

## **Housing & Community Overview & Scrutiny Committee Review 2017-2018.**

Due to local and national elections during May and June 2017, the first meeting of the H&C OSC 2017/18 session did not take place till July 2017, making the meeting agenda for the ensuing two meetings that much extra longer.

At the July meeting, the Committee were presented with the Provisional Outturn financial report for 2016/17 (Q4), prior to the closure of the Council's accounts for the year. The committee were also briefed about the Capital and Revenue elements of the General Fund, the Housing Revenue Account (HRA), Capital Programme along with Balances and Reserves adjustments. The Committee in particular sought clarifications on 'capital development movements' provisions between the various new-build projects.

Also at the July meeting, the Committee looked at the Quarter 4 Housing Performance Operational & Risk Register matters. These are set of performance indicators that a derived in consultation with the Housing Team members and the Tenants and Leaseholders Committee and scrutinised by the H&C OSC Committee. The report monitors Osbornes housing repairs and maintenance contract and the HRA capital programme. The risk registers identify potential risks, both operational and financial, and use a traffic light system to assess and manage these risks. The committee raised questions on building fire and other health and safety provisions of the DBC housing stock, especially blocks of flats - in the aftermath of the Grenfell Tower fire tragedy in London.

Also at this extended July meeting were the Q4 Residents Services Group reports pertaining to Neighbourhood Action delivery service area, Community Safety Partnership report covering local crime and anti-social behaviour. The report also gave an update on Adventure Playgrounds, CCTV operations and priorities and performance at the Old Town Hall. An update on the important topics of 'safeguarding' and 'domestic abuse' was provided to the meeting. The committee sought clarification from the officers and queried how Borough Council and County Council are working together on the issue of safeguarding.

An update on the homelessness prevention strategy, and the challenges currently faced, was presented to the committee. The growing demands on the service were noted and the Committee was satisfied that the issue was being addressed to meet the requirements of the new Homelessness Reduction Act. The increase in number of people claiming homelessness provisions, of approximately 100 increase compared to the previous year, was noted. The committee agenda for the evening was completed with the reviewing of the report detailing the DBC Housing Service Benchmarking report pitched against other peer service providers.

The new quarterly reporting cycle restarted at the September 2017 meeting, where the Committee scrutinised the Quarter 1 Reports for the services that come under its remit. A packed agenda of reports was considered at this meeting.

The September meeting scrutinised the Q1 Budget, Q1 Housing Performance and Q1 Resident services Reports. These quarterly reports are the committee's bread-and-butter scrutiny item.

In addition the following reports were scrutinised by the Committee:

- (a) The Homeless Elms contract with Dens, and an update report from Dens
- (b) A very comprehensive Safeguarding Policy and Procedures document
- (c) Update on Tenant Involvement initiatives
- (d) Review of the Allocations Policy

The Committee scrutinised certain aspects of each policy.

The October meeting looked at the Council progress on the ongoing New Build projects. The update reported on progress on the Able House, Wood House, Swing Gate Lane, Stationers Place, Martindale School and Westerdale and Northend Garage Sites' schemes, as well as giving heads up on the proposed developments in the pipeline. Committee Members queried parking provisions at some site and questioned how overflow parking was catered for. The issues of fire resistant materials and contaminated land were raised. The progress on new developments was noted.

At the same meeting, the committee were updated on the performance of the Gas Servicing provisions being provided by Sun Realm (Year 4 update) and the Total Asset Management contract with Osborne (Year 3 update). Members raised questions on methods of satisfaction survey data collection for both the contracts, and the feedback return time on tenant complaints was also queried.

For the October meeting the Committee had requested a formal Report on the "Use of Loft Space" in Council dwellings. This followed concerns raised by some tenants on this newly introduced policy. The policy had been introduced for health and safety issues pertaining to the use of lofts and other confined spaces for storage. For avoidance of doubt and for clarity, the Committee stressed the need for clear communication to tenants whenever new policies or rules are introduced.

The November meeting reviewed the performance reports for Q2 Budget, Q2 Housing and Q2 Resident Services. A more detailed update on the diverse and complex Anti-Social Behaviour was also presented to the meeting. Apart from general observations on policy, issues such as victim centred approach, community engagement initiatives and real life studies were discussed. The committee were very much interested in staffing levels and suggested the need for a ASB Victim Support Officer to strengthen this area of policy.

The Joint Budget presentation was made at the December meeting. During budget scrutiny the need for ASB Victim Support Officer was again reinstated.

A special meeting was called for In January 2018 to consider the call-in of the cabinet's decision to award the contract for the management of the Borough's Leisure facilities.

In a meeting that lasted nearly 5 hours the Committee listened patiently to the presentations made by the 'other' bidder's representatives, specialist advisors, council officers and Members on the merits of the proposed award of the leisure services contract.

At the end of the evening proceedings and deliberations, the Committee made a unanimous decision to refer the Cabinet's decision to Full Council for further consideration. The referral to Full Council called for a review of the financial assumptions of the winning bid as well a review of the organisation's tax regime model and health and safety record and its fitness for a public contract award. The Committee also requested the Full Council to look at the possible lack of local considerations, in particular of the impact of award on the local community and local businesses.

The first meeting in February looked at the budget proposals for 2018/19.

The second February meeting later in the month looked at specific policies relating to Asset Management and the Decant Policy. The decant policy looks at temporary provisions, including small financial contribution, to facilitate a temporary move for tenants to undertake essential major works in their home. The policy lays down the ground rules for this process.

The Asset Management Strategy covers the provisions of the management and maintenance of the council's housing stock. This policy is the overarching document that lists number of the policies that help achieve the housing maintenance objectives. The policy also projects the next five year capital investment programme as well as looking at investment options for generating additional revenues. The committee questioned and sought clarification on each section of the policy.

The final meeting of the year, of March 2018, looked at the Q3 Housing and Q3 Residents' Services reports. With regards to Housing, the Committee were informed that at the time of the meeting that there were no Homeless related B&B costs and usage. The Committee also queried how large staff turnover and shortages were being addressed by the department management. With regards to Resident Services, the Committee raised concern that no one from Resident Services was present at the meeting to respond to Committee Scrutiny questions on the Report submitted for scrutiny.

The March meeting also looked at the Older Persons Strategy where the Committee agreed with the recommendations contained in the report, the County Councillor with interest in elderly care was also present when this item was discussed; Public Space Protection Orders paper was discussed at length and feedback provided to the Portfolio Holder who was present at the meeting; and the London Borough's Homeless Issues effecting Dacorum, were also discussed at this meeting. The Committee requested that, in light of the ASB that

comes with some of these transferees, could the Officers investigate whether “problem families” were being moved out of their area by London Boroughs. The Committee also requested the Portfolio Holder take up the issue of moving potential known problem tenants to other Boroughs, like Dacorum, up with the local MP.

During the course of the past year the H&C OSC Vice Chairman chaired the Tenants and Lease Holders Committee meetings. These meetings are very informative and which provided an insight into the Tenant’s viewpoint and feedback on the Housing Service. They can also be first port of scrutiny of policies tin time coming to the Committee.

The aim of the Scrutiny Committee is to “promote service improvement, influence policy development and hold the executive to account for the benefit of the Community of Dacorum”. Members are invited to refer any Housing or Community policy which is of concern to local residents to be referred to the H&C OSC Committee for scrutiny. In the past two years we have had two such instances and the non-committee Member input in each case was much appreciated.

Last but not least, the time, effort and contribution of Members, Portfolio Holders, Officers and the TLC Members dedicate to monitoring and improving the Housing and Community Services, and thus making the meeting outcomes meaningful for the benefit of the local communities, is appreciated and gratefully acknowledged.

Councillor Suqlain Mahmood,

Chairman, Housing & Community Overview and Scrutiny Committee