

## **2021/22 Housing & Communities Overview & Scrutiny Committee Report**

2021 revealed the first signs of a possible post-pandemic normality. The recovery was assisted by the corporate grant scheme although there were still pressures on the budget.

The Capital Programme was rephased as expenditure moved from 2020/21 year to 2021/22. The programme was temporarily disrupted by the pandemic, but it still remained in sharp focus for the council. Dacorum has always championed the building of social housing and were one of the first to do so in 2015 when restrictions on building were eased. It was reassuring to see that the events of 2020 did not change this commitment and building works resumed as quickly as possible. 2021 saw the opening of a number of newly built housing developments across Dacorum. Included in this was The Martindale housing development which was a mixture of private and social housing. This was an innovative new way to ensure of funding the required social housing.

The spirit of unity and community continued despite the urge to move back to normality. In keeping with this, The Private Rented Sector team worked closely with the Homelessness Prevention Team and prevented a number of illegal evictions from taking place. This ensured that families in Dacorum still received support as they transitioned to post-pandemic living. The team also continued to licence HMOs and the number of licenced properties increased by 20% in the year to June 2021 and continues to increase.

The tenancy sustainment team, despite being under increased pressure, were successful in managing to reduce rent arrears for households across Dacorum. Tenants in Dacorum experienced negative impacts on their household income but stayed committed to maintaining their rent payments with the support of the team and early advice made available to households. The arrears at the end of the year came in at 3.9% against a forecast of 5%.

Whilst the headlines were rightfully filled with news of the pandemic and cautions on lifestyles, the council did not forget it's duty to those affected but other tragedies. The Committee agreed with the recommendation to provide certainty and stability to a ten Syrian Refugee Families that were forced to leave a very dangerous and war-torn country. This group were amongst several families that arrived in the UK with government support.

Following consultation with the Tenants and Leaseholders Committee, The Housing Allocations Policy was presented to the Committee for review. A number of amendments were recommended in particular a change to the time required to qualify for local connection and the income thresholds for applications. The committee questioned whether the figures presented reflected current income levels and the cost of living. After review and some discussion, it was confirmed that the threshold in Dacorum both considers and reflects both points and is more generous than some other Local Authorities in Hertfordshire. Affordability data had been closely looked at when considering the thresholds as well as the rise in blended families and families with a disabled member in their household. This ensures that the revised policy is the fairest it can be.

The borough stayed committed to maintaining its Physical Activity, Wellbeing, Arts & Culture offer. Highlights included: The Virtual Wellness Festival, Tring Book Club and DBC Author Webinar Events, The Colourful Minds Course and The re-opening of The Old Town Hall. The Virtual Wellness Festival, a week-long health and wellbeing event, took place in June 2021. This event aims to raise the profile of health and wellbeing services and support organisations in Dacorum. It had a reach of reach was over 16.5k with positive testimonials from individuals from residents. The Colourful Minds course took place with residents completing the course and participating in the WEMWBS well-being evaluation. The gross mental health social value of the course to Dacorum was calculated at £9432 and feedback from attendees is exemplified by this comment:

*"Everybody should have this instead of being offered anti-depressants."*

The Committee had previously referred the Physical Activity Strategy and was pleased to see the revised plan return with 28 new activities that were more geographically inclusive across the borough. The additional activities addressed the gaps and demand previously identified by the Committee. These projects/initiatives are split between DBC, Apex and Dacorum Sports Network and cover a wide range of sports and physical activities including: refurbishing the basketball court at Northridge way, Shape Up Weight Management programme, Your Town 2021 5 k fun run and pledges for the refurbishment of Berkhamsted & Hemel Hempstead Hockey Club. Additionally, consultation started for the redevelopment of Berkhamsted Leisure Centre. Thirty-seven local and national sports organisations were included in the consultation process. The Concept Design proposals, a RIBA Stage 2 Cost plan and aligned revenue

business plan for the proposals have been completed. The committee looks forward to receiving the Stage 2 Briefing Paper that will provide a summary of the scheme development, site constraints, concept site layout and general arrangement layouts, initial phasing considerations and initial sustainability strategy. The project has an estimated completion date of May 2025.

Tring Book festival worked with Dacorum Borough Council to run two webinar events, one with ex RAF John Nichol and one with Michael Morpurgo. The Michael Morpurgo event attracted over 3000 children and 14 Dacorum schools received signed copies of 'Farm Boy' which is his follow up from 'War Horse'.

An Operations Lead officer as well as the Arts Administrative Officer were recruited for Old Town Hall. These two key roles ensured that the Old Town Hall was ready to reopen once restrictions were lifted. The Old Town Hall team prepared a short programme of outdoor summer events including a children theatre performance in Gadebridge Park and two comedy events managed by the old Town Hall but delivered at the Olde Kings Arms in the Old High Street. Indoor performances recommenced in Autumn 2021.

The corporate planning process was undertaken to develop the priorities and identify opportunities for the Council for the next three years. The resulting budget proposals were brought to the scrutiny committee. A number of consistent themes across the council were identified which included: Climate change action; Improving customer focus; Improving processes through digitisation and the development of a Digital Strategy; Developing positive leadership and culture and the need for a new People Strategy; Community Safety; Economic Recovery and a refreshed focus on the Council's place shaping programme.

Additionally, a specific and detailed external Service Review was undertaken of the housing service. During the review, an action plan was developed which the Housing Services Management Team has used to prioritise service development activities. Key activities include:

- Making use of a 100% stock condition survey as a means to advise and refine the HRA Asset Management Plan regrading improvements, component replacements and to advise on the fabric first requirements of the stock, as a key element of meeting the target to be net zero carbon by 2050.
- Delivering major improvements to IT systems to bring all data together to provide efficiencies in use and also service improvements to tenants.
- Establishing a cross-Council Housing Development Corporate Group which will provide oversight to the Council's own housing development programme and will also provide focus to the broader strategic activities the Council is undertaking to meet housing need in the borough
- Preparing for and commencing, the procurement process for the significant contracts for the repair, maintenance and improvement of the Council's housing stock.
- Improving partnership working with key agencies to develop strong multiagency working practices which support the Council's most vulnerable households. A focus on improving the joint working between the Community Safety and Housing Teams to help tackle Domestic Abuse, ASB and more challenging issues, such as cuckooing.
- Continuing to provide an excellent Homelessness prevention service and support to those families that become homeless and ensuring a sufficient supply of good quality Temporary Accommodation.

The Corn Mill Court, housing development, in Berkhamsted received an award from the Hertfordshire Association of Architects for the conservation work carried out on the properties fronting the high street. This is the second award the scheme has received beating the schemes of larger and higher resourced national companies. This is just one of the awards the council has won for its new developments in recent years, which illustrates the housing team's commitment and resolve to provide the best quality housing possible to those in need.

The Assistant Director of Housing, Natasha Beresford, won Inspirational colleague of the year at the Housing Heroes Awards. The committee were not surprised by this win as it has long recognised the exceptional work done by the housing team with Natasha often being a person whose work stands out. It was a delight to see this recognised on a larger scale.

I would like to thank my Vice-Chairman, Cllr Gbola Adeleke, the Committee, Portfolio Holders and Officers for their support through out this past year. I would also like specifically to thank Sarah Turner for her excellent work in taking the minutes of our meetings.

Councillor Isy Imarni

Chairman, **Housing & Communities** Overview & Scrutiny Committee April 2021