

MINUTES

HOUSING AND COMMUNITY OVERVIEW AND SCRUTINY

4 NOVEMBER 2020

Present:

Members:

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

Officers:

Mark Brookes	Assistant Director - Corporate and Contracted Services
Oliver Jackson	Team Leader - Supported Housing
Fiona Jump	Group Manager - Financial Services
Matt Rawdon	Group Manager - People
Linda Roberts	Assistant Director - Performance, People and Innovation

Also Attendance:

Portfolio Holders:

Councillor Banks (Community & Regulatory)
Councillor Griffiths (Housing)

Councillor Williams (Leader of the Council)

The meeting began at 6.30 pm

72

MINUTES AND ACTION POINTS

The minutes from 09 September 2020 were agreed as correct. The minutes from 07 October 2020 received a number of amendments which had been sent via email but hadn't been included in the published document. The Chairman apologised for this

oversight which was due to internet problems and agreed to take a look at these additions so that the minutes can be approved at the December meeting.

Concerns were raised regarding the accuracy of the minutes and The Chairman agreed to discuss with Member Support, although it was not thought to be a regular occurrence.

A statement was provided by Cllr Banks, Portfolio Holder for Community and Regulatory.

I have been made aware of a concern from a member of the committee that I should not have taken part in the discussion at the last meeting on the Active Dacorum Hub item due to my employment at the Grovehill Community Centre.

I have reflected on the concern raised and taken advice from the Monitoring Officer. My employment is registered on my register of interests and is therefore a disclosable pecuniary interest. I acknowledge that where such an interest arises a member should not take any part in a discussion or decision which relates to that interest.

When I considered this matter prior to the meeting, I was of the opinion that the impact would only have had a very minor impact, if any, on the community centre and that I could still take part if I limited my involvement to points of clarification. However, having considered this further I acknowledge that the right course of action would have been to not take any part at all in order to comply with the declaration rules and to avoid any perception that my views were influenced by my involvement in the community centre.

I appreciate and remind members that the report is currently being reconsidered by officers and I will consider that report afresh once it is finalised. If the report involves the Grovehill Community Centre I will not take part in any discussion going forward on this item and will defer any related decisions to my Cabinet colleagues.

In addition to this over the past few weeks there has been some confusion over some projects within my portfolio and I would like to clarify this to the committee if I may Chair

The Youth Proposal Project was discussed at the last H&C OSC, DBC is looking to deliver a programme of youth physical activity events with a DBC reserve budget of £44k. After really useful feedback about the delivery areas and consultation, a further report will come back to OSC early next year, as agreed at the meeting.

The money held in reserves does not, does not include funding raised by the public.

Cllr Adeleke asked for clarification on the point which had concerned him regarding the funding and where it had come from. The Chairman confirmed that the budget £44k, for Youth Provision was the Council's reserves and the money raised by the residents was held by Highfield Community Centre, is nothing to do with the Council. Cllr Tindall has requested an investigation is carried out. Cllr Banks confirmed this was correct and what has been reported by the papers and on social media was incorrect. The Chairman commented about the need for accuracy and how important it was to get clarification on any issues.

73 **APOLOGIES FOR ABSENCE**

Cllr Bassadone sent her apologies for the meeting.

74 **DECLARATIONS OF INTEREST**

Cllr Barry confirmed she worked for Children Services and this was included on the agenda.

75 **PUBLIC PARTICIPATION**

None

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

None

77 **BUDGET MONITORING Q2**

F Jump presented the report and asked Committee for any questions.

Cllr England mentioned point 3.4 where additional funding for Covid 19 of £2.5m that the council has had and £1.3m income guarantee support. He notes that additional premises insurance charges relating to HRA premises, which has arisen due to significant weather events and wanted to highlight that this is a prime example of rising costs to the council that we will increasingly face due to the climate emergency and that underlines the need for us to act quickly to reduce those effects.

Cllr Mahmood questioned the £3.1m and with another lockdown planned, will this mean an increase in costs. F Jump confirmed this figure was from September and is therefore pre-lockdown but there is the potential that the position will worsen. F Jump added she would not want to speculate at the moment but once we have more information of the impact over the next few weeks it will be incorporated into the forecasts.

Cllr Mahmood asked about point 5.6 the repairs and maintenance budget, the £2.1m HRA and the pressures were less than the £2.1m 'savings' by not being able to do the work, will the pressures elsewhere be relieved by the money that hasn't been spent this year and there will come a time when it will be spent, but there will be a new budget next year. F Jump confirmed that the work will be move further down the line and will be incorporated into the budget for next year. F Williamson advised that in terms of the expectation we are not expecting to go back to emergency repairs during this lockdown, we have had feedback from tenants and in the main they would prefer to operate business as usual. With regards to pressures elsewhere we will be looking to maintain a balanced budget.

Cllr Mahmood queried the restrictions this time round and asked how it works going into other people's houses to do the repair of the work. F Williamson said that some works are going ahead this lockdown and that the guidance that has come out from the Construction Council and Central Government allows for workplace activities

within residential properties, but obviously there is some heightened concern over any people who are in the clinically vulnerable groups, therefore we will be continuing with the triage questions that were used throughout the whole of this pandemic to ensure that there is no additional risk being introduced.

Cllr Mahmood asked for clarification on point 4.1 and 4.2 as it appears there's an underspend on garages maintenance and a pressure of £65k on emergency Bed and Breakfast, there is also a pressure on garage income. F Jump confirmed that 4.1 shows that there is an overall pressure on progress budgets within Housing and Communities, within that there is a separate pressure on emergency accommodation, so the net of those two give the overall pressure within premises.

Cllr Mahmood mentioned that there is no reduction in garages uptake, should that mean that there's no pressure. F Jump confirmed there continues to be a pressure.

Cllr Mahmood asked about the total income and where appreciation should be included. F Jump advised that appreciation is accounted for differently, not in the Housing Revenue Account and she would be happy to provide the information outside of this meeting.

Action: F Jump

Cllr Pringle mentioned the triage for work being done in tenants homes, asking if they are provided with general advice prior to the appointment, for example wear a mask, open windows, go into another room with the door shut, all simple things that people could do and might take the pressure off the workforce and protect the household. F Williamson confirmed they do go through the guidance at the point the appointment is made, but because there is a backlog, due to Covid, which is now almost all completed but the day to day repairs continue, so sometimes the actual appointment can be some in the future so the operative does do a doorstep triage to make sure the circumstances within the household hasn't changed, but certainly the advice given could supplement what we are doing currently and will look to take forward the suggestions put forward.

Cllr Adeleke said that on page 28, point 5.7, says that there is additional pressure on insurance than expected and asked for clarification on the reason for this. F Jump advised it was the wet weather, a high degree of rainfall, which caused a lot of flooding and we have received more insurance claims.

Cllr Adeleke queried that this should direct to the insurance company. F confirmed that the Council had to pay a percentage of every claim that comes through, so up to a certain amount the Council are self-insurers.

The report was noted.

78 **CHILDREN SERVICES AND COMMUNITY SAFETY PARTNERSHIP,
CUSTOMER SERVICES, THE OLD TOWN HALL,
COMMUNICATIONS AND COMMUNITY PARTNERSHIPS Q2
PERFORMANCE REPORT**

M Rawdon introduced the report and asked the Committee for any questions.

Cllr Barry asked if there is a breakdown per venue of the attendance at Adventure Playgrounds. M Rawdon confirmed there would be and he will circulate the details.

Action M Rawdon

Cllr England mentioned that on Page 39 Communications, he wanted to say thank you and appreciation to the Team, we do appreciate how challenging it is at this time, also the web statistics, which he had asked for previously so wanted to say thank you for providing them. These will prove useful to see trends over a period of time and hopes it will continue as it's helps to understand what's being done.

Cllr England asked what the Council's Policy is and what it might be in terms of supporting the local community with information about the incidents of Covid locally. Cllr England mentioned that he had been copied into correspondence, from Jo Bullen who is posting information on Facebook daily, which asks if the Council can amplify the output that she is producing. Cllr England wanted to know if we can do that. M Rawdon will raise with the Incident Management Team.

Action: M Rawdon

L Roberts advised that we need to be very careful of the information provided due to confidentiality. Cllr England will the request as he does not think it contains personal information, it's Government information and just a case of amplifying it as it's already in the public domain. L Roberts confirmed it would be helpful if Cllr England could forward the information.

Action: Cllr England

Cllr Pringle raised concerns about public perception on Covid at the moment, there is a sense that people are consciously challenging the risk despite the Governments advice, which people are not trusting. There is more trust at a local level and Cllr Pringle would like Dacorum Borough Council to take stock and reflect on the vital role we can play, a granular approach is needed, working very closely with schools, which is a trusted community network. Cllr Pringle had raised previously about a communications strategy, people need to know what's happening in their community because it's vital that people understand the facts. Consideration should be given to a granular breakdown being published daily, with perhaps inclusion in weekly newsletters in schools and education facilities that are already being sent out, which sets out the details in the Borough to ensure that the public are fully aware of the risks and the actions they can take. M Rawdon confirmed he would raise it at Incident Management Team.

Action: M Rawdon

Cllr Mahmood had thought that reporting on Covid was the responsibility of the County Council. M Rawdon confirmed this was the case, they have a Communications Cell that we piggy back on, that's doesn't mean that we can't issue our own messages, but in the main we will be led them.

Cllr Mahmood mentioned that we rely more on IT could there be a ticker tape on the website where people can find information. L Roberts said we have an obligation with accessibility, our information can be viewed on many different types of devices, some of which the ticker tape style option does not transfer across and this would mean that we would not be compliant with the accessibility rules. Cllr Mahmood said to use something else that does transfer across so that we keep the public informed.

Cllr Mahmood said that the closure of the Old Town Hall and at first he was a bit concerned but now there is another lockdown I can see that it was a good decision and requested that we keep it on the agenda for when it can be opened.

Cllr Mahmood highlighted that the figures on Dacorum Delivers was very good, there was a good turnout at the Adventure Playgrounds over the summer.

Cllr Pringle wanted to come back in on what Cllr Mahmood said and said she would like to emphasise that we are going through a very new experience of rapid change and we all have to step up. Cllr Pringle was concerned with what she was seeing and we need to improve the communications across the Borough, positive not alarmist messages about keeping people safe, there is an element of denial setting in and we need to look at what we can do to work hand in hand with the Government and Herts.

The report was agreed.

79 HOUSING Q2 PERFORMANCE

F Williamson introduced the report and asked if Committee had any questions.

Cllr Adeleke commended Fiona's team for the work they are doing at this very difficult time and requested that Fiona passed the good recommendations and thanks to her team.

Cllr Mahmood asked three questions; 1, what are the implications for Dacorum's performance of the new Building Safety Bill, 2, is there a risk assessment for Covid for everything Housing does and 3, clarification on the table on page 100 garages figures in red. F Williamson advised that that the new Building Safety Bill has not been passed through parliament and reached Royal Assent yet, there will be a period for compliance for the statutory compliance and building regulations that will create the framework for which we will need to work. It's focussed on the high rise, high risk buildings and we have six in that category, we have undertaken preparative work through fire risk assessments and we have all that data on a system called Geometra. This will identify all of the work that's required in those buildings, that will be done on a priority basis. We have put a growth bid in the budget for a Building Safety Manager, which is a key role in the new Bill, they will coordinate all of the information to ensure that all those buildings will be certified by the new regulator who is part of the HSE, we have also increased the budget so that we can undertake the additional work. In respect of the Covid Risk Assessments Fiona mentioned that all Group Managers have worked with their Team Leaders and Health and Safety to identify any risks with any of the job activities or interactions with the public, so each area has their own risk assessed method statement. F Williamson explained the detail in respect of page 100 for the garages. The employees were two members of staff who deal with allocations and the licences, the premises cost is maintaining the garages, but that has been reduced as there is a pressure on income, because there are 70% of the garages occupied, there has been an adjustment, but with the work being undertaken with the stock condition survey and targeted investment, which will be presented to Scrutiny in December, we have reduced the expenditure to make sure we don't put additional pressure on that budget. The recharges are through the general fund for the administration and central office function that we pay that is the

cost of managing the garages internally. F Williamson advised she will circulate more detailed information on the Capital charges breakdown.

Action: F Williamson

Cllr England said that on page 45 point 2.1.2 the performance of lifeline call services and asked how long and what method it's taken to identify that they were out of action. F Williamson replied that the Supported Housing Officers were contacting tenants asking them to test their lifelines, there was a problem when the Officers restarted the visits they found faults on the line, which meant that they could dial out but may have not been heard by Tunstall, it wasn't a huge number but when the tenants said they had tested the equipment, it transpired they hadn't done it. O Jackson added that we spoke to our contractor and this was a situation that the majority of providers were facing, something like 20% increase on fault reporting when staff returned. The majority of those faults didn't affect the operation of the lifeline. We set up some contingency plans to ensure that we could alleviate some of these pressures on tenants.

Cllr Adeleke asked for an explanation of satisfaction with Anti-Social Behaviour (ASB). F Williamson confirmed that with ASB we set out the expectation, sometimes the expected remedy is eviction of the perpetrator, which is often the remedy people require, we advise we can undertake mediation or tenancy enforcement or demote the tenancy. When it's higher level we do work together with the Police. F Williamson confirmed that it's satisfaction with what we said we would do, not necessarily that they got the outcome they wanted.

Cllr Adeleke added that it may be more useful for Members if you could provide a breakdown of the work undertaken, for example evictions 10%, mediation 1% etc, in a table. F Williamson confirmed that we have a KPI that actually measures that for management information, so it's not one of the indicators that sits within the rocket report that comes to Overview and Scrutiny but we can provide that information if you would find it useful. Cllr Adeleke said that it would be useful for Members to see the breakdown. L Warden added that we have a satisfaction survey that we provide to all residents after a case has been closed, it asks how we have managed the case, for example, did we contact you when we said we would. It is based on how satisfied they were with how we managed the case, it does also ask how satisfied you were with the outcome. We could provide more information on the survey we carry out and the general questions we ask.

Cllr Johnson asked for clarification on the review of the Supported Housing sheltered schemes and developing a strategy and wondered what the strategy would look like and the timescales. F Williamson advised that we have undertaken extensive work to look at the condition, the layout, the location of properties and we've done a lot of work with the occupants of schemes. O Jackson has been responsible for this work and he's now looking at demand with Housing Needs. We are not in a position to formulate that strategy yet, but we probably have 80% of the detail to start to build that strategy in regards to the category 2 schemes, which are the ones that have communal facilities. It's in our service plan spanning this year and next, but we don't know what the desirability will be when we come out of Covid, so we may have to potentially market schemes differently.

The report was noted.

O Jackson presented the Supported Housing Update and offered Committee the opportunity to ask questions.

Cllr Mahmood asked for clarification on the support we provide and whether it was more or less than other authorities. O Jackson mentioned that the other organisations in the appendix relate to how often the tenant was visited by the Supported Housing Officer. We offer a wide range of support to tenants from daily visits to very low level support with quarterly visits.

Cllr Mahmood queried the meaning of passported groups. O Jackson confirmed it was tenants who had a tenancy prior to the Supporting People charge coming in.

Cllr Mahmood asked about the difficulty getting people into Supported Housing and the higher vacancy rate, presuming the charge isn't an issue, but wondered what the impact will be. O Jackson advised that as part of the work Fiona mentioned earlier, we've really looked into why people don't want to move into Supported Housing, why people have rejected a property when they had bid on them and we've not actually come across any instances where the charge has put people off. That could be because the charge is relatively low but we would also need to be aware of the impact of any increase in charge on any future demand.

Cllr Mahmood said the report mentions Housing Benefit and queried if this should be Universal Credit. L Warden clarified that anyone of pensionable age is entitled to Housing Benefit and not Universal Credit.

Cllr Freedman queried if the proposal for charges was compulsory but also people have discretion. O Jackson replied that the charge is mandatory but with other providers there is a tiered service, where the tenant can select the level of support they require and we would like to operate this system.

Cllr Freedman asked how the charge will be administered. O Jackson said that our income team arrange and collect the support charge, it's applied on our housing management system Orchard and they will work closely with the tenants to ensure the charge is collected.

Cllr Freedman wondered if there will be some tenants current benefits mean that all the current charges are paid and then suddenly there is another charge they are responsible for, will there be concern amongst tenants. O Jackson replied that he didn't think there would be concern as when they apply for the property the charge is included in the offer letter. We've undertaken communications to let tenants know about the charge.

Cllr Freedman was concerned for existing tenants who will suddenly get an increase in their bills, you've clearly tried to reduce the impact in the past and it seems fine for people moving into the property, but will we be including the charge in the maximum threshold for Housing Benefit. L Warden said we have discussed this and where a tenant has a £6 charge and Benefit would cover half of it, the Council pays the other half because they are on Benefit. If the decision was made that they pay the other half we would need to discuss the impact of the potential increase in costs, but

additionally there are extra administration costs for us, one of our preferred options would be that it only applies to new tenants not existing tenants.

Cllr Adeleke said it looks like we are charging less than other providers and asked if the current level of charges will it have significant negative impact on the Council finances. Cllr Adeleke also asked if the list on page 116 which we are being asked to consider, is it for Members to respond to this. O Jackson said that the current charge does not fully cover the cost of the service, should we pass all of the costs of the service to tenants, these charges were set when the service was very different and we have some figures that show that it will have an impact on the HRA, it's one of the reasons why we wanted to include it in the review of the charge. In terms of the second question it would be good if Members would be able to forward their thoughts and we would welcome Members view, as they are the key areas that will support this review. No decisions have been made yet so we want to gain a much balanced and broader view as possible.

Cllr Adeleke said that given the environment we are in now, it's not the time to introduce increased charges, it would be sensible to delay it until this pandemic is over or slowed down. O Jackson confirmed we had considered this and we do not intend to introduce it this financial year, we also need time to undertake the consultation.

Cllr Mahmood mentioned that increasing the charges, worrying about the impact people on Benefits and in favour of a combination of options five and six, but he will send through his detailed thoughts by email.

Cllr Griffiths highlighted that Members comments are very important as part of the consultation and whilst it's important for tenants on Housing Benefit, that this might tip them over the edge, it's also important to bear in mind the people that aren't on benefits, but also do not have savings, this could tip them over the edge too, we have to look at it in the round, bearing in mind tenants also have to pay for TV licence, so that has significantly impacted tenants. Also this is ringfenced to housing only, the HRA account, not the general fund and we are a not for profit organisation, we support the community, if tenants are using this service, they should not all be charged this additional amount, the General Fund should subsidise this fee for our tenants as a community benefit. This fee has not been increased since 2011 and whatever we come up with, we should put a formula in place that automatically increases it in line with inflation or some other way that Housing use.

Cllr Pringle mentioned that she was always happy to contribute and she would echo the comments about Covid, the situation is a lot to take on board, we did see some economic bounce back, we don't know where we are in terms of this emergency, introducing conversations about financial demands is a step too far at the moment and it should be kept under review. We can't make assumptions about when this will be over so we have to be realistic.

The report and comments were noted.

The Chairman highlighted that the Work Programme only went up to February, but that there was a meeting with the Climate Change Officer and as of March there will be training for Members and a presentation to this Committee, which should appear on the Work Programme at the next meeting.

The Meeting ended at 8.40 pm