

MONMOUTHSHIRE COUNTY COUNCIL

Minutes of the Joint Meeting of the Adults and Strong Communities Select Committees held at County Hall, Usk on Wednesday 8th July 2015 at 10.00 a.m.

PRESENT: County Councillor P.S. Farley (Chairman)

County Councillors: R. Chapman, D. Dovey, A. Easson, R. Harris, M. Hickman, S.G.M. Howarth, P. Jones, V.E. Smith, A. Webb, S. White, K. Williams and A.M. Wintle.

ALSO IN ATTENDANCE:

County Councillor G. Burrows

CO OPTED MEMBERS

D. Hudson
D. Hill

OFFICERS IN ATTENDANCE:

H. Ilett	-	Scrutiny Manager
I. Bakewell	-	Housing and Regeneration Manager
K. Beirne	-	Chief Officer, Enterprise
D. Hill-Howells	-	Head of Community Led Delivery
R. Davies	-	Head of Revenues and Benefits
K. Durrant	-	Private Sector Housing Manager
N. Perry	-	Democratic Services Officer

ALSO IN ATTENDANCE:

Michele Morgan	-	Assistant Director, Monmouthshire Housing Association
David Morris	-	Director of Housing and Communities, Monmouthshire Housing Association
Kathryn Edwards	-	Corporate Director, Charter Housing
Justin Wigmore	-	Director, Melin Housing
Tom Broadhead	-	Community Development Lead, Melin
Sherril Thomas	-	Housing Solutions Manager

1. ELECTION OF CHAIR

We elected County Councillor P.S. Farley as Chairman.

2. APOLOGIES FOR ABSENCE

Apologies for absence were received from County Councillors R. Edwards and S. Jones.

**Minutes of the Meeting of the Adults and Strong Communities Select
Committees dated 8th July 2015 - continued**

3. DECLARATIONS OF INTEREST

The following declarations of interest were received:

- County Councillor S. White declared a personal, non-prejudicial interest as a Board Member of Monmouthshire Housing Association.
- County Councillor V.E. Smith declared a personal, non-prejudicial interest.
- County Councillor A. Wintle declared a personal, non-prejudicial interest as a Director of Monmouthshire Housing Association.
- County Councillor A. Webb declared a personal, non-prejudicial interest.

4. JOINT HOUSING SOLUTIONS SERVICE

Context:

We received, for scrutiny, a report to update Members on the delivery of the joint Housing Solutions Service with Torfaen County Borough Council. The proposal was in support of the implementation of the Housing and Communities Medium Term Financial Plan project mandate.

Key Issues:

The agreed model had been implemented on a pilot basis for one year, from 2nd March 2015.

The focus of delivery of the proposal had been the creation of a Housing Solutions Team and a Private Sector Housing Team.

Changes necessary to deliver the new service were being implemented alongside changes necessary to ensure requirements of the Housing (Wales) Act 2014 relating to homelessness prevention were met.

Member Scrutiny:

Members were advised that the Prisoner Release Funding from Welsh Government was for the joint partnership not Monmouthshire County Council alone.

Members questioned where private landlords were working with local letting agents, who would be responsible for clients should there be problems. In response we heard the letting agents would be responsible but they could be referred to the Housing Solutions Team. Support would be provided to clients for as long as necessary.

A Member queried if the Authority would establish its own letting agency. The Housing and Regeneration Manager explained that this was an option and key

Minutes of the Meeting of the Adults and Strong Communities Select Committees dated 8th July 2015 - continued

discussions would be necessary with Torfaen County Borough Council. As the team was still in a set up stage it was not an appropriate time.

A Member raised concerns with regards to accommodation and increasing requirements, and questioned if work had been undertaken to identify potential empty properties. We were advised that officers had contacted the owners of a number of empty properties in the County, but usually received negative responses. Often properties were waiting to be sold or part of estates. It was suggested that the loan facility available was not attractive to empty property owners.

A Member suggested looking at empty factory units as opportunities for development. The Housing and Regeneration Manager welcomed all suggestions and informed the Committee that there were ongoing discussions to identify new buildings. Officers were wary that big buildings may result in many young people in one building.

In response to a question regarding Bed and Breakfast facilities, were heard that generally chains, such as Premier Inn, were not used, unless absolutely necessary.

With regards to the disposal of assets, we were informed by the Head of Community Led Delivery that alternative uses would be considered. Departments were given the opportunity to bid on assets before being put to the open market.

In response to a query regarding the sustainability of the scheme, we were informed that as resources stood the service would be able to continue and there was scope to bring in further income.

We were informed that as of October 2015 a Landlord Registration Scheme would be in place where private landlords could apply, for a fee, to have their property included on a housing register.

The Chief Officer for Enterprise addressed the Committee to explain that with regards to sustainable efficiencies the budget gap for next year stood at £6,000,000. A challenge for housing, moving forward, was how to move to become self-sufficient. Areas to be considered as ways to create extra income could be shared lodgings, private lettings, Careline and our own property development.

Recommendations:

Members were recommended to note and comment on the content of the report.

**Minutes of the Meeting of the Adults and Strong Communities Select
Committees dated 8th July 2015 - continued**

Committee's Conclusion:

Chair's Summary:

The Chairman advised that Economy and Development Select Committee would look at the assets portfolio in further detail.

Members would welcome further reports on the progress and development of the service at a future meeting.

Congratulations were expressed to all officers concerned, and it was recognised that the service undertook a continuous process of change.

The Chairman agreed to address agenda item 4iii and would defer agenda item 4ii to the end of the agenda.

5. MONMOUTHSHIRE HOMESearch HOUSING REGISTER: POLICY CHANGE AND DELIVERY UPDATE

Context:

We received a report from the Housing and Communities Manager in order to propose minor amendments to the Housing Allocation Policy to meet the requirements of the Housing (Wales) Act 2014 and to provide a delivery update.

Key Issues:

Since the establishment of the current policy there had been a number of enhancements introduced to improve delivery, including:

- Introduction of a welcome pack.
- The option of telephone interviews for applications and bidding.
- Engaging with non-bidding applicants.
- Enhanced information for clients.
- Streamlined business processes.

Earlier this year the Council undertook an independent health-check of the register and its administration. The health-check identified recommendations for further improvement, which would be considered in a full review later in the year. Proposals would be presented to Adults Select Committee at a future meeting.

Members Scrutiny:

A Member raised concerns regarding the banding process for tenants of private landlords. It was queried if the Authority would ease the process for people moving.

Minutes of the Meeting of the Adults and Strong Communities Select Committees dated 8th July 2015 - continued

In response we were informed that the changes being proposed did not cover the banding processes. The issue of the private sector would be discussed under a wide ranging review between MCC, Melin, Charter Housing and MHA. It was noted that the Options Team received many queries regarding the disadvantages of the private sector.

Concerns were raised regarding the targets set on delivering affordable homes. We heard that the issue was an ongoing process and officers were working with Estates to identify opportunities.

It was noted that there would be an extended session on the issue at Strong Communities Select on 16th July 2015.

Recommendations:

The report recommended that Members:

- Recommend to Cabinet that the policy amendments be approved.
- Note the contents of the report and receive a presentation providing an overview of the housing register.

Committee's Conclusion:

Chair's Summary:

The Chairman noted that the amendments had been described as small, but in a highly complex area. The Committees noted the contents of the report.

The Committees resolved to recommend the policy amendments to Cabinet, but wished to note that:

- Further discussions should be conducted with planning regarding affordable housing.
- Further development of the policy with regards to the ability to move between bands.

6. DISCUSSION ON WELFARE REFORM AND ANTI-POVERTY

We welcomed visitors from Monmouthshire Housing Association, Charter Housing and Melin

We received a presentation from the Head of Revenues and Benefits outlining the preparations being undertaken by Monmouthshire County Council for the introduction of the Universal Credit benefit.

Minutes of the Meeting of the Adults and Strong Communities Select Committees dated 8th July 2015 - continued

Universal Credit had been introduced in April 2015 in Torfaen, and would be introduced for single claimants in Monmouthshire from 21st September 2015. Universal Credit aims to simplify the benefit system and to make work pay, increasing work incentives for those unemployed or working part-time.

From 21st September 2015 single jobseekers in Monmouthshire would have their housing costs met through Universal Credit. It was estimated that 15 claimants in Monmouthshire, per month, would be affected by the introduction of Universal Credit.

Following the presentation, guests were invited to comment, during which time the following points were noted:

Monmouthshire Housing Association

MHA considered Universal Credit to have potential to impact negatively on them as a business and housing provider. We were informed that 53% of tenants were in debt, 63% were worried about bills and 11% could not pay bills. It was a concern that Universal Credit would need to cover the whole benefit and tenants may struggle to manage the benefit efficiently.

With regards to the bedroom tax there had been a reduction of tenants affected, but tenants were still struggling to manage.

In MHA 56% of tenants were of working age, of which around 1000 were in employment, which left 470 who were classed as unemployed. MHA provided a Way Into Work Scheme, working with tenants providing a 6 week training package to help people become work ready. Through the scheme MHA had helped 20 tenants to get back into work, 7 of whom were affected by the welfare reform. However, this could present a different set of challenges, such as further arrears.

MHA were hoping to build the Work and Skills Wise Programme into people's claimant commitments.

MHA described a good relationship with Monmouthshire County Council, and informed the Committee there had been significant numbers of attendance at recent job fair events. Also, 29 people had found employment through the MCC Way into Work Scheme.

A Moneywise scheme provided advice to those affected by the welfare reform, which made a significant difference to families. Gaps needed to be identified to develop the resources.

There were concerns surrounding delays in people receiving Universal Credit payments due to communication issues. Discretionary Housing Payments were also a concern for future discussion.

Charter Housing

Charter Housing described a similar picture to Monmouthshire Housing Association.

Minutes of the Meeting of the Adults and Strong Communities Select Committees dated 8th July 2015 - continued

Charter Housing had been part of a demonstration project for direct payments of Housing Benefit in Torfaen, involving around 100 tenants. There had been issues surrounding rent arrears, showing a 300% increase at one point.

Preparations were being undertaken in order to help tenants manage the new system. It was expected that 120 tenants would be in receipt of direct payments by August 2015. It was proving to be a labour intensive exercise, but was beneficial for a smooth transition.

We heard that it was considered that some tenants should not receive direct payments as it was inappropriate. It was hoped that the payments would be paid direct to the landlord.

There were concerns surrounding the business costs, and the ability to produce more homes.

Melin

We heard that Melin had started the journey in June 2010 when the reform was introduced, and there were ongoing concerns regarding the effect the reform would have on the business. Initially there had been a team of 4 people collecting rent, which had now increased to 9 people, including 3 full time people providing financial advice to tenants. Last year, within Monmouthshire, the team had worked with 282 residents and managed to retrieve over £190,000 in unclaimed benefits on behalf of tenants.

The main areas of covered were the Bedroom Tax and the benefits cap. 34 people within Monmouthshire were affected by the Bedroom Tax. There were concerns surrounding the benefits cap as Melin operated the private sector leasing for homeless people.

There had also been a rise in the use of food banks. Melin had distributed 71 food parcels within Monmouthshire last year.

Of the resident base, 487 people were expected to be affected by Universal Credit. There were concerns of how best to inform people without causing alarm.

Members were invited to comment, during which time the following points were noted:

- It was questioned what the effect would be in six months. It was expected that there would be Universal Credit claims in Monmouthshire. Budget proposals were expected to affect the benefits cap, and may take effect prior to April. There were concerns surrounding the removal of benefits from young people aged 18-21. There were concerns that families with more than 3 children would suffer under the benefits cap.

**Minutes of the Meeting of the Adults and Strong Communities Select
Committees dated 8th July 2015 - continued**

- Regarding the application for Universal Credit and the length of time waiting for applications to be agreed, arrears of payments was a concern. It was noted that the DWP electronic links in place were failing due to a lack of administrative support.
- Members requested further information on the number of food banks across the County.
- Concerns were raised regarding the waiting time of payments being issued and how it would affect the private sector. There were concerns where people would turn if they were negatively affected, eg. doorstep lenders, pay day loans. It was questioned how Registered Social Landlords intended to cope with the increasing demands in the future. We heard that with intensive work up front many people would adjust and cope. There were, however, people who would need constant help. Charter Housing had increased the amount of wider support. Effort needed to be focused on more vulnerable people.
- We heard that RSLs were committed to providing homes for vulnerable people.
- There were concerns surrounding the housing market and what it held for young people.
- It was questioned if the direct payments would have staff or cost implications to RSLs. It was confirmed that there was no administrative cost saving as there was still a need to provide support for Universal Credit. There was a criticism that clients did not get the choice on how they could receive the payments.
- With regards to the private sector, it was questioned if the Authority had plans were in place for people released from prison. In response, we were informed that there was a need to expand opportunities, as RSLs did not have the capacity to meet increasing demand. The reinvestment in the structure of the Housing Options Team meant that there would be more staff available to develop opportunities in the private sector. Part of homeless prevention was to facilitate access into the private rental sector.
- A Member wished to acknowledge how fortunate the County is to have the Housing Associations, who go far beyond their remit.
- It was noted that direct payments had been introduced in April 2008 as part of the Local Allowance arrangements.
- It was suggested that Job Centre Plus should attend One Stop Shops in order for people to access information.
- It was questioned if there was a potential of competition for the same territory, and if more could be done for the services to unite on a broader front. It was

Minutes of the Meeting of the Adults and Strong Communities Select Committees dated 8th July 2015 - continued

confirmed that there were partnerships within Monmouthshire, also the Gwent Reform Welfare Partnership, including the 5 Authorities and 9 RSLs.

Committee's Conclusion:

Chair's Summary:

The Chairman expressed thanks to the guests at the meeting.

The Committee acknowledged that the Authority were fortunate to have forward thinking, pro-active RSLs and were impressed with the engagement between themselves and the Council.

It was noted that encouragement should be made to engage with the Job Centre system.

It was noted that the Authority should have a pro-active representative

Concerns would be raised at a meeting of the Gwent group regarding the Welfare Reform.

7. HOMELESS PREVENTION IMPROVEMENTS AND HOUSING (WALES) ACT 2014 PRIORITIES

Context:

Members received a presentation and report in order to advise the Committee about the homeless prevention requirements of the Housing (Wales) Act 2014 and the steps being taken to meet the requirements of the legislation which came into effect on 27th April 2015. The report updated Members on prevention related activity, performance, and baseline information including feedback from clients about the former Monmouthshire Housing Options service.

Key Issues:

The improvement of homeless prevention had been a priority of the Council for a number of years. The scrutiny of related activity had been a feature of the Committee's workplan, and was particularly relevant since prevention became a statutory duty on 27th April 2015.

Preparing to implement the new legislation had been a focus for the Council and had resulted in establishing the joint Housing Solutions Service with Torfaen County Borough Council.

Minutes of the Meeting of the Adults and Strong Communities Select Committees dated 8th July 2015 - continued

The implementation of the new duties presented an ongoing challenge to the Council, particularly in context of ongoing demand and the permanent and temporary accommodation supply issues, which had resulted in bed and breakfast use.

Members Scrutiny:

Members questioned if we could expect to see a rise in homelessness as a result of the welfare reforms. In response we were informed that the restructure and the merging of the Housing Team would maximise the number of options available in order to provide support. Also developing relationships in the private sector would be beneficial.

It was queried if we would stand to lose collateral through the system. It was explained that private landlords would want to minimise risk and maximise rent. We work closely with private landlords to minimise risks. There was a fund available to provide flexible payments private landlords.

It was queried if there was a specific area of people who presented as homeless. It was confirmed that there was not a particular area of people, but there were difficulties for young, single people. Going forward, aspirations were to identify people willing to take in lodgers.

Recommendations:

Members were recommended to:

- Receive the presentation providing an overview of the homeless prevention statutory duties and updating on homeless prevention related performance.
- Use the report and the associated indicators to scrutinise whether services were being delivered in line with expectations and were contributing to agreed outcomes.

Committee's Conclusion:

Chair's Summary:

The Committee resolved to accept the report.

The Committee agreed to accept that services were being delivered in line with expectations, and noted there were ongoing areas needing attention.

The Chairman expressed thanks to Members of both Committees for their attendance.

The meeting terminated at 13.15pm.