues or design of the building which means that the WHQS standard cannot be achieved. If there are known issues, then the Council will deal with them when the property becomes void. There is also a balance with rent loss to be considered. WHQS is on target to be completed by the end of 2018. Some properties will however be classed as acceptable fails. However, WHQS does not go away and components of WHQS will continue to need to be in an acceptable condition.

Question:

Does Housing monitor the contract with Green Fingers.

Response:

The contract is with the Highways Service but Housing does feed into the monitoring process.

Question:

Rent Smart Wales – is the Council involved with this?

Response:

Yes – this was established for private landlords to join.

Councillor Elwyn Vaughan left the meeting at 12 p.m.

In the Chair's summary of the discussion, the Portfolio Holder for Housing indicated that he would be undertaking visits to the Council's estates.

Recommendation to the Cabinet:

- **That the installation of fans in bathrooms be considered where suitable to alleviate condensation issues.**

6.	DAMP AND THERMAL COMFORT STRATEGIES
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The Committee received and considered the report of the Portfolio Holder for Corporate Governance, Housing and Public Protection. (Copy filed with signed minutes)

It was noted that Powys has the highest provision of "off gas" properties in Wales and the UK. In the various strategies the Council is seeking to do more than the WHQS standard. However, if a tenant does not work undertaken then they are not forced to have it undertaken, and the Council will then seek to undertake the required work when the property becomes a void. Alternatively, the Council will seek ways of being able to undertake the work but reduce the impact on the tenant whilst the work is being undertaken.

It is difficult to get an energy rating for some properties and there are issues with "off gas" properties. The Council is reviewing whether gas provision can be extended, but this is dependent on energy providers, or whether there are other means of achieving an energy rating. In relation to dampness a whole building approach is undertaken linked to heating.

With regard to Thermal comfort the aim is to have a SAP rating of 65 or more, but the Council is always seeking to improve on this. The Committee was advised that some heating such as LPG and air source heating could reduce energy ratings for properties and discussions were ongoing with the organisation controlling energy rating to try to remedy this situation. There was a need to establish criteria for dealing with requests for changes in heating systems especially where heating systems had been changed previously. There was also a need for a medical request policy so that decisions on medical grounds could be justified and met certain criteria.

Question:

Does the Council have properties with LPG tanks and does the Council assist tenants buy LPG in bulk.

Response:

This was raised by Councillor Huw Williams in Council and the Council is looking into this.

Question:

The Council has spent £47million on upgrading its properties and there are 5000 in the housing stock. The best way to deal with fuel poverty is to extend the mains network. As these are national infrastructure issues can they be taken up with Welsh Government?

Response:

At the Welsh Local Authority WHQS management meeting it was suggested that there was a need to undertake discussions with the utility companies in order to reduce the carbon footprint.

The Portfolio Holder for Housing was asked to take up this issue with the Minister at Welsh Government and to make representations to Welsh Government.

Question:

Local energy co-operatives and energy production in clubs – this is not included in the strategy. This is also about keeping energy production local. Different ways of reducing tenants' energy consumption should also be included in the strategy.

Response:

Local energy co-operatives and energy clubs would be included in the strategy. Councillor Jackie Charlton would provide information to officers on existing schemes.

Question:

Does the Council have access to current and previous complaints made so that patterns can be identified?

Response:

Yes, this information is available to Housing. Work is also being undertaken with HOWPS about the recording of complaint data to improve the data captured. Part of that project is also around the referral process of issues such as fuel poverty from HOWPS to the Council.

Question:

Did the Council record issues of dampness in properties in the past?

Response:

Yes.

Question:

With regard to flooding, there is no mention of some areas where flooding had occurred in the summary report.

Response:

This would be reviewed.

Question:

A Member suggested that tenants should contact the main service centre rather than contacting individual housing officers as there were instances where matters were not dealt with.

Response:

The strategy was about clarifying the approach moving forward. In addition there was need for a more robust reporting system.

Question:

Mains gas may not always be the best way forward. In rural areas other systems such as ground source heat pumps could be considered. There is a need to look at other options for heating.

Response:

Ground source and air source hybrid systems are being considered which can be added to the strategy.

Councillor Heulwen Hulme left the meeting 1.03 p.m.

Recommendations to the Cabinet:

- **The Council should investigate how it can assist tenants in the bulk buying of fuel such as oil and LPG.**
- **That the Portfolio Holder for Housing make representations to the Minister and Welsh Government to bring pressure on utility companies to extend energy networks to reduce fuel poverty in Wales.**
- **That local energy co-operatives and local energy production be included in the strategy.**
- **That other energy systems such as ground source heating and air source hybrid systems be included in the strategy.**

7.	WALES AUDIT OFFICE REPORT - SCRUTINY IN POWYS
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The representative of the Wales Audit Office (WAO) presented the report to the Committee and it was noted that there were 6 recommendations for the Council to address following the review.

The Scrutiny Manager and Head of Democratic Services advised the Committee about the work of the Scrutiny Development Board which had been established to review the scrutiny committee structure and make recommendations to the Council possibly in November.

Members suggested that any reports prepared for committees and Panels needed to be clear and robust. A Member also commented that committee meetings needed to be regularised on the same day every week as this assisted Members who were working in planning their attendance. Members also felt that a better use of technology in scrutiny such as Skype and email would be an advantage as well as involving other Members who were interested in particular matters, but who were not members of a scrutiny committee.

Members commented that the Council had taken part in a number of consultation exercises over recent months, but that most Members were unaware that the Council was being consulted. It was also stressed that however many scrutiny committees the Council had, Members needed to do the work for them to be successful.

The Committee noted that the Management Response to the WAO review would be presented to the Audit Committee for consideration and its implementation monitored by the WAO as well as the Audit Committee.

8.	WORK PROGRAMME
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The Committee received a copy of the Scrutiny Work Programme.

County Councillor G I S Williams
Chair

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