

MINUTES

HOUSING AND COMMUNITY OVERVIEW AND SCRUTINY COMMITTEE

Wednesday 1 February 2023

Present:

Councillor Imarni (Chair)
Councillor Adeleke (Vice Chair)
Councillor Barry-Mears
Councillor Harden
Councillor Hollinghurst

Councillor Johnson
Councillor Mahmood
Councillor Pringle
Councillor Wyatt-Lowe

Officers:

Natasha Beresford
Darren Welsh
Oliver Jackson
Mark Pinnell
Kayley Johnston

Assistant Director - Housing Operations & Safe Communities
Chief Housing Officer
Head of Housing Operations
Assistant Director Property (attended online)
Corporate & Democratic Support Officer (minutes)

Others:

Councillor Griffiths
Councillor Banks

Portfolio Holder – Housing
Portfolio Holder

HC/22/23 MINUTES

The minutes from 6th January 2022 were formally approved as an accurate record.
The minutes from 1st February 2022 were formally approved as an accurate record.

HC/023/23 APOLOGIES FOR ABSENCE

Apologies for absence were received from Councillor Durrant, Ransley and Dhyani

HC/024/23 DECLARATIONS OF INTEREST

There were no declarations of interest.

HC/025/23 PUBLIC PARTICIPATION

There was no public participation.

HC/026/23 CONSIDERATION OF ANY MATTER REFERRED TO THE COMMITTEE IN RELATION TO A CALL-IN

None.

HC/27/23 Q3- HOUSING PROPERTY/OPERATIONS & SAFE COMMUNITIES

NBeresford presented the report, noting that it combines performance data for the Housing service portfolio and newly added Safe Communities portfolio that incorporates community safety. The report was taken as read, and it was noted that the revised KPIs are included in the pack. This is a reduced suite of KPIs and these remain in development. It was also noted that some KPIs are newly collected and there is therefore an absence of trend and historical data, which will therefore develop over time. The report highlights challenges and interventions in relation to key service challenges across the portfolio.

NBeresford requested that if any members have specific areas of service performance that they require further detail on then they should raise these to the team or during the meeting to allow them to review their approach to performance reporting to scrutiny as they move into the planning cycle.

Cllr Adeleke asked how many rough sleepers there currently are in town. NBeresford noted that there is an entrenched cohort of up to 6 in the borough, though this fluctuates when street counts are undertaken. There are 6 known individuals that regularly rough sleep in the borough that the Council engages with and the numbers will depend on their access to severe weather services and engagement with current interventions.

Cllr Adeleke referred to page 7 of the report and asked what the current level of complaints that the department receives are and how their interaction with residents is. MPinnell stated that he did not have the exact level of complaints and that there is a customer service team in place that consists of a senior surveyor, resident liaison officer and two multi-trade operatives. On receipt of a complaint, it goes to the DBC appliance site, and a DBC member of staff will visit, with an RLO if appropriate. If the complaint can be easily fixed, the multi-trade officer will respond and fix the issue, otherwise the resident will be appointed a point of contact at DBC to manage the complaint. The process is much improved and is entirely managed through DBC and complaints have significantly reduced. MPinnell noted that they have not received any late complaints and are all being responded to within policy guidelines and timescales.

Cllr Barry-Mears commented on the rough sleepers report on the gov.uk website and suggested that the estimate for Dacorum is 8. Cllr Barry-Mears asked how often the figure is updated. NBeresford confirmed that the highlight reporting comes from DBC and is an estimated figure. Spotlight audits are undertaken as well as bi-monthly

street counts in collaboration with the Community Safety Partnership and the Dacorum Street Outreach team. Once the estimate is submitted, a validation has to be provided on the number of rough sleepers identified on a given night, and that 6 is the validated number that was submitted. NBeresford advised that they work with significantly more individuals than the reported 8 and that intervention work is ongoing with as many as 35 single homeless individuals who may be at risk of rough sleepers. These individuals have an assigned caseworker and have a personalised housing plan, and they also actively engage with the outreach team. NBeresford confirmed that more detailed information could be provided and explained that the Community Safety Partnership and Homeless Forum work through a targeted intervention and meet monthly to discuss individuals known to the services.

Cllr Mahmood referred to page 6 of the report and asked if there has been an increase in anti-social behaviour and how this is being tackled over recent years. NBeresford advised that figures have remained fairly steady, though they see seasonal trends, such as an increase in noise and other nuisance behaviour during summer months. The review of anti-social behaviour is being taken from a case management perspective and relates to the Housing Transformation Improvement Plan, and the review is being undertaken across the whole housing service portfolio as well as specific areas of activity. There is currently a differential approach depending on whether you are a DBC tenant or resident of the borough, and the intention is to review the mapping process of the service delivery and move to a preferred position where there is a one-service approach that is more consistent in tackling ASB for all residents.

Cllr Mahmood commented on the cost of living crisis and asked if the approach is being led by the voluntary sector or DBC and what the feedback has been so far. OJackson noted that it is a joint effort between DBC and the voluntary sector and that they are working closely with Community Action Dacorum to highlight opportunities to speak to residents and tenants about their concerns. OJackson confirmed that they are due to release a schedule of events across the borough to reach areas where there has been less engagement and that this is an opportunity to build on existing events as well as lead and coordinate on their own to talk with the local community. There is a lot of data on those who are struggling and that they want to focus on those who sit outside of these groups to ensure they are also supported and signposted to relevant agencies.

Cllr Mahmood asked if issues are first brought to DBC or voluntary organisations. OJackson stated that the aim is to develop their approach and that they are linking up with organisations to ensure there is a golden thread between the local authority and voluntary sector. The aim is to have a consistent message and be aware of what support is available from each organisation.

Cllr Banks commented that the cost of living signposts on the DBC website is a good port of call for residents and that a direction will soon be issued to link all voluntary, charitable and DBC contributions to help people manage the crisis.

The Chair noted that they were not using bed and breakfasts before Covid and that £11,000 was spent on this in December 2022 and asked if the figure regarding those in temporary accommodation refers to bed and breakfast or the blocks specifically built for temporary accommodation. NBeresford confirmed that they had not heavily utilised bed and breakfast prior to Covid, and as of today there are currently 2 households in bed and breakfast accommodation. NBeresford advised that it is not ideal to utilise bed and breakfast accommodation and they are working hard to ensure this is kept to a minimum. When there are recommendations from a community perspective and ensuring that an individual is placed in a certain locality or type of accommodation then bed and breakfasts may be the most appropriate. NBeresford added that it also can help ensure the physical safety of an individual if they do not have appropriate temporary accommodation, such as being fully accessible, and that they may need to provide bed and breakfast accommodation for a short period of time.

NBeresford confirmed that they do not have any families in temporary accommodation for an extended period of time and families will typically be moved within a 24-hour period. On the figure regarding households in temporary accommodation, NBeresford advised that this relates to the total number of households in temporary accommodation and will include bed and breakfasts and units.

The Chair referred to page 9 of the report and the number of estate inspections completed. The Chair asked if this refers to the new policy of ensuring that the Council regularly inspects its stock and if they would see all 8,600 homes within an 18-month period. OJackson confirmed that this is correct and that there is a schedule of estate inspections. Estates are visited on an agreed frequency with those that have had historic issues being visited on a monthly basis and others less so. All areas of the borough are captured as part of the estate inspection schedule. NBeresford advised that this would not relate to the number of new tenant visits that are undertaken and that estate inspections are in addition to other visits undertaken across the stock.

The Chair referred to page 13 of the report and suggested that some numbers are quite high around high-risk domestic abuse and ASB cases. The Chair asked what is driving this increase in cases. NBeresford stated that she would need to provide additional data on these areas. On the number of domestic abuse cases heard, NBeresford advised that it did not seem unusually high and they are assessed on a dash risk assessment above a 14 threshold, the accumulative assessment that is undertaken by officers. NBeresford advised that the number of cases may relate to

cases discussed over a whole quarter rather than just one MARAC meeting and that she would clarify this.

On ASB cases, NBeresford advised that this is the number of cases where they will have undertaken interventions and confirmed that they relate to community safety ASB cases, not housing cases, and doesn't highlight any ongoing monitoring of these cases that may be taking place.

The Committee noted the report.

HC/28/23 DECANT POLICY

OJackson presented the report, noting that the policy replaces the previous Decant Policy dated 2018. The report and policy aims to clarify key areas where the Council has strengthened its position, namely in its approach to providing financial help when households are forced to move from their home. The policy also covers clarification around the approach to household members and those eligible for assistance and also defines the approach taken to find suitable alternative accommodation. The policy has been supported by a review of the working practices related to decants and drew on the experiences of tenants who have undergone the process. There has also been a review of procedures, which are included in the report, with a key finding being the need to reduce the number of officers from various teams that individuals and households deal with when going through a particularly challenging time.

Cllr Adeleke asked if the Decant Policy is unique to Dacorum or if other local authorities are also looking at this. OJackson advised that part of the internal review included benchmarking against other local authorities and that there are different approaches taken. OJackson explained that their focus was on utilising DBC's own stock and temporary accommodation when available, whereas other authorities enter into agreements with hotels or letting companies. This will be monitored on an ongoing basis to understand what options are available.

Cllr Mahmood commented on the financial support offered to those being decanted and asked how the costs are agreed. Cllr Mahmood also asked if they ask tenants to have an insurance policy for contents. OJackson explained that they encourage households to take on contents insurance and that the Council runs its own scheme.

Cllr Mahmood asked if a tenant wants to move back to their property whether the payments will reduce or if they will have the same quality of life in the new place. OJackson confirmed that each household has a right to return and they will look to arrange this as soon as possible. Households receive the payment regardless of

their length of stay and there is also the opportunity to provide discretionary payments dependent on the nature and circumstances of the decant.

Cllr Mahmood asked if households are paid when they move back. OJackson confirmed that the payment is only when they move out of their primary house into the decanted property.

The Chair noted that the disturbance payment is a minimum of £6,100. OJackson advised that this is the statutory home loss payment rather than the decant payment.

Cllr Wyatt-Lowe agreed that the decision to review the number of officers involved in the process should help make it less stressful for tenants. This should also allow for more accurate information passing.

The Chair advised that the policy went to the Tenants and Leaseholders Committee first, which is made up of tenants in social housing as well as leaseholders. The Chair noted that it was positive to see their comments taken on board and advised that the Council is quite unique in ensuring its policies are scrutinised as service users. NBeresford added that there will also be a focused session on 30th March with the Tenants and Leaseholders Committee to discuss the working practice of the policy in more detail and help with their understanding.

HC/29/23 HRA BUSINESS PLAN

DWelsh provided an overview of the report, noting that this is the strategic and financial plan and comes against a context of the government putting new regulatory arrangements in place for social landlords. The plan is a medium and long-term plan and there is a detailed financial model behind it, and the document sets out DBC's strategic priorities in managing its housing stock. There are 4 main priorities regarding improving the existing council homes, building new council homes and increasing the supply of affordable housing stock locally, improving services for residents, and decarbonising the housing stock.

A total investment of £263m will be made into existing council homes to improve them over the next 10 years and £106m will be invested in building new council homes. The 3-year plan has been updated to an annual refresh to mirror the budget process and there are new priorities, including managing issues connected to damp and mould, and it notes the process to recommission the repairs contracts. The Tenants and Leaseholders Committee have been briefed on the document and it has been brought to the H&C OSC to gain comments and raise visibility of the plan as it will have implications for the Work Programme. The plan will also be taken to Cabinet for their approval before being taken to full Council for adoption.

Cllr Mahmood commended the plan and the intention to refresh it each year. On damp and mould, Cllr Mahmood asked if each property is inspected or if they rely on tenants to report issues. DWelsh advised that they take both a proactive and reactive

approach. MPinnell added that they rely on residents to report damp and mould, though they also conduct proactive stock condition surveys every year with 3,000 completed and 2,000 surveys booked in for next year. Of the 3,000 surveyed so far 16 have been classed as higher risk, and these have been modelled to give an approximate 200+ homes to visit. MPinnell noted the investments being made and confirmed that this work isn't being outsourced, meaning there is a personalised and proactive service, though there will also be a reliance on tenants reporting issues. There is a tracker in place to ensure that cases are followed up with high-priority cases visited within 2 days, otherwise 2 weeks, and all properties will be visited.

Cllr Mahmood commented that damp and mould tend to come from poor ventilation or construction and asked how they are educating tenants. MPinnell confirmed that there is signposting on the website regarding the control of condensation, though the biggest challenge is linked to the cost of living crisis with residents turning off extractor fans, or air bricks are being sealed up to prevent bringing cold air into properties. There is a focus on education as well as being realistic on what can be achieved, and condensation data will be revised as well as a move away from blame culture, though this has to be balanced with educating residents.

Cllr Hollinghurst referred to a previous issue with damp and mould, noting that it was related to defects in the construction of the houses and asked if the properties are being checked for this. MPinnell confirmed that there are some construction defects and that checks will depend on the severity of the damp and the building pathology. Once damp meter readings have been taken and thermal imaging has been assessed, samples of concrete floors will be taken if rising damp is suspected, and more severe cases will require external support for investigations and may lead to decants in more extreme cases. There are a number of supporting organisations that will assist with this and the work is being done incrementally.

Cllr Adeleke referred to appendix 1 and suggested that the new build programme will be positive. On the interest rate borrowing. Cllr Adeleke asked if a range of 4-6% should be stated given the current volatility rather than just 4%. DWelsh advised that the assumptions were modelled by the finance team and are based on advice taken and comparable plans. Assumptions have been stress tested and they will remain under regular review as assumptions put into the plan will determine their capacity in terms of the amount of investment they have. A prudent approach has been taken though they have been stress tested over a broader range.

Cllr Adeleke noted the positive plan of new builds, which will be based on borrowing, and asked if rising interest rates will reduce their ability to build as much as they want. DWelsh confirmed that it will reduce if interest rates change, though their assumptions are based on the public works loans board rates, which are stable. There is a challenge on how to expand the new build programme going forward given that finances are within a certain envelope and that they therefore need to look

at how they can build new properties whilst also supporting investment into their housing stock.

Cllr Harden referred to item 8.1 on page 35 and asked if the business plan funding is ready with an additional bid to secure funding or if the bid to secure funding is already in place with an outcome of £3m. DWelsh advised that the funding referred to is council funding and this money is available within the housing business plan and any external funding would be over and above this. The £1m and £3m is being put in from the Council's own resources.

DWelsh provided an overview of his role to the Committee and urged members to contact him if they wish to discuss the services he covers.

HC/30/23 Action plan

The Chair noted that most action points had been responded to.

The Chair confirmed that Cllr Banks had sent a response to Member Support, though this was not circulated. Cllr Banks noted that this referred to the Healthy Hub, advising that in November members had raised a question regarding a drop in referrals in Q3. Officers could not immediately respond and Cllr Banks reassured members that there is no particular evidence base for the drop and is likely to be a fluctuation ahead of Christmas. Cllr Banks confirmed that the number of referrals in Q1 was 367, 420 in Q2, 536 in Q3, and that Q4 figures aren't yet available. The Healthy Hub is a valued service and signposting in the main to other support organisations or services go across the borough.

HC/31/23 WORK PROGRAMME

The Chair noted the Work Programme and advised that the next meeting will take place on 7th June 2023.

Cllr Griffiths thanked the Committee for all its work and the support it has given to staff. Cllr Banks echoed the comments and thanked the Chair. The Chair thanked the Committee for its support.

There being no further comments, the Chair closed the meeting.

The meeting finished at 20:40