

No.

## HOMES AND SAFE COMMUNITIES SCRUTINY COMMITTEE

Minutes of a Remote meeting held on 8<sup>th</sup> January, 2025.

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

The recording of the meeting is available [here](#).

Present: Councillor A.M. Collins (Chair); Councillor B. Loveluck-Edwards (Vice-Chair); Councillors J. Aviet, G.M. Ball, S.J. Haines, S.M. Hanks, W.A. Hennessy and S. Lloyd-Selby, M.J.G. Morgan and H.M. Payne.

Also present: C. Ireland (Citizens Advice Cardiff and Vale); (H. Smith (Tenant Working Group / Panel Representative); Councillors L. Burnett (Executive Leader and Cabinet Member for Performance and Resources), G. John (Cabinet Member for Leisure, Sport and Wellbeing), Dr. I.J. Johnson, S.D. Perkes (Cabinet Member for Public Sector Housing and Tenant Engagement) and M.R. Wilson (Cabinet Member for Neighbourhood and Building Services).

### ANNOUNCEMENT –

Prior to the commencement of the business of the Committee, the Chair read the following statement: “May I remind everyone present that the meeting will be live streamed as well as recorded via the internet and this recording archived for future viewing”.

### APOLOGIES FOR ABSENCE –

These were received from G. Doyle, D. Dutch and V. John (Tenant Working Group / Panel Representatives).

### MINUTES –

RECOMMENDED – T H A T the minutes of the meeting held on 4<sup>th</sup> December, 2024 be approved as a correct record.

### DECLARATIONS OF INTEREST –

Councillor J. Aviet declared a personal but not prejudicial interest in Agenda Item 5 - Final Housing Revenue Account (HRA) Budget Proposals and Rent Setting – as she was a Council tenant.

Councillor W.A. Hennessy declared a personal but not prejudicial interest in Agenda Item 5 – Final Housing Revenue Account (HRA) Budget Proposals and Rent Setting – as he was a Council tenant.

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Councillor H.M. Payne declared a personal but not prejudicial interest in Agenda Item 5 – Final Housing Revenue Account (HRA) Budget Proposals and Rent Setting – as the report referred to a property let by the Council to Llamau Housing Trust, and she was employed by Llamau, however, Councillor Payne had a dispensation from the Standards Committee to speak on the matter.

Councillor S. Lloyd-Selby declared a personal but not prejudicial interest in Agenda Item 6 – Work to Tackle Poverty and the Current Cost of Living Crisis – as she was a Trustee of the Vale Food Bank, which was a beneficiary of Council funding. However Councillor Lloyd-Selby had a dispensation from the Standards Committee to speak and vote on general matters relating to the Vale Food Bank, and to speak only when matters regarding finance or property in respect of the Vale Foodbank were being considered.

#### CORPORATE SAFEGUARDING MID-YEAR SUMMARY REPORT – NOVEMBER 2024 (REF) –

The reference from Cabinet of 19<sup>th</sup> December, 2024 was presented by the Head of Housing and Building Services. Following presentation of the report the officer provided the following advice in response to Committee questions and comments:

- The Council worked closely with schools on their safeguarding responsibilities and work in this area had been strengthened over the past year;
- Elected Members who were Governors with specific safeguarding responsibility, had all received the appropriate training;
- Officers were also providing stronger guidance to school governors, and this had been well received;
- Regarding safer recruitment, there had been some issues around school term dates and this affecting the ability to complete the relevant paperwork to deadlines at all times;
- Tenant representatives on this Committee also had the opportunity to update their safeguarding training;
- Officers were directing employees and other relevant stakeholders to use the Disclosure and Barring Update Service.

With no further comments or queries, Committee subsequently:

**RECOMMENDED – T H A T** the Cabinet reference, and appended Corporate Safeguarding Mid-term Summary Report, be noted.

#### Reason for recommendation

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

#### FINAL HOUSING REVENUE ACCOUNT (HRA) BUDGET PROPOSALS AND RENT SETTING (DEH) –

The report was presented by the Head of Finance / Section 151 Officer.

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The report detailed the final Housing Revenue Account (HRA) budget proposals for 2025/26.

The HRA was a ring-fenced account that was self-funded mainly by Council dwelling rents and expenditure consists of staffing to manage the provision, repairs and maintenance costs of the housing stock, capital financing costs to service the debt and revenue contributions towards the Capital Programme, including decarbonisation and new developments.

The report also set out the proposed rents and service charges for the coming financial year 2025/26; as part of the Rented Homes Wales Act the Council was required to give 2 months' notice of any increase in Council Rents to Council Tenants.

In setting the rent level for 2025/26 the Council had ensured that it had complied with the Policy for Social Housing Rents which was issued by Welsh Government on 13<sup>th</sup> November, 2024. The maximum allowable uplift had been set by Welsh Government at 2.7% for 2025/26.

The Council proposed to increase its rent by an average of 2.7%. Due to Covid-19, the Welsh Government (WG) suspended Target Rent Bands in 2020 and replaced them with a self-certification monitoring form.

WG required all Local Authorities with retained housing stock to submit a fit for purpose annual 30 year Housing Business Plan, which was in Appendix A to the report.

The Plan incorporated a detailed financial forecast in the form of a 30 year financial model. The submission deadline for the Housing Business Plan was 31<sup>st</sup> March, 2025 and was required as part of the Major Repairs Allowance grant application.

Guidance from WG for the submission of the Housing Business Plan had not yet been received but no significant changes were expected for 2025/26. There was no guidance received in 2024/25 and reliance had been placed on previous guidance.

The Housing Improvement Programme reflected ambitious proposals to invest in new build accommodation to address the acute shortage of social housing in the Vale of Glamorgan. The Improvement Programme also sought to decarbonise the existing housing stock through investment in alternative energy sources, insulation and other energy efficiency initiatives.

The HRA Business Plan was both viable and sustainable in terms of meeting the Council's obligations under Welsh Housing Quality Standard (WHQS) for existing stock and provided consideration on the investment needed to respond to climate change, new build and regeneration whilst managing the level of debt within the HRA.

Following presentation of the report, Members raised a number of points including:

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- Whether the building of new homes was being undertaken in the most appropriate areas of the Vale of Glamorgan;
- The affordability of the proposed increase in Council rents and the levels and types of support available for those Council tenants in need of it;
- The services that Council tenants received in return for the proposed increase in rent levels;
- How Council rents after the proposed increase would compare with those in the private sector and among Registered Social Landlords;
- Whether the 30-Year Housing Business Plan 2025-2054 would be able to be taken forward, if the proposed rent increase was not approved.

In response to Members' questions, officers provided the following advice:

- 'Bad debt' mentioned in the report primarily consisted of rent arrears, but could also include charges for repairs and maintenance that were chargeable to the tenant. The level of current debt stood at approximately £1m, but not all of this was uncollectable. A portion of this debt had occurred around a large number of tenants moving from legacy benefits to Universal Credit, and it may be possible to recover this portion of the debt over a longer period of time. Committee was advised that collection and recovery rates on such debt were improving.
- In relation to the affordability of Council rent for tenants, officers undertook affordability assessments prior to the take up of all new tenancies. The Money Advice Team also visited new tenants to assess any additional issues that they may have.
- The Council commissioned a successful housing support service through third-party organisations, and there was a good level of awareness among Council tenants of the range of support available to them.
- Tenants with housing support needs could also be referred to other external organisations for further support.
- Staff numbers within the Money Advice Team had increased in recognition of the increase in the number of tenants who were facing financial difficulty. Support with, for example, maximising income, was provided by this team.
- The Council was committed to keeping rents as low as possible, and would not evict tenants into homelessness.
- Council rents were currently approximately 25% lower than the private rented sector, and also around 13% lower than the Council's Registered Social Landlord partners.
- The report and 30-Year Housing Business Plan were primarily financial documents intended to ensure a viable business plan, and this was why specific needs and demand data was not included in full operational detail. This detail was, however, included in local housing market assessments which were reported to Committee previously. The Business Plan would be submitted to Welsh Government, who would also scrutinise its content.
- Building new homes in the areas of most need and demand was constrained by the land that the Council owned and the land that was available for it to buy. Ideally there would be more new homes being built in areas such as

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Barry, but the opportunities to build were not always available where the greatest demand occurred.

- The increase in rent proposed was relatively small compared to current inflation information, and was unlikely to impact upon Council rents remaining the most affordable in comparison to the private rented sector and Registered Social Landlords.
- There had been a substantial increase across Wales and the UK in rents and house prices. The Vale of Glamorgan was a highly desirable place to live, which also created high demand versus a shortage in supply.
- The Council wanted to improve the energy efficiency of its homes, as this would help to alleviate the increasing costs associated with heating bills for tenants.
- Approximately 70% of Council tenants received a form of housing subsidy through Housing Benefit or Universal Credit, for example, and a large proportion of tenants may not see any increase in their housing costs as these were often covered by welfare benefits.
- The Business Plan was viable with the proposed rent increase, and any increase lower than 2.7% would require the Council to review its proposals, which would mean a lower level of investment in the current housing stock and / or less investment in new builds.
- There were a number of consequences of not providing a viable business plan, for example higher costs associated with temporary accommodation e.g. in hotels, and this would impact on the wider Council budget, with the same level of funding not then available to invest in other areas such as Education and Social Services.
- The 2.7% figure for the proposed increase had been arrived at by looking at the Consumer Price Index (CPI) at September 2024, plus 1%. September 2024's CPI may potentially be the lowest point of CPI for the year, and this would have an impact as borrowing costs, for example, would be higher than 2.7%.

With no further comments or queries, Committee subsequently:

RECOMMENDED – T H A T the report and Recommendations (2) to (6) which were being considered by Cabinet on 9<sup>th</sup> January, 2025, be noted.

#### Reason for recommendation

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

#### WORK TO TACKLE POVERTY AND THE CURRENT COST OF LIVING CRISIS (DCR) –

The report was presented by the Director of Corporate Resources and the Policy Officer, who advised that the report provided an update on work being undertaken across the Council and working in partnership to tackle poverty, and to respond to the cost-of-living crisis across the period June 2024 – November 2024.

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The report illustrated the breadth of work undertaken to support people into employment, help families and young people through financial and wellbeing support, including various sports opportunities as well as the developing work within schools to use them as community hubs.

The report highlighted the work to tackle food insecurity by supporting projects that improved access to food, reduced loneliness and isolation through supporting the development of community spaces, and provided financial support to individuals through a number of schemes.

It also provided details about the use of the cost-of-living reserve, which was established as part of the 2023-24 budget, demonstrating how the Council was matching the use of reserves with the Council's core priorities as set out in the Financial Strategy and Annual Delivery Plan. Shared Prosperity funding was also supporting a number of projects that would be helping to target poverty and address the impacts of the cost-of-living crisis.

Following presentation of the report, Committee welcomed the important work outlined within it. Councillor Haines subsequently asked for any update on increasing the number of warm space projects located within the rural Vale of Glamorgan. In response, officers advised that there would be a meeting in the weeks following this meeting to discuss funding for such projects, and that some applications for funding for warm spaces were expected to be received through a forthcoming Small Community Grant Scheme. There were already some Warm Spaces within the rural Vale of Glamorgan, and officers would forward the web pages which outlined all locations of Warm Spaces within the Vale to Members of the Committee. Officers advised that there were more warm spaces located within towns than in the rural Vale of Glamorgan. However, The Council were looking to expand the number of rural warm spaces available, and were also looking at using libraries in rural areas, which could also provide high quality Warm Spaces.

With no further queries or comments, Committee subsequently:

#### RECOMMENDED –

- (1) T H A T the work being undertaken with regard to tackling poverty and the cost-of-living crisis, be noted.
- (2) T H A T the use of the cost-of-living reserve to support those in need, be noted.
- (3) T H A T Committee refer the report and the following comment to Cabinet:
  - While Committee commended the important work that was being undertaken, as outlined in the report and the presentation by officers at the meeting, further Warm Space projects located in the rural Vale of Glamorgan would be welcomed.

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Reasons for recommendations

- (1&2) Having regard to the contents of the report and discussions at the meeting.
- (3) In order for Cabinet consider the Scrutiny Committee's comment.

3<sup>RD</sup> QUARTER SCRUTINY DECISION TRACKING OF RECOMMENDATIONS  
AND UPDATED WORK PROGRAMME SCHEDULE (DCR) –

The report was presented by the Assistant Democratic and Scrutiny Services Officer, who advised Members of progress in relation to the Scrutiny Committee's historical recommendations, and the updated Forward Work Programme Schedule for 2024/25.

Included with the report were the following appendices:

- 2<sup>nd</sup> Quarter Recommendation Tracking July to September 2024 (Appendix A);
- 3<sup>rd</sup> Quarter Recommendation Tracking October to December 2024 (Appendix B); and
- Updated Forward Work Programme Schedule for 2024/25 (Appendix C).

Having fully considered the report, Committee subsequently:

RECOMMENDED –

- (1) T H A T the status of the actions listed in Appendices A and B to the report be agreed.
- (2) T H A T the updated Forward Work Programme Schedule for 2024/25 attached at Appendix C to the report be approved and uploaded to the Council's website.

Reasons for recommendations

- (1) Having regard to the contents of the report, and to maintain effective tracking of the Committee's recommendations.
- (2) For public information.