

READING BOROUGH COUNCIL

REPORT BY DIRECTOR OF EDUCATION, SOCIAL SERVICES & HOUSING

TO:	HOUSING, NEIGHBOURHOODS & LEISURE COMMITTEE		
DATE:	17 JULY 2013	AGENDA ITEM:	9
TITLE:	DECENT NEIGHBOURHOOD FUND		
LEAD COUNCILLOR:	COUNCILLOR RICHARD DAVIES	PORTFOLIO:	HOUSING
SERVICE:	HOUSING	WARDS:	ALL
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1. PURPOSE OF REPORT AND EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

- 1.1 This report provides background on the Decent Neighbourhood Fund established by the Housing Service and funded from the Housing Revenue Account, and sets out the scope of the funding and an update on what estate improvements have been achieved so far.

2. RECOMMENDED ACTION

- 2.1 That members note this report and endorse the approach to tenant and community engagement in setting local priorities for investment.

3. POLICY CONTEXT

- 3.1 Over the last few years the Housing Service has placed considerable emphasis on achieving the Decent Homes Standard, with funding being put into improving individual properties. Although it is important to continue to improve individual properties it is of equal importance for tenants that investment is made to improve the appearance of the neighbourhood in which they live.
- 3.2 In order to invest more money in improving neighbourhoods the Housing Service set up the Decent Neighbourhood Fund (DNF) in 2009/10 with the aim of improving local neighbourhood estate areas. The funding comes from the Housing Revenue Account which is the rental income received from tenants. As such it is a condition of the DNF that the money spent must be shown to benefit Council Housing estates and tenants. The budget for the DNF is £490,000 and is spent in consultation with tenants

- 3.3 The DNF can contribute towards a broad range of environmental and community initiatives designed to improve the appearance of neighbourhoods and quality of life of those living in a neighbourhood. Local residents are asked for ideas on improvements that could be made to the area they live in; the ideas are then developed into small or larger projects on which local residents are consulted before work commences. It is important the projects reflect the concerns and issues raised by local people.

The Joint Consultative Committee (JCC), a tenant policy group, were involved in agreeing:

- Prioritisation of areas/neighbourhoods which would benefit from the fund
- Agreeing priorities for spend within given areas
- Agreeing which types of projects the fund can be spent on

4. DECENT NEIGHBOURHOOD FUND

- 4.1 It was agreed with the JCC that around 70% of the Decent Neighbourhood Fund should be targeted at existing Thriving Neighbourhood Areas - particularly Whitley, East Reading (Orts Road) and Southcote (these match closely with Housing estate areas). The remaining 30% is spread through other estate areas across the Borough.

- 4.2 Deciding priorities for projects is done through a combination of:

- The Neighbourhood Officer identifying projects through their knowledge of the area and as a result of the outcomes of estate inspections in consultation with local Community Voices and Sounding Board members.
- Wider consultation through surveys such as the Tenancy Neighbourhood Survey, Building Cleaning Survey etc.
- Views being sought through local Neighbourhood Officer Newsletters and Housing News.

- 4.3 The DNF can cover a broad range of environmental issues designed to improve the appearance and quality of life of those living in a neighbourhood. The works can be divided into a number of broad themed areas:

- Traffic/Parking
- Landscaping/General appearance
- Security/Reducing Anti-Social Behaviour

In general the fund will cover:

- Landscaping
- Painting
- Brickwork/Pavements
- Lighting (improving existing or providing new lighting)
- Provision of new parking bays

- Marking out of existing parking bays to make them more effective
- Road signage, block signs, estate maps - securing grass verges.
- Notice boards
- Improvement to block communal garden areas
- Improved street furniture

The aim is to ensure all works use environmentally friendly and sustainable materials and technology.

- 4.4 In addition one-off grants for community groups can be considered where they contribute towards enhancing a local service to make necessary improvements and assist in ensuring the long term sustainability of a community project. Examples would include contributing towards funding equipment for a baby and toddler group or funding the kit for a junior football team.
- 4.5 The budget for 2012/13 has funded a range of different projects including:
- Granville Road car parking scheme
 - Landscaping to various locations across the borough
 - Play equipment on Hexham Road
 - Improvements to the communal areas in and around Caversham Road flats
 - Closing off the Arthur Place walkway in Orts Road (a 'design out crime' initiative to reduce drug activity).
 - St Giles Close parking scheme
 - improvements to Southcote Youth and Community Centre
 - Jim Hanley Memorial garden

Extensive consultation with local residents, ward councillors and other stakeholders took place on all of these projects.

5. "YOUR COMMUNITY, YOUR CASH"

5.1 A slice of the DNF budget is spent using a participatory approach named "Your Community, Your Cash" (YCYC). A local pot of money is made directly available for communities and neighbourhoods to bid for. The bidding process usually takes place at a community event where residents "vote" for their favourite projects. This approach helps to develop social capital within a community and its transparency enables residents to be certain that the expenditure clearly reflects local priorities.

5.2 Last year's winning projects have been very successful, they include:

- The Coley Park Radio Station Project which gave 22 young people the chance to learn production skills whilst another 43 took part in a film at Coley Park Community Centre's Winter Barbecue
- Lots of young people joined the Kickz street dance, hair and beauty sessions in April half term
- Whitley Wood Football Club has been competing in the Berkshire County Cup
- Local residents have enjoyed Boxercise and Yoga sessions at Hexham Community Centre

In addition funding was given to the Whitley Excellence Cluster to fund projects in schools. As a result:

- Parents from Geoffrey Field School have been enjoying the new outdoor shelter and garden created
- The new bike shed at New Christ Church Primary School has enabled an extra 22 children to cycle to school and take part in bikeability courses
- Whitley Park Primary School are growing their own vegetables and learning about healthy eating

5.3 This year so far, successful YCYC events have already been held in Dee Park Tilehurst, Hexham Road Whitley, Southcote and Whitley Wood. One further YCYC event is planned for Coley in August. Some of the successful bids voted on by local residents at the events already held include:

- The Grange Café (United Reform Church) which aims to provide a place where parents can socialise and children can wind down after school (Southcote)
- The MAD Academy (Music and Dance) will offer courses combining lively music and dance for toddlers/children under 5 years (Southcote)
- The Mens' Room at Hexham Community Centre to engage men in social and healthy activities (Whitley)
- Health and Well Being Group at Hexham Community Centre (Whitley)
- School Holiday Activities at Whitley Wood Community Centre (Whitley Wood)
- The Homework Club for 8-15 year olds (Dee Park)
- Community Café (Dee Park)

5.4 School Holiday Activities at the Whitley Wood Community Centre Youth Forums have also had a successful voting event and the following bids were approved:

- Community Park Days
- Community BBQ
- Cook It, Eat It

5.5 The Housing Service is currently working with Aspire and the Whitley Schools Cluster to agree bids that will be voted on by Whitley School Youth Councils in Autumn 2013.

6. DNF PRIORITIES FOR 2013/14

6.1 Priorities for the 2013/14 budget have already been set. These are based on the outcomes from the Tenant Satisfaction Survey results 2011 and 2012, local offers to residents, Thriving Neighbourhood Action Plans (themselves based on a series of local resident surveys), Tenant Scrutiny Inspection reports, NAG priorities, Health and Safety issues and the corporate priorities of the Council. The priorities include:

- Landscaping - bulbs, trees, improvements to communal gardens.
- Parking - new parking bays, marking out of existing bays, better design of existing space to create more bays and more effective parking.
- Dog issues - dog fouling campaigns, dog bins, dog walking areas.
- Pavements/Roads - resurfacing of car parks, resurfacing of pavements, and replacing slabs with tarmac.
- Grass verges - create parking bays, some form of bollard to prevent parking on them.
- ASB - designing out crime initiatives, lighting, and fencing.
- Initiatives to improve community spirit including community events/fun days, adult learning classes, initiatives to support inequalities in poor health or education, employment skills; life skills for young people, arts projects, support to estate football teams etc.

6.2 A number of potential commitments to the 2013/14 budget have already been identified. These include projects that were put forward in the previous financial year once funding was no longer available. They include:

- Landscaping projects in a number of areas across the borough
- Hexham Road play equipment upgrade
- Southdown Road (Caversham) - improvements to the pathways, steps, and railings
- Amersham Road/Alston Walk - improvements and resurfacing to pathways
- Easter Holiday Youth Activities at Whitley Youth and Community Centre
- Chequers Way, Woodley - improved/additional car parking and resurfacing of car park area
- Caversham Road flats, graffiti proof paint
- Dee Park Youth Club 8 - 11 year olds (Friday evenings for 50 weeks)

- Virginia Way, Southcote, new play equipment for 8-13 age group
- Granville Road car parking improvements
- Southcote Summer Holiday Childrens activities (joint with Play Rangers)

6.3 For the future the Housing Service is aiming to work with other Registered Social Landlords in areas where Housing Association properties border or are located on RBC estate areas. Contributions from Registered Social Landlords will enable an expansion of what has been achieved so far and bring wider benefits to neighbourhoods across the borough. In Dee Park this year we achieved this in partnership with Catalyst Housing Association.

8. COMMUNITY ENGAGEMENT AND INFORMATION

8.1 Community engagement is a key part of the process in deciding the priorities for funding. The 'Your Community Your Cash' scheme is a form of 'Participatory Budgeting' - this directly involves local people in making decisions on the spending and priorities for a defined public budget. It's an approach centred on the importance of valuing the knowledge and experience of local people and empowering them to identify their own priorities, find solutions to the problems affecting them and to make their own decisions about how public money should be spent. This approach is in line with the Council's commitment to involving communities in decision making. It encourages and supports local people to have a real voice in their community, to identify their own needs and priorities, and develop and deliver projects to meet those needs.

9. LEGAL IMPLICATIONS

9.1 There are no current legal implications in relation to the Decent Neighbourhood Fund

10. FINANCIAL IMPLICATIONS

10.1 The Decent Neighbourhood Fund is funded from the Housing Revenue Account and is maintained within budget. As such the main focus of spend is directed towards tenants.

11. BACKGROUND PAPERS

None