



## **Economy, Residents and Communities Scrutiny Committee**

### **Scrutiny Observations to Cabinet on: 28.03.2023**

The Economy, Residents and Communities Scrutiny Committee met for an Informal Meeting on 20.03.2023 and considered the following documents:

#### **Housing Revenue Account (HRA) Thirty Year Financial Business Plan 2023-2024.**

The Economy, Residents and Communities Scrutiny Committee thank the Portfolio Holder County Councillor Matthew Dorrance Deputy Leader and Portfolio Holder for a Fairer Powys and Head of Service for attending scrutiny.

Scrutiny made the following observations:

The Committee welcomed that:

- A robust and thorough Business Plan was presented.
- The Council continues to be a committed and responsible Landlord maintaining stock and standards.
- Various energy efficient options are being investigated for properties.
- An ambitious suite of Key Performance Indicators has been introduced as part of the Improvement Plan.
- The service is working flexibly to achieve targets with most of the work being carried out in-house with external contractors commissioned on a need only basis.
- Social housing grant funding will continue from the Welsh Government for the duration of the current government.
- A housing condition survey will begin in 2024.
- New contracts have been issued to all tenants (Contract Holders). The process engaged through a Working Group which included representatives from the Tenants Scrutiny Panel to achieve a positive outcome. Both Secured and Standard contracts are now in place.

The Committee noted that:

- The Housing Service is awaiting Welsh Government funding plans and guidance regarding the Welsh Housing Quality Standards.
- The Love Where You Live programme budget is held locally with Area Team Managers for minor repair works and small scale projects to develop and support communities.
- Any saving surplus remains within the HRA for the following year.
- Garages provide a good income but require investment to improve standards, and garage sites are being reviewed for possible future development.
- Housing demand depends on many factors not just homeless, but includes those moving away from renting privately, those wishing to leave home and the loss of domestic dwellings to the holiday sector.

- Recruitment difficulties have been experienced and retention of staff is challenging with the difference in wage levels between the private and public sectors.
- Housing stock within Powys is mixed with a lot of older properties. Smaller one-bedroom properties are most in demand.
- Town centres are being reviewed to convert empty or redundant properties which are more expensive in comparison to new builds but extremely worthwhile.
- Gypsy and Traveller sites are being improved and some extended. Additional needs have been recognised including larger pitches.
- Assurance was provided that transferred staff from the Heart of Wales Property Services (HoWPS) have fitted into the Council well and are making positive and valid contributions to the service.
- The Housing Service are keen to ensure that as much grant funding is obtained to help towards the decarbonisation of the current housing stock.
- A fabric first approach will be taken to ensure all homes are energy efficient and fit to live in, however due to the nature of the stock there is not a one plan that fits all. As the cost to tenants will be unrealistic and unachievable. And looking at boilers for example that are hydrogen ready.
- Options to be explored:
  - Shared Ownership – a proportion of the property is bought
  - Shared Equity – just the property is purchased and not the land
  - Mortgages
  - Help to buy
- Tackling the housing crisis is a top priority for the Council which is actioned in several ways, examples including quarterly performance targets, Key Performance Indicators, and the Star Survey (tenant satisfaction).
- Recognising the need to make improvements and changes when services are undelivered. Engagement and listening to the experience from those that live in Council properties is a priority to make improvements (a damp and mold pack has recently been designed for tenants and staff).
- Targets and priorities are set for each customer request that arrives with the Council.

The Committee expressed concern regarding:

- Demand on the housing stock has doubled and continues to increase. Even with 350 new social homes by 2031 it will not be enough to meet demand.
- The speed in which the Council and Housing Associations are building new homes.
- The number of houses that are required to fill demand.
- No legal obligation to be a landlord and 11 out of the 22 authorities in Wales have ceased. Assurance was given that Powys will continue with Landlord responsibilities and will uphold statutory duties.
- Purchasing property is an option, however long Council processes cannot be compared to the cash purchases of the private sector. Set regulations are in place with Welsh Government design standards which cannot be compromised and only properties in areas of need that meet the standards can be acquired.
- Decarbonisation definitions and funding plans are yet to be clarified by Welsh Government; only then can a more accurate details be provided for improvement costs per property.

- Concerns to be addressed for new age traveller sites. Only those that self-declare as an organisation and wish to engage in the process are currently included.

The Committee requested:

- Ward Details - Housing locality meeting will be set up to discuss needs in different areas which will result in Information regarding the housing waiting list details and housing stock by ward.
- Key Performance Indicators and how comments, compliments and complaints managed within the Housing Service.

Scrutiny's Recommendation to Cabinet	Accept (plus Action and timescale)	Partially Accept (plus Rationale and Action and timescale)	Reject (plus Rationale)
1.Explore garage sites for potential development.	Housing Services and Commercial Services to prepare amendments to the Council's procurement rules to allow easier development, by local builders, of small sites (such as garage sites) – by end of Q2 2023-2024; schedule of garage sites deemed suitable for development as homes to be drawn up by end of Q2 2023-2024.		
2. Could the Council review current arrangements around Gypsy and Traveller sites and how to engage more with New Age Traveller Groups that do not register.	Liaison to be undertaken with New Age Traveller Groups – by end of Q3 2023-2024.		
3. Consider and investigate more options the Council could offer around help to buy schemes.	Position statement setting out home ownership options that could be considered for Powys, to be presented by end of Q2 2023-2024		
4.To look into how the Council could make	Policy proposals to be presented by end of Q3 2023-2024 on		

more affordable housing available.	options available to the Council to increase scale of affordable housing provision, over and above current activity.		
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In accordance with Rule 7.27.2 the Cabinet is asked to provide a written response to the scrutiny report, including an action plan where appropriate, as soon as possible or at the latest within 2 months of the date of the Cabinet meeting i.e., by 05.06.2023

Membership of the Economy, Residents and Communities Scrutiny Committee  
County Councillors:

A Cartwright, A Davies (chair), Arwel Jones, B Davies, C Walsh, G Mitchell, K Lewis