

MINUTES

HOUSING AND COMMUNITY OVERVIEW AND SCRUTINY COMMITTEE

23 JANUARY 2013

Present:

Councillors:

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

Also Attended:

Councillor A Williams	Leader of the Council
Councillor N Harden	Portfolio Holder for Resident and Regulatory Services

Officers:

Elliott Brooks	Assistant Director, Housing
Julie Still	Group Manager, Resident Services
Rita McGinlay	Group Manager, Regulatory Services
Fiona Williamson	Group Manager, Property & Place
Julia Hedger	Group Manager, Strategic Housing
Teresa Wood	Housing Options Team Leader
Isabel Connolly	Housing Strategy & Partnerships Officer
Trudi Coston	Member Support Officer, Democratic Services

The meeting began at 7:32 pm

OS/010/13 MINUTES

The minutes of the meeting held on 05 December 2012 were agreed by the Members present and signed by the Chairman.

OS/011/13 APOLOGIES FOR ABSENCE

Apologies for absence were received on behalf of Councillors Adshead and Organ. Councillor Clark substituted for Councillor Adshead. S Parker and M Cook also sent their apologies.

Councillor A Williams attended the meeting in the absence of Councillor M Griffiths, Portfolio Holder for Housing.

OS/012/13 DECLARATIONS OF INTEREST

Councillor Mahmood declared a personal interest as he is a member of Global Pindd.

OS/013/13 PUBLIC PARTICIPATION

None

OS/014/13 CONSIDERATION OF ANY MATTER REFERRED TO THE COMMITTEE IN RELATION TO A CALL-IN

None

OS/015/13 EXCLUSION OF PUBLIC

It was moved by Councillor Mrs Bassadone and duly seconded to move to Part II of the meeting and to exclude the public.

Resolved:

That, under s.100A (4) of the Local Government Act 1972 Schedule 12A Part 1 as amended by the Local Government (Access to Information) (Variation) Order 2006 the public be excluded during the item in Part II of the Agenda for this meeting, because it is likely, in view of the nature of the business to be transacted, that if members of the public were present during this item there would be disclosure to them of exempt information relating to: Item 13, That the report contains information relating to the financial or business affairs of any particular person (including the authority holding that information). Local Government Act 1972, Schedule 12A, Part 1, paragraph 3

OS/016/13 PERFORMANCE REPORT ON THE GAS SERVICING CONTRACT

Full details can be found in the Part II minutes.

The meeting reverted to Part I.

OS/017/13 QUARTER THREE PERFORMANCE REPORT – RESIDENT SERVICES

Julie Still introduced the item and highlighted some key points throughout the report. She referred to the Community Safety Partnership report and asked members to inform her if there was any additional information they would like to see reported. She explained that the verge hardening project was moving forward and the first piece of work would commence in April. She said the Adventure Playgrounds and Youth Clubs had been performing well and the number of attendees continued to increase, and they had also been successful in securing funds from the Community Safety Partnership for additional equipment. The CCTV project and installation also continued to move forward.

Key points of discussion:

Councillor Mrs Bassadone referred to the verge hardening project and asked if an order of priority had been assessed yet. J Still said the top 12 areas had been circulated to members in November. She advised they would be contacting residents during the next couple of months to consider their views on priority as the majority of information had been sourced from agencies such as the Fire Service and Clean, Safe and Green.

Councillor Adeleke commended J Still and her team on their efforts. He referred to page 5 of the report and asked why the Portfolio Holder for Resident and Regulatory services has not been invited to the neighbourhood action events. He then referred to the 'Kick Racism Out of Football' event and asked how much it had cost and what long term benefits they hoped to achieve from the event. J Still replied it was an annual event, which is increasingly successful with a number of local agencies, and cost Dacorum Borough Council approximately £400. She said from Dacorum's point of view, the benefits from the event were positive and clear.

Councillor Adeleke said he was not completely satisfied with the idea of the event being solely about football and queried if it could involve various sports. J Still advised that the event would be reviewed and said she would take all the comments on board.

Councillor N Harden, Portfolio Holder for Resident and Regulatory Services, advised that he was informed of the neighbourhood action meeting dates, but due to a busy schedule had

not had chance to attend. He said if there was a specific meeting Councillor Adeleke wanted him to attend, to give him notice and he would make every effort to be there.

Councillor Hearn asked how many people attended the youth forum. J Still advised there were approximately 12 attendees but they were looking at ways to ensure this number increased.

Councillor Mahmood noted that the street lights had gone off and crime had gone down, and wondered if there was a connection between the two events. He also noted that there had been a 28% reduction in Anti-Social Behaviour reports but the general work load had increased and queried the reasoning for this. J Still explained it was the nature of the complaints that were more complex and there were lots of cases involving mental health or vulnerable individuals. She said there were also some complex court cases and the preparation for that is lengthy.

Councillor Mahmood queried the role of the Family Intervention officer. J Still explained that the Family Intervention officer worked closely with 5 families at a time that have been identified by local agencies and was a very successful project. She advised it was in addition to the Thriving Families project which runs throughout Hertfordshire.

Councillor N Harden, Portfolio Holder for Resident and Regulatory Services, referred to Appendix C and highlighted the success of Dacorum's continued reduction in reports of crime and disorder in comparison to other authorities throughout Hertfordshire.

Councillor Marshall thanked the officers for clear and thorough reports and statistics.

Outcome:

The report was noted.

OS/018/13 QUARTER THREE PERFORMANCE REPORT – REGULATORY SERVICES

Rita McGinlay explained that Food Safety service had been busy in quarter three and the indicator for high risk premises was below target. She advised that premises in a high risk category were those serving vulnerable people and/or having a history of unhygienic premises. She said they were on track to reach their end of year targets. She explained that the partnership with Tesco was going well and another couple of businesses had taken an interest in forming partnerships with Dacorum. She advised that there was no cost involved in forming partnerships, it enabled Dacorum Borough Council take the lead and is good for our reputation and profile.

She advised that the bid for £395k funding to deliver the Warmer Homes, Healthy People campaign had been successful. She said the Emergency Planning Audit had been completed and the two minor improvements relating to website links had been implemented.

Key points of discussion:

Councillor Mrs Bassadone referred to the indicator REG01 and asked if vehicles that are parked on residential streets with 'for sale' signs on them were monitored. R McGinlay explained that those particular vehicles were under ownership and therefore do not fall under the remit of abandoned vehicles but were monitored in case they became a problem. She asked that members inform her if they were aware of any problematic vehicles.

Councillor Adeleke referred to paragraph 3.1 and queried if a premise is closed down, does a penalty charge occur. He then advised of a petition being circulated in Bovingdon relating to a business premises and asked if the team were aware. R McGinlay explained that a penalty notice is not served but the premises do suffer in other ways due to reputation

damage and loss of trade. She then asked Councillor Adeleke to contact her with the details of the Bovingdon petition and premises.

Councillor McLean noted that the food hygiene ratings were not always displayed on the premises. R McGinlay replied that all food hygiene ratings were advertised on the Food Safety Agency website, but the premises are not legally required to display their rating certificate. She advised that the FSA were hoping to make the display of ratings a legal requirement but she was unaware of when this would be introduced.

Councillor Conway asked when a premises is allowed to re-open after being closed down. R McGinlay explained that the operator of the premise has to notify DBC when they feel they are prepared to re-open and an Environmental Health officer will return to reassess the premises. If a satisfactory improvement has been shown, the premises will be allowed to re-open.

Outcome:

The report was noted.

OS/019/13 QUARTER THREE PERFORMANCE REPORT – HOUSING LANDLORD

Elliott Brooks introduced the item and highlighted three points within the report. He referred to paragraph 2.2 and advised this was the additional information requested by the committee at the previous meeting. He referred to paragraph 2.1.4 and highlighted the efforts of the Tenant and Leaseholder team for collecting more rent than the rent owed for the year. He advised that they were already thinking about 2013 Christmas rent campaign. He then referred to paragraph 2.1.5 and explained that performance in this area has improved throughout the year and all 88 reports of Anti-Social Behaviour have been responded to.

The Committee agreed with Councillor Marshall that the additional information in paragraph 2.2 was what is sought and should be included in the quarterly performance reports in the future.

Key points of discussion:

Councillor Flint said she was pleased to see that an Empty Homes Lead Officer will be appointed this year and asked what expectations they had for improvement. E Brooks referred to the indicator PP09 and said they would like to improve and reach their target and advised that the problem could be due to the involvement of so many different teams instead of one team or officer having overall responsibility. He said the Empty Homes Lead Officer would be able to meet with each team and discuss any issues arising.

Councillor Mahmood asked if the introduction of an Empty Homes Lead Officer was due to performance related issues. E Brooks explained that the role was income generated and should pay for itself if they are able to re-let properties quicker. He said the Income and Repairs teams had team leaders and it was considered that the void team should also have a leader.

Councillor Adeleke asked if the income officers' procedure for rent collection was humane. E Brooks replied the procedures were in place to offer advice and assist tenants with their finances. He said it was about creating a healthy balance for everyone involved. There was no point in officers demanding a repayment schedule which the tenant could not afford to maintain.

Councillor McLean asked if there were plans in place relating to the forthcoming change in the benefits system, due to benefit being paid directly to the tenant. E Brooks explained that they were increasing the provision for bad debt in the HRA (Housing Revenue Account) business plan as of year 2014/15, when the changes will take effect, and the HRA business

plan is currently being reviewed and will be presented to the Cabinet in the next months. He said they were also increasing resources in the income recovery team to assist those affected.

Outcome:

The report was noted.

OS/020/13 HOUSING ALLOCATIONS POLICY

Julia Hedger introduced the item. The Policy had been approved by the Cabinet the previous meeting and would be going out to public consultation. In answer to Councillor Marshall's question, she advised that the Cabinet had made no amendments to the Policy.

Councillor Marshall informed the Committee that the Tenants & Leaseholder Committee had intended to debate this at their meeting on the 14 January, which was postponed to the 21 January due to snow. Unfortunately the 21 January was also postponed due to snow and the Committee next meets on 4 February. J Hedger said the Committee's comments on the policy would be considered during the six week consultation period. She said the policy would return to the Committee in March 2013.

Key points of discussion:

Councillor Marshall said although she was in support of the principles of the policy, she was concerned at the number of drafting issues, some of which were simply wrong, others so unclear as to lead to misunderstanding.

She referred to the Active and Deferred registers and asked if they were two lists or if they comprised lists within lists of separate groups of individuals. J Hedger explained there were two lists so they could separate applicants depending on the qualifying criteria. Councillor Marshall referred to the separate "qualifying groups" at paragraphs 4.6, 4.7 and 4.9 and pointed out that the drafting clearly indicated separate lists within either or both the Active and Deferred registers. She knew there were not separate lists, but simply applicants who are (or not, as the case maybe) entitled to their place on the Active Register. I Connolly advised this was due to the legislation of qualifying classes. She said they legally had to produce a short summary for applicants to refer to in the policy but they were open to suggestions if the Committee felt the terminology would cause confusion. Councillor Marshall gave examples of what could be literally inferred from the present drafting and asked that those paragraphs be redrafted.

Councillor Mrs Bassadone referred to paragraph 4.7 and asked if there was a minimum amount that tenants needed to pay towards their rent arrears. J Hedger advised that the tenant would be expected to contribute towards the arrears and would need to set up a repayment plan in order to be transferred to another property, but there is no minimum requirement.

Councillor Mrs Bassadone referred to paragraph 4.10 and felt the opportunity for applicants to refuse up to three offers was excessive. J Hedger said the decision was discussed within the working group and was also part of the current Housing Allocations policy but alterations could be considered during the consultation period.

Following a short discussion, the Committee agreed not to consider any changes to the number of refusals permitted by an applicant.

Councillor Mrs Bassadone referred to paragraph 4.12 relating to those in the armed forces and felt that applicants living within the Borough would be at a disadvantage. J Hedger said it was a result of direct guidance from Government that local authorities had to exclude local connection criteria for those in the armed forces.

Councillor Adeleke queried the overcrowding points and the age of “children” of 21. J Hedger advised that the bedroom criteria in this respect were taken from Government guidance.

Councillor Adeleke referred to paragraph 6.6 and advised that a large number of the armed forces were being made redundant. He asked if Dacorum could cope if there was a large increase in applications. J Hedger advised they would need to follow guidelines and accept them on to the housing register. She said there were additional points to be considered relating to priority once an application is received, which were also detailed in the policy.

Councillor Adeleke asked if there was a contingency plan in place, should cut-backs in the armed forces occur. J Hedger advised there was no plan in place as the announcement had just been released but it would be discussed and considered during the consultation period.

Councillor Maclean asked about the position of EU residents on the housing list and also the practice of London local authorities placing those applicants with whom they have a housing duty in other local authorities such as Dacorum. J Hedger that the LB of Brent has a scheme of placing their applicants in Dacorum and there is a duty on that Authority to continue providing assistance to the applicants for up to 2 years. The issues that Councillor Maclean referred to are some of the reasons justifying the strengthening of the local connection in the Housing Allocations Policy.

Councillor Mrs Bassadone referred to the Table for allocating points, noting that identical terms had been used for Medical Grounds and Welfare Grounds, which was at variance to paragraphs 6.4.1 and 6.4.2. J Hedger said that was a mistake and the terms would be corrected on the Table for allocating points..

Councillor Marshall referred to the 5th paragraph of 4.11, on page 62, relating to high-risk groups which required sensitive handling, pointing out that a redraft was very much needed. J Hedger agreed to amend the paragraph.

Councillor Mahmood sought clarification between medical and welfare grounds. J Hedger explained that medical grounds were considered by a medical advisor and welfare grounds were considered by a housing panel and strict criteria will be applied.

Councillor Marshall referred to page 63 and asked if the size of each bedroom in a property would be considered. J Hedger replied there was no legislation relating to the size of a bedroom but the housing panel could consider extreme circumstances if an applicant could not fit a bed in a bedroom in their property.

Councillor Marshall referred to paragraphs 7 and 8 and queried if it should relate to the point of offer, not the point of bidding. J Hedger advised that it was the point of offer but they could try to rephrase the information to make it clearer.

Councillor Marshall queried if flexi care was restricted to older persons. J Hedger advised it was restricted to those of 60 years of age and over but there were other options available to those under 60 years of age with individual needs.

Councillor Flint asked if a paper copy of the weekly Choice Based Lettings advert was available to those without internet access. J Hedger confirmed there were paper copies available from the housing department and from the Customer Services Unit.

Councillor Marshall felt it was unfair to exclude those from the housing register with savings of £16k or over. She suggested someone with an industrial injury could receive a lump sum of money and be unable to work and felt those persons should not be excluded. J Hedger said individual circumstances could be considered by the housing panel but the £16k

savings was taken from the in guidance issued by the HCA (Homes and Communities Agency).

Outcome:

Though supportive of the principles underlying the Policy, the Committee's comments to be noted, drafting amendments to be made to the Policy before putting it out for consultation the following Monday, and an update report be added to the work programme for March 2013 following the six week consultation period.

OS/021/13 REVIEW OF APPROACH TO UNDER OCCUPATION

Andy Vincent introduced the item and said they were committed to review the approach to under occupation. He advised they had completed a series of consultation with tenants through News and Views, a housing conference and a mail shot. He said there were two policies in place relating to under occupation but they were trying to refresh the policy and merge the two together.

Key points of discussion:

Councillor Marshall felt the review had been needed for a long time. She queried if a tenant would change to a flexible tenancy if they moved to a new property. A Vincent advised that would not be the case. Councillor Marshall then asked if the tenant would automatically be charged the target rent on the new property as, to do so, would prove to be a disincentive for a tenant thinking of downsizing. A Vincent and E Brooks advised that they would think this through and come back to the Committee.

Councillor McLean said he supported the proposal. He referred to paragraph 3 relating to the consultation and queried the reaction of the feedback received. A Vincent advised that the responses had been supportive and were provided within the report.

Councillor Marshall referred to page 121 of the report and queried the difference between relaying carpets and fitting carpets. A Vincent advised there was no difference. J Hedger explained that fitted carpets are part of the minimum letting standards for sheltered housing.

Councillor Adeleke referred to page 117 of the report and suggested the word 'payable' was replaced with 'offered' as it related to an incentive scheme. A Vincent agreed it could be rephrased.

Outcome:

The report was noted and the Committee supported the proposal though sought clarification on whether the target rent would be charged.

OS/022/13 STRATEGIC TENANCY POLICY

Julia Hedger introduced the item and welcomed questions from the committee.

Key points of discussion:

Councillor Marshall noted that the Policy had been agreed by Cabinet the previous evening and asked why members were not part of the flexible tenancy appeal procedure. J Hedger said if members were to be part of the appeal process, their working hours would increase dramatically. She explained it had been discussed with the Portfolio Holder for Housing and the Legal team and concluded that it was procedural document.

Councillor A Williams said the Cabinet were aware of the Committee's comments and could not comprehend why members would be part of the appeal process.

Councillors Hearn and Mrs Bassadone accepted and agreed that they understood why members would not be involved in the appeals process.

E Brooks advised that they would not be aware of the appeals figures until approximately six years later.

A Vincent said it needed to be made clear to flexible tenants how the appeals procedure will be conducted and how their tenancy will be reviewed.

The Committee considered and supported the draft Flexible Tenancy Review Procedure attached to the Policy.

Outcome:

The Strategic Tenancy Policy was noted and the draft Flexible Tenancy Review Procedure supported.

OS/023/13 WORK PROGRAMME 2012/13

The Committee discussed the 2012/13 work programme and made the following additions:

March 2013

- Add Draft Housing Strategy
- Add Housing Allocations Policy update following consultation period

Councillor Marshall asked J Hedger why the item of Council House Building Programme and Homeless Hostel had been removed from the work programme for this meeting. J Hedger replied there was no additional information to update. In reply to Councillor Marshall's question, she advised there was no slippage and the projects were progressing as planned.

The Committee also agreed that the Budget Scrutiny should proceed on the 5 February, especially as it had not yet considered the HRA 2013/14 budget.

OS/024/13 WORK PROGRAMME 2013/14

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

June 2013

- Add Council House Building Programme and Homeless Hostel

The meeting ended at 9:53 pm