



RHONDDA CYNON TAF COUNCIL COMMUNITY SERVICES SCRUTINY COMMITTEE

Minutes of the Virtual meeting of the Community Services Scrutiny Committee held on Monday, 30 January 2023 at 5.00 pm

This meeting was live streamed, details of which can be accessed [here](#)

This meeting was recorded, details of which can be accessed [here](#)

County Borough Councillors – The following Community Services Scrutiny Committee Councillors were present:-

Councillor J Bonetto (Chair)

Councillor G E Williams	Councillor S Bradwick
Councillor R Davis	Councillor A J Ellis
Councillor D Evans	Councillor A Fox
Councillor H Gronow	Councillor N H Morgan
Councillor D Owen-Jones	Councillor D Parkin
Councillor A Roberts	Councillor T Williams

Officers in attendance:-

Ms L Davies, Director, Public Health, Protection and Community Services
Mr C Hanagan, Service Director of Democratic Services & Communication
Mrs T Watson, Senior Democratic and Scrutiny Officer
Mr G Black, Community Safety and Strategic Partnerships Manager
C Emery, Interim Head Of Community Safety and Community Housing
Mr P Nicholls, Service Director, Legal Services
Ms C O'Neill, Strategic Arts & Culture Manager

County Borough Councillors in attendance:-

Councillor B Harris

Apologies for absence

Councillor G Stacey

28 APOLOGIES FOR ABSENCE

Apologies of absence were received from County Borough Councillor G Stacey.

29 DECLARATION OF INTEREST

In accordance with the Council's Code of Conduct, there were no declarations made pertaining to the agenda.

30 MINUTES

It was **RESOLVED** to approve the minutes of the 28th November 2022 as an accurate reflection of the meeting.

31 CONSULTATION LINKS

Members acknowledged the information provided through the consultation links in respect of open consultations, Welsh Government consultations and those matters being consulted upon by the local authority.

32 SUPPORT TO REFUGEES, UKRAINE NATIONALS AND ASYLUM SEEKERS IN RCT

The Director of Public Health, Protection & Community Service began by advising Members that the work cut across a number of teams, within Public Health, Protection, and Community Services with a number of the Refugee Programmes having been in place for a number of years. Members were informed that the purpose of bringing the report before Scrutiny, was for Members to consider how the Service had responded and continue to respond in terms of both the Wellbeing and support aspect for Refugees and those fleeing wars as well as considering how that aligned with the Services housing responsibilities. The Director of Public Health, Protection & Community Service highlighted to Members that this was a long report, and she would talk Members through as well as Members hearing from an Afghan refugee, Mr Osmani. The Director of Public Health, Protection & Community Service then took Members through the key points in the report, before pausing for questions from Members.

A Member stated that he wholeheartedly supported everything that had been said but felt this was the tip of the iceberg and said he would like to know how many properties Clearsprings Ready Homes (Clearsprings) had already provided and if possible, for Members to be given that information. The Member felt it would be useful to arrange a working party on this matter.

The Service Director, Democratic Services and Communications explained that it would be more appropriate, if there was a need for there to be a working party on this particular matter, this would be taken forward through the discussions of Chairs and Vice Chairs, in the Overview and Scrutiny Committee.

A Member supported the work being done 100% but felt it would be helpful if Members on either side of a ward could be told when refugees/Ukraine Nationals/asylum seekers were placed, as he had been told by residents, rather than being told directly, in respect of the Welcome Centre.

The Director of Public Health, Protection & Community explained that Clearsprings Ready Homes looked for properties from the private rented sector, so there was no impact on the social housing waiting list. Home Office guidance, in terms of engagement, and ability to consult was very restricted, and concerns had been expressed about the ability to engage and share that information. Where properties were proposed, initial feedback was given from a police perspective and community cohesion perspective and generally those conversations were positive. Clearsprings Ready Homes were under an imperative to secure properties and local Member views were fed back, and they were made aware of those conversations, but the Home Office didn't allow local Members to veto properties, so it was a very delicate negotiations between Officers and Clearsprings. In terms of the Members comment about the Welcome Centre, they were some very sensitive issues being managed when that premises were being opened and it was very difficult to get the balance right, in terms of information, but the Director of Public Health, Protection &

Community would take on board the feedback, of how difficult that made it for local Members.

The Community Safety and Strategic Partnerships Service Manager explained with regard to the question on numbers, Clearsprings had sourced a total of 29 properties, with 9 of those properties subsequently discarded by Clearsprings over location concerns, and currently only 2 other properties were occupied by asylum seekers, throughout RCT at the moment.

A Member stated that asylum seekers were probably going to be the most vulnerable of all and had very little access to resources and in respect of community cohesion, was what was being done, in terms of a strategy, involvement of the voluntary sector and whether there was a role for councillors, particularly where tensions might arise.

The Director of Public Health, Protection & Community explained that there was a community cohesion strategy and there were active dedicated community cohesion Officers and particular approaches to addressing community cohesion issues. In terms of the voluntary sector, this was very active in the community cohesion groups and were integral in driving community cohesion approaches generally and the Director of Public Health, Protection & Community explained that the Service could reflect on whether the strategy needed to be strengthened, particularly in relation to this cohort, to make sure it was as strong as it could be.

The Community Safety and Strategic Partnerships Service Manager explained that under the contract Clearsprings had with the Home Office, they had to provide a wrap around service whilst the asylum application was going through, which could take up to a number of years, so had to keep involved with that family. The Local Authority had also been quite proactive by linking in with Clearsprings with from day one to ensure the local authority was also in a position to provide that wrap around, either from a community and safety perspective, from the community cohesion team but also the resettlement team were involved, so there was plenty of support for asylum seekers. No funding was received for the wrap around service, so this was on top of all the other work.

A Member asked if the local authority supported asylum seekers or refugees, from other areas where there was no schemes set up. E.g., not from Ukraine, Afghanistan or Syria. The Member also asked if there was a mechanism for supporting asylum seekers, if they wanted to settle back in their own country.

The Director of Public Health, Protection & Community explained the report referred to particular re-settlement schemes which were aligned to a particular geographical location or particular conflicts, and had government funding and pathways, but the people being supported by Clearsprings, could be from anywhere in the world. She continued that for all the people in the UK and RCT, the task was to understand their needs and try and resettle them here. If any of those individuals in time found they did want to go back to their country, that decision was respected but there was a limit of what could then be done to support them. What was often seen was people wanting to settle elsewhere in the UK, and there was a process to support individuals and link up with local authorities and support networks, across the UK, to make sure the resettlement journey continued successfully.

The Community Development Service Manager explained in relation to the Ukraine resettlement that a number of Ukrainian residents had returned home, for a variety of reasons including medical reasons, to keep their families together, etc., and she highlighted that all the Ukrainian people spoken to, would prefer to go home.

A Member highlighted that 800 asylum seekers were expected to come into the area and asked how this would be done in a comfortable and respectable way.

The Director of Public Health, Protection & Community explained that this was the plan that was being written by the Wales Strategic Migration Partnership (WSMP), in collaboration with the 22 local authorities, is trying to describe what equitable dispersal could look like. She continued that this was not a RCT scheme, but a Home Office scheme and Clearsprings were accountable to the Home Office, which placed the local authority in a position to negotiate, build relationships with Clearsprings and try and influence properties that they are choosing. The local authority was doing its best to work with WG, the WLGA, etc., to describe how dispersal happens. The Director of Public Health, Protection & Community shared Members concerns about the numbers, but it was recognition that thousands of people arrived in the UK, as a nation of sanctuary and there was a legal and humanitarian obligation to try and meet those needs and grant asylum to those genuine cases.

A Member asked what age group, the unaccompanied young people were, coming across.

The Director of Public Health, Protection & Community confirmed that these were unaccompanied children, who were under 18 years of age, and why they fell under the remit of Children's services, as they had very specific safeguarding and support requirements.

A Member referred to the mention of Clearsprings and the Home Office and the impact they had, and asked what sort of checks, governance and scrutiny Clearsprings carried out, when selecting properties.

The Director of Public Health, Protection & Community explained that Clearsprings would be aware of what the legal requirements are in Wales, and renting home standards, and their contract with the Home Office is to ensure properties are fit and suitable for them to enter into, sometimes long contracts, with landlords, so they had to be of a minimum standard. With many of the other properties, particular properties sourced outside the social rented sector, environmental health officers or housing solutions officer, do the checks for the Ukraine hosted schemes, so there was standards across those, but the Clearsprings relationship is different but they are ultimately renting properties and placing people so they had to exercise their own due diligence, but we have met with them and explained our very specific HMO licensing requirements.

The Community Safety and Strategic Partnerships Manager explained that checks were made by Clearspring and then the local authority received the details of the address. He explained there maybe a number of individuals as asylum seekers, therefore probably more appropriate, for a HMO, so we the local authority would do the checks then to ensure the appropriate licence was in place, but Clearsprings did the initial checks and sourced the properties.

A Member enquired in respect of Welcome centre A, which was due to close at

the end of March and obviously if there are families who are still at Welcome centre A, is there any further support we would give them at that time, if that centre does close.

The Director of Public Health, Protection & Community explained that working in partnership with WG, and the Welcome Centre A, was set up on their behalf, there was an exit plan, with the housing team assessing peoples needs, with a number wishing to live outside RCT and this was being supported. If by the end of March, there wasn't move on accommodation for them, they would continue to be supported by WG and move into another Welcome Centre arrangement, in another local authority area.

Members then heard from Mr Osmani, who shared his experience as an Afghan refugee, coming to Wales.

The Chair and Members thanked Mr Osmani for sharing his experience and wished himself and his family a happy and peaceful future.

A Member acknowledged the harrowing impact of Mr Osmani's experience and the experiences of refugees and asked whether Officers were supported in their work.

The Community Development Service Manager explained that the Service was not just responding to the trauma that was affecting those that were arriving, particularly from the Ukraine, but had made sure everyone within that staff team had been trained in terms of responding to trauma. So, they had trauma informed practice training from Cwm Taf Morgannwg, from specialist advisors who have dealt with that within areas of extreme conflict, as well as access to the occupational health counselling that was available. There was also a dedicated counsellor staff team, for that 1 2 1 support, ready to be on site, if required.

The Head of Community Safety and Community added that her department covered a wide variety of vulnerable client groups, so all staff were trauma informed. Staff are also encouraged to talk about situations, to share experiences as a team and specialist teams e.g., housing solutions team, have access to specialist clinical supervision, on a 1 2 1 basis. Staff are also encourage to pick up on any Council resources available.

The Chair concluded by thanking the team, from herself and all Councillors, for everything they were doing and would continue to do.

Following scrutinization of the significant actions being taken to support and welcome people re-settling in RCT by the Council, partners and stakeholders, by the Committee, it was **RESOLVED** to note the increasing numbers of refugees, Ukrainian nationals and asylum seekers being resettled in RCT and consider the emerging housing, support and financial demands this presented.

The Head of Community Safety and Community began by advising Members that this was another very long report, which provided the Committee with an overview of the Rhondda Cynon Taf (RCT) Housing Allocation Scheme and gave the Committee an opportunity to understand how the policy worked, and to

what extent the policy helped the Council and its partners to meet the housing needs of people in RCT. The report also provided the Committee with an overview of the arrangements the Council has with local registered social landlords for the allocation and letting of social housing in the Borough, as well as highlighting the impact of pressures on the operation of the policy and current challenges and how these are being addressed. The Head of Community Safety and Community then summarised some of the key areas in the report, before pausing for questions from Members.

A Member noted the lack of availability of 3 or 4 bed housing raising the concerns of having mixed sharing in properties of 1 or 2 bed occupancy. The Member also raised concern regarding anti-social behaviour issues relating to sheltered accommodation and the age ranges that are currently housed here.

The Director of Public Health, Protection & Community explained that the Allocations Policy is being reviewed and this report highlights particular aspects of the policy that need specific review. The Director of Public Health, Protection & Community confirmed that the full details of the policy will be reported to Committee for scrutiny by Members in due course.

A Member questioned the banding system and if there were opportunities for the resulting band to be challenged.

The Head of Community Safety and Community confirmed the right to challenge and appeal the banding decision.

A Member stated their concerns regarding the opportunity for Local Members to be involved in the review process and provide an in-depth analysis of the issues faced on a local basis.

A Member questioned if there were figures available for voids.

The Director of Public Health, Protection & Community explained to Members that the Local Housing Market Assessment (HMA) had recently been reported to Cabinet. Members were advised this informs Local Development Plan and Social Housing Grant Investment programmes. Members were informed that a future report could be provided to Committee to explain how developments are identified and how the Social Housing Grants programme / private programmes discharge their responsibilities. The Director of Public Health, Protection & Community also explained that the HMA takes account of homelessness and data from the common housing register to try and forward plan for emerging housing need and informs future policy. Members were informed that a consequence of last HMA is the result of single person accommodation developments emerging in local areas. The Director of Public Health, Protection & Community explained the aim of the local authority is to try to secure mixed developments, but the current overwhelming need is for single person accommodation. The Director of Public Health, Protection & Community acknowledged the difficulties this can place on a local basis but advised the developments consider need across county borough. Members were also advised of the legal requirements that bound the policy, meaning difficult circumstances can arise requiring the balance of needs is met.

The Head of Community Safety and Community confirmed that to their knowledge there are currently no empty properties that can be currently let expanding on the issues of the standards of empty properties.

Following scrutinization of the actions being taken in respect of the proposed review of the RCTCBC Housing Allocation Scheme and timeline for completion of the review by the Council and RSL partners it was **RESOLVED** to note the current high demand for social housing and service pressures for the Common Housing Register.

34 INFORMATION REPORTS

Members were advised of the report that was reported for information and were reminded if they had any queries in relation to this report, they should contact the Scrutiny mailbox.

35 CHAIR'S REVIEW AND CLOSE

The Chair thanked Officers for the very comprehensive and challenging reports that had been presented and thanked Members for their questions and attendance and Officers for their input and reminded Members that the next meeting of this Committee would be held on 27th February 2023, at 5pm.

36 URGENT BUSINESS

None

This meeting closed at 6.51 pm

**Councillor J Bonetto
Chair.**