

My Ref: Scrutiny/Correspondence/Cllr McGarry

8 January 2016

Councillor Susan Elsmore
Cabinet Member
c/o Room 520
County Hall
Cardiff
CF10 4UW



Dear Susan

Community & Adult Services Scrutiny Committee – 6 January 2016

On behalf of the Members of the Community & Adult Services Scrutiny Committee, I would like to thank you and the officers for attending our Committee on 6 January 2016. I have sent a separate letter to you and Councillor Patel regarding our scrutiny of the Gypsy and Traveller Accommodation Assessment and Site Assessment Criteria. This letter covers our pre-decision scrutiny of the Housing Revenue Account Business Plan 2016-17 and our deep dive into council housing voids management.

Housing Revenue Account Business Plan 2016-17

Members thank officers for preparing the report and presentation, which we found both interesting and useful. With regard to the robustness of the Business Plan, Members are unable to comment on this given that the levels of several key parameters are still awaited from Welsh Government.

With regard to the proposed rent increase of 1.4% plus £2 per week, leading to an average increase of £3.30 per week, Members were reassured to hear that this will not impact on the majority of tenants as the increase will be covered by housing benefit. Members were concerned about the impact on those tenants most affected by recent Welfare Reforms, notably the benefit cap and 'Bedroom Tax'. Members note that there are approximately 200 households covered by the benefit cap, who will be affected by the rent increase. Members note that, for those tenants affected by the 'Bedroom Tax', the consequent impact will be approximately 14% of the overall increase, and therefore more manageable than may first appear to be the case.

Members asked several questions regarding the level of debt repayment, both overall and specifically to do with debts relating to the Housing Revenue Account Subsidy exit. Members note officers' assurances that the debt repayment is prudent, sustainable and affordable in the longer term. Members also note that finance officers keep a close eye on the situation with a view to enabling earlier repayment were this proven to be viable. However, Members think that it would be useful to undertake comparison with other local authorities to see how our ratio of debt and repayment measure up, if only to provide reassurance that our ratio is appropriate.

With regard to the Building Maintenance Framework Agreement, Members are aware of the main issues with this, particularly following our deep dive into council housing void management, which included examining the Constructing Excellence Wales reports taken to Audit Committee recently and discussing issues with officers involved in the day to day management of this Agreement. Members recommend that the shortfalls in this Agreement be addressed in the new agreement being developed; this will improve the experience of tenants when contractors are undertaking planned, programmed and reactive repairs, as set out in the Housing Revenue Account Business Plan 2016-17. More details on this are provided in our report on the deep dive into council housing void management, attached to this letter.

I mentioned at the meeting that the signage at Marland House requires improvement to clearly signpost that services are now provided at Central Library. I note that Sarah McGill agreed to improve the notices in the ground floor windows of Marland House, to make them larger and clearer, and I look forward to this being undertaken.

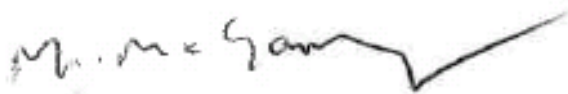
Deep dive into council housing voids management

As mentioned above, our Performance Panel has recently undertaken a deep dive into council housing void management, with the subsequent report being approved at Committee. The report is attached to this letter and contains sixteen recommendations, aimed at improving our performance in the short and medium term. I very much hope that this is of use to you and officers.

To summarise, I look forward to hearing back from you on the following:

- Recommendation – to undertake comparator work with other local authorities regarding Housing Revenue Account debt and repayment ratios
- Recommendation – that the shortfalls in the Buildings Maintenance Framework Agreement be addressed in the new agreement being developed
- Recommendations from the deep dive into council housing void management – whether these are accepted and, for those that are accepted, details of how and when they will be implemented.

Yours sincerely,



COUNTY COUNCILLOR MARY M^CGARRY

Chairperson - Community & Adult Services Scrutiny Committee

Cc: Sarah McGill Jane Thomas Colin Blackmore Anil Hirani
Liz Patterson
Claire Deguara Matt Swindell