

COMMUNITY & ADULT SERVICES SCRUTINY COMMITTEE

5 DECEMBER 2018

Present: Councillor McGarry(Chairperson)
Councillors Ahmed, Carter, Ebrahim, Jenkins, Kelloway, Lent
and Molik

35 : APOLOGIES FOR ABSENCE

Apologies for absence were received from Councillor Goddard.

36 : DECLARATIONS OF INTEREST

Declarations of interest were received from Councillors Ahmed and Molik in relation to Item 4.

Councillor Molik declared a personal interest as a private landlord.
Councillor Ahmed declared a personal interest as a family member is a private landlord.

37 : MINUTES

The minutes of the meeting held on 7 November 2018 were agreed as a correct record and signed by the Chairperson.

38 : HOMELESSNESS AND HOUSING REVIEW STRATEGY 2018-22

The Chairperson welcomed Councillor Lynda Thorne Cabinet Member Housing and Communities, Sarah McGill Director People and Communities and Jane Thomas Assistant Director Housing and Communities to the meeting.

The Chairperson advised Members that this item enabled them to carry out pre-decision scrutiny of the Cardiff Homelessness Strategy 2018-22, and analyse the review of homelessness and an update to the Rough Sleepers Strategy, which are also contained in the Cabinet Proposal. This Item would be considered by Cabinet on the 13 December 2018.

The Chairperson invited the Cabinet Member to make a statement in which she said that the Strategy is based on a comprehensive review of homelessness in Cardiff. Pressures on services have increased significantly in recent years, both in terms of the numbers of clients and the growing complexity of their needs. While the Council and partners have a wealth of services for the homeless in Cardiff, there is a need to constantly review and improve these to meet new challenges. Therefore the Strategy sets out a significant number of commitments and actions to build on current service provision for all homeless households and also to meet the needs of the City's most vulnerable citizens.

Members were provided with a presentation on Homelessness and Housing Review Strategy 2018-22, after which the Chairperson invited questions and comments.

Members noted that homelessness was not always about housing and that there were many other complex issues involved. Members were concerned however that they had heard that rough sleepers were not happy with the services being offered to them and would rather not engage with them. Members noted that there was enough accommodation for all rough sleepers so sought clarification on whether it was the accommodation or the support services that rough sleepers were choosing not to take. Officers explained that people don't always want accommodation available such as in the Huggard Centre, Litchfield Court or the Wallich Night Shelter. Officers stated that the accommodation offered could sometimes be used as an excuse by those who do not want to engage, therefore it was essential to wait for the right time to engage with people, including offering support on the streets.

Members discussed the Huggard Centre further, noting that it had the lowest eviction rate, but also that there were occasions where the people there may be disruptive. They stated that these people were the most difficult to deal with and they were reluctant to evict them and put them back out on the streets. Officers added that the services around accommodation were complex and needed to be provided wherever people needed them, even if that was out on the street. Members agreed that a proactive multi-agency approach was needed and that there are services out there who do engage well so a collaboration was needed.

Members discussed Housing First and noted that there were 8 units. Officers explained that this number may seem low but that there was a lot of work needed to be undertaken on the street before people were ready to go into accommodation. Members further discussed how people can get services and for example, recover from addiction, if they are not in accommodation. Officers reiterated that it was much more about intervention at the right time rather than accommodation.

Members referred to links between mental health support and homelessness and noted that this had not been mentioned in the recently scrutinised Mental Health Strategy.

Members asked whether last resort services could be replicated across the city rather than have the most difficult and vulnerable people all in one place such as the Huggard Centre. Officers explained that other provision is available. Officers considered that more resources needed to be put into the Huggard centre, increase security at night time and make it more welcoming, increase activities for people, have partner services there to help and keep people usefully active.

Members asked how safe the Huggard Centre was and whether there was any specific accommodation for women. Officers stated that it is safe and there were no reports of people being hurt, any particularly vulnerable people/women can go into the pods/rooms; there was always space available and always alternatives available too.

Members considered that this was such a broad issue and given the complexity of it, asked whether officers thought the strategy should be broken down into smaller areas addressing the issues sooner before homelessness becomes the end result. Officers agreed and explained that there was lots of work going on with Early Help, Substance Misuse and Mental Health and all interrelated activity; it was important to

bring the services around the needs of the individual as efficiently and effectively as possible and also that the services all talk to each other.

Members noted the good work undertaken on data, prevention and services going out to Hubs.

Members wondered whether there was an argument for increasing the amount of temporary accommodation possibly by renting on mass from the private sector and asked what the strategy and approach was on this. Officers explained that this already happens through partners, adding that the Welsh Government are making a scheme available for longer term lets from private sector (up to 5 years) which would be an improvement as it was important to move people on to more permanent accommodation.

The Cabinet Member referred to container and timber frame accommodation and explained that it was taking longer than anticipated but the sites were being prepared. There were sites across the city that could be used, owned by the Council or Welsh Government and not identified for development for the next 5 or so years which was a semi-permanent length of time.

Members asked what incentives were offered to private landlords and how tenants fund the gap between benefits and high rents. Officers explained in terms of incentives, they find the tenants and do inventories and are piloting acting as a guarantor for rent for 5 months. There would be a dedicated team who would speak to landlords and provide advice on things such as fire alarms. With the gap in rents, Officers explained that lots of people have to top up and it was important when assessing not to place people if they cannot afford the rent going forward.

Members discussed paper bonds and were advised that landlords were reluctant to take these, which was unusual as bonds have to be placed into a bond security. Officers also stated that guarantors and agency fees were causing major issues with landlords. They added that there were successes though and people were getting placed into private rented sector properties.

Members discussed the cycle of Prison, Substance Misuse, Hostels and Prison and considered that if people are not equipped to cope they may be better in accommodation with fewer people and more support. Officers stated that they are trying to support people through the advocacy project where an individual's needs are identified and support tailored around them.

Members noted the public's perception that the hostels are run down, unwelcoming and unsafe and asked what could be done to remedy this. Officers agreed that there could be better communication with the public possibly through social media.

Members asked when mistakes are made are there processes for learning from the mistakes and making improvements when developing strategies and policies. The Cabinet Member stated that they identify things that work well and not so well, rather than mistakes; they do things with a purpose but sometimes do not get the desired outcomes. Officers added that an outcome for an individual may not work out for lots of reasons but all advice given would be the best in time effective and joined up advice; lessons could be learned from when the outcome doesn't happen but it is not through a mistake as people will make their own decisions.

Members asked when an Action Plan would be in place and implemented. Officers stated it was a long term strategy up to 2022, the Action Plan would be in place by the end of the financial year; some actions will require partner's involvement so there would need to be some alignment.

AGREED: that the Chairperson, on behalf of the Committee, writes to the Cabinet Member conveying the observations of the Committee when discussing the way forward.

39 : THE IMPACT OF UNIVERSAL CREDIT ON RENT ARREARS

The Chairperson welcomed Councillor Lynda Thorne Cabinet Member Housing and Communities, Sarah McGill Director People and Communities and Jane Thomas Assistant Director Housing and Communities to the meeting.

The Chairperson advised Members that this Item had been brought onto the Agenda, following the distribution of a briefing note on this issue to CASSC Members.

The Chairperson invited the Cabinet Member to make a statement in which she said that the Committee will be aware of the issues with Universal Credit from the national publicity and the pressures that this has put on individuals and those who are trying to support them. The presentation today will set out the impacts on Cardiff Council tenants and the increase in rent arrears that has resulted. The Cabinet Member added that sadly the situation is only likely to worsen as more tenants become affected.

Members were advised that the presentation sets out how Officers are adapting services to meet this new challenge and to prevent legal action and evictions where possible.

Members were provided with a presentation on the Impact of Universal Credit on Rent Arrears after which the Chairperson invited questions and comments.

Members asked if there would be an impact on the HRA if similar levels of default continued. Officers explained that if defaults continued on the current trajectory there would be, but that this is only in relation to debts written off and this was difficult to work out. Members sought clarification that Fresh Start was a form of writing off debts and was were advised that this was correct.

Members asked if consideration had been given to changing from a weekly to monthly rent model. Officers stated that they had thought about monthly rent and for Universal Credit they would accept payment at the end of the month when tenants are paid and their records could be programmed with that date. It was explained that all tenancy agreements have weekly rent runs but tenants can pay monthly if they want to. It was also explained that there are some tenants who prefer to pay weekly and by changing to monthly they wouldn't be able to continue doing so, but this would be kept under review.

Members sought clarification on the issues and asked if it was the method of payment or the amount received that was causing the problems. Officers explained that it was the payment method, tenants get paid a month later and have to budget

accordingly but they are in arrears from the start. The Cabinet Member stated that what was happening in Cardiff reflected the findings of the pilots undertaken by various local authorities yet the scheme was still rolled out.

A Member considered that Cardiff had had more time than other Local Authorities to prepare for the introduction of Universal Credit and asked if Cardiff had been prepared or was playing catch up. Officers stated that Cardiff was part of the pilot for payments directly paid; adding that Cardiff was fully set up for the scheme. Officers added that Cardiff is housing an increasing number of very vulnerable people and it needs to be anticipated that these people will struggle and pre-empt the decision to apply for direct payments, and there needs to be a change to the procedure on this. The Cabinet Member stated that Cardiff was better prepared than most and had identified all of the tenants to be affected by the first tranche; personal contact had been made with tenants, Hubs had been established, staff had been trained and support had been put in place, adding that the issue was with the way in which the scheme was rolled out and the impact it was having on families.

A Member considered that there was a very negative feel around the issue and that Cardiff should be embracing Universal Credit. The Cabinet Member stated that Cardiff had embraced it and were prepared to support people; Cardiff had taken part in the pilot and had identified issues such as rent arrears and these issues had come to light now the scheme was being rolled out; Cardiff was now working hard to find ways of mitigating these issues.

The Chairperson added that when she had read the briefing report on this issue she was very distressed and had asked for the issue to come before Committee; she stated that on average people were £1000 in arrears, and that there was potentially around £1million of debt to the Council and extra staff had needed to be employed. The Chairperson asked if there were any organisations who were lobbying for compensation for local authorities, Officers stated that they were not aware of any but if so there may be a case for claiming for the extra costs and resources reducing.

AGREED: that the Chairperson, on behalf of the Committee, writes to the Cabinet Member conveying the observations of the Committee when discussing the way forward.

40 : PREVENTING YOUNG PEOPLE'S INVOLVEMENT IN DRUG DEALING

Members were advised that this Item contained the draft report on the joint CASSC/CYPSC Inquiry into Preventing Young People's Involvement in Drug Dealing. Councillor Ebrahim was the Chair of the Inquiry, with Councillor McGarry and Councillor Kelloway also representing CASSC on the Task & Finish Group.

Members were requested to consider the report and endorse it, before it goes forward to Cabinet for consideration. The report would also be considered by Children & Young People Scrutiny Committee on the 11 December 2018.

The Chairperson invited Councillor Ebrahim to make a statement in which he said that in front of Members was a report from a joint Scrutiny Inquiry by the Community and Adult Services and Children and Young People Scrutiny Committees, following a

seven month investigation into the impact drug dealing can have on the life of a young person, their families and the wider community.

The Inquiry Team was made up of 7 Councillors from both Scrutiny Committees, and took place between October 2017 and May 2018. During this time, the Inquiry Team heard from approximately 30 witnesses face-to-face; studied a wide range of secondary evidence; and distributed a community survey, which resulted in 413 responses.

The report contains 46 Key findings and 19 recommendations, based around the key themes of:

The Impact of drug related crime activities on Communities

How the Council and its partners can safeguard young People and their Families

The Role of Agencies and how they work together and with the wider community

The importance of education & awareness raising

Issues relating to crime & enforcement in relation to drug-related activity

It was important to identify what would drive a young person to become involved in drug dealing. This resulted in a very complex number of reasons, ranging from poverty and lack of opportunities to seeing it as a quick way to earn money and gain material goods. However, what was imperative was to keep in mind that these were still (in the main) vulnerable young people preyed upon and groomed by older people.

Conversely, the Inquiry also uncovered the fears and frustrations felt by communities having to witness and deal with drug-related activity and crime. The Inquiry Team felt that all communities deserved to live in a safe and healthy environment where drug dealing, taking and other related nuisance such as discarded needles should not be blighting their lives. Children should not have to witness this type of behaviour and see it as the “norm” on their streets.

The Inquiry Team heard from a wide range of organisations who are dealing with this issue. We all acknowledged that they were all working hard to tackle this issue. Many witnesses praised the Police in their commitment in working within communities, but more needed to be done to support this.

Throughout the Inquiry, it was heartening to hear the real desire by individuals and organisations to step up and make a difference to the lives of all young people in their communities. Councillor Ebrahim believed that if communities, agencies and partners were able to work together to provide a range of local measures, we could all make a real impact in providing services, role models and options for young people to choose a more positive path.

He added that, through the recommendations set out in this report, the Council and its partners can take a significant leap forward in tackling this issue, and he therefore asked the Committee to endorse the report.

The Chairperson invited comments from Members;

Members considered it was a very comprehensive report and it was a nice change to have an Inquiry Team chaired by someone other than a Scrutiny Chair.

Members discussed the number of people, organisations and community teams involved in the Inquiry and noted that they all endorse the report, stating it was going to be hard work but it was achievable.

Members considered the report had a very good set of recommendations.

The Chairperson advised Members that pending approval by Children and Young People Scrutiny Committee, the report would now be put forward for consideration by Cabinet.

41 : COMMITTEE BUSINESS/FORWARD WORK PLAN

Members were advised that the report sets out a summary of the Committee's business since the last meeting, including; A response from Councillor Thorne re the Voids issue considered by CASSC in October 2018; A response from Geraint Rees, Equality & Human Rights Commissioners Office re the Housing Toolkit issue considered by CASSC in October 2018; An updated Work Programme 2018/19; CASSC Forward Work Programme January – April 2019; Inquiries/Task & Finish Groups and CASSC Performance Panel.

With regard to the work programme, Members were advised that the January 2019 meeting would now have two pre-decision items on the agenda, in addition to a WAO report. Members were asked for views on when they would like to scrutinise Homelessness and after consideration Members decided they would like an extra scrutiny meeting between the scheduled January and February meetings. The Principal Scrutiny Officer would obtain availability and organise a date for this meeting.

Members agreed to the publication of the amended work programme on the Council Website.

42 : URGENT ITEMS (IF ANY)

None

43 : DATE OF NEXT MEETING

9th January 2019 at 4.30pm.

The meeting terminated at 7.00 pm