

Dacorum Borough Council

Housing and Communities Overview and Scrutiny Committee

WEDNESDAY 15 JUNE 2022

Councillors

Cllr Imarni (CHAIR)
Cllr Adeleke (VICE CHAIR)
Cllr Harden
Cllr Mahmood
Cllr Pringle

Cllr Johnson
Cllr Hollinghurst
Cllr Barry
Cllr Ransley
Cllr Dhyani
Cllr C Wyatt-Lowe

Portfolio Holders

Cllr Griffiths
Cllr Banks

Officers

Allison Westray-Chapman (EW)
Karen Proudfoot (KP)
Robin Barton (RB)
Jody Nason (JN)

Fiona Jump
Jon Maxwell
Mark Brookes
Natasha Beresford
James Doe
Claire Hamilton
Aiden Wilkie
Sara Railson

APOLOGIES:

Cllr S Mahmood
Cllr Durrant

Meeting start: 19:30

HC/021/22 MINUTES OF THE LAST MEETING

The minutes from the last meeting were approved and signed by the Chair.

HC/022/22 APOLOGIES FOR ABSENCE

Apologies were noted from Cllr Suqlain Mahmood and Cllr Durrant. Cllr Sobaan Mahmood substituted for Cllr Suqlain Mahmood.

HC/023/22 DECLARATIONS OF INTEREST

Cllr Imarni declared that the company she worked for held a contract with Osborne.

HC/024/22 PUBLIC PARTICIPATION

Two members of the public were in attendance.

HC/025/22 DISCUSSION OF ANY MATTER REFERED TO THE COMMITTEE IN RELATION TO CALL-IN

No matters had been referred.

HC/026/22 PROVISIONAL FINANCIAL OUTTURN 2021/22

The report was summarised by F Jump and Committee was advised it was provisional in nature as it was subject to finalisation of reserve movements, and also was subject to completion of the council's audit by the external auditor Grant Thornton.

A surplus of around £0.6 million was recorded, including a drawdown from the economic recovery reserve established to help the council mitigate the financial impact of the pandemic.

A proposal would be taken to the Cabinet to in turn recommend to the council in July that the surplus be reallocated to an inflationary pressures reserve, to help the council to face any unforeseen financial pressures stemming from the increasing cost of living.

The Housing and Community General Fund budgets were reporting a pressure of £0.2 million, primarily driven primarily by a shortfall against income targets within the Temporary Accommodation Service.

The housing revenue position was a balanced outturn, with various pressures outlined in the report.

Housing and Community General Fund capital had reported a further slippage in the year of £1.9 million, driven by payments to registered providers, and new accommodation construction projects.

There was also a pressure of £0.4 million against the General Fund Housing and Community Capital budgets, around £100k of which was not a true pressure and in fact stemmed from external funding.

Further slippage £0.6 million was reported on the HRA programme.

There was a small underspend of around £0.1 million, representing a small percentage of the overall capital programme budget.

The report was noted, and the floor was opened to questions.

Cllr Adeleke asked for a breakdown of the inflationary pressures outlined in the report. In response, it was explained by F Jump that the proposal was to use the surplus from the previous financial year as a contingency fund for any inflationary pressures arising in the next financial year, though as this was a contingency measure, it was not possible to outline the exact pressures at this point in time.

Cllr Adeleke then asked, in relation to the aforementioned underspend of £0.1 million, whether all obligations with respect of this budget had been met fully and in a timely manner. F Jump confirmed that this was the case, and that the underspend may be due to project expenses coming in under budget, though council officers may be able to provide further detail on this.

HC/027/22 Q4 – PERFORMANCE REPORT – HOUSING

The report was summarised by N Beresford, and some key areas were highlighted in relation to positive performance across the service, particularly in terms of income collection related to HRA stock, as well as 100% gas and safety compliance in relation to HRA-maintained assets. Additional support continued to be provided to the most vulnerable households, particularly in relation to refugees.

Poor performance had been seen in key-to-key times and non-urgent repairs, though extensive action plans were in place to remedy this. Several council officials were present to answer any more detailed questions. The floor was then opened for any questions or comments.

Cllr Johnson referred to the average of a 72-hour delay reported in compiling property information, particularly in terms of what type of information this referred

to. It was explained that this related to property inspection, including key property attributes, in order for the property to be relet. The delay was ascribed to a range of factors, and it was reiterated that an action plan was in place to work across multiple areas of service to remedy the multiple funding and practical factors contributing to this.

In response to a query from Cllr Adeleke, it was explained that the number of ASB cases tended to be consistent, though there was some seasonal variance particularly in the summer.

In response to a further query from Cllr Adeleke, it was highlighted that 180 homeless households in temporary accommodation undergoing statutory assessment in relation to the existing homelessness legislation. A dedicated officer also worked to coordinate the Watermill Hotel, which was currently accommodating just over 100 households awaiting resettlements through the Afghan resettlement process. 110 accommodation checks had also been carried out in relation to the Ukraine resettlement scheme, and requests for around 10 accommodation checks per week were being received, though this number was starting to fall. 7 homeless approached had been received from Ukraine households whose sponsor placements had broken down since arriving in the UK, and the council was supporting households in initial asylum accommodation, with support provided to around 205 households in 2 hotel sites, in addition to 10 Syrian refugee households resettled to date.

Cllr Adeleke asked whether feedback from refugees having been settled indicated whether or not those individuals were happy to have been resettled in the Borough. It was reported that feedback had generally been positive despite the difficulties faced. Excellent wrap-around support was in place in terms of education, healthcare and other services to aid the resettlement process.

Cllr Imarni highlighted the significant number of negative indicators in relation to waiting times across Housing and Communities services, particularly in relation to non-urgent repairs, and levels of satisfaction with those repairs. It was explained that this biggest impact to repairs was due to supply-chain challenges owing to Brexit and the pandemic. There was consequently a backlog of repairs that were not able to be carried out during the pandemic, which were still being worked though, and it was hoped that in time the indicators would improve as this was done. Quality versus quantity was also a consideration in terms of selecting subcontractors. In all, however, Cllr Imarni was assured that action was being taken to remedy the situation.

On a further query, there were some challenges in terms of internal communication between DBC and Osborne, particularly due to the volume of repair requests and ongoing works being processed. Issues had also been seen previously with materials such as plaster, though this was also improving. Repairs were also being batched to aid efficiency and speed. Going forward, a

focus would also be placed on improving communication toward residents. An improved triage process was also being rolled out to increase operational efficiency.

Cllr Harden asked about the reluctance of private landlords to take on residents in receipt of housing benefits, and whether anything could be done to remedy this. It was explained that this continued to be an ongoing challenge, and work remained ongoing to challenge these discriminatory practices. Some success had been seen in terms of support provided to individuals approaching the council in relation to this. The focus would also be placed on educating landlords. In future, it was anticipated that asylum dispersal may further exacerbate these issues in respect of the private sector.

HC-028/22 Q4 PERFORMANCE REPORT – COMMUNITIES

Allison Westray-Chapman, interim Assistant Director for Place, Communities and Enterprise, summarised the first parts of the report and highlighted several salient points.

COVID restrictions had been lifted in Q4, meaning the doors of the Old Town Hall had been reopened, with 5 sold-out performances and average attendance of 69% at live shows. Highly positive feedback had been received from customers on a satisfaction survey.

In Community Partnerships, positive results had been achieved in respect of the Healthy Hub, particularly in terms of vaccine updates. Just under 2,500 patients had been called, and nearly 300 vaccines delivered with a further c.170 with vaccinations scheduled. 400-plus individuals had been referred to the Healthy Hub, especially through online mechanisms.

A virtual Community Grants ceremony had been held, with a link provided in the report to the Facebook page.

Karen Proudfoot, Interim Head of Community Safety and Children's Services, then summarised the remainder of the report.

Work continued to maintain consistent numbers in relation to the safeguarding service.

Work was also continuing to tackle antisocial behaviour (ASB), in partnership with multiple organisations across the Borough. A community trigger had been received, through which members of the community had requested a review of the handling of their ASB complaint, to identify if the response to this particular complaint had been appropriate or whether further action needed to be taken. In this case, it was decided that the process would be reviewed due to the unusual circumstances surrounding the case.

Adventure playgrounds across the Borough had benefitted from improvement works and continued to see increasing attendance. One playground had also benefitted from a grant from the Digital, Cultural, Media and Sports Investment Fund of £45,000.

The report was noted, and the floor was opened to questions.

Cllr Harden queried whether KPIs were available within the report. EW responded that KPIs were not currently used for quarterly reporting. However, it was pointed out that work was underway to examine which KPIs could be used for such purposes going forward.

Cllr Adeleke welcomed EW and KP. In response to a query, it was reported that recruitment for the positions detailed in the report remained ongoing.

Cllr Adeleke then asked how many event tickets were expected to be sold in total. Cllr Banks clarified that around 200 tickets had been sold in previous years.

On the adventure playground funding of £45,000, Cllr Adeleke asked whether similar funding could be applied for in relation to other playgrounds. KP pointed out that further bids would be submitted in future for any funding made available.

Cllr Adeleke also thanked those involved in relation to the community trigger mechanism, which was highly effective and well-received by residents.

Cllr Imarni was very pleased to hear that the Old Town Hall was reopened and was being used. She then asked for an update at a future time in relation to potential refurbishment works.

ACTION – update to be provided at a future meeting in relation to funding for Old Town Hall refurbishment works.

HC/029/22 HOUSING ASSET MAMAGEMENT CONTRACT

Robin Barton, interim Strategic Director for Corporate and Commercial, summarised the report, which provided an update on performance improvement in relation to the Osborne housing repairs contract.

The client management function for the contract had been recently rebuilt, with the recruitment of a dedicated contract manager sitting within the Commercial Directorate but working closely with Council colleagues. KPI improvements had

been seen with Osborne, though KPIs in some areas remained lacking, particularly in terms of reactivity to needed repairs. Osborne had undertaken significant recruitment which was beginning to improve resourcing and operational capacity. Several meetings a week were being held with Osborne to discuss and monitor ongoing works. Work continued with Osborne to support them in recruitment amid challenging construction labour market, and also given the impact of inflationary pressures which particularly affected the construction industry as a whole. Conversations would also be held in the coming weeks and months regarding a formal review of pricing in light of the aforementioned inflationary pressures. Work was also underway to examine long-term contract options in anticipate of the end of the current contract in Summer 2024. The report was noted, and the floor was opened to questions. Cllr Adeleke asked for more information on the amount of time would be given to see the sufficient improvement levels on the part of Osborne, before conducting the aforementioned formal pricing review. R Barton explained that the messaging to Osborne had been robust in relation to the improvements that the council required before a pricing review could be conducted. It was important to balance this however with a realistic expectation in terms of the level of Osborne would be able to enact amid the challenges facing the construction industry, though DBC had been firm with Osborne regarding the need for significant improvements to be demonstrated. Cllr Johnson asked how widely tenants were aware of the resourcing and administrative challenges being faced by Osborne and the wider construction industry, which may place some of the poor performance KPIs into context. In response, R Barton explained that events were being planned to provide a forum for two-way communication between tenants and DBC in this regard. Cllr Imarni then requested a further update on the KPIs, which R Barton agreed to provide in writing. Moreover, further talks would be held with Osborne within the next few weeks regarding the practicalities of a pricing review.

Action: R Barton to provide an update on the KPI's

HC/030/22

HOUSING ACTION PLAN

J Nason, , outlined the Housing Action Plan paper, provided as a draft to give an update on work in relation to the Housing Transformation & Improvement Programme, which had arisen from the previous Housing Action Plan. Key priorities related to ensuring that residents were at the heart of service delivery, along with responsiveness and engagement, and also the use of technology. The various workstreams were being recalibrated and updated, as outlined in the report and accompanying diagram. The report was noted.

The members of the public in attendance were asked to leave the chamber while this item was discussed.

JN then presented the report. A review carried out had revealed 250 HRA properties where repairs to existing smoke detection devices had not been carried out within a reasonable period of time, or where records showed partial or no smoke detection with insufficient response to remediate this. A further 130 properties were non-compliant in terms of electrical safety, and the council's asbestos register was incomplete. DBC had sought legal advice and had referred itself to the Regulator of Social Housing. The referral was made on 29th April and a subsequent meeting was scheduled with the regulatory body.

The report outlined some of the initial actions undertaken. Smoke detection had been prioritised in the 250 aforementioned properties, and the majority now had hardwired smoke detection. In those not having received this, work was underway with legal specialists to ascertain how to gain access to properties to install such devices.

Electrical tests had been completed, and again legal specialists were being consulted regarding how to gain access to those properties that could not be accessed currently.

There had been a team restructure with a focus on compliance, along with the inclusion of compliance at the core of the housing improvement programmes mentioned above, and further work to improve processes.

Performance data across several aspects of health and safety regarding properties had been compiled into a single repository, among other measures outlined in the report.

The report was noted, and the floor was opened to questions.

Cllr Pringle then asked what needed to happen before the public could be made aware of this currently confidential matter. In response, it was explained that the Regulator of Social Housing would decide this in due course.

Cllr Pringle then asked whether her colleagues could reveal the area in which the incident leading to the report had occurred. In response, the incidence had occurred in Berkhamsted, however there had been no issues in terms of compliance in respect of the property involved in the incident.

Cllr Wyatt-Lowe enquired as to the process in terms of investigating the cause of death of the resident involved in the aforementioned house fire incident. In response, it was reported that the police and fire services had conducted an initial investigation and were satisfied that this was an accidental death and not due to the property itself, and the coroner's report appeared to support this.

Cllr Pringle added that the finding that this was an accidental death did not mean to say that nothing more might have been done to avoid the incident. In response, it was highlighted that further investigations would be conducted by various authorities to explore any opportunities for further improvements. Cllr

Wyatt-Lowe pointed out the need to make it clear to the public that the initial investigations made by the fire and police services were a separate process to the council's self-referral to the regulator, and it was important to avoid these two separate processes being conflated in the eye of the public. It was also highlighted that the self-referral to the regulator was not specifically about the house fire incident but was conducted in response to several findings about compliance data held by the council.

After further discussion, it was requested that a chronological overview be verbally provided of the events leading to DBC's self-referral to the Regulator of Social Housing. It was explained that an independent consultant had been engaged, who had conducted a detailed review of the Housing Service in Spring 2021, with a report produced in October 2021. Following the report's findings, a working group had been set up to examine contract management, particularly in respect of Osborne. Through the work of this working group and with input from the senior leadership team, a first audit was commissioned by Ernst & Young. Following this, a deeper investigation was about to be commissioned when the aforementioned house fire incident occurred. Then as part of the immediate council review, as standard all aspects of DBC's interactions with the individual tenant had been reviewed. As part of this work, a cause for concern was identified around compliance for 250 properties, and some of the compliance data collection had been expedited in the aftermath of the house fire incident. In addition, it was pointed out that as part of the Housing Transformation & Improvement Programme, a workstream was being mobilised to make sure that any communications released to the public and to various stakeholders were sensitive and factually accurate.

Cllr Adeleke attempted to summarise the above discussion, in that council investigations into housing safety compliance had already been underway when the house fire incident occurred. Cllr Adeleke was satisfied that the correct actions had been taken by DBC in relation to these investigations, both prior to and after the house fire incident in relation to these investigations. He then asked whether an indication was available as to when the investigations would come to a close. Secondly, he asked what support if any had been offered by DBC to the loved ones of the tenant who had lost her life in the house fire. Thirdly, Cllr Adeleke pointed out that the report set out that the last communication to residents was recorded as August 2022, which appeared to be a date in the future.

In response, J Nason said that it was hoped that confirmation of timelines would be given over the coming week, after which a further update would be provided to the Committee. Secondly, the Community Safety Partnership, Welfare Support and the Tenancy Management Team were all involved in providing the relevant support. Lastly, it was explained that the above date was a typo and that the last communication was in fact in August 2021, though a further communication was now being prepared.

Cllr Imarni then asked for an explanation of why the 250 houses had not been identified sooner given that investigations had been conducted since 2015. In

response, though she was not in a position to comment on work done in 2015, J Nason pointed out that several procedural and administrative failings had been highlighted. Work was now underway to produce an integrated and automated dashboard with a view to preventing properties being missed again. Following a further query from Cllr Imarni, it was clarified that properties would be visited every 5 years for health and safety inspection purposes. Cllr Imarni also asked for a brief overview of the Housing Transformation & Improvement Programme for any members not familiar. In response, J Nason referred the Committee to the details of the programme in the report she had just summarised and explained that the programme had a broad scope encompassing all areas that impacted Housing. Cllr Adeleke then asked specifically whether the 250 houses mentioned above had been identified as a result of the new regime and thorough investigations by DBC. In response, it was explained that since Autumn 2020, work had been underway to bring the management and oversight of Housing into the corporate work sphere, to apply the same rigour and to seek the same assurances in Housing as in all other areas within the council. Through this process, a comprehensive transformation programme had been developed, sponsored by the CEO and with senior leadership support. Work was now underway to ensure that the right actions were begin taken to improve and modernise the service. It was therefore hoped that the above reports demonstrated that the appropriate action was being taken.

HC/032/22 COUNCIL PROPERTY CLADDING UPDATE

J Nason then summarised the report, which detailed work undertaken since the Grenfell incident.

8 council buildings had been identified as at-risk. 3 of these did not require any further work. Of the remaining 5, 3 were low-risk, and 2 were considered high-risk. Legal advice was being awaited and mitigating actions had been taken in the meantime. Communication had also been sent out to residents in each of the blocks to confirm what the council was doing and to provide reassurance.

The report was noted, and the floor was opened to questions.

Cllr Barry asked for clarification on the date of public communication. J Nason confirmed that communication was sent to residents in August 2021, with a further communication sent out in June 2022 but since report had been published, and therefore this data did not feature within the report.

HC/033/22 WORK PROGRAMME

Cllr Imarni would liaise with officers to ensure the Work Programme and accompanying action plan were properly updated.

HC/034/22 ACTION PLAN

Cllr Imarni would liaise with officers to ensure the Work Programme and accompanying action plan were properly updated.

Meeting closed: 21:00