
HOUSING & COMMUNITIES STATEMENT

WLGA Housing Cabinet Members Network

Earlier this month, I attended a meeting of the WLGA Housing Cabinet Members Network, which brought together fellow Cabinet portfolio holders and senior officers from all over Wales to discuss the pressing issues facing housing in Wales, including addressing homelessness and the need for new homes. The Welsh Government Minister for Housing and Regeneration, Rebecca Evans AM, attended the meeting and I was pleased that she made clear her commitment to supporting councils to build new homes.

The Prime Minister also announced recently that the UK Government plans to scrap the current cap on how much councils can borrow against the value of their housing stock, which was implemented in 2012. This would allow councils to build more council homes and, whilst no details have yet been given about this proposed change, it appears to be very positive news. This will remove a major barrier to the delivery of our commitment to build 2,000 new council homes in Cardiff.

Development of New Council Homes

I was really pleased with the announcement made by the Welsh Government on 16th October 2018 that Cardiff's two bids for a total of £2.6 million of Innovative Housing Programme funding have been successful. We are always looking at new and innovative ways to deliver more council housing and I'm delighted that both the PassivHaus scheme on the site of the former Highfields Centre in Heath and the proposed modular scheme at Crofts Street in Plasnewydd will benefit from this funding. These schemes will help tackle current housing pressures in the city and contribute to our aim of delivering 1,000 new council homes by 2022, and 2,000 new council homes in the longer term.

Our plans for both the Highfields and Crofts Street sites are inventive and exciting. The environmentally-friendly development of 30 flats and 12 mews homes at the Highfields site will be built to rigorous PassivHaus energy efficiency standards. Ten flats will be available for rent from the Council, while the remainder will be sold on the open market.

The proposed development of 17 properties (12 flats and 5 houses) at the Crofts Street site will be built using a modular system, which is highly energy efficient, larger than standard properties and quicker to construct than traditional building methods. As a result, we hope to make significant time savings on site, thereby delivering new homes more quickly and reducing the impact on local residents.

The £2.6m grant funding awarded by the Welsh Government is on top of the £1.2m in Innovative Housing Programme funding that Cardiff received last year for two schemes to provide housing solutions for homeless families in shipping container units. I am really pleased that our new build programme is progressing at pace and new council homes will be delivered in volume. This means that we are well on the way to meeting the target that was set out in Capital Ambition.

On 25th October 2018, I will also be accompanying the First Minister on a visit to our new housing development at Willowbrook West in Trowbridge, which is being delivered through Cardiff Living, our innovative partnership with Wates Residential. The First Minister will not only have the opportunity to see first-hand the quality of the new homes that we are delivering both for the market and for social rent, but also how our schemes are helping to regenerate local communities, whilst providing quality affordable new homes.

Letting of New Council Homes

I am pleased to announce that our first new council homes delivered through the Cardiff Living programme will be let in November 2018. A special letting policy was developed for the new properties which gives some local people a chance to move into the new homes. Thirteen homes will become available next month on the following sites: Captains View/Walk, Upper Llanrumney; Willowbrook, St Mellons and Ty To Maen, Old St Mellons.

All council homes will be allocated under the policy and suitable applicants have already been identified for the properties on Captains Walk and Ty To Maen. It is particularly pleasing that it has been possible to offer two of the homes to families with disabled children, as they can easily be converted to accessible homes with through floor lifts. Another property has also been allocated to a council tenant with a high need to move who lives locally and wishes to stay in the area. These applicants have accepted the properties and will view their new homes in the next few weeks.

Long Term Empty Properties

Since June 2017, Shared Regulatory Services have been working to address the ongoing blight and concern that empty properties can cause by dedicating resources specifically to tackle this issue. The additional resources have allowed us to not only respond reactively to complaints about empty properties, but also to work proactively to target empty property owners with advice and support for bringing these properties back into beneficial occupation. Despite the various complex reasons for properties being left empty, this two-pronged approach has resulted in 80 long term empty properties being brought back into use during the 12 month period from October 2017 to October 2018, and I am pleased to confirm that the team is on track with their targets for this year. Whilst we seek to work informally and sensitively with owners to assist them in bringing these properties back into beneficial use wherever possible, we will also utilise enforcement powers where necessary and appropriate, as demonstrated by the two Compulsory Purchase Orders that are currently being processed.

Community Well-being Hubs

I am pleased to confirm that the new and improved join up of Hubs and libraries in the city will start on 29th October 2018 following completion of a staff restructuring process. This will ensure that good practices from both our Hubs and libraries are embedded equally with full support and staff integration. Alongside this, Community Inclusion Officers will be working closely with all Hub teams to enhance social activities and promote health & well-being.

From the middle of November 2018, we will also be analysing services and scoping the enhancement of local service provision. This will include consulting with communities and ensuring that the services we offer meet local needs, such as being able to apply for a bus pass in all locations and offering additional help such as money advice. We anticipate that the new services will be in operation from the New Year.

Community Safety Workshop

On 4th October 2018, the Police & Crime Commissioner and I led a very successful community safety workshop that was held as part of the Cardiff Public Services Board partnership arrangements. This provided an excellent opportunity for members of the Community Safety Leadership and Delivery Boards to reflect on our community safety priorities for the city and, equally as important, to understand if we have the right governance structures in place to deliver on them. This is particularly important in the context of continued austerity and decreasing resources for public services, which means that all partners need to do more with less. Some clear themes emerged from the workshop, such as identifying and managing the vulnerabilities of individuals and communities. It is clear to me that we all have a stake in keeping vulnerable individuals and communities safe and resilient. We need to ensure that there is a consistent approach among partners and, in the coming months, we will be focusing on developing improved understanding and awareness of our priorities here in Cardiff.

Cardiff Job Fair 2018

The 2018 Cardiff Job Fair, hosted by the Into Work Advice Service in partnership with Job Centre Plus, was held at St. David's Hall on 12th September 2018 and attracted over 1,100 jobseekers. Forty major employers (including Admiral, Hilton, Lidl, Marks and Spencer, S.A. Brain & Co, Subway and the NHS) were represented at the event, offering thousands of employment opportunities across a wide range of sectors. In addition, 22 partner organisations were in attendance, including Foster Care Services, Careers Wales, Open University and Wates Construction. The Into Work Advice Service was also in attendance and provided attendees with advice on getting the most from the event and information on the range of services it offers, as well as the Council's advice and support services as a whole.

Councillor Lynda Thorne
Cabinet Member for Housing & Communities
19 October 2018