

MINUTES

HOUSING AND COMMUNITY OVERVIEW AND SCRUTINY COMMITTEE

Wednesday 2 November 2022

Present:

Councillor Imarni (Chair)
Councillor Adeleke (Vice Chair)
Councillor Barry-Mears
Councillor Johnson
Councillor Mahmood
Councillor Harden

Councillor Wyatt-Lowe
Councillor Ransley
Councillor Hollinghurst
Councillor Dhyani

Portfolio Holder: –Councillor Banks (Communities) Cllr Griffiths (Housing)

Officers:

Jon Maxwell	Interim AD Housing Operations
Natasha Beresford	Assistant Director - Strategic Housing
Sarah Pemberton	Deputy Chief Executive (Resident Services)
Andrew Linden	Head of Commercial Development
Hannah Peacock	Head of Transformation
Layla Fowell	Corporate & Democratic Support Officer (minutes)

HC/44/22 MINUTES

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

HC/45/22 APOLOGIES FOR ABSENCE

Apologies for absence were received from Councillor Mahmood and Councillor Pringle for lateness

HC/46/22 DECLARATIONS OF INTEREST

There were no declarations of interest.

HC/47/22 PUBLIC PARTICIPATION

There was no public participation.

HC/48/22 CONSIDERATION OF ANY MATTER REFERRED TO THE COMMITTEE IN RELATION TO A CALL-IN

There were no such matters.

HC/49/22 ACTION POINTS FROM PREVIOUS MEETING

The Chair advised that most action points had been covered with some outstanding.

The Chair noted the Part 2 agenda item at the end of the meeting, noting that attendance will just be the Committee and presenter.

HC/50/22 Q1 BUDGET MONITORING REPORT

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This item was deferred

HC/051/22 Q2 BUDGET REPORT – HOUSING SERVICES

NBeresford took the report as read, noting the performance highlights, including the positive trends in relation to repairs performance and collection as a percentage of the rent roll. Activity underway to support residents with rising costs of living was also noted. The report also outlines performance challenges and interventions in train to bring improvements to challenges identified.

Cllr Barry-Mears commented on gas safety PP01, on page 22 of the report, and asked what 99.4% equates to when looking at how many people don't have gas safety.

NBeresford confirmed that she would check this and provide the information to the councillor.

Cllr Barry-Mears noted the supplier issues causing delays to some emergency and non-emergency repairs since 2019 and that some people are still experiencing these issues. Cllr Barry-Mears asked if this will be looked into further.

NBeresford advised that the report highlights some of the challenges experienced and that there are wider issues related to Brexit and Covid, and that some planned work was stopped during the pandemic in line with guidance. There is now a period of catching up in addition to addressing supplier issues. MPurnell is working closely with suppliers and procurement teams to move this forward and NBeresford confirmed that she would ask him to provide further details to the councillor. (ACTION: NBeresford)

Cllr Wyatt-Lowe referred to item 4.3 of the report regarding the performance of Tunstall, noting the increasing pressure as winter approaches, and that they have failed to meet targets. Cllr Wyatt-Lowe asked what improvement processes are in place ahead of going into winter.

JMaxwell confirmed that there are regular meetings with Tunstall regarding the contract and their obligations around it. They currently have issues with recruitment, and weekly meetings are being held to review staffing numbers and how this is affecting the service. Ensuring this performance improves is a priority. Cllr Wyatt-Lowe commented that pressure should be put

on Tunstall and queried when their contract is due for renewal. JMaxwell confirmed that the contract is due for renewal mid-2023 and that the council will go to different suppliers to see which can offer this service. There will also be an option to review the terms of the contract, such as putting in penalties if the contract is not adhered to. The focus currently is on working with the contractor for them to improve the service and recruitment of staff. Cllr Wyatt-Lowe asked that there be a focus on these issues when the contract is up for renewal to ensure that the council is receiving a service that is fit for purpose.

The Chair commented on the labour and skills shortage, noting that they should review how they are writing contracts to help eliminate issues within the industry, and that the council may need to look to bring in more apprentices. The Chair stated that they would not be able to tender this in the same way as in the past and that DBC may need to consider bringing some work back in-house.

Cllr Dhyani asked if Osborne have looked at sponsorship to bring in further labour.

JMaxwell responded that he was unsure if they have, noting that Tunstall are based in a different part of the country and would have different arrangements regarding funding and apprenticeships.

Cllr Dhyani asked if they have an approved sponsor.

JMaxwell confirmed that he would look into this further.

NBeresford raised a point of clarification, noting that they were discussing Osborne in relation to the Tunstall contract and Lifeline, and not in relation to the contract for repairs and maintenance.

Cllr Barry-Mears asked if a change of equipment would be required if a new contract was considered and therefore cause further delays.

JMaxwell confirmed that the service and equipment are separate.

Cllr Griffiths commented on the upgrade of the phone system from analogue to digital.

Cllr Adeleke requested further information on the Humanitarian Response Lead Officer.

NBeresford advised that the Humanitarian Response Lead Officer primarily leads on asylum settlement and that she liaises with statutory and voluntary sector organisations to ensure a cohesive response in relation to services being delivered to those resettled in Dacorum. The officer also liaises proactively with HCC health services and the voluntary sector regarding the provision being delivered through the migration hotels. There are also two initial asylum hotels in Dacorum where the Home Office places people for an initial period whilst their asylum claim is assessed, and the officer ensures these hotels are well managed and free from any issues.

Cllr Adeleke asked how much they are receiving from central government to look after refugees and asylum seekers.

NBeresford explained that there are different funding streams relating to different provisions with asylum seekers managed directly by the Home Office and DBC's role is primarily around coordination and liaison to prevent community tensions with no specific burden on the local authority outside of this. When a household receives asylum status, they can then come to the local authority for further assistance. NBeresford added that members would also be provided with further briefings on the decisions being made nationally in relation to broadening out asylum dispersal to assist with current infrastructure problems. When dispersal is made in a district area, a funding allocation is available, though this is relatively low and is unlikely to cover all costs in the event of serious issues. On the Afghan and Syrian resettlement schemes, both have funding arrangements attached and funding is received for every household that DBC provides support to. The funding helps with additional officer capacity within the service, and there is also a Russian-speaking officer who can provide support with the Ukrainian resettlement response, and it also helps with ESOL provision for households to enable them to improve their employability and access other services. DBC is also awaiting details regarding funding from HCC relating to the Ukrainian settlement response.

Cllr Adeleke asked how much pressure resettlement work has put on housing staff.

NBeresford confirmed that there has been some dispersal of workload, though the work has caused additional pressure, which is why a dedicated Humanitarian Response Lead Officer has been brought in. Senior officer time is also taken up with managing activities in relation to coordinating with the Home Office and other central government services, and there is also additional pressure on police and other statutory resources. There are also additional pressures around housing assistance to help repair damaged relationships in relation to the Ukrainian housing scheme and provide alternative housing assistance. The rise in the cost of living is also putting additional pressures on the service and extra resources will be brought into the team to assist with this.

Cllr Harden noted that some local authorities have taken the Home Office to court regarding the block booking of hotel rooms and asked if this was a concern for DBC.

NBeresford confirmed that they are being proactive in addressing any issues that are likely to arise from this, such as engaging with the Strategic Migration Partnership and HCC in relation to growing concerns across Hertfordshire to ensure there is a cohesive response to the Home Office. There has been successful communication with the Home Office regarding growing concerns. A fortnightly meeting takes place to ensure this is managed as effectively as possible, though the Home Office is not always in attendance. No legal action is currently being undertaken by any Hertfordshire local authorities and a meeting will take place on Friday with the Home Office to discuss any pressures.

NBeresford referred back to Cllr Barry-Mears' earlier question regarding gas safety and confirmed that 2 properties are not compliant due to access to accommodation, meaning that a legal process will be taken in partnership with the tenancy and legal teams to ensure they are compliant as soon as possible.

The Chair asked that the team be thanked on behalf of the Committee.

ACTION: NBeresford to ask MPinnell to provide further information on supply issues and delays to repairs to Cllr Barry Mears.

ACTION: JMaxwell to check if Osborne have looked at sponsorship to address recruitment challenges.

HC/52/22 Q2 BUDGET REPORT – COMMUNITY & PEOPLE

The report was taken as read, and the performance of the Old Town Hall was noted with regards to sell-out shows.

Cllr Barry-Mears commented on the graffiti, noting that she had met with the Prevent Officer for Hertfordshire, who highlighted a rise in anti-Semitic graffiti, particularly in Adeyfield, and asked if this was being monitored.

Cllr Banks noted this had not been brought to the team's attention, though the tagging of graffiti is fed through the police to check with schools and other partners to help recognise individuals. It was confirmed that this would be fed back to officers.

Cllr Harden commented on leadership tiers and that he was surprised it was JDoe's responsibility to be at the Committee meeting.

The Chair stated that they would ordinarily expect a representative present, either the author of the report or someone knowledgeable enough to present the report and answer arising questions. The Chair noted that this was the first time an agenda item had been brought to the meeting with no one to present it.

Cllr Ransley noted an increase in graffiti in Tring, noting that one of the subways from the junior and infant schools has been repeatedly graffitied in the last three years. Cllr Ransley commented that the team had painted black squares over offensive words and that this was then targeted with further graffiti. Cllr Ransley asked if they could approach others who may want to paint the space and to provide ownership.

NBeresford advised that underpasses are the responsibility of HCC and that she would feed this back for discussion.

The Chair noted a scheme in West London that sponsors artists and that this can help prevent graffiti.

Cllr Wyatt-Lowe commented that some artist projects have helped stop graffiti and that she would like to see more of this, adding that they could look at having an official graffiti wall where people could express themselves. Cllr Wyatt-Lowe noted that graffiti is an outlet and they should therefore channel it in a more positive way.

Cllr Banks asked that any instances of graffiti be reported via the council webpage, adding that some projects have been successful and should therefore be pursued.

Cllr Adeleke referred to Cllr Wyatt-Lowe's comments, advising that each local area in Paris has to legally provide an area for people to express themselves.

Cllr Adeleke asked if they could take the approach taken to fly-tipping in areas where graffiti is a particular problem.

Cllr Banks confirmed that she would pass this comment back to officers. (ACTION: Cllr Banks)

The Chair commented that she was in favour of sponsoring graffiti artists rather than criminalising them, given that aerosol cans can't be used inside and the restrictions they have should be acknowledged through the provision of space.

Cllr Banks agreed, adding that it would require an artist-led project.

Cllr Dhyani asked what happened to the artwork on the Plough subway.

Cllr Banks stated that her understanding was that they were stolen or damaged. Cllr Banks noted her disappointment, adding that they should still pursue this type of project.

Cllr Harden commented on Healthy Hub, noting that statistics appear to be reducing each quarter and that they are no longer receiving referral statistics. Cllr Harden asked why statistics are decreasing and what officers are doing to encourage growth.

Cllr Banks confirmed that she would forward the question onto officers.

ACTION: Cllr Banks to feedback to officers regarding reported increase in anti-Semitic graffiti in Adeyfield.

ACTION: NBeresford to raise issues regarding graffiti to HCC.

ACTION: Cllr Banks to feed back comments from Cllr Adeleke regarding the use of cameras to help prevent graffiti.

ACTION: Cllr Banks to raise question with officers regarding drop in Healthy Hub referrals and what is being done to encourage growth.

HC/53/22 HTIP WORKSTREAM DEEP DIVE; COMMISSIONING AND CONTRACTING

ALinden presented the report, noting that they are currently in phase 1 of the work with a view on mitigating risks. Recommendations have been set up on housing compliance regarding asbestos, electrical, fire, gas and lifts. This work commenced in September and should be completed by January 2023. Phase 2 focuses on ensuring contractor performance, that risk is being managed and that there is compliance with current legislation regarding policies. How contracts are managed going forward is also being looked at to ensure best value for money, and Phase 2 will also look at commissioning and procurement

of contractors through a more robust approach to secure better value for money and outcomes.

No questions were raised on the item.

HC/54/22 COMPLAINTS POLICY

HPeacock presented the policy, noting that it is a part of the Customer Strategy, as approved by Cabinet in February 2022. The strategy focuses on putting the customer at the centre of services and providing a positive customer experience, which includes looking at the complaints process with the aim to make it more effective and positive. The first phase looked at mapping the existing complaints process through workshops with customers and officers. This process identified a number of pain points within the policy and procedures behind it, and the second phase of implementation is taking these lessons learned by amending the policy to reflect these lessons. The key changes within the policy include speeding up response times to provide a more effective and efficient response. The other change is regarding the levels of responsibility where a team leader completes stage 1 and head of service or above completes stage 2. This recognises the understanding of issues that team leaders will already have as well as providing a wider pool of officers to respond to complaints, thereby improving response rates. Calling customers to address informal complaints has also been added to the policy to ensure that officers are having conversations with customers and helping mitigate any issues before becoming formal complaints.

Cllr Harden asked what is the preferred method of communication to the council from a resident.

HPeacock responded that the majority of complaints are via the webform on the intranet and internet pages, though further statistics on contact routes could be provided.

Cllr Harden commented that there is an issue that people are unable to get through to officers via telephone and that they need to consider how they manage the expectation people have that someone will pick up the call. Cllr Harden stated that they also need to look at how they promote the preferred route of communication to help reduce complaints.

Cllr Harden commented that people are unable to call up to book bulky item collection and that Homelessness can't be contacted out of hours via phone.

On contacting the Homelessness service, NBeresford advised that this can't be contacted directly out of hours, though this issue has been addressed and scripting has been reviewed with the Customer Service Unit to allow the handler to assess the call and then contact the out of hours homelessness officer. The number isn't readily shared with residents, though officers proactively engage with call handlers.

Cllr Hollinghurst commented that he was pleased to hear that the issue has now been addressed, noting that homelessness needs to be on the menu when people are calling the out of hours number.

HPeacock noted that officers will receive training on the process for handling complaints and what customer expectations are. The expectation on officers is also addressed through the strategy and ensuring that this is embedded in all their work.

Referring back to Cllr Harden's earlier comment regarding bulky item collections, HPeacock advised that they are working in partnership with Ignite on a series of improvement workshops to look at individual processes on customer-facing and high-volume processes. This process will be mapped to look at how it can be made more effective and efficient, and whilst bulky items isn't part of the first phase of this work, learnings will be taken and applied to further processes in future.

Cllr Hollinghurst commented on the usefulness of geographical identification when logging complaints and asked if this could help identify any hotspots.

HPeacock confirmed that this information could be obtained from the e-form and that these locations are mapped to then be fed into the complaints data that is provided back to the service.

Cllr Adeleke commented on item 5.12 in the report regarding receiving a formal response within 20 working days and asked if this is the normal working standard.

HPeacock advised that this is in line with the Housing Ombudsman policy and is the industry standard.

The Chair remarked that complaints from residents tend to be regarding services provided by contractors.

NBeresford noted that any complaints about contractors should come to the council to investigate further to help identify any remedial action required.

Cllr Griffiths said that it doesn't matter who is delivering the service and that if DBC has given the contract out then it is their responsibility to pick up any issues. Ownership should be taken and internal procedures should then be part of the contract arrangement with the third-party.

The Chair commented that the timeline set out has not been followed before with contractors and that they would now be told to respond within the timeframes set out.

Cllr Pringle noted that residents have reported incidents, including ones that pose a danger to children, and that they have ended up in the Osborne system, which isn't up to the same standards as with DBC. Issues raised with Osborne may not be picked up and therefore performance targets could then be misrepresented. Cllr Pringle continued that they should scrutinise Osborne's complaints handling process and this should be part of any contract to ensure that third parties align to DBC's complaints policy.

NBeresford thanked Cllr Pringle for the comments and confirmed that she would liaise with HPeacock on this further. NBeresford confirmed that they actively engage with Osborne and other contractors regarding ongoing complaints and joint liaison meetings take place in

relation the customer interface and contract. It was noted that MPurnell could demonstrate to members the approach that is taken regarding monitoring satisfaction and responses to complaints. (ACTION: N Beresford)

Cllr Pringle commented that some complaints may not be accounted for and asked how they capture the population that give up on a complaint.

NBeresford advised that they need to ensure that both staff and residents are aware of the revised policy. HPeacock added that they are looking to improve data quality and the monitoring of outstanding complaints.

Cllr Griffiths noted that the complaints policy will be available on the website, meaning that residents will know the timelines for complaints, and that staff now take personal ownership of an issue that comes to them, which will be assisted by the data monitoring and IT that will be brought in. This will help identify any gaps around poor staff performance or understanding. Cllr Griffiths commended the work and noted the importance of understanding the data involved.

Cllr Pringle asked if they are taking away learning points regarding systemic failures, particularly when there is a high turnover of staff.

Cllr Griffiths advised that this would be addressed through a CRM to allow issues to be documented. HPeacock agreed, adding that they are looking to streamline the database to help provide an overview of concerns. Staff are being centralised into the Customer Service unit and repetitive complaints will be addressed through service improvements.

Cllr Dhyani asked for an update on the CRM.

HPeacock confirmed that a CRM system is being investigated as part of the customer strategy and that further detailed work is being developed on this, which will then come back through for member consideration given that it will be a considerable investment.

Cllr Dhyani asked if it is realistic for the policy to begin from 1 December.

HPeacock confirmed that time is required to put the policy in place and that it will go to Cabinet in November, though work is also being done regarding the centralisation of staff and resource as well as the production of procedures that form part of the policy.

Cllr Johnson stated that it would be useful for residents to have an index so that they could be signposted around where to send complaints.

HPeacock acknowledged the comment, noting that this is a challenge of local government, and that when the policy goes live, wording will be included to detail what items are within DBC's remit or other services that they can contact.

The Committee noted the report.

ACTION: NBeresford to ask MPurnell to share approach regarding monitoring satisfaction and responses to complaints with members.

HC/55/22 EXCLUSION OF THE PUBLIC

HC/56/22 HOUSING SERVICES MANAGEMENT STRUCTURE

The details can be found in the Part 2 Minutes

The meeting finished at 21.20pm