

MINUTES

HOUSING AND COMMUNITY OVERVIEW AND SCRUTINY COMMITTEE

WEDNESDAY 10th September 2020

Present:

Councillor Imarni (Chair)
Councillor Adeleke (Vice Chair)
Councillor Barry
Councillor Bassadone
Councillor England
Councillor Freedman

Councillor Hollinghurst
Councillor Johnson
Councillor Su. Mahmood
Councillor Pringle
Councillor Tindall

Officers:

Matt Rawdon	Group Manager - People and Performance
Sara Railson	Arts Team Leader
Linda Roberts	Assistant Director – Performance, People & Innovation
Fiona Williamson	Assistant Director – Housing
Layna Warden	Tenants & Leaseholders Group Manager
Fiona Jump	Group Manager (Financial Services)
Kayley Johnston	Corporate & Democratic Support Officer

Others:

Councillor Griffiths	Portfolio Holder – Housing
Councillor Banks	Portfolio Holder – Community & Regulatory Services
Councillor Williams	

HC/051/20 MINUTES

The minutes from 1 July 2020 were agreed by the members present.

HC/052/20 APOLOGIES FOR ABSENCE

Apologies for absence were received from Councillor Arslan.

It was also noted that Councillor Bassadone was having issues joining and that she will connect later.

HC/053/20 DECLARATIONS OF INTEREST

There were no declarations of interest.

Councillor Mahmood noted that he is a Director of a company that receives government funding.

HC/054/20 PUBLIC PARTICIPATION

There was no public participation.

**HC/055/20 CONSIDERATION OF ANY MATTER REFERRED TO THE COMMITTEE IN
RELATION TO A CALL-IN**

None.

HC/056/20 Q1 – BUDGET MONITORING

F Jump introduced the report outlining the financial position for the Council for 2020/21 and stated that these figures were correct as of the end of June but in the current climate, a lot has changed since then. The figures in the report are consistent with those in the Covid-19 update report that went to Cabinet in June and another update will go in September and likely to be a revision to financial position. Most of the variances in the report are covid-19 driven and in terms of highlights, in the General Fund, currently expecting a pressure of £5.8 million and this does include some funding streams received from central government. Further details have been received from government about the loss of income and it is believed the council could receive between £1-1.5 million. On the Housing Revenue Account, the forecast is a surplus of £900k and this is being driven by a reduction in expenditure in relation to the number of repairs which is directly related to the pandemic and accessibility issues into properties. There is also a £7.3million in slippage in the HRA capital programme.

Councillor Adeleke referred to page 5, paragraph 1.2. There has been a reduction in expenditure of £2.2 million on repairs which is part of surplus that is being quoted. He asked if this is something that would be revisited and if so, if something is due to be repaired, how is this cost factored into the budget forecast?

F Jump said that as we are unable to access properties, we will see a saving in the current financial year but the repairs work needs to be done. This is a timing issue rather a saving in expenditure.

Councillor England said that Covid-19 is a massive uncertainty and asked F Jump if she was able to say when things will be clearer.

F Jump said that it is difficult to say, the forecast reflects our current position but things are changing daily (i.e. policies, a statement from the Prime Minister today) and could potentially see another lockdown in winter. She said the financial forecasts were prudent but changing.

Councillor England referred to the assumption that the council are not expecting another lockdown in winter and asked if they were referring to a local or national lockdown.

F Jump said she wouldn't distinguish between them, either of those situation would have a similar impact on Dacorum's position.

Councillor Mahmood referred to the £5 million plus pressure and asked if it was a pessimistic forecast or if things had improved since June.

F Jump said that it is a prudent forecast and that they are more optimistic since the lockdown ended. She added that they could be in a worse position if we were locked down again but could also see an improvement in the forecast depending on the situation for the remainder of the financial year.

Councillor Mahmood referred to the Capital Programme which has not been spent and asked how this would impact on next year's budget.

F Jump said that the capital programme is agreed over a rolling period so the funding has already been approved for these projects.

F Williamson said there will be several factors to determine whether the expenditure will be made next year. There are slippages on some of the development schemes which are still programmed for next year. The approach to kitchen and bathroom planned works is evolving and the rationale behind not undertaking these works this year is that these works involve many different trades going in and out of properties in a two week period and this potentially creates problems if there is an infection in household or with workers. Providing there are no restrictions in any complete lockdown for the construction sector, there will be a programme of external works rolled out throughout this year and into next. Cannot provide any guarantees that all the slippage will be spent next year but currently working on our programme and more information will be available on a monthly basis.

Councillor Johnson referred to page 9 about initial work on tenders for supported housing schemes and asked why they were no longer valid.

F Williamson said that the tender was out of the time limit for the contractor to be able to undertake any revisions so as with any competitive tendering process, there is a backstop on the time where it remains valid. Due to some revisions to the original design and further work that had been undertaken to review all of the supported housing schemes, that period has elapsed and that means we will need to either re-tender or look at the lowest previous bidder.

Councillor Adeleke referred to page 7, paragraph 4.2 in relation to garages. He said the committee have visited this in previous meetings about upgrading garages to make them more attractive to residents and how many tenants have returned keys for their garages through the current covid-19 pandemic.

F Williamson said that there had been a net gain of 9 additional garages since the beginning of the year. We were anticipating that a number of garages would be terminated if residents needed to make reductions to their household budgets.

Councillor Mahmood questioned the labelling of this period as a recession.

F Jump said we are in a recession in terms of the economic definition. She didn't think the forecasts were pessimistic but are realistic and would be updated when we get more information.

Councillor Mahmood referred to the new build construction and asked if they were up and running as normal.

F Williamson said there was only a short suspension of around 3-5 weeks whilst the contractors introduced additional measures to make the sites covid secure. It has had a slight impact on the handover of the major sites but Magenta will be handed over in the next few days and Martindale is on track for the end of September.

Councillor England referred to the garages and said it seems as if the effects of the pandemic should expect to last as long as restrictions last but there are a few other indications that we are in a recession for other reasons. On balance, he felt the pessimism is well placed. He made an observation on the construction work and said he has read articles from experts who talk about ventilation and once you get the building weather tight, you face different challenges in terms of working space because there is less ventilation, and we are

going from summer into winter and that might have an effect on building. He asked if conditions would be against us moving into winter and asked if this has been considered.

F Williamson said the main consideration on the sites is in the guidance. Internal work had been impacted and one contractor took the approach of placing multi trades in one apartment to finish which provided two benefits – there was no issue with social distancing and it gave them an insight into quality control of the trades. Contractors have come up with Innovative measures to work differently and minimise the impact.

Councillor Imarni said that we are yet to fill the full economic impact of covid-19. She added that after the furlough scheme ends, we will see the true impact and reminded members to bear this in mind.

HC/057/20 Q1 – HOUSING PERFORMANCE

F Williamson introduced the report detailing the housing performance and ran through the highlights. She stated that members will note that overall performance is positive for quarter 1 despite being heavily impacted by the pandemic and the teams have responded well to the restrictions of lockdown, however some data is not available for this quarter, due to the service not being available during pandemic, such as some planned internal work to kitchens and bathrooms.

Councillor Freedman referred to the backlog of work and the task and finish group that had been brought into look at it. He said he has had several complaints from residents when their requests haven't received a response. He understood that works would be taking longer and work being prioritised, he asked if the team were looking at getting communication out to residents to acknowledge there is a delay in responses and planned works.

F Williamson said that they were aware of this and there has been an increase in complaints and some communication issues. A task and finish group was set up to agree what the priority cases are and to identify those cases that need urgent intervention and ensure communication goes out to other tenants awaiting repairs. She added that scripts are being amended to reflect the backlog to advise tenants of any delays and timescales for completion of the work.

Councillor Mahmood asked if we were addressing the mental health of our tenants and what support we provide.

F Williamson said the department have been working with a number of agencies to provide support and we also provide life lines to private sector.

L Warden said officers had made contact with all tenants in a high risk group such as those who were over 70 or who has a health condition at the start of lockdown in order to offer support and make referrals to external agencies such as those who required food parcels. Work has been carried out with Community Action Dacorum and Age UK who have set up friending services for those who were socially isolated. The Supported Housing Officers have carried out extra work and identified tenants in different categories for weekly phone calls and some were phoned 2-3 times a week to maintain contact. Since the start of August, the officers have begun doorstep visits which was important as there was an increase in alarm faults because they were not able to test them. 85% of tenants in supported housing have now received a face to face visit and officers have made 143 referrals in August alone. It has been great to shift some services online and the majority of tenants have appreciated this but it has also identified that some need face to face contact in order for the council to

offer the right support.

Councillor Mahmood asked for clarification on the red indicators on the risk register and section 114 in relation to homelessness.

F Williamson explained that a section 114 is a notice that the council would serve in the event that we were facing bankruptcy as a council. This is a worst case scenario if we were to mismanage the financial expenditure and not recover any grants where applicable. In housing, this relates to an increase in the number of people presenting as homeless especially those requiring welfare support and again, we are able to apply for grant funding to cover some of those costs and this is an ongoing situation. In order to mitigate against risk, we are ensuring we make budget provisions and use our own stock wherever possible. In relation to compliance and the backlog to repairs and testing, this can create a risk to health and safety and there are mitigations in place to prioritise those and remain in contact with tenants and ensuring where necessary that we redeploy to ensure compliance remains a high priority.

Councillor Adeleke referred to the repairs and backlog, and said that every tenant will suggest their repair is a priority and asked when the backlog will be completed. He asked a second question about support for rough sleepers at the height of the pandemic and asked if this support will end.

F Williamson said that the process to clear the backlog is a validation one, and contacting those awaiting repairs to see if they still need them. Concerned about those that weren't classified as urgent but now could cause damage such as a slow leak and they are given priority in the first round of repairs. The team are looking at increasing the labour force to get them completed in the next month and this is subject to no local restrictions in terms of access. In respect to support for rough sleepers, everyone who was placed in temporary accommodation will receive a personalised housing plan and that is set out in the Homelessness Reduction Act. This may mean they are housed in council accommodation or duty discharged to the private rented sector. Ongoing support will be provided to these individuals and the Tenancy Sustainment Team have seen a dramatic increase in the number of cases they are working with. We do not anticipate demand going down and we need to make sure we are appropriately resourced within the team.

**HC/058/20 CHILDREN SERVICES AND COMMUNITY SAFETY PARTNERSHIP,
CUSTOMER SERVICES, THE OLD TOWN HALL, COMMUNICATIONS
AND COMMUNITY PARTNERSHIPS Q1 PERFORMANCE.**

M Rawdon introduced the report and provided an update on service performance over quarter 1 2020/2021 and also highlighted key achievements over this same period. He said members will note that services needed to be delivered in different ways due to covid-19 and services had to adapt and change to provide the response to covid-19. For example, the adventure playgrounds were shut and staff were redeployed to help across the organisation, mainly around assisting the housing cleaners and welfare calls to residents. The Old Town Hall team have supported Environmental Health making contact with residents and businesses. The Community Safety Team helped deliver food parcels to vulnerable residents.

Councillor Mahmood said the report was very good with lots of positive updates. He highlighted an error on page 16 in the report and asked for this to be amended.

Councillor England thanked M Rawdon for the report and recognised the challenges faced and the achievements. He recognised the improvement in answering the CSU phone lines. He asked M Rawdon what he thought the main factor was in this improvement.

M Rawdon said he thought this was due to the fact that we could quickly deploy our staff so that they could all work from home. Part time working from home was introduced in the team 12 months ago in order to try and retain our staff, so the transition was not a difficult process. We have noticed that there were a lot of residents unable to make face to face visits and therefore forcing to make calls or go online and this has showed there is not a great need for services of the CSU to always meet face to face. He thought the staff were more productive at home.

Councillor England said that the reports show great levels of performance and asked if they will retain home working once the pandemic has passed. He referred to the paragraph on communications and asked if it was possible to get some numbers from the website in terms of which pages are being visited most frequently and which campaigns are most popular.

M Rawdon said those statistics are available and will incorporate in the next report.

Councillor Adeleke said well done to M Rawdon and his team on a good report. He referred to the team's charity efforts on behalf of the council and asked if there was any attempt to publicise this. He added to Councillor England's comments re home working and was concerned that not everyone is comfortable with working from home and asked if staff would have a choice on where to work. He gave his thanks to Councillor Banks for arranging to have the war memorials cleaned.

M Rawdon said the food parcels were part of the wider Herts Help campaign so not sure what messages they have publicised, we can look at speaking to Communications department about how we get the positive messages out. In terms of the CSU, we can deliver the service whilst working from home when the building isn't open to the public but need to balance with regard to the operation when people back into the Forum, we will probably use a blended approach with some staff at home and some in the office,

Councillor Pringle agreed with the blended approach to working from home and asked if there would be a staff satisfaction survey to find out what works which could help recruitment and retention.

L Roberts said that in the CSU a large number of staff work part time so getting the right blend to make sure the office in the Forum is covered and answering the phones will be challenging but is something the team are keen to pursue. There has been a staff survey to understand if staff felt they had been supported and there have been some 'Learning from lockdown' sessions with group managers across the council to understand from them what the positives and negatives have been to address them in the next phases of the new normal programme. Line managers were encouraged to keep in contact with their team so staff did not feel isolated.

Councillor Pringle referred to domestic abuse statistics under paragraph 3.1.6. She asked how these figures compare from year to year and wondered if there was any indication from other services whether there is a perception of a dramatic increase in levels of domestic abuse. She asked if there were any drivers behind an increase such as unsuitable housing or economic factors.

M Rawdon said that from this quarter to the previous one there has been an increase in domestic abuse cases.

L Roberts said the Community Wellbeing Group has continued where various organisations meet and had confirmed the increase in domestic abuse cases.

L Warden said there were 123 cases reported in the first seven weeks of lockdown which was a considerable increase and a lot was due to relationship breakdowns and people fleeing relationships. The safeguarding officer is working with Herts County Council to map these cases and where highlights have been within each ward to identify any extra support that could be given and prevention work. The women's refuges have been constantly full so this is a considerable pressure identified anecdotally.

Councillor Hollinghurst referred to the performance of answering calls and it now being quicker. He said the success of this depends on the options available to the person making the call and that people were abandoning calls because the automated phone system does not offer the right option.

Councillor Griffiths said that the Council would have figures on that as all abandoned calls were recorded.

M Rawdon confirmed that the call handling abandon rate was 3% for this quarter, whereas previously it has been around 10-12%.

HC/059/20 OLD TOWN HALL UPDATE

Councillor Banks presented the report to the committee as the portfolio holder. The Old Town Hall has been hugely impacted by Covid-19 and is one of the few services that remains closed. There is currently no date set for when to reopen the hall and the paper highlights the impact on the hall and its staff.

Councillor Mahmood asked if the Old Town Hall could stream events as there are no current plan to open.

M Rawdon said that technology is very costly and as the building is so old the costs are increased and currently do not have the budget available. He suggested that films could be shown.

Councillor Mahmood asked if we could record the performances and then stream them.

L Roberts said that they don't have the licences required it's not just as simple as that because it's the artists content. She explained that they had looked at all options but there just not viable.

Councillor England asked about the ventilation in the hall and if it would be feasible for people to sit in the hall for a performance when it could be opened.

S Railson said that there is no air conditioning in the main auditorium but there is an air filtration system in the cellar. There is a ceiling fan and windows in the auditorium.

Councillor England said he thought this would be a barrier to using the space. He was thinking that it could be used as an extension of space for local schools.

S Railson said it is a generous space. She referred to government guidance which acknowledged that older buildings would not have a filtration system in place and rely on natural ventilation.

Councillor Adeleke referred to the report that mentions the capacity with social distancing is 45 seats and he said we need to look at the long term use for the hall. He also asked what the prospects were for the staff employed at the Old Town Hall.

M Rawdon said in the short term whilst the hall is unable to open, we are making sure we are in the best position possible to reopen as soon as given the go ahead. In relation to staff, we can look at deploying staff into other areas of the council that need support during the covid-19 response.

L Roberts said that we will have a better indication over the next few weeks about a second spike in the pandemic and the impact on current timelines. The work that has been done to date in the report, shows we are able to reopen when possible. Some casual staff have been able to let go but there are other staff who we will be looking to redeploy and have lots of transferable skills to help in other departments.

Councillor Mahmood referred to section 5 of the report and activities that could take place at the Old Town Hall. He asked if this will be pursued.

M Rawdon said that the Council need to decide when it is going to open but at the moment it isn't an option.

Councillor Banks thanked Councillor Mahmood for his comments and said she would take away on behalf of the committee to see what avenues can be explored further to open for some limited and socially distanced exhibitions.

Councillor Imarni said that as it's a heritage site would it be possible to get a grant through them to update the hall so it is suitable for a post covid era and asked if it has been explored as to what's available.

S Railson said that they have looked at the arts side rather heritage money offered but was happy to look into it and report back to the committee.

Action: SR to confirm options re grants.

Councillor Imarni asked if we could get the exact costs for the work to be undertaken.

S Railson said there would need to be significant investment to bring the hall up to standard to stream performances. There are issues with copyright and how people would pay for this. She said is still waiting to hear back from ICT but thought the costs would be between £10-15,000 for the estimated works.

Councillor Imarni asked about the associate works.

S Railson said that we are probably looking at the same figures again. The building is listed and was constructed in three different parts so the wiring of the building is an issue.

Action: SR to provide costings for the upgrade of the Old Town Hall.

Councillor Mahmood asked if one way signs and routes had been put in place to be covid-19 compliant.

S Railson said it has been done and are ready to go.

Councillor England asked if the café was open when the building was.

S Railson said that the café isn't open because it supplements the performances. It is not independently run.

Councillor England asked if we could open it with the measures in place and would we need staff.

S Railson said the space has been set up to accommodate social distancing measures. It could be opened with measures that were already in place but it would need someone to run it as the Old Town Hall staffs it during performances.

M Rawdon added that a private company use to run it but it didn't last due to competition in the old town and it probably would not be financially viable.

Councillor Hollinghurst asked if the failure of the café being run privately was linked to the rent charged by the council.

M Rawdon said they went out to market to see if anyone else was interested about a year ago but there was no interest.

S Railson said part of the difficulty of just running it as a café is that it doesn't have a front face on the high street and so it is difficult to be competitive. She thought the rent was £5,000 per annum for the third party operator.

Councillor Adeleke said there was a Task and Finish Group set up to look at the Old Town Hall. He suggested that officers revisit their recommendations as it looked at the profitability of the cafe and he felt this was still relevant.

Councillor England said if for a short period until we are able to return to normal and if there would be any possibility of offering the performance space where people might want to use it as a creative space alongside the café.

S Railson said she was happy to investigate other ways to make use of the space.

HC/060/20 HOUSING HOUSEMARK COVID IMPACT

L Warden introduced the report to members. Housemark are a benchmarking company who we provide data to regarding performance and costs so get evidence to see if getting value for money and best outcomes. Covid-19 has had a significant impact on delivery of services and HouseMark started a monthly data collection so housing providers could track their progress and to predict future issues.

Councillor Mahmood asked if the colourful leaflet in the report was the national picture of the figures against our own.

L Warden said this was the executive summary. It shows we have taken strong steps at the beginning to manage performance.

Councillor Mahmood asked if it was possible to have the national figures compared to our own in future reports. He then referred to 3.15 in relation to the increase in universal credit. He asked if it impacts Dacorum because we would receive rent later.

L Warden said she would include comparison figures in future reports. In relation to Universal Credit, there is an impact on workload at the start due to the verification process as we have to provide details to the DWP. There is a five week delay but some pressures is

that some tenants have been receiving benefits for some time but are not used to the new process.

Councillor Mahmood referred to anti-social behaviour during lockdown and asked if the new restrictions meant that there is more work for the council or just the police. He thanked the housing teams for their hard work during the pandemic.

L Warden said that there was a slight dip in ASB cases reported in August. There were 21 cases reported compared to 30 the previous month. We are working with our partners including the police to tackle the issue. In relation to the lockdown restrictions, the legislation intends to make it the responsibility of the police and the focus of local authorities is on enforcement on businesses. However, a lot of calls come through to the council but if any relate to flouting lockdown restrictions are passed onto the police.

Councillor Adeleke asked who gives the external providers guidance of what to follow regarding PPE.

F Williamson said that the contractors have to provide us with their risk assessed method statements and we review them against our guidelines and to ensure that they are appropriate. We provide them with information on tenants who may be shielding or are high risk who may require additional measures. We have been getting feedback from tenants, as to what they feel are priorities to make them feel safe when they have operatives coming to their home.

HC/061/20 WORK PROGRAMME

The work programme was agreed.

Councillor England asked about the Climate emergency lead report and Councillor Imarni said it was on the action log.

The meeting finished at 20:47