

COMMUNITY & ADULT SERVICES SCRUTINY COMMITTEE

8 DECEMBER 2021

Present: Councillor Jenkins(Chairperson)
Councillors Ahmed, Carter, Gibson, Lent, Lister, Mackie and McGarry

37 : APOLOGIES FOR ABSENCE

Apologies received from Councillor Hill-John. Councillor Carter and Councillor Mackie advised they would be joining the meeting late.

38 : DECLARATIONS OF INTEREST

None received.

39 : MINUTES

Minutes of the meeting of 10 November 2021 were approved.

40 : AGEING WELL STRATEGY

The Chair welcomed Councillor Susan Elsmore, Cabinet Member for Social Care, Health and Wellbeing, Councillor Lynda Thorne, Cabinet Member for Housing and Communities, Sarah McGill, Corporate Director, People and Communities, and Jane Thomas, Director for Adults, Housing and Communities.

The Chair invited Councillor Elsmore to make a statement, during which she introduced the draft proposals for the Ageing Well Strategy. Officers then provided Committee with a presentation after which members were invited to ask questions and make comments/observations.

Members were interested to hear how the Ageing Well Strategy complemented other Council strategies and policies such as recommissioning domiciliary and non-domiciliary care, Wellbeing plans, the Corporate Plan, and Directorate Delivery Plans. Members were advised that the Ageing Well Strategy was being brought forward for the first time and in a new way and that over time it will replace some other Council strategies and plans. It was accepted that it was important to have a congruent and coherent Golden Thread running through everything.

Members wanted to know whether the Quality Assurance Framework was in place yet. Officers advised that the Quality Framework had been developed and had been expanded to include commissioned care in addition to Council services, and that it was now in place.

Members sought clarification on how many people would benefit from having Telecare services, and how many potential beneficiaries had not yet taken up such services. Officers advised that the service focused on the over-75s. Currently 71% of Telecare users are over 75, but that only represents 18% of the over-75 population. The service helps get assistance to people who have had a fall, and can prevent them having to go to hospital. The Council has only just begun to use the service but

would be keen to promote it, and is interested in seeing how it has performed in other areas and in possibly expanding use of the service to include low-level care. Members were further advised that the technology is seen as complementary to human contact and not as replacing it. Technology can enhance care to make it 24/7.

Members referred to the high turnover of staff and low level of qualifications, and sought information on whether there had been any improvement over the past 12 months. Members were advised that the care sector was facing very significant challenges. When there was a high turnover of staff there were fewer people registered, because there is a certain period of time before people register. There has always been a high turnover of staff in the care sector. Remuneration is low and people move on to higher paid jobs. It is necessary over time and with the help of the Welsh Government to make working in the care sector more of a profession and make people feel they have career options and are reasonably rewarded. That will lead to lower turnover and a higher number of people registered. There are currently nationwide difficulties in recruiting into the sector.

Members sought clarification on how the Strategy would be weighted alongside the Council's statutory responsibilities such as the Regional Partnership Board, and whether such partnership working would be integrated into the Strategy or remain separate. Members were advised that the Strategy would be aligned with the partnership working and that discussions had taken place with the RPB to ensure that such alignment would be made in the draft Strategy, as well as discussions with other partners. The Cabinet Member for Social Care, Health and Wellbeing chairs the RPB Ageing Well Partnership Board.

Members sought clarification on the support that was available for community groups and volunteers caring for older people, and whether it encompassed financial support, moral support or training. Officers advised that support for individual volunteers had been expanded through Age Connect and the Council's advice services. Financial support is available for groups, for example groups that were working with people with learning difficulties before the pandemic as the Council is keen that they are restarted. The Council is working with Cardiff Third Sector Council (3SC) on a grant scheme, and supporting 3SC in a project to understand what groups are already working in the community helping people avoid social isolation. The Council would support new groups wanting to set up in Hubs.

Members were interested in learning how the Strategy complemented the work of other departments and other Council activities such as leisure provision and transport, for example how community transport providers are funded to support elderly residents, and how Officers planned to engage with other departments to deliver the Age Friendly City aspiration. Members were advised that the Age Friendly City was supported by a separate Action Plan, which had been submitted for approval by the Older Person's Commissioner and pulls together various strands including leisure and transport provision.

Members were advised that the Age Friendly City plan was seen as a strand of the Ageing Well Strategy. Members were reminded that the Age Friendly City plan was being presented to the United Nations. The aim was that Age Friendly became as integral to for example building design as the Child Friendly and Dementia Friendly approaches. Cross-directorate working was necessary.

RESOLVED: That the Chairperson writes to the Cabinet Member on behalf of the Committee expressing their comments and observations during the Way Forward.

41 : EMPTY HOMES POLICY 2021-24

The Chair welcomed Councillor Lynda Thorne, Cabinet Member for Housing and Communities, Councillor Peter Wong, Cabinet Assistant for Matters Relating to Private Sector Housing, Dave Holland, Head of Shared Regulatory Services, and Steve Tudball, Team Manager – Cardiff Housing Enforcement.

The Chair invited Councillor Thorne to make a statement, and she invited Councillor Peter Wong to introduce the Policy. Officers then provided Committee with a presentation after which members were invited to ask questions and make comments/observations.

Members sought clarification on whether Housing Enforcement would become involved if a house had been vacant for a long period of time but did not present an environmental or other hazard. Officers advised that there was an active case load of approximately 250 properties, which were mainly those regarding which the Council had received complaints in relation to their impact on neighbouring properties. Housing Enforcement was aware of 1,300 empty properties altogether. An annual mail shot is conducted to provide advice and assistance, and attempt to enter into a dialogue with owners, giving the potential to bring more properties within the active case load. Efforts are being made to increase capacity to deal with more properties and engage with more owners. The priority would remain properties that were having the biggest nuisance impact and those that appear derelict. However, efforts would be made to engage with owners of other properties that were lying empty for a long time and were viewed as a wasted resource.

Members discussed whether properties that had simply been vacant without being a nuisance and were being properly maintained by their owners should be given a score of 0 in the classification, irrespective of how long they had been empty. Members were advised that if a property had lain empty for a number of years without a plan for how it would be brought into use it might be considered a wasted resource. It would be appropriate to explore options for such properties. It might be desirable in future to consider Council leasing of them. Once the worst properties in terms of nuisance had been dealt with, it might be desirable to consider Empty Dwelling Management Orders for other properties. They would not be appropriate for properties that had only been empty for 1-2 years but for properties that had been empty for 7-10 years without a plan they might be, although that would be a political decision.

Members were further advised that it was recognised that properties are sometimes empty for valid reasons, such as bereavement. However, residents being consulted on the LDP might wonder why there was such a need for housing when there were good properties available. The Council Tax Premium was intended as an incentive and has been successful, and the Council may in future wish to charge a higher Premium.

Members expressed concern at the high number of flats that are empty and enquired as to whether there were ways to bring them quickly back into use. Officers advised that there were no quick solutions. The Council and housing associations are in a position to lease properties, and it would be desirable to explore how the Council and housing associations can more effectively put people in touch with those schemes.

Members expressed disappointment at the limited powers at the Council's disposal to bring long-term empty properties back into use, and considered how people who had been left property by deceased relatives could be assisted in disposing of it, perhaps by the Council offering purchase in a private sale. Officers advised that 2 Compulsory Purchase Orders had been taken forward, and discussions were taking place around enforced sale. Once the process was established it should become more efficient and effective. One of the purposes of the Policy was to ensure that there were robust CPO processes in place.

Members discussed whether there was an aversion to pursuing CPOs due to the cost to the Council. Officers advised that one of the recent CPOs had entailed significant additional costs due to its complexity. However, a property that had lain vacant for 20 years had been brought back into use. The way forward is joint working with Welsh Government, which has made available a recyclable pot of £15.2 million to underwrite this work. Housing Enforcement has been meeting with Welsh Government to begin discussions on the way forward. Due diligence is required to ensure that the best choices are being made for properties and that enforcement actions are legally watertight.

Members discussed whether the direction of policy development would lead to an ideological push against the owners of second homes. Members were advised that 60-90 properties had been brought back into beneficial use following engagement with property owners. Officers advised that the majority of properties brought back into use would be done so by the owners based on the advice and assistance of the Housing Enforcement team. There was no disagreement that it was right for the Council to target the worst properties. Officers did not see the policy leading to a fear of investing in Cardiff or a reluctance to own legitimately second homes.

Members discussed the Council Tax Premium. Members were reminded that there had been reluctance about the Premium because there were doubts that people would be willing to pay, and it was thought the costs of collection might outweigh the benefits. However, it had generated extra income and enabled extra resource to be put into Housing and Housing Enforcement.

Members sought information on the most common reason for houses being empty, and whether it was sufficient to contact owners yearly or whether more frequent contact might be better. Officers advised that there were a range of reasons why properties were left empty. Inherited properties where the owner is undecided about what to do, and properties stuck in probate, are common categories. In some cases owners are in care or in prison. Some properties are held by investors pending sale, letting or renovation. Members were advised that the annual mailshot was only one intervention. Officers are in constant dialogue with owners of properties that form the main caseload. Officers would explore what additional incentives could be offered and how frequently owners should be contacted.

Members enquired as to whether resources spent on empty homes detracted from other areas of work, or whether there was a net benefit from income generation. Officers advised that a staff member had been taken from other work to work on the Policy, but this was seen as 'spend-save' and that 2 additional staff members were now being funded from Council Tax receipts.

RESOLVED: That the Chairperson writes to the Cabinet Member on behalf of the Committee expressing their comments and observations during the Way Forward.

42 : COMMITTEE BUSINESS

Members were provided with an indicative Forward Work Programme, noting that this was subject.

Members were advised of potential changes to the dates of the February and March 2022 meetings, due to the late budget settlement from Welsh Government. Potential dates, subject to agreement were 21 February 2022 at 1.30 and 9 March 2022 at 4.30pm.

43 : URGENT ITEMS (IF ANY)

None received.

44 : DATE OF NEXT MEETING - WEDNESDAY 12TH JANUARY 2022

The meeting terminated at 6.30 pm