

MINUTES

HOUSING AND COMMUNITY OVERVIEW AND SCRUTINY COMMITTEE

19 JUNE 2013

Present:

Councillors:

Adeleke	Killen
Adshead	Mahmood (Vice-Chairman)
Mrs Bassadone	Marshall (Chairman)
Douris	McLean
Flint	Wixted

Also Attended:

Councillor Griffiths

Portfolio Holder for Housing

Councillor Tiley

Portfolio Holder for Finance & Resources

Officers:

Steve Baker

Assistant Director (Legal, Democratic and Regulatory)

Elliot Brooks

Assistant Director (Housing Landlord)

James Deane

Assistant Director (Finance & Resources)

Julie Still

Group Manager (Resident Services)

Chris Baker

Group Manager (Revenues, Benefits & Fraud)

Nicholas Egerton

Team Leader (Environmental Protection & Housing)

Sara Railson

Team Leader (Arts)

Carolyn Leech

Team Leader (Policy & Participation)

Jack Burnham

Team Leader (Strategy & Development)

Camelia Smith

Lead Officer (Housing Development & Programme Delivery)

Claire Lynch

Lead Officer (Active Communities)

Pauline Bowles

Member Support Officer (Democratic Services)

Clare Thorley

Member Support Officer (Democratic Services)

The meeting began at 7:30 pm

OS/116/13 MINUTES

The minutes of the meeting held on the 13 March 2013 were agreed by the Members present and then signed by the Chairman subject to the following changes:

Minute OS/079/13 (Presentation by Youth Connexions) - Councillor Mrs Bassadone said that 13,319 people (not young people) lived in Tring.

Minute OS/086/13 (Work Programme 2013/1) – the additional item was an update on the Star Satisfaction Survey to the November 2013 meeting.

UPDATE ON MINUTES

Councillor Marshall advised that she had not progressed the issue of the statistics on Youth Connexions as quickly as she ought and promised to report at the next meeting.

OS/117/13 APOLOGIES FOR ABSENCE

Apologies for absence were submitted on behalf of Councillors Conway and Organ and S Parker and M Cook.

Councillor Wixted substituted for Councillor Organ.

OS/118/13 DECLARATIONS OF INTEREST

- Councillor Marshall declared a personal interest as she is a trustee for Hemel Hempstead Day Centre for the Elderly.
- Councillor Flint declared a personal interest as she is member of Urban Access.
- Councillor Douris declared a personal interest as HCC Executive member for Highways and Waste Management

OS/119/13 PUBLIC PARTICIPATION

There was no public participation.

OS/120/13 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/121/13 QUARTER FOUR PERFORMANCE REPORT – RESIDENT SERVICES

J Still introduced the item and drew attention to the great reduction in the general crime figures and to the first tier of the verge hardening project that starts on Monday. The finance for this project will fund more projects than initially expected and therefore the second tier is now being considered and consultation will start for new areas on the list.

The review of the Adventure Playgrounds has taken place and the new structure comes into force on 1 July. The opening hours remain the same but the Youth Club sessions have been incorporated as part of the playgrounds core business which has proved very successful with around 60-70 young people attending each session.

Last year proved very successful for Youth Democracy. One achievement was a film competition lead by the Active Communities Officer to encourage young people to vote. The winning two minute film was shown at the meeting and was well received.

Key points of discussion:

In response to a question from Councillor Killen relating to the reduced crime figures, J Still replied that despite the Borough wide 12.5% reduction of crime, Berkhamsted has seen a significant increase in crime due to a high number of domestic burglaries. Arrests have been made and the recent levels of burglaries in Berkhamsted have fallen.

Councillor Mahmood asked the reasons for the overall reduction in crime. J Still replied that this reflects a nationwide trend, but DBC has been particularly successful due to a whole range of projects targeted on specific priorities, identified within the Community Safety Plan.

Councillor McLean asked about the date for the transfer of the CCTV control centre to Cupid Green. He referred to a particular problem of fly-tipping in Barnes Lane, Kings Langley that

he has raised with the Portfolio Holder, who agreed to look at the possibility of a camera at this spot once the move was completed.

J Still replied that the service is being transferred gradually. The operators have to be trained on the new system, but it is hoped the transfer will be completed by the end of the summer. All members will be invited to view the new facilities.

Councillor Mahmood asked about the work capacity of the Family Intervention Officer. J Still replied that the work of the Family Intervention Officer varies, but the demand for the service is growing. He is currently working with seven families which are at the very high end of what he can manage. He regularly spends up to ten hours with each family giving intense support. The Family Intervention Officer has an enhanced DBS (formally CRB) check and has received specific training in dealing with troubled families as well as receiving clinical support for himself.

Councillor Tiley referred to the Case Study contained within the report. He said it had been a real success story and asked for congratulations to be passed on to the person responsible for this intervention that has resulted in a transformation of this family's life. The Committee agreed.

Outcome:

The report was noted.

OS/122/13 QUARTER FOUR PERFORMANCE REPORT – REGULATORY SERVICES

Steve Baker introduced Nicholas Egerton, (Team Leader Environmental Protection & Housing) and Acting Group Manager for Environmental Services.

The red indicator for removal of abandoned vehicles within 24 hours was highlighted and he said that the report sets out corrective action that has taken place to put this right.

Steve Baker referred to the amber indicator for percentage of high risk food premises. He said that the Council had to shut down a certain food premises due to serious mouse infestation. The food operator was successfully prosecuted, he was fined £5,000 and had to pay the Council's costs.

Referring to paragraph 3.2, Steve Baker reported that Empire Cinemas has now been accepted along with Tesco as Primary Authority Partnerships. Rita McGinley was heavily involved in running the partnerships and, since her leaving, a specialist Environmental Health Officer (James Allaker) has been recruited to run these two partnerships. This new post is fully funded by Tesco and Empire Cinemas.

Key points of discussion:

Councillor McLean felt it would be helpful to know the number of abandoned cars that the indicators referred to and also, how many food premises are being checked each quarter. Steve Baker agreed that this information would be provided in future reports.

Councillor Adeleke asked for clarification on the definition of food premises. Nicholas Egerton replied that it included any food business registered with the Council such as food stores, market traders, restaurants and food producers.

Councillor Mahmood expressed concern about foxes in urban areas. Nicholas Egerton explained that this was not an Environmental Health matter because they were not classed as a public health pest and they were not owned by anyone.

Councillor Mahmood said it would be interesting to know who would be responsible if there were an incident involving a fox. Steve Baker offered to investigate and report back to Councillor Mahmood.

Outcome:

The report was noted.

OS/123/13 QUARTER FOUR PERFORMANCE REPORT – HOUSING LANDLORD

E Brooks introduced the report and drew attention to the details of the Service Plan and performance Indicators for the next financial year that will include Strategic Housing which merged with the rest of Housing in December 2012.

Key points of discussion:

Councillor Mahmood asked how the increase in resources following the move to Self-Financing were benefiting tenants. E Brooks replied that this has resulted in more money being spent on improvements to tenants' homes and housing issues within the Borough. He added that the reports on the HRA Business Plan and Council House Building Plan will explain how the additional resources are being used.

Councillor Mahmood referred to a Government initiative encouraging Right to Buy and asked how this would impact the Council.

E Brooks explained that certain assumptions have been made within the Business Plan relating to Right to Buy sales. Discussions with the Finance department are on-going since it was discovered that during 2012/13 there have been far more Right to Buy sales than was projected. This has implications on rent received and the availability of funds for the new council house building programme. There are also new rules on the receipts of Right to Buy which the Council is now able to keep. All these issues are being carefully monitored in relation to the Business Plan.

Councillor Adeleke asked how the low level of complaints compared with other Councils.

E Brooks said that the Council does submit data for comparisons through House Mark who produce an annual report comparing us against similar authorities who are members of House Mark.

Councillor Adeleke asked if the comparison figures could be included in future reports. This was agreed.

Councillor McLean asked which budget the Right to Buy receipts go into. James Dean answered that the £5m from Right to Buy goes into the Capital Budget, but because the Business Plan is based on everything being funded through the Revenue budget, it has a knock-on effect. It means that £5m less is needed to be transferred from the Revenue Account on capital projects.

Councillor Marshall referred to Councillor Adeleke's point on comparisons with other authorities and suggested that this information would be helpful for monitoring performance as well as complaints.

E Brooks replied that the report received from House Mark was very detailed and could be suitable for reporting, but the information needed to be viewed with caution because there was no control on the information submitted by other authorities.

Councillor Flint felt that complaints can be constructive in shaping the service. She welcomed a report on comparisons, but thought it would be difficult to actually compare like-for-like.

E Brooks agreed that complaints offered a learning opportunity, providing that the same mistakes are not being made over again. He referred to the complaints received by Property and Places which were responded to within target; from 222 to 218. He added that between 40 to 50 of these were around the time of the problems with the Carillion contract, which was subsequently terminated.

Councillor Mahmood asked why the Customer Service Improvement Programme was behind schedule.

E Brooks said that not all these items were under his remit but he could report that the delayed objectives under the responsibility of Julia Hedger had been put on hold because of the contract situation relating to the Customer Service Unit. New service level agreements are being agreed with the service provider.

Councillor Marshall referred to the TL13a and noted that the percentage of community alarm calls answered within a minute were within target but she said that the Committee had also asked for the percentage of community alarm calls answered within three minutes to be included in the Quarterly Reports. In addition, the Committee had asked for an update for this meeting regarding the Community Alarm telephone lines

E Brooks replied that the information relating to calls answered within three minutes comes under a performance indicator that is tracked on a monthly management report rather than the quarterly performance reports and said he will ensure that the percentage will be included in the Quarterly reports to the Committee in future. As regards the number and capacity of lines going into sheltered housing schemes, Dharini Chandarana has provided an update to say that the procurement team is finding out if the upgrade of the lines is included in the current contract rather than having to pay extra. If this is not the case, the upgrade will progress and will link into the Sheltered Housing Review scheduled for consideration by the Housing and Community Overview and Scrutiny Committee in September.

Councillor Marshall referred to the lack of milestones for the Housing Service Plan and expressed her concerns about the drift on the development of the Older Person Strategy. E Brooks explained that the Older Persons Strategy and Review Of Sheltered Housing are two separate pieces of work, albeit closely linked. The Older Person Strategy considers all older people within the Borough, not just those living in sheltered housing. The report for the Sheltered Housing Review, which relates only to DBC's sheltered housing stock and which includes the nature of the service provided and charging, is in first draft and will be presented to the working group within the next couple of weeks, before coming to this committee in September.

Councillor Marshall felt there was a lack of milestones and timescales in the Housing Service Plan. E Brooks said that a departmental meeting is to take place on 24 June to confirm the timescales. The Committee asked that an update report, with the milestones, be included in the agenda for the next meeting.

Outcome:

The report was noted and the Housing Service Plan, with milestones, is to be included in the agenda for the next meeting.

Councillor Mahmood left the meeting at 8.17 p.m.

OS/124/13 PROVISIONAL OUTTURN REPORT 2012/13

James Deane introduced the report and highlighted the key points, in particular, the Provisional Capital Outturn where he pointed out that the Capital Outturn for this Scrutiny committee's area was a real success story. The revised budget for 2012/13 was £2.597m and the actual outturn was £2.632, which gave a variance of just £36k (1.4%). A major improvement from 2011/12 when the slippage was over 50%.

Key points of discussion:

Councillor Adeleke referred to the Provisional Capital Outturn 2012/13. He asked if the Verge Hardening Programme could be extended. He also asked for details about the professional fees on line 272 of Appendix C to the report.

J Still replied that once the Verge Hardening Programme is complete, it will be evaluated and if appropriate, more funding will be sought. This will however be a Member decision.

James Deane explained that the professional fees of £12k were originally anticipated for help with the procurement of the new contract for housing repairs and maintenance but those fees are now being funded by Revenue.

Outcome:

The report was noted

OS/125/13 REVIEW OF DISCRETIONARY POLICIES IN REVENUES AND BENEFITS

Chris Baker introduced the report and explained that this report was also submitted to the Finance and Resources OSC with the purpose of submitting comments from both OSCs to Cabinet.

Key points of discussion:

In response to a question from Councillor Marshall about the purpose of the documents before the Committee, Chris Baker said that they were policies which have been written with the aim of providing information and guidance, readily understood by applicants, of when and how people can receive discretionary help. It is not however possible to make it too prescriptive.

Councillor Marshall expressed concern that, without officer guidelines in executing the policy, there is the possibility of inconsistent decisions being made.

Chris Baker said that he would look at the documents again in relation to procedural guidelines before being submitted to Cabinet.

Councillor Bassadone drew attention to 'What will be considered when the decision is made' and said she hoped this would not encourage multiple debts.

Chris Baker said that certain conditions will be applied and customers will be encouraged to seek debt advice and counselling.

Councillor Killen referred to the applications being considered on individual merits and asked what financial constraints are in place as she was concerned that those constraints should not affect fairness.

Chris Baker replied that there were different levels of budget. The Council is given a grant from Central Government to contribute to the DHP budget. Last year the grant was around £90k but with the additional support following the welfare reforms, the grant is likely to be £250k. We cannot spend more than two and a half times that amount with the residual coming from the General Fund. The Council is therefore closely monitoring the situation. He added that the overall Budget cap could lead to an increase in applications.

Councillor McLean asked if it was possible to provide figures on the costs within the three areas. Chris Baker replied that it would be possible to provide information on Discretionary Housing Payments and Council Tax reductions but there is no specific budget for the Discretionary Rate Relief.

Councillor Marshall asked for her concerns about the consistency of approach to be noted. She asked if the Council's compact with the voluntary sector regarding the 20% Discretionary Rate Relief still continued.

Chris Baker replied that there is an agreement with the Council's Strategic Partners. The Policy has been amended with more flexibility to take into account the overall finances of organisations. Regarding consistency, Chris Baker said that each decision on Discretionary Housing payments will be considered by at least two lead officers. Council Tax reductions will also be looked at by two officers and appeals are to the Valuation Tribunal. The Council's Appeals Committee are appointed to review Discretionary Rate Relief decisions. Chris Baker said that he would add the provision of a periodic review of decisions that have been agreed in order to check the level of consistency. Housing Payment appeals are dealt with internally, adjudicated by officers.

Councillor Marshall said that there were a number of charity organisations who provide services entirely for the benefit of Dacorum residents but whose services are so specialised that it was essential for skilled personnel to be employed. Some of those organisations are probably Strategic Partners and the proposed policy as written would appear to remove their discretionary rate relief.

Chris Baker said that it was not the intention to penalise these charities providing a public benefit and he offered to look at either making a special category or altering the wording so that the intention is clearer.

Councillor Adshead mentioned a couple of Town Centre shops that have been given over to charitable purposes, but are either not open or not providing any charitable service to the public. He asked how it could be ensured that this is not a scam to receive rate relief.

Chris Baker replied that in order for the charitable rate relief to be granted, the premises must be partly or wholly used for charitable purposes and this requirement is being reflected in the provisions of the procedures for the registration of the people liable to pay the rates.

Outcome:

The comments and concerns of the Committee were noted and will be put forward for consideration by Cabinet.

Councillor Tiley left the meeting at 8.40 p.m.

OS/126/13 OLD TOWN HALL UPDATE

Sara Railson introduced the item and highlighted key points within the report.

Key points of discussion:

Councillor Marshall commented that she was disappointed that the closure for Phase II of the project was scheduled for spring time of 2014 as she expected this to potentially be quite a busy period for the Town Hall. S Railson explained that typically the summer and autumn periods were the busiest as January tended to be quiet following the Christmas period. S Railson also highlighted that this period of closure was necessary for the refurbishment of the Old Town Hall.

Councillor Marshall asked how long the Town Hall would be closed for, S Railson advised that the Old Town Hall would be closed from the beginning of January until the end of March.

Councillor Marshall then referred to point 3.1.4, the new Old Town Hall Staff Structure, and asked who had accepted this new proposed structure. S Railson explained that the new structure had been accepted by the Senior Management team (including Julie Still – Resident Services Manager).

Councillor Killen then highlighted that some of the Old Town Hall's targeted audience did not have access to the internet/emails to learn of upcoming events at the Old Town Hall so would it be possible to utilise the Parish Noticeboards in order to keep residents aware of what events were happening. S Railson said that she would be happy to pass this on to the Marketing Officer.

Councillor Flint referred to point 2.2, specifically the installation of a lift to allow for disabled access. Councillor Flint said that she did not believe that the lift could be used in the event of a fire and asked if there was a procedure in place should this situation arise. S Railson replied that this was an operational management issue in which the number of disabled customers in the Old Town Hall are taken into account and there are E-Vac chairs that could be used in the event of a fire. S Railson added that there were four members of staff who were trained in how to use these.

Councillor Adeleke asked for an update on the external refurbishments of the Old Town Hall. S. Railson said that the external refurbishments were part of the wider Old Town regeneration programme and as such was being handled by the Council's Regeneration team, however she was aware that there were potential challenges with the installation of outside lights as the Old Town Hall was a Grade II listed building.

Outcome:

The report was noted.

OS/127/13 GET INVOLVED STRATEGY 2012-15 UPDATE

Carolyn Leech introduced the item and said that Year Two of the 'Get Involved' strategy was under way. C Leech stated that Dacorum Borough Council was working collaboratively with tenants and leaseholders to achieve the strategy's key objectives.

Key points of discussion:

Councillor Marshall asked who was consulted when the Asset team and the Housing team decided which residential areas of the borough would be worked on. C Leech responded by saying that a number of individuals were consulted, including residents, tenants and leaseholders in the respective area and also relevant internal members of staff. Councillor Marshall then enquired as to whether there were any checks in regards to the efficacy of the consultations carried out. C Leech stated that the team was defining a consulting framework that would be ready for consideration at the Tenants and Leaseholders Committee on the 1st July.

Councillor Killen asked how the recruitment objective was progressing and was there a concern around acquiring tenant involvement. C Leech said that the team is looking into ways to get individuals involved in their committees whilst also making provisions for attrition rates that occur due to people no longer being involved due to moving away or no longer having the time to commit. C Leech highlighted that the team did receive very good feedback from the Star Survey and that they had expected to recruit individuals off the back of this, however the number of respondents/interested parties had dropped since then. To combat this, the team were reaching out to places like the Volunteer Bureau and the Job Centre to source possible recruits.

Councillor Adshead added that he felt that perhaps the team would have more interest if they visited the targeted areas and directly approached residents. Councillor Adshead also commented that if interest in being involved in the various tenant groups was shown by residents the team should seek to follow this up very quickly as if left a while interest may dwindle. C Leech responded by saying that the team were already involved in direct low-level work with the communities in question and that due to the recent re-structure of the team, quick follow up and the mapping out of areas of interest could be achieved.

Councillor Adeleke asked if the strategy would be rolled out to other areas and how would these areas be selected. E Brooks said that the team used a computer system, Orchard, to track maintenance jobs carried out in the community and that this allowed them to identify particular 'hotspots' where numerous jobs were carried out and that these areas were likely to be involved in the strategy. E Brooks also noted that an increase in the estate improvement budget also allowed the team to tackle neglected community areas. Councillor Adeleke asked if the selection process for the areas be included in the report in future.

Councillor Douris welcomed the Cabinet's decision to invest a further £750,000 into housing repairs over the next four years, commenting that it shows the Council is careful what it does and spends.

Outcome: The progress made by the 'Get Involved Strategy' and the report was noted.

OS/128/13 COUNCIL HOUSE BUILDING PROGRAMME AND HOMELESS HOSTEL

J Burnham introduced the item, highlighting key points from the report; J Burnham relayed that there had been good progress with the delivery of new council homes, he also reported that the HRA Business plan had been remodelled to assume that the new homes would be delivered at 'target social rent' and that the Council had made the decision not to accept the HCA housing grant as the rent levels this grant stipulated would not be easily affordable for some. However despite not accepting the HCA grant for the Phase One residential programme, the Council was still receiving £841,500 for the homeless hostel.

Key points of discussion:

Councillor Bassadone referenced the development at London Road in Apsley and asked what provisions had been made for parking in regards to this particular development, J Burnham stated that there would be 26 car parking services as part of the development, Councillor Bassadone enquired as to whether this would be sufficient considering there were 36 flats in the development and also taking into account that parking was already an issue in this area.

Councillor Adshead enquired as to what potential residents who were car owners without spaces would do, Councillor Griffiths pointed out that there was a large public car parking facility near this development, Councillor Marshall commented that she believed that there were planning guidelines concerning parking and these would have been taken into account when planning permission for this development was granted. J Burnham acknowledged that parking could potentially be an issue and as a result the housing team would look at parking controls in relation to this development.

Councillor Adeleke acknowledged that it was good that the Council was building new homes but enquired as to what provisions had been made for local businesses to benefit from the developments. J Burnham stated that this had been taken into account, and that procurement were looking into providing more scope for the Council to engage with smaller enterprises via organising events such as 'Supplier Days' for the Council to meet with local businesses and discuss potentially working together. Councillor Adeleke stated that he thought this was a good idea but that he thought it necessary that if the Council went ahead with this it was important to ensure maximum publicity so local businesses were fully aware of this opportunity.

Outcome: The report was noted.

OS/129/13 HOUSING REVENUES ACCOUNT BUSINESS PLAN

E Brookes introduced this item stating it was a summary of the HRA Business Plan, particularly detailing associated recommendations that were made at the Cabinet meeting in April 2013. E Brookes stated that Phases 2 and 3 of the Council House New Build Plan were being committed to. Also improvements to communal areas in Dacorum were being accelerated; E Brookes highlighted the repairs made to the Walkways in the Council's housing stock in relation to this. E Brookes also mentioned that the HRA Business Plan had taken into account various recent changes to the benefits system that were likely to impact the Housing service.

Key points of discussion:

Councillor Adeleke commended the efforts of the housing team in regards to their swift response to repairs, specifically with the walkways. E Brookes referenced a member of the housing team, Peter Farrier, who dealt with the matter very effectively.

Councillor Mclean then asked if Dacorum Council's decision to move towards 'target social rent' as opposed to the HCA's "affordable rent" could potentially be challenged by the Government or EU. E Brooks said "no", that there would be no legal challenge. E Brooks explained that they had understood the HCA grant was to be given on the basis of rents to be charged "up to" 80% of market rents (i.e. affordable rent) but then subsequently learnt that the grant would only be given if 80% of market rent is being charged. In view of the Council's concerns about the affordability of 80% of market rent, it was decided to forgo HCA's grant and charge target social rent. He added that HCA grant is however being provided for the new hostel.

Councillor Marshall asked if the Committee agreed to seeking a report on the potential consequences of increasing the rent to less than the current formula in view of the changes to the Welfare system and the risk of higher rent arrears. She thought that there was little logic in raising rents to a level higher than many could afford. She asked that the report be available earlier enough to feed in the budget considerations, so that the Committee could make representations to the Cabinet in a timely manner. After discussion, and considering the points raised by Councillor Griffiths, the Committee agreed and asked for such a report to be presented, possibly in October.

Outcome: The report was noted and a report on the possible consequences of reducing the rate of rent increase be made in October.

OS/130/13 WORK PROGRAMME

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

17 July

Housing Service Plan milestones

11 September

Quarter 1 Performance Report (& Q1 Operational Risk Reports)
Sheltered Housing review, including Telephone Lines Review

16 October

Impact on the Business Plan of reducing the rate of rent increases

13 November

Quarter 2 Performance Report (& Q2 Operational Risk Reports)
Star Satisfaction Survey and Get Involved Strategy Update

No fixed date

Housing statistics comparisons (House Mark)

The meeting ended at 9.46 pm.