

Housing & Community Overview & Scrutiny Committee Review 2016-2017

Each year the 'bread and butter' agenda items for the Housing and Community Overview & Scrutiny Committee are the statutory quarterly submissions covering budget papers, housing service updates and resident service reports. These reports form an essential, and a regular, part of the Committee scrutiny cycle.

During the 2016/17 season the budget reports looked at the General Fund, Housing Revenue Account and the Capital Programme income and spend items. In recent times the budget for the H&C OSC has been set against a backdrop of achieving year on year savings through efficiency provisions. With this constraint in place the Committee found that the budget under its remit has been well managed by the housing service through good planning, and without compromising too much the quality of service being provided to the tenants. The Committee reviewed the financial variances by scrutinising and querying the budget underspend and overspends, where appropriate.

Overall, the H&C OSC Committee found the financial management and budget process under its remit for the Housing and Community OSC budget for the year, after scrutiny, to be satisfactory.

During the 2016 scrutiny period the Housing and Planning Bill also became an Act necessitating additional policies updating work for the Housing Service leading to amendment of, or revisions to, existing policies and strategies that were in place. The Act covered all aspects relating to social housing, social landlords and included the contentious issue of "pay-to-stay" for the tenants, something they found a little unfathomable. In the summer therefore a meeting was arranged at the request of the Tenants and Leaseholders Committee (TLC) with the local MP's, Mike Penning and David Gauke, to discuss aspects of the Housing and Planning Bill, and in particular the tenant's concerns on "pay-to-stay".

The fruitful meeting at the Civic Centre in the summer was led by the TLC Chair and supported by the Leader, Portfolio Holders and the Committee Chairman. The concerns surrounding "pay-to-stay" and other housing matters were taken back to Westminster by the MP's for review. Government amendment to "pay-to-stay" resulted with the joint TLC & DBC contribution leading up to the change being acknowledged. Thus the mandatory nature of "pay-to-stay" was made non-mandatory.

On this high note the outgoing TLC Committee, as we had come to know it, bowed out. The new revised format and terms of engagement for the TLC were formulated by the Officers during the course of the year and arrangements are now in place with the 'new' TLC Committee meeting quarterly. The changed format was presented to the Committee before implementation.

Over the summer period, the reports and policies for housing rents and charges, community alarm update, Osborne and Sun Realm contract review, housing asset management strategy and tenant involvement strategy were all reviewed by the Committee. The de-pooling strategy, whereby the housing rent and service charge were separated, was also scrutinized during this period.

By the end of the year reports on the Old Town Hall, the Community Safety Partnership and update on New Build Housing Schemes in the Borough were presented and reviewed by the Committee.

The Committee also met the new Youth Connexions (YC) manager for the Borough, Karen Haswell, who explained the 23 or so local area specific projects that are being delivered in Dacorum by YC. The committee emphasized the need for joined up working between the services being provided by DBC for young people and the Youth Connexions provisions. A further update report was provided by YC for the March 2017 committee meeting. This year's presentation by Youth Connexions was an improvement of previous years' offerings, with more informative and a Borough specific report.

The Committee welcomed the opportunity to review the "Park By-Laws Report" which the Portfolio Holder for Environmental, Sustainability and Regulatory Services kindly brought to the committee for additional scrutiny and input. The Committee gave a thorough and constructive feedback to the report instigators. The number of comments provided on the report vindicated the Portfolio Holder's decision to present the report to more than one committee for wider scrutiny.

The most thoroughly reviewed policy during the 2016/17 term related to the Homelessness Strategy (2016-2020). The Committee was informed that homelessness is becoming a growing problem in the Borough and how the Housing Services was tackling and making efforts to create awareness of the issues and what prevention measures being taken.

The homelessness theme continued over a number of meetings and awareness on Members was substantiated by the presentation and training session given by the Group Manager. It must be acknowledged that there was a consensus of Committee opinion that the officer concerned had certainly put a lot of thought, effort and heart-and-soul into addressing this issue of homelessness in the Borough.

The homelessness policies reviewed do set out the effective way DBC are tackling and preventing the increase of homeless numbers in the Borough. Through its policy updates the Housing Service sets out its aspirations and leads other local partners in tackling this unwelcome fact of life.

Continuing with the theme, it was decided to switch the January OSC meeting to The Elms, to meet the new CEO of Dens and hear her vision and also to hear the experiences of residents who had benefitted from the provisions of DBC & Dens working together for the benefit of homeless people.

The members who attended this session at The Elms were able to inspect the homelessness provisions at the particular site and more importantly had the opportunity to hear at first hand the experiences of local residents who had successfully managed to get back on their own two feet again after falling victim to homelessness. The feeling of achievement felt by these individuals in getting their life back on track again through a supportive homelessness programme being implemented in the Borough, was so evident from the smiles and enthusiasm with which they narrated their experience and inspiring stories.

Apart from budget matters, the February meeting also had the opportunity to review the “No second night out” policy, thus bringing to conclusion the review of various aspects of the Homelessness Strategy as set out in the Borough’s ‘Delivering for Dacorum Corporate Plan’.

The March 2017 meeting brought to an end the 2016/17 scrutiny cycle by reviewing the Q3 Reports and scrutinizing the Housing Revenue Account (HRA) Business Plan.

It is worth reminding Members that 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 Members, on specific policies for review during the coming year, and also on ways to make the H&C OSC scrutiny more effective, are as always welcome.

The 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 wider Dacorum Community, is greatly appreciated and acknowledged herewith.

Councillor Suqlain Mahmood

Chairman, Housing & Community Overview and Scrutiny Committee

March 2017