

HOMES AND SAFE COMMUNITIES SCRUTINY COMMITTEE

Minutes of a remote meeting held on 13th January, 2021.

The Committee agenda is available [here](#).

Present: Councillor Mrs. S.D. Perkes (Chairman); Councillor Ms. J. Aviet (Vice-Chairman); Councillors J.C. Bird, Ms. B.E. Brooks, Mrs. C.A. Cave, Miss. A.M. Collins, Mrs. S.M. Hanks, Mrs. R. Nugent-Finn and L.O. Rowlands.

Also present: Councillors N. Moore (Executive Leader and Cabinet Member for Performance and Resources), E. Williams (Cabinet Member for Legal, Regulatory and Planning Services) and Ms. B. Hunt (Citizens Advice Cardiff and Vale Representative).

329 ANNOUNCEMENT –

Prior to the commencement of the business of the Committee, the Chairman read the following statement:

“May I remind everyone present that the meeting will be recorded via the internet and this recording archived for future viewing.”

330 APOLOGIES FOR ABSENCE –

These were received from Councillor A.C. Parker; and Mrs. W. Davies, Mrs. G. Doyle and Mr. A. Raybould (Tenant Working Group Representatives).

331 MINUTES –

RECOMMENDED – T H A T the minutes of the meeting held on 9th December, 2020 be approved as a correct record.

332 DECLARATIONS OF INTEREST –

Councillor Ms. J. Aviet declared an interest in relation to Agenda Item No. 4 – Results of Customer Satisfaction STAR Survey. The nature of the interest was that the Councillor was a Council tenant of the Vale of Glamorgan Council. Due to this being a personal interest only, the Councillor could stay and speak on the presentation.

333 PRESENTATION: RESULTS OF CUSTOMER SATISFACTION STAR SURVEY –

The Committee welcomed Mr. Adam Payne of ARP Research Ltd, which had undertaken the STAR tenant survey on behalf of the Council, and he presented this report in conjunction with the Housing and Strategic Projects Team Leader.

The Housing and Strategic Projects Team Leader explained the Council had commissioned the ARP consultants some time ago to undertake a large-scale survey of all Council tenants in order to find levels of satisfaction, including tenant feedback on what the Council was doing well and what areas needed improvement.

Mr. Payne went on to outline the report, explaining that originally this had been due to be reported to the Committee in March/April 2020 but had been delayed due to COVID-19, with the key areas covered by the presentation being:

Background and Methodology –

- The survey was based on the ‘HouseMark Star’ survey, a standard framework used by most landlords within England and Wales for benchmarking and the basis for Welsh Government to set specific target questions for submission every two years. This included a two-stage postal self-completion survey for tenants with their responses returned via freepost which was conducted between October – November 2019 and the results subsequently collated;
- The 2019 results were compared against the previous survey results from 2016 and benchmarked against the Council’s peer group in the HouseMark database which included Councils – district, unitary and metropolitan authorities – across England and Wales;
- 1,392 persons took part which equated to a 37% response rate, which Mr. Payne stated was a good level of response, with a margin of error of +/- 2% indicating a high level of accuracy for the survey;
- The data was weighted in order to better represent the population, by area and stock type (sheltered versus general needs) which matched the previous survey in 2016, therefore comparing ‘like for like’ but going forward such results would need to be weighted more against age.

Overall satisfaction, key drivers and results –

- There had been an increase in satisfaction in the overall service provided by the Council to tenants, increasing from 81% in 2016 to 84% in 2019;
- Key factors in this increase in overall satisfaction were improvements in day to day repairs (such as in relation to timeliness and doing the job expected), tenants’ view of neighbourhoods as places to live (which had gone up to 90% in 2019 from 88% in 2016) and tenant perception of how the Council was dealing with anti-social behaviour (increasing to a satisfaction rate of 63% in 2019, from 58% in 2016), which was good compared with other landlords;
- Mr. Payne caveated these positive increases by stating there was still room for improvement with 1/10 of those surveyed not satisfied with Council services and although there had been an overall increase in satisfaction rates regarding customer service in 2019 compared to 2016 (up 80% from 76%)

there had been a drop in satisfaction in specific areas such as ease on getting hold of the right person (down 6% from 2016) and whether staff were helpful as well as call waiting times and call backs. However, satisfaction rates for the final resolution of tenants' calls and queries still remained high;

- There were variations in satisfaction levels depending on age (with older age groups more satisfied overall), how recently they had made contact with the Council and by area (such as by ward or by the Eastern and Western Vale areas, with the Eastern Vale on the whole more satisfied);
- Drilling down into the 'key drivers' for the overall satisfaction rates, the best predictor of overall satisfaction rates in both 2019 and 2016 was the quality of homes, with neighbourhood, anti-social behaviour and repair responses scoring improving since 2016. Also of note was that value for money in terms of rental rates and service charges had also become key drivers and satisfaction levels remained good, remaining static for both 2016 and 2019 and either on or just above par compared to the Council's peers. Again, Mr. Payne caveated this by referring to the number of respondents who struggled with making rent payments and/or heating their homes (1/5 and 1/10 of respondents respectively) and just over half of Universal Credit claimants surveyed were happy with the Council's support (with around a quarter dissatisfied);
- Regarding online services, in 2019 (and pre-COVID-19), only a third of tenants that used the internet utilised the Council's online services; although Mr. Payne felt that this would have changed with the Pandemic and the increasing need to use online services as a result.

The impact of 2020 on future surveys –

- Mr. Payne had undertaken surveys with other clients in 2020 and had found significant changes such as unprecedented increases in satisfaction with listening and communicating, linked to COVID-19 wellbeing calls. However, since Summer 2020 day to day repairs scores were now suffering. Therefore, these two areas would be of importance in 2021 for landlords such as the Council for future surveys;
- Changes in methods of undertaking surveys such as moving on to an online means of surveying tenants and responding to changes to the STAR methodology (such as the need to 'weight' by age).

Following the presentation, Councillors Bird and Nugent-Finn asked about the cost of the STAR survey and why the survey was outsourced. The Head of Housing and Building Services replied that the survey cost approximately £12,000 (including printing and postage) which was felt to be good value for money and this survey was undertaken bi-annually with the Welsh Government making the undertaking of this survey a requirement in relation to receipt of the Major Repairs Allowance and in terms of the new Rent Policy. Regarding outsourcing, he explained that due to the resourcing and analytical specialism required, this could not be undertaken 'in-house' and outsourcing this work ensured that the survey could be seen by tenants as providing independent and unbiased analysis and results. Subsequently, such analysis formed the basis for the Council's focus on areas that were important to tenants and needed attention such as Anti-Social Behaviour, repairs and so on. Mr. Payne added that the Pandemic had spurred on changes for organisations in

carrying out surveys such as making these more online-based and therefore more cost-effective, using smaller samples as well as focusing more 'traditional' methods of surveying to those tenants that were not online in conjunction with online components for those tenants that could access the internet thereby reducing costs but also widening the reach of the survey to more tenants at the same time.

Councillor Cave asked if tenants could, for future tenant surveys, be trained to collect the data, ask the relevant questions, collate the results and present these in 'lay terms' to tenants as well as establishing the reasons behind the levels of satisfaction found. In addition, she enquired as to the reason(s) why the Western Vale was less satisfied as shown in the survey. Finally, the Councillor made a suggestion for the Council to calculate the percentage of profit made on the rents it collected from individual tenants in order for this to be ploughed back into the tenants' funds for them to use to pay off rent arrears, a deposit to change properties or towards a mortgage and buying a home.

On the training of tenants to help undertake future STAR surveys, the Housing and Strategic Projects Team Leader replied that he would consider this suggestion, and this could be useful in following up on the survey results, with tenant volunteers potentially facilitating focus groups which could run alongside the Timebanking and employability sessions run by the Council. Mr. Payne added that such volunteers could help to drill down on the results at a local level, thereby 'closing the loop' on what the results mean as well as the tenants involved gaining transferrable skills, with the higher-level statistics and analysis being undertaken by specialists. With regard to the lower satisfaction levels within the Western Vale, Mr. Payne replied he would undertake further analysis and provide the results to the Committee via the Housing and Strategic Projects Team Leader. Finally, the Head of Housing and Building Services explained that the Council did not make any profit on the rents and service charges collected from tenants, with such rents and charges simply covering repairs, services, the new build programme, WHQS and the condition of Council properties as well as bad debt provision. Any surplus or underspend on the related Housing Revenue Account was invested back into services or used to reduce capital borrowing by Housing or the Council or for improvements to services to tenants. There had been discussions with Welsh Government on how to assist tenants who wished to buy properties such as investments in 'Rent to Buy' as well as some Registered Social Landlords offering similar opportunities.

Finally, the Housing and Strategic Projects Team Leader wished to add that the survey had provided overall positive results and feedback but there was still more work needed to be done such as with digital services, with Housing moving over to more online components for future STAR surveys and, in light of the Pandemic, the increasing importance of the roll out by the Council of its customer 'portal' for tenants to access their rent accounts, check their balance and update their details.

There being no further questions, the Scrutiny Committee, having considered the presentation, subsequently

RECOMMENDED – T H A T the presentation on the results of the Customer Satisfaction STAR Survey be noted.

Reason for recommendation

Having regard to the contents of the presentation and discussions at the meeting.

334 REVENUE AND CAPITAL MONITORING FOR THE PERIOD 1ST APRIL TO 30TH NOVEMBER 2020 (DEH) –

The report was presented by the Finance Support Manager, who outlined the 2020/21 financial position against the revised revenue budgets explaining that all services within this Committee's remit were forecasted to break-even, albeit some may need to draw on reserves in order to do this.

The Finance Support Manager added that the Council had been able to claim back lost revenue and additional costs incurred due to the Pandemic from the Welsh Government (WG). For example, the WG had funded the cost of housing the homeless during the Pandemic until the end of March 2021; however, should this funding end after this date, the Housing Service could not contain such costs within its existing revenue budget. Also, the Disabled Facility Grant had been one of the services that had benefitted from successfully claiming back its lost fee income from the WG and would now achieve a balanced budget. However, both the CCTV and Rent Allowance budgets would need to draw down from their reserves due to them not being able to meet a revenue savings target and due to the impact of the Welfare Reform roll-out, respectively.

In terms of Capital, the Finance Support Manager informed the Committee of the Cabinet approved project to deliver temporary accommodation, in response to the Homelessness crisis caused by the Pandemic, at the former Civic Amenity site adjacent to the Court Road Depot, Barry. This was part funded by WG and was included within the report under the 'New Build' capital spending of £8.697m.

With reference to the capital project on temporary accommodation, Councillor Bird asked whether there was an update on the progress made at Court Road. The Head of Housing and Building Services replied that a further update and report on this development would be coming to the Committee in the near future and was on the Work Programme for the Committee. In the meantime, he stated that the Council had entered into a contract for the development of the project, with preliminary work already started such as demolition and other ground works. The Council was still on target to complete the accommodation by the end of March 2021.

The Chairman asked about the Disabled Facility Grant, with the Finance Support Manager confirming that, after previous concerns that the budget could not be balanced by year end due to a reduction in fee incomes as a result of contractors being unable to access homes due to the Pandemic, the lost income claim made to WG had now been paid out and hopefully this would be funded to year end, thus balancing the budget at the end of the year.

There being no further questions, the Scrutiny Committee, having considered the report, subsequently

RECOMMENDED – T H A T the position with regard to the 2020/21 revenue and capital budgets be noted.

Reason for recommendation

Having regard to the content of the report and discussions at the meeting.

335 IMPACT OF COVID 19 ON CONTACT ONE VALE (MD) –

The report was set out by the Operational Manager for Customer Relations explaining the key challenges that Contact OneVale (C1V) had faced during the COVID-19 Pandemic, the service response to these and the impact on service performance.

The Operational Manager for Customer Relations wished to stress that as well as C1V's role as a contact centre, it also delivered Telecare Monitoring, Reception services, Blue Car Badge and Concessionary Travel Pass services, Shared Regulatory Services (SRS), Armed Forces Advisory Services as well as providing services to external partners such as Cardiff and Vale Health Board and Transport for Wales. Many of these services were accessed by the most vulnerable in the Vale and those most likely to be impacted by the Pandemic such as residents shielding or in self-isolation accessing services such as Adult Social Care Assessments, Housing and Homelessness and Registrars.

He went on to say that from the start of the Pandemic the focus was on ensuring that C1V could continue to support the most vulnerable residents and those in crisis.

The service initially identified the highest risk to its successful functioning as the potential for high infection rates among its staff due to the Pandemic. Therefore, in order to minimise this risk, C1V staff were initially split over two office sites and were subsequently moved on to home working. At the same time residents were encouraged to access non-urgent services online via the Council's website. This resulted in a 32.5% reduction in call volumes compared to the expected demand. However, overall demand remained as expected due to the emails generated from the public accessing services online. Despite this, such demands could be managed more effectively as emails did not need to be dealt with instantaneously – as telephone calls had to be – and this suggested an appetite to access online services by the public that could be built on in the future.

The Operational Manager for Customer Relations went on to discuss the current working from home arrangement for C1V staff, where the majority (95%) were currently working remotely. The key challenges to this form of working and the service provided were both technical (for example, the need to improve connectivity which had been undertaken with ICT) and in terms of staff support. He explained that staff had moved from working in an open plan working environment where there were other staff, team members and supervisors who could offer immediate support to working on their own with less immediate contact and support from colleagues. In order to overcome such challenges, themed 'chat' facilities were set up via Microsoft Teams which allowed staff to quickly access support from colleagues in order to help

deal with customer queries as quickly as possible. 'Real-time' monitoring had continued in order for team leaders to identify issues quickly and to offer pro-active support, for example, if a call handler was on their call for some time, the team leader could listen in to the call and identify if the agent was having a problem and intervene in order to resolve it or discuss it with the call handler at the end of the call. Due to the changes in services provided throughout the Council during the Pandemic, updates on these were circulated to C1V staff in order for them to be able to pass on the most up to date advice and support to the public. The contact centre was subsequently able to keep the First Contact Resolution rate at around 85% during the Pandemic which prevented calls from being re-routed elsewhere within the Council or the need for callers to be called back.

Increased staff absence at C1V had been an ongoing and significant issue during the Pandemic. Initially, due to COVID-19, staff had to self-isolate and be absent from work when home working was not available, but, once remote working had been implemented, those staff with mild COVID-19 symptoms or others who needed to self-isolate with no symptoms could now work from home and therefore help to maintain staffing levels. Another factor had been the rise in absences due to mental health and wellbeing issues – in part due to extended home working – with this peaking in October 2020, with 9 members of staff not able to attend work which impacted on C1V's ability to answer calls by residents in a timely manner (the average time residents had to wait to have their telephone call answered was 243 seconds). In order to deal with these welfare issues, C1V introduced welfare calls so that team leaders could keep in contact with staff and to address any issues. Also, weekly video calls had been introduced in order to engender a greater team 'ethic' and to offer support to staff. Such measures had helped to reduce absences with 7 of the 9 call handlers who were previously absent having already returned to work and the remainder due to return to C1V in the next few weeks.

Despite these issues, C1V had continued to implement measures to support residents during the Pandemic, for example, the establishment in April 2020 of a Crisis Support Line in order to support shielding residents who needed help with accessing food and medicine (such as those Vales residents receiving food parcels via the Welsh Government). The contact centre ensured that residents who did not answer the door to food parcel deliveries were identified and contacted to ensure their safety and where necessary such concerns were escalated to partners, Police and Adult Social Services. C1V's support to residents had expanded to include financial issues, mental health services, loneliness/befriending and homelessness as well as overall wellbeing either through providing direct advice on Council services or referrals to voluntary/third sector partners such as Glamorgan Voluntary Services and Age Connect. This was also replicated online with the implementation of a 'Chatbot' to assist with enquiries virtually and backed up by a manned webchat option should the Chatbot not address the questions raised by callers.

The Operational Manager for Customer Relations also informed the Committee that demand on the Crisis Support Line had been relatively low over the last 5 months, with 2-3 calls on average a day. This could be explained however, by those residents already shielding having put in place support mechanisms over time in order to get them through the ongoing Pandemic and lockdowns. This call rate could change with the increase in issues around mental health and financial concerns due

to the Pandemic. C1V was also working very closely with other Council services and external providers to ensure that residents could be fully supported via the Crisis Support Team as a single point of contact and a single means of monitoring and measurement of such needs.

Finally, the Operational Manager for Customer Relations outlined the work that C1V was doing on a regional basis such as the ongoing collaboration with Transport for Wales in delivering the Fflecsi demand responsive transport service to allow key workers and vulnerable citizens to access COVID-19 Safe public transport. Also, C1V's assisted Cardiff and Vale University Health Board with the establishment of the CAV 24/7 service to protect Accident and Emergency services due to the Pandemic.

Councillor Hanks referred to the section of the report around the use of the Chatbot/ artificial intelligence, with its 426 interactions a week, and asked if this high rate of interaction with the public was something new or something ongoing. The Operational Manager for Customer Relations replied that there had been a high uptake of interactions from the public and C1V was working with the service provider in order to get more insight on these interactions, such as did users see through their interaction to the end or drop off. He would provide additional information to the Committee once this had been received. Councillor Hanks wanted to add that the online Household Waste Recycling booking service for the Vale seemed to be working well and was a positive development for the Council.

The Chairman asked about C1V staff welfare and in particular on how staff who started prior to the Pandemic were being supported. The Operational Manager for Customer Relations explained that the introduction of new technology to C1V prior to the Pandemic had helped in the effective transfer over to remote working. New staff had received in-house training prior to home working and had access to the C1V knowledge database (regularly updated), regular contact with their team leaders, quality monitoring of their call handling skills plus coaching via Teams. Also, C1V could closely manage the types of the calls new staff took, ensuring they built up their skills and knowledge with key types of calls and subject areas.

Finally, the Chairman asked if C1V staff could still contact Occupational Health while working from home, to which the Operational Manager for Customer Relations replied that this service was still available via telephone and that the measures to support staff outlined in the report were in addition to the normal support mechanisms offered by the Council as part of Management of Attendance policies.

The Committee expressed its appreciation of the work undertaken to develop and broaden the range of services offered by C1V during the Pandemic as well as the hard work undertaken and help offered by its management and staff to Vale residents, both online and with the partial reopening of the reception at the Civic Offices for those residents who could not access services online.

Following consideration of the report, it was

RECOMMENDED – T H A T the way in which C1V has both been impacted by and supported the Council's response to the Coronavirus Pandemic be noted.

Reason for recommendation

Having regard to the content of the report and discussions at the meeting.

336 3RD QUARTER SCRUTINY DECISION TRACKING OF
RECOMMENDATIONS AND UPDATED WORK PROGRAMME SCHEDULE
2020/21 (MD) –

The Democratic and Scrutiny Services Officer presented the report, the purpose of which was to report progress on the Scrutiny recommendations:

- 3rd Quarter October to December 2020 (Appendix A to the report);
- 2nd Quarter July to September 2020 (Appendix B to the report);
- Municipal Year April 2019 – March 2020 (Appendix C to the report);
- Municipal Year April 2018 - March 2019 (Appendix D to the report);

and to confirm the Committee's updated Work Programme for 2020/21 (Appendix E to the report).

The officer explained that due to the Pandemic, Scrutiny Committee meetings were cancelled between March and July 2020. Following the August Recess, meetings resumed in September 2020. Therefore, there were no recommendations of the Committee for the 1st Quarter of the 2020/21 Municipal year and only the September meeting recommendations for the 2nd Quarter.

The Democratic and Scrutiny Services Officer drew the Committee's attention to Appendix E (the Committee's updated Work Programme for 2020/21) and the report concerning the Youth Offending Service: Performance Report for the Committee meeting in February 2021. He asked if the Committee would give its approval for the report to be pushed back to the next meeting in March 2021 as it would not be ready for February due to issues around capacity and the ongoing Pandemic and asked for this to be updated on the Work Programme prior to it being uploaded to the website.

RECOMMENDED –

- (1) T H A T the status of the actions listed as completed in Appendices A, B and D to the report be agreed.
- (2) T H A T the actions listed as ongoing in Appendix C to the report be noted.
- (3) T H A T the Youth Offending Service: Performance Report referred to in Appendix E be moved from February 2021 to March 2021 on the Work Programme Schedule prior to uploading on to the Council's website.
- (4) T H A T the updated Work Programme Schedule attached at Appendix E be approved and uploaded to the Council's website.

Reasons for recommendations

- (1&2) To maintain effective tracking of the Committee's recommendations.
- (3) In order to accommodate capacity and other issues around the Pandemic that have caused a delay in its completion and submission.
- (4) For information.