

Social Services, Housing and Community Safety Scrutiny Committee
(Multi-Location Meeting - Council Chamber, Port Talbot & Microsoft Teams)

Members Present:

18 April 2024

Chairperson: Councillor C.Galsworthy

Vice Chairperson: Councillor H.C.Clarke

Councillors: H.Davies, O.S.Davies, S.E.Freeguard,
A.Lodwig, S.Rahaman and P.D.Richards

Officers In Attendance A.Thomas, C.Howard, A.Jarrett, A.Thomas and
K.Warren, N.Jones, S.Hockin, S.Jones,
H.Short, V.Smith and A.Thomas

Cabinet Invitees: Councillors J.Hale, S.Harris and A.Llewelyn

1. **Chair's Announcements**

The Chair welcomed everyone to the meeting.

2. **Declarations of Interest**

Cllr H.C.Clarke – Item 13, Personal – Friend works for organisation identified in report.

Cllr. S. Freeguard – Item 12, Personal – Sits on Board of organisation identified in report.

3. **Minutes of Previous Meeting**

The minutes of the meeting held on 2 February 2024 were approved as a true and accurate record.

4. **Pre-Decision Scrutiny**

Engagement & Participation Annual Report

Members considered the report as circulated within the agenda pack. The Director of Social Services advised that this item pertains to Children's Services. Reports relating to Adult Services and Housing will be brought to a future meeting.

Members referred to the report which outlined a meeting had been held with landlords. Members queried how many private landlords attended the meeting. Further, how many private landlords there are in NPT and if members could have a list of landlords so that the member can research how many private rental houses there are available in comparison to housing association properties. Officers confirmed that the meeting was attended only by private landlords. The forum was held to provide information, support and advice to landlords around things that may be of relevance to the landlords. It is intended to hold these forums every quarter. Officers advised that they would be unable to provide a list of all private landlords in the area and could not confirm how many private properties there are in Neath Port Talbot. However, this information may be held by Environmental Health.

The Chair advised that Rent Smart Wales holds a lot of information with regards to the private rentals available within specific wards. The Chair also asked officers to let the committee know of any future forums/events that committee members are able to attend, as they provide a lot of useful information to members.

Following scrutiny, the report was noted.

Annual Complaints Report

Members considered the report as circulated within the agenda pack.

Members asked for clarification on page 40. It was noted that all complaints were resolved at stage 1, however members queried if any complaints progress to further stages. The report also outlines complaints that were partially upheld, members queried if there were any appeals. Officers confirmed that there would have been a number of complaints which progressed to the next stage. Officers outlined the various stages of the complaints process. Stage 1 is an

investigation by internal officers. Stage 2 is an investigation by external officers and Stage 3 is a referral to the Ombudsman. Members advised that it would be useful to have the various numbers of complaints at different stages outlined within the report. The Director advised that he would obtain that information for members.

Members referred to page 42 of the report and the corporate complaints procedure. Members queried if there were any complaints which fell into this procedure that were related to Social Services. Officers advised that this information is sent to officers weekly and is available. Corporate complaints tend to straddle more than one directorate. Officers advised that they would circulate the information relating to complaints which were considered via the corporate complaints process.

Following scrutiny, the report was noted.

Policy on Rent and Service Charge Arrears Prevention and Recovery

Members considered the report as circulated within the agenda pack.

The policy sets out a process that officers would undertake to prevent people, living in temporary accommodation, accruing arrears, and what action would be taken if people continuously fail to pay rent or their service charge. Officers stressed the importance of supporting people in temporary accommodation to make regular payments towards the costs identified and for those that do find themselves in arrears, that they are supported and helped towards working towards paying off that debt. Officers outlined the importance in this process, not only to the financial impact on the Council when there are arrears but also when a person has a history of bad debt it makes it a lot more difficult for people to leave temporary accommodation. This may have a detrimental effect on the person themselves and also a large financial cost to the Council.

Officers outlined the process if a person is entitled to housing benefit. The housing benefit is paid directly to the Council therefore its very rare that a person would get into debt. However, where a person is not in receipt of housing benefit, a policy like this is required to allow the Council to take action where a person is responsible for paying their rent and they do not pay it. Alongside rent there is a service charge, approximately £16/week which residents in temporary accommodation are required to pay. This is often where the debt will

arise as people in temporary accommodation are responsible for paying that charge directly to the Council. To date, there has been very little consequence if a person fails to make regular payments to the authority. The policy will set out a clear framework which details how the authority will work with people who accrue arrears and also assist with people not getting into debt in the first instance.

Members sought assurances that the policy will not disadvantage vulnerable people. Officers recognised that people in temporary accommodation are often some of the most vulnerable members of the community, Officers advised that the policy would only be implemented where officers are satisfied that everything has been done to try and support the person living in temporary accommodation from accruing arrears. Members were provided with an overview with regards to what is done before a person is offered temporary accommodation, for example setting out the payments required, reading through associated contracts etc. in a way that is clear for the person.

When someone is placed in temporary accommodation, a person is allocated a Support and Accommodation Officer. Their role is to communicate with the person and develop a personal support plan for that person that is relevant to their life circumstances. Officers confirmed that they also linked with other organisations, including Welfare Rights, that could assist with supporting the person. Officer will also accompany the person to various appointments to help them to understand the advice that may be provided to them. Further, they can refer the person to specialist debt advice agencies who can assist with their debt management. The authority also provide a 'tenancy ready' courses. This course helps to prepare and gain skills ready to manage a home, for example budgeting. Support is also provided to help people access employment.

Officers gave an example of when the policy would not be implemented. This could happen when benefits are suspended, and the person would no longer be able to meet the payments required for temporary accommodation. Officer assisted the person in getting their benefits reinstated and also a back payment made. This meant that the person could then pay back the arrears.

Members queried how much outstanding arrears there are currently. Officers advised that they did not know the exact amount but that there were some notable amounts outstanding. Officers advised that they could obtain the figure and circulate to members.

Members noted the extensive support offered by the service that had been highlighted during the meeting.

Following scrutiny, the recommendation was supported to Cabinet Board.

Grant Arrangements for the Provision of Warm and Welcoming Spaces SPF Sustainable Communities Grant Funding

Members considered the report as circulated within the agenda pack.

Members asked that they be provided with a list of the warm spaces that are currently available for people to access. Officers advised that they would circulate this information.

Following scrutiny, the recommendation was supported to Cabinet Board

5. **Urgent Items**

There were no urgent items.

6. **Access to meetings**

Resolved: to exclude the public for the following item(s) pursuant to Section 100A(4) and (5) of the Local Government Act 1972 and the relevant exempt paragraphs of Part 4 of Schedule 12A to the above Act.

7. **Pre-Decision Scrutiny of Private Item/s**

Contractual Arrangements for Third Sector and Non-Regulatory Services funded by Social Services, Health and Housing

Members considered the report as circulated within the agenda pack.

Following scrutiny, the report was noted.

2024/25 Contractual Arrangements for a Range of Services Funded
Through the Housing Support Grant

Members considered the report as circulated within the agenda pack.

Following scrutiny, the report was noted.

CHAIRPERSON