

COMMUNITY & ADULT SERVICES SCRUTINY COMMITTEE

18 MARCH 2024

Present: Councillor Taylor(Chairperson)
Councillors Ash-Edwards, Lent, Lewis, Littlechild and McGarry

40 : APOLOGIES FOR ABSENCE

None received.

41 : DECLARATIONS OF INTEREST

Cllr Littlechild declared a personal interest in item 5 due to his work with social housing projects and Cllr Lewis declared a personal interest in item 5 as ward Councillor.

42 : MINUTES

The minutes of the meeting held on 26/02/24 were agreed as a correct record and signed by the Chairperson.

43 : HOUSING REVENUE ACCOUNT BUSINESS PLAN 2024/25

Members were advised that this item allows them to consider the use and management of the Council's Housing Revenue Account.

Members were reminded that Appendix 4 is exempt from publication and therefore any questions on that Appendix would have to be taken in closed session.

For this item, the Chairperson welcomed Councillor Lynda Thorne, Cabinet Member for Housing and Communities, Sarah McGill, Jane Thomas, Helen Evans and Dave Jaques from the Housing & Communities directorate and Anil Hirani & Gill James from the accountancy department.

The Cabinet Member was invited to make an opening statement after which Members were provided with a presentation from Officers.

The Chairperson invited questions and comments from Members.

Members discussed the need for a balance between highlighting the Financial aspects of the plan with telling the story of Council House building and to ensure that the Plan speaks to its many audiences in a clear transparent way.

Members suggested that future Business Plans could include a more strengthened emphasis on the challenging financial context throughout, in addition to providing more detailed financial information such as explanations of terms like "bad debt" and insights into borrowing payback assessments and viability toolkit. Members found the

Business Plan to effectively communicate complex financial information in a clear and accessible manner but recommended enhancements for future versions.

Regarding the Welsh Housing Quality Standard (WHQS) 2023, the Committee considered that the following points could be explored with the Welsh Government:

- Investigating if the Council's efforts to build carbon-positive housing can be offset against older housing stock that may struggle to meet energy performance rating requirements by 2034.
- Understanding how achieving WHQS standards might impact the Council's ability to receive Major Repairs Allowance Grants.
- Urging Welsh Government to consider the requirements placed on private developers in meeting decarbonisation targets while ensuring equity and balance in achieving climate ambitions.

Members noted the lack of financial planning in the Business Plan for meeting the decarbonisation aspects of WHQS standards. While acknowledging the challenges in estimating costs until further details are available, Members suggested including indicative financial planning in the Business Plan, such as estimated cost analysis per unit.

The Committee were pleased to hear about the establishment of a new task force to address WHQS challenges and expressed an interest in liaising further with the task force and potentially offering assistance to ease resource pressures.

Members were concerned about the significant increase in reliance on external grants and contributions in the 2024/25 Business Plan compared to the previous year. They requested further detail on the confirmed versus anticipated grant funding and emphasised the importance of ongoing financial planning in case grants are not received. It was noted that the majority of grant uncertainty relates to social housing grants, and Members urged caution against assuming grants will come through.

The Committee expressed disappointment that their previous comments regarding providing greater clarity and analysis of void properties in the HRA Business Plan had not been addressed. They requested clarity on the meaning of figures presented and emphasised the need for future Business Plans to provide clearer information on void properties.

Members commended the ambition and financial commitment outlined in the plan for housing repairs, addressing anti-social behaviour, meeting the housing needs of ethnic minority backgrounds, and right-sizing council properties.

Members stressed the importance of reviewing digital processes and service change offerings and to ensure that all processes are inclusive to all.

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

44 : RECLADDING OF NELSON / LOUDON

Members were advised that this item enabled them to explore the achievability and deliverability of the recladding of Nelson & Loudoun House.

Members were reminded that Appendices 3&4 are exempt from publication and any questions on these would have to be taken in closed session.

For this item, the Chairperson welcomed Councillor Lynda Thorne, Cabinet Member for Housing and Communities, Sarah McGill, Jane Thomas, Helen Evans and Dave Jaques from the Housing & Communities directorate and Anil Hirani & Gill James from the accountancy department and Graham Bond, Operational Manager in Building Control.

The Cabinet Member was invited to make an opening statement after which the Chairperson invited questions and comments from Members on the information in the public domain.

A discussion took place around the lessons learned from the Lydstep Flats project and Members expressed concern about the Cabinet Report's focus primarily on cladding choice, overlooking other important lessons and resident experiences. Members sought confirmation of the final overall costing for Lydstep Flats and the contributions of leaseholders, including what their payments covered.

The committee expressed concern about the impact on residents due to the removal of cladding from Nelson House and the presence of non-compliant cladding at Loudoun House, causing anxiety among residents. Members noted the provision of financial compensation for Nelson House residents' utility bills.

Concerns were raised about the delay in starting the project despite its proposal in 2020. Members understood the reasons but emphasised the importance of minimising further delays to alleviate residents' concerns.

Members noted the anticipated cost for the project, including a contingency allocation and the ability to claim back VAT. They were pleased to hear that a Welsh Government grant is expected to cover the full cost of work, with Loudoun House leaseholders not required to contribute financially.

The committee highlighted the importance of cost transparency and a process for decision-making in case of cost escalation, including further liaison with the Welsh Government and reporting to the Cabinet for a decision.

The committee expressed concerns about the proposed 18-month construction timeframe for Nelson & Loudoun House, given the extended delivery time for Lydstep Flats.

Members were concerned about the potential loss of technical guidance and control over cladding specification. They were reassured to learn that contractors would not have full discretionary power and that technical advisors, along with building control review processes, would guide and manage the outcome. The committee stressed the importance of ensuring ongoing and detailed oversight of the project's technical specifications and delivery.

Due to sound issues experienced at the meeting, the committee requested clarification on the Building Safety Act 2022's implications for the Council, particularly in relation to the Nelson & Loudoun project. They sought insight into how the timing of new Welsh regulations might impact the project and what steps were being taken to mitigate this risk. Additionally, they requested an update on the progress of drawing up the action plan recommended by Audit Wales to prepare for the Act's requirements.

RESOLVED – That the public be excluded from the meeting at this point during consideration of this item as the Committee discussed exempt information of the description contained in paragraph 16 of Part 4 and paragraph 21 of Part 5 of Schedule 12A of the Local Government Act 1972. The public may be excluded from the meeting by resolution of the Committee pursuant to Section 100A(4) of the Local Government Act 1972 during discussion of this item.

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

45 : URGENT ITEMS (IF ANY)

None received.

46 : DATE OF NEXT MEETING

April 22nd at 4:30pm

The meeting terminated at 6.25 pm