

## **PARTNERSHIPS SCRUTINY COMMITTEE**

Minutes of a meeting of the Partnerships Scrutiny Committee held in Council Chamber, County Hall, Ruthin and by Video Conference on Thursday, 14 December 2023 at 10.00 am.

### **PRESENT**

Councillors Joan Butterfield (Chair), Jeanette Chamberlain-Jones, Kelly Clewett, Pauline Edwards, Bobby Feeley and Terry Mendies.

**Lead Member-** Lead Member for Housing and Communities, Councillor Rhys Thomas was in attendance at the Committee's invitation.

### **ALSO PRESENT**

Corporate Director- Communities (NS), Head of Planning, Public Protection and Countryside Services (EJ), Strategic Planning and Housing Manager (AL), Senior Officer- Strategic Planning and Housing (JA), Scrutiny Co-ordinator (RE), and Committee Administrators (NH and RTJ).

**Clwyd Alyn Representative:** Rachael Williams- Head of Affordable Homes and Customer Services for business item 6.

**Adra Representative:** Heledd Owens- Head of Finances for business item 6.

**Adra Representative:** Rhys Parry- Director of Resources for business item 6.

**Cartrefi Conwy Representative:** Danielle Mason- Lettings and Property Manager for business item 6.

**Cartrefi Conwy Representative:** David Lowe- Senior Development Manager for business item 6.

**Grŵp Cynefin Representative:** Catrin Roberts- Affordable Homes Manager for business item 6.

**Observers:** Councillor Gareth Sandilands

## **1 APOLOGIES**

Apologies for absence were received from Councillors Brian Jones, Raj Metri, Arwel Roberts and David Williams.

## **2 DECLARATION OF INTERESTS**

Councillor Kelly Clewett declared a personal interest in business item 6 on the agenda, 'Setting of Affordable Rent Levels', as the owner of privately rented properties not those subject to social rent or intermediate rent.

### **3 APPOINTMENT OF VICE-CHAIR**

Following Councillor Peter Scott's resignation from the Committee on his appointment as Chair of County Council, the role of Committee Vice-Chair had become vacant.

Councillor Bobby Feeley nominated Councillor Pauline Edwards to fill the role of Vice-Chair of Partnerships Scrutiny Committee. Councillor Edwards' nomination was seconded by Councillor Jeanette Chamberlain-Jones. No other nominations were received and therefore the Committee unanimously:

***Resolved:*** to appoint Councillor Pauline Edwards as its Vice-Chair for the remainder of the 2023/24 municipal year.

### **4 URGENT MATTERS AS AGREED BY THE CHAIR**

No matters of an urgent nature had been raised with the Chair or the Scrutiny Coordinator prior to the commencement of the meeting.

### **5 MINUTES OF THE LAST MEETING**

The minutes of the Partnerships Scrutiny Committee meeting held on Thursday, 26 October 2023 were submitted. The Committee:

***Resolved:*** that the minutes of the meeting held on 26 October 2023 be received and approved as a true and correct record of the proceedings.

No matters were raised in relation to the contents of the minutes.

### **6 SETTING OF AFFORDABLE RENT LEVELS**

The Chair welcomed Officers and Lead Member Councillor Rhys Thomas to the meeting.

The Head of Planning, Public Protection and Countryside Services introduced a report on the setting of Affordable Housing Rents to the Committee. Officers stated that there was a mature and productive relationship with Housing Associations within the County. Housing Associations and the Council worked closely together to deliver the housing need within the County.

The Strategic Planning and Housing Manager guided members through the report.

Affordable Rent was split into two categories, social rent and intermediate rent. Social rent was the lowest most affordable kind of rent and most Council and Housing Association (Registered Social Landlords) properties have rent pitched at this level. All local housing authorities and Registered Social Landlords (RSLs) in Wales were required to comply with the Social Housing Rent and Service Charge Standard. The Standard was brought in as part of The Housing (Wales) Act 2014.

The report presented was concerned with intermediate rent. The definition of Intermediate Rent was set by the Welsh Government (WG) as rent that is pitched at either Local Housing Allowance (LHA) rate (determined by the Valuation Office Agency (VOA) to be the lowest third of open market rents), up to a maximum of 80% of market rent; the figure was inclusive of service charges. Intermediate Rent was market led rather than income led and therefore was affected by rent increases seen recently in the private rented sector.

Intermediate Rent was an option available to private developers alongside assisted home ownership, when considering planning obligations on new development sites. In Denbighshire there were 15 dwellings owned by 3 different private developers, which were rented out as intermediate properties.

Affordable Housing within the County was accessible via the Tai Teg register which was operated by Grŵp Cynefin. There were currently 960 applicants requesting Intermediate Rental Accommodation which had grown significantly. The increase in demand could be explained by the uncertainties in the job market, Brexit and Covid, property prices had also been increasing dramatically.

There had been issues regarding service charges being included within intermediate rent and a number of meetings had taken place with Registered Social Landlords (RSLs) and Welsh Government officers concerning this. In conclusion to these meetings, it was agreed that the Welsh Government guidance was slightly unclear and therefore they issued a letter (previously circulated as appendix (iv) to the report) to clarify any concerns stating that Intermediate Rent should include any service charges.

There was a further commitment from Welsh Government to review Intermediate Rent levels as part of their future policy however, there was no timescale for this at this time.

The Chair thanked the Strategic Planning and Housing Manager for the report and welcomed questions from Members.

Members referred to the service charges and questioned if this was a way of increasing rent by the developers. The Head of Affordable Homes (Clwyd Alyn) stated that some communal areas were maintained by the developer, there was an annual charge for each property which was passed onto the residents as a service charge.

Members asked if a tenant was having financial difficulties were the Housing Associations able to adjust the rent and service charges. The Clwyd Alyn Representative stated that they explored ways of helping tenants to pay their rent by issuing food and energy vouchers - they had a Residents Fund set aside for such circumstances - however, they could not stop the service charges. Consultations with residents had taken place to establish ways in which to reduce the service charge as much as possible for example cutting communal grass areas every 3 weeks instead of every 2 weeks.

Members discussed if the service charge included the maintaining of play areas and whether they were being brought back under public ownership through Denbighshire County Council (DCC). The Head of Planning, Public Protection and Countryside Services stated that they would raise this question with the Head of Highways and Environment and get a written response to this query to members following the meeting. Adra advised that they did have communal play areas on some of their estates, whereas Clwyd Alyn did not have any. Some developers had play areas on the estates they managed and the maintenance costs for those were included in the service charges.

Members discussed pro-active communication plans that the Housing Associations had in place to help low-income tenants and questioned how RSLs were communicating the support that was available to households who were struggling the most.

Representatives from both Clwyd Alyn and Adra stated that they were very pro-active with providing tenants with information on the support that was available to them. Tenants' arrears were closely monitored, and direct contact was made with the tenant to explore potential avenues of help that may be available to them. Tenants were also informed of agencies that would be able to help them to access any grants/funding that they were entitled to. Before being allocated a property all tenants underwent an affordability check to ensure that they were able to afford the property. Early Intervention Officers were also in place to help struggling tenants. Each RSL gave an outline of their own association's early intervention and support services which were available and provided to tenants who were struggling. They emphasised that supporting the health and well-being of their tenants was an integral part of their day-to-day business and a core element behind their establishment.

Members queried whether all Housing Associations communicated with each other and shared information. The Head of Planning, Public Protection and Countryside Services explained that there was a very close working relationship between Housing Associations and the Council. Regular meetings were attended to allow for discussion of future plans and emerging concerns.

Members questioned if the Police attended the regular meetings that were held in the event of a disruptive tenant, this would allow the information to be shared. The Affordable Homes Manager stated that the Police did not attend these meetings as they were primarily to discuss practices and processes. If there were any cases of anti-social behaviour a separate multi-agency meeting would be held.

Members asked about tenancy agreements and whether they were the same within all Housing Associations. The Head of Affordable Homes (Clwyd Alyn) explained that every Housing Association had a standard contract, also known as Occupation Contracts for Intermediate Rent tenants which had the same policies and procedures outlined within them. These contracts were rolling contracts and each tenant had a designated Housing Officer who was available to them for advice and could help signpost them to other agencies and services that may be able to provide support to them.

At the conclusion of an in-depth discussion the Chair thanked officers and representatives from all registered social landlords in attendance for providing comprehensive and constructive answers to members' questions. The Committee:

**Resolved:** *subject to the above comments and observations to –*

- (i) *confirm that it had read and understood the process of setting intermediate rents; and*
- (ii) *support the continuation of the work with Private Landlords and Registered Social Landlords (RSLs) to strategically implement intermediate rents where appropriate to ensure the development of sustainable communities and maintain affordable tenancies.*

## **7 SCRUTINY WORK PROGRAMME**

The Scrutiny Co-Ordinator introduced the report and appendices (previously circulated) seeking Members' review of the Committee's work programme which provided and update on relevant issues.

The next Partnerships Scrutiny Committee meeting was scheduled for the 8 February 2024. There was one item listed for the next meeting:

- North Denbighshire Community Hospital Project- Members were informed the item had been provisionally deferred to Committee's March 2024 meeting.

The Scrutiny Chair's and Vice-Chair's meeting was scheduled for the 29 January and members were encouraged to complete the relevant form (previously circulated) if there were any items Members wanted to be considered at the meeting. No items had been added to the Committee's work programme at the previous Scrutiny Chair's and Vice-Chair's meeting.

Appendix 3 was the Cabinet's Forward Work Programme for Members reference. Appendix 4 provided the Committee with further information regarding recommendations from the previous meeting.

The Scrutiny Co-ordinator highlighted that following the resignation of Councillor Peter Scott, the Committee was required to nominate a replacement substitute representative on the Capital Scrutiny Group.

Nominations were sought from Members. Councillor Jeanette Chamberlain-Jones nominated herself. With no further nominations it was proposed and seconded that Councillor Jeanette Chamberlain-Jones be appointed the Committee's substitute representative on the Capital Scrutiny Group.

The Committee:

**Resolved:** –

- (i) ***to confirm its forward programme as set out in Appendix 1, subject to the North Denbighshire Community Hospital Project item being provisionally rescheduled from the February 2024 meeting to the March 2024 meeting; and***
- (ii) ***to appoint Councillor Jeanette Chamberlain-Jones to serve as the Committee's substitute representative on the Capital Scrutiny Group (CSG), to deputise in the absence of the Committee's appointed representative as and when required.***

## **8 FEEDBACK FROM COMMITTEE REPRESENTATIVES**

Bwthyn y Ddôl Children's Assessment Centre: Councillor Bobby Feeley, Denbighshire County Council's Scrutiny Committees' representative on this facility's Project Board advised that the construction work was now at a well-advanced stage and that everything seemed to be on target. She also stated that the Council's Head of Children's Services was keen to provide members with a report on the project in the near future.

Service Challenge – Performance, Digital and Assets Service: the Vice-Chair, the Committee's representative on this Service Challenge Group, informed members that the Service Challenge meeting for this Service was due to be held early in the new year. She encouraged members who had any questions or concerns in relation to this Service to forward them to her as soon as possible, to enable her to raise them at the forthcoming meeting.

The Chair thanked members for their attendance at the meeting and closed the meeting.

Meeting concluded at 11.20am.