

MONMOUTHSHIRE COUNTY COUNCIL

Minutes of the meeting of Adults Select Committee held at Council Chamber, County Hall, The Rhadyr, Usk, NP15 1GA on Tuesday, 23rd January, 2018 at 10.00 am

PRESENT: County Councillor S. Howarth (Chairman)
County Councillor (Vice Chairman)

County Councillors: L.Brown, M.Groucutt, J.Pratt, R. Harris,
R. Edwards and S. Woodhouse

Also in attendance County Councillor(s): V. Smith

OFFICERS IN ATTENDANCE:

Julie Boothroyd	Head of Adult Services
Wendy Barnard	Democratic Services Officer
Paula Harris	Democratic Services Officer
Karen Durrant	Private Sector Housing Manager
Steve Griffiths	Strategy and Policy Officer
Cath Sheen	Safeguarding Officer
Carley Norval	Accommodation Assistant
Lindsay Stewart	Private Sector Housing Project Officer

APOLOGIES:

County Councillors L.Dymock and P.Pavia

1. Declarations of Interest

There were no declarations of interest.

2. Public Open Forum

No members of the public were present.

3. Empty Homes Update

Purpose:

The purpose of the report is to update members on the current position of empty properties in Monmouthshire and the approach being adopted to tackling this issue historically and for the future.

Recommendations:

To consider the extent and impact of Empty Homes on Monmouthshire and local communities and the current approach being taken to reduce Empty Homes.

Key Issues

1. Tackling empty properties is an area of social policy prioritised by Welsh Government for a number of reasons, including:

- They could be a source of accommodation for people in housing need providing they are situated in the right areas and at the right price, either to buy or rent.
- Also they are a source of accommodation that could alleviate issues of homelessness, another policy area prioritised by WG.

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- They can have a detrimental effect on the community in which they are situated if they have been left to deteriorate, for example, vandalism and vermin infestation.
 - Owners, as potential landlords can be regarded as small businesses and, if in receipt of a rental income, could be contributing to the local economy.
2. Although prioritised by the Welsh Government, the issue and problems associated with empty properties can vary from one local authority area to another. This is also true of the work undertaken by various local authorities in the work they undertake to bring their long term empties back in to use.
3. Work was undertaken by both Environmental Health and Housing on the condition of Monmouthshire's empty properties during 2013 – 15 and March 2017 through a programme of inspections. The conclusion of that work found that the issues associated with long term empty properties does not exist in any meaningful way in which their return would contribute to points highlighted in 3.1 above. The properties inspected were, particularly, not to be in a poor physical condition.
4. Informed by the Environmental Health condition inspections, the key conclusions are:
- Monmouthshire does not have an empty property issue in the traditional sense as typified by headline news of rows of empty and dilapidated houses causing environmental issues.
 - A typical empty property found in Monmouthshire can be characterised as being:
 - Owned by family members;
 - refurbished for the owner to occupy;
 - sound condition and having no negative impact on its immediate environment;
 - often don't lend themselves for affordable housing for various reasons such as often being in rural areas or to be too large and would command a high rent value putting it far outside the parameters of what constitutes affordable housing.

Member Scrutiny:

The Officer introduced the report and provided an update that the number of empty properties for 2016/17 was 696 explaining that the authority works with about 500 of those. The remainder are RSLs, a number are private retirement homes and other homes are subject to probate. The Principal Environmental Health Officer explained the role of his service in dealing with empty properties from an enforcement viewpoint.

The Head of Planning Policy and Place Shaping addressed the return of empty properties to use and provided reassurance that, whilst there is no simple solution, appropriate tools are used where possible. Viable ideas and suggestions from Members were welcomed.

Following presentation of the report, questions and comments were invited:

In response to a question about the performance indicator, it was confirmed that there is a 6 month Council Tax exemption on empty properties rising to 100% after that time. Empty houses represent a low percentage of the total Council Tax paying houses in the county. The amount of Council Tax lost was not known noting that the position can change daily.

It was questioned if the authority could consider placing a premium on the Council Tax levied on properties that are empty for a substantial period of time.

A Member commented that, in some rural areas, there are empty homes that could be used to house local people and questioned if it was possible to make contact with owners. In these circumstances, it was confirmed that the properties may not be known and, if notified, a letter can be sent offering assistance. A questionnaire for empty home owners is planned to explore

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what can be done to bring the properties back into use. Officers welcomed any information from Members on empty properties within their ward areas.

A Member questioned collaboration with Brecon Beacons National Park regarding planning to develop accommodation for young people. It was added that it is difficult to find tenants in some areas as there are no buses. The Head of Planning Policy and Place Shaping responded that the Committee has influence over its LDP and planning policies, and has a good relationship with the RSLs. The Council will approach the National Park on specific cases as necessary to e.g. to promote affordable housing.

Regarding loans, it was queried if the short repayment timescale had a bearing on the reduced take up. It was responded that the 2/3 year loan period is likely to be changed to 5 years by Welsh Government. It was suggested that a loan over 5 years works out at approximately 3.1% APR which is quite competitive but there are cheaper loans available so it is important that the applicant checks it is right for him/herself.

Committee Conclusions:

The Adults Select Committee scrutinised the report and update on empty homes and were in agreement with the recommendation as presented. The Committee was satisfied with the approach taken to reduce the numbers of empty homes in the county and supported Option 3 - To continue with the nature and scope of the work currently being undertaken by Housing & Communities.

The Officers were thanked for their helpful responses and contribution to this subject.

4. Gypsy and Traveller Pitch Allocation Policy

Purpose:

To seek approval for the introduction of the Gypsy and Traveller Pitch Allocation Policy for any future Council owned Gypsy and Traveller Site in Monmouthshire.

Recommendations

To recommend to Cabinet that the Council adopt the proposed policy with immediate effect.

Key Issues:

1. An initial draft of the report was considered by the Committee on the 25th October 2017 for initial consideration and comment prior to it going out for consultation.
2. The Committee requested that the report be reconsidered after the consultation period ended.
3. Consultation was undertaken with members of the Gypsy and Traveller Accommodation Assessment Project Group that was formed specifically to oversee the drafting of the Council's Gypsy and Traveller Accommodation Assessment (GTAA).
4. The consultation ended on the 15th December with one comment received.

Member Scrutiny:

The Head of Planning Policy and Place Shaping presented the report. Following this, Members were invited to make observations:

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The Chair asked if a site is earmarked in the LDP within the LA boundary or neighbouring authority. It was confirmed that Welsh Government policy is strengthening on identified need. A recent study identified the need for some pitches in the county. This point will be considered in the next LDP review. The most recent GTAA revealed that all respondents stated a preference for a privately owned site.

It was commented that there is growing communication with people looking for sites.

The Committee received the proposed Gypsy and Traveller Pitch Allocation Policy and, whilst recognising that there are no council owned sites currently available in the county, were happy to recommend that Cabinet and Council adopt the policy as presented.

The Officers were thanked for their participation.

5. Safeguarding Performance

Purpose:

This purpose of this report is:

- To evaluate the progress of Monmouthshire County Council's key safeguarding priorities, in the period April – October 2017, using identified measures to highlight progress, identify risks and set out clear improvement actions and priorities for further development.
- To inform Members about the effectiveness of safeguarding in Monmouthshire and the work that is in progress to support the Council's aims in protecting children and adults at risk from harm and abuse.
- To inform Members about the progress made towards meeting the standards in the Council's Corporate Safeguarding Policy approved by Council in July 2017.

Members received this report at Council on 14th December 2017 however there had not been the opportunity for the report to be scrutinised by Adult Select Committee prior to Cabinet and Council. The report was scrutinised by CYP Select on 13th November 2017.

Recommendations:

Members are requested to:

- Note the key safeguarding risks and approve the priority improvement actions as set out at Appendix 2 to this report.
- Endorse the evaluation of safeguarding progress set out in Appendix 5 to this report.

Key Issues:

This safeguarding evaluation is based on activity and information from April 2017 – October 2017. It builds upon the previous progress review reported in March 2017. The timing of this report reflects a biannual reporting cycle to Select Committees, Cabinet and Council. This reporting period saw the approval of Monmouthshire County Council's Corporate Safeguarding Policy which extended the policy scope to cover statutory duties for both children and adults at risk in line with the Social Services and Well Being (Wales) Act (2014).

The analysis within this report reflects current legislation and policy and draws on data and information concerning both groups.

1. Good Governance:

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It is recognised that good progress has taken place in regard to previous recommendations made in regard to the Councils Senior and Directorate level. Changes at Regional Board level and within National Policy will require a continued planned response.

2. Safe Workforce

Whilst recognising that Safe Recruitment processes are well embedded, a new corporate roll out of the SAFE audit's across the Authority has been completed. This has highlighted the significant Safeguarding Training programme to ensure the authority is compliant with the Revised Corporate Policy.

3. Preventative Approach

The new focus on the development of a Preventative agenda has led to increased partnership working with developing within Community Hubs and within the Community itself. Changes and ambiguity under the SSWA have changed the responsibility and accountability within early support services, and this developing work will need to link carefully within the authorities statutory responsibility.

4. Robust Protection

The Safeguarding Processes have been embedded within Child and Vulnerable Adult protection for a long time. Within Children's Services the ongoing agenda of change has created a good time in which to review current CP processes and procedures, and to ensure staff understand the requirements and expectations of their role and task. Further to this, where pressures both internally and externally are identified safe practice must be supported by a clear infrastructure of Risk Management Frameworks, clear procedures, models and tools. The creation and development of joint Adult and Children's Safeguarding teams/Unit allows opportunities to consider how best to identify opportunities for "joined up" work and models of working together prior to the revised All Wales guidance for both Vulnerable Children and Adults.

5. Safe Services

Whilst there has been an established approach to contract monitoring in commissioned services for some time, this is no doubt where future understanding of how we scrutinise and Quality Assure commissioned services will develop most.

Member Scrutiny:

The Head of Adult Services and Corporate Safeguarding Programme Lead introduced the report noting that it has already been considered by Children and Young Peoples Select Committee (with Adults Select Committee invited), Cabinet and Council. This is a collaborative report by a number of authors. Members were advised that there is no Appendix 5.

It was commented that the report is difficult to read and understand with no clear overall responsibility. It was commented that a lot of measures have been undertaken but improvement is not necessarily visible. It was responded that the corporate approach is broad and overarching. The wider context of the report is how to disseminate to other services effectively.

It was queried why the report had not been seen by Adults Select Committee prior to Council and Cabinet, and responded that this was due to timing issues. The Committee was reminded that there was an invitation to Adults Select Committee to attend Children and Young People Select Committee when the report was considered. A Member requested an A4 sheet with a synopsis of the main points for all reports to committees.

A Member challenged the self-evaluation score of 16/30 on 5 areas and if this is matter of concern. It was responded that context and proportionality was important plus the identification

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of what good looks like. Self-assessment scores are relative and must be proportionate and realistic within context. The scores identify where there are problems or systems that need to be improved. The Member was reassured by the answer provided. It was queried if the self-evaluation is annual and explained that there will be a 6 monthly update provided.

A Member commented that more needs to be done for new members e.g. speed reading courses and provision of skills to read and pick out salient points. A Member requested an A4 sheet with a synopsis of the main points for all reports to committees.

Reassurance was sought regarding commissioning of services and responded that this has been an area of enquiry for the whole authority safeguarding group to ensure a robust approach to contracts and that safeguarding is entrenched. It was explained that work is ongoing and an update on compliance across the council will be provided in May.

It was queried if there are shared self-assessment criteria with other authorities to ensure accurate comparison with other councils. It was responded that it is solely self-assessment for Monmouthshire at the current time.

The Chair questioned why Elected Members were not DBS checked apart from those who are school governors. It was explained that Monmouthshire is the only council in SE Wales to check all governors, adding that there is no legal requirement for Elected Members to be checked under the criteria set by the Home Office. Only those persons in regular unsupervised contact with children or vulnerable adults are required to apply for a DBS disclosure check. It was also added that it is possible to have a portable DBS certificate instead of multiple certificates.

The importance of preserving the personal safety of elected members was emphasised.

Committee conclusions:

The Select Committee welcomed the opportunity to scrutinise the report and requested that more thought is given to the presentation and format of reports on adult and children's safeguarding. It was recommended that all elected members should receive future reports on safeguarding.

6. Melin Private Leasing Scheme

Purpose:

This is a follow up to the report received by the Committee on 12th September 2017 and advises that the Council's contract with Melin Homes to manage the Private Leasing Scheme (PLS) will end in June 2018. The report updates the Committee on the due diligence findings and considers the options for the future scheme management. The report also provides an update on Welsh Government temporary accommodation funding and its relevance to the PLS.

Key Issues:

1. Under the Housing (Wales) Act 2014, the Council has a duty to both respond to homelessness and to prevent homelessness. The Act also provides the power to discharge the associated duties into the private rented sector. Strengthening prevention activity is an on-going priority, including engaging with private landlords to enable access to private accommodation as a key option for the Council to discharge its homeless duties and minimise over reliance on social housing and the need to utilise bed & breakfast.

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2. A PLS has operated for over ten years. It was initially established due to the lack of social housing and supports the Council to discharge its statutory duties and helps to minimise bed & breakfast use. The PLS was transferred to Melin Homes in 2009 under contract, which ends in June 2018. A decision now needs to be made about the future of the PLS and the Council is actively preparing for the end of the contract and undertaking a process of due diligence. Melin no longer wish to

manage the scheme, in part, due to Welfare Reform changes. Of relevance is the Department of Work & Pensions decision from April 2017 to remove the ability to claim a £60 pw per property temporary accommodation management fee subsidy, through housing benefit. Welsh Government have replaced with additional Rate Support Grant.

3. Although the Council continually seeks to access private rented opportunities, the ability to deliver the required number of properties is limited for a number of reasons including:

- Homeless applicants typically are low income households and in receipt of benefit. Lettings agencies and landlords are often reluctant to accept households on benefit.
- Many households cannot afford to meet local rents and upfront private sector costs.
- Vulnerable households are often perceived, often incorrectly, as a risk to landlords
- Some households with complex needs are difficult to accommodate in any sector

An update was provided that since the report was compiled, the forecasted overspend of £127,000 has reduced to £98,000. The projected overspend in 2018/19 has reduced from £229,000 to £150,000. For 2018/19, this is due to properties reducing e.g. going back to landlords and not being returned to Monmouthshire. A review of house share properties leading to their re-designation to hostel status means that a management cost can be charged, covered by housing benefit and will provide income. It was added that the Minister is due to announce that authorities that lost out from the removal of the management fee will be reimbursed for 2016/17 only and this should reduce pressure on budgets for this year.

Member Scrutiny:

A Member asked what standards a person housed in a hostel could expect and also queried the length of stay. In response, it was clarified that hostels are based on the shared housing stock. There are 16 residential units which have been checked by Environmental Health. The properties are used as long term accommodation and prevent homelessness. They are mainly for single persons with family accommodation available in Monmouth. It was explained that there are shared bathroom and kitchen facilities, and locks on individual doors. In response to a question, it was confirmed that shared accommodation is only for single persons.

A Member asked how UC (Universal Credit which has been put back to June) will affect interaction with landlords. It was confirmed that its introduction will impact on the team managing house share. The team will work with Department of Work and Pensions to get benefits paid to us direct for more vulnerable individuals. It was explained that UC payments are very slow which makes management of rent accounts harder. The situation is being monitored. Concern was expressed at the possibility that anyone on UC was automatically in rent arrears.

A member asked for further information about the decrease in housing stock due to some landlords not proceeding and asked how the shortfall will be dealt with. It is projected that Monmouthshire Letting Service (MLS) properties, which are currently being advertised for, will make up the shortfall plus the housing register. The Officer is monitoring properties returning to owners, tenants, bids, looking for alternative accommodation options and offering other practical help e.g. with bonds etc. Initial feedback regarding MLS is that landlords are interested.

A Member questioned the approach to empty properties noting that whilst many are family or second homes, some are just empty. It was queried if there was a way to liaise with the owners to bring these properties into use. It was confirmed that twice yearly liaison (Letter drops) is

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undertaken to ascertain if there is a willingness to work with the Council and to offer assistance. It was suggested that an advantage of the removal of the bridge tolls is that more people may be persuaded to sell their empty properties.

It was queried how other authorities deal with homelessness and confirmed that most use the same schemes and practices. Regular network meetings are held to share best practice e.g. MLS and how extra funding will be utilised. It was added that all authorities attempt to engage with the private rental sector but that Monmouthshire is struggling more than most because of property prices. It was suggested that Elected Members could assist in advertising for new landlords in e.g. ward newsletters.

The Chair asked about arrears from the previous landlord and it was confirmed that these will be handed back to the authority if not settled. It was estimated that this would be in the region of £4,000. It is hoped that Melin will deal with them before the handover.

A general point was made about freezing the headings of columns of information in reports so they are available on each page for ease of reading.

Committee conclusions:

The Committee was satisfied, through responses from Officers, that the Private Leasing Scheme supports homelessness and that the council's homeless related duties are discharged appropriately. It was assured that the authority has suitable options for meeting its responsibilities for the ongoing provision of the PLS as part of the Council's temporary accommodation portfolio, as per the requirement of the Housing (Wales) Act 2014.

The Adults Select Committee was in favour of Option 1 that the PLS transfers back to the Council and the PLS is maintained, certainly in the short term and that this view is reported to Cabinet with a recommendation that other options are identified to continue to strengthen homeless prevention and/or facilitate new housing options that would help to provide alternatives to the PLS, that the authority works with Melin to end the contract by June 2018, implements the process of due diligence particularly concerning rent arrears and property condition , and facilitates TUPE regarding 1.6 wte Melin staff.

7. Adults Select Forward Work Plan

The Adults Select Committee Forward Work Plan was noted.

8. Council and Cabinet Work Plan

The Council and Cabinet Work Plan was noted.

9. To confirm the date of the next meetings as Thursday 8th February 2018 at 10.00am (Special Meeting) and Tuesday 20th March 2018 at 10.00am.

The meeting ended at 12.10 pm

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