CARE SCRUTINY COMMITTEE 21/09/17

Present: **Councillor Eryl Jones-Williams - Chairman**
Councillor R. Medwyn Hughes – Vice-chairman

Councillors: Annwen Daniels, Anwen J. Davies, Alan Jones Evans, Siân Wyn Hughes, Elin Walker Jones, Linda Ann Wyn Jones, Cai Larsen, Beth Lawton, Dafydd Owen, Rheinallt Puw, Peter Read, Dewi Wyn Roberts, Elfed P. Roberts and Angela Russell.

Officers: Aled Davies (Head of Adults, Health and Well-being Department), Gareth James (Member Support and Scrutiny Manager) and Glynda O'Brien (Member Support Officer).

Also in Attendance:

For Item 4 / 5 below:

Councillor Craig ab Iago, Cabinet Member for Housing, Leisure and Culture
Arwel Owen, Senior Manager, Housing and Well-being
Carys Fôn Williams, Housing Manager – Supply and Enforcement
Susan Griffith, Homelessness and Housing Support Manager

Apologies: Morwenna Edwards (Corporate Director)

Councillor Cai Larsen was welcomed to his first meeting of the Care Scrutiny Committee as a successor to Councillor Selwyn Griffiths, who had given up his seat on the Committee due to work pressure. The Chairman paid tribute to Councillor Selwyn Griffiths for his support and contribution to the work of this Scrutiny Committee as well as his commitment as Champion for Older People over the last few years.

1. DECLARATION OF PERSONAL INTEREST

(i) The following members declared a personal interest in item 7 on the agenda - Health Provision in Blaenau Ffestiniog, for the reasons noted:-

- Councillor Siân Hughes - as she was employed by Betsi Cadwaladr University Health Board
- Councillor Elin Walker Jones - as she was employed by the Betsi Cadwaladr University Health Board
- Councillor Dafydd Owen - as his daughter was employed by Betsi Cadwaladr University Health Board
- Councillor Rheinallt Puw - as he was employed by Betsi Cadwaladr University Health Board

The members were of the opinion that they were prejudicial interests, and they withdrew from the meeting during the discussion on the item.

(ii) Councillor Dewi Wyn Roberts declared a personal interest in item 7 on the agenda - Health Provision at Blaenau Ffestiniog, noting that his daughter was employed by the Betsi Cadwaladr University Health Board.

The member was of the opinion that it was not a prejudicial interest, and he did not withdraw from the meeting during the discussion on the item.

(iii) Councillor Linda Ann Wyn Jones stated that she would not declare a personal interest this time in Item 7 - Health Provision at Blaenau Ffestiniog as she had let herself and the people of Blaenau Ffestiniog down at the extraordinary meeting of this Scrutiny Committee that took place on 4 September 2017.

2. URGENT ITEMS

No urgent items were received.

3. MINUTES

The Chair signed the minutes of the previous meeting of this Committee, that took place on 13 June 2017, as a true record.

4. HOMELESSNESS

(a) The report of the Cabinet Member for Housing, Leisure and Culture on homelessness in Gwynedd was presented.

(b) The Senior Manager for Housing and Well-being gave the background to the report and noted that homelessness was one of the Council's statutory responsibilities as set out in the Housing (Wales) Act 2014. Changes to homelessness legislation were welcomed and these had come into effect and allowed cases to be open for a much longer period. However, there was more workload on officers and although some transitional grant funding had been received this would end on 31 March 2018 and the Government had not committed to any subsequent grants thereafter. It was emphasised that without transitional funding the service would not have been able to cope with the changes or have so many successful outcomes with homelessness prevention. In addition, it was noted that there were changes on the horizon in the welfare benefits system that would impose a burden on the service and following the commissioned work, reference was made to the main findings of this research work.

(c) The service was facing a number of challenges as a result of legislative and benefit changes and it had identified that demand had increased and the forecast was that it would continue to grow. It was therefore crucial to consider how the service would respond to ensure the sustainability and ability of the service, and how to manage future expenditure.

(ch) On a positive note, it was stated that in 2015/16 Gwynedd was the best in Wales in terms of the percentage of homelessness prevention, however this would decrease this year due to the loss of one member of staff.

(d) Members were given an opportunity to ask questions and the officers responded as follows:

(i) There had not been an increase in the number of people referred to bed and breakfast accommodation,however, they had stayed there for a longer time. Nevertheless,

the service had managed to support them within the budget. An assurance was given that the service tried to avoid placing families with children in bed and breakfast accommodation. At all times they sought to retain individuals where they were by negotiating with the landlords. By increasing council tax on second homes, it was trusted that the money could be re-invested in this area to supply for the needs of the individuals.

(ii) The Homelessness and Housing Support Manager was requested to send information to the Members Manager as follows:

- How many people were referred to bed and breakfast accommodation
- Are they individuals / families / young people / male / female
- The costs of the above

(iii) Regarding houses leased by private landlords, rent was paid at the same rate as the local housing allowance.

(iv) That the cases were from across the County and included rural towns and villages.

(v) Regarding how the Council was preparing for the changes in the benefits system, it was noted that the service was:

- seeking to ensure that individuals were aware of the changes
- ensuring that all property developments were suitable
- collaborating with the Empty Homes Unit and the private sector housing
- giving people advice.

(vi) In light of the fact that there was an increase in the number of cases, it was noted that there was additional pressure on staff to find accommodation, especially considering that only a small stock of housing was available. with a specific time-schedule to deal with the cases. It was further noted that the main increase was single people.

(vii) It was ensured that the Service collaborated closely with jails, Probation Service, Housing Associations, however, there was a little more work to be undertaken to have a more robust structure in place to collaborate with the Health Board.

(viii) That approximately 95% of the cases were from Gwynedd citizens and not from people from outside the County.

(ix) In the context of young people of 16 years old who were in receipt of benefits, it was noted that the percentage of cases was not high and there was a specific responsibility to cooperate with Social Services. It was also noted that there was strong cooperation with GISDA.

(dd) During the discussion regarding the proposals to address the concerns of the Service about the significant challenges to provide accommodation for homeless people in Gwynedd in the future, the following points were highlighted:

- Would it be cost effective for the Council to look at its own buildings and to adapt these as accommodation for the homeless
- Look into building on land that becomes available and cooperate with Housing Associations

In response to the above, it was explained that discussions were being conducted with Housing Associations, however, it was anticipated that the difficulty with house building

schemes would be the time-schedule for the houses to be ready, and only a small number of houses were currently being built.

The Head of Adults, Health and Well-being added that the problem of a lack of provision was not unique to Gwynedd. It was proposed to submit a report to the Council's Cabinet drawing attention to the financial elements and whilst accepting that there would be changes afoot in the future, they had to try and be as proactive as possible.

Resolved: (a) To accept, note and thank the officer for the report and acknowledge that the service was facing additional pressure as a result of legislative changes and changes in the benefits system.

(b) To request that the Head of Adults, Health and Well-being Department conveys the wish of this Scrutiny Committee to establish a strong structure with collaboration between the Council and the Betsi Cadwaladr University Health Board for people with high needs discharged from hospital into the community where accommodation and support resources had by now disappeared.

(c) Investigate the possibility of getting more suitable houses for the needs of homeless people such as:

- **Consider property in the Council's ownership to be transformed as accommodation.**
- **Building new houses on land that become available**

5. EMPTY HOUSING

The report of the Cabinet Member for Housing, Leisure and Culture on homelessness in Gwynedd was presented which referred to several schemes to assist house owners to make the best use of their property.

It was reported that the Housing Service had succeeded in bringing 455 houses back into use and, as a result, managed to accommodate 915 people in Gwynedd that had enabled individuals to stay in their communities.

A slide presentation was shown giving a visual taste of some of the problematic houses in the towns/villages of Trawsfynydd, Maentwrog, Llan Ffestiniog, Penygroes, Bryncrug, Dolgellau, Caernarfon, Llanbedr, Bangor, Nefyn, Llandwrog and Tywyn.

Regarding the continuation and future of the funding available, it was noted that the Council in terms of the capital programme had invested and attracted funding from other sources. It was trusted that additional money received from the increase in Council Tax on second homes could be re-invested to bring empty homes back into use.

Individual members highlighted the following main points:

(i) It was asked if it was possible to bring an enforcement case referring specifically to a house in Llan Ffestiniog that had been in a dire condition for many years and had caused considerable concern to nearby residents.

(ii) In response, the Housing Manager – Supply and Enforcement outlined the powers available to the Council and noted that it was possible to bring an enforcement case against the property owner, if the property affected the structure of the house next door. In this specific case there was no structural impact on the neighbouring house. It was further noted that discussions on the house in question had been on-going for many years with

officers from the Snowdonia National Park and the Local Member was encouraged to discuss the matter further with Park officers as the Housing Unit did not have powers to resolve the matter.

In terms of investments to house owners, it was noted that it was not necessary for them to undertake a means test and that the investment was not to buy houses, but was rather to make improvements and to bring empty homes back into use. It was further noted that a means test could lead to a situation that would slow down the work of bringing empty houses back into use as landlords would make quite a substantial investment themselves in renovation costs. The empty house would be part of a leasing scheme for a period of 5 years, or would be available to people on the Council's waiting list or Social Services clients.

(iii) It was asked what were the targets and how success would be measured? A further comment was made that the interest rates were approximately 8 / 9 % in 2008 which was a favourable policy at the time but had the figures decreased?

In response, the Housing Manager – Supply and Enforcement explained that there were two types of loans - one was internal and the other was on behalf of the Welsh Government. There was a great deal of demand for the loan and the service had changed recently with the pay back time extended. It was confirmed that the scheme had been levelled out as interest rates had decreased.

The Senior Housing Manager added that when the scheme commenced they had managed to bring approximately 10 houses a year back into use, however by now the outputs had increased but the funding had remained the same.

(iv) In response to how much money it was anticipated that would come back from the Council tax premium on second homes, the Head of Adults, Health and Well-being noted that it was difficult to predict what the additional income would be, however, he and the Housing Service would present information for the consideration of the Cabinet Member to support re-investment in empty homes to bring them back into use. However; he noted that they had to be realistic bearing in mind that all Council services would face cuts and savings.

(v) In terms of the administrative fee, it was noted that it was the individual who received the loan which would be paid either beforehand or on the loan and it would be recycled for more investment.

(vi) In response to an enquiry regarding why the condition of empty houses were worse in Gwynedd, the Housing Manager – Supply and Enforcement noted that the Service had created a questionnaire approximately 9 years ago and a number of responses were received and reasons such as that people had inherited houses, had retained them because of sentimental reasons and their condition had deteriorated; others had bought houses and did not have sufficient money to repair them to a suitable condition. The Senior Manager, Housing and Well-being added that many houses in Gwynedd had been built prior to 1919 and these had deteriorated in slate industry town communities and another factor was depopulation in some areas of Gwynedd.

(vii) Bearing in mind that the average income level was low in some areas of Gwynedd, it was asked why the Council could not build houses and implement a rent to buy scheme. It would then be possible for the Council to receive rent and Council tax and consequently gave young people a chance to be able to live locally.

In response, it was explained that it was possible to implement the above and the service had discussed with a housing association (Cynllun Tai Lleol Gwynedd) to develop sites in

Gwynedd (Waunfawr, Penygroes, Llanllyfni, Bethesda, Llanuwchllyn). Also, that the government operated a buying scheme where it was possible to buy a percentage of a house and individuals could own between 60/70% and rented the rest. The Council would have to invest at a huge scale but the resources were not currently available.

(viii) It was asked if the methodology for identifying empty houses and perhaps the opportunity to have a more thorough system with the Planning Department, played a specific role to bring empty shops back into use.

In response, the Head of Adults, Health and Well-being noted that there was a role for the Planning Department to contribute but not to lead and it should be ensured that the planning system / housing service worked side by side.

(ix) It was noted that there was no list of empty houses available to be shared with Community/Town Councils in accordance with the Data Protection Act, however, permission was received to share the list with Elected Members and any information about empty houses in their wards that were not on the list would be welcomed.

To conclude, the Cabinet Member for Housing, Leisure and Culture noted that it was evident that there was a need for more houses to avoid homelessness and it was necessary to continue with the work on 1164 empty homes. It was noted that there was a very limited amount of money available and they would have to be mindful and use this to respond to needs.

It was proposed, seconded and voted unanimously to support that a portion of the additional funding that will come from the Council tax second homes scheme is re-invested into the empty homes service on housing stock.

It was further suggested that it was necessary to manage the applications by considering undertaking a means test on the individuals who submit applications.

Resolved: **(a) To accept, note and thank the officer for the report.**

(b) To request that the Cabinet Member for Housing, Leisure and Culture conveys the approval and support of the Care Scrutiny Committee that any additional funding that comes from the council tax premium on second homes and empty homes is re-invested into the Empty Housing Service for the purposes of bringing empty homes back into use.

(c) To request that the Department consider looking at the bank details of the applicants when they present their applications.

(ch) That the Service presents a list to the Members of this Scrutiny Committee of empty homes in Gwynedd in order that they can keep an eye locally and update this as required.

6. HEALTH PROVISION IN BLAENAU FFESTINIOG

A report was submitted that comprised six recommendations emanating from the discussion on the above matter at an Extraordinary Meeting of the Care Scrutiny Committee that took place on 4 September 2017.

It was explained that the purpose of the report was to confirm the final wording of the recommendations to be presented to the Cabinet Member for Adults, Health and Well-being and the Chief Executive of the Betsi Cadwaladr University Health Board for action:

There was a difference of opinion amongst Members regarding the wording of clause (ii) of the recommendations and it was proposed and seconded to delete the words 'reasonable time' and amend as follows:

"that the Committee requests a report immediately on the health provision in the Blaenau Ffestiniog area by an independent agency, to be presented for the attention of the Care Scrutiny Committee.

That the Scrutiny Committee calls upon the Betsi Cadwaladr University Health Board to regularly monitor information and data in relation to the effectiveness of current health services in the Blaenau Ffestiniog area and the well-being of its residents and to commit to adapting/changing the provision if there is evidence to justify this.

It was confirmed that the remaining recommendations (i), (iii), (iv) and (vi) were acceptable.

In terms of providing an independent report as suggested above, it was noted that the Council would be able to suggest the names of external independent consultants to undertake the work.

It was noted that the Community Health Council were not pleased that they had not received an invitation to be represented in the discussion at the Extraordinary Care Scrutiny Committee.

Resolved: Convey the following final recommendations to the Cabinet Member for Adults, Health and Well-being and the Chief Executive of the Betsi Cadwaladr University Health Board:

(i) That the Care Scrutiny Committee calls on the Betsi Cadwaladr University Health Board to share all the background information that was part of the original decision to change the provision of facilities and health services in the Blaenau Ffestiniog area.

(ii) That the Committee requests a report immediately on the health provision in the Blaenau Ffestiniog area by an independent agency, to be presented for the attention of the Care Scrutiny Committee.
That the Committee calls upon the Betsi Cadwaladr University Health Board to regularly monitor information and data in relation to the effectiveness of current health services in the Blaenau Ffestiniog area and the well-being of its residents and to commit to adapting/changing the provision if there is evidence to justify this.

(iii) Stemming from the evidence submitted by the Blaenau Ffestiniog Memorial Hospital Defence Committee regarding the lack of response to petitions and correspondence in the past, that the Board give detailed consideration to engagement and consultation shortcomings in the past in order to improve future arrangements. The Health Board is encouraged to communicate regularly and effectively with the residents of the Blaenau Ffestiniog area in relation to the provision of facilities and local health services.

(iv) The Cabinet Member for the Environment and the Cabinet Member for Care are requested to commission an assessment of the convenience and accessibility of health services via public and community transport within the Ysbyty Alltwen catchment area. Once the priority given to this catchment area is completed, they could then consider if there was any benefit to undertake similar assessments in other areas.

(v) That the need for suitable homes for older people included the provision of extra care housing in the Blaenau Ffestiniog area is fully aired jointly with the Cabinet Member for Care, Cabinet Member for Housing, Leisure and

Culture and the Health Board together with the Gwynedd Housing Partnership.

(vi) That the Care Scrutiny Committee calls on the Betsi Cadwaladr University Health Board and Gwynedd Council to work closely and jointly and take appropriate practical steps to recruit care and health staff in order that there are full teams in place to maintain services in the Blaenau Ffestiniog area and across the County.

The meeting commenced at 10:30am and concluded at 12:40pm.