

MINUTES

HOUSING AND COMMUNITY OVERVIEW AND SCRUTINY

5 JUNE 2019

Councillors: Adeleke (Vice-Chairman)
Mrs Bassadone
England
Imarni (Chairman)
Mahmood
Pringle
Arslan
Durrant
Johnson
Oguchi
Hollinghurst
Barry
Freedman

Officers:

Fiona Williamson	Assistant Director - Housing
Lynne Hunt	Private Rented Sector Lead Officer
Fiona Jump	Group Manager - Financial Services
Katie Kiely	Team Leader (Income)
Matt Rawdon	Group Manager - People
Linda Roberts	Assistant Director - Performance, People and Innovation
Sarah Turner	PA to the Corporate Directors
Layna Warden	Group Manager - Tenants and Leaseholders
Carly Thomas	

The meeting began at 7.30 pm

33 MINUTES

The minutes from 06 March were agreed and then signed by the Chairman.

34 APOLOGIES FOR ABSENCE

There were no apologies for absence

35 DECLARATIONS OF INTEREST

There were no declarations of interest

36 **PUBLIC PARTICIPATION**

There was no public participation.

37 **CONSIDERATION OF ANY MATTER REFERRED TO THE COMMITTEE IN RELATION TO CALL-IN**

None.

38 **PROVISIONAL OUTTURN REPORT 2018/19**

F Jump presented the provisional outturn report for 2018/19 and invited questions.

Cllr England enquired about the HRA operating underspend of £235k and what percentage. F Jump confirmed this was a small percentage of HRA expenditure budgets (approximately 0.4%).

Cllr England asked about the premises £307k overachievement for the maintenance for £250k, that we are awaiting a stock condition survey for garages. In the past there was high occupancy and there has been two large price increase for rentals, which would be spent on maintenance. F Williamson confirmed that the investment programme was based on investing in areas where the condition of garages was poor, there is also the garage disposals strategy, which identified blocks where low demand or high density of garages in small geographical area. Before we make any future investment decision, we need to collate and codify that with the disposals strategy to make sure we are investing in the right areas. We undertook some market research which found that the rents were considerably lower than surrounding geographical areas and we looked at rental increases to bring it in line with neighbouring authorities.

The Chairman confirmed that Members had agreed to the rental increases as it had presented to Committee as we were significantly lower than neighbouring authorities. F Williamson confirmed this was correct and we are about the second highest now and we believe there has been an equalising in the market for rental charges. Now we need to ensure we invest in those areas where we have got low demand.

Cllr England said that he felt we was not spending on garages. FW confirmed that some of the money had been used for the stock condition survey as this will provide us with the necessary information to develop an investment strategy that's aligned to the condition instead of the demand. At the moment we are spending on responsive repairs and we've had two blocks recently refurbished and there is one more block agreed for the refurbishment programme, although this is a very light touch as we want to ensure we are investing in the right areas.

Cllr England asked if Cllrs who have garages in their wards that are in poor condition should we tell officers about it. F Williamson advised they would be picked up in the stock condition survey, the aim is to have that concluded by second quarter and there will be a report to Scrutiny later in the year in terms of the Garage Strategy.

Cllr Adeleke enquired about Universal Credit where we have factored in £400k provision for bad debt and he understood that Government was providing funding to help with Universal Credit problems. F Jump said that we did have some funding

about £78k available to the Revenues and Benefits service but she was not aware of any additional funding. L Warden advised that money doesn't go to the Housing Revenue Account, that it was to support residents in their claims.

Cllr Freedman mentioned the over-recovery on service charge and whether we had plans to spend that money. F Williamson confirmed that all the money goes into the Housing Revenue account and forms part of the overall Business Plan which looks at the level of investment in existing stock alongside the delivery of new homes. In respect of service charges a lot of work has been undertaken to identify actual costs of services because we want to obtain the best deals for tenants and leaseholders. When we look at service charges we are only recovering the actual costs, but it is also about investing in items such as lifts.

Cllr Freedman said he noticed that we are in the process of making a service charges policy, but in short the money that we charge to pay for services later down the line, which may include capital replacement as a provision for future service charges. F Williamson advised that none of it is ringfenced for a specific purpose, once it goes into the Housing Revenue Account, often we are recovering monies that we've already paid out, so we are actually using the service charges just to recover payments that have already been made out. In terms of how that's accounted for there is detail of that within the accounts, but within the Housing Revenue Account, we look at revenue items or expenditure and capital items for investment. This is all based on the stock condition survey and the ongoing investment plans that we have.

Cllr Freedman said that we obviously have some provisos on what we can do with tenants rent and are we looking to have similar provisos on what we can do for tenants service charges, which are going to a general fund that doesn't have any covenants on how we can charge, those people are seeing charges going up and going into a general fund which may be spent in future years. That would be a hard message to give. F Williamson advised that the overall Housing Revenue Account and the way the money is spent, everything goes back to the tenants in terms of service delivery. How that is split between particular items, whether it comes from rental income or service charges, it all forms part of that overall Housing Revenue Account.

Cllr Freedman asked if when we look at the service charge policy, we will be looking at a covenant that confirms increases year on year.

Cllr Griffiths advised this would be a budgeting decision that this Council will make, not the Officers. The rents have been set by Government directive, the service charge there is no restriction, no Government policy. We have to bear in mind that we have to fund those services, there is no profit, all the money taken in, obviously pays for staff etc, but there is no profit taken.

F Williamson said that there is a list of services that are eligible for service charges and that includes things that potentially there is no provision for in an existing block. For instance, if we are rolling out CCTV to improve security in blocks that would be a new charge that would be eligible for service charge recovery, but it's based on the premise that they are then receiving that new service, so it has some benefit.

The Chairman suggested that Cllr Freedman was trying to establish if we are increasing charges and not delivering the service. The chairman commented that

she would challenge this, especially as this department delivers fantastic value for money and they are always open to scrutiny, specifically from this Committee and wider areas of the Council, it's come up time and time again and she thought our offer is competitive and that we can show where money is being spent.

F Williamson confirmed we are able to justify the basis for the charging for the service charge element, there is the rent formula which determines the rent level we can charge, are for service charges there is a set criteria and there are only certain services we can charge for.

The Chairman asked if service charges for social tenants was very competitive. F Williamson confirmed they are competitive, they are on a cost recovery basis, so in order for us to maintain that we need to ensure that we get the best value for any services that we're delivering.

Cllr England enquired about the £141k under budget on dwelling rents due to the void rate being expected to be 0.8% and is actually 1%, which looks as if it's a small change, but if the void rate was expected to be 0.8 and is now 1%, that's a 25% increase in voids. So is a small or a significant shift in voids. F Williamson confirmed that she can advise a bit more detail in the Performance Report, but as a percentage yes it's an increase but in terms of the overall budget position, at the beginning of the year and the voids element, there was also some slippage in terms of the delivery of the new build, which had been accounted for at the beginning of the year, which again had an impact.

Cllr England wanted clarification on the balances and reserves, where the management of change reserve has a net £125k contribution which is net of £470k in technical adjustments and then minus £345k to cover the cost of the Sportspace transition and asked why the money is coming from the management of change reserve and how will we track that money, because the idea is that we get money back from Everyone Active deal. Shouldn't that money go into a particular reserve so that we can see where it's gone and when it comes out again. F Jump confirmed that movement on the reserves is a decision for Members and this was the proposal that was put to Cabinet, we can investigate the potential to have an earmarked reserve for those movements but actually in terms of accounting records it's very easy to see what's gone in and out, because it has to come before members for approval.

The Chairman highlighted the recommendation that the report is noted and the Committee agreed.

39 HOUSING QUARTER 4 PERFORMANCE REPORT

F Williamson updated Committee on the Housing Quarter 4 Performance and was happy to take questions.

The Chairman asked for an explanation of the difference on letting an adapted property and why they impact the figures. FW confirmed that when a property has an adaptation, these can cost a significant amount of money, such as through floor lifts or wet rooms or extensions, so we try to match the property to an individuals need rather than take an adaptation out. Each person's needs are assessed on the

individual circumstances and this can take some time and the process can be extended. We try to get the best use of our stock and to get the people with a high level of need for an adapted property a suitable property.

Cllr Mahmood asked three questions.

1. The targets have been the same for years and years, how are the targets reviewed?
2. What is the average time to let and you alluded to the fact there are three different types of properties, sheltered, adapted and general. Why don't we split the three up and then we can have a real picture of where the problem is.
3. Some of the work is being moved to Property and Place and enquired what the thinking was behind that.

F Williamson confirmed the following:

1. With regard to target setting, the targets are reviewed on an annual basis. Some of them form contractual measures and therefore they have to be in consultation with our service providers. We are in the process of undertaking the fifth year review of the Osborne contract, so there is the potential for some re-setting of some of the performance indicator targets at the end of this financial year for the remainder of the Osborne contract. The others are set in consultation with the Tenants and Leaseholder Committee and the Portfolio Holder and the Group Managers in each service area, to make sure that the targets remain sufficiently challenging but are realistic.
2. We are looking at splitting out the property types in consultation with the Portfolio Holder. We have agreed that this year we should do this in order to see those exceptions and also do some benchmarking against other organisations on the standard voids. That will be shown separately in the reports going forward.
3. We are currently trialling moving the lettings team into Property and Place because once the properties are handed to the contractor to undertake the work the lettings team need to work very closely with them to understand when that property will be ready to let, so that the advertising cycle can co-ordinated, so that these two things run concurrently. At that stage hopefully the advert will have closed and we shall be ready to identify a suitable applicant.

Cllr Mahmood enquired about when we are notified that the home is becoming empty, do we go in during the notice period so that we can undertake a survey. F Williamson confirmed that we did when we have a notice to quit served, we have 28 days to try and get into the property. We have to work with the outgoing tenant in those circumstances, we do get a pre-termination visit undertaken so that we are aware of the extent of any work and also to re-inforce to the outgoing tenants what their obligations are in respect of the condition they are expected to leave the home in. In 18/19 some analysis was undertaken to look at the reasons that properties were terminated, there were a high number of terminations through death, which means there is no notice period. We had 13 through evictions and four through abandonment. In situations like that we don't have any prior notification.

The Chair asked how far the numbers are skewed by adapted properties as she understood that we have to wait for an occupational therapist to assess the property and she believed that was 116 days, so straight off we are 116 days behind normal target. N Beresford confirmed the figures for May and we had 38 properties that were let, of those properties two were adapted, taking a total of 150 days, which is quite a significant period of time. We require lengthy negotiations with an

occupational therapist to determine the suitability of a property for a household. The two properties that we've been negotiating with, both the client and the occupational therapist has some unfortunately circumstances in one case where we had identified a household for the property and some minor works were undertaken to ensure it was suitable. Unfortunately during that process there was a bereavement during the process which meant that the household no longer required the adaptations. We then had to undertake the process of identifying another household. N Beresford confirmed it is an extensive process, circumstances change a lot whilst we are undertaking assessments and we are required to liaise with colleagues at County and often multiple agencies. For this month we had 15 sheltered properties that were let during May, which had a total void period of 595 days, so we quite quickly start to see that adapted properties and those undergoing major works do account for a large number of the days taken to let properties.

The Chairman enquired about the costs of adaptations and why it's worth undergoing the lengthy process. F Williamson replied that a through floor lift is around £14k. If there is a ground floor extension with lifting hoists, a level access shower and other specialist equipment, that has to have additional strengthening works to the structure, will mean that the costs will be more than a standard build and can often run between £50k and £70k depending on the nature of the equipment used.

The Chairman requested clarification on the costs to maintain a property, without adaptations. F Williamson advised that within the Business Plan we look at investment of around £51k over a 30 year period.

Cllr Mahmood said that there seems to be two issues with adaptations, one is money and the other the type of adaptations that are needed. Are we being proactive in what needs to be done or do we just wait for people to come in. N Beresford highlighted that with applications on the Housing Register we have an in-depth medical assessment undertaken. Quite a lot of our stock does not lend itself to undertaking adaptations due to the nature of the property, so there is extensive work undertaken with the teams in preparation for our new build programme and five of the units at Kylna Court development are lifetimes homes built to adaptable requirements, so we are looking to futureproof tenants needs to look at the long term requirements. We do have an extensive list of households who require more intensive adaptations than just ramping and handrails, they require significant adaptations to a property. We currently have households that have been waiting in excess of two years for extensive requirements because we are unable to accommodate their needs with the adapted properties that are coming available.

Cllr England asked what proportion of the stock is significantly adapted. F Williamson replied that there was not huge numbers, we are talking in the 10s rather than 100s properties with significant adaptations. With properties that have a stairlift or level access shower is in the 100s. In the bathroom renewal programme, especially with shelter accommodation, we are looking at replacing baths with level access showers.

Cllr England suggested that the letting time is being affected by the adapted properties and this begins to explain the 25% increase in voids. Cllr England asked if this was a significant contributor to what's happening with this KPI. Cllr Griffiths said that's why she has agreed to split the figures out so that we can see rather than

guess. Hopefully as we go through the year and definitely by this time next year we will have more definitive information.

Cllr England mentioned the direct offer list and asked if this was a massive funnel for the numbers going through. N Beresford confirmed that households pending an offer on the direct offer list, on the wider housing register we have 5,600 applicants, that increases by approximately 180 applications every month, a good proportion of those, at least 25%, are identifying with some form of medical need, either physical or mental health requirements. The direct offer list has around 50 households pending an offer of adapted accommodation.

Cllr Mahmood enquired if we have looked at prefabrication to speed things up. F Williamson confirmed that we have used prefabricated pod on a trial basis for one property that we adapted. It was successful but they do have some site constraints if you're using a volumetrics system because you have to be able to crane it into place, so you do need to have room at the side of the property rather than the rear.

Cllr Freedman mentioned the number of complaints we had received and asked if there is any more resources available or if we are at risk in dealing with complaints. F Williamson advised that generally the performance has been positive and in the main 100% are responded to within target. We did have a number that came in that were complex, either due to a number of services being involved or waiting for external contractors. One of the reasons there were six out of target was because four of those were complex cases, one was due to a member of staff being on long term sick and the other one were as a result of the system which gave an incorrect response date.

Cllr Freedman mentioned that the collection of arrears is positive, which is very good, but wondered what the bad debt policy was as he had noticed that in the past year this has been significantly above budget. Cllr Freedman asked if we have favourable arrear collection but still a significant adverse variance on bad debt. L Warden explained that a substantial amount of these were from Debt Relief Orders whereby a tenant has the debt written off, so we have to write the debt off. This was substantially more than we were expecting and additionally we went through a process to identify some long standing debts, like former tenant arrears, whereby we have been trying to recover for many years.

Cllr Freedman queried if people who get a Debt Relief Order can stay in the tenancy. L Warden confirmed they would be able to stay and continue the tenancy with us.

The Chairman confirmed the recommendation that the report is noted and Committee agreed.

40 PRIVATE SECTOR HOUSING

N Beresford introduced the Private Sector Housing report and asked if there was any questions.

Cllr Bassadone asked for clarification on the process for dealing with enquiries received and FOI's. N Beresford confirmed there was an extensive number of FOI enquiries received across the Housing Service, certainly in Strategic Housing and advised that there had been 5 FOI's this week. They range in terms of service

delivery requests, but also through to extensive requests around how the service is budgeted, the types of complaints we receive and how we are dealing with enforcement activity. We have only actually declined to respond to one FOI which was because the requirement to process the request exceeded the time limits set out by the Information Security Officer and would have significant costs to assess the enquiry. We have been able to provide the information in a reasonably quick timeframe to the requester.

Cllr Mahmood enquired how the public would know that they have an HMO, how do we educate them, how do we get the message out there that they should register or let the Council know. What are we doing to make the public aware of the requirements. N Beresford confirmed that we have used social media, mailshots etc. and we have contacted landlords direct. We also have the Landlords Forum which is an opportunity for us to engage with landlords, which provides landlords with updated information in relation to legislation and offer landlords access to free accreditation schemes and training through the Landlords Forum and our partnership with the National Landlords Association. This is an opportunity for us to engage with landlords, provide them with the support to ensure they can manage their property and their tenancies effectively, give them useful information to enable them to make sensible decisions about how to manage their properties safely.

Cllr Pringle asked what were the main identifying source of HMO's, also have we any idea what proportion have we identified within the Borough and how are we going to reach the hard to find ones. N Beresford confirmed there are approximately 103 licences now. We believe from a BRE stock modelling report that was undertaken several years ago, there could be up to 600 and 900 HMO's in the area. We don't know if all those premises will require licensing, so it will require a piece of work to identify and detect those licenses.

NB added that the processing of a licence application is quite extensive and can take up to 3 months to process one application, it requires robust checks with other agencies, such as Trading Standards, the Police and Revs and Bens to determine that the landlord we will be issuing the licence for is deemed to be fit and proper, otherwise people residing at the property could be at risk. We also have to undertake extensive property checks and the landlord is asked to provide details so that the property is let to an appropriate standard.

NB confirmed that we don't believe that we have identified all the properties that need licenses and we have appointed a temporary member of staff to do some detection work to identify potential problems and enforcement.

NB highlighted that there is an initial licence fee but if you have a property and you don't come forward as an HMO we will go out and undertake a licence via enforcement. We would go out and detect that property or it could be a complaint by a neighbour or via general enquiries by a member of public or our officers going out and about. One of our primary contacts are the Fire Service from when they go out and check large properties or properties above restaurants, they raise our awareness to properties that could be licensable.

Cllr Pringle asked if there was any sanction for a landlord who doesn't come forward. NB explained that it is a licence fee so there's a part 1 licence fee and then there's a licence fee by enforcement. If the landlord doesn't engage with us and supply the

relevant documentation to support the licensing process, then we may be required to undertake enforcement action, which is costly and officer intensive so we work really closely with landlords to try and ensure that they are complicit with the process. The Private Rented Sector team have been in Housing for 12 months and we have not been required to undertake any enforcement activity, which is really positive. There is one HMO which was brought to our attention by Members and we are working closely with the landowner to ensure that residents are able to safely occupy the property.

Cllr Pringle wanted to know if it has been anticipated that most of the information will come from statutory agencies or people with some sort of specialist, is there any information or publicity that will enable them to understand their rights of having this enforced. N Beresford said that we are developing a communications plan based on landlords but also to potential residents. One of the primary concerns is that residents living in low cost accommodation are reluctant to come and approach us and let us know of poor housing condition for fear of reprisals, for fear they may be evicted or that they may be unable to find alternative housing, but it's really important that we engage with the landlord to ensure that residents can continue to live in a home safely. Where landlords evict a tenant for complaining about disrepair or rent levels, we are able to take enforcement action as there is legislation related to retaliatory eviction.

N Beresford added that we are able to use internal data and we are currently developing our Council Tax service hold a lot of information, so we are using this to identify properties where there are high numbers of occupants in a home that may not be related to each other.

Cllr Pringle asked if there was anonymity for someone who did want to report but didn't want to be identified and would they be identity protected. N Beresford said that we act on complaints that come direct to the team via our mailbox, residents do not need to leave details as to who they are, we will respond to any complaint and this will be followed up by making an inspection and make enquiries with other agencies or the neighbours.

Cllr Oguchi enquired how many empty homes were there across the Borough and that due to the changes in legislation and limited staff resources we had been unable to tackle empty homes. N Beresford said that the team transferred into Housing in January last year and our primary focus has been managing the process in relation to new legislative requirements that came in last year and this year. In respect of HMO's our current data shows that approximately 103 properties had been empty for more than two years. There are many reasons why a property may be empty, it could be used as second home or due to disrepair and lack of affordability in bringing those properties back into use.

N Beresford confirmed that we are focussing our efforts in areas where there is most risk to residents, so our primary focus is to ensure that we are licensing correctly and dealing with the complaints. Going forward we will be looking to create and develop an additional resource so that we can tackle empty homes. This may help with the demand on our housing register but also we have approximately 200 Homeless applicants every month with an identified housing need. We also currently have just over 110 households in temporary accommodation, so it's really important as an

authority in how we bring those homes back into use and make them available for the community to access.

N Beresford said that ideally we should be engaging with landlords to consider schemes to bring those properties back into use, there can be grants available to loan to landlords, in extreme measures, enforcement activity enables the local authority to take over management of the property and place occupants in the property after bringing the property up to standard and placing a charge on the property so that we can recoup the monies thereafter.

N Beresford said that the teams focus at the moment HMO Licensing and undertaking the stock modelling exercise to inform the strategic approach.

Cllr England said that you have gone from 43 to 103 HMO's, but if the BRE are correct you have to get another 800% and what do you consider your capacity to get from where you are now to potentially another 900 HMO's and how quickly can you do that. N Beresford stated that when the team transferred into the Housing Service there were 43 HMO's and we currently have 103 and we have 27 applications pending initial assessment. I'm confident with our detection process currently, the additional resource that we've bought in that will enable us to do some focussed work detecting HMO's. It is important that we focus on this work as this work has generated an additional £39k for the General Fund.

Cllr England highlighted to members of the Committee that his opinion of the Housing Service at Dacorum, as an opposition Councillor, a difficult target, which is meant to be a compliment.

Cllr England asked if we have considered with regards to the empty properties where often several empty properties are owned by one person, a similar dynamic as HMO's and he presumed we have already crossed that. N Beresford replied that we had, we have great information from the Council Tax department which enables us to identify which landlords we may approach for easy quick wins. That's currently being developed within the team and now we have the dedicated resource of the Team Leader, so we have a strong team, which helps us to build a strong approach with regards to licensing but also regulating the private sector and providing secure affordable accommodation for residents in Dacorum.

Cllr Adeleke enquired about the 27 pending but in the report it mentioned 52. N Beresford confirmed that since she had written her report we have had a number that have finalised that process.

Cllr Hollinghurst asked about the HMO's that are owned by absentee landlords and if there was any link to money laundering and if empty properties changing hands might be used for that purpose. N Beresford said that there was no evidence to suggest that any of the empty homes are in relation to money laundering. We do work closely with Trading Standards and Community Safety Unit. We do currently have a multi-agency HMO investigation ongoing where we believe there are cases of modern slavery, that's an existing HMO, there is no intelligence in relation to empty homes at this stage.

Cllr Mahmood wanted to know if the team paid for itself or if it's being subsidised. N Beresford explained that some of the team members were part of the team managing

the Council's Help to Rent scheme, which we no longer operate. The staff have been upskilled so they are existing posts within the establishment, the only new post was the dedicated Team Leader which was approved in the last Budget Scrutiny. In respect of budgets, any income generated through enforcement and HMO's licensing comes back into the General Fund to support other activity.

Cllr Griffiths asked to put on record that the Housing Department, certainly the Private Sector Housing has hit the ground running when it came into Housing and have done a phenomenal piece of work, which she is aware some of the new Members will not know anything about. It is a credit to them and to the work that they've put in on this as to how well they are doing. Which is why it was a late item for the budget but we put in the extra money for this particular position and I believe that has been well founded. The ground work has been done and we can start to see the efforts coming back. It hasn't been an easy task, it's been a slog and she would like to put on record her appreciation for all the effort they have put in to this.

The Committee agreed.

The Chairman echoed Cllr Griffiths comments. The report came to us for Members to offer comments on the Private Sector Enforcement Policy and the HMO Policy, she had been on this Committee about a year ago when this was a new project and it's incredible to see how quickly you've upskilled the team and set an example for how it should be done, you have done a fantastic job. N Beresford will feedback to the team.

Action: N Beresford

41 TENANCY STRATEGY

C Thomas presented the Tenancy Strategy report to Committee and invited questions.

The Chairman asked about flexible tenancies for new tenants and advised she had heard they hadn't been successful and that she understood we are moving away from these. Cllr Griffiths highlighted that we would be reviewing these later this year.

The Chairman mentioned the length of demoted tenancies querying if 12 months was long enough to collate evidence. L Warden confirmed that we are unable to select any longer due to the anti-social behaviour regulations, but we have other options available where serious ASB is taking place and having an impact on surrounding residents we may look at closure orders and outright possession. Demoted tenancies are used where we believe that we need to give the person a chance to receive support from us or external agencies, if that's successful they become a secure tenant but that doesn't mean that if it commences again, we could look at mandatory possession or suspended possession order.

Cllr Barry asked what would be used to trigger a court order regarding the impact of the community area and how would it be determined. L Warden confirmed that it was the 'locality of' is the official definition. That is open to interpretation but there are ways we can look at things if there is a wider impact. Court action for eviction is always a last resort, we will try other methods first. We have Community Protection

Warnings and Community Protection Notices and these can be served swiftly if needed. These can resolve low level issues quickly.

Cllr Pringle queried when the behaviours are taking place in the locality rather than in the property itself, are we able to take action against the tenant. L Warden advised it would be difficult to take action under the tenancy if it's not in the locality of the property but there are other steps that we could take.

Cllr Pringle asked what could be done if the problem is in sheltered and the tenant at number 1 is causing problems at number 20, so they are still on the premises but not in their own property. L Warden said that if it was in a scheme then the locality would be used. We would also look at safeguarding, we are keen to ensure we address those types of issues quickly.

Cllr Oguchi asked if housing association properties had been historically more expensive than Council properties and what were the differences. N Beresford confirmed that local authorities charge social rents and typically housing associations charge an affordable rent, which is 80% market rent, so slightly higher than social rent. Feedback from residents when we are advertising properties is that the rents are too high, although they are much more in line with local housing allowance rates for some of the private sector properties. Housing associations are regulated and their business plans are slightly different to local authorities and the way that we are financed is different.

Cllr Griffiths said that historically Dacorum had always had low rents, it's been a priority of this administration and the Government set policies where we had to reach target rent, which we complied with but we had such a long way to go achieve target rent, that when it was abandoned we were still short of reaching it. Then also on our new build we have decided all our housing is at the same level of rents.

Cllr Hollinghurst enquired if the anomaly with Tring regarding benefits calculation with respect to the wider area market rate is still happening, making it much higher than in Hemel Hempstead. N Beresford confirmed that Tring comes under a different area under the local housing allowance rates. The remainder of Dacorum comes under south-west Herts and Tring is under Aylesbury, which can mean that there is a bigger gap for residents in Tring in rental and benefit entitlement.

Cllr Griffiths mentioned this was a government restriction, not a local council.

The Chairman commented that it seems a short deadline if a nominee fails to respond within 24 hours. N Beresford advised that we are in constant communication with people who are actively bidding, so we ensure we can turn around properties promptly and maintain void times. We will have been talking to applicants in advance of shortlist closing if they are sitting in a favourable position. We start to verify applications to ensure they still meet the criteria set out in the Allocations Policy and their circumstances haven't changed. They are advised when they are bidding for properties that they need to engage with the registered provided and respond to contact. Typically applicants do respond as they are on the housing register due to their need for housing. Applicants who are actively bidding may be in touch up to four times a day.

Cllr England asked if there was a continuing or any difficulty with any renters with the term affordable rent. N Beresford said that we do get questions around the differences and officers are able to explain, we do have literature available that we can share, some of the bigger challenges are trying to encourage increased bidding for properties with affordable rent, so when we compare the number of bids for council properties with that of affordable rent, they are considerably lower. This could mean we repeat advertising cycles several times over for a new build property because applicants are keen to pursue a social rented property.

The Chairman confirmed that comments had been provided as per the recommendation.

42 UNIVERSAL CREDIT UPDATE

L Warden updated on the Universal Credit report and asked if there was any questions.

Cllr Adeleke asked about the impact on the rent arrears and given what we know so far and given the hardships this has placed on a number of people, is this trend going to continue for a long time or do you see it levelling out and if it does how will it affect the Council's financial position. L Warden reported it will have a long term impact, we have roughly 2,900 tenants in receipt of housing benefit that are of working age. The intention is that the managed migration will mean that all of those by the end of 2023 will be in receipt of universal credit. Based on the figures we have at the moment, that will have a considerable impact and it could increase all of our rent arrears. At the moment they are £1.76m and it could go up to £2.84m but that's the worst case scenario. Realistically it's going to be seven to eight years until migration slowly moves over.

Cllr Pringle said that we have a new Officer to support tenants with applications and those who are vulnerable or with mental health problems needing significant support, will this be a permanent position and therefore a permanent cost to the Council. K Kiely replied that the Universal Credit Officer is newly in post and we are yet to see fully how her role will pan out. At the moment she is doing a lot of liaison with DWP and the Job Centre, as a lot of the issues relate to the Job Centre not understanding housing and how tenancies work. With the new build, like Kylna Court, there have been a lot of tenants who haven't had to pay rent before, the focus has been on helping people to make claims and understand what's happening with the claims. Once the claim is in place there is the Tenancy Sustainment Team who may be taking that over. The role is initially for two years but it is anticipated that this will need to continue at least until managed migration has finished.

Cllr Pringle raised concerns that there are a lot of people who can't walk off the street if they are hungry, they have to have a referral to the foodbank and wanted to check if Officers are able to refer to the foodbank, secondly do we know how much demand has increased since the introduction. L Warden advised that the Tenancy Sustainment Team and Homeless Team are signatories so they are able to issue vouchers. There has been a 44% increase in foodbank vouchers given out between January and April. The previous quarter there was an 11% increase, so there is a correlation between the increase and the introduction of Universal Credit, but can't be sure it is due to Universal Credit, but the major change during that time was the introduction of Universal Credit.

Cllr Oguchi enquired about the amount in arrears increasing and how the service will be addressing the deficit. L Warden advised we are going through a fall claims process, so any claims where the circumstances have changed or any new claim will go onto Universal Credit. At the moment the numbers are slowly increasing each month, so over the next 12 months we don't expect the jump to be huge, we can just see it's going to slowly increase. We can't be sure exactly how much that will be as it's hard to tell at the moment. We are working with tenants on Universal Credit which is reducing the arrears. We are taking steps within the team to deal with general rent arrears so we can keep on target and we are making changes to the team structure. Additionally having a Universal Credit post will help and also trying to make savings in other areas.

Cllr England said that it was confirmed that we will be targeting vulnerable people and according to the Gazette this week, 74% of the 517 claiming have fallen behind with the rents, so how are we going to target 74%. K Kiely commented that when a tenant makes a claim they will not receive their first payment for five weeks. The vast majority of tenants will not have the funds in that first five weeks to make any payment. A reasonable number of them will pay their arrears and some of them will pay more than the five weeks they owe, gradually bringing themselves into credit. We will be concentrating on the tenants who are having trouble making a claim who we are already aware have particular vulnerabilities.

Cllr England asked what percentage of the 517 tenants are being targeted. K Kiely said it would be difficult to tell, there would be an initial contact with all tenants and at that point we would do some triage, but it is anticipated that as more people become familiar with Universal Credit, including the Job Centre, that the arrears will not be an issue. L Warden said that we have approximately 120 new claimants each month and we are notified of each one, so we are aware of any concerns and we can proactively support the tenants. We are currently aware of tenants who are in receipt of Housing Benefit, so we can contact them prior to the managed migration.

Cllr England asked if we are in a position to make a response should the Government say your roll is happening in December 2019. L Warden clarified that we were the last of roll out last year, St Albans went a year before us and Welwyn and Hatfield six months before that, so we are expecting it to follow a similar pattern. We are working with Chartered Institute of Housing, National Housing Federation and Shelter to find or provide information for any consultations and we have provided information on a couple of consultations where we have concerns.

Cllr England was concerned that we were more vulnerable as we have a large housing stock. L Warden said that we have benefitted from a strong relationship with Housing Benefit, so the biggest impact is the Job Centre not fully understanding some of the housing elements. We have Job Centre Coaches coming over and spending time with Housing Officers so they understand why we make certain decisions. We are trying to think ahead as much as possible to ensure we are supporting our tenants.

Cllr England asked about how many people does the 44% increase in foodbanks from January to April relate to. L Warden said that this information is provided by the CAB so we don't know. Cllr England would like to be advised of the details. L Warden to contact the CAB.

Action: L Warden

Cllr Adeleke enquired if we have contacted neighbouring authorities to see what their experiences are. L Warden confirmed that we have done a lot of work, especially with stock retaining authorities and it's been really useful to understand the lessons learnt, which they have been happy to share with us as it's realised that this is an issue that's going to affect all of us. There have also been a number of different conferences and training sessions. CAB have also been highlighting where the policy can be changed slightly to make it more effective.

Cllr Barry enquired if there had been any research into ages where we are aware of people using foodbanks and in arrears with rent, that it could be a gap in young upbringing education rather than an identified vulnerability. L Warden confirmed there has been a few different reports and research, there are a few things around identifying who is most likely at risk, within Dacorum we have done some research on those under 25 and we are putting together a proposal on a project on how to support those that are potentially more at risk. We have found a number of people under 25 do have rent arrears, so CAB are offering things like budgeting support. Also our Tenancy Sustainment Team will work more closely with the team of other agencies to provide support.

Cllr Mahmood asked if the problem is the five week lag, do they get less money or is it just a five week delay. K Kiely said that sometimes they will get less money depending on their circumstances, there are a number of other issues around payment periods particularly for people in work. For example, if you are paid monthly and your wages coincide quite closely with your payment period, you may get two amounts of wages in one month and nothing in the following month, which will completely mess up your Universal Credit payment. It's more the lag and secondly that the rent is paid directly to the tenant rather than being paid to the rent account, which means if they have other debts, then that money is going to brighthouse or buy the kids new shoes.

Cllr Griffiths wanted to mention that this was Katie's last meeting, she has been with the Council quite a long time and she is going to sorely missed. K Kiely confirmed she is taking early retirement after being here 30 years. There was a round of applause. Cllr Griffiths took the opportunity to thank Katie for all the hard work and dedication she has given to the tenants in Dacorum. The Chairman said that as a Committee would echo Cllr Griffiths thanks and wish Katie well in her retirement

43 **QUARTER 4 PERFORMANCE REPORT - CHILDREN SERVICES AND COMMUNITY SAFETY PARTNERSHIP, CUSTOMER SERVICES, THE OLD TOWN HALL, COMMUNICATIONS AND COMMUNITY PARTNERSHIPS**

M Rawdon presented the Q4 Performance Report for People and Communities.

Cllr Pringle said that she had problems getting through on the telephone system. M Rawdon asked if anyone experiences problems please let him know. L Roberts confirmed this is a netcall problem and if we are aware of the details we can make the necessary changes.

Cllr Adeleke asked about how staff would be put forward for the Annual Staff Recognition Scheme and how Councillors could become involved. M Rawdon advised we could add it to Members News and how to vote or nominate a member of staff. Cllr Griffiths confirmed that Members were able to nominate anyone that they feel meets the criteria. L Roberts confirmed we had nominations that come from Members last time.

Cllr England asked about the Old Town Hall marketing percentage when we are looking at an 88% increase in new email subscribers and would like to see the actual figures. M Rawdon would send the information out.

Action: M Rawdon

The Chairman confirmed the recommendation that Members note the report and the Committee agreed.

44 WORK PROGRAMME

There were no additions to the Work Programme.

The Meeting ended at 9.50 pm