

MINUTES

HOUSING AND COMMUNITY OVERVIEW AND SCRUTINY

WEDNESDAY 11 JANUARY 2023

Present:

Members:

Councillors: Harden
Adeleke (Vice-Chairman)
Imarni (Chairman)
Pringle
Durrant
Johnson
Oguchi
Barry
Dhyani
Stevens
Peter

Councillors: Councillor Griffiths Portfolio Holder - Housing

Officers:

Natasha Beresford Communities	Assistant Director Housing – operations & Safe
Mark Pinnell	Assistant Director Property
Jodie Bartlett	domestic Abuse Project Officer
Kayley Johnston	Corporate & Democratic Support Officer (minutes)
Dianne Southam	Assistant Director for Place, community

The meeting began at 7.30 pm

1 **MINUTES**

The minutes from 6 December 2022 were agreed as an accurate record and signed by the chair.

2 **APOLOGIES FOR ABSENCE**

Apologies for absence were received from Councillor C Wyatt-Lowe and Councillor Ransley. Councillor Peters is substituting for Councillor C Wyatt-Lowe and Councillor Stevens was substituting for Councillor Ransley.

3 **DECLARATIONS OF INTEREST**

There were no declarations of interest.

Cllr Imarni wanted to highlight that the company she works with has contacts with Osborn but it is not a declaration or interest she just wanted to make members aware.

4 **PUBLIC PARTICIPATION**

There was no public participation.

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

None.

6 **DOMESTIC ABUSE**

NBeresford presented the new Domestic Abuse Policy, noting that the papers and policy have been through a number of consultation and engagement sessions through the police committees, the member briefing sessions, in Cabinet and SLT. They have also been scrutinised externally with extensive feedback from partners across the country.

NBeresford advised that they are introducing two new policies, (1) a dedicated policy for employees and (2) a policy for residents, tenants and members. These policies are in line with the DAHA framework recommended good practice and they outline a number of clear expectations and the approach to tackling domestic abuse in Dacorum. The accompanying paper documents DBC's ongoing commitment to achieving overarching DAHA accreditation. NBeresford noted that the work has been led by JBartlett to ensure that services are exemplar.

Cllr Pringle commended the proactive steps being taken and noted how having immediate help will positively benefit outcomes for families.

Cllr Johnson asked for further clarification regarding the Domestic Abuse Protection Notices and Domestic Abuse Protection Order. JBartlett advised that these are the lead provisions with notices translating into an order and will provide immediate protection to families and victims in the aftermath of an incident with police intervention potentially translating into an order. The aim is this will be simplified legal protection for victims and will take into account other existing processes, such as injunctions. JBartlett advised that they have liaised with local police and put in an internal process to respond to them with the expectation that the police will notify DBC when there has been an issue to a Dacorum resident and steps will then be proactively taken. This is work in progress and this will be reviewed to monitor how well the process works.

Cllr Pringle asked if they would be consulting victims, their families and social services and how they will get feedback. JBartlett explained that they are looking to gather feedback from survivors as well as look at case closure processes. Feedback processes are built into the work and JBartlett confirmed that this would be done in a way that will not be too onerous on the victim.

Cllr Pringle queried if matters would automatically be referred to DBC. NBeresford advised that she will also be responsible for Community Safety as part of her new remit and that they do work through the responsibilities of officer groups to identify where serious case reviews are required, which will be identified and recommended by the Safeguarding Board at county level. This recommendation is then submitted to the Chief Executive.

Cllr Pringle requested that an automatic review take place of any serious incidents that take place in DBC properties. Cllr Pringle noted that whilst not all domestic cases are reported, incidents may come to light through property reports. NBeresford agreed, noting that this is part of the lessons learned process and how to identify cases earlier. NBeresford noted JBartlett's work that allows them to implement processes and procedures through contract management and attendance of repair activity at properties to help with identification. On the lessons learned process, the Community Safety Team will lead a strategic assessment implementation and engagement activity with partners. JBartlett added that the case management aspect of the work strongly advocates regular reflective practice and that she is currently undertaking a sample case review against the accreditation framework they are assessed against. As this is built into processes, reflective practice will be ongoing.

Cllr Harden commented on internal damage to properties as a result of domestic abuse and asked about the process of repairing damage and how the individual is treated. NBeresford advised that this would depend on how the incident is reported. Where there is a serious crime or incident, there is a response turnaround that ensures the repair takes place within an emergency period. If an incident occurs during a working day or is identified as a potential crime or incident that may be identified as domestic abuse, these are flagged sensitively by staff internally. NBeresford noted the importance of not making assumptions and that officers will have the appropriate information available to them to identify potential indicators of domestic abuse or other activity to then provide the right level of support or signposting.

Cllr Harden noted that some damage can be caused by victims out of frustration. NBeresford agreed and noted that additional layers of support being built into the service are around interventions for safe practice of staff, such as trauma-informed support and trauma-informed case management. It was noted that JBartlett is also exploring initiatives that enable DBC to consider how funding can be covered for legal services and addressing issues regarding costs where damage has been caused that may not have been known as domestic abuse in the first instance.

Cllr Stevens asked if there is a way for neighbours to report abuse of victims without their identities being disclosed. JBartlett advised that there are ways to report cases anonymously and that the police have processes in place to ensure this can take place. The team will ensure they are proactive with information reported to them and understanding that noise or nuisance complaints could be indicators of domestic abuse.

Cllr Harden noted that the national helplines are very useful and recommended that these also be used.

Cllr Pringle asked that further details be recorded when noise complaints are being made and recommended that staff be trained to ensure they are recording this information. NBeresford confirmed that they have a domestic violence IFA (ph) who is based within the service once a week to enable all staff to take cases where there are concerns to this individual to discuss the most effective form of approach. This is funded through existing funding frameworks across the service. There is also a dedicated casework management review panel where officers can seek guidance on next steps. The panel is attended by officers of varying levels and receives senior management and safeguarding input. NBeresford stated that there are arrangements in place to support staff and that everything embedded in the service is interlinked with the Community Safety Partnership Framework with the Domestic Abuse Lead Officer and IFAs and is also overseen by the Safeguarding Lead Officer who can give consideration to other areas around safeguarding.

Cllr Pringle noted the importance of public awareness and advised that this could be promoted in and around nurseries and primary schools as this is often the one journey that those who are being coerced and controlled can make each day. Other parents should be educated in what a coercively controlled person looks like and encouraging human curiosity could lead to help for victims. Cllr Pringle stated that the general awareness in the community is far behind professional awareness. NBeresford agreed and advised that JBartlett has led a number of campaigns. JBartlett confirmed that she held a drop-in event with the library to raise awareness of domestic abuse. It is hoped that this partnership will be continued and can be replicated across the borough. There will also be an internal comms plan to ensure awareness is promoted internally. JBartlett reflected on the importance of highlighting domestic abuse and that this will help people engaging with these discussions. It was also noted that JBartlett went on Radio Dacorum in collaboration with Hertfordshire Domestic Abuse Helpline to discuss the 60 Days of Action. It was agreed that this would be included in the next Members' News.

Cllr Barry-Mears commented on the policy for residents, tenants and members and asked if this would be sent to residents and tenants. It was noted that it would be available on the website. Cllr Barry-Mears advised that she has called the police regarding a domestic incident and that they were told it has to be reported by the

victim. It was noted that the policy would therefore help empower people when reporting incidents. NBeresford confirmed that there would be a communication launch once the policy has been signed off by Cabinet to ensure awareness amongst residents and tenants. NBeresford clarified that the information that Cllr Barry-Mears received on reporting a domestic violence incident was incorrect and asked that further examples of this be sent to her to look into further. JBartlett added that the policy would also be promoted through tenancy sign-up packs and will be referred to in the tenancy agreement. Appendices will be available and information will be clearly signposted on the website.

NBeresford noted that information would be made available to members and asked that they contact the team with any concerns.

Cllr Adeleke asked how widespread domestic violence is within Dacorum compared to national levels and asked if victims are coming forward more compared to the last two years. NBeresford advised that it is difficult to compare Dacorum to the national average as domestic abuse statistic figures are still fairly new, though there has been a spike in reporting since the Domestic Abuse Act was brought in and this is accepted to grow. There was a large spike in reporting throughout the World Cup given the proactive media reporting. NBeresford noted that domestic abuse is not always initially identified as such and stated that figures are not higher or lower than any other local authorities, though Dacorum is rated third out of ten in terms of domestic abuse reporting with particularly high levels seen in some wards. NBeresford confirmed that further details could be provided and that there are quarterly reports through the Dacorum Policing Unit. JBartlett added that whilst there has been a spike in reporting, it is too soon to see if this was due to an increased prevalence or an increase in awareness.

The Chair referred to the list of what is classed as domestic abuse on page 35 of the report and asked if this would be considered for future campaigns. The Chair commented on the time it takes for domestic abuse to be reported and asked how this could be improved. Cllr Griffiths agreed, noting that they need to highlight other forms of domestic abuse.

It was noted that schools should be looking at raising awareness around domestic abuse. NBeresford agreed, adding that they need to look at how to reach more hard-to-reach communities. NBeresford advised that they deliver Home Truths sessions, as funded through Homeless Prevention grant funding, and that this goes into schools. These sessions touch on a number of difficult areas around drug misuse and activities that may lead to or relate to financial abuse, isolation, peer pressure and unhealthy relationships. Commitment is required from all schools to take these sessions on board and it was noted that not all schools want these sessions delivered.

Cllr Dhyani asked if information could be included in the resident newsletters to help raise general awareness. It was stated that information could be given on what steps to take if people want to report domestic abuse. JBartlett noted that a domestic abuse statement was recently circulated. The importance of getting the message to schools was noted.

The Chair asked how people should proceed if the victim does not want to press charges. NBeresford advised that whilst people can continue to report, they can't force someone to report or seek advice and help that is being offered. It is important to continue to discuss what help is available and ensuring that safeguarding is prioritised, including additional monitoring with schools and target hardening of the home.

It was noted that culture has changed over time and that the police will conduct a risk assessment. If there is enough evidence to proceed without the involvement of the victim, this will frequently take place and therefore this relies on building a case. It was stated that creating logs of evidence is therefore crucial to help the police establish an offence.

Cllr Dhyani queried if police officers receive specific training or if DBC can run any training to ensure that the police have more confidence to take action. JBartlett advised that there is training as part of the Domestic Abuse Act and that a Perpetrator Strategy is due to be published. It was noted all police should be trained and the effectiveness of this is dependent on the culture of the particular police force. NBeresford added that DBC have an accredited internal programme available to all staff and members. This programme is continually reviewed and this information will feed into the Community Safety Partnership recommendations made.

Cllr Dhyani asked if DBC will be informed in the early stages of reporting. JBartlett suggested that information would be received by the Community Safety team. NBeresford advised that the new Housing Service and Safe Community structure has been developed to allow the team to work more strategically with services.

It was noted that NBeresford was successful at interview and is now Assistant Director for Housing Operations and Safe Communities.

7 DAMP AND MOULD -DACORUM UPDATE AND RESPONSE

MPinnell took the paper as read and provided an overview of the report, noting that the paper deals with housing stock and not the private sector. The paper is written with an honest focus regarding damp and mould and that DBC relies on reports from residents regarding issues across stock. There is currently not a robust governance structure to ensure that properties are revisited and instead there is a reliance on residents to put measures in place. The recommendations and actions plans will

ensure DBC is acting proactively rather than waiting for reports to come through. Damp and mould is a national issue and the ability of residents to put their heating on will be greatly reduced during the cost of living crisis, so the team will be working with residents.

Section 2 of the report provides an overview of metrics. In Q1 2021-22, DBC was aware of 88 cases, though cases have not historically been reported as damp and mould. A separate category has now been set up to ensure cases are reported accurately, and in Q1 2022-23, there are 166 live cases with 90-95 that specifically mention mould. When a report is made by a tenant, it goes through a triage system and is still reliant on residents instigating this, and the aim is that once a report is received, a physical visit will be made to the property. The Stock Provision Survey Programme has commenced, of which 3,078 have been completed to date, and this follows a clear process with a surveyor assessing both the inside and outside of the property. Cat 1 and Cat 2 ratings are combined internally as high-risk to ensure there is no separation. Of the 3,078 surveys completed, 84 cases showed visible damp or mould and 6 of these cases were identified as high risk. Some have undergone immediate repairs and others are having replacement windows.

Section 3 focuses on the options available to address damp and mould issues and how these issues are escalated. On the increased agile response, the intention is that this will be delivered by DBC staff to promote ownership and trust back to residents rather than dealing with a contractor. On section 3.3, condensation is likely to be the highest driver of black mould and monitors are being provided to residents to read the level of moisture in the air.

Section 4 lists out recommendations, including the creation of a specialist team with advanced knowledge and self-help. For properties with smaller patches of mould, a kit will be provided to residents to enable people to start to look after their properties better. Section 5 looks at the research project that DBC was involved in that looks at how the climate links back to improving thermal insulation in properties. Section 6 provides revised literature and section 7 provides financial information.

Cllr Oguchi commented on the reason regarding the doubling of reports and asked if this is due to recent news coverage regarding damp. Cllr Oguchi queried if it is feasible for DBC to provide dehumidifiers to residents who are on low incomes or are at high risk as a temporary solution until more permanent measures have been brought in. MPinnell noted that there has been a marked increase in reports following news coverage. On dehumidifiers, MPinnell advised that whilst these are gifted to residents, they are unable to afford to have them plugged in and they are therefore looking into disposable crystal dehumidifiers.

Cllr Adeleke noted the constructive actions being taken and asked if DBC would be receiving any financial support from central government. MPinnell stated that this is

unlikely as support will come as an addition to Net Zero as insulating properties will reduce cold spots and compensation.

Cllr Harden commented on the flow chart on page 62 and asked how many of the 88 identified properties are outstanding from the 4 or 20 days chosen. MPinnell stated that it is all 88 properties as getting a damp wash through the Osborne contract is 8 weeks, and therefore the proposal is that DBC has their own operatives to do the damp wash and survey properties. The intention is therefore to attend the property within 2 days and return in a month's time to check if it works. Current lead times need to be improved and MPinnell confirmed that all 88 cases are outstanding.

Cllr Harden referred to a particular case where Osborne attended a property in November, stated they did not have the right equipment and returned in February. Cllr Harden asked if they could provide the crystal dehumidifiers that can be used again once they had been put in the microwave. MPinnell advised that this approach is being developed and that they can look into more economical solutions going forward, though it needs to be understood that this will not solve the problem entirely.

Cllr Harden queried if they could link with external partners to assist people in how to manage their energy bills. NBeresford advised that this links into the cost of living work they are conducting and introduced DSoutham, whose team are delivering a cross-agency cost of living action plan that is internally owned by DBC and receives contributions from voluntary sector partners.

Cllr Pringle acknowledged the importance of monitoring and the cost of tackling mould and asked if they could provide diluted bleach to residents to use whilst a more permanent measure is found. Cllr Pringle noted the development of the app to record incidents and asked if the same recording history will be generated for residents unable to use this. On the app, MPinnell clarified that this is for officers to diagnose cases and ensure that conveyors are being consistent. With regards to using bleach, MPinnell explained that this will only clean off the mould and further products are required to kill the bacteria. MPinnell noted that if they can empower residents to remove the mould then it will help prevent mould spreading further. Products provided need to be safe and also need to be available off the shelf. MPinnell noted that when they are engaging with residents more, they will understand more what approaches work.

Cllr Stevens commented that there is likely an under-reporting of what is taking place and advised that a resident is still awaiting a callback from Osborne from 12 months ago. Cllr Stevens commended the work to bring the service in-house. NBeresford asked that the resident contact the Housing Officer to arrange a tenancy visit and assessment.

Cllr Griffiths stated that information needs to be generally available on the DBC website for all private housing residents and landlords to also use. Cllr Griffiths noted

that damp and mould is an issue across society and is not limited to council tenants. NBeresford agreed and noted that there is under-reporting within the private sector.

Cllr Harden asked if there would be enforcement direct to non-local authority housing providers from central government. NBeresford confirmed that the private sector housing team are liaising with the local registered providers and have been asked to provide copies of their responses to regulation. If appropriate action is not taken, an improvement notice will be issued if necessary before DBC looks at enforcement *Action*. NBeresford advised that engagement with private providers has been positive and that they have advised DBC of the steps they are taking.

Cllr Harden asked if a resident has an issue a housing association that they can go to the local authority. NBeresford explained that there is a dedicated Private Housing Sector mailbox and that issues will be actioned with contact made with both the resident and Asset Management Team at the registered housing association. MPinnell added that the government are also naming and shaming organisations.

Cllr Dhyani queried if there is a provision for ventilation to be added to properties. MPinnell advised that they are unable to take a blanket approach due to differences across properties. As this is a national problem, further products will be brought to the market that can be retrofit relatively cheaply. It was noted that new town housing has ventilation though some have been covered up or taken out.

The Chair noted that solid block dehumidifiers are more effective than the crystals. MPinnell noted the range of products available and the key focus is to ensure that they are also acknowledging lifestyle factors. It was noted that there is also a concern around the use of disposable products.

DSoutham introduced herself to members as the Assistant Director for Place, Communities and Enterprise, noting that her remit includes economic growth and investment as well as place strategies, arts and entertainment, community partnerships and the adventure playground.

8 ACTION POINTS

The Chair noted the outstanding action points.

ACTION POINT: KJohnston to chase them

9 WORK PROGRAMME

Work programme agreed

10 EXCLUSION OF THE PUBLIC

That, under s.100A (4) of the Local Government Act 1972 the public be excluded during the item in Part II of the Agenda for this meeting, because it was likely, in view of the nature of the business to be transacted, that if members of the public were present during the item there would be disclosure to them of exempt information relating to the financial and business affairs of a particular company.

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11 **TOTAL ASSET MANAGEMENT (TAM) CONTRACT - BENCHMARK AND RECOMMISSION UPDATE (PART 2)**

For full details, see part 2 minutes.

The Meeting ended at 9.55 pm