



COUNCIL

MINUTES OF THE MULTI-LOCATIONAL MEETING HELD IN THE CHAMBER PENALLTA HOUSE AND VIA MICROSOFT TEAMS ON TUESDAY, 23RD MAY 2023 AT 5.00PM

PRESENT:

Councillor M. Adams - Mayor
Councillor J. Simmonds - Deputy Mayor

Councillors:

E.M. Aldworth, C. Andrews, A. Angel, A. Broughton-Pettit, M. Chacon-Dawson, R. Chapman, P. Cook, D. Cushing, C. Cuss, D. T. Davies MBE, N. Dix, G. Ead, C. Elsbury, G. Enright, K. Etheridge, M. Evans, A. Farina-Childs, C. Forehead, E. Forehead, J. E. Fussell, A. Gair, N. George, C. Gordon, D. Harse, T. Heron, A. Hussey, D. Ingram-Jones, M. James, L. Jeremiah, G. Johnston, J. Jones, A. Leonard, P. Leonard, C. Mann, A. McConnell, B. Miles, C. Morgan, B. Owen, T. Parry, L. Phipps, M. Powell, D. W. R. Preece, H. Pritchard, J. Pritchard, J. A. Pritchard, J. Rao, J. Reed, J. Roberts, E. Stenner, J. Taylor, A. Whitcombe, L. Whittle, S. Williams, J. Winslade, C. Wright and K. Woodland.

Together with:

C. Harry (Chief Executive), D. Street (Deputy Chief Executive), R. Edmunds (Corporate Director Education and Corporate Services), M. S. Williams (Corporate Director Economy and Environment), S. Harris (Head of Financial Services and Section 151 Officer), R. Tranter (Head of Legal Services and Monitoring Officer), N. Taylor-Williams (Head of Housing), F. Wilkins (Housing Services Manager), M. Betts (Tenant And Community Involvement Manager), L. Allen (Housing Services Manager), E. Sullivan (Senior Committee Service Officer) and S. Hughes (Committee Services Officer).

RECORDING, FILMING AND VOTING ARRANGEMENTS

The Chief Executive reminded those present the meeting was being live streamed, and a recording would be available following the meeting via the Council's website – [Click Here to View](#). She advised that decisions would be made by Microsoft Forms.

1. APOLOGIES FOR ABSENCE

Apologies for absence were received from Councillors C. Bishop, S. Cook, S. Kent, S. Morgan, D. Price, R. Saralis, J. Scriven, S. Skivens, C. Thomas and W. Williams.

2. MAYOR'S ANNOUNCEMENTS

The Mayor referred to the engagements and events he had attended since the last meeting of Council and advised Members that he had been very pleased and proud to represent Caerphilly County Borough Council at the Bryn Meadows 10K event, the opening of the

Community Café at Machen RFC and he expressed his thanks for all the hard work by Staff and Local Ward Members. The Mayor attended a special event with Blackwood Rotary Club at the Maes Manor, Blackwood and mentioned the positive feedback he had received from Food Bank organiser regarding the help and advice that had been provided by Caerphilly Cares.

3. TO RECEIVE PETITIONS UNDER RULE OF PROCEDURE 28(3)

There were no petitions received.

4. PRESENTATION OF AWARDS

There were no awards to be presented.

5. DECLARATIONS OF INTEREST

There were no declarations of interest received.

6. SPECIAL COUNCIL HELD ON 23RD FEBRUARY 2023

RESOLVED that the minutes of Council held on 23rd February 2023 be approved as a correct record.

7. COUNCIL HELD ON 15TH MARCH 2023

RESOLVED that the minutes of Council held on 15th March 2023 be approved as a correct record.

8. SPECIAL COUNCIL HELD ON 19TH APRIL 2023

RESOLVED that the minutes of Special Council held on 19th April 2023 be approved as a correct record.

9. TO RECEIVE AND TO ANSWER QUESTIONS RECEIVED UNDER RULE OF PROCEDURE 10(4)

Question received from Councillor B. Miles to the Cabinet Member for Social Care, Councillor E. Forehead.

Can the Cabinet Member for Social Care outline the pressures on Domiciliary Care and what we in Caerphilly CBC are doing to try to meet the demand?

Response From the Cabinet Member for Social Care, Councillor E. Forehead to Councillor B. Miles.

Thank you, Cllr Miles for that very pertinent question. Members will be aware there has been a long-standing pressure on domiciliary care services, this pressure isn't exclusive to Caerphilly and efforts are being made locally, regionally and nationally to try to improve the situation.

I am pleased to be able to advise that the position has improved significantly and currently we have 175 hours of care per week that we are unable to provide for 23 people, only one of whom is in hospital. We have previously had over 1000 hours of care per week we couldn't provide for over 100 people.

Locally we have had targeted recruitment campaigns, using our own staff, produced a video of jobs available, and promoted them heavily on social media, local cinemas and on buses. Staff have also attended all the events fairs, etc across the borough with the employment team to help people complete application forms which has yielded positive results and will be repeated this year.

Staff have also attended schools and colleges to promote social care as a career path and offer work placements. We have also introduced an assessment service to work with individuals to promote their independence and reduce the need for statutory services. This is working well with very positive feedback from clients and their families.

Regionally we are working with colleagues in the 4 other Gwent local authorities to try sustaining the staff in the domiciliary care market, for example, as part of the winter plan, domiciliary care agencies were awarded an additional £1 per hour to be passed on to staff in a variety of ways to reflect the increase in fuel prices.

Nationally we are using the Social Care Wales "We Care" campaign to advertise all our vacancies on their web site. Recruitment and retention continues to remain a high priority for us.

10. TO RECEIVE AND TO ANSWER QUESTIONS RECEIVED UNDER RULE OF PROCEDURE 10(4)

Question from Councillor K. Etheridge to the Leader of Council, Councillor S. Morgan.

To ask the Leader to define, and make a statement on what advice, consultation and engagement he had in with merging the Cabinet Posts of Corporate Services, Property and Highways, under one Cabinet Post and does he feel this will offer best value, effectiveness, efficiency and wellbeing of just 1 Cabinet Member in dealing with such a large portfolio in the interests of Team Caerphilly.

Response from the Deputy Leader of Council, Councillor J. Pritchard on behalf of the Leader, Councillor S. Morgan to Councillor K. Etheridge.

Thank you for the Question Councillor. I'll answer this in the Leader's absence. In merging the Cabinet Posts of Corporate Services, Property and Highways the Leader held discussions with the Cabinet as a whole. As a collective, we keep our approaches under constant review and ensure that any opportunities that emerge that might enable things to be done more efficiently and effectively are always fully considered. The overlaps between aspects of the two portfolios, the tight working relationships across Cabinet together with Cllr George's experience as a long-standing Cabinet Member will ensure that progress continues.

Supplementary Question from Councillor K. Etheridge.

With the merging of Scrutiny Committee's in September such as the Social Services and Education Scrutiny Committee, will you confirm tonight that in the interests of consistency that one cabinet post will be reduced.

Response to Supplementary Question from the Deputy Leader of Council, Councillor J. Pritchard.

Thank you, Councillor Etheridge, and I would refer the Member back to the response given earlier, we have merged Councillor George's portfolio with the portfolio of former Cabinet Member Councillor J. Simmonds as detailed at the annual meeting of Council, therefore the Cabinet posts have been reduced by 1 Member.

11. TO RECEIVE AND TO ANSWER QUESTIONS RECEIVED UNDER RULE OF PROCEDURE 10(4) – TO BE ANSWERED IN WRITING.

Question from Councillor J. Winslade to the Leader of Council, Councillor S. Morgan

Would the Leader provide an update on housing pressures in Caerphilly County Borough?

Response from the Leader of Council, Councillor S. Morgan to Councillor J. Winslade.

The question was answered in writing with the response circulated to all Members following the meeting, following the change in procedure as agreed at the annual meeting of Council.

The operating environment in which housing professionals exist has experienced significant change in recent years and this has led to increasingly more pressure across all the 22 housing authorities in Wales, both stock owning and non-stock owning, with some of the greatest pressure felt in recent times.

The external factors that have led to these over recent years include the macro-economic position which impacts all members of society with the cost of living affecting all. This impacts home owners due to the cost of borrowing and increase in interest rates and monthly mortgage costs, it impacts those landlords that rent their properties to those that can't afford to buy, where they may now think twice about letting the properties due to mortgage costs, reduced number of properties for rent increases the number of citizens that need to access affordable housing, and indeed for those already in housing in receipt of benefits or not, as the cost of everything increases and difficult decisions have to be made to ensure families and lives continue as normal.

We are already seeing increased number of section 21 evictions and increased number of homeless presentations. We have record numbers of applicants on our housing register at 6300 and this is rising. The total number of those accepted as Homeless In Priority Need and Unintentional has increased by 44% over the 12-month period between April 22 to April 23 and we have 5 times the number of families in temporary accommodation in April 23 as we did in April 22. It is in this area that we are feeling some of the biggest pressure and impact of external factors.

Caerphilly Homes are a supportive landlord, but we now see high levels of bad debt. We are not a money-making business, and we don't want to see people evicted to then need assistance through our statutory homeless function. We have created more tenancy support officers to offer advice and assistance so that tenancy can be sustained as opposed to look to evict due to rent arrears.

There are increased presentations due to financial pressures of those privately renting as the cost of private rent across the county borough has increased as it has across Wales, mortgage increases for landlords as mentioned and indeed mortgage default for existing homeowners also impacts.

However, over the last year or more Welsh Government brought in the biggest legislative changes to renting property in 40 years the Renting Homes Wales Act, impacting not only social landlords but private landlords. This gives more rights to the renter, which is in principle a good thing, however the unintended consequences have meant that many private landlords are leaving the sector as legislative change and extra scrutiny coupled with the macro-

economic climate mean that it is not financially or administratively worth continuing to let properties. This means there are more people in need of housing and less landlords that may have provided the council with temporary accommodation to address homelessness, wanting to engage.

This puts much more pressure on finding landlords attracting them to work with the council so that Caerphilly Homes can house our homeless in temporary accommodation. Caerphilly Keys is working well but again becoming more challenging to encourage this partnership work with less interest.

We also have the pressure of the humanitarian crisis in Ukraine and the home office decision to dispersal of asylum seekers across the UK, this means potentially more families in need of affordable accommodation and more private landlords being sought for different political priorities meaning less available properties to address those currently in unsuitable temporary accommodation or indeed at risk of homeless.

Welsh government have given record levels of social housing grant and introduced more flexible grant programmes to support those in unsuitable Temporary Accommodation or at risk of homelessness which really does help but does it go far enough?

We need more new affordable housing built in Caerphilly within Wales and across the UK.

Caerphilly Homes are now building again for the first time in circa 20 years, and we have done a lot of work in developing a pipeline of potential development opportunities to deliver, build, develop, own and manage new homes to increase our housing stock. We are also looking at acquiring available individuals' properties that are coming onto the market largely those that were ex RTB where we have a pre-emption, and this is positive but is only part of the solution. We must access our own land more quickly and more efficiently and put it through the planning system far quicker to ensure more homes, more affordable homes can be built more quickly. We are exploring modern methods construction to speed up that delivery as we need to explore all avenues of delivery. We must build our way out of this housing crisis. This will take a full Team Caerphilly approach to achieve this.

The economic situation also impacts here and creates extra pressure as the viability of certain sites and the cost of delivery means that it is more challenging to make schemes financially viable to deliver this applies to Caerphilly Homes within the HRA and our partners across the RSL sector. Certain sized sites are not deliverable, and they would make a loss and we can't make a loss with the business plan. Certain properties are costing more to build than they can be sold for which is a sure indicator that the market needs adjusting and is broken.

These pressures are felt across our excellent staff, but we have recruitment and retention issues in the sector there was a stat from one of our neighbouring authorities that over the last ten years one of their housing support workers' salaries has increased just £1k in ten years and we wonder why is it difficult to recruit and more importantly retain staff in this critical roles supporting our most vulnerable in our communities.

The recruitment issues are not just here. We are a significant social landlord in the context of Wales we circa 10,700 Homes and there is a lot of pressure to ensure that we maintain these properties to Welsh Quality Housing Standard. The quality of some of our homes needs to improve to ensure we offer the highest possible service to our customers, and this puts additional pressure on a team which is carrying circa 20% vacancy rate due to recruitment and retention challenges. Recruitment continues to be an issue and additional pressure across all sections of the service.

We look to external contractors to assist in maintaining our homes but with less and less taking jobs for existing frameworks so we look to review these now to bring more capacity into the system to ensure we can keep up with all the works required.

There is about to be a new Welsh Housing Quality Standard 2023 issued from Welsh Government which will mean we need to improve the energy performance of all properties over the coming years this will cost a significant amount and will be subject of further debates with the cabinet and council in the future, but it also brings with it a new range of skills required to achieve the decarbonisation solutions to our properties. All of Wales will be needed to reskill and to recruit those with this skill set and this is a pressure that we have to address now collectively across Wales.

Whilst all of this is taken as the operating context of Caerphilly Homes and other statutory housing authorities across Wales, we are still delivering on all our objectives, maintaining stock, building new, working with private landlords, reviewing empty properties to bring them back into use, reviewing our later living and sheltered accommodation.

12. NOTICE OF MOTION – FOSTER FAMILY FRIENDLY EMPLOYER

Consideration was given to the notice of motion presented by Councillor E. Forehead which sought Council support to provide staff that foster children extra support in balancing their work and care responsibilities by offering up to 5 days paid leave to attend training or meetings relating to their role. Employees would also be entitled to additional unpaid time off work to deal with unexpected emergencies, such as welcoming children into their home at short notice.

Members were advised that the notice of motion had been considered by the Social Services Scrutiny Committee at its meeting on the 24th January 2023 and had unanimously supported its recommendation to Council.

Members welcomed the notice of motion and Opposition Members confirmed that they would have been more than willing to formally support the motion had the opportunity to do so been offered, and queried if in the future they might also be included when such motions were being brought forward. The Deputy Leader confirmed that he would be more than happy to work with Opposition Members in this regard.

Following consideration of the notice of motion and having been moved and seconded, by way of Microsoft Forms and in noting that there were 57 For, 0 Against and 0 Abstentions this was unanimously agreed.

RESOLVED that the Notice of Motion be supported.

13. NOTICE OF MOTION – FUEL POVERTY

Consideration was given to the amended notice of motion presented by Councillor C. Andrews. Councillor Andrews outlined the motion and amendment which sought Council support to write to UK Government to pass legislation to prevent energy companies entering people's homes and fitting pre-paid meters, unless asked to do so by the householder concerned. In addition, people should be given the right to have pre-payment meters removed from their home.

Members were advised that the notice of motion had been considered by the Social Services Scrutiny Committee at its meeting on the 21st March 2023 and had unanimously supported its recommendation to Council.

Members fully supported the notice of motion and again expressed the disappointment that it had not been more widely circulated to allow all parties to formally support its proposal.

An addition to the motion was suggested that a letter also be sent to the Senedd to seek their support in writing to UK Government and Councillor Andrews as proposer of the motion accepted the amendment.

Following consideration of the report and having been moved and seconded and in noting there were 57 For, 0 Against and 0 Abstention the amended notice of motion was unanimously supported.

RESOLVED that the amended notice of motion be supported.

REPORTS OF OFFICERS

Consideration was given to the following reports.

14. HOUSING REVENUE ACCOUNT BUSINESS PLAN 2023/23

Consideration was given to the report, which asked Council to consider and take a view on the Housing Revenue Account (HRA) Business Plan 2023/24 and approve an extension to the borrowing cap to £100m.

Members noted that the HRA Business Plan was an annual requirement from Welsh Government (WG) as part of the annual submission of the Major Repairs Allowance (MRA) grant application.

Members also noted that the report had been considered by the Housing and Regeneration Scrutiny Committee on the 27th February 2023 and Cabinet on the 8th March 2023. Members were referred to the consultation section of the report where comments from each were noted.

The impact of unprecedented inflation increases and the volatility within the market in terms of material costs, support and labours costs were discussed and Members acknowledged the significant impact that this could have on new build commitments as well as the ambitious decarbonisation agenda coming forward.

Clarification was sought in relation to Welsh Government's launch of WHQS 2 and Officers confirmed that responses to the consultation were currently undergoing detailed analysis, however one of the biggest changes in the new standard would be around affordable warmth and decarbonisation. Officers advised that until the new WHQS 2 is agreed, published and comes into effect the existing WHQS continues to be the minimum that must be maintained.

Members were assured that WHQS 2 given its significance would be featured heavily at Scrutiny and further reports would be brought forward.

Clarification was then sought in relation to the number of voids in the borough and the expected turn around required to bring them back into use. Officers acknowledged that the level of voids was not as they would like and confirmed that there were currently 131 voids in the borough which was about average for a housing stock of this size, and that the turn around was on average about 10 weeks. This timeframe was entirely dependent on the condition of the property coming back in, as some were in quite a poor condition when returned. Officers confirmed that they were committed to improving this timeframe.

Members expressed concern in relation to the number of privately owned empty properties within the borough and Officers provided an update on the work of the Empty Property Team and confirmed the robust approach being undertaken to bring these back into use. Further clarification was then sought in relation to 'enforced sales' and the length of time this process

took to complete. Officers confirmed that the process did take a long time, however it was a legal process and as such must be followed in a prescribed way. Members were encouraged by the action being taken and that every avenue to contact empty property owners was being explored.

Members sought assurances that more local firms would be involved in the supply chain for the new build programme and Officers explained the social value element of the procurement process, which ensured that this would happen.

Members were pleased to note the support being given to tenants in relation to rent arrears and Officers confirmed that £3m of additional support had been secured to assist tenants to sustain their tenancies.

Following consideration of the report it was moved and seconded that the recommendations contained in the Officer's report be approved. By way of Microsoft Forms and verbal confirmation (and in noting there were 52 for, 0 against and 1 abstention) this was agreed by the majority present.

RESOLVED that: -

1. The comments of the Housing and Regeneration Scrutiny Committee and Cabinet be noted.
2. It be noted that Cabinet considered and approved the 2023/24 Housing Business Plan and its submission to WG by the 31st March 2023.
3. An extension of the HRA borrowing cap to £100m as a result of higher than anticipated inflation to maintain services and to progress with the new build programme be approved.

15. FUTURE OF CAERPHILLY HOMES TASK GROUP

Consideration was given to the report which asked Council to consider and agree the future of the Caerphilly Homes Task Group due to the completion of the Welsh Housing Quality Standard Programme.

Council noted that the report had been considered by the Housing and Regeneration Scrutiny Committee at its meeting on the 27th February 2023 and by Cabinet on the 8th March 2023. Members were referred to Section 10 of the report and the comments contained therein.

The Deputy Leader and Members placed on record their thanks to the tenants that had served on the Caerphilly Homes Task Group for all their hard work and commitment and praised the contributions that they had made throughout.

The part that Tenant Groups might play in relation to void properties was discussed and a Member emphasised the need to push forward with a more dynamic approach in relation to voids, perhaps through a stronger inspection regime. He expressed the opinion that an improvement here, would help to reduce homelessness and those relying on bed and breakfast accommodation. After all the sooner properties were brought back, the sooner they could be let. The Chief Executive acknowledged the concerns raised and confirmed that this would be picked up through the relevant Scrutiny Committee.

Members agreed that that Task Group had outlived its usefulness at the end but sought assurances that tenant engagement and participation would continue. The Deputy Leader referred Members to Section 5.7 of the Officers report which detailed future tenant/contract

older engagement and highlighted the various mechanisms that would be utilised to provide opportunities for tenants/contract holders to have a meaningful and positive impact on the delivery of services, including Tenant Information Exchange, Have You Say Conversation Sessions and Housing Improvement Partnership. The important role that Local Ward Members would play in terms of tenant engagement was also emphasised.

Following consideration of the report it was moved and seconded that the recommendations contained in the Officer's report be approved. By way of Microsoft Forms and verbal confirmation (and in noting there were 54 for, 0 against and 0 abstention) this was unanimously agreed.

RESOLVED that: -

1. The discontinuation of CHTG, for the reasons stated within the report be approved.
2. The CHTG be commended for the contribution it has made towards achieving the Welsh Housing Quality Standard.
3. The various existing and potential new methods to be explored by Caerphilly Homes for engagement with tenant/contract holders now and in the future be acknowledged and approved. Council noted that the proposals for effective and meaningful engagement will enable more tenants/contract holders to have an opportunity to express views and be consulted on the future direction of Caerphilly Homes. Proposals for changing engagement / consultation with tenants will be reported to Scrutiny Committee for consideration, prior to going to Cabinet for approval.

The meeting closed at 18.35 p.m.

Approved as a correct record and subject to any amendments or corrections agreed and recorded in the minutes of the meeting held on 4th July 2023 they were signed by the Mayor.

MAYOR