

RHONDDA CYNON TAF COUNTY BOROUGH COUNCIL

HEALTH & WELLBEING SCRUTINY COMMITTEE

Minutes of the meeting of the Health & Wellbeing Scrutiny Committee held at the County Borough Council Offices, The Pavilions, Cambrian Park, Clydach Vale on Wednesday, 8th February, 2017 at 5 p.m.

Present

County Borough Councillor R.W.Smith – in the Chair

County Borough Councillors

A.Calvert
W.J.David
C.Davies
A.S.Fox
G.Stacey

In Attendance

County Borough Councillor C.J.Willis – Scrutiny Performance Management
Coordinator

Officers

Mr.G.Isingrini – Group Director, Community & Children’s Services
Mr.C.B.Jones – Director, Legal & Democratic Services
Mr.P.Mee – Service Director, Public Health & Protection
Mr.P.Howells – Head of Community Housing
Ms.L.Davies – Head of Environmental Health, Trading Standards & Community
Safety
Ms.J.Parry – Trading Standards Manager
Ms.K.May – Head of Democratic Services

36 APOLOGIES FOR ABSENCE

Apologies for absence were received from County Borough Councillors (Mrs.)M.E.Davies, I.Pearce, (Mrs.)S.Rees, (Mrs.)A.Roberts, (Mrs.)M.Tegg, L.Walker and D.H.Williams.

37 DECLARATIONS OF INTEREST

RESOLVED – that in accordance with the Members Code of Conduct, there were no personal interests made at the meeting pertaining to the agenda.

38 MINUTES

The minutes of the meeting of the Health and Wellbeing Scrutiny Committee held on the 18th January, 2017 were circulated at the meeting and the Chair

adjourned the meeting for five minutes to give Members the opportunity to read them. **RESOLVED** – to approve as an accurate record the minutes of the meeting of the Health & Wellbeing Scrutiny Committee held on the 18th January, 2017.

39 MATTERS ARISING

With reference to Minute No. 35(4) of the meeting held on the 18th January, 2017, the Chair informed Members that representatives of OPAG (Older Person's Advisory Group) and the appropriate Cabinet Members had been invited to the next meeting of this Committee which had been brought forward to Wednesday, 15th March, 2017 instead of the 22nd March, 2017.

40 PRE SCRUTINY: DISCRETIONARY EMPTY PROPERTY GRANTS ACROSS RCT

The Committee received Mr.P.Howells, Head of Community Housing who commenced his presentation by reminding Members of the report that was presented to the Council meeting on the 10th March, 2016 by the Cabinet where following a review of the reserves which was undertaken by the Section 151 Officer during the Autumn of 2015, post audit and sign off of the Statement of Accounts for 2014/15 which enabled £10.150M to be released and invested in Council priority areas. In light of the additional resources, the Cabinet were of the view that the best use of these one off resources was to invest in the infrastructure and to support these aspirations and priorities one of the specific areas to support this was to provide more affordable homes thus contributing to the anti-poverty priority.

It was agreed by full Council on the 10th March, 2016 that the reserves and underspend released would be used to fund the investment priorities as set out in the report of the Cabinet and as presented thereat, which would be incorporated into the Capital Programme and Revenue Budget as appropriate. One of the investment priorities was Empty Property Grants as it was felt that returning empty properties into use has a significant positive impact for the community by providing valuable accommodation but also improving the street scene and enhancing the neighbourhood's environmental and social conditions. As at the 1st April 2015 there were 2,577 known empty properties in the County Borough. Over the last three years the combined work of the Housing teams in Public Health and Protection had brought back into use 293 properties through direct action, loan or grant aid. An additional investment of £1.500M to further support these strategies was agreed as it would have a significant positive impact on this County Borough wide issue (and would support the scrutiny review of Empty Properties as reported to the Health and Wellbeing Scrutiny Committee on 20th January 2016).

The Head of Community Housing stated that following a report that was presented to Cabinet on the 19th April, 2016, approval was agreed to £1.5m over two years in respect of the proposal to deliver a discretionary empty property grant across RCT, the principle purpose being to bring long term empty properties back into use.

With the use of PowerPoint slides, the Head of Community Housing reported on the Eligibility Criteria for such grants:-

- Properties must be in RCT and have been empty for more than six months
- The grant will only be available to potential owner occupiers and they must live in the property for five years after the grant has been paid
- Applicants are required to make a contribution of 15% up to a maximum of £3k

In response to a query raised by a Member, it was reported that there is discretion to waive the applicant's contribution in exceptional circumstances and also residing at the property for five years could also be waived.

It was reported that as of the 2nd February, 2017, 143 application forms had been issued and 18 grants had been approved to the value of £274k and 47 properties had been surveyed and were awaiting approval to a potential value of 771k. Therefore the total number of grants approved and surveyed was 65 with a potential value of £1m.

As referred to in the report that was presented to Council in March, 2016 the added value of this investment priority would be to stimulate regeneration and as outlined in the presentation would also give opportunities for first time buyers to get on the housing ladder and also contracting opportunities for local small builders.

In response to a further query made by a Member in respect of the Council's website needing to be strengthened to ensure that information in respect of the grants available are publicly known; the Head of Community Housing reported that a new website is soon to be launched and other marketing such as social media, visits and leaflet drops to all estate agents in RCT was also being undertaken.

Following the review that was undertaken by this Committee in respect of Empty Properties, Members still had concerns on the number of empty properties within RCT, when it was reported that the grant complements other approaches/products that are available including Houses into Homes Loan Scheme and that the number of properties that had been brought back into use in 2015/16 was 144 and for 2016/17 the target is 170 with that figure increasing in 2017/18 which would assist greatly in the Welsh Government's national target of 5000 empty properties being brought back into use during the current administration.

Following consideration of the information provided by the Head of Community Housing, it was **RESOLVED** – That Cabinet be informed that Members of the Health and Well-being Scrutiny Committee were satisfied with the progress that was being made in respect of the administration of the Empty Property grants system which has linked into the wider Empty Property Strategy and therefore assisted in the reduction of empty properties

throughout RCT which should be further improved by the launch of the new website in the near future.

REPORT OF THE GROUP DIRECTOR, COMMUNITY & CHILDREN'S SERVICES

41 TRADING STANDARDS – PROTECTING VULNERABLE PERSONS

In his report, the Service Director, Public Health & Protection updated Members on the following four aspects of the Trading Standards role that protect vulnerable consumers:-

- Doorstep Crime
- Age Restricted Sales and Illicit Tobacco
- Anti-Counterfeiting
- Scams and Safeguarding

At the meeting, Ms.J.Parry, Trading Standards Manager gave her detailed observations on the four aspects listed above and with the aid of PowerPoint slides dealt with each area under the following sub-headings:-

Doorstep Crime

- **No Cold Calling Zones** – areas within Tonteg, Porth and Llantrisant were used whereby notices were erected and stickers displayed on properties stating “no cold calling – don't buy it” which aided in the reduction of cold callers and where people felt more confident in sending doorstop sellers away and felt safer in their homes.

In response to a query raised by a Member, it was reported that Charities are excluded from the `no cold calling zones`. In November, 2015, RCT Trading Standards set up a Facebook page and with just one notification of someone knocking doors selling knives reached 20,000 people raising awareness through social media has been met with positive results.

Age Restricted Sales and Illicit Tobacco

- It was reported that 25% of people in RCT smoke and that the highest rate was in the most deprived areas which contributes to poverty through loss of income, loss of productivity, disease and death.
- The cheap tobacco market in Wales accounts for 19% of tobacco consumption with 15% being illicit and are purchased from private addresses, pubs/clubs, shops and street sellers.
- The Trading Standards Manager reported that the Council was actively involved in the new Community Alcohol Partnership (CAP) which was launched in Porth in November, 2016 and is a part of the Welsh Government initiative to support areas in Wales in tackling the problems caused by underage drinking and the resulting harm to local communities such as anti social behaviour.

Anti-Counterfeiting

- Members were informed that anti-counterfeiting no longer consists of poor standard music or clothing but other items such as foodstuffs and pharmaceuticals and those experiencing financial vulnerability may become unwilling victims of counterfeiting, purchasing from whom they believe is just a cheaper supplier.
- Sales of counterfeit goods through the use of social media is also monitored by Trading Standards and are involved in national multi-agency operations which may result in website `take-downs` as well as investigation and resolution in courts.

Scams and Safeguarding

- The Trading Standards Manager reported on the systems that were in place to try and alleviate postal and telephone sales scams victims as once a person becomes a scam victim they risk being targeted and scammed again, as their details are sold on to other scam companies. One such system to address this issue, is the installation of call-blocking units in the homes of the most vulnerable persons that are identified as scam victims

In conclusion, it was reported that Trading Standards has an important role in protecting vulnerable persons and disadvantaged communities and not only have to keep up to date with changes in legislation but changes in tactics used by unscrupulous traders. Therefore, Officers individually and the team as a whole are continually innovating and searching for new ways of operating which will provide the best outcome to support both reputable traders and the consumers of Rhondda Cynon Taf.

Following consideration of the information provided prior to and at the meeting, it was **RESOLVED** –

1. To note the contents of the report and the presentation;
2. To note that Members were satisfied with the information provided and therefore did not wish to scrutinise in greater depth any matters as reported at the meeting.

**R.W.SMITH
CHAIRMAN**

The meeting closed at 6.15 p.m.