
HEALTH AND WELFARE SERVICES COMMITTEE 01.04.04

Present:- Councillor Michael Clishem (Chairman)

Councillors Dylan Edwards, William Arthur Evans, Peter Gaffey, Keith Greenly-Jones, Gwen Griffith, Henry Jones, Linda Wyn Jones, R.L. Jones, Dafydd Owen, W. Roy Owen, W. Tudor Owen, Ieuan Roberts, Jean Roscoe, Arthur Wyn Rowlands and R.H. Wyn Williams.

Also present:- Ffrancon Williams (Head of the Housing Service), Glyn Hughes (Head of Social Services), Gareth Jones (Senior Manager - Administrative and Legal Service), Emyr Vaughan Evans (Senior Policy and Performance Manager - Care), David Humphreys (Housing Policy Manager), G. Rhys Thomas (Housing Manager – Private Sector), Gerry Baker (Chief Housing Officer, Private Sector), Gareth Parri (Policy Officer – Public Sector), Simon Smith (Beha Williams Norman Ltd), Paul Brackett (Beha Williams Norman Ltd), Michael Howard (Michael Howard Associates) and Llywela Haf Owain (Committee Clerk).

Apologies:- Councillors Tony Eccles and Pat Larsen.

1. ELECTION OF CHAIRMAN

Councillor Michael Clishem was elected chairman for the remainder of the current year.

2. ELECTION OF VICE- CHAIRMAN

Councillor R.L.Jones was elected vice-chairman for the remainder of the current year.

3. DECLARATION OF PERSONAL INTEREST

The following declared personal interest for the reason noted below:

- 1) Councillor Keith Greenly-Jones declared personal interest in item 8 because he is in the process of buying a council house from Gwynedd Council.
- 2) Councillor Jean Roscoe declared personal interest in item 9 because she is one of the directors of Care and Repair.

4. MINUTES

The chairman signed correct the minutes of the meeting of this committee which was held on 29 January, 2004 as correct.

Matters arising

Underspending of Housing Grants

In response to a question from a member the Senior Policy and Performance Manager – Care said that the second meeting of the Working Group on Underspending of Housing Grants will be held on 28 April and that the third is to be held during May. He said that a report on the work of the working group is to be presented at the next meeting of the committee which is to be held in June.

5. TASKFORCE FOR REVIEWING THE HOUSE LETTING POLICY

It was reported that a request had been received from the Arfon Area Committee that this committee should call a meeting of the House Letting Policy Taskforce to discuss the points system for homeless people.

The Senior Policy and Performance Manager reported that the taskforce referred to above is no longer operational as it has completed its remit. He suggested that a task group should be set up to discuss the points system for the homeless with the chairman of this committee and other councillors as members.

RESOLVED:

- i) to set up a task group including the chairman of the Health and Welfare Services Committee and four other members in addition to the leader of portfolio, in order to reconsider the points system for the homeless**
- ii) to elect the following people to sit on the task group for reviewing the homeless people's points system:
Councillors Michael Clishem (chairman), Gwen Griffith, Peter Gaffey, Linda Wyn Jones (leader of portfolio), R. L. Jones and W. Tudor Owen.**

6. ANNUAL REPORT OF THE SOCIAL SERVICES COMPLAINTS PROCEDURE

The Head of the Social Services presented a report on the complaints procedure for adults, children and young people including information on the comments and complaints received in 2003. It was reported that there was a total of 158 comments, 92 of them positive ones, 65 informal complaints and one formal complaint. It was noted that the number of formal complaints had dropped. It was added that the social services will still deal with the complaints of the provision unit even though the service was under the leadership of a different Head of Service.

In response to members' questions the Head of Social Services reported that:

- i) there was opportunity for children and young people to express their viewpoint on the service, be it complaint or praise. He went on to say that if a complaint is made two independent people are appointed to look into the complaint and deal with it. He noted that there is no Customer Care Officer for children's complaints alone.**
- ii) he agreed that many service users do not express an opinion about the service. However he noted that he did not believe that the complaints procedure was unduly oppressive or that it prevented people from complaining.**
- iii) he was appointed a member of the group which will be responsible for the publication of the Welsh Assembly Government's final document on the new complaints procedure. He added that the legislative changes to**

enforce local authorities to comply with the new requirements have not yet been published.

RESOLVED to accept and note the report.

7. ASBESTOS STRATEGY

The revised report of the Property Development Manager of the Housing Maintenance and Repair Operational Unit on the asbestos strategy, which had been distributed at the beginning of the meeting, was presented by the Head of the Housing Service.

It was reported that it is now the responsibility of those who are in charge of maintenance and repair of non-domestic property to manage the risk arising from asbestos. Although it is not at present compulsory for the Council to formulate and adopt an asbestos plan it is foreseen that this will be necessary in future for all the rented residential property. The proposed strategy was explained, specifically the main requirements on those who are responsible for asbestos, the housing asbestos register, the management policy the asbestos review, the use of specialist contractors, disposal of asbestos and the advice given to tenants. It was added that it is hoped that the asbestos register will be in place by November.

In response to questions by members the Head of the Housing Service noted the following:

- i) that it is the responsibility of each tenant to inform the Council of any work undertaken on a house including the removal of asbestos. He emphasised, however, that it is difficult to monitor this and that work is undertaken from time to time without first notifying the Council. He added that the intention is to provide information for the public via the "Newyddion" newspaper which is circulated to all the homes in the county.
- ii) that a specialist contractor is to be appointed to remove asbestos from property, rather than using Council workmen. It was stated that the contractors are to be chosen by tender following the adoption of the strategy.
- iii) that Councillors are encouraged to contact the housing maintenance operational unit if they are concerned about property which contains asbestos. He emphasised that little risk is connected with asbestos which is not disturbed.
- iv) that the Council is aware that there is asbestos in units used as bathrooms in Maes Barcer in Caernarfon and that there are plans afoot to deal with this. He added that plans of new bathrooms have been presented to tenants by consultants and that they are soon to be presented to the Board. He added that it is impossible to get a grant to do the proposed work.
- v) that he was aware that the cost of disposing of asbestos will increase due to the fact that waste will have to be transported all the way to Warrington, and nothing can be done about this.
- vi) that the Council's workmen have been given training in asbestos awareness and that the procedure for dealing with asbestos has been strengthened. He added that in time it will be possible for each workman to discover where there is asbestos by using the asbestos database.

The Senior Policy and Performance Manager - Care added that he agreed that there is room for improving the contact between tenants and Council and that the present procedure is to be reviewed.

The service was congratulated for its excellent work.

RESOLVED to receive and note the information.

8. RIGHT TO BUY SCHEME

A report was presented by the Senior Policy and Performance Manager – Care on the current right to buy scheme following a request from Dwyfor Area Committee that this committee should discuss the matter.

It was reported that the above committee wanted this committee to consider whether or not the National Assembly of Wales should be strongly urged once more to abolish the right of tenants to buy Council houses, whether or not a transferable discount scheme should be reintroduced whereby tenants could buy a house in the private sector and whether or not the implementation of the condition which prohibits the reselling of houses unless the buyer is a local person and the adoption of the Assembly's new regulations in the areas here such a condition can be implemented. It was noted that the right to buy cannot be abolished without legislation as this is part of the 1985 Housing Act which was enacted by Parliament. It was added that the Transferable Discount Scheme cannot be reintroduced at the moment because of a lack of capital.

The Senior Policy and Performance Manager noted that there is currently a lack of consistency across the county regarding the conditions of selling on. He explained that two options had been put before the members which would help to remove inconsistency in order to resolve this.

- a) to restrict the selling on to persons who have lived or worked, for the 3 year period before the application for permission to sell, within the 'Designated Region' namely within Gwynedd Council or Snowdonia National Park.
- b) to set conditions on the original sale that the property cannot be sold on during a 10 year period from the original sale unless the owner has offered to sell the property back to the Council and the Council has refused the offer or has not responded within a month of that offer.

Some of the members noted that they did not believe the definition of 'local people' to be a true one and that the buyer should have lived or worked in the 'Designated Region' for a total of 10 years. Concern was expressed that the houses sold under the right to buy scheme are being sold in timeas Holiday homes and that there is a shortage of affordable homes in the county. In response to this the Senior Policy and Performance Manager noted that the definition of 'local' is that used in the housing act and cannot be altered. The Senior Manager - Administrative and Legal Service added that actions have to be in accordance with the legislation and that it would be impossible to add a condition that a section 106 agreement has to be signed.

In response to a member's question concerning the provision of houses for elderly people the Senior Policy and Performance Manager – Care agreed that there is a need to reconsider the letting policy for housing for the elderly. He explained that due to the lack of demand for purpose built housing for the elderly in some areas people under 60 years of age have been allowed to move into them.

The members also expressed a wish to send a strong message to the National Assembly of Wales expressing the need for more resources for councils to build new Council houses to fulfil the need for local affordable homes.

RESOLVED:

- i) **that this committee receive regular reports on the development of the housing bill through Parliament and the effect of this on the administration of the Right to Buy Scheme**
- ii) **that the relevant officers in the Housing Service contact the Welsh Assembly Government in order to:**
 - a) **ask them and strongly request that they release special capital to the local authorities to run the Transferable Discount Scheme and to build new Council houses**
 - b) **express the concern of this committee about the shortage of affordable homes in Gwynedd**
- iii) **report back to this Committee in due course on the Welsh Assembly Government's response to the aforementioned request.**
- iv) **to recommend that the Council Board restricts the sale of property within a 'Designated Region' to persons who have lived or worked within the 'Designated Region' for a period of 3 years before the application for permission to sell on.**

9. STRATEGY FOR OLDER PEOPLE

A report from the Strategy for Older People Coordinating Officer on the outline development programme for the Strategy for Older People was presented by the Senior Policy and Performance Manager - Care. It was reported that the strategy for older people had been launched by the Welsh Assembly Government in January 2003 and that £35,000 had been earmarked for each authority to appoint a Development Officer to establish a local strategy. It was further explained that the officer had developed the scheme by consulting a number of groups of older people, Council officers and voluntary agencies. It was added that one of the chief priorities of the strategy for Gwynedd Council will be the strategic theme of 'Respecting Older People'. It was noted that the proposed draft strategy had been presented to the Council Board and the Assembly in mid March 2004.

In response to questions and comments from members the Senior Policy and Performance Manager – Care noted that officers are appointed by the Finance Service to try to encourage people to apply for tax benefits. He said that it would be possible to cooperate with agencies such as Age Concern in order that older people could be helped to fill application forms for tax benefits and tax reductions. He added that the crime and disorder strategy will be paying close attention to matters which are relevant to older people.

RESOLVED to receive and note the information.

10. HOUSING STRATEGY FOR BLACK AND MINORITY ETHNIC PEOPLE

A report was presented, for information, on this by the Senior Policy and Performance Manager - Care.

It was reported that a strategy had been jointly formed, which includes an action plan for each local authority, by the local authorities of Anglesey, Conwy, Denbighshire, Flintshire and Wrexham. It was noted that the strategy and the

action plans are current documents in that not all the authorities have as yet accepted them. It was added that the strategy is to be launched on 23 April 2004.

One member noted that it is important that each county provides services for the travelling community.

In response to members' questions the officers confirmed that the strategy notes that a pack on language and culture should be presented to people who move into Gwynedd.

RESOLVED:

- i) to receive and note the contents of the report**
- ii) to receive and adopt the strategy and the current action plan**
- iii) to present the strategy and the action plan to the Council Board.**

11. RENT STANDARDISATION PROJECT

Simon Smith and Paul Brackett of Beha Williams Norman Ltd were welcomed to the meeting.

Background information on the rent standardisation project was provided by the Senior Policy and Performance Manager. He explained that as a result of the reorganisation in 1996 varying rent rates were inherited across the county and in order to find a fair way of rectifying the situation the company Beha Williams Norman Ltd was appointed to look into the matter and to form a calculation and rent scheme which could be used across the county.

Simon Smith and Paul Brackett gave a presentation on the rent standardisation project and reference was made to the following main points:

- i) the company had been involved in discussions with officers regarding the collection of current data and options which could form the basis of a new rent calculation structure. It was stated that the proposed operational pattern shows how the present rents will gradually change in order to reach the rent target. It was added that shops and extra payments had been excluded from the original data received.
- ii) the average rent for the Council's housing stock is £44.90. In order to determine a new rent target details of addresses, number of bedrooms, type of property and current rent of the housing stock had been gathered. The target rent had been calculated by using a key weighting between the number of rooms (60%) and the type of house (40%). Other weightings were also used within the two categories. It was explained that if there is a change to one of the weightings the formula used will recalculate the target rent for the property concerned. It was noted that the formula for the model will also take inflation into consideration
- iii) that it is predicted that the majority of the stock will pay the same amount of rent in 15 years if the proposed model is used. It was added that it will be possible to adjust the model to some degree.

There followed a question and answer session. In response to members' questions Simon Smith and Paul Brackett said:

- i) that it will be possible to adjust the model to some degree by adding other categories. However he stressed that each category had to be objective and one that could provide reliable information. It was

- explained that it would not be practical to base the model on the value of a house or on the tenant's income.
- ii) that a snapshot of the Council's housing stock at a particular time had been taken and that stock which had been sold since that time should not be taken out of the model.
 - iii) that a special rent benefit could be introduced for those with disability but that this should not be taken into consideration in the rent standardisation model.

The Senior Policy and Performance Manager – Care added that garages and shops had not been included in the model because their rent is determined separately. He noted that this type of scheme has to be operated over a period of time in order to ensure fairness for all the tenants.

Members said that they would like all those who make a presentation to use a hand held microphone so that everyone in the chamber can hear.

RESOLVED:

- i) **to use the following key weighting in the model:**
 - Number of bedrooms 60%**
 - Type of property 40%**
- ii) **restrict the necessary increase for each property in order to reach the rent target on the basis of a series of designated parameters to £2**
- iii) **restrict the necessary reduction for each property in order to reach the rent target on the basis of a series of designated parameters to £2**
- iv) **the addition of a housing category for disabled people should be considered**

12. PRIVATE SECTOR HOUSING REVIEW

Michael Howard of Michael Howard Associates was welcomed to the meeting.

It was reported that the Senior Policy and Performance Manager – Care that Michael Howard Associates were commissioned to conduct a review of the condition of houses in the private sector in Gwynedd. The results of the review are to be used i enable the Council to develop its local housing strategy.

Michael Howard gave a presentation on the review. The following points were reported:

- i) a sample of 1548 houses was chosen, representing 2.10% of the housing stock in Gwynedd throughout the three areas. It was found that a number of holiday homes are left vacant and that the proportion of people who own a house is higher than the national average. It was noted that 94.5% of the properties are occupied by one family and only 5.4% of the stock are flats. It was added that there is strong evidence that houses in the private sector are in poor condition.
- ii) it was discovered that 8.96% of the houses are unsuitable and that expenditure of £4.8 million is necessary on them to ensure that they reach an acceptable standard. In order to deal with unsuitable housing and repair work, expenditure equivalent to £131.17 million will be necessary.

- iii) it was found that the head of the household or partner in 25.2% of families considered themselves to be disabled or to have suffered long term illness and that possibly 38.6% of the families cannot afford to pay for fuel. Around 43.5% of families in Gwynedd live on an income which is less than £10,000 per annum. The need to deal with social and economic problems which are associated with housing issues was stressed.
- iv) it was recommended that the housing strategy should build on the proactive work which is done by the private sector in order to raise the standard of housing in the private sector. It was stated also that partnerships should be formed with those working in the energy efficiency field in order to promote energy efficiency in the home and to develop a strategy to tackle energy poverty in co-operation with other agencies. Attention needs to be paid, also, to the increasing rise in the demand for housing for disabled people.

In response to a member's question the Senior Policy and Performance Manager said that this review had cost £44,000 but that half the cost would be met by a grant.

It was RESOLVED to receive the report and to ask the officers to present a further report on prioritising housing renovation assistance for the future.

The meeting started at 10:30 am and ended at 3:30 pm.