

Housing and Community Overview and Scrutiny Committee Review 2018-2019

The 2018/19 OSC meeting cycle started during June 2018. The first meeting of each year contained a packed agenda of reports. This meeting agenda scrutinised the Quarter 4 Performance Reports for the budget, resident services, and housing portfolios. These quarterly reports form the bread and butter, and also essential and regular, part of the committee agenda during the course of a year.

The June 2018 committee meeting also reviewed the Homelessness Strategy, the Voluntary Sector Contract Delivery and the Sports & Physical Activity Strategy.

The committee learnt that over 10,900 children attended the adventure playgrounds in the previous quarter. Also that the Community Safety Partnerships had set priorities to tackle knife crime, ASB and drugs & alcohol issues. The Committee were heartened to hear that the Old Town Hall had achieved 83% attendance for the fourth quarter, which covers the post-Christmas winter quiet period.

The Committee also called for consideration to be given to the appointment of the Victim Support Officer being made longer than the planned 6-months. It was also acknowledged that the role may be duplicated in other departments and will be reviewed on an ongoing basis.

The Homelessness Strategy has been a regular agenda item over the past few years. The officers reported that the homeless figures were keeping at around 120 people signing up as homeless per month. The committee scrutinised the 2016-2020 policy document pertaining to prevention and tackling of homelessness in the Borough. The Committee acknowledged the proactive work the housing team is undertaking in this area.

An update on Voluntary and Community Sector Contract Delivery programme was provided to committee members. It was acknowledged that this service was responding well to the residents needs and tackling community issues and supporting the preventative agenda of the council.

The consultation on the Sport & Physical Activity Strategy setting out the vision for sports and physical activity across borough was presented to the Committee outlining how local sports clubs, the Council and its partners are being consulted to improve provision and opportunity for local people. Whilst the report was brought to the Committee to get the views of the Members to assist with further development of this strategy, the Committee felt that the strategy had come to the meeting without containing sufficient level of detail to provide in depth scrutiny. The committee unanimously requested more 'meat-on-the bone' for the strategy and suggested further work needed to be undertaken, with more detailed facts and figures. The request was made for the Report to be brought back to the Committee for further review before adoption.

The July 2018 meeting presented the reports on Private Rental Sector, sustainable tenancies, housing income management strategy and an update on Universal credit.

With regards to the private sector rental further government legislation was expected in October 2018, which required private landlords and private tenancies to be formally managed by the Council. Strategic Housing team had taken the responsibility for delivering this service. It was reported to the meeting that approximately 18% of the dwellings in Dacorum were privately rented properties, and

the Houses for Multiple Occupation could increase from the current 50 to 400 following the October legislation.

The Committee were asked to provide feedback on three policies at this meeting; Private Rented Sector (PRS) Enforcement Policy, Houses in Multiple Occupation (HMO) Policy, and the Private Rented Sector Enforcement Panel Terms of Reference document. The committee were assured that staff and preparations were in place to deliver the service effectively to satisfy the new legislation.

The above policies feed into the 4-year Sustainable Tenancies Strategy management plan, thus replacing the previous Vulnerable Person Strategy for social housing.

The Sustainable Tenancies Strategy was also reviewed along with the commitments contained therein that will help towards ensuring that vulnerable tenants are supported and more tenants succeed in sustaining their tenancy. The committee were also assured that the strategy was there to ensure that the rents were paid on time and the obligations of living in the property are met as per the tenancy agreement.

The income management strategy reviewed at the same meeting focussed on HRA income sources such as rents, service charges and tenant debts. An update on Universal Credits was also provided.

The September 2018 meeting started by looking at the Performance Reports covering Children Services, Community Safety Partnership, The Old Town Hall and Community Partnerships were looked at by the Committee.

The committee were briefed on the private hire of the adventure playgrounds, the progress on the ongoing verge hardening, and a reminder of community safety partnership priorities. It was reported that the Old Town Hall utilisation was above the expected target, and the positive trend was welcomed.

The October meeting covered the third year reporting of the performance of the Elms emergency accommodation facilities. The meeting also covered the review of the policy for Direct Offer of council housing in special circumstances. The Committee sought clarity on what checks and balances were in place for the Direct Offer policy.

The major element of the October meeting was the borough's Physical Activity & Sport Strategy. The policy was first reviewed during June 2013 and came back to the committee for further scrutiny. The policy had attracted a large public response during the consultation period with many attendees in the public gallery at the meeting. Public representations were made to the committee and are contained within the October reports.

The Committee felt that the strategy still lacked financial details and commitments and certain parts of the scoping needed further work. Following a much heated debate, both from the public speakers and the committee members, the Policy was approved, much to the attending public disappointment.

The intention being that the Strategy would be brought back to the Committee every six months over the coming two years for further monitoring, review and scrutiny. The Officers stated that the strategy is there to determine the outcomes that the council is seeking to achieve, and further detailed work will continue following the approval of the strategy.

The sports theme continued on the next agenda item pertaining to the 'Relocation of Athletics Track Consultation'. During 2018 a complete renewal of the Dacorum Leisure Modernisation Programme was undertaken, and this consultation looked at the option of relocating the Athletics Track at

Jarman Park to Cupid Green Fields. The purpose of the consultation was to gauge local feedback and public support for the relocation, and this was reflected by the large public attendance at the Committee Meeting.

Following the public speaking and committee debate, it was confirmed by the Leader who was in attendance, that the recommendation to the Cabinet would be not to relocate the athletic track from its current home in Corner Hall, much to the attending public delight.

With the approval of the Physical Activity & Sports Strategy for adoption, and the rejection of the Jarman Park Athletic Track relocation, contrasting moods and outcomes were realised on the same evening.

The November meeting covered the routine Quarter 2 Reports on budget monitoring, performance and people and housing. The committee expressed their concerns on the delays within the Empty Homes process and queried how that was to be addressed. The large turnover of staff from the Customer Services Unit was also discussed at length.

The Gas and Total Asset Management Contract performance was also scrutinised. Benchmarking costs and value for money issues were raised and discussed with regards to the Total Asset Management Contract.

Joint budget meeting was held during December 2018. Allocation of community grants and rules for allocation were queried by the committee. The committee also queried the benchmarking of rates for Adventure Playground hire.

A year earlier in January 2018, the housing service took on the responsibility for regulating private sector housing. This required an adaption and update of policies around private renting. Some policies were reviewed earlier during 2018. January Meeting had one agenda item on HMO Fees, which was looked into very thoroughly by the Committee and scrutinised at depth. The method used to set charging for the HMO Licence whilst retaining value for money for both council and landlords, was discussed at length.

The joint final joint Budget meeting was held in February 2019. Community grants and flexible homes grant funds, and their budget allocation, was queried by the Committee.

The final meeting of the council year was held during March 2019, and covered the Quarter 3 Performance Reports. With regards to the budget for new builds, the issue of underspend and overspend was discussed by the committee with the officers, including how costs be better predicted and better controlled. On Housing matters actions points covering voids and anti-social behaviour were requested by the committee to be monitored and reported on specifically during the next set of quarterly reports. The committee raised a point that the youth clubs, run by both borough council and county council were not being regulated or service provision coordinated together. The committee sought a report from County representatives on their decorum based youth provisions for a future meeting.

Looking forward to 2019/20 meetings – the forward plan - further updates on the Sports Strategy, community aspect of the Leisure Contract, action on housing voids and Private Sector Rental related policies will no doubt be further scrutinised to depth and monitored by the Housing & Community Overview and Scrutiny Committee. This is in addition to the other policies and performance indicators that are routine for the Committee.

The aim of the Scrutiny Committee is to question and query the Executives decisions for the benefit of the local residents who elected the Members. The H&COSC has certainly done its utmost to scrutinise effectively during the past year.

Thanks are due to the Officers, TLC committee, and Committee Members who have conducted the discussions and sometimes heated debates in a fair and professional manner, even when the stakes were high and crowds were on the side-lines. Isn't that what scrutiny is about?

Councillor Suqlain Mahmood

Chairman, Housing and Community Overview and Scrutiny Committee

April 2019