

MINUTES

HOUSING AND COMMUNITY OVERVIEW AND SCRUTINY COMMITTEE

WEDNESDAY 7 OCTOBER 2020

Present:

Councillor Adeleke (Vice Chair)
Councillor Arslan
Councillor Bassadone
Councillor Barry
Councillor Durrant
Councillor England
Councillor Freedman
Councillor Hollinghurst

Councillor Imarni (Chair)
Councillor Johnson
Councillor Mahmood
Councillor Pringle

Officers:

Linda Roberts	Assistant Director – Performance, People & Innovation
Fiona Williamson	Assistant Director – Housing
Layna Warden	Group Manager – Tenants and Leaseholders
Matt Rawdon	Group Manager - People and Performance
Sandra Mogan	Team Leader – Rent and Income
Ryan Glanville	Team Leader – Tenants & Leaseholders
Alex Care	Team Leader – Community Partnerships
Claire Foster	Community Partnerships & Wellbeing Officer
Katie Mogan	Corporate & Democratic Support Lead Officer

Others:

Councillor Griffiths	Portfolio Holder – Housing
Councillors Banks	Portfolio Holder – Community and Regulatory Services

HC/062/20 MINUTES

The minutes from the previous meeting were not available to sign.

HC/063/20 APOLOGIES FOR ABSENCE

There were no apologies for absence.

HC/064/20 DECLARATIONS OF INTEREST

Councillor Barry declared an interest in item 6 as she was employed as a youth worker in Hertfordshire.

Councillor Banks declared an interest in item 6 as she was employed by Grovehill Neighbourhood Association.

HC/065/20 PUBLIC PARTICIPATION

There was no public participation.

HC/066/20 CONSIDERATION OF ANY MATTER REFERRED TO THE COMMITTEE IN RELATION TO A CALL-IN

None.

HC/067/20 HOUSING INCOME COLLECTION

S Mogan introduced the report to members and ran through its highlights.

Councillor Freedman thanked the officer for the report and suggested that the report should focus more on the known metrics such as how difficult is it to make contact once a tenant is identified as needing support and how much contact is required to get a response from them.

Councillor Adeleke was concerned that the system would not be able to recognise underlying issues. He referred to paragraph 3.11 and asked if there was a perception that tenants are scared to speak to rent officers. He also referred to the Universal Credit officer and noted the hard work this post had completed. He asked if there were plans to extend the contract beyond May 2021 as the current covid-19 situation is going to have a lasting impact.

S Mogan noted Councillor's Adeleke's concern about the system not recognising underlying issues. She explained that the system does not just look at rent arrears, it will look at payment patterns and if, for example, the tenant pays their rent on 25th of each month, it won't highlight this as a risk until the payment has been missed. It is an intelligent system but will take the point away about it potentially missing important information, especially those tenants who pay their rent on time. In relation to the fear of talking to rent officers, she said the team are working hard to change that perception that they are debt collectors. When the team manage to contact a tenant in serious arrears, it often comes as a relief to the tenant as we are able to offer support and help them pay their rent and apply for any benefits they may be entitled too. There is a huge benefit to tenants if they remain in contact with rent officers. The intention is to review and extend the contract of the Universal Credit Officer.

Councillor Mahmood said arrears had gone up 1.06% which totalled £400k. He asked if this was correct.

S Mogan said the percentage of the arrears is worked out as a percentage of the gross debit which equals approximately £54 million a year.

Councillor Mahmood referred to paragraph 3.8 and the automatic reminders that are issued. He asked about the wording in these as this could cause stress to tenants.

S Mogan said there are a variety of letters than get sent out and are based on stages of the rent arrears that appear on the Housing Management system. There has been a 60-70% reduction in letters sent in quarter 1 and 2 this year compared to last as the team are making more phone contact with tenants. If a tenant is not engaging with the team, as a very last resort we send them a support letter explaining what we can do to help them and this is to encourage them to contact the team.

Councillor Mahmood asked if the letters threaten to take legal action in them. He said it was important to get the rent income but need to balance this against our tenants' wellbeing.

S Mogan said as the arrears increase, the message becomes more serious in the letters. We want them to understand how serious the situation is.

Councillor Mahmood referred to paragraph 3.22 and the five pending court cases and asked for some clarification.

S Mogan said the five cases are waiting to be looked at by the courts, they were shut at the start of the pandemic so there has been a delay. The courts will not look at any cases where a tenant is claiming universal credit or has rent deductions. The team was previously focussed on enforcement and are now moving into a support role to prevent tenants getting into high arrears. For example, one account had arrears of £5,500 and the tenant was due to be evicted but the team have worked with him over the last couple of months and they have just cleared the last outstanding arrears and court costs.

Councillor Pringle asked if there were lessons to be learnt in terms of future engagement to reduce arrears. It seems that once the enforcement option has been removed, the team become more successful in collecting the rent. She asked how the team would manage collecting rent if the economic situation becomes worse with further lockdowns and the end of the furlough scheme.

S Mogan said moving forward, the team will be focussed on supporting tenants and on early intervention. We will contact tenants as soon as they enter into arrears to find out what the issues are before it progresses and gets worse. Going forward, enforcement action will only be taken on those tenants who are not engaging when all methods of contact have been tried and often, a final court date prompts engagement and payment. At the start of the pandemic, the team started recording what tenants were financially impacted by covid-19 and a marker was placed on the system to alert officers. We know what tenants will be affected when the furlough scheme ends and those who could be a risk of redundancy. Some tenants who were furloughed and only receiving 80% of their wages were able to pay 80% of their rent and a repayment plan would be introduced when they are back to their full income. Building these relationships with tenants will be important moving forward.

HC/068/20 ANTI-SOCIAL BEHAVIOUR UPDATE

R Glanville introduced the report to members. He said he had received an enquiry from a member before the meeting requested seasonal patterns for reporting of ASB and said this is something he will provide after the meeting and will look to add detail of the length of time cases are open.

Councillor Adeleke said it was excellent and reassuring for tenants that reports of ASB are looked into within 24 hours. He had concerns that now the ASB had moved into the housing team, that private tenants would not be given the same level of service and asked what powers the team have and how private residents are supported.

R Glanville said moving the ASB team to housing meant they could specifically focus on council tenants and leaseholders. The report in the agenda addresses the private sector which falls under a different team and work closely with the police. There are a range of powers to tackle ASB; notice seeking possession, acceptable behaviour contracts, injunctions, closure orders. The measures are always proportionate and officers must complete a proportionality statement.

L Warden added that she was involved in the transfer of ASB officers from Regulatory Services into Housing. The team were sitting outside housing but were managing housing cases which made up about 80% of their case work so it made sense for them to work alongside the housing officers. They still have a number of cases involving private landlords

and there are a few different routes, there is a Community Safety Action Group held on a monthly basis where cases are discussed and talk about a variety of methods and action plans for example, a Community Protection Warning/Notice or liaising with the landlords. Once a new post has been created, ASB issues affecting private residents will fall under the Community Safety Team and ASB cases affecting council tenants will be dealt with in the Housing team.

R Glanville said that the courts are now open but we make sure we engage with tenants. Last week, we were successful in securing a closure order in Grovehill due to the severity and the nature of the crimes being committed at the address. We will still push to take residents to court where necessary once all options have been exhausted.

Councillor Adeleke asked which age groups were the worst offenders.

R Glanville said we could look to include supplementary information and there is a wide range of age groups.

Councillor Mahmood referred to paragraph 4.4 and the different case numbers that have increased during lockdown. He asked if the table was broken down into the average duration of time taken to resolve cases and the nature of the ASB.

R Glanville said we do see a peak in reported ASB in the summer months and this obviously increased during the pandemic. The most common behaviour reported was noise nuisance and the use of cannabis and drugs. The team don't have powers of entry but work closely with the police when they are entering properties to seize drugs and ride on the back of their investigation to take action against tenants.

Councillor Freedman said he had concerns about providing age demographics and would be more interested in the case being broken down into severity levels.

R Glanville said the team do deal with complex cases including those tenants who suffer mental health issues and this could cause issues if they are not put into context.

Councillor Pringle enquired what level of training the ASB officers had in recognising potential signs of domestic abuse.

R Glanville said the team have continued to undertake training virtually throughout the pandemic and they are trained to spot the signs. One concern raised in the report is that officers have not been able to visit tenants in their homes so have been unable to spot visual signs. Telephone conversations have happened with tenants and perpetrators and the officers are well versed to ask the right questions. He said he was confident that the team have all the necessary training for their role.

Councillor England said the numbers would be quite small if broken down by severity and would rapidly run out of sufficient numbers to draw effective conclusions. It is difficult to satisfy all people around ASB and tends to be a lose-lose situation. He asked if the council use preventative communications that are available to get residents thinking about ASB and importantly, involve members who go out into the community.

R Glanville said there have been some recent improvements made to the website where residents can go for initial advice and hopefully makes them think twice about reporting and suggests speaking to neighbours first if it is safe to do so. The team work closely with partners at Herts Mediation and offer conflict coaching and gives an opportunity to learn techniques on how to deal with neighbours when it doesn't amount to ASB. He suggested that the team could look into more joined up working with members.

Councillor Hollinghurst said he had some concerns that the private sector may be neglected. He raised a point about older people who are less likely to contact the council electronically and are more likely to feel intimidated by ASB and may be afraid to complain.

R Glanville reassured members that they were not being neglected and the team can offer them advice and signpost them to other agencies and the police if it is serious enough. Older people in supported housing schemes have an allocated Supported Housing Officer who visit tenants regularly and can raise concerns with the ASB team. When the pandemic is over, we can begin to offer the Silver Street meetings again at schemes where an ASB officer goes to give a talk on how to report and deal with ASB. Tenancy officers have spoken to all residents over 70 during the pandemic and conversations about ASB would have been addressed in those.

Councillor Imarni asked if the team were still involved in joint briefings with the police. She said a lot of the ASB complaints she received from residents was increasing about joyriding.

R Glanville said he has set up a separate meeting with Inspector Jeff Scott which he feels works better in addressing ASB cases. There has been an increase throughout the pandemic on reports of joyriding in public spaces and he said the team were reliant on residents reporting this behaviour to police with the number plates. The team can step in if a council tenant is perpetrating this crime.

HC/069/20 SUPPORTING YOUNG PEOPLE PROGRAMME THROUGH THE ACTIVE DACORUM HUB

A Care introduced the report to members. The report outlines information about projects the team are looking to run and how this will be funded and sustained. The money for this project was set aside many years ago for the Highfield Youth Club which did not materialise and was then used to create the Cycle Hub at Cupid Green. This is no longer running and so the council are looking to provide activities for young people to engage in activities to support their physical and mental health. There are a number of proposed activities and these are costed out in the report. There is an allocated budget for monitoring, consultation and evaluation to understand what is and isn't popular and to gain some evidence to focus on what works and how to develop it for the future.

Councillor Adeleke said he thought this was an excellent initiative and he was a hundred percent behind any projects that support the youth in the community. However, he had a number of concerns and asked why the Cycle Hub was not successful. He added that the project was designed to plug the gap for young people aged 11-16 but he did not feel there was an adequate explanation as to what they are doing now or what they needed support with. He had concerns that members were not invited to provide their views on the initiative. He referred to the impact on covid-19 and said all the activities listed are group activities and felt it was reckless to provide these activities at this point in time. He felt that the team were determined to spend the money allocated and he could not see how some of the costings were arrived at.

Councillor Banks said the Grovehill ward councillors were not consulted and neither were the Woodhall Farm members. She had some input as the portfolio holder. She gave some background into the Highfield Youth Club and said the project never materialised and only got as far as identifying the land it would be provided on. The money for this project is sat in reserves waiting to be spent and it was originally used to set up the Cycle Hub but they were not able to engage in providing further facilities/activities. Apex have now taken on the facility are delivering a wider facility which now has a keep fit studio, gym and on-site café. This

should be a Dacorum wide facility and she said she had questioned officers about how they were going to include the town and villages across the borough.

A Care said she did not make it clear that it was Councillor Banks as the portfolio holder was consulted, not the Grovehill councillors. She said the team know there is a gap and it is known nationally, that mental health and obesity are key concerns for young people and these have been made worse by the current covid pandemic. At this stage, the report is for comment and feedback and needs to go to Cabinet for approval to draw down the money from reserves. We are not looking at getting the project in place until February/March next year at which point, the weather starts to improve and we will have a better idea of where the pandemic is and hope to capture these young people coming out of the pandemic. All relevant risk assessments would be undertaken. She said the team were not looking to spend the whole £44k and the costings in the report were provided by Apex and suspect they are lower than market rate as Apex is non-profit. If the project is approved, the costings will be more defined.

Councillor Adeleke asked what the basis of the budget for marketing and contingency was.

A Care said the Youth Voice would be provided with a £2k grant to set up their own events and some costings are on previous experience in other projects.

Councillor Barry echoed Councillor Adeleke's comments about investing in young people but also shared his concerns that young people had not been consulted on what activities they would like to be provided. She said the Redbourn Road was quite heavily congested at times and bus travel is not favourable in the current climate and it would mean less emissions if activities could be spread throughout the adventure playgrounds. She questioned why schools had not been considered as sites because the young people are already in their school bubbles. She felt as if the team were desperate to use the site at Cupid Green even if it isn't suitable.

Councillor Banks said the site is located at Cupid Green and it was looked at for developing the athletics track but the site wasn't suitable. These activities have to be based somewhere but the outreach should be far reaching and she asked officers to take on board the comments from members.

A Care said she found it interesting that in a previous consultation with youth clubs, young people were asked what they wanted to be provided and they responded by saying nothing yet when they were provided with a space to do nothing, they came up with great ideas. She said young people would be consulted on what activities they would like to see but the project and funding needs to be approved first. She said she will take on board the comment about using schools but felt this might be difficult at the moment due to the covid-19 situation.

Councillor Barry asked if A Care could clarify why the team had suggested setting up another youth voice group when they already existed and could be invested in.

A Care said it won't be something new, it will coordinate what is already out there.

C Foster said she had already started conversations with Councillor Barry about the youth voice/council and how to grow this.

Councillor Hollinghurst said he had been approached by young people interested in skateboarding and he said this was not mentioned in the project list. He said the one in Tring is quite old and the new one provided in Berkhamsted has been a great success. He said he had been impressed with how friendly the young people using the park were and they travel

a long way to use it. He asked if additional provision could be considered in future budget cycles.

Councillor Banks agreed with Councillor Hollinghurst's comments and said it might be more appropriate for the community centre network to extend this provision as they are able to claim for grants that the council cannot.

C Foster said there were fantastic skateboarding facilities already across the borough, there is a new park in Gadebridge Park and there is also the XC centre at Jarman Park but understand this did not cover Tring and said it is something that could be looked at.

Councillor England said he felt that officers had started with the building available and not the people and he said there were six wards in Dacorum with deprivation and felt these should be focussed on. He said there were already established buildings across the borough that could host these activities. He had concerns over the governance of the project and said the sport strategy highlights that the council will improve engagement with stakeholders and have a collaborative approach but didn't feel this was reflected in this project.

Councillor Banks responded and said that Grovehill was one of the wards which was an area of deprivation and officers have used this as a base and utilised estate we already have. She accepted comments from members about spreading the provision across the borough and has asked officers to look into this.

A Care said that part of the project is consultation and engagement and some projects may change and is not set in stone.

Councillor Griffiths clarified with the committee that the recommendation is that members note the report and provide feedback and there is no mention of referring this to cabinet.

Councillor England said the committee need to make clear that this ought to be consulted with all councillors and more widely in the community.

Councillor Banks said these were all valid points and the team will take away on work on them. She said the project was worth pursuing and the report will be fine-tuned and brought back to the committee.

Councillor Adeleke asked if there was a time limit on the spending of the £44k.

M Rawdon said there was no timescale for spending the money.

Councillor Mahmood suggested the report was taken away and reworked.

M Rawdon thanked the committee for their comments and the team will take them away and back to committee with a revised report.

Councillor Imarni summarised the committee's comments as part of their feedback. The committee required clarification on costings, increased consultation with youth groups, whether it was feasible to use school facilities, consider streamlining youth groups and look at the provision of skate park facilities. There is a feeling from councillors that the officers started with the building not the people and there should be a greater focus on the six wards with deprivation. There should be improved engagement with stakeholders. Councillor Imarni asked the officers to reschedule the report to come back to the committee.

HC/070/20 DBC PHYSICAL ACTIVITY AND SPORTS ACTION PLAN

C Foster introduced the report to members and said there have been a lot of changes because of the pandemic and some activities have moved online which demonstrated how technology can support the delivery of sports and activity. A virtual wellness festival took place online with a range of activities including yoga, mindfulness and healthy eating. There were seven activities with 445 people attending. The Run Your Town event will be held virtually this year on the weekend of 17-18th October and we are asking residents to sign up to walk/run 5km or 10km for a £5 donation and all proceeds will go to the local NHS charity as chosen by the Mayor. All participants will receive a medal. The Active Dacorum Hub is open now as a multi-use communal venue and the aim is to engage all residents in their physical and mental wellbeing. C Foster said she was able to utilise s.106 funding to resurface the tennis courts and add netball courts at Cupid Green.

Councillor England thanked C Foster for their engagement in the changes to the report he had proposed, he said they had done a good job and it was good to see some numbers. He recognised that covid-19 has impacted the programme and makes it difficult to evaluate what is being done. He said he felt strongly that adventure playgrounds and community centres should be involved. He suggested a goal of a greater percentage of projects tackling inactivity.

C Foster said Dacorum is a large borough and the project has to start somewhere. The first task was to find a use for the closed building at Cupid Green playing fields and this has now been achieved. She said she was passionate about creating community partnerships which should allow us to look at other locations. In relation to inactivity, this is being tackled again through partnership working and working with Sports England and the planning team to set up a working group to look at the results from the Local Plan and awaiting on the indoor feasibility study to be published by the end of the year. There are certain areas with a shortfall, such as artificial 4G pitches and local football facilities which is run by the Football Association. She said she would be happy to receive any suggestions or invite interested members to the working group.

Councillor Adeleke asked how many projects C Foster envisioned would happen for the whole year and is there a target to achieve.

C Foster said the action plan was a working document and there aren't any specific targets. New items can be added as the plan evolves.

Councillor Adeleke asked about community grants and how are they policed to ensure the money is being spent for what it was intended for. If a group is successful at being awarded a grant, he asked if they would be able to apply again.

A Care said there was three grants rounds a year. If a community group applies and is successful, they cannot apply for another grant until the next financial year and it cannot be for the same project. If a group applies and is unsuccessful, they can apply again within the same financial year. In terms of policing the grant money, if a group is successful, they are issued with a terms and conditions letter and must complete an evaluation form when the project is complete.

Councillor Mahmood thanked C Foster on a good report and said it was heartening to see the level of activity and engagement.

Councillor Barry asked for clarification on the type of pitch that was being installed at Cupid Green; was it 3G or 4G?

M Rawdon said he would confirm with officers.

Action: M Rawdon to confirm the type of pitch

Councillor Barry suggested that 'Dacorum Active Hub' makes it sound quite central.

C Foster said she wanted to incorporate the whole of Dacorum in the name and not make it specific to Grovehill.

HC/071/20 WORK PROGRAMME

Councillor England requested an update on when the committee would be able to consider the climate change emergency.

Action: Councillor Imarni to get an update from the Climate Change Lead Officer

The meeting ended at 9.10pm