

9MINUTES

**HOUSING AND COMMUNITY
OVERVIEW AND SCRUTINY COMMITTEE**

WEDNESDAY 01 DECEMBER 2021

Present:

Councillors:

Adeleke	Oguchi
Durrant	Barry
Imarni (Chair)	Freedman
Johnson	Hollinghurst
Mahmood	Pringle

Portfolio Holders:

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

Officers:

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

Attending on Teams:

Jason Grace	Group Manager Property and Place
Oliver Jackson	Group Manager Tenants and Leaseholders

HC/072/21 MINUTES

The minutes from the meeting held on Wednesday 17 November were agreed and signed by the Chairman.

HC/073/21 APOLOGIES FOR ABSENCE

Apologies for absence were given by Cllr Harden, Cllr Bassadone and Cllr Durrant. No apologies were received, but Cllr Ransley was not in attendance at the meeting.

HC/074/21 DECLARATIONS OF INTEREST

There were no declarations of interest.

HC/075/21 PUBLIC PARTICIPATION

None.

Chairman:

HC/076/21 CONSIDERATION OF ANY MATTER REFERRED TO THE COMMITTEE IN RELATION TO A CALL-IN

None.

HC/077/21 BUDGET PREPARATIONS 22/23

F Jump provided an overview of the revenue growth and savings proposals. The new and amended capital bids was provided as follows:

- Communications fixed term post which will be £50,000 and reserve funded. This would be a 2 year fixed term resource to deal with strategies and recovery work from COVID.
- A revenue savings proposal which relates to customer services software and a HR subscriptions saving of £20,000 which represents underspends in the customer services budget and the savings as a result of the new HR software system.

In terms of new and amended capital bids:

- There is a proposal to extend the rolling programme of capital community grants of £20,000 for a further year in 2026 and 2027.
- There is a proposed amendment to the verge hardening programme that's already been approved until the end of the financial year 2025/26 at a cost of £395,000 with an additional year of verge hardening in 2026/27 of £250,000.

Cllr Adeleke queried whether, given the current climate, such expense on verge hardening was still viable. Cllr Hollinghurst agreed and noted that part of the long term strategy is to reduce the amount of vehicles on the road and increase the use of electric vehicles. Cllr Banks reminded everyone that the verge hardening is about increasing parking and reducing neighbourly disputes. It was questioned whether these verges that hardened could include electric charging points to deal with two issues at hand. Cllr Pringle is keen that verge hardening is prioritised where electric charging points can be provided. Cllr Imarni added that parking is a big contributor to antisocial behaviour.

Cllr Hollinghurst added that the money from CIL used to go to county councils and is now ending up in the reserves of the parish and town councils all around the borough. Cllr Hollinghurst therefore suggested that verge hardening is pushed back to the parish and town councils and they are asked to contribute towards this cost. In reality the parish councils are offering to pay for works to get them done, as a result of having the CIL money so works can get done more quickly.

Cllr Imarni queried whether renting out council parking to residents could resume and it was confirmed this was when land was rented to housing tenants. Resident parking passes don't solve this problem either as they apply to parking in a wider area.

Cllr Griffiths explained that verge hardening on housing land is owned by the borough, but where it's not council or housing land, it's owned by highways. If the verge is on county council land then the borough have to get their permission and the borough pays for the hardening on their land.

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L Warden clarified that a review was underway of Verge Hardening and already considering the points members raised and future delivery would take into account biodiversity and infrastructure for electric charging points.

L Warden presented on the changes to the Communities Partnerships team and the Community Safety team and the following 3 proposals:

- Proposed increased income of £35,000 in 2022/23 in grants. This is indicated from Herts county council, public health and various other streams of funding. COVID has impacted the grants in some areas positively, with additional funding around health inequalities, but there are additional uncertainties around priorities that are changing. We're hoping we can obtain additional funding in addition to the £35,000, up to £57,000. This will allow the borough to identify the priorities it wants to address.
- Additional income through public health to allow delivery of various initiatives particularly around the healthy hub and continuing with that. That income will be spent on a healthy communities post. The healthy hub has been very successful and Mind are doing some sessions for it on mental health. Funding in the future is expected to cover this post.
- The additional post for the Communities Group Manager has been funded from the reserves from this financial year. There is a continuing need for this post and there are challenges coming up in terms of meeting statutory responsibilities around community safety and dealing with new legislation. L Warden noted the aim is to make this post permanent, at a cost of £100,000 for 2022/23.

Cllr Adeleke was positive about the work of the Health Hub and asked if there is a plan B. L Warden explained that other resources and grants have been looked at and there could be an opportunity to employ an apprentice to give more flexibility to the other officers to access more funding streams. Cllr Hollinghurst highlighted the benefits of shared services across the borough as had happened with building control.

N Beresford explained that the housing services is split into (1) the General Fund, which relates to the statutory functions in relation to the delivery of homelessness, temporary accommodation, the private sector and licensing, the delivering of disability grants with grant sector accommodation and the management of the garage stock and (2) the Housing Revenue Account, which relates to landlord functions, predominantly the management of our housing stock, income management and social behaviour.

General fund items:

- The reduced temporary accommodation income of £23,000 for 2022/23 as a result of the increased use of temporary accommodation in the pandemic. This has allowed the borough to release those properties that were being used as emergency accommodation back to the HRA and that will save a reduction in income. There are also properties that are forecast for part year use as temporary accommodation. These are properties that are used temporarily as temporary accommodation but are pending demolition as part of our refurbishment and redevelopment programme.

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- A partly General and HRA funded Housing Strategy and Partnerships Lead Officer at £14,000 for 2022/23. They will be working closely with planning colleagues working with the affordable housing SPD and local planning development, but also in terms of engagement with our registered providers.
- 2 Housing Needs Officers (at a cost of £44,000) which relate to the delivery of the Part 6 function in housing needs and allocation of social housing. Currently there are over 200 applications every month for applications for housing need. In addition, there is the risk of new build developments with registered providers. There is increased need of allocations to this service. There is an increase in number of registered providers coming into the borough, and resource is needed to meet this.

There is a Homeless Prevention Grant funded post to deal with bringing empty units back into use to meet housing needs in the borough. There is also a Homes and Convention Grant funded post which is a PRS prevention and proactivity officer to deal with proactive engagement with landlords.

N Beresford explained that there has been a focus for the last 6 months in relation to the housing service with a dedicated consultant working closely with everyone to understand the key priorities for the housing services moving forward. The following points were noted:

- In 2021/22 CPI increased by 0.5% which gave a rental increase of 1.5% and in October 2021 the Office of National Statistics announced a 3.1% increase giving a total rent increase of 4.1% for 2022/23. This increase has been benchmarked with other local authorities in the region. The average rent is £111.23 a week.
- Expense of £60,000 is needed for the implementation of mobile working licences. These licences will allow the borough to procure agile working modules to front facing staff who are working out in the community.
- Expense of £65,000 for a housing technology business partner to deal with significant growth in the housing service, but also to help residents use technology.

Looking at the tenancy management service:

- A proposal of 2 new tenancy management officers at a cost of £84,000 in relation to the delivery of 3 year tenancy management visits. The current staffing capacity doesn't enable these to be carried out. The introduction of these 2 officers will see a reduction of patch sizes per officer from 1300 per officer to about 700 per officer which L Warden confirmed was more manageable.
- A proposal of 2 new income officers at a cost of £82,000 which will be funded from the bad debt provision. Rising costs will potentially see a number of challenges for tenants with affordability.

Looking at asset and risk management within the HRA:

- A proposal for an asset management post at £73,000. This is a senior project manager level.

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- A proposal for a part year commercial manager post at £37,000, which relates to the end of our current contracts within the property and place service which are coming to an end in 2024. The commercial manager would be working with the service to deliver that new contract.

The requirements of the White Paper and the Building Safety Bill sees a number of pressures to ensure we're managing risk effectively. This means:

- a building safety manager part year cost of £10,000
- a building safety surveyor part year cost of £20,000

These posts are needed to ensure risk is managed effectively within high rise blocks to ensure compliance with new legislation.

N Beresford noted there a proposal for the procurement of contracts to replace the repairs and maintenance contracts cost of £100,000. A project team needs to be established to oversee the delivery and procurement of this contract.

N Beresford added that not included in the slides is a proposed extension of the disabled facilities grant of £741,000 to take the project through to 2026/27. This is grant funded to allow the DFG work to continue.

N Beresford noted that the average rent of £111.23 is per week and is an average taken across the housing stock in the borough. This is 48% lower than the average provider of affordable rents.

Cllr Adeleke queried whether these new posts would be filled internally or externally. N Beresford said they would be advertised both internally and externally but specialist roles will need to be filled externally as there aren't the skills in house for these roles.

N Beresford confirmed that the income officer is not a benefits officer but they will work on collection of the council's rental income. They will also help with maximising the income of tenants, and this could include helping tenants to claim the correct benefits and/or signposting.

Cllr Hollinghurst noted the problem in Tring with the calculation of the broader market area including St Albans which resulted in unfairly higher rents in Tring. N Beresford was aware of this issue noting that rental officers and assessors would have to be lobbied to remedy this. There has also been good engagement with Legal & General on their new development to ensure that their rents are affordable.

Cllr Hollinghurst asked whether the borough could enhance the insulation against heat loss in the standard houses and flats they have. Whilst helping the climate emergency this could also provide lower heating costs for residents. N Beresford noted that climate change features heavily in all policy development and features strongly in the action plan. The borough is looking at how through asset management climate change is considered very carefully in its approach in respect of maintaining and future proofing its stock. There are also grant funding opportunities that the borough is exploring in relation to bringing in new energy efficiency models in relation to homes. J Grace added that the borough has to concentrate on Fabric First and that alternative heating systems are in their infancy but tackling the climate emergency is at the forefront of all the borough does with its refurbishment. Work has been done by the Energy Savings Trust to map out the

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financial and budget requirement for housing assets in the future. Fabric First also looks at enhanced loft insulation, external wall insulation and upgrading windows to A rated.

N Beresford was asked whether there was any offsetting for all of these new roles that were required and she explained there wasn't due to the demand and pressures that had been put on housing, even more so due to the pandemic – it was considered necessary to build capacity across the service. The pandemic also meant that officers couldn't access homes to carry out routine repairs and only emergency and statutory compliance works were carried out during the pandemic. With agile working N Beresford hopes that officers will interact more with residents and create better working relationships with them. Works that couldn't be done in the pandemic are being prioritised now. J Grace added there is now the additional struggle of Brexit which means a lot of the Eastern European labour that the borough relied upon for its maintenance works has disappeared. The borough is working with Osbornes to address this. Unfortunately J Grace stated there are no mitigations to the labour shortage that can be carried out because there is just a smaller pool of workers to carry out the maintenance which means costs are increasing.

N Beresford noted that affordable rents are currently 48% higher on average than the borough's rents. In some areas the affordable rents being built and let by the borough recently on behalf of registered providers are in excess of the local housing allowance levels so £1,036 a month for a 2-bedroom property compared to a private rental which is £950.

Action:

- N Beresford to provide specific information on average rents and show the disparity with social and affordable rents in the borough.
- N Beresford to also provide a breakdown of average service charges across the borough too.

HC/071/21 WORK PROGRAMME

There were no additions to the Work Programme.

HC/070/21 ACTION POINTS

All action points were completed.

The Meeting ended at 22:20

Chairman: