
CARE SCRUTINY COMMITTEE
28/03/2019

PRESENT: Councillor Eryl Jones-Williams (Chair)
Councillor Dewi Wyn Roberts (Vice-chair)

Councillors: Menna Baines, Elin Walker Jones, Olaf Cai Larsen, Alan Jones Evans, Dafydd Owen, Annwen Daniels, Beth Lawton, Angela Russell, Anwen J Davies

Officers: Gareth James (Members' Manager - Support and Scrutiny), Rhonwen Jones (Member Support Officer).

ALSO IN ATTENDANCE:

In relation to item 5 on the agenda: Councillor Craig ab Iago (Cabinet Member for Housing, Leisure and Culture), Aled Davies (Head of Adults, Health and Well-being Department), Arwel Wyn Owen (Senior Housing and Well-being Manager), Rhys Alun Williams (Housing Strategic Officer).

1. **APOLOGIES:** Councillor Peter Read.
Condolences were extended to Councillor Linda Ann Jones following her bereavement. It was understood that Councillor Rheinallt Puw had resigned from the Care Scrutiny Committee; it was a matter for the Plaid Cymru group to appoint a member to replace him.

2. **DECLARATION OF PERSONAL INTEREST**

Councillor Cai Larsen (Board of Cartrefi Cymunedol Gwynedd).

3. **URGENT ITEMS**

No urgent items were received.

4. **MINUTES**

The Chair signed the minutes of the previous meeting of this committee held on 31 January, 2019 as a true record.

5. **Draft Housing Strategy:**

Background:

The Senior Housing and Well-being Manager, Cabinet Member for Housing, Leisure and Culture and Housing Strategic Officer gave an update on the report, requesting members to consider the content of the strategy further, before the document was submitted before the Full Council for formal adoption.

The context was that the Housing (Wales) Act 2014 made it mandatory for every local authority to draw up a Housing Strategy for their area every five years. The Housing Strategy was an opportunity to identify the factors that influenced the demand for housing and to outline the Council's priorities and how it would seek to achieve the strategic objectives as a local authority.

The Strategy's intention was to set the framework to ensure that the Council focussed on the correct priorities to provide homes for the people of Gwynedd and make the best use of scarce resources to improve the provision across the County. This meant that the Housing Strategy offered a golden opportunity to make a difference over the coming years; in order to take full advantage, the Strategy would need to be a live document and respond to the various opportunities arising. The consensus was to collaborate closely with the Housing Associations and other Partners to monitor progress and modify the priorities.

There had been an opportunity to discuss some of the priorities and development plans of the Housing Strategy with members of the Informal Care Scrutiny Committee on 31 January 2019; those comments had been considered when developing the content of the strategy and elements had been modified.

The Chair asked the officers to explain the headings within the strategy and gave members an opportunity to make their observations.

The following main points were highlighted during the discussion:-

- Considering the cuts within the Council, would this cause difficulties to the Housing Strategy?
- On what grounds did Housing Associations sell property at auctions, what was the difficulty in refurbishing these houses so that they reached an acceptable living standard?
- Empty houses - the planning department objected plans on empty properties, in line with what recommendations did they base the decisions of the system?
- Tax payable on empty houses in Gwynedd, questioned this time-frame and whether it was realistic?
- The pattern of the location of empty houses in Gwynedd - problematic areas needed to be defined
- The challenge facing the youth of today such as employment - young people needed a trade (joiner, electrician, builder, plumber). Third Sector - Bangor Homelessness Hub?
- Waiting list - how many applications were on the list, what was the turnover of the applications?
- Understanding of affordable housing.
- Local authority building plan?

The Head of Adults, Health and Well-being, Housing Officers and Cabinet Member elaborated on the above points in turn, emphasising that this was the Council's Strategy, with contributions from the Housing Associations who shared our vision for the future.

Sub-standard property - Housing Associations:

Unfortunately, with a section of Housing Associations' properties, stock needed to be sold if it cost more to refurbish it than it would to build from scratch.

Another reason was that the family size pattern had changed, which prevented Associations from offering the property on the grounds of state rules. Therefore, it was better to sell them so that the money was invested in building houses that are genuinely needed and which comply with the needs of our vision.

Empty Housing Scheme in Gwynedd

Gwynedd had the highest number of empty houses in Wales, with the majority located within rural areas and a lower proportion in urban areas.

Reducing the number of empty houses in the private sector was key in order to contribute to identify affordable housing for local people.

A property that was empty for a long period of time was a wasted resource.

Four-hundred houses were out of the system in Gwynedd due to their inhabitable, dilapidated condition.

By working in partnership with private landlords, we would continue to give grant assistance to improve the standards of empty properties; subject to offering the property at a local housing rent allowance level or less, and allocate to local people; as a result, the property could be refurbished and returned back to use with assurance of an affordable rent for a five-year period.

Another scheme offered interest-free loans to motivate landlords to improve and upgrade the standards of their property. Landlords who received assistance would have to commit to offering property of high standard and to let property at an affordable rent for a specific period.

Grant assistance was also offered to first-time buyers to renovate empty houses to a living standard.

In terms of **the payable taxes** a discussion would be needed with the Finance Section, along with a response. At present, a period of one year was permitted in order to make the property habitable. It was questioned whether a period of one year was sufficient in order to renovate houses? It was suggested that six months should be added to the window for first-time buyers.

In terms of **planning** permission on the empty houses, the difficulties arising from the Planning Department and Snowdonia National Park were challenging. The departments themselves were the only ones with the ability to respond.

It was expressed that the waiting lists were based on the assessment of need, in accordance with the Well-being of Future Generations Act.

In response to the point raised, from the 2,000 on the waiting list, with a turnover of new applications every year within the register, it was possible that the numbers that were genuinely in need of housing could be higher.

It was noted that the increase in the list for a property was a reflection of the possibility of factors relating to tax credits in general, along with private landlords leaving the market, which placed a strain, and increased further those who genuinely needed a house.

The Housing Strategy sought to identify the need to do something about the problem. It was noted that the department would be working in the hope of improving the situation and being more ambitious, and investing more to resolve the problem.

The Head of Adults, Health and Well-being gave assurance that they would aim to meet the need for housing for the people of Gwynedd.

Affordable Housing:

It was emphasised that discussions with the associations regarding the Strategy document on affordable housing had taken place and that we were of the same opinion regarding the vision on how to move forward, bearing in mind that this document was our strategy as a Council.

In a number of communities it was very difficult, if not impossible, to find suitable property under £140,000. In some communities seven times the average income was required to buy property.

Challenge - Lack of Tradespeople:

A challenge facing us in addressing the annual shortfall was the lack of tradespeople to build houses. This lack of tradespeople had meant substantial delay and an increase in costs in some schemes over the last few years.

The challenge was exacerbated by the fact that it was not possible to train young tradespeople within the Council. The officers agreed that Gwynedd was aware of the deficit and that it was an item to consider at the Education and Economy Scrutiny Committee in the main. There was a need to consider how to encourage these providers to offer apprenticeships. It had to be borne in mind that the main point of the meeting was the Housing Strategy and how to facilitate and meet the genuine need of the people in Gwynedd to have homes that met the specific requirements.

The Senior Housing Manager added that there were opportunities for the workforce in Holyhead at present, which offered training for young people on creating modular houses, namely a pilot scheme by Cartrefi Conwy. The Council had to monitor this to see whether it would be successful, it would then be possible to develop in other areas to respond to the challenge of training young tradespeople.

The Cabinet Member was asked whether it would be possible to consider establishing a company to build houses for young people in the areas of Gwynedd. In response, it was noted that in order for this to be achieved, members would need to support the direction of the Strategy submitted to the committee as it would offer an opportunity to open the door to the creation of an additional option, and the best way of achieving the needs of the Housing Unit.

The Cabinet Member said, in general, that the comments supported the strategy that would be taken forward to the Council in July. It was noted that the strategy would not return to scrutiny, however, the comments of the members would be considered. Members were asked to send any other observations on the strategy to the Members' Manager - Support and Scrutiny.

Hub Services:

Some ideas were noted along with the need for services that combined the work of the Health Board and Care, including an element of Housing. The matters and comments came from housing partners, with the Health Board mainly promoting. These services were better if they were located within the community. The department felt that it would better placed in the centre of the City of Bangor, ideas which reflected the needs of the people within the communities in Bangor and the provision available to them. It was early days and this, along with the benefits within the strategy, would need to be considered during the coming year. A challenging plan from a financial perspective, but from packaging it correctly, it should be a plan that scored highly with support from various sources.

Hafod y Gest Figures:

It was noted that the Hafod y Gest figures were yet to be received. The comprehensive figures could be seen once the units had completed them. An analysis would be submitted once an update would be available.

Matters raised:

The Chair, on behalf of the committee, asked to acknowledge their gratitude to Councillor Gareth Roberts following his retirement as the Cabinet Member for Adults, Care and Health. The Members' Manager - Support and Scrutiny agreed to send a note of thanks to him.

The Members' Manager - Support and Scrutiny expressed his gratitude to Councillor Eryl Jones-Williams for his work as the Chair of the Care Scrutiny Committee over the past two years.

RESOLVED:

- Gratitude was expressed for the draft Housing Strategy and the Housing Department was asked to address the observations of Members in taking the draft Strategy forward to the Cabinet or Council.
- The Members' Manager – Support and Scrutiny was asked to take forward the discussion regarding council tax to the Finance Department.
- To consider conducting a Scrutiny Investigation in the field of Empty Houses.

The meeting commenced at 10.15am and concluded at 12.00pm.

CHAIR