

RHONDDA CYNON TAF COUNTY BOROUGH COUNCIL

ENVIRONMENTAL SERVICES SCRUTINY COMMITTEE

MINUTES of the meeting held at Rhondda Cynon Taf Headquarters, Clydach Vale on Monday 8th September, 2014, at 5.00 p.m.

Present

County Borough Councillor G R Davies – in the Chair

County Borough Councillors

S Bradwick	S Carter	(Mrs) L De Vet	J Elliott	P Howe
(Mrs) S Pickering	(Mrs) A Roberts	G Smith	M Weaver	T Williams

Officers

Mr N Wheeler – Service Director, StreetCare
Ms J Ellis – Housing Strategy & Standards Manager
Ms C Emery – Housing Options, Homelessness and Supporting People
Manager
Mrs L Davies – Environmental Protection Manager
Mr A Wilkins – Corporate & Democratic Services Solicitor

8. APOLOGIES

Apologies for absence were received from County Borough Councillors (Mrs) J Bonetto, L Langford, (Mrs) M Tegg and M J Watts.

9. DECLARATIONS OF INTEREST

In accordance with the Members' Code of Conduct the following declarations of personal interest were made:-

- County Borough Councillor P Howe – Agenda Item 3 – “I am a Landlord”
- County Borough Councillor G Davies – Agenda Item 3 – “I am a Landlord”

10 ANNOUNCEMENT.

The Chairman commented upon the recent ill health of Councillor J Watts and the retirement of the Group Director, Environmental Services due to ill health and the Committee **RESOLVED** that a letter be sent to both giving the Committees best wishes.

The Chairman also took the opportunity to advise the Committee that the Council has been shortlisted within 3 categories of the Association for Public Service Excellence (APSE) awards in respect of:-

- Best Service Team Highways, Winter maintenance & Street Lighting
- Best Service Team Transport & Fleet
- Best Service Team Street Cleansing & Streetcare.

11. **MINUTES**

RESOLVED to approve the minutes of the Environmental Services Scrutiny Committee held on the 14th July, 2014 as an accurate record, subject to the amendment of the typographical error of County Borough Councillor S. Carter's surname.

REPORTS OF THE GROUP DIRECTOR, ENVIRONMENTAL SERVICES.

12 **AN OVERVIEW OF ACTIVITY IN RELATION TO THE IMPLEMENTATION OF THE BOROUGH WIDE ADDITIONAL LICENSING SCHEME FOR HOUSES IN MULTIPLE OCCUPATION 2014.**

The Housing Strategy & Standards Manager provided Members with an overview of the implementation of the Additional Licensing Scheme within Rhondda Cynon Taf that was approved by Cabinet on the 28th October in 2013 and implemented in April 2014, including key performance and compliance information.

Members were reminded of the previous licensing scheme in place and the work undertaken by the Environmental Scrutiny Committee through a working group and the resulting recommendations by the group in respect of a borough wide additional licensing scheme for HMO's, which were taken forward by Cabinet.

Within the report the Housing Strategy & Standards Manager provided details of the HMOs covered within the new scheme, the license conditions and the current position including key performance information, with the officer advising that since the 1st April, 2014, 79 licenses had been issued under the new HMO licensing scheme.

The Housing Strategy & Standards Manager concluded her report by advising the committee of the future priorities for the service within the area including effective and proactive enforcement and information and communication.

One member queried officers as to whether Charitable organisations were exempt from the additional licensing scheme and the Environmental Protection Manager advised the committee that they were, due to them being listed as exempt from under the definition for HMOs within the Housing Act. The Environmental Protection Manager commented that there would be other regulations that charitable organisations would need to adhere to.

It was queried whether letting agencies were classed as licence holders within the scheme, and it was advised that letting agencies could be a licence

holder, although often they managed the property and the licence would be held by the Landlord.

The number of days taken to issue a licence from receipt of application was highlighted by committee members, and officers were asked whether 167 days a reasonable time frame was. The Housing Strategy & Standards Manager commented that a couple of anomalies had caused the average to rise, and commented that usually the time taken would be between 2 – 3 months. The Environmental Protection Manager commented on the practice of other authorities, where they issue licences first and then complete the process for compliance, but the officer commented on the importance of compliance first for RCT.

Officers were questioned as to the number of landlords that had signed up to the Landlord accreditation scheme and whether the scheme had made a difference. The officers commented that they believed the accreditation scheme did make a difference and spoke of the benefits to both the authority and the landlord.

The Chairman thanked the officers for the detailed presentation and commented on the positive work of the scrutiny working group which recommended implementation of the scheme.

Members **RESOLVED** to Note the content of the report and the progress made in implementing the 2014 Additional Licensing Scheme for Houses in Multiple Occupation.

13 AN OVERVIEW OF THE COUNCIL'S CURRENT HOUSING ALLOCATION SCHEME, ITS IMPLEMENTATION SINCE 2012 AND PROPOSED FUTURE POLICY CHANGES.

Through the aid of a PowerPoint presentation as well as a detailed report the Housing Strategy & Standards Manager, along with the Housing Options, Homelessness and Supporting People Manager provided the Committee with information regarding implementation of the council's Housing Allocation Scheme that was approved by cabinet in January 2012 and implemented in October of that year and the current review being undertaken of the scheme and the proposed future changes.

Members were provided with the background to the scheme and the recent review undertaken to ensure whether the scheme was being adhered too, that it was meeting the housing need effectively, meeting the needs of the housing associations that are part of the Common Housing Register and enabling them to let their vacant properties effectively, and ensuring that the IT system was enabling the scheme to be administered efficiently. The offices also advised that it was also necessary to review the scheme in the context of the Welfare Reform Bill, as it was too early for the effects to be fully known when the scheme was launched in October 2012.

The Housing Strategy & Standards Manager advised of the issues identified following the review and the resulting policy change proposals which would be going forward to Cabinet in October for decision. The Committee were provided with a brief outline of the proposals and their intended impact which were:-

- Changes propose to the way that the Housing Allocation Scheme is delivered through the Common Housing Register
- Changes proposed to the Housing Allocation Scheme
- Reduction of the number of bands
- Removing the process of reduced priority from within the scheme
- Reduce the number of refusals of offers of accommodation by applicants from three to two
- Tenants with no housing need who just 'want' to transfer are not eligible for a transfer unless they have been a tenant for at least 12 months or they have a housing need.
- Allow applicants to underlet properties following an affordability assessment
- Pregnant applicants will not automatically receive an additional bedroom
- Change the assessment of type and size of accommodation to be in line with DWP assessment
- Move on applicants to awarded Band A instead of Band B
- Applicants with minor barriers within the home
- Remove banding targets from the scheme
- Applicants with savings over £50,000 will be able to join the register but will be placed into Band D
- Armed forces
- Disrepair will only be in band A where there is prohibition order
- Band C additional category for applicants who have to share facilities with other households and where they do not have a tenancy agreement
- Changes to priority given for under letting.

The officers concluded their presentation by advising Members that effective implementation of a fit for purpose Housing Allocation Scheme is critical to ensure the sustainable and efficient allocation of social housing, assist in building balanced communities, ensure an equitable and efficient process is experienced by service users and discharge the Councils statutory responsibilities in this regard. It was added that subject to the decision by Cabinet, the recommended changes proposed to the Housing Allocation Scheme would ensure that this continues to be the case in RCT and would improve the customer experience of applying for and being offered social housing of their choice.

Members queried the response from the Housing Associations in respect of the proposed Choice Based Letting and the Housing Strategy and Standards Manager advised members that the associations were happy to fully support

the new way forward as they felt this would also benefit them and saw the benefits with transparency of the system.

One member commented on the issues of non compliance of tenancy agreements through tenants anti social behaviour and queried how this was addressed. The Officer commented on the partnership work taken to address this complex issue and the introduction of an 'Eligibility panel', although it was reaffirmed that such incidences of potential exclusions needed very careful consideration, commenting on the Authority's duties in respect of homelessness.

Members commented positively on the potential introduction of the Choice Based letting, commenting that this would assist in the management of individual expectations and the importance of transparency. Members also commented that such choice based letting would hopefully allow applicants to live in an area where they could settle and enjoy, although they were aware that the problem in respect of lack of suitable properties being available in an applicant's desired area would still be an issue.

Members of the Committee also commented on the issue of rent arrears and queried if this impacted upon an applicant's eligibility on the register. Officers advised that applicants in rent arrears would not be eligible for a property unless they illustrated some effort to reduce the arrears, with the officer continuing to advise of pre payment plan options.

The Chairman concluded the discussions by commenting on the positive proposed changes to the Housing Allocation Scheme and welcomed the future policy change.

The Committee **RESOLVED** to note the contents of the report.

14 EMPTY PROPERTIES IN RHONDDA CYNON TAF

The Environmental Protection Manager provided the Committee with a report and PowerPoint presentation in respect of the empty property issue within Rhondda Cynon Taf and the measures available to the Council to reduce the impact of long term vacant properties on Communities and to bring them back into occupation.

Members were advised that in April 2013 there were approximately 3083 properties that had been empty for 6 months, with 53% of these being empty for less than two years, 16% over 5 years and 9% vacant for over 10 years. In April 2014 there was an increase of 9.5% in empty properties, which was attributable to transactional empties that owners remain unable to sell in the current market.

The Environmental Protection Manager provided a brief overview of the Council's role in tackling the issue of empty properties including enabling reoccupation through financial incentives and enforcement powers. Details in respect of performance monitoring were also provided.

The officer concluded her presentation by advising that returning long term vacant properties to use is a key strategic priority for the Council and partners, as set out in the Single Integrated Plan. It was added that a range of approaches are currently available to achieve the Council's aim although challenging housing markets and areas of low housing demand can adversely impact on the ability of the Council to secure sustainable re-occupation of properties.

Members commented on the issue of empty properties within the county borough and it was **RESOLVED** that a working group be created to look at the matter in more detail.

15 WORK PROGRAMME FOR THE ENVIRONMENTAL SERVICES SCRUTINY COMMITTEE FOR 2014/15.

The Scrutiny Support Officer provided the Committee with an overview of the report which advised members of the work programme to be taken forward for the Committee for the 2014/15 Municipal Year. Members were advised that there was one addition from the previous draft version submitted to the July meeting and this was in respect of a request received to consider the bee population. It was also advised that the date set for the November committee meeting was the 10th November and members were reminded that the work programme was a fluid document and could be amended to reflect changing priorities, if needed.

Members commented in agreement with the proposed work programme and **RESOLVED:**

- a) to note the content of the report;
- b) to agree the work programme as set out at appendix 1.

16 SCRUTINY COMMITTEE PRE-MEETINGS.

The Corporate & Democratic Services Solicitor updated the Committee on the work of the Overview and Scrutiny Committee's Working Group, set up to consider the findings and recommendations of the Wales Audit Office report "Good Scrutiny? Good Question!" and their initial recommendation in relation to scrutiny pre-meetings.

The Committee were advised that the working group considered the issue of 'pre-meetings' at its inaugural meeting and its recommendation into the introduction of pre-meetings at future scrutiny committees along with

recommendations for best practice were endorsed by the Overview and Scrutiny Committee.

Members considered the introduction of pre-meetings before the commencement of future committee meetings and the benefits it could bring in respect of key lines of enquiry.

The Committee **RESOLVED** to:-

- a) Note the information provided
- b) Agree to the introduction of full committee member pre-meetings as set out within the report, when felt necessary.

Cllr G Davies
Chairman

The meeting closed at 18:40pm.

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