

MINUTES

HOUSING AND COMMUNITY OVERVIEW AND SCRUTINY COMMITTEE

WEDNESDAY 21 JULY 2021

Present:

Councillors:

Adeleke	Mahmood
Bassadone	Oguchi
Durrant	Freedman
Imarni (Chair)	Hollinghurst
Johnson	Ransley

Portfolio Holders:

Councillor Banks (Community & Regulatory)
Councillor Griffiths (Housing)

Officers:

N Beresford	Group Manager Strategic Housing
L Warden	Group Manager Communities
M Gaynor	Corporate Director Housing & Regeneration
F Jump	Group Manager Financial Services
S Turner	PA to the Corporate Directors (minutes)

HC/041/21 MINUTES

The minutes from 21 July 2021 were agreed and signed by the Chairman.

HC/042/21 APOLOGIES FOR ABSENCE

Cllrs Barry, Harden, Oguchi and Tindall sent their apologies for the meeting. Cllr Ransley substituted for Cllr Tindall

HC/043/21 DECLARATIONS OF INTEREST

There were no declarations of interest.

HC/044/21 PUBLIC PARTICIPATION

None.

HC/045/21 CONSIDERATION OF ANY MATTER REFERRED TO THE COMMITTEE IN RELATION TO A CALL-IN

None.

Chairman:

HC/046/21 BUDGET MONITORING Q1 REPORT

F Jump presented the first quarter budget monitoring report and asked Members if they had any questions.

Cllr Mahmood asked about the ongoing impact of the pandemic, we had set aside £1m, £700k has been spent in the first quarter and questioned whether we are seeing an end to that spending. F Jump advised that £1m is the full year forecast pressure, £700k is the full year forecast pressure attributable to Covid. In terms of the ongoing impact we are continuing to see an impact on our income streams, for example, car parking.

Cllr Hollinghurst queried the £90k arising due to void properties in the hostels and temporary accommodation wanted to know how that had arisen. N Beresford confirmed due to 'Everyone In' ask we had a significant spike in placements into temporary accommodation, now that has reduced in terms of flow but we still have a high number than usual applicants in temporary accommodation of just over 145 households, at the peak of this year that was in excess of 170. The reduction in numbers are due to a number of factors, the cessation of the 'Everyone In' ask has meant that we are not continually bringing in new clients at the same rate and also we have been able to move them onto other accommodation. We have also had some very proactive prevention engagement with external providers and high street letting agents, which has meant we had over 50% increase of households moving into private sector accommodation, which in turn has meant an increase in voids. We had expected and planned for an increase in homeless approaches as a result of the new Domestic Abuse Duty, but this didn't happen, there has been an impact but it's less than we expected.

Cllr Hollinghurst raised concerns about the advertised prices of accommodation per month in Tring and wondered how people are able to afford this. N Beresford confirmed that there was some properties advertised recently with Legal and General for a new development. These were affordable rent, not social rent, which were agreed through the planning process s106 agreement, within 80% market rental values, so much higher than social rents, but every person that is referred into those properties will have an affordability assessment by the Housing Needs Team and also the Registered Provider. The same process is also undertaken when putting people into a private rented property, a number of assessments are completed to determine that the option is affordable for that family.

Cllr Adeleke asked about the Government Grant of £325k and how the Covid administration of £250k was spent, also queried the pressure arising due to Council liability on 5.8. F Jump explained that the grant income we received is not ringfenced, corporately we use it to support the overall costs of the authority, but in terms of the specific reason those grants were provided for administration, they are for the test and trace which the Council is administering. They are taken to support the Council's bottom line helping towards the delivery of all services and for us to distribute out to the local population and businesses.

Cllr Adeleke mentioned that he thought test and trace was down to Central Government and if it was us, did we have to employ specific officers. F Jump confirmed that it was a national policy, but the authority was responsible for administering it and making sure individuals get the funding, so we are currently meeting the costs of administering that scheme with existing staff and are using the government funds that have been provided to deliver that service and existing staff have been used from the Benefits section to ensure that people are actually eligible

Chairman:

for the grants. F Jump added that her team would be responsible for carrying out financial checks and making sure that payments were made.

Cllr Adeleke repeated his earlier question on point 5.8 regarding the Council's liabilities. F Jump said that this relates to Council Tax and that there has been a change on the amount of time you can have council tax discount and it's now down to one month, from three months, which means we are effectively paying more for Council owned properties. We need to realign the budget associated with those council tax payments and this will be corrected next year so that we are correctly aligned with current policy.

Cllr Mahmood asked about variances on the capital programme, which is about £4.6m and wondered if that will be sufficient with costs increasing. F Jump said that from a financial perspective, the £4.6m is the slippage on the capital programme, which means that the work is not happening this year, but it will happen in future financial years when we come to set the budget. We will of course take into account that it's slippage and it may be that some costs have gone up as a result, we are not currently factoring that into next year's budget, but we will need to review that are part of the budget setting for next year. The work that we are planning to deliver will not happen this year but we do expect it to happen in future years.

Cllr Mahmood queried how it would be managed in terms of workload and whether we will be able to catch up. M Gaynor confirmed that there may be a delay, this is due to many issues, delays with planning permission, shortages of materials and that prices keep going up, but the staff will carry on working on future schemes. M Gaynor confirmed that it's not a real concern as projects do slip, we may have to spend more and there may be increased costs, but it will be delivered.

Cllr Mahmood asked if there should be a column identifying potential risks. M Gaynor advised that we do build in a contingency and where the building price index has gone up this should be covered.

Cllr Freedman wondered if it would be possible to use the delays/slippage for bringing forward some of the climate emergency work on Council owned properties. M Gaynor clarified that it would not be advisable to take the money out of building new homes as this was also a Council priority. The stock condition survey will identify homes with lower EPC's that would benefit the most from improvements and the programme for Council houses is due by 2050. We need technology to catch up with the requirements, for instance the Government wanted 600,000 heat pumps a year and it's actually closer to 50,000, which will also mean that we'll pay more than we need to.

Cllr Freedman said if we've got issues carrying out the work, why couldn't we address the insulation and noise problems now, given the government guidance and our own campaign to be net zero by 2030, are we missing an opportunity to change the priority. M Gaynor confirmed that the more work we do, the longer the property will be void, we do need to turnaround around as quickly as possible, so that we have the rental income stream. The point made has logic but we do need to look at the significant housing need we have in the borough.

Cllr Freedman asked about service charges to tenants and refunding some where the service had not been delivered to the expected frequency or quality. N Beresford confirmed that we would need examples of where this was the case and then this could be investigated by Jason Grace.

Chairman:

Cllr Adeleke asked about the slippages and was concerned there were several areas where if they carried on at this rate would we be able to look at these again. F Jump confirmed that in terms of monitoring the position, it's done on a regular basis, including coming to Committee on a quarterly basis. For the performance of our capital programme slippage F Jump advised it is kept under constant review.

The Chairman thanked everyone for the work that's been put into the report and said that it was fantastic as usual.

The Chairman said she was concerned that Councils were led to believe that there would be government funding to support councils that were forecasting a deficit, we are yet to see the fallout of the pandemic and the end of furlough will have an impact on us. We are going to be £1m short and it will get worse and asked if there is any way to mitigate this. The Chairman also mentioned the pressure on dwelling rents, which is down, some of which is due to sheltered schemes and asked if there is a wider strategy to combat this. F Jump said that the Government funding is incorporated into the current forecast however the position can change, the Government has been compensating us for lost sales fees and charges income for the first quarter. From our forecast we expect pressures against our income to continue for the whole financial year, so it may be that Government change their position in terms of compensation that is offered to local authorities. That means it could possibly improve the Council's position but at the moment we are basing our forecast on what we know about Government support.

F Jump mentioned that in terms of the rents, that part of the variance relates to a difference between what we assume in budget setting in terms of void levels and then what's actually transpired during the year. We review that every year and perhaps we could look at the methodology that we use to if it can be refined. N Beresford advised that in terms of sheltered housing rental income, work was being undertaken on a sheltered housing review, which will be presented to Senior Leadership Team before going to Members. There is also a review of the Allocations Policy which will revise the capital thresholds, which will be coming to Members in October.

The Chairman confirmed the recommendation to note the report.

HC/047/21 Q1 PERFORMANCE REPORT – PEOPLE & COMMUNITIES

L Warden updated Committee on the Quarter 1 Performance Report for People and Communities. L Warden asked if Members had any questions.

Cllr Adeleke queried what Dacorum Live was. L Warden confirmed that this is the new print newsletter that has been developed by Communications and is issued to all residents in the Borough through the post. All residents should have access to it and it will contain an overview of all areas and what's happening across Dacorum. It will also be available online.

Cllr Adeleke, through the Chairman, commended the efforts of Communications staff during the Covid crisis. L Warden confirmed she would let staff know.

Action: L Warden

Cllr Adeleke mentioned problems with delivery of Digest and that some Councillors had residents advise they had not received them. Cllr Adeleke also asked if Communications could include information on community grants in the Digest. L Warden would speak to Matt Rawdon about delivery and also advised that with

Chairman:

community grants it's important that we get the message out to as many people as possible, so we are highlighting this in Members News and Dacorum Live.

Action: L Warden

Cllr Mahmood mentioned the Old Town Hall and wondered if we are fully functional now. L Warden advised that we have an Autumn programme of events which has been launched and we are trying to make it as successful as we can. We have recruited new members of staff to ensure that we can deliver the programme.

Cllr Mahmood asked if we advertise the community grants locally, for example in Community Centres or leaflets or posters on community notice boards. L Warden replied that we are very aware that we make sure we engage with Community Centres, they are often a hub for the local area and that's where a lot of these groups meet. It's very important that we get that communication out there as much as possible and we will make sure that's something we continue to do.

Cllr Mahmood queried how referrals are made to the Healthy Hub. L Warden advised that there are a few different routes that people can come to the Healthy Hub, they can access it online through our website or the Healthy Hub website, they can request information or a referral with a variety of areas at which point contact will be made and they'll be put in touch with the relevant agencies to support or help them. Additionally there's drop in sessions at the South Hill Centre. L Warden confirmed that she would circulate some information for Members which can be shared with as many residents as possible.

Action: L Warden

Cllr Mahmood enquired if Healthy Hub was open to all residents. L Warden advised that it is for anyone who needs it, regardless of tenure.

Cllr Mahmood queried the increase in anti-social behaviour and wondered what we are doing to help, especially for non-council tenants where sanctioning isn't as easy. L Warden confirmed that there are a number of tools and powers that we have available to us. First we will always try to engage with residents to identify any issues or extra support that's needed, then we will issue warning letters and this can be quite helpful as we will offer mediation. We might look into serving a Community Protection Warning, which is a tool to help prevent further issues, we also work with the Police on Closure Orders.

Cllr Mahmood asked why didn't we have something like a ticker tape outside the building, advertising things like the community grants or Healthy Hub, as it would be nice to communicate what we are doing with the wider public. L Warden confirmed that we advertise through a number of channels, for example social media and the big screen in the Marlowes, but she would let Matt know for him to consider the options.

Actions: L Warden

Cllr Hollinghurst mentioned that there are a lot of good things happening with community grants and a lot of effort is being put into this, there was an article in the paper regarding monies spent by County Councillors and wondered if we could include a Borough Councillor. We also used to have a scheme like this for Councillors and they were responsible for a local budget, which helped them become involved in their communities. The newspaper article is transparent, you know what is spent by whom and he thinks that Council's should be a bit more involved and transparent. L Warden advised that we are looking at how to engage

Chairman:

Councillors in grants or improvements in their areas and also how we work with County Councillors.

Cllr Hollinghurst said about giving Members an indicative budget to help them with local issues.

Cllr Griffiths mentioned that we have set up a housing related community grant that is currently in it's infancy and they are area specific and is meeting independently of the Council, which is Chaired by a tenant, the principal behind that is anything that comes forward the Ward Member will be informed and invited to that meeting to discuss the grant. Cllr Griffiths also advised that the query about Members having an indicative budget will be too cumbersome, take too much staff time to work out and we used to have it previously but can't see it coming back, due to financial pressures and priorities. It was one of the budget cuts which meant we didn't have to cut front line services.

Cllr Hollinghurst clarified that previously it was a shared dialogue, a bit more democratic and not dominated by corporate objectives at the expense of local needs. Cllr Griffiths replied that she was sure that Officers had taken on the comments and would look at how Members could be involved in the future.

Cllr Adeleke asked about the Old Town Hall staff discounts that had previously been discussed. Cllr Banks mentioned that we are undertaking a review and she had put forward the request, which is currently being considered by the consultants.

Cllr Ransley queried what plans are in place to provide The Healthy Hub in Tring as there is an area of deprivation there and not all residents have access to a car or to a computer. L Warden advised that the intention was to launch it in Hemel and then to look at other locations, like Tring, but due to the pandemic it all had to go online. We are now looking at how locations, dates and times, also how it might fit with other agencies. L Warden mentioned that as soon as we have more details it will be forwarded to the relevant Members.

Cllr Hollinghurst mentioned that Tring Community Centre which has been very well supported by the Borough and reminded people that we do have this infrastructure in place, they have been shut down due to Covid, but when we are up and running again it's important to look at getting more out of them for things like community involvement. Cllr Banks confirmed that this was an idea from Public Health and it was very much about using the assets that we have the community, including the community centres networks and church halls. Now we are looking at getting back to near normal the Healthy Hub are looking to see where they could deliver locally.

The Chairman confirmed that the report was noted as per the recommendation.

HC/048/21 Q1 PERFORMANCE REPORT - HOUSING

N Beresford presented the Q1 Performance Report for Housing and asked if Committee had any questions.

Cllr Bassadone queried the figures for sheltered accommodation. N Beresford confirmed that the figures have fluctuated from period to period. There are examples of properties that have been advertised on more than 19 occasions without successful applicants being offered the property. There are some schemes that we are identifying as difficult to allocate, we need to make some difficult decisions on how we move forward with those schemes and also we have amended

Chairman:

the capital threshold on the Housing Allocations Policy, which we hope will have a positive impact.

Cllr Bassadone wanted to check some of the figures in the report for the lifeline as they mention March. N Beresford confirmed they were an error and would provide up to date details.

Action: N Beresford

Cllr Adeleke mentioned that he had a number of questions; 1) is the installation of bathroom and kitchens still suspended, plus how are we dealing with the worst cases for example where someone doesn't have running water, 2) the number of rough sleeper has reduced to three from what, and 3) we said we were looking at adaptations for some schemes and wondered if this was still under consideration. N Beresford confirmed that: 1) we are prioritising the repairs needed including the cases where improvements had previously been suspended, but in some cases we have having to identify alternative contractors, in terms of urgent repairs these have all been undertaken or alternative options would have to be considered, like decanting the tenants, where we were unable to find a solution, 2) in respect of rough sleeps the number has reduced from five to three, you may see more within the local community, but generally these are people who are perceived as sleeping rough, the figures have been validated by the Home Office so we are confident they are correct, 3) in respect of sheltered housing, N Beresford said that she assumes Cllr Adeleke means the repurposing or alternative options and confirmed these are being considered as part of the wider sheltered housing review, we need to consider what is feasible and plans will be worked up with external contractors.

Cllr Mahmood said that the number of people in temporary accommodation has gone up and asked what is driving that. N Beresford advised that it was a number of factors, we were responding to the Government task of bringing everyone in, which meant a significant number of households coming into temporary accommodation. We still have 38 households remaining who were brought in during that period and are working closely with other services, County, Public Health colleagues, MHCLG and Homes England, to identify grant funding options to look at step down or move on accommodation. We are also seeing the impact of Covid which has meant a loss of accommodation in the private sector, we are currently working with about 48 households who are set to lose their accommodation in the private sector by November. We are working really hard with the landlord to ensure that as many tenancies can be sustained, but a high number of private sector landlords are looking to discharge their interest in property due to their own circumstances that have come about through the pandemic. There are also a high number of increased relationship breakdowns and there has been an increase in domestic abuse, which because of the changes that came into effect in July 2021, means they are automatically considered to be in priority need. The threshold for domestic abuse has been widened and now includes things like coercive control, financial control and strangulation, which previously wasn't an offence, so this widens the number of clients who would be considered automatically eligible for housing and access to temporary accommodation.

Cllr Mahmood enquired about whether the Council had any HMO's for single people to live in and if we have considered converting sheltered housing for single people or couples. Cllr Griffiths asked that Members waited until the review came out so that we are not second guessing the outcome, if what you are suggesting isn't in that review then that would be the time to look at this. N Beresford confirmed that the Council does not have any HMO's within its stock, we do have three HMO type hostels within our temporary accommodation, but it's very challenging to manage,

Chairman:

plus during the pandemic it was extremely difficult as there was a clear steer from the Government that households should not be sharing facilities, which meant we had to move households into dispersed accommodation and we did have to utilise some of the sheltered housing stock for temporary accommodation and did not feel that the report would recommend using sheltered for HMO's for these reasons. Our current focus is licensing the HMO's we have in the Borough rather than creating more HMO's within our stock.

Cllr Freedman queried the Government funding of £8.6b announced this week for affordable housing and wondered if we are getting any of it. M Gaynor replied that the Government regularly comes up with its annual affordable housing programme, the largest recipients are housing associations who are in a different position financially and are able to borrow more and charge higher rents. Our aim is to get social rent grant, which they are providing, it's a bigger amount, as the rents are lower we will be seeking to demonstrate, partly because of our successful programme, that Homes England will be very interested working with us, if we can increase the number of homes, in particular social rented, we will. We will certainly try and get our share of the affordable housing grant, but we have a number of active housing associations, like Hightown, Thrive and Watford Community Housing, who will definitely want to have some of that funding, which will mean that we will benefit in that way.

Cllr Hollinghurst mentioned that until recently his wife and himself had a business in Dunstable and if you have a business you are around day and night, you see an awful lot of things going on and asked Officers to consider that there may be links with HMO's and modern slavery. It may be less likely in Hemel Hempstead, but it's something to consider with accommodation above shops. N Beresford advised that the work undertaken in the Private Sector Housing Team, we work very closely with the Community Safety Team and we have a Service Level Agreement with Trading Standards and Immigration Services, so we are receiving regular updates to any properties or business premises where we believe there may be an issue surrounding modern slavery. We monitor them very closely with comings and goings, employment agreements, contract agreements and accommodations agreements so we are very mindful of these issues.

Cllr Adeleke mentioned that was a very interesting question raised by Cllr Hollinghurst and was aware you are working hard, some Councils in London have Whistleblowers for this purpose and wondered if it's something that we've explored. N Beresford said that the point would be considered by the team, but we have a very small team in comparison to the London Borough's and we do need to focus on the key priorities, which is reviewing and responding to customer service requests, ensuring that all identified and suspected HMO's within the Borough are licenced and tackling empty homes. We also need to look at how we prioritise and resource the changing legislative areas within private sector housing. L Warden added that there is quite a lot of work that's been happening within the Community Safety Team and Herts County Council in relation to things like modern slavery, who have funded an organisation called the Shiva Foundation. They have been leading across the County, looking at procurement exercises, looking outside the private sector, it's definitely on our radar and we are working alongside Natasha's team making sure appropriate action is taken where required.

The Chairman wanted to know more about the award that we've won for the building in Berkhamsted as it's important to celebrate success. N Beresford said this is Cornmill Court in Berkhamsted, it was an award from Hertfordshire Association of Architects for the conservation work carried out on site and the properties that are

Chairman:

funding the High Street, so there was a second award from the Berkhamsted Citizens Association and there may be further good news as since writing this report there has been more award nominations in recognition of the work that we do.

The Chairman asked who we are assessed against for these awards. N Beresford advised that we are up against some of the larger housing providers, so for a small development team we are doing extremely good work with really great outcomes. M Gaynor mentioned that for one of the awards we were up against some of the bigger developers in the private sector. The Chairman said it's good to highlight some of the work we do, not just to Members, but everyone gets to see and really appreciate the work that you do and the quality as you are not just providing homes, you're going over and above. The Chairman added that for any Members who hadn't been it's worth taking a drive to the Martindale scheme as it's an absolutely beautiful development, you can't differentiate between the social and private housing, which is exactly what we want.

The Chairman recalled a question from earlier that she wanted to ask, about the slippages on building, this sector was open during most of the pandemic and wanted to understand the root cause of the slippages, was it due to material supply or labour supply and will we be able to catch up so that it doesn't become a slippage that we move from year to year. M Gaynor advised that the initial slippage was due to the whole of the building industry being stopped for a while, but we quickly re-mobilised, the issues of delays are mixed, the time to get planning permission, the shortage of skilled labour and both shortage and increasing costs of supplies have contributed, it's likely that we will be able to catch up, but there will be some increase in costs associated with that. We have a very effective tendering process to make sure we get value for money, but it's always a balance between quality and cost, with quality quite often coming first because these homes need to last 60 years or more.

HC/049/21 ACTION POINTS

The Chairman said that the both of the outstanding actions from previous meetings were completed but would check with Cllr Pringle on that point.

Action: Cllr Imarni

HC/050/21 WORK PROGRAMME

The Chairman noted the Work Programme.

The Meeting ended at 21:25

Chairman: