

MINUTES

HOUSING AND COMMUNITY OVERVIEW AND SCRUTINY

4 MARCH 2020

Councillors: England
Imarni (Chairman)
Mahmood
Pringle
Arslan
Durrant
Johnson
Oguchi
Barry
Freedman

Also Attendance: Banks
Griffiths

Officers: Fiona Williamson Assistant Director - Housing
Ryan Glanville Tenancy and Leasehold Lead Officer
Fiona Jump Group Manager - Financial Services
Cassie O'Neil Corporate Support Team Leader
Linda Roberts Assistant Director - Performance, People and Innovation
Layna Warden Group Manager - Tenants and Leaseholders

The meeting began at 7.30 pm

19 MINUTES

The minutes from 04 February 2020 were agreed as correct.

20 APOLOGIES FOR ABSENCE

Cllrs Adeleke and Hollinghurst sent apologies for their absence.
Cllr Bassadone was also absent.

21 DECLARATIONS OF INTEREST

None.

22 PUBLIC PARTICIPATION

None.

23 CONSIDERATION OF ANY MATTER REFERRED TO THE

COMMITTEE IN RELATION TO CALL-IN

None.

24 BUDGET MONITORING REPORT Q3

F Jump presented the report stating that this is the portion/forecast as end Dec and advised that this will be the last forecast before end of financial year, she then invited questions.

Cllr England referred to slippage and asked; are you able to say how much rent and Council Tax that would equate to? FJump responded that rent & Council Tax wouldn't be impacted by slippage. Cllr England suggested that empty homes would impact the Council's income from rent & Council Tax. FJump acknowledged the question and advised it was not something she is able to answer tonight.

Cllr Freedman referred to recent increases in rent that has recently been communicated to tenants and asked; what sort of feedback has the Council received to that? LWarden advised that letters would have been received by tenants early this week. She confirmed a number of calls have been received with queries around service charges, but no concern of feedback has been expressed regarding increases.

Cllr freedman referred to the annual budget for next year and asked, has this been sent on the basis that any proposals that aren't included in budget could be brought forward to Cabinet to look at releasing reserves if required? In case any work was not needed or planned for within the budget setting process. LRoberts responded that if there is something officers need to deliver that requires a draw down from reserves during a financial year, there is facility to do so. This would be via the submission of a business plan which would be brought forward by officers for consideration.

FWilliamson advised that information has been gathered to ensure maximum carbon reduction to establish exactly what the options are in terms of maximising any investment to ensure we are future proofing as much as possible, adding that these factors would need to be considered before drawing down any reserves, to ensure they are correctly directed.

Cllr Mahmood referred to items 4.2 & 4.3 of the report re. garages and commented that the two items refer to underspend and pressure against budget due to low income, asking, is that managed? Are the two linked? Is this underspend due to the Council not getting enough income? FWilliamson responded that the garages project is underway and underspend is owing to them waiting for this, to ensure we are maximising capital investment. Since garage project commenced the Council has seen an increase in uptake of garages which is positive.

Cllr Johnson referred to paragraph 6.3 of the report re. slippage on special projects in sheltered housing and creation of new units, noting that the next paper refers to difficulty filling some EPD units and asked, is this being considered? FWilliamson responded that the new units are fully wheelchair accessible units, different to the sheltered housing schemes reported in voids.

FWilliamson introduced the report, referring to performance highlights and challenges.

Highlights – had continuingly good levels of performance in terms of satisfaction with repairs and maintenance service. Positive outputs from Tenancy Sustainment Team who work with tenants with complex needs. Number of rough sleeper approaches has reduced from 6 to 0 for same period as last year, due in part to the good work of team and initiatives working with Hightown with their outreach worker. Positive news on rent collection; qtr. collection increasing in part due to proactive work the team are doing in respect of universal credit.

Challenges continuing to see problems with empty home key to key times. Had some feedback from Keymark that due to all our units being included in that criteria (including those undergoing major works) it shows us as high in that area, but reasonable overall. In terms of lettings, have been some delays in getting properties re-let, some due to refusals, some due to sheltered. The team have been carrying out work to establish why some schemes are more popular than others and why dispersed schemes are more popular. Satisfaction with outcome of ASB has reduced, a lot of this is around communication with those people bringing complaints to us. Been some recent changes to bring ASB team within Housing Service, enabling us to provide a more consistent service to any tenure that has ASB problems.

FWilliamson invited questions.

Cllr Mahmood referred to sheltered accommodation, commenting that trouble letting those units has been an issue for a long time and asking; do we need to categorise them, to see how we can look at things differently? There is a high demand for housing but we have all these properties that we cannot let. LWarden responded that they are currently undertaking project work around sheltered housing to try and understand tenant's needs. Devised an action plan to look at promoting schemes, some suggested changes to brighten up and make schemes more accessible. Next step is to draw up clear plans to bring this forward. Will also be looking at incentivising people to move to sheltered units, particularly those in larger homes who need adaptations or are perhaps isolated. Very much something we are aware of and have teams working on potential solutions and will bring a paper forward later in the year.

Cllr Mahmood asked, have we looked at reducing age you can move into sheltered housing? LWarden confirmed yes, in some cases we reduced age to 50 from 60 in some of the more difficult to let schemes, but have found that too big a split in ages can cause some difficulties in inter-generation and managing the scheme. Have also done some work to increase the levels of savings you can have and still qualify from £100k to £250k, hoping that will increase the numbers of people that can come into sheltered housing who still need the level of support a scheme can provide.

Cllr Griffiths added that one of the biggest complaints she receives in respect to sheltered accommodation is the 'younger' residents moving in. Different ages have a different lifestyle so have to take all those challenges into consideration when looking at ages etc.

Cllr Imarni observed that, from the handful of people in Gadebridge that have spoken to her, they don't seem to be aware of when they become eligible for sheltered accommodation, particularly those not already engaged with services via benefits etc. FWilliamson responded that there have been some open days and advised that they don't want to send out any communication at this stage, until the current review is concluded as we now have 4 categories of scheme in terms of longer term viability so need to consider whether some of them are decommissioned or made available for general use.

Cllr England expressed his thanks to the team for the proactive work being done on Universal Credit and also the great news on rough sleepers. He queried, how do you know the figure is accurate, when do you know you have looked everywhere? FWilliamson responded that the data is based on the number of people that present themselves as a rough sleeper. We also collect information from other agencies in terms of anyone who is reporting as a rough sleeper who might not be presenting to us, so that is included.

Cllr England referred to Empty Homes and the Keymark feedback, commenting that as Dacorum are a big stockholder, for us to be just slightly behind the medium has more of an impact as it would be for some other authorities and asked, what else is there we can do to improve in this area, if we had more people could we do more?

FWilliamson advised that Soprasteria have been commissioned to undertake a review and with their findings they have made a number of suggestions on how we can change the process to front load the process. They identified a number of areas they believe could be run consecutively to reduce the key to key time by running as many of those processes in tandem. LRoberts added it is also about team communication and what systems and products we are using. Looking at all those and hoping to deliver a quick wins project soon.

Cllr England asked, given this is an age old process, people moving out new people moving in, how has this process become such that a consultant is needed to identify changes? FWilliamson responded that the lettable standard has improved which means we try to do as much work as we can with the property empty rather than once the tenant is in situ, so they suffer less disruption, however this does impact the time it takes to turn those properties around. There has also been a change in how we record compliance information, we now undertake all the commissioning of things like asbestos surveys. Another issue is the condition people leave properties in, we have done a lot of work around charging tenants for leaving properties in poor condition. Been working with Clean Safe & Green to carry out property and garden clearances – that brings another party into the process which can add more time. Soprasteria have stripped that back to look at all of those elements and see what can be streamlined.

Cllr Griffiths added this is an area that has been difficult to resolve for a number of years, been looked at various times but have never got it to quite where we want it to be. Having someone from outside to strip it back will help.

Cllr Mahmood referred to the service objectives for each group, commenting that they all seem to have either expired or were completed in 2019 – asking, why has this not been refreshed? FWilliamson advised that the qtr. 3 update is gives the

current position – the objectives are set at the beginning of the performance cycle and updated/reported quarterly, to monitor if objectives are meeting their deadlines. Have a number of service plan objectives still ongoing. Some things have finite finish date as have to comply with scrutiny and Council timescales. Some objectives are completed in year, some will be rolled forward into next year.

Cllr Mahmood, asked, do you refresh targets each year? FWilliamson confirmed that yes, we have an annual service plan over and above business as usual which is why we have the quarterly updates.

Cllr Pringle referred to a point made about sheltered housing and commented that although there may be a surplus properties at the moment, she would want to sound a note of caution about decommissioning them without mapping what the future need might be as there could be some demographic changes. Cllr Pringle asked; is there any consideration to younger people who might not quite qualify, but might be on housing list and have other conditions such as medical need, do we signpost people to sheltered accommodation if they might not be aware they qualify? FWilliamson responded that decommissioning would be a last resort, it is an intervention category, expressing we either need to do something drastic now or soon to make those properties fit for purpose for the future (such as first floor access). We do spend time looking at demographic and aging population, we consult with Public Health England. It is difficult to fully understand how we make the properties more attractive, but work we are doing around allocations will come as secondary work once we know where we are going to invest.

FWilliamson referred to point around demand, adding we do not go out and proactively try to identify people who might be suitable for sheltered accommodation, but the housing advice team do give advice on all tenures, including sheltered, even if they are not in the age qualification, if a tenant has medical need we might discuss with them the suitability.

Cllr Mahmood referred to coronavirus and what we would do in terms of vulnerable people in sheltered accommodation. LWarden confirmed this is something they are considering and will keep strong links with partner organisations and keep sheltered housing officers briefed,

Cllr England commented, with regard housing service plan, he cannot see any reference to the climate emergency, and asked, is this a plan that is due to be updated and is that why it is not in there? FWilliamson responded that they had a service planning away day on Friday (last) and the Climate agenda is in every strand of the service plan – it is cross cutting across all areas of service to identify how we can best respond in a proactive way, both in relation to our buildings and our tenants.

26 **CHILDREN SERVICES AND COMMUNITY SAFETY PARTNERSHIP,
CUSTOMER SERVICES, THE OLD TOWN HALL,
COMMUNICATIONS AND COMMUNITY PARTNERSHIPS Q3
PERFORMANCE REPORT**

LRoberts introduced the report and advised the KPIs are embedded in the report. Overall performance is positive for qtr 3. Adventure Playground attendance remains a slight concern, had to remove some structures due to safety issues, currently exploring use of some s.106 monies for more compliant structures. Would like to highlight how well CSU have performed in last quarter.

LRoberts invited questions.

Cllr Johnson referred to 3.3.1; signing in app at Reception, commenting that he recently attended a meeting, went through the process of signing in and it occurred to him afterwards, in terms of GDPR, how long is the information kept and stored? LRoberts responded it is just kept on the system for that day then clears, it is not stored.

Cllr Mahmood referred to adventure playgrounds and concerns about numbers going down, asking; why did we not do a proper report to say, when we take out the equipment, this is what we will put in its place? LRoberts responded it was not a planned removal, it had to be taken out for H&S reasons.

Cllr Mahmood asked, is it in this budget? LRoberts advised she would have to check and come back, adding that they are looking to apply to s.106 monies to apply for these scheme, in process of trying to identify which s.106 has been delivered against what areas to see what is available.

Action: LRoberts to check budget position re. replacing structures at Adventure Playgrounds

Cllr Mahmood referred to Old Town Hall and asked; is its utilisation better than last year? LRoberts responded it is at a steady state. A lot of work goes into promotion but it is a competitive market.

Cllr England referred to page 91 of the report; CSU call handling and commented that looking at last year's results, the call time answering target appears to have been relaxed against, referring to item CSU10 on page 91. LRoberts confirmed last year's shows as 210 second target, and this year is 300 second target, she confirmed she would take this back to check.

Cllr England asked, do you have data on how many people have called and have been waiting for more than 300 seconds? LRoberts confirmed she would get that information and come back to Cllr England on both points.

Action: LRoberts to check call answering target increase & number of callers waiting more than target

Cllr England stated that he called in recently and was on hold for 20 minutes. LRoberts stressed that if that happens, it is really important that you email in and give the date and time so it can be looked into. LRoberts and Cllr Banks comment that it is important that we let TLancashire know if there are issues like this so she can look into the particular call, encouraging Members to email TLancashire with the specific call information such as date and time of call and what you asked the automated system for, so it can be properly investigated.

Cllr Mahmood commented that he had a similar issue with a website query he logged and has not received response for 2 months, asking; who is responsible for web enquiries? LRoberts responded that it would be relevant service the query related to (in this case Clean, Safe & Green). Cllr Imarni commented she has found CThorpe

to be very efficient, whenever she's had a problem and escalated anything to him he acts very quickly.

Cllr Imarni referred to concerns around mental health, hoarding & modern day slavery, asking; what support do we give to tenants that have hoarding issues, as they fall into a very special category in that they don't necessarily pose a nuisance to neighbours, may pay their rent on time etc, but sometimes they are threatened with eviction?

LWarden responded that the intention is to roll out 5 year health checks, to be more proactive in inspecting properties and hopefully meaning early intervention. Hoarding can cause H&S risks and risk to the property in terms of fire etc . Have been looking at setting a project up with MIND, we have a number of tenants and leaseholders who have gone through that process and found it beneficial. Some tenants are also referred to the Tenancy Sustainment team who do more intensive work with those individuals. Eviction is a last resort, it is not beneficial to us or them.

Cllr Imarni referred to Community Partnerships and Christmas Light events, noting that 6 events were supported by the team and commented that 6 seems a very low number. Cllr Imarni expressed her understanding that the cost of the events is making it prohibitive to Community Centres. LRoberts confirmed that she would look into this further.

Action: LRoberts to provide feedback regarding Christmas Light events/costs

Cllr Banks advised that originally, the neighbourhoods that had lights were associated with the Neighbourhood Action Group areas, networks that were set up and supported by Council officers to engage with communities that had been identified as areas of deprivation. That is how it originated. Some neighbourhoods have since dropped out. One of the biggest issues is that there needs to be a group (such as a resident, neighbour or traders association) to enable issuing of funds as they need to be given to a 'body'. Cllr Banks expressed that she would be keen to see Christmas Light events expanded across all neighbourhoods. Some wards may struggle in the absence of any set up associations. Would be happy to speak to others about how they make is successful at Grovehill.

Cllr England referred to Adeyfield and advised Nicky McIntyre (Officer) has always helped with this and emailed Councillors and asked County Councillors if they want to use any of their locality budget for this purpose.

Action: Cllr Banks welcomed emails/enquires from any Members/Community Centres who might require support for bids for Christmas Lights

27 HRA STRATEGIC ACQUISITIONS POLICY

FWilliamson introduced report the report, the purpose of which is to review the acquisitions policy that has been developed to provide HRA with opportunity to purchase property from open market and consider s.106 units which are currently being purchased by alternate providers. This policy sets out a criteria on where it is prudent to purchase from open market or buy back from those who have purchased through right to buy. Along with opportunity to address the homelessness crisis by buying temporary accommodation to reduce pressure on use of Bed & Breakfast.

FWilliamson invited questions.

Cllr Mahmood referred to item 3.2 in the report and asked, are we going to be increasing the prices of housing in the Borough and therefore creating a disadvantage for first time buyers. FWilliamson responded our intention is not to look at whole scale acquisitions, it is just to provide us with the opportunity, particularly those 106 properties that have to be defined as affordable and have been put out to the open market by developers but where they have not been successful in selling them. The 106 properties are the affordable housing elements that developers have to include. We want to have the viability to purchase those properties and let them at social rent level rather than affordable, it will not in any way impact the private sale market.

Cllr Mahmood asked that this point is made clear in the report. FWilliamson responded that she can look at making some amendments to wording to make it clear this is not about us trying to purchase property from the open market, this is about acquisition possibilities, only for circumstances where developers are looking to offload property.

Action: FWilliamson to review wording of item 3.2 of report

Cllr Mahmood asked, can we buy garage sites ourselves? FWilliamson responded they are owned by the general fund, if HRA want to purchase those for housing it is based on a red book valuation.

Cllr England commented that he likes the idea of giving ourselves the ability to buy land that becomes available because developers want to move on elsewhere. However, he is uncomfortable about buying the excess units developers haven't been able to sell as it feels like we are providing a safety net for developers. FWilliamson responded it is not about creating an opportunity, the current situation is that developers would offer those to registered providers, so there is no new safety net. This is about trying to open up more for social rent rather than the providers that charge affordable rents – which are 80% of market rates. We charge social rent – which is around 24-30% market rent.

Cllr Griffiths added, this isn't a compulsory thing we have to do, we will only purchase properties we want to.

Cllr Imarni added we have over 10,000 people on our housing waiting list, commenting that if an opportunity comes up to purchase some stock, we should be able to.

Cllr Freedman expressed that he feels it is a very good policy, giving us an opportunity not an obligation to be able to do something. Cllr Freedman asked; how long has it been since the Council has purchased property or land instead of developing itself?

FWilliamson confirmed we have purchased some land for development but have never exercised our right to purchase back a property from the open market. We have exercised our right to buy back in very specific cases where people have got into difficulty.

Cllr Freedman asked, in terms of the land, has this been land in use? FWilliamson advised that through the development programme we have purchased sites that had previous use, such as office use. Some of them have had previous use, some have been brownfield sites or allocated housing sites.

Cllr Freedman referred to the allocated housing sites, asking; have we made any purchases in recent years? FWilliamson confirmed it was in the recent development programme which commenced in 2014. First site we developed was a site we owned already and were working with registered provider to develop out the site but they were taking too long so we exercised our right to develop out the site ourselves.

Cllr Freedman commented that he infers from that, we already have a purchase policy in place and a way to evaluate things, asking is it the case that this proposes to expand that policy into other purchase opportunities? FWilliamson confirmed, yes, to purchase properties that are surplus to developer's requirements and also property from the open market which may be suitable to use for temporary accommodation due to the location, where we may not want in our portfolio for long term accommodation, but where it would provide suitable safe accommodation for us to use on a temporary basis.

28 HELP TO MOVE TO A MORE SUITABLE HOME

LWarden introduced draft help to move policy, which will replace the previous policy 'help to move to smaller home', which was introduced in 2013 to tackle under occupation brought in by bedroom tax and to try to free up some of our larger homes. The Council have carried out a survey, looking at the current need through housing register and looked at what neighbouring authorities provide.

Cllr Mahmood asked, in the 7 years since the previous policy, how many people have taken up this option to downsize? LWarden responded that initially there was a reasonable level of uptake, in response to the introduction of bedroom tax. That has now tailed off. In 2019 we had 27 people who downsized, and 20 of those were moving into sheltered accommodation. We only had 7 moving within our general stock.

Cllr England referred to adapted properties and asked, what is the typical amount that it would cost us to adapt a property and does that have any bearing on how much we should be offering someone? LWarden responded it is dependent on how much work is required. The amount we are offering is £1k plus cost of removals. We want to trial this for the first year to see if that is enough of an incentive, we can always review the scheme at a later date.

Cllr Freedman advised he is in favour of the policy but gave some feedback that he is finding it quite difficult to scrutinise the report as there were some things that are perhaps not evident in the report. Cannot quite see what the target is, is there a target number of properties of specific sizes that we are trying to move? He added that when he read the policy it comes through very much what would happen if someone was going to move house right now. What about if someone was thinking about downsizing but might want to move to a specific area, or have other influencers on not wanting to move immediately. Is there a way someone can formally register on specific criteria for a future move?

LWarden thanked Cllr Freedman for feedback about targets, commenting that is something they will take back for consideration.

LWarden then responded to the comments about waiting for a suitable property and then downsizing, advising that tenants who register to downsize will then apply for houses they see advertised that they are interested in, if they are successful, a member of the support team will contact that tenant and advise them they qualify for the incentive payment and will support them at that stage.

Cllr Johnson asked, how is the scheme advertised to our tenants? LWarden responded that it is promoted through our website and through News & Views. When the survey was carried out they found some people were not aware of the scheme so they plan to do a formal launch. Publicity will also be included with the next quarterly rent statement.

Cllr Johnson asked, is it correct this scheme was previously not open to anyone in rent arrears? The new policy appears to allow people who have rent arrears but are making regular payments to participate, will that have any impact? LWarden responded that we do currently still accept people in arrears, but their case would first be reviewed by a panel. We recognise that leaving people in properties that are too big for their needs does not help the situation as they may be affected by bedroom tax and not able to afford the rent, so moving them would be beneficial to all parties.

Cllr Oguchi referenced the trend going down in terms of the number of people downsizing and asked, do you have an idea of how you want this new policy to impact this? LWarden responded that we know from the housing register how many people are under occupying and how many have registered an interest to downsize. We are hoping this policy will encourage a lot of those people to take the next step and start looking to move. We have set our budget based on 2019 figures of households moving.

29 WORK PROGRAMME

FWilliamson referred to the June programme and advised it should read Private Sector Assistance Programme (not policy) and asked for this to be corrected.

Action: CONeil to amend work programme

Cllr England queried, is there an agenda item coming forward to cover the Evelyn Sharp lift issue? Cllr Imarni responded that the matter is being looked at, has been passed from MBrookes to CONeil who will be looking into it and a paper will be coming forward in due course.

The Meeting ended at 9.15 pm