

Housing & Community Overview & Scrutiny Committee Review 2015-2016.

The first meeting of the 2015/16 session took place in June 2015 and looked at the Quarter 4 Reports for the end of the previous year (2014/15). These reports form an essential, and a regular, part of the Committee agenda papers. The final cycle of such reports is explained in some detail at the start of this annual report to give Members a better understanding of some of the subject matters covered by the Housing and Community Overview and Scrutiny Committee (H&COSC).

At this June 2015 meeting, the Committee were presented the Quarter 4 Provisional Outturn Financial Report for 2014/15, prior to the closure of the Council's accounts. The committee were told about the Capital and Revenue elements of the General Fund, the Housing Revenue Account, and the Capital Programme. The Committee sought clarifications on 'retention' provision, the reasons for the less than expected take up of Home Improvement Grants and sought explanation for the overspend on one of the new build projects.

The 2014/15 Quarter 4 Housing Service Report highlighted the improved end of year figures for Empty Homes and the benefits arising from the new service provider contract. It also covered the work of the Tenancy Sustainment Team, and the plans for more tenant engagement via the 'fun day'. The Committee sought further explanation on the hard to let properties, homelessness targets, key-amnesty and also sought clarifications on the complaint reporting procedure.

The Quarter 4 Residential Services Report covered the Old Town Hall improvements, Community Safety Partnership crime reports, Neighbourhood Action community initiatives, Dacorum Youth Form engagement events, the ongoing CCTV success and aspects of Safeguarding. The scrutiny discussion covered everything from probing into each section of the report details and figures, to cyber crime reporting, and also tried to seek clarity on such things as drone use over the Borough's airspace, and which was explained as being legislated by other Agencies and not the Council. The meeting also acknowledged the success of the Verge Hardening Programme to date.

The Regulatory Services Report presented their Quarter 4 results updating Members on food hygiene matters, fly tipping concerns, dog fouling nuisance, health and safety prosecution, air quality measurement and HMO related issues.

In July 2015 the Committee reviewed the Mobile Homes Policy drafted in response to the Mobile Homes Act 201. They also reviewed the overarching Enforcement Policy drafted to meet the requirements of the Regulator's Code 2014. Member scrutiny resulted in minor amendments to both policy drafts.

The September meeting scrutinised the Quarter 1 Reports for the services that come under the H&COSC's remit. The budget monitoring report, housing service plan, resident services risk and performance and the regulatory services performance reports were all reviewed.

The October meeting looked into policies covering the Voluntary Sector Core Funding changes. An update report on Love Your Neighbourhood initiatives was also received and scrutinised. The reports on Osborne's Total Asset Management contract and update on the Gas Servicing contract were also reviewed at this meeting.

The same October 2015 meeting also reviewed and discussed the Assigning Tenancies policy. This policy review was requested by Cllr Guest in response to a specific case in her ward. Cllr Guest's input prior to, and at the meeting, was much appreciated. In this particular case, the policy was reviewed by the Committee and further clarity on law and policy matters was provided by the Group Manager. Full details of the report and discussions can be found on the DBC website. Such requests from Members on a specific Housing or Community matter is most welcomed by the Committee and can form the basis of a more effective and proactive scrutiny.

In November the Quarter 2 Reports and Annual Review of HRA Business Plan were presented and scrutinised. In addition, Dave Cove, the Chief Executive of Sportspace provided a very informative annual presentation on sport provisions in the Borough, and the subject of tackling obesity in the Borough was also raised. The Young Person's Housing Strategy update was also considered at this particular meeting.

During December 2015 and February 2016, the Committee received and reviewed the reports on the 2016/17 budget in common with other Scrutiny Committees. Further detailed scrutiny on areas that come under the Committee remit took place. The Committee appreciates the hard work of the officers in providing information and then providing further explanation at the meeting. The Committee also acknowledges the good management of the Council's finances that are seen to be provided, despite the difficult cuts and changes to funding settlements.

January 2016 Committee meeting reviewed the updated CCTV Code of Practice and looked into the new build Housing Development update. Much interest was focussed on the Tenancy Sustainment Team update report which was also brought to this meeting. This initiative from the Housing team for dealing with 'complex tenant cases' was well received by the Committee Members as it sets out to achieve one of the objectives of scrutiny - to provide support and best value for the tenants. Such initiatives also show proactive approach on the part of the Officers on specific issues, which is most encouraging.

During March 2016 the Quarter 3 Services' Reports were scrutinised by the Committee. In addition the Vulnerable Person Strategy update was reviewed following the recent changes to incorporate the work of the Tenancy Sustainment Team in the policy and to formally include Partnership Working in the body of the document.

During the previous year the Committee debated at length the revisions to the Council's Homelessness Review Procedure. An update on the process change and how it was functioning was specifically requested for the March 2016 meeting. The process was reviewed by the Committee and found to be functioning in a satisfactory manner, and no adverse comments were made by Members.

During the course of the past year the Chairman also attended the TLC meetings, which are an informative and useful source of information, and which provide a good insight into the Tenants' viewpoint and feedback. This tenant input is further supplemented by the TLC representatives attending the OSC meetings and their valuable input is greatly appreciated.

Two Separate meetings were also held by the Committee Chairman with David Austin and Elliott Brooks and their Group Managers. The aim of each meeting was to establish, and better understand, how the agendas are compiled by each Service for the OSC meetings,

and to see how specific requests for member identified and led policies for scrutiny could be made. The ultimate aim of these meetings was to help establish how a more constructive and effective questioning based scrutiny could be realised. This process is ongoing and will be reported back to the Housing and Community Committee Members in due course.

The aim of the Scrutiny Committee is to “promote service improvement, influence policy development and hold the executive to account for the benefit of the Community of Dacorum”. Suggestions, from all Members, on selection of specific policies for review and on ways to make the H&COSC scrutiny more effective and probing is sought via this annual report. With the paperless agendas and reports being the norm for some time now, and any associated teething issues reducing, one looks forward to much greater Committee Member engagement and more probing scrutiny during the coming year - some of which may have at times seem lower than expected over the past year?

The time, effort and contribution that the Officers, TLC Committee Representatives and Members’ dedicate to scrutinizing and improving the Housing and Community Services, and thus making the OSC process more transparent and meaningful for the benefit of the Dacorum Community, is greatly appreciated and acknowledged herewith.

Councillor Suqlain Mahmood

Chairman, Housing & Community Overview and Scrutiny Committee

April 2016