

MINUTES

HOUSING AND COMMUNITY OVERVIEW AND SCRUTINY

21 JULY 2021

Present:

Members:

Councillors: Harden
Adeleke (Vice-Chairman)
Mrs Bassadone
Imarni (Chairman)
Pringle
Johnson
Oguchi
Hollinghurst
Barry
Freedman

Officers:	Mandy Peters	Tenancy Sustainment Team Leader
	Sarah Turner	PA to the Corporate Directors
	Fiona Williamson	Assistant Director - Housing

Also Attendance: Councillor J. Banks
Councillor M. Griffiths
Councillor R. Ransley (Substitute for Councillor Tindall)

The meeting began at 7.30 pm

1 **MINUTES**

The minutes from 16 June were agreed and signed by the Chairman.

2 APOLOGIES FOR ABSENCE

Cllrs Durrant, Mahmood and Tindall sent their apologies for the meeting. Cllr Ransley substituted for Cllr Tindall

3 DECLARATIONS OF INTEREST

Cllr Bassadone declared that, in relation to Item 7 on the agenda, she has a family member who works at the Elms.

4 PUBLIC PARTICIPATION

None.

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

None.

6 THE ELMS CONTRACT

F Williamson presented the report on the performance information and The Elms proposed contract arrangements and asked Members if they had any questions.

Cllr Freedman commented he was very much in support of The Elms and renewing the contract on 1+1 basis as it seemed a logical and reasonable approach. He wanted to flag up that if we change suppliers it is quite a risk, Dens is very good at building its brand across Dacorum as a whole and that he would worry that any new supplier would be seen as a Hemel only offer. Cllr Freedman asked how we would ensure that any tender would look at how we could include that part of it. F Williamson said that the points made were very valid, Dens have a very good brand awareness and the hostel is managed properly. F Williamson added that any future procurement would include the brand awareness and that any new organisation would work across all of Dacorum.

Cllr Adeleke said thank you for the report, that he was in favour of the proposals and he had two questions. Cllr Adeleke asked about the KPI's on page 27 mentions eight self-referrals and wondered if they were from Dacorum. Also would the original installer of the cladding be responsible for any compensation. F Williamson replied that self-referrals can be anyone who is in crisis and they present themselves to Dens independently as opposed to through the Council's Homelessness Service. They can be an out of area presentation and sometimes they are from within the Borough. F Williamson confirmed that in respect of the cladding, we are working with the Fire Safety Engineers, the original contractor and the Dacorum's internal team, looking to reclaim some of those costs from the main contractor.

Cllr Pringle echoed the comments of the previous Councillors about how much they appreciate the work that Dens has done building relationships in our communities, especially during the pandemic. At the beginning of March 2020 lockdown when Cllr Pringle was contacting her constituents in Northchurch, Dens was supporting those who needed it so it does reach into our communities.

Cllr Pringle asked about the fire safety precautions and whether there was adequate measures in place. F Williamson confirmed that there are a number of measures in place, we've been working very close with the Fire Service who attend our fire safety meetings. We have a Fire Safety Strategy for the building which is operated by Dens and this has been reviewed by the Fire Service. The building is flagged in respect of the material used for the cladding and they would provide a double response in the case of a fire. CCTV monitors the external parts of the building and it does have a full fire alarm in place, plus two staircases. F Williamson added that in respect of anyone in the building with mobility issues, they have a personal evacuation plan and they are placed on the lowest level of the building as possible.

Cllr Hollinghurst asked if we are able to bring any action against the contractors for the use of the materials, or because they met the building regulation standards at the time and we are able take action against the Government or the Building Research Centre, who must have contributed to the regulations at the time. It seems to be a breakdown in regulations and that in my opinion is down to the Central Government at the time or the bodies that drew up the specifications. There should be a case for compensation. F Williamson replied that the Hackett Report that was conducted following Grenfell has resulted in the Building Safety Bill, which is working its way through parliament to Royal Assent at the moment and has identified a number of improvements around how building safety is operated in the future. F Williamson added that she is unable to comment historically or about Central Government's position, but we are exploring all avenues in terms of any potential redress that is available to us and we are currently concentrating on the workmanship and detailing of the original installation of the cladding.

The Chairman commended the work Officers have done in creating The Elms with Dens and identifying the need, getting National Lottery Funding and building The Elms which has been very successful in reducing Homelessness in the Borough. Covid has changed the dynamics and there will be longer term effects, people that have lost their homes or jobs and wondered if a second Elms type project needs to be commissioned by the Council and is there a way to bid for funding. F Williamson advised that the Council has submitted a bid for the Rough Sleeper Next Steps Accommodation Programme and that bid is currently being considered by MHCLG, this is for eight modular units sited on a garage sites, plus nine further units in conjunction with Hightown, which will be a conversion of a building in Alexander Road. We are constantly looking at providing additional accommodation.

F Williamson added that Herts County Council are undertaking a review countywide of the temporary accommodation provision looking at the operating models, including where are the successes and looking at conjoining services to improve the offer available. We are working with Herts County Council and once the review is complete we will be in a better position to understand what's required in Dacorum.

F Williamson advised that we are also doing additional work mapping the number of homelessness presentations and initially we were concerned about the moratorium on evictions coming to an end would increase the presentations from the private rented sector and we had over 100 households who contacted us with concerns they may be evicted from the private rented sector and the Homelessness Prevention Team have been working closely with those people and many of them are in a stronger position having negotiated with their landlords to prevent the homelessness situation. Also because the moratorium has gone on for so long there is a backlog of cases in the courts which will cause delays and they will take a while to go through the courts so that's why we are closely monitoring. That's why the Homeless Team have been looking at Discretionary Housing Benefit or working with the landlord to try to guarantee some security for their tenure.

Cllr Adeleke asked if the two year extension is normal standard practice. F Williamson replied that this is a commission type of contract, it could be structured for a period of between one year and up to four years. The restrictions are mainly around the contract value so we have structured this for one year plus one year, so that we can keep the focus on performance, whilst there hasn't been an problems to

date, it's important that we continue to work with Dens to deliver the services both to the homeless cohort and the wider community.

The Chairman thanked staff for the excellent work they have done and also pre-empting what we will need in the future.

7 SYRIAN REFUGEES

M Peters updated the meeting on the latest with the Syrian Refugee Project and to consider the longer term housing options, once Indefinite Leave to Remain is obtained. M Peters asked if Committee had any questions.

Cllr Bassadone said that on page 45 it mentions families one and family four are in receipt of PIP and she wanted to know what PIP is. M Peters confirmed that it was Personal Independent Payment which is for people with disabilities.

Cllr Pringle asked if it would be fair to say that the families have been through an ordeal, been through some awful experiences and whether there are any additional needs, for example the children requiring mental health referrals from trauma and are they getting the help that they need. M Peters advised that yes we have victims of trauma. The schools have been fantastic in meeting their needs, the children have been having talking therapies, also the Tenancy Sustainment Team is still heavily involved and Officers have built up a rapport and trust, which is rare with authority and people from Syria. One of the first conversations you have to have is that you don't need to fear or bribe people in authority, building those relationships takes a long time. Disabilities in Syria is very much taboo, so to admit you have a mental health problem is very difficult for them, but we are getting to the point where we can discuss it with them so that the help can be put in place.

Cllr Adeleke said thank you for the report and all that you are doing for the Syrian refugees. Cllr Adeleke remembered the first time this was discussed, it was thought best not to publicise this for security reasons and wondered if that was still the case. Also when the refugees arrive do they have any financial means, at the end of the five years, if they apply and are successful in obtaining Indefinite Right to Remain, do we continue to provide moral and financial support or do we leave them to stand on their own two feet.

M Peters confirmed that in regards to their safety, we have been very successful, before they arrived we did our research, selected a property and worked with the Community Safety Team and the Police etc in relation to making sure that the area is safe for the family. We have not had any hate crime or any adverse reaction to their resettlement and they have settled into the neighbourhood very well and their neighbours have been very accepting. There have been some issues in Watford but we have put measures in place to ensure that doesn't happen here.

M Peters advised that the support we have been providing in the first five years is funded by the Home Office and we receive annual funding for each of those families. In terms of the support we provide, if they receive Indefinite Leave to Remain, they will continue receiving state benefits or continue working and we do have families that are independent, what will happen after the five years is that they will be supported the same as any tenant, if they require that support we will provide it.

Cllr Adeleke said should their application fail what is our moral obligation to them. M Peters confirmed that if their application failed it would be down to the Home Office what happened next, what would happen initially is that they would lose their rights to benefits, accommodation, etc. The steer that we've been given is that will not happen because they have come through a resettlement programme, they've integrated well and done everything they need to do, there should be no problem in them meeting the criteria for Indefinite Leave to Remain.

Cllr Griffiths wanted to continue on the theme that Cllr Adeleke started, this for Dacorum Borough Council has always been about the people and not about the praise for the Council, we like to take praise if it's going, we like to publicise what we do, but a conscious decision was taken by Members that it was about the fact of getting these people, who had been through enough trauma, into homes and environments they felt safe in. It wasn't about us shouting about what we were doing as we didn't think it would help the families integrate into their communities and that's why we didn't publicise what we were doing, but it is also down to the hard work that Mandy and her team have done, the research before, the care and consideration they've given the people, it's not just a job and that's what makes our Housing staff such a fantastic team. There have been challenges and some staff have needed support in what they've heard, we can't imagine some of the trauma these people have been through and we've had to assist our staff in what they have heard and the stories. Mandy has highlighted that the relationship has developed over time and now the families trust our staff and I don't think there is any member of staff that would withdraw that support for any resident, regardless of whether they are refugees, homeless, secure tenants or flexible tenants, it doesn't matter, we don't have staff that would do that. Cllr Griffiths wanted to put on record her thanks to the staff for what they have done, which in some cases have been very harrowing, but they've also had some fantastic times.

The Chairman commended Mandy and her team for the work they have done on behalf of the whole Committee.

The Chairman confirmed the recommendation that at the end of the five year flexible tenancy each family is offered a secure council tenancy dependent on a successful application of Indefinite Leave to Remain. The Committee agreed the recommendation.

8 ACTION POINTS

The Chairman said that the majority of them are completed. The fuel and grants action, HC/016/21 and HC/030/21, has been completed but not updated on the action plan. HC/026/21 is in The Chairman's draft box and will be sent. HC/028/21 is outstanding. HC/028/21 needs Cllr Pringle to send photos to Matt Rawdon.

9 WORK PROGRAMME

The Chairman noted the Work Programme.

The Chairman requested that staff are informed that we commend and thank them for their hard work and that we do recognise that they stand out against neighbouring Council's, they are always proactive and ahead of the curve in all that they do.

The Meeting ended at 8.25 pm