

MINUTES

HOUSING AND COMMUNITY OVERVIEW AND SCRUTINY

1 JULY 2020

Present

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

Officers:

Katie Mogan	Corporate and Democratic Support Lead Officer
Linda Roberts	Assistant Director - Performance, People and Innovation
Fiona Williamson	Assistant Director - Housing

Also Attendance: Griffiths
Williams

The meeting began at 6.30 pm

42 **MINUTES**

The Chair advised that there were some amendments to the minutes from 3 June 2020 so will be agreed at the next meeting.

43 **APOLOGIES FOR ABSENCE**

Apologies for absence were received from Councillor Hollinghurst.

44 **DECLARATIONS OF INTEREST**

There were no declarations of interest.

45 **PUBLIC PARTICIPATION**

There was no public participation.

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

None.

47 **GARAGES**

L Roberts introduced the report to the committee and thanked Councillor England for pointing out an inconsistency in the report, she confirmed that a report would be going to Cabinet in November. The project was started in February 2020 but Covid-19 has had an impact on its progress. The companies that were working on this project had to furlough their staff and the council's programme manager's contract was not continued as he was unable to continue the work required of him. There was also the additional task to ensure remote working was in place and move processes to work from home effectively across all services. The tender for the project was sent out to three companies and the local firm Aitchison Rafferty have been appointed to carry out the surveys of the garages. Obviously, they have also been affected by covid-19 but have agreed a start date of 6th July and based on the number of surveys that need to be carried out, they expect to have completed it by the end of August. The garages team have done extremely well in lockdown, they are working from home and coming into the office when required. They have dealt with 263 eform enquiries, made 93 offers, 60 commencements and 56 terminations. The council's surveyors have not been able gain access to properties due to social distancing so they have managed to do carry out inspections of 756 garages so there are approximately 6000 inspections left for Aitchison Rafferty to carry out. The lockdown period has been used productively but have been impacted by third parties furloughing their staff.

Councillor Bassadone asked how many garages were currently vacant.

L Roberts said she did not have that information to hand but would circulate the information to the committee

Action: L Roberts

Councillor Bassadone asked if there was a large number of vacant garages.

L Roberts said she knew approximately 30% of the total garages were vacant. The team will need to monitor the impact of covid-19, garages might be the first thing household's return due to a reduced household income.

Councillor Freedman ask if any comparisons had been done with the same period last year.

L Roberts said it had and it was roughly the same as last year. Obviously, it is too early to tell the impact from covid-19 but will be monitoring on a weekly basis to identify trends.

Councillor Adeleke had a few questions. Firstly, he asked if the team were still accepting applications for garages, secondly, asked if L Roberts could expand on the

definition of the external programme manager and thirdly, asked if intervention was required to avoid a decline in applications for example, some garages are not compatible with modern vehicle sizes.

L Roberts said garage applications were still being processed and the team were receiving a steady stream of enquiries. The external programme manager was a contractor being paid a day rate and was signed up for a period of time to complete the work. The consequences of lockdown meant it was sensible to give him five days' notice of his contract ending as he was unable to perform the role required. With regards to intervention, the data needs to be collected to understand what needs to be done with the stock to make best use of it. This may mean a complete refurbishment or some enhancements. It is not clear whether the garages are used to store cars so this needs to be understood before money invested to make them suitable for modern cars as people may use them for storage. The project is complex and the data is needed to make decisions on whether garages are knocked down to rebuild, knocked down and the land sold or just refurbished.

Councillor Mahmood asked what the terms of the survey were.

L Roberts said it was a building survey and analysis of the results will be conducted by the council, not Aitchison Rafferty. They are collating the data and giving their opinion on the quality of assets.

F Williamson confirmed it was a full component stock condition survey which would also outline financial costs.

Councillor England asked what measurements will be collected in this survey.

L Roberts said they have the data in terms of occupancy levels which was a piece of work carried out at the end of last year and the asset information will enable better, more informed decisions.

Councillor England asked how many garages the council have built in the last 10 years.

L Roberts said she didn't have the information to hand but would circulate to the committee.

Action: L Roberts

Councillor Durrant commented that garages could be reinforced with doors and locks to make them a viable option for local businesses to use as storage.

L Roberts said it was certainly an option to be considered.

Councillor Adeleke commented that if the council are offering out garages as a storage solution then the relevant licence and legal obligations need to be researched.

L Roberts said that was a useful point and would need to look at consequences for all options and look at the council's current terms and conditions.

48 **EMPTY HOMES**

F Williamson introduced the report to members. Over the last two years, reporting against empty homes performance figures has been divided into three categories: general needs, supported housing and adapted properties. This performance against the targets has not been where it needs to. A number of reviews have been undertaken both internal and external and Sopra Steria have been commissioned to carry out a review to find out what the issues are with existing processes and understand the demand for certain types of property. The demand for general needs and supported housing is quite different.

Appendix A shows the performance of key to key times since April 2014. There is a period of improved performance through to 2016/17 where the key to key time was as low as 19 days. In 2016, the methodology for collecting data and the way major works were included. Most properties are returned in a reasonable condition so can be re-let quickly but in some instances, especially in properties where perhaps an elderly resident has passed away, the condition can be poor and need extensive work to bring up to the required standard. Other housing providers would take these out of their figures and class them as major works so this has an impact on our figures. Appendix B shows the volumes in the different categories.

Appendix C details the findings of the Sopra Steria. They started the review in December 2019 using a workshop with internal and external stakeholders to map out the voids process which is complex due to the number of different contractors involved. Various stakeholders attended workshops to look at the existing process to understand if there were any opportunities to streamline the process or run elements of the process concurrently. A number of key issues were identified and Sopra Steria were due to present their findings but covid-19 and the lockdown has delayed this.

The Strategic Housing team have undertaken some analysis on the level of demand and found that despite having over 5,000 people considered to have a housing need, around only 1,200 of those have been active on bidding for properties in the last 12 months.

Supported housing schemes have proven more difficult to let and a supplementary piece of work is being undertaken to review the condition, layout and facilities of category 2 schemes. It is evident that dispersed schemes are more popular and it is proposed that a report will be brought to committee in the autumn with the full findings and any recommendations for intervention.

Councillor England referred to the number of people actively bidding on properties and wondered if this was due to people not understanding the process or not believing they have enough points to be successful.

F Williamson said one of the roles of the Independent Reviewing Officer is to understand why some properties have a higher number of bids than others. Some people wait for the new build properties to come online and some people on the housing register are already in a council property and are wanting to transfer.

Councillor Bassadone asked how many supported housing properties are vacant and if there is any reason why people do not want to move in. She also asked if there had been any cases of covid-19 in the supported housing schemes.

F Williamson said the number of vacant units is currently higher because due to lockdown, any properties that were vacant, we haven't been working on due to balancing the risk between infection controls and turning the properties around. The current focus has been on ensuring there is sufficient move on accommodation for those who must move due to medical grounds and domestic abuse. There have been restrictions on working practices within properties due to social distancing and as it takes longer to re-let supported housing properties, have suspended activity on these to focus on properties with a greater demand. During lockdown, staff have contacted every tenant over the age of 69 to check they have a support network and address any welfare concerns but were also spoken to about supported housing and if they had an interest in moving. Sadly, there have been deaths from covid-19, however they have not been in the schemes, mainly where residents have contracted it in hospital. A decision was taken early on to close all communal areas and increase cleaning to twice a day and over the weekend.

Councillor Bassadone thanked the housing team for their hard work.

Councillor Imarni echoed those thanks and was impressed with how well the team has stepped up and adapted.

Councillor Adeleke also added his thanks to the team. He noted the increase in key to key days and asked what the target was in other organisations. He also noted that despite the increase in savings threshold for people to be eligible for supported housing there had been no increase in demand.

F Williamson said making direct comparisons with other organisations was difficult as we keep the major works category in the key to key reporting whereas a majority of organisations take it out. Some organisations also work on a private sector approach whereby a tenant will move out one day and the next tenant moved in the day after. This means they only undertake a safe, sanitary and secure check of the property and all works are undertaken in situ which is more expensive and obviously causes disruption to the tenant. Research has been carried out with tenants and they have indicated a preference for moving into a property with all works complete. We are striving to get the targets as low as possible and aiming for an average of 30 days for general needs properties and acknowledging that there is less demand for supported housing, aiming for an average of 43 days. In relation to the demand in supported housing, interventions have already taken place to address it and some properties are not ideal for the age demographic so have been redesignated. 72 supported housing properties were redesignated to general needs and 39 general needs to supported housing.

Councillor Mahmood commented on whether supported housing needed to be rebranded and if there were any additional restrictions on these properties that were stopping people from moving in.

F Williamson said she was conscious of the perception of supported housing and needs to be reinforced that it is independent living and category 2 schemes have the benefit of communal areas for social opportunities. A marketing campaign will be built on the research that has been conducted by the team built on feedback from those currently in general needs properties. There are very few restrictions in supported housing than differ to general needs and they have similar tenancy agreements. One main problem is that most of the properties are one bedroom, there is a two bed

scheme in Adeyfield, so restricts the possibility of visitors. There are visitor suites in the schemes and have been considering revamping the visitor accommodation to make it more contemporary and family friendly.

Councillor Mahmood referred to the key to key times and noted that there seems to be a decline after April 2018.

F Williamson said she was aware that performance declined around April 2018 and it has been looked at in detail. There was a staffing resource issue in the lettings team where they were at 50% capacity but full capacity was reached later that year but performance didn't increase. Further work is ongoing in terms of what else could be done to reduce to key to key times. One thing that was noted by Sopra Steria was that there needs to be more responsibility and taking ownership with a one team approach.

Councillor Pringle also echoed her thanks to the team. She asked if it was necessary to have an external contractor look into how the team could improve target times and whether this could have been identified by management. She also asked if supported housing could be extended for those with hidden disabilities and are younger than the current threshold or those suffering from domestic abuse or trauma and might benefit from a community atmosphere. She also asked how many homeless people were housed at the start of lockdown.

F Williamson said the external contractor was appointed due to the complexity of the process and part of their remit was to look at the IT.

L Roberts said it is difficult to critique yourself and should not underestimate the impact of a third party, as they have the skill in being able to go through a business process review. Sopra Steria were able to hold a workshop to engage staff and allow everyone to contribute which also buys people into the process. On the technology side, they know the art of the possible and can use other approaches to enhance what we currently have in place.

F Williamson said if the supported housing property is not let after two advertising cycles, it is opened up to those over 50 with a medical need. In the past, we have found that mixing age groups and different needs has created problems when trying to manage schemes. There is a piece of work ongoing to understand the needs of residents and what level of support they require, whether a weekly visit is too much for some people or if others would benefit from a more frequent visit. She added that six street homeless people had been housed, two of which have no recourse to public funds.

Councillor Adeleke asked if it was possible to send out invitations to those on the register to bid on properties if they haven't been active in the past.

F Williamson said the council operates a choice based lettings scheme and the process is explained to applicants when they first apply. It would be an onerous task to write to all applicants and some people can be successful in gaining a property within local villages if they meet the local connection criteria. The team does proactively engage with other council's and attend benchmarking clubs and the Herts Head of Housing meeting to exchange best practice on empty homes.

Councillor England referred to Appendix A and said it would be sensible to produce data in such a way so all data is recorded in working days to understand the trends. He hoped that if the cause was found for poor performance, it could be rectified and return to consistent performance.

F Williamson said she would get the data produced and circulate to members. The team endeavour to maintain a high level of performance and Sopra Steria had identified some key events that happened at various stages in personnel and the void process management.

Action: F Williamson

L Roberts emphasised that the key to success what to run as many processes as possible in parallel instead of in a linear process.

Councillor Imarni said that some residents have mentioned to her that they do not understand how to bid on houses.

F Williamson said the team do look into why people are not bidding on properties and what additional support we can provide to them. Strategic Housing have appointed new Housing Needs advisors who are able to contact residents struggling to bid and provide support. Some of the older demographic find it particularly challenging to bid so half of one post is dedicated to providing support to these people. At the moment, due to covid-19 we are unsure on the impact this post has had.

L Roberts said they are considering how to make processes more mobile. More people now use their smartphones regularly instead of using laptops and need to make use of that to help.

Councillor Griffiths said a lot of work has gone into this project. She highlighted that those eligible for supported housing are often very specific about what area they would like to move it and will not bid until that area comes up. In addition to L Robert's comments, she noted that many people do not have a telephone in their homes and just rely on their mobile phones.

49 PRIVATE SECTOR ASSISTANCE PROGRAMME

F Williamson introduced the report to members. This policy replaces the previous one approved by Cabinet in March 2013. The previous policy provided a raft of grant assistance, primarily based on loans for private sector housing from disabled grants to grants for home improvements to address housing health and safety to ensure the private rented sector could provide good quality accommodation. There was a low level take up of these loans and the transfer of the team from regulatory services to housing provided an opportunity to review the policy to include current central government funding and ensure the council can provide broader assistance to individuals to remain living independently in their homes. The new policy allows the council to provide discretionary support to individuals who may have a need to make their home safe, warm, secure or adapted for a medical need. The majority of the funding allocation from central government is for the mandatory disabled grant. For the last two years, the government have provided top up payments in the winter months with the expectation that this is spent by the end of the financial year. By broadening the scope of the policy, it provides discretionary allowance to provide funding to people who may not be able to leave hospital as their homes are

unsuitable for their needs. There is a requirement to consult with the CCG and Herts Adult Care Services to understand where the pressures are to make decisions around those waiting to be discharged in hospital. The policy has been drafted mainly to address any top up funding that may become available and allow for flexibility in allocating grants.

Councillor Mahmood asked if the grants were available to all residents of Dacorum, not just council tenants. He asked if there was a limit on this funding.

F Williamson said there is no additional money being allocated for discretionary grants. The policy is providing the opportunity for existing funding to be used in a different way. These grants are only for private sector and not for social housing as there is the opportunity within the council's housing stock to find alternative, more suitable accommodation. She said that its use will be limited outside the mandatory powers. It is important to consider that central government may have to look at a number of areas which may affect people who are recovering from covid-19 and may have long term health problems.

Councillor Adeleke asked if the money is not spent, does it have to be returned to central government.

F Williamson said the winter top up fund requires it to be spent before the end of the financial year. In the first year, half the money was spent and the department contacted MHCLG to ask if they wanted the money returned and they said it could be continued to be spent within the first quarter.

50 **WORK PROGRAMME**

The work programme was agreed.

The Meeting ended at 8.20 pm