

MINUTES

HOUSING AND COMMUNITY OVERVIEW AND SCRUTINY COMMITTEE

17 JULY 2013

Present:

Councillors:

Adeleke	N Hollinghurst
Adshead	Killen
Bassadone	Mahmood (Vice-Chairman)
Conway	Marshall (Chairman)
Douris	McLean
Flint	Organ

Co-opted Members:

M Cook

Also Attended:

Councillor N Harden Portfolio Holder for Resident and Regulatory Services

Officers:

Chris Troy	Group Manager (Regulatory Services)
Julia Hedger	Group Manager (Strategic Housing)
Julie Still	Group Manager (Resident Services)
Nicholas Egerton	Team Leader (Environmental Protection & Housing)
Natasha Brathwaite	Team Leader (Housing Advice & Homelessness)
Isabel Connolly	Team Leader (Strategy & Private Sector Housing)
Clare Thorley	Member Support Officer, Democratic Services

The meeting began at 7:34 pm

OS/131/13 MINUTES

The minutes of the meetings held on 19 June 2013 were agreed by the Members present and signed by the Chairman.

Following the circulation of the Youth Connexions briefing report by Mohamed Fawzi (following on from the Housing and Scrutiny OSC on the 13 March) several councillors had some queries regarding the report. Councillor Bassadone commented that there appeared to be a lack of budgetary information in the report and she asked if these could be provided to the Housing & Community OSC.

Councillor Flint said that she had been disappointed with the report and that she was interested to know how many face-to-face meetings had been carried out between the Youth Connexions team and the young people in the area. Councillor Flint added that figures outlining the number of young people who were using the Connexions building at Jarman's Park was also absent. Councillor Flint also thought the report submitted by Mohamed Fawzi contained figures from youth projects that were part of Dacorum Borough Council initiatives and not only Youth Connexions projects. Councillor Flint said that considering all of these points she was not happy for a review of Youth Connexions to be done in a year's time and that perhaps it needed to be done sooner.

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Councillor Douris also agreed with this and said that a more detailed report with accurate figures needed to be produced. Councillor Douris was concerned that there was the opportunity for 'double-counting', and that clearer distinctions needed to be made between young people supported by Dacorum Borough Council and young people supported by Youth Connexions in order to ensure that Youth Connexions was providing value for money. Councillor Douris suggested that it may be more beneficial to have a review of Youth Connexions in six months.

Councillor Mahmood commented that there seemed to be a number of youth clubs in the area in addition to Youth Connexions and that more openness and communication between the clubs, Youth Connexions and Dacorum Borough Council was needed in order for members to be fully aware as to what provisions were in place for young people.

Councillor Hollinghurst then commented that the report did not appear to detail the outputs of Youth Connexions for example; what jobs were these people obtaining following their contact with Youth Connexions.

The Chairman then explained that in the original set of figures provided by Youth Connexions there were numbers of how many young people went into further education or employment. The Chairman asked Councillors to send her any more questions they had in relation to Youth Connexions and that perhaps a review could be scheduled for early 2014. The Committee agreed.

Outcome:

A Youth Connexions review would be held early in 2014.

OS/132/13 APOLOGIES FOR ABSENCE

Apologies for absence were submitted on behalf of Councillor Organ.

OS/133/13 DECLARATIONS OF INTEREST

There were no declarations of interest.

OS/134/13 PUBLIC PARTICIPATION

There was no public participation.

OS/135/13 CONSIDERATION OF ANY MATTER REFERRED TO THE COMMITTEE IN RELATION TO A CALL-IN

There were no matters referred to the committee in relation to a call-in.

OS/136/13 MILESTONES FOR THE HOUSING SERVICE PLAN

J Hedger introduced the report and asked if there were any questions. The Chairman said that the report had been presented at the last meeting in June but had lacked target dates. The Chairman asked the committee if a review late this year or early next year would be appropriate.

Councillor Mahmood asked if there were any contingencies to tackle unforeseen circumstances regarding homelessness. J Hedger commented that provisions for homelessness came out of the General Fund, which is regularly reviewed, and the budget had been increased to take into account potential increases in homelessness.

Chairman:

Outcome:

The report was noted and an update be provided at the end of 2013.

OS/137/13 EMPTY HOMES STRATEGY

C Troy introduced the report and outlined the key aims of the strategy and also the approach that Dacorum Borough Council would be adopting in regard to bringing empty homes into use. C Troy also drew attention to issue that the number of empty homes in Dacorum had been rising in contrast to the national trend which showed a decrease in the number of empty homes.

Councillor Harden entered the meeting at 19.50

Councillor McLean asked C Troy to explain why the empty number of homes in Dacorum was rising despite the national number decreasing. C Troy explained that this could be due to there not being an empty homes strategy in place in Dacorum to tackle the issue.

Councillor McLean asked if Nicholas Egerton knew the average length of time that homes are empty in the Borough and approximately how long it took to get an empty home back into use following council intervention. Nicholas Egerton said that he was not sure of the average length of time though how long it takes to get an empty home back to being in use depended on what options were available and whether is legal action required.

Councillor Mclean stated that the strategy did not appear to be a quick solution to the problem of empty homes. N Egerton stated that, by targeting and approaching owners of homes that had been empty for a period of 6 months (instead of 2 years), the Council could work alongside home owners to return the property to usage quickly.

Councillor Killen commented that presumably some derelict homes left empty longer than 6 months which would be targeted by the empty homes strategy would need a great deal of refurbishment. N Egerton said that the empty house strategy would consider the feasibility of taking over potentially derelict houses and depending on the level of refurbishment needed they would not take them on. Councillor Killen asked that if the financial costs of refurbishment were too expensive, would these properties be completely excluded from the strategy? N Egerton commented that there may be potential in this circumstance for a compulsory purchase order to take over property and sell to potential developers.

Councillor Adeleke asked if there were issues around EU regulations and the Human Rights Act in regards to this strategy. For example did it mean that people were unable to purchase a holiday or second home in an area and then leave it uninhabited for an undisclosed period of time? N Egerton said that the strategy did not concern second homes and second homes left empty for a long period of time that were not causing problems were a low priority for the strategy.

Councillor Adeleke then drew attention to point 2.2 in the agenda and asked where the money for loans that helped people bring their properties back up to a liveable standard would be coming from. N Egerton said that there was a national empty homes loan scheme and that Dacorum Borough Council would encourage people to look at this. This national scheme will be discussed in a future report to be submitted to the Housing & Community OSC around the Housing Assistance Policy.

Councillor Adeleke asked if people may take advantage of this scheme, in that if they had a property they were struggling to sell would they leave their house empty in order to provoke Dacorum Borough Council into carrying out a compulsory purchase order. N Egerton said

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that because compulsory purchase orders were carried out using current market rates, there would be no financial incentive for people to deliberately invoke a compulsory purchase order.

Councillor Adeleke then asked whether the inspectors looking at the properties concerned would be new hires or existing officers. N Egerton said that they would be existing officers and that the Environmental Protection & Housing team had already devised an approach for Environmental Enforcement Officers doing the inspection of empty homes and that this team would be liaising with the council tax department to identify homes registered as second homes or empty.

Councillor Hollinghurst then said that under the 2004 Housing Act, councils now had the power to place orders on property owners to improve the quality of the housing stock and that he hoped that the Empty Homes Strategy would be implemented in a sensitive manner so as not to negatively affect vulnerable property owners who had let the standard of their property decline due to circumstances out of their control. C Troy said that the Council were obliged to behave in a proper manner and N Egerton added that the upcoming report on Housing Enforcement Policy would be complying with the enforcement regulation code. N Egerton added that a compulsory purchase order was absolutely a last resort and that only 14 compulsory purchases had been carried out nationally which indicated it was quite a rare occurrence.

Councillor Hollinghurst also mentioned that there were many empty flats above commercial properties that were used for storage and also that potentially the council owned some of these flats and asked if they could not be used for accommodation. J Hedger stated that there were not many flats owned by the General Fund but any that were owned were now being used by Dacorum Borough Council and DENS as temporary accommodation for homeless people and that 5 of these vacant flats had recently been renovated specifically for this purpose.

Councillor Bassadone then queried the point that property owners were liable if children came on to the property and injured themselves whilst playing. She questioned this as surely children were trespassing. C Troy stated that under current health and safety legislation the owner would be liable.

Councillor Mahmood pointed out that one way to combat rising numbers of empty homes would be to double the council tax after 3 months of the property being vacant. Councillor Mahmood pointed out that this may speed up the process of making empty homes habitable again.

The Chairman then asked Councillor Harden if the Council Tax policy regarding empty homes had not recently been reviewed by Cabinet and Councillor Harden replied that it had, implementing certain changes to the discount scheme. N Egerton drew attention to point 4.1 where the Council had introduced a 150% council tax charge for long-term empty properties (over 2 years empty).

J Hedger stated, in relation to the empty flats above commercial properties, that the Council is working on their property assets and temporary accommodation is very much needed by the Council. Therefore when commercial leases were coming to an end, the Housing team were working with Mike Evans (Group Manager, Commercial Assets & Property Development) to look at splitting the commercial property away from the flats above, so as to provide more residential accommodation for use by the Housing Department.

Councillor Flint said that the empty homes strategy was very positive but that it could potentially be quite expensive to make the necessary alterations to the flats above commercial properties. J Hedger said that while this is true, there are however savings to be

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made using these flats as temporary accommodation for homeless individuals instead of covering the cost of them staying in B&B's. J Hedger also pointed out that the Council could create revenue by charging rent on some of the properties and that this profit would be fed back into the homelessness strategy.

Councillor Douris stated that if businesses were using adjacent flats for storage then they should move to larger commercial properties in order to release the flats back into the domestic market, Councillor Douris suggested that perhaps Mike Evans should take a firmer approach with businesses to ensure this was achieved. J Hedger stated that Mike Evans had been working from this viewpoint and also working with DENS to pass properties onto them for the homeless. J Hedger pointed out that this was beneficial because if more homeless individuals were supported by DENS this would enable Dacorum Borough Council's homelessness team to help more people.

The Chairman asked if there was any data protection implications on using Council Tax records for information. N Egerton advised no as it relates to possible enforcement.

Outcome:

The report was noted and recommended for approval by Cabinet.

OS/138/13 HOMELESSNESS STRATEGY

I Connolly introduced the report on the new draft Homelessness Strategy for 2013-2018. Following legislative changes, the housing team had completed a full service review including a peer review in May 2012, an internal audit by Deloitte in February 2013 and then an internal service review looking at several case studies. These reviews helped shaped the four key objectives of the strategy which focused on primary prevention of homelessness, securing suitable and appropriate accommodation for homeless individuals, to provide support for people who were homeless or threatened with homelessness and finally to tackle the root causes of homelessness through early intervention and prevention through education.

Councillor Hollinghurst stated that the commitment to work on primary causes was very good but he highlighted that mental illness often played a large part in homelessness and related Government programmes concerning homelessness no longer had a discrete fund for individuals who were homeless due to mental health issues. Councillor Hollinghurst enquired whether the housing team worked with mental health agencies to combat this. N Brathwaite stated that the housing team had a monthly meeting with the mental health community team and had close links with other agencies supporting vulnerable individuals such as the County Council and the 'Striving Families' officer in order to prevent homelessness arising from their circumstances.

Councillor Mclean commended the strategy and asked what financial incentive there was for landlords to take in homeless individuals and was Dacorum Borough Council providing the funds for this. I Connolly said that this issue related to the Deposit Guarantee Scheme mentioned later in the agenda and that the housing team were looking to develop the service further and provide a package for tenants and landlords, whilst also providing a mediation service for landlords and tenants should tenancy problems arise.

Councillor Hollinghurst commented that the Housing Allowance Rate in Tring, for housing benefit purposes, had been set in a Local Market Rental Area which included Aylesbury where rents are very low whereas Hemel Hempstead is in an area which includes St Albans and Harpenden where rents are very high, thus the residents of Tring are at a disadvantage. Councillor Hollinghurst asked if this could be looked at again. Councillor Hollinghurst noted that there also appeared to be a lot of new builds in Aylesbury, Leighton Buzzard and Dunstable and asked if there was some way of perhaps using these buildings as rented

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accommodation. J Hedger said that something like this had been looked at before more locally but that the challenge was around convincing developers to rent the properties to the Council as this was not something the developers are keen to do.

The Chairman then asked in relation to Councillor Hollinghurst's query about Local Market Rental Areas, when Dacorum Borough Council had last appealed to the Government regarding the boundaries. J Hedger said that this was a common issue for authorities and Dacorum Borough Council had last appealed a few years ago but to no effect. The chairman then asked if it would be possible to appeal again. J Hedger said that she would have to discuss this with Mark Gaynor and Dacorum Borough's two MP's. N Brathwaite explained that the reason Tring was included in the Aylesbury catchment area was due to the sharing of transport facilities which tied them into that area. The Chairman asked if appealing against this could be looked at again in view of the change in Government and asked for an update on this point be provided to the Committee over the coming months.

Councillor Adeleke stated that he thought it was a very good report but that he had a query regarding the Partners involved in the homelessness service. Councillor Adeleke asked if the YMCA in Watford was also included as a Partner and in addition was there a meeting date for all these Partners to come together to ensure they were all working together cohesively. I Connolly said that Dacorum Borough Council's key partners met annually at a housing forum which was key to finalising strategic points in the Housing Strategy. N Brathwaite pointed out that the list comprised the main, key partners but that Dacorum Borough Council also worked with partners such as the YMCA.

Councillor Harden asked what the controls were for out-of-borough placements concerning ex-offenders by London local authorities. J Hedger said that the London authorities had to liaise with Dacorum Borough Council before placing ex-offenders in the area and that these individuals would need to have a pre-existing link with the area in the first place. J Hedger said that recently only 5 young men from outside the Borough had been placed in a multi-occupation house and that they had no history of criminality. J Hedger pointed out that often Dacorum would be bypassed for out-of-borough placements, who would often be placed in Milton Keynes or Northampton. J Hedger said that no sex offenders would be accepted into the community via another authority's out-of-borough placement scheme. Councillor Harden also expressed concern that the new homeless shelter being built in Dacorum may become a 'dumping ground' for other councils to house their homeless. J Hedger explained that the homeless shelter had 41 beds available, half of which was only for individuals referred by Dacorum Borough Council. The other beds are still yet to be designated but that any institution looking to place individuals there would have to go through a rigorous procurement process and measures had been put in place to ensure that a 'dumping ground' scenario did not occur. J Hedger also commented that local organisations such as DENS and Druglink had expressed an interest in the shelter and acquiring these additional beds.

Councillor Bassadone commented that when she had attended housing appeals meetings she had noticed applicants from outside the borough. N Brathwaite said that in order for an application to be successful, applicants from beyond Dacorum would have to prove that they had a relevant local link, N Brathwaite did acknowledge however that the Council was obliged to provide advice and guidance to any individual who approached them needing housing advice and so the Council did have to consider all applications but that having a local link is an extremely significant criteria.

The Chairman agreed that this was a good report but asked what the working relationship with the local charities entailed. N Brathwaite responded by saying that the Housing Team ran local 'housing surgeries' which the local charities attended and helped provide advice to members of the community that had housing issues. N Brathwaite said that Dacorum Food Bank had a collection point in the Civic Centre and that officers were able to issue food bank vouchers to those in need. I Connolly also pointed out that officers were helping families

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using the Food Bank to learn how to budget for food. DENS also had a system with the Council whereby they helped provided low cost packages to those in temporary accommodation with bare essentials, for example furniture.

The Chairman enquired what the pathway for ex-offenders was as mentioned on p63 of the agenda. N Brathwaite stated that the Council is obliged to provide housing advice and temporary accommodation to ex-offenders subsequent to them leaving their temporary licensed accommodation provided by the probation service. N Brathwaite stated that the housing team worked with HMP The Mount to give offenders housing advice 3 months prior to their release. I Connolly said that this issue fell under one of the main strategic objectives of the Homelessness Strategy; 'to provide appropriate accommodation' and that the council along with DENS and Druglink were looking at potential group accommodation in the private sector for ex-offenders.

The Chairman then asked what the 'Outcome Star Model' was on p78. I Connolly said that it was a 10-point model that encompassed various areas of someone's life. The idea was that the model focuses more clearly on the individual and the aspects of their life that may be contributing to their housing predicament.

The Chairman then drew attention to the 'No Second Night Out' policy and enquired who would be overseeing this and ensuring that individuals it concerned were not spending a 'second night' without accommodation. J Hedger explained that this was a Government initiative and that the Council conducted a 12 month count of rough sleepers and that the number in Dacorum was currently approximately 7. J Hedger explained that this number would have to be submitted to the Government in October. I Connolly explained that the housing team are hoping to commit to a 'No First Night Out' strategy and that they were working alongside DENS to achieve this. Councillor Adeleke queried the number of people sleeping rough in Dacorum and what was being done to help these individuals. J Hedger stated that there is a core group of individuals who are currently sleeping rough in Hemel Hempstead who are known to the housing team and that every effort had been made to help these individuals with their housing situation but that they had turned down the advice and/or accommodation offered by the Council.

The Chairman asked in relation to the education programme in objective 4 of the strategy, who would be carrying out the education in secondary schools. N Brathwaite stated that this is a mayoral initiative and would be implemented in September. It would take the form of lesson plans and/or assemblies and that Strategic Housing recognised that there was work around looking at why young people fall into homelessness. The teaching would be carried out by teachers in the school but that Housing officers would be providing teachers with material and support to carry out this initiative.

Outcome:

The strategy was noted and the committee recommended its approval by cabinet.

OS/139/13 DEPOSIT GUARANTEE SCHEME SERVICE

I Connolly introduced the report and outlined that it was an internal service development with a view to developing and rebranding the existing service (DIGS), using it as a housing option to help people sustain their tenancy. I Connolly outlined that the housing team would appoint an officer who focused on developing and maintaining relationships between Landlords and Tenants using a variety of methods including mediation services, social media and online tools. This cultivation of positive relationships with Landlords and tenants, including a mediation service for landlords and tenants, should reduce the risk of landlords claiming from the Council under the Deposit Guarantee Scheme. J Hedger also asked for it to be noted that in contrast to the proposed timeline set out in the agenda, this report would not be brought to Cabinet in July and that it had been brought to the Housing & Community OSC for

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discussion only. The consultation of Landlords had been put back to early September, when there would be the next Landlords' Forum.

Councillor McLean asked if, once this scheme had been rolled out, it would be possible for the Housing & Community OSC to receive regular updates on this. J Hedger responded by saying that the scheme's performance would be monitored by Corvu and that updates would be submitted to the Housing & Community OSC via quarterly reports.

Councillor Killen then asked if there was to be a cap on the amount of money landlords could claim back from the Council under this scheme should claims be received which would breach the budget. J Hedger responded by saying that typically there was a very low claim rate and that there was a budget in place to deal with any potential claims and there would also be an opportunity to review this budget in the event of a rise in claims. I Connolly added that typically the deposit was just the first month's rent and from this amount the Landlord would only be able to claim for damage or loss in relation to the property but not rent loss, so in effect the amount claimable was capped by the deposit itself. I Connolly assured councillors that this process was rigorously monitored in order to keep claim levels down.

The Chairman queried the budgetary implications and whether vulnerable single people would be covered by this Council scheme or the Rent Aid scheme. J Hedger stated that single people will continue to be assisted under the Rent Aid scheme run by DENS, under a separate Council budget but would advise the Committee of the budgets set aside for the Council scheme and the Rent Aid scheme.

Councillor Adeleke then asked who was responsible for monitoring the Landlords and ensuring that their property was kept up to a reasonable standard. I Connolly explained that this was outside of the housing teams remit. J Hedger commented that if the property became uninhabitable then enforcement action could be carried out by the Environmental Health Team.

Outcome:

The report was noted and the Scheme supported

OS/140/13 DOMESTIC ABUSE POLICY

Julie Still introduced the Corporate Domestic Abuse Policy that brought together all services to provide a co-ordinated approach when tackling domestic violence. Julie Still outlined that part of the approach was to train officers to be more aware of the issue of domestic violence so they could potentially identify colleagues who were affected by domestic violence. Julie Still also pointed out that there was a specific officer championing this within the Resident services team who was very experienced and recognised by CAADA (Co-ordinated Action against Domestic Abuse).

Councillor Douris asked if the Partnership list was a 'live' list that was updated regularly and whether there were other agencies involved in helping Domestic Abuse victims that were not on the list. J Still said that yes, the list was live and close working relationships were formed with agencies who help victims of Domestic Violence.

Councillor Flint commented that she had been involved with the local women's refuge since it had opened and that she would like to know, as the refuge is now run by Hightown, whether Dacorum Borough Council would be monitoring this takeover. J Hedger said that Dacorum Borough Council would be monitoring Hightown and their running of the refuge and that Hightown had made an effort to get Dacorum Borough Council's input into the operational strategy, J Still then said that she would get some feedback to the Housing & Community OSC concerning Hightown's takeover of the shelter.

Chairman:

Councillor Bassadone said she was staggered at the figures concerning domestic abuse related deaths in point 3.2, J Still commented that there had been two cases of homicide in Dacorum relating to domestic abuse and that the team were learning a lot from these cases and that there needed to be a robust structure in place when looking at incidents like this. Councillor Mclean asked J Still if there was a men's refuge in Dacorum, J Still said no but she was aware of men's refuges in London and Birmingham.

Councillor Killen referred to point 3.5 on p113 and asked if the Policy was sufficiently flexible to enable changes to take place as a result of national or local reviews. J Still said yes.

The Chairman then asked who the Lead Officer mentioned in point 5 was. J Still said that the Lead Officer was Nicola Bryant and that her role included delivering training to the officers sourced to be trained for the Domestic Abuse Policy. J Still also added that this training was open to Members if they wished to take part.

The Chairman also then referred to a point on p112 of the agenda concerning officer's cultural awareness. The Chairman commented that presumably all officers in Dacorum Borough Council were culturally aware. J Still responded by saying that as the officers trained in the Domestic Abuse Policy were to be the first point of contact for victims of domestic violence it was important that they were extra aware of subtle cultural differences that may have been a factor in any instances of abuse.

OS/141/13 WORK PROGRAMME 2013/14

The Committee discussed the 2013/14 work programme and made the following additions:

16 October

New Build Development Strategy

13 November

Review of Homelessness Strategy following Cabinet

19 March

Older Persons Strategy

No Fixed Date

Youth Connexions update

The meeting ended at 9.45 pm.

Chairman: