

MINUTES

HOUSING AND COMMUNITY OVERVIEW AND SCRUTINY

WEDNESDAY 13 SEPTEMBER 2023

Present:

Members:

Councillors: Barry (Chair)
Capozzi (Vice-Chairman)
Adeleke
Barradell
Cox
Johnson
Williams
Banks
Link
Pringle
Link
Symington
Wilkie

Portfolio Holder: (2)

Councillor Wilkie – Portfolio Holder – Place
Councillor Symington – Portfolio Holder – Corporate and Commercial

Officers:

Natasha Beresford Assistant Director - Housing Operations & Safe Communities
Fiona Jump Head of Financial Services
Mark Pinnell (Assistant Director Property - via Teams)
Ben Hall (Service Charges Manager - via Teams)
Diane Southam Assistant Director - Place, Communities and Enterprise
Kayley Johnston Corporate & Democratic Support Officer (minutes)

The meeting began at 7.30 pm

The minutes from Wednesday 19 July 2023 were agreed by Members and signed by the Chair.

54 **APOLOGIES FOR ABSENCE**

Apologies for absence were received from Councillor McAreyve, Councillor Paterson substituted on behalf of Councillor McAreyve.

55 **DECLARATIONS OF INTEREST**

None

56 **PUBLIC PARTICIPATION**

None

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

None

58 **Q1 BUDGET MONITORING**

F Jump introduced the report to Members, explaining the forecast outturn for 2023-24 as at quarter 1, 30th June 2023. She explained that the report covers the following budgets with associated appendices:

General Fund – Appendix A. A surplus against budget of £0.766m is forecast. Included in this is a pressure of £0.03m against Housing and Community service areas.

Housing revenue Account (HRA) – Appendix B. A pressure of £0.390m is forecast.

Capital Programme – Appendix C. Housing and Community General Fund schemes are forecasting re-phasing (slippage) to future years of £1.254m. The HRA capital programme is forecast to budget and re-phasing to future years of £17.682m.

F Jump was happy to take any question.

Cllr Baradell noted that in section 6.3, the slippage for housing revenue accounts that was mention, the entire development programme is on review. He asked how long they expect the review to last and what impact will it have on meeting the housing needs going forward.

F Jump said that they are looking at the whole housing development project and still continuing with the schemes that are live.

There are certain schemes in particular, cherry bounce and the garage sites, which are just on hold while they are looking at it.

N Beresford said that the services is currently pushing forward with border review of existing housing strategy and will shortly be coming to Members with a more detailed draft and housing strategy that outlines our proposals and intentions to meet the needs in the boroughs. That is both of our own programme and a review of our existing stock and closely liaison with register providers and colleagues to ensure that housing needs are met.

The report was noted

N Beresford introduced the report to members giving an overview of the performance of the Housing Service during the first quarter of 2023/24, measured against the suite of performance indicators. She explained that the performance indicators are extracted from InPhase and contained in Appendix A for the Housing & Property Service portfolio. Future reports will provide updates on new government measures, known as the Tenant Satisfaction Measures, which will be reportable from 2024.

She said performance is reviewed on a monthly basis via InPhase reports, which provide an overview of the housing service. The Operational Risk Registers are also reviewed by the relevant teams at least quarterly, to reflect any changes internally or externally that have impacted upon the identified risks and to include new risks. Robust mitigations are in place to reduce the risk's likelihood and severity.

She said that this report also outlines any newly arising service pressures and feedback to Members on action taken to address matters arising.

N Beresford is happy to bring further reports to future meetings to drill down on further areas of interest, if need be.

N Beresford was happy to take questions

Cllr Johnson asked, if the foreign national implications are going forward because obviously it mentions the continuing uncertainty about the rising cost of labour and materials. He said, I just wondered if generally you've got a feel for whether that's something that's going to continue throughout the current financial year or is there, some light at the end of the channel for all of us?

N Beresford commented that she is the service AD and chief Housing Officer working very closely with our colleagues in finance to review the overall healthy revenue and business plan and the continued position in all pressures.

She said they will make adjustments wherever needed to ensure that those are effectively managed.

M Pinnel said that he thinks it is difficult to give assurance at this stage, but what he can give assurances around is as an attached alluded to is the oversight that we've got as a team.

So there's a couple of things in train at the moment as Members are aware, we are re procuring two of our biggest contracts.

One is the Osborne contract, refer to the total asset management contract and the other one is the heating contract.

He said both contracts, are substantial amounts of money one is 23 million and the other is in the circle of four. We are expecting some price increases because of the volatility of the market and as you're alluded to, the supply chain and availability in

materials and expertise.

However, what we will be doing with the procurement process is building in efficiency savings, because if we don't building the efficiency savings and work with our contractors and supply chain, we won't be able to afford to provide the services that we're currently providing.

So he think it's an absolutely key question to ask and thinks it's very difficult to articulate and a trim a positive answer.

However, please do take assurance that you'll be the first committees to be aware of any plans and proposals moving forward and for probably the first time in a long time the Council are holding contractors accountable to provide some efficiency savings back to us as a Council to make the joint enterprise between us and contractors deliverable.

He said it is in their interest to make it work because they get longevity of work, and its in our interest to make it work, to continue to provide the level of service that unknown members are looking for us to provide.

The report was noted.

60 OLD TOWN HALL ACTIVITY REPORT

D Southam highlighted to the committee an error with the portfolio Holders name in the report.

She informed members of the increase in ticket sales and the income received from ticket sales has increased. The social media, promoting the theatre will still continue and to increase the forward planning of the theatre and you will note from the report we have a Christmas programme and tickets are selling well.

The gallery space is being used for exhibitions etc and when the head of arts and crafts is in place they will be undertaking a review of the operations to make sure they are maximising the use of the assets, any recommendations of use for the venue will be considered. She informed the committee that a report will be brought back after the review has taken place.

D Southam was happy to take questions.

Cllr Patterson said that he sees that its mainly theatrical shows there, he asked if they could possibly get more musical or various kinds.

D Southam said yes, its definitely something which they could look into.

Cllr Banks referred to the table 3.1, and thanked the officers for the work within the old town and the increase ticket sales.

She said 2022 to 2023 was a hugely successful year and even if you go back before the COVID years, we never achieved quite a success with revenue.

She asked if they have been able to bottom out where that success has come from so that we can build on it?

D Southam replied, Steward who has been acting as the theatre manager roll has implemented the re structure and that position is currently out to internal advert for permanent appointment. He has been very active, vigorous and enthusiastic about looking at the program in a more proactive program and a broader spectrum, and as she highlighted in terms of the way they are promoting that through social media, supplemented by the hard copy program that they distribute as well. She said its really been down to the team's hard work in terms of the apps that they're booking and the way they're promoting it and how they're engaging with mailing lists and with people in terms of getting right events and performances there.

Report was noted.

61 LEASE VARIATION REPORT

N Beresford introduced B Hall, the service charge manager who has led much of the work which you have in front of you. The reason for bringing the report before you this evening is to identify to you that our billing is not in line with the definitions and requirements of our right to buy lease for our leaseholders.

Over 1900 properties across our stock and the intention is to ensure that we can bill in accordance with future lease agreements.

The current lease agreement is not advantageous for us to bill in line with our agreement, due the impacts that it would have on potential cost recovering. Ben has sought extensive legal advice and on this basis, the report before you this evening is recommending that our leases are varied in format, making it more efficient for staff to bill with it in line with the agreement and vitally freeing up time for those staff to support our residents who may be experiencing difficulties and have queries.

She said it intended to improve our position, bringing about a more positive situation for residents and reducing the number of bills by half that they receive.

B Hall and N Beresford were happy to take any question.

Cllr Barry-Mears said that its really useful in here that there's the example of how they look that's on page 34. That was really useful to see because as you said it halves the amount that the lease holders are getting.

Cllr Baradell referred to the legal costs in the report and asked if there are any administrative costs to the Council in changing the way the lease are done.

B Hall said the business as usual approach if the lease is worth varied, the administrative costs would actually reduce by simple virtue of half in the number of bills that are being posted out, So looking at staff time and postage costs and just the background calculation of those four bills moving to two bills.

Cllr Johnson said that there is obviously going to be further consultation itself, with leaseholders, are you anticipating any issues?

N Beresford said, that was correct, it needs to be extensive consultation and that will be planned by Ben and the team alongside our communications team, we're not anticipating any issues. In fact, she thinks that it's very important that we set out the impact and the benefits for our residents and we're anticipating improved position for residents and a transparent approach.

She would hope that that would be something that's welcomed by residents.

The report was noted

62 ADVENTURE PLAYGROUND ACTIVITY REPORT

D Southam gave an update on the adventure playground and explained that it's a come and go service for over 8's. Under 8s need to be supervised.

D Southam explained that the report shows the activities they hold, and that schools engage in the service.

Cllr Banks asked how financially viable are the playgrounds.

D Southam said at the minute no they are not self sustaining but that is part of what they are looking to do. They will be looking at the commercial aspects and how they can maximise profit.

So not just the after school service, the hire of the service for parties and the 3G pitches, which are successful, Part of the consideration will be do we want to invest in the capital money

They will review the service again when the head of communities and leisure is in post. They are investing in the services; Grovehill will have a new laser tag at the playgrounds.

Cllr Johnson said it's a great facility for the borough, particularly the after school club.

Cllr Banks said as part of the review will you look at best practise across the adventure playgrounds for an outreach service for some of the villages so the kids don't miss out there.

D Southam said that it's defiantly something we can look at and provide information of how to provide the out reach service for those areas.

Cllr Capozzi said maybe we could arrange a visit to the playgrounds. She asked if the service is open in the day or only just in the evening after school.

D Southam said she will take that forward. She said its mainly after school, you cant just turn up at the weekend and just use the service, its not a park or open space.

ACTION POINT: Member development – a visit to the adventure playgroup to view the activities that are happening. **DS**

63 **GENERAL COMMUNITIES ACTIVITY REPORT - INC COST OF LIVING, HEALTH AND WELLBEING, COMMUNITY GRANTS, ETC**

D Southam gave an update on the report. Its to provide an update on activities of the Arts, Culture and Wellbeing, Health Inequalities and Healthy Hub areas of work within the Communities team, as she had previously mentioned they will be recruiting for a manager that will cover all of the above areas.

She explained that the health hub is externally funded and it's the last year of the 3 year service, they are hoping that the funding will be extended for another year. The health and equalities programme is approved by Herts County Council as part of the funding agreement, there is positive feedback in terms of the programme itself and what we are achieving from the health qualities programme board. The three main projects are self-explanatory, the funding offers one officer to deliver this and she is part time and does pick up on some other areas highlighted in 3.5.

Cllr Banks touched on 2.3 there is a correction in there, the funding came from Cllr Wyatt-Lowe and not Cllr Guest.

She asked when the funding comes to an end for the Health Hub, is there a commitment from us that they we will continue to support it.

D Southam said once they are in a position to show the results, they would hope that they can get further funding.

64 **ACTION POINTS**

The action point were agreed.

65 **FORWARD PLAN**

Housing Points system booked for 26 Oct.

D Southam said move the BCS to Nov as its going to Cabinet in December.

The Meeting ended at 8.20 pm