

MINUTES

HOUSING AND COMMUNITY OVERVIEW AND SCRUTINY COMMITTEE

Wednesday 7 September 2022

Present:

Councillor Imarni (Chair)	Councillor Wyatt-Lowe
Councillor Adeleke (Vice Chair)	Councillor Ransley
Councillor Barry-Mears	Councillor Hollinghurst
Councillor Johnson	
Councillor Mahmood	
Councillor Harden	

Portfolio Holder: – Councillor Griffith (Housing Services), Councillor Banks (Communities)

Officers:

Jon Maxwell	Interim AD Housing Operations
Natasha Beresford	Assistant Director - Strategic Housing
James Doe	Strategic Director
Sarah Pemberton	Deputy Chief Executive (Resident Services)
Nigel Howcutt	Assistant Director (Finance & Resources)
Kayley Johnston	Corporate & Democratic Support Officer (minutes)

HC/0/22 MINUTES

Cllr Imarni opened the meeting at 7.30pm. The minutes of the previous meeting were unanimously approved.

HC/0/22 APOLOGIES FOR ABSENCE

Apologies for absence were received from Councillor Durrant

HC/0/22 DECLARATIONS OF INTEREST

There were no declarations of interest.

HC/0/22 PUBLIC PARTICIPATION

There was no public participation.

HC/0/22 CONSIDERATION OF ANY MATTER REFERRED TO THE COMMITTEE IN RELATION TO A CALL-IN

Chairman

There were no such matters.

HC/0/22 Q1 BUDGET MONITORING REPORT

A representative presented the report on behalf of Fiona Jump. The report was summarised as follows:

There was a pressure of around £870k in two key areas. The first was reductions in car parking income and the second was pressure on waste services in terms of the cost of delivery. Action plans were being implemented in both cases.

There was a pressure of £1m on the Housing Revenue Account, with measures in place to mitigate this.

At present, no significant variances on the capital programme were forecasted, though it was stressed that negotiations remained underway with capital providers in this respect. Construction was one key area expected to experience significant pressure on prices in the current economic climate. It is likely that by Q2 and Q3 there will be significant pressure on the capital side.

The floor was then opened to questions.

Cllr Adeleke asked, given the current cost of living crisis, what the Council's plans were to assist tenants. In response, it was explained that a large amount of grants were being processed for businesses, while a cost of living symposium was being conducted for residents. An initial event would be held on the coming Monday, with a series of task and finish groups to follow, and a follow-up event on 10th October. Moreover, the provisional pay award for HRA was 6% for the current year, and was expected to be at least 4% for the coming year, and construction costs were expected to increase significantly. It was also highlighted that the current policy of increasing rent income by CPI plus 1% was unlikely to be feasible due to the current economic situation.

Cllr Adeleke then asked what the impact would be on the Council's finances, were rent increases to be frozen for the next year. In response, it was highlighted that the Council collected circa £50m in rental income, with every 2% increase representing around £1m. Such a freeze would therefore have a significant impact. Moreover, a large proportion of the Council's rental income was social rent, which represented a lower level of income.

Cllr Mahmood asked for a frank appraisal of the outlook for the HRA in the current economic climate. It was explained that with mitigating measures, there were no immediate concerns in the short term. However, escalating costs and the impact of the cost of living crisis on tenants' ability to pay rent, and also increasing construction costs would all increase pressure and would require further mitigating actions. In the short-term rising interest rates meant that the Council would receive greater interest on current funds, though this would become a negative impact in the long-term in respect of the Council's future borrowing.

Cllr Johnson asked a question in relation to the £1m allocated to property repurchase. In response, it was explained that assessments would need to be made to ensure that any repurchase represented good return on investment. Lengthy discussions had been held in relation to the figure to be allocated, and it was clarified that the £1m figure represented a starting figure to provide the facility to make such repurchases, and this figure would be continually reviewed.

Cllr Imarni then opened the floor to Deputy Chief Executive Sarah Pemberton and Interim Assistant Director of Housing Operations Jon Maxwell, who each introduced themselves as this was their first time in attendance.

HC/0/22 Q1 BUDGET REPORT – HOUSING SERVICES

Natasha Beresford introduced the report and opened the floor to any questions.

Interim Director of Compliance for Property and Place Mark Pinnell was also given the floor to introduce himself.

In response to a query from Cllr Wyatt-Lowe, it was explained that many repair works had been upgraded to emergency status given the backlog, which in the short term had produced a peak in the emergency repair workload, but this had been anticipated and these cases were quickly being worked through. This was therefore not expected to be an issue in the longer term.

Cllr Harden referred to the anticipated 60% of Ukraine housing sponsors were unlikely to continue the sponsorship scheme beyond its current expiration date. Natasha Beresford explained that this was a concerning position. A dedicated staff member had been appointed as Humanitarian and Response lead, and work was underway with various service representatives and organisations in this regard. The Council had been asked to respond more proactively in relation to rematching, though the Council's resources were stretched on this front. Conversations were underway regarding the most appropriate approach, with discussions ongoing regarding the establishment of a dedicated team.

Cllr Harden also asked how the Council planned to resolve the issue of damp in some properties. It was explained that extensive work was underway, and that cases were addressed on a case-by-case basis. In the longer term, a damp and mould strategy would be put in place involving education for both staff and residents, with a focus on empathy and resolution.

Lastly, Cllr Harden asked whether there were plans for more solo housing given the success of the current range of such properties. It was explained that several actions were being taken in this regard, as well as to support tenants in the current properties to embed themselves firmly in their local community.

Cllr Mahmood observed a large number of red items within the performance report. Natasha Beresford highlighted the work underway to address several such performance indicators, but that challenges in terms of volume of work and resource were being experienced. Cllr Mahmood asked whether the current performance might be attributed to working from home.

It was explained that a large proportion of the relevant services' workforce were predominantly based in offices and in the field, and those services were continually seeking ways to improve performance. Moreover, several of the current indicators in red might be attributed to factors intrinsic to the respective processes.

Cllr Griffiths added that the impact of COVID was still being reflected in the figures.

In response to a query from Cllr Adeleke, it was explained that work was underway to address the matter of rough sleeping, though this required a long-term and robust approach. In response to a further question, Natasha Beresford explained that the target was to reach zero rough sleepers, and it was incumbent upon the council to find innovative ways to break the cycle of learnt behaviour and to build trust among individuals sleeping rough. A new outreach programme was being implemented with, it was hoped, the support of a vehicle to aid service delivery, along with a 24hr service. Moreover, it was explained that those regarded as rough sleepers were individuals found to be bedding down or planning to bed down in public areas. Cllr Harden asked for information on the success of the Tap and Give scheme to aid rough sleepers. Natasha Beresford agreed to provide further information on this at a later date

HC/0/22 Q1 BUDGET REPORT – COMMUNITY & PEOPLE

The report was summarised, before the floor was opened to questions.

Cllr Harden asked for further information on the Your Town Fun Run. It was explained that, following its postponement, the run had been rescheduled for later in 2022.

In response to a further query, it was explained that the cost of living symposium and other related events and actions would like have an impact on the budgets of several services.

HC/0/22 HOUSING TRANSFORMATION & IMPROVEMENT PROGRAMME BUSINESS CASS MANDATE

The paper and appendix were taken as read, the paper was summarised and the floor was opened to questions.

Cllr Mahmood challenged the HTIP model and asked for clarification on how it differed from previous approaches. It was explained that HTIP sought to improve upon several identified key areas. Cllr Griffiths replied that she was pleased to see the provision for a CRM system set out within HTIP, which she hoped would aid the issue of siloed working and which she felt would represent a step change in terms of service delivery.

Cllr Adeleke asked whether this plan might be rolled out to other services, should it be successful within Housing. It was clarified that the model was in line with similar models being rolled out across the Council.

Cllr Imarni welcomed HTIP, though she highlighted the need to ensure that the technology involved was as user-friendly as possible, particularly for residents, and advocated for a budget allocation for UX design. Natasha Beresford acknowledged this, and also pointed out that a customer service provision would be made for residents struggling to use the system.

It was also anticipated that HTIP would allow for an improvement to bidding for the housing register for residents who wished to be rehoused.

Concerns were raised that the digitisation of certain aspects of service delivery may make safeguarding more difficult. In response to this, Natasha Beresford pointed out that extensive work had been and continued to be underway in relation to communication with residents regarding any safeguarding concerns.

The work programme was agreed.

The meeting finished at 9.00pm