

MINUTES

HOUSING AND COMMUNITY OVERVIEW AND SCRUTINY COMMITTEE

10 SEPTEMBER 2014

Present:

Councillors:

Adeleke	Killen
Adshead	Mahmood (Vice-Chairman)
Clark	Marshall (Chairman)
Conway	McLean
Flint	R Sutton
Hearn	

Councillor Griffiths (Portfolio Holder, Housing)

Councillor Harden (Portfolio Holder, Residents & Regulatory Services)

Co-opted Member:

John Howard

Officers:

Elliott Brooks	Assistant Director, Housing
James Deane	Assistant Director, Finance and Resources
Andy Vincent	Group Manager, Tenants and Leaseholders
Chris Troy	Group Manager, Regulatory Services
Julie Still	Group Manager, Resident Services
Joe Guiton	Neighbourhood Action Team Leader
Trudi Coston	Member Support Officer (Minutes)

The meeting began at 7:30 pm

OS/190/14 MINUTES

The minutes of the Housing and Community Overview and Scrutiny Committee meeting held on 16 July 2014 were confirmed by the Members present and then signed by the Chairman.

OS/191/14 APOLOGIES FOR ABSENCE

Apologies for absence were received on behalf of Councillor Mrs Bassadone and Mavis Cook. Councillor Clark substituted for Councillor Mrs Bassadone and John Howard substituted for Mavis Cook.

OS/192/14 DECLARATIONS OF INTEREST

There were no declarations of interest.

OS/193/14 PUBLIC PARTICIPATION

There was no public participation.

OS/194/14 CONSIDERATION OF ANY MATTER REFERRED TO THE COMMITTEE IN RELATION TO CALL IN

None.

OS/195/14 QUARTER ONE BUDGET MONITORING REPORT

J Deane introduced the item and explained which sections of the report related to each of the budgets. He welcomed questions from the committee.

Councillor Adshead referred to Appendix C items 108 and 110 relating to Woodwells Cemetery and Bunkers Farm. He noted there was no original budget for either of them but a combined amount of £226k had been spent. J Deane said he would need to look in to the matter.

Councillor Mahmood asked if the slippage relating to Highbarns was from last year. J Deane advised it was outstanding costs from the works last year.

Councillor Mahmood referred to the budget for the Old Town Hall refurbishment and asked if it was carried over from last year. J Still replied it was slippage from the previous year.

Councillor Marshall referred to the overspend in the drainage budget and asked if it was a one-off or an ongoing problem. J Deane said it could have been an error and under budgeted last year. E Brooks suggested the drainage problem could have been due to the bad weather in the winter so it was difficult to say whether the issue would be ongoing.

Councillor Harden arrived at 7.45 pm.

Councillor Conway asked if the new contractors had caught up with any outstanding work that occurred between the change in contracts. E Brooks advised there was no break between contracts for responsive repairs but there was a 3 month break with planned repairs. He said they had already started working on properties in need of new kitchens and bathrooms as planned maintenance.

Councillor Conway felt there was a considerably long wait for the contractors to carry out repairs. E Brooks said there were some cases that would be put through as planned maintenance instead of a responsive repair and that was one of the changes they have made in asset management. He advised they were already seeing improvements and the average cost of repairs had been greatly reduced.

Councillor Adeleke asked if the contractors would have caught up by next year. E Brooks said the Council is planning that, with the increase in planned maintenance, the demand for responsive repairs will decrease and that occasionally a non-urgent responsive repair was not undertaken when the work is intended to be covered in the near future by planned maintenance.

Action:

J Deane to clarify original budget for Woodwells Cemetery and Bunkers Farm.

Outcome:

The report was noted.

OS/196/14 QUARTER ONE PERFORMANCE REPORT – REGULATORY SERVICES

C Troy introduced the item and highlighted various key points throughout the report.

Councillor Adeleke asked how much pest control charged to deal with rats. C Troy advised it was £44. Councillor Adeleke asked what would happen if someone could not pay the charge. C Troy said it was a public health duty and they have to treat the problem but would take in to consideration someone's ability to pay. He advised that Dacorum card holders received a reduction in the fee.

Councillor Adshead referred to the cycle to work scheme and asked if there was provisions to store bicycles at the council. C Troy advised there were spaces for bikes in the underground management car park.

Councillor Marshall referred to section 9 of the report and congratulated the officers. She then asked if the pest control charges were on the DBC website. Councillor Marshall said some charges were on there but others were not. Councillor Harden explained that the Portfolio Holders were of the view that all charges should be on DBC's website (unless there are good reasons not to publish them) and were taking steps accordingly.

Councillor Mahmood asked if foxes were considered as pests. C Troy said foxes were a difficulty due to their protection but more education was needed for businesses and households on waste management to deter foxes. He advised that bird feed in gardens as a big problem for attracting foxes.

Councillor Hearn asked if they had sufficient resources for the expansion in the pest control service. C Troy replied they were in the process of training officers in the department to help out.

Councillor McLean referred to the HMO (House in Multiple Occupation) mentioned in the report and asked if they were charging a premium rate. C Troy explained they were governed by the Housing Act in terms of cost but they will receive some income from the tenants.

Councillor Adshead asked if they could recover the cost of prosecuting the landlord of the HMO. C Troy advised they could not recover the costs but they had a duty to take action.

Outcome:

The report was noted.

OS/197/14 QUARTER ONE PERFORMANCE REPORT - HOUSING

E Brooks introduced the report and highlighted that the quarter one performance indicators would be the last that related to MITIE and the next quarterly report would relate to Osbournes. He advised that they were finalising some new performance indicators which were likely to be introduced in January 2015. He updated the committee on the Service Plan and the Risk Register and then welcomed the committee's questions.

Councillor Mahmood referred to the Housing Service Plan 2014/16 on page 20 of the report and asked if it was directed at tenants. E Brooks said it was directed to tenants but the council had an interest in the actions across the board. Regarding the Back to Work Initiative, Councillor Mahmood asked if the Job Centre should not be involved. E Brooks said many agencies would need to be involved including the Job Centre as they are likely to have more involvement on a day-to-day basis with tenants and that it is not intended that DBC be dealing with the Back to Work Initiative directly but through agencies.

Councillor Marshall asked for the STAR survey report, which informed the Service Plan, to be scheduled in for the meeting in October. A Vincent confirmed he would provide the report.

Councillor Mahmood said he was pleased to see tenants were downsizing.

Councillor Conway sought clarification as to why sheltered accommodation properties take so long to let. E Brooks explained that although the properties were often in good condition, the reasons for refusal were usually due to individuals specific needs.

Councillor Marshall queried why some historic data was not shown. E Brooks explained that the previous figures were under different codes and he will ask the responsible officers to transfer over the data history for the future reports.

Councillor Conway asked why it had taken longer to re-let properties. E Brooks advised the figures were the final period of time with the MITIE contract where the voids were not prioritised. He explained that they now met with Osbournes every Wednesday morning and received a live and up to date spreadsheet of every empty property in the Borough. He felt much more confident that the new process with Osbournes would reduce the time to re-let properties.

Action:

A Vincent to provide a STAR survey report at the next meeting in October.

Outcome:

The report was noted.

OS/198/14 QUARTER ONE PERFORMANCE REPORT – RESIDENT SERVICES

J Still explained that the way crime is measured has changed and incidents such as fly-tipping and not paying for petrol was now included in the statistics. She said that the Youth Clubs and Adventure playgrounds were continuing to be successful and well used. She congratulated Joe Guiton for all his hard work organising the Tour of Britain. She advised that the new CCTV systems were up and running and were proving successful, and added that the Old Town Hall launch is scheduled for Saturday 13 September.

Councillor Hearn asked why the Youth Connexions sessions had stopped in Adeyfield. J Still explained there had been significant damage to the equipment there and it required further monitoring before they could restart the sessions. She advised the agreement was now in place and the sessions had restarted on Monday 8 September.

Councillor Mahmood asked if there were going to be some new events at the Old Town Hall once it is fully open. J Still said there would be additional performances during the winter period and a full report detailing the proposals for the future would be coming to this committee in November this year. She advised that they now had a catering business in the premises; they had a good track record and run other contracts elsewhere.

Councillor Marshall asked if any consideration was given to community involvement when drawing up the tender and considering the bids. J Still said that they had approached the voluntary sector but it was not something they wished to pursue and therefore none applied at the final stage of the process.

Councillor Marshall referred to paragraph 5.2 and asked if the change in recording crimes was affecting the whole of Hertfordshire. J Still confirmed it was.

Councillor Mahmood asked what action was being taken to reduce burglaries. J Still said that Joint Action groups were working on trying to find trends in the crime and CCTV and Neighbourhood Support team also had involvement. Councillor Mahmood said it was a shame that Neighbourhood Watch had changed. J Still advised it was now called OWL but the work still continued.

Councillor McLean referred to the crime table on page 39 of the report and asked if it was possible to know the other districts and the reasons why Dacorum were 9th worst for dwelling burglaries. J Still said the other districts were all the Hertfordshire district authorities, and explained that individuals from outside of the Borough target particular areas within the Borough. She said resources were being directed to the specific needs of each area.

Action:

J Still to email members the monthly breakdown for crime in each Ward.

Outcome:

The report was noted.

OS/199/14 NEIGHBOURHOOD ACTION

J Guiton introduced the item and elaborated his report, particularly the pilot project planned for Highfield early next year.

Councillor Hearn noted there was no neighbourhood action service in Tring, but at paragraph 4.9 it showed poverty in a particular location in Tring. She asked if they would consider including that Tring area in the pilot. J Guiton explained they needed to look at the specific needs and demand of each area but he would look in to it and inform the appropriate Ward councillors of any progress. He said the intention is to have a week of action targeted work with multi-agencies, on the last day of the week they would collate the feedback and schedule the projects in for the year. Councillor Harden said it was not his intention to include the Tring area in the project. Councillor Hearn expressed disappointment.

Councillor Adshead referred to page 63 of the report and queried why the Police no longer attended the Neighbourhood Action meetings. J Guiton advised it was difficult for the Police to attend evening meetings but the problem had been identified and they were looking at options to ensure they remain informed.

Councillor Flint asked J Guiton to expand on the different agencies that they used as she felt it was more beneficial to use voluntary agencies. J Guiton said it depended on the service they needed to provide but they did make full use voluntary services.

Councillor Marshall asked how the new service would be resourced. J Still explained that they were unsure of the amount of resources they would need at this time but once it had been identified they would pull in resources from external agencies and the voluntary sector.

Councillor Marshall asked what the department would no longer be doing now in order to carry out the extra work. J Still said they had been working with a reduced number of staff for the last four months so they would continue to manage that same workload but an assessment needed to be carried out before introducing extra resources.

Councillor Marshall felt the Neighbourhood Action Survey was unclear on the level of satisfaction. J Still said they repeated the survey from last year and compared the results and the indication was that individuals were more satisfied. She said they hoped it was not because less people had bothered to complete the survey and it was that people were more satisfied.

Councillor Marshall asked what areas would no longer have evening meetings. J Still said the decision had not yet been made as they were waiting for the project to be evaluated. Councillor Adeleke asked when that would be. J Still advised it was planned between February and the end of the financial year.

Councillor Marshall asked what happened to the comments that the department could not deal with. J Still said they would seek involvement from multi-agencies to try and resolve specific issues.

Councillor Marshall asked if members were able to see a copy of the responses. J Guiton said the responses could be found on the website.

The Committee agreed that the following action is required:

Action:

An update to be emailed to the Committee in January 2015 to specify (1) what resources are being redeployed (2) what areas of the Neighbourhood Action service is being diminished or stopped in order to service Highfield and other changes to the Department's work and (3) when the area in Tring identified as having a high level of child poverty will be the subject of a targeted programme by the Department similar to that being provided to Highfield.

Outcome:

The report was noted.

OS/200/14 VULNERABLE PERSONS STRATEGY

A Vincent introduced the report and explained that the housing service was working to develop a vulnerable person's strategy to identify the needs of new and existing council tenants throughout different stages of their lives. He said the key objective was to take people through a journey.

Councillor Flint said she was impressed with the report. She said it was important that the service was tailor-made to vulnerable people.

A Vincent advised that a Team Leader had been recruited and is due to commence employment in October 2014.

Councillor Killen endorsed Councillor Flint's comments. She asked what action would be taken to help homeowners that are unable to pay their mortgage and risk repossession. A Vincent said they wanted to have more involvement with the housing advice and homelessness department to ensure all individual needs are understood. Councillor Killen said it was important that people are made aware of what services are available to them, and A Vincent agreed.

Councillor Marshall said she was pleased to see progress being made but felt there was a need throughout the council to be more aware of vulnerable people. A Vincent said it was a point that he had raised many times before that more recognition was needed council wide. He said services were becoming more tailor-made to individual needs.

Councillor Hearn referred to page 119 and said there were tenants, particularly elderly tenants, wanting to downsize but are unaware of the bidding system or unable to use it. She felt more help was required for those people. A Vincent said that colleagues in Strategic Housing were pro-active in contacting people to encourage and help them to bid for properties, especially those with high points and in greater need. Councillor Marshall asked when this service had started. A Vincent replied approximately six months ago. Councillor Marshall said she was aware of a very recent case where staff did not have sufficient time to provide such support.

Councillor Marshall queried the staffing implications of the Strategy and asked if the Department had the resources to deliver the whole package. E Brooks explained they had a mix of current officers and two new roles to produce a dedicated team. He said they had wanted to do more than they are at present so they ensured budgetary provision was made to create a new team and introduce a team leader role. He reassured the committee that they should now have the resources to deliver the strategy.

Councillor Adshead left the meeting at 9.30 pm.

Councillor Marshall referred to page 136 and said she felt that officers are often unaware of voluntary organisations available to help. A Vincent said they wanted to involve all available agencies to help families to sustain their tenancies. Councillor Marshall suggested A Vincent circulate the draft list of agencies to members to check none had been missed. A Vincent agreed. E Brooks said he felt that having a dedicated team would be beneficial with issues like this as they would have all the information they needed to deal with each issue.

Councillor Marshall asked when the strategy would be completed. A Vincent said they were now approaching the final version and hoped it would be completed by November.

The Committee were very impressed with the Strategy and considered that a similar strategy should be made Council-wide, not just confined to housing. Consequently the Committee resolved to commend the strategy and recommend to Cabinet that the principles of the Strategy are considered to be taken forward in a Council-wide Vulnerable Persons Strategy.

Action:

A Vincent to circulate a draft of the list of voluntary groups referred to in the Strategy to members.

Outcome:

The committee supported the Vulnerable Persons Strategy but recommended to Cabinet that the principles of the Strategy are considered and taken forward in a council-wide Vulnerable Persons Strategy.

OS/201/14 HOUSING REVENUE ACCOUNT BUSINESS PLAN

E Brooks introduced the report and highlighted that it was late this year as they were waiting for the new Government Rent Guidance to be released so they could identify what would be affected going forward, and consult with the Tenant and Leaseholder Committee (TLC). He highlighted a key page within the report, namely page 182. He welcomed the committee's questions.

Councillor Harden left the meeting at 9.40 pm.

Councillor Marshall asked if her assumption was correct that it will be proposed next financial year that the rent of tenants currently paying the target rent would increase by CPI + 1%, and the rent of tenants currently paying below target rent would have their rent increased by RPI + 0.5% + £2 per week. She referred to Appendix 1 of the report and felt it was the most helpful in giving a clear explanation of the matter. E Brooks said that, whilst the TLC were supportive of the proposed rent increases, they were also concerned about the impact of such rent increases and the sustainability for tenants. John Howard said there was no plan B and the TLC felt they would be neglecting their duties as a responsible body if they did not support the increase in rent to fund increasing the housing stock whilst there are so many people waiting on the Housing Register.

Councillor Marshall asked if new tenants were given advice on Asbestos. E Brooks advised new tenants received Asbestos information during their sign-up. Councillor Marshall asked if the information was sufficient for them to be covered if an incident arose. E Brooks said any high risk asbestos would be dealt with during the period of the property being empty and any undisturbed asbestos considered to be low risk is left alone but notification would be given.

Councillor Marshall said the Business Plan understandably concentrated on Property and Place but felt no reference was made to cost of management, staffing, software etc. E Brooks felt that was a fair point and although the costings were incorporated in to the Business Plan, more references could be made.

Councillor Griffiths said the purpose of the chart on page 166 of the report was to highlight the key themes in the Business Plan.

Outcome:

The report was noted.

OS/202/14 WORK PROGRAMME

The following items were added to the work programme:

October:

STAR Survey – A Vincent/E Brooks

December:

Air Quality Action Plan – N Egerton

The meeting closed at 9.51 pm.