

Housing Services Cabinet Committee

Wednesday, 25 September 2019

7.30 pm

Present:

Cllr Jenny Wallace (Chair)
Cllr Christina Rolles (Vice-Chair)

Councillors: Diane Marsh
Leslie Pearton
Peter Scollard
Dakota Dibben
Colin Caller
Lyn Milner
Leslie Hoskins
Frank Wardle
Lee Croxton

Wendy Lane Assistant Director (Planning)
Wale Adetoro Assistant Director (Housing Policy & Management)
Daniel Killian Assistant Director (Housing Assets)
Mark Cordingley Technical Manager (Housing Repairs)
Nicole Arthur Service Delivery Manager
Lauren Wallis Committee Services Officer (Minutes)

9. Apologies

An apology for absence was received from Cllr Colin Caller and Cllr Lee Croxton attended as his substitute.

10. Cllr Ruth Martin

Those present stood in silence in memory of Cllr Ruth Martin who had recently passed away.

11. Minutes

The minutes of the meeting of the Housing Services Cabinet Committee held on Wednesday, 3 July 2019 were signed by the Chair.

12. Declarations of Interest

No declarations of interest were made.

13. To consider whether any items in Part A of the agenda should be considered in private or those (if any) in Part B in public.

None.

14. Rural Housing Needs

The Assistant Director (Planning) presented the report which updated the Committee on the future rolling programme for Rural Housing Needs Surveys and on the outcome of the Rural Housing Needs Surveys undertaken between 2017 and 2018 for Vigo, Istead Rise, Luddesdown and Shorne. Although affordable housing tended to be the main thrust of the Surveys, the Assistant Director (Planning) drew Members' attention to the survey findings which indicated a need housing required for older persons who wanted to downsize but the majority of these needed market housing rather than affordable housing.

The following points were made during discussion on this subject:

- The Government required local authorities to define the affordable housing need for rural parishes and this, in the case of the Borough, included Istead Rise even though the area was not parished. The Council had been working with the Action with Communities in Rural Kent (ACRK) to identify needs and to develop different types of housing. This was often difficult as housing associations could not afford to pay the market rate for land and therefore affordable housing sites tended to be located in the Green Belt as Rural Exception Sites. Green Belt use was permissible as limited affordable housing for local community needs was not considered to be inappropriate in the Green Belt.
- The Borough Council undertook a rolling programme of Rural Housing Needs Surveys and it was recognised that the surveys were a snapshot in time and best practice recommended that they have a 'shelf-life' of no more than five years, at which point a new survey should be undertaken. The surveys could be undertaken using a shorter timescale but this was not considered to be helpful for the communities involved.
- A fundamental refresh of the surveys had been undertaken approximately eight years ago at the behest of a Meopham Borough Councillor who was an expert in questionnaire design who assisted the Council on how to avoid designing questions containing unconscious bias.
- It was noted that undertaking the surveys could cause sensitivities. However rural areas had to be aware that sometimes the housing needs of these areas were neglected to maintain the status quo. Therefore, the communities became older and less diverse.
- Whilst the Council could buy ex-Council houses of people who wished to downsize using Right to Buy receipts, rural premiums made this difficult to achieve. Another major factor was that people who wanted to downsize also generally wanted to remain in the area.
- A reservation was expressed as previously affordable housing had not always been made available to local people. The Assistant Director (Planning) explained that she was aware of an anomaly for a property in Higham a number of years ago and this has been caused by a high turnover of staff at the housing association in question resulting in the policy of offering affordable housing to local people not being passed

on. This issue has since been addressed. Equally a local connection to a parish did not necessarily mean that the person was currently a resident in that parish.

- Following a question with regard to the covenant against building in Vigo, the officer confirmed that the covenant was challenging as it was not a material planning consideration. Planning permission could be granted by the Borough Council and the Parish Council could refuse to vary the covenant.

Resolved that:

- 1. the future rolling programme be noted for publication on the Council's website; and**
- 2. the Rural Housing Needs Surveys for Vigo, Istead Rise, Luddesdown and Shorne be noted for publication on the Council's website.**

15. Draft Private Sector Housing Enforcement Policy

The Assistant Director (Housing Policy & Management) introduced the report which recommended the approval and adoption of the Council's Private Sector Housing Enforcement Policy. The Council has legal duties to ensure that accommodation in the private rented sector meets minimum housing management, health and safety standards and to deal with landlords and letting agents that fail to meet those standards. Financial penalties have been introduced by the Housing & Planning Act 2016 as an alternative to prosecution to meet the Government's aim of clamping down on 'rogue' landlords and letting agents and reduce offending. The table of financial penalties was set out in Appendix 1 of the report and had been constructed to be broadly similar to other local housing authorities across Kent.

The following points were made during discussion on this item:

- Members were advised that when the Council was made aware of an issue, officers would contact the landlord to invite them in for a chat in an attempt to resolve the issues. Council officers could also access the property to undertake a survey and a timescale for repairs drawn up. If the property was considered dangerous or unfit for human habitation, the Council had powers to close the property. Officers tried to work with landlords as this tended to benefit the tenants, the landlord and the Council. The Council could also undertake necessary repairs and put a charge against the property to recoup the money.
- The Assistant Director (Housing Policy & Management) advised that retaliatory evictions were not permitted and were covered by sanctions. If a landlord evicted a tenant because the tenant had raised concerns with the Council, then the Council could prevent the landlord from reletting the property. Members' attention was drawn to paragraph 12 of the Draft Private Section Housing Enforcement Policy.
- It was noted that Houses in Multiple Occupation (HMOs) and non- HMOs were covered by this Policy.
- Following a question of informing tenants of support available to them, Members were asked to refer tenants who raised issues, to the Council and to signpost tenants to information on the Council's website. The Council also occasionally held promotional events including bi-annual Private Sector Landlord forums. Officers also received referrals and intelligence from Citizens Advice, the Council's Environmental Services, the Police and Fire services and other agencies including Customs & Excise. However, it was the most vulnerable tenants who were most at risk as they

were aware that their accommodation was probably the only one they could afford. The Chair requested that Councillors pass any information they happened to come across to the appropriate officer.

- The effect of this policy on the staff resources of the Housing Policy team was raised. The Assistant Director (Housing Policy & Management) confirmed that the policy had been considered by the Council's Management Team and the additional pressure on staff resources had been identified by the Chief Executive.

Resolved that:

- 1. That the Council's Private Sector Housing Enforcement policy be approved and recommended to Cabinet for adoption; and**
- 2. That the Council's Policy for imposing financial penalties under the Housing Act 2004 and the Housing and Planning Act 2016 at Appendix 1 of the report is approved and recommended to Cabinet for adoption.**

16. Overview of Active Housing Repairs Diagnostic System

The Assistant Director (Housing Assets) gave an overview of the changes that the DSO Building Management Team had been through over the last 3 years including fundamental changes to processes, procedures and IT systems which had enabled significant efficiency savings to be made. The new diagnostic system would further enhance the service and allow tenants to report problems online, book appointments and to reschedule an appointment if required. The new system will ensure consistency and efficiency for both the in house team and tenants.

The Service Delivery Manager advised Members that the repairs work of the team had been analysed over three years and a system had been devised that would allow the correct information to be collected from tenants to initiate an efficient repair process. A number of systems had been considered and Active Housing had been chosen as it was able to be fully integrated into the Council's website and the in-house repairs system. This would enable the system to pick appointment times and allocate the correct priority to the job. Once the appointment date and time was selected by the tenant a text would be sent to them confirming the appointment. The system would also highlight when officers were in the area in an effort to reduce the Council's carbon footprint. At present, 65% of repairs were reported by telephone. The system had been designed to make it as easy as possible for tenants to report problems including pictures in an effort to collect accurate information on what was required. It was not intended to scale back the Council's telephone offering and tenants would be asked to report emergency repairs in this way.

The Committee was shown a presentation on the use of the new system.

The following points were made during discussion on this item:

- Following a question on water meters, Members were informed that Southern Water used to reimburse customers for water wasted during leaks that had been recorded by water meters. However, they were now more challenging with regards to compensation claims. The Committee was asked to inform their constituents who were Council tenants to report water leaks as emergencies via the telephone number and could be dealt with by the out of hours service which could not be accessed via the website booking system.

- Officers undertook to give some thought to making stopcocks more accessible.
- Following a concern with regard to the reduction of availability of the telephone reporting service, Members were assured that this was not the case. The introduction of the online system was simply to make it as easy as possible for tenants to report issues. In addition, 20% of issues were reported to the team by Council officers.

The Assistant Director (Housing Assets) advised that the team was keen to get residents involved in shaping the new system and asked Councillors to contact the Service Delivery Manager with any comments.

The Chair gave her thanks to all three officers for the excellent progress made and savings achieved and noted the savings had enabled carbon monoxide detectors to be installed in Council properties. She also expressed her gratitude to the officers who had talked contractors into contributing works and materials to the Gravesham Sanctuary.

Close of meeting

The meeting ended at 8.30 pm