

Housing Services Cabinet Committee

Wednesday, 12 February 2020

7.30 pm

Present:

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

Councillors: Dakota Dibben
Leslie Hoskins
Diane Marsh
Lyn Milner
Leslie Pearton
Peter Scollard
Frank Wardle
Brian Francis

Note: Councillor: Leslie Hills was also in attendance

Nick Brown Director (Housing & Operations)
Wale Adetoro Assistant Director (Housing Policy & Management)
Lauren Wallis Committee Services Officer (Minutes)

22. Apologies

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

23. Minutes

The minutes of the meeting of the Housing Services Cabinet Committee held on 12 November 2019 were signed by the Chair.

24. Declarations of Interest

No declarations of interest were made.

25. Allocations Policy Review

The Chair advised that the Borough Council's Allocations Policy had not been reviewed since 2014 and this report was the start of wider consultation on proposed changes. Time had proved that the existing policy was not as effective as it could be and working within the confines of the available Council housing stock the greatest concern the Council had was not to raise false hopes for applicants of the register. The proposed Allocations Policy gives greater emphasis to housing needs and, with the rise in homelessness, there had never

been greater need than at the present time. The current policy could create unnecessary barriers for households most in need of social housing.

It was essential that the Council continued to help those in greatest need whilst making best use of the limited stock. The two year local connection was proposed to be extended to three as the Council felt that local residents must come first.

The Policy would also be in line with Objective 1 of the Corporate Plan (2019-23) - People - as the Housing Allocations Policy would help ensure the commitment to provide a proactive, supportive and financially efficient housing service - giving high quality tenant management experienced through a service making full use of its assets.

The Council needed to achieve the fairest allocation with its limited stock and to ensure that tenants and residents understood the revised Policy once approved.

The Assistant Director (Housing Policy & Management) reported that approval was sought for the review of the Council's Housing Allocations Policy and the commencement of wider consultation on the proposed changes to the Policy. The proposed changes to the Housing Allocation Policy were to ensure that it reflected changes in legislation, guidance and good practice and the redraft provided a comprehensive housing allocation scheme which would reflect how the Council would assess and prioritise the high demand from applicants for the limited supply of social housing, to make best use of the stock available and deal with urgent housing needs e.g. homelessness. An officer consultation had been undertaken and the feedback had resulted in the changes proposed to the policy and this would be put out to public consultation with the objective of final approval of the Policy in September.

The Assistant Director (Housing Policy & Management) stated that there were seven significant changes proposed to the Policy:

1. Definition of qualifying local connection criteria – this would include the simplification of the local connection criteria and the length of connection (residence or employment in the Borough) would also be increased from two to three years without break although there would be some exceptions to this. Applicants needing to move into the Borough to give or receive care would be excluded from the local connection criteria and instead included within the exceptional circumstances category, so that each case could be considered on its particular merits.
2. Sanctions for refusing an offer of social housing – most applicants would be entitled to receive two offers and could refuse one property without sanction, with a second refusal resulting in a six month suspension from the Housing Register. The proposal was to increase the suspension from the register from six months twelve months, with all suspensions being subject to an appeals process.
3. Simplification of the priority banding awarded on medical grounds – there were currently 4 categories A to D and it was proposed that this be changed to 2 bands A and C. Band A where there was an evidenced urgent need to move on medical/mobility/disability grounds and whose current housing has serious and life threatening impact on them and Band C where there was an evidenced medical/mobility/disability need for a move and whose housing presents non-life threatening impact on them. The assessment process would remain the same.

4. Simplification of the priority banding awarded on overcrowding grounds – it was proposed to simplify the priority awarded on the grounds of overcrowding to Band B where the household had two or more bedrooms fewer than they needed and Band C where the household was lacking one bedroom.
5. Definition of Band D priority – Band D priority was to be changed to include only those applicants assessed as needing sheltered housing.
6. Enhancement of the priority banding awarded to homeless households – all homeless households would be moved to Band B. However, Members were advised that this was not a way of getting housing “through the back door”. All homeless applicants would be entitled to a relief duty for 56 days which would be used to focus on securing alternative accommodation, and a rehousing duty would only be accepted once the relief duty had expired.
7. Simplification of the priority banding awarded to under occupying tenants – it was intended to prioritise tenants who had volunteered to downsize to a smaller property and move them from Band B to Band A.

The Chair asked Members to comment on each of the proposals in turn.

Definition of qualifying local connection criteria

- An element of flexibility was requested. For example, a resident could live in the Borough for 10 years, move out of the Borough for 3 years, move back again and then have a housing need arise. Consideration needs to be given to how the eligibility of such applicants would be considered under the local criteria.

Sanctions for refusing an offer of social housing

- Following a question on the timescale for appeals, the officer confirmed that an appeal against suspension from the Housing Register following a refusal would be considered almost immediately following the refusal of a property by an applicant.
- A question was raised on moving applicants to other parts of the country and Members were advised that such an offer tended to involve homeless applicants who were unable to afford local properties, could not afford local private sector rents and did not qualify for social housing. The applicants would be made aware of all the options including those in other parts of the country. These were only offers but were sometimes the only option open to an applicant.

Simplification of the priority banding awarded on medical grounds

- It was noted that professional medical advice was usually sought where appropriate. The current banding structure allowed for Band A – high medical priority – where the current housing was seriously affecting a member of the household with a life threatening condition, or had a major adverse effect on a medical condition which warranted emergency priority, Band B – medium medical priority – where the current housing had a major adverse effect on a medical condition and Band C – low medical priority – where the current housing had an adverse effect on a medical condition creating a particular need for a move. Band D would mean no medical priority.

- Following a question on whether mental health issues were prioritised, the Assistant Director (Housing Policy & Management) explained that if the applicant's current housing had an adverse effect or had been the cause of a mental health issue creating a particular need for a move, that that person might be prioritised.

Simplification of the priority banding awarded on overcrowding grounds

- An issue regarding waiting time was raised in relation to growing families who, for example, might have applied for a 2 bedroom dwelling having two very young children, and having been on the Housing Register for some time, now needed a three bedroom property. The officer was asked if, having notified the Council of their changing needs, the waiting time would have to start again. The Director (Housing & Operations) advised that the Council did not operate a 'waiting list' but a Housing Register and applicants were prioritised for housing on the basis of housing need. It was noted that the statistics contained in the report in relation to 'waiting' times were a guide but the average letting times shown could be skewed by a single case that had been on the Register and had not moved for many years, for example the presence of an 11 year 'waiting' time as seen on Table 6 of the report.

Definition of band D priority

- The Committee was advised that the Council did not change applicant's bands unless there was a change in the needs of the household. If within 6 months, an applicant had not placed a bid for a property, they would be taken off the Register and sent a letter. Unless the applicant confirmed to the Council that they wanted to stay on the Register, they would remain removed from it. This was a way of checking that applicants were still searching for accommodation.
- Following a question on whether people have to renew their application for housing annually, Members were advised that applicants do not have to renew the application but were asked to maintain contact with the Council.
- It was noted that Table 1 on page 5 of the report should have a zero inserted in line P instead of there being a blank space.

Enhancement of the priority banding awarded to homeless households

- Following a question on how the enhancement of the priority banding awarded to homeless households would affect other applicants on the Register, the officer replied that it would depend on the level of need. The priorities were being reviewed to make best use of the Council's limited housing stock.

Simplification of the priority banding awarded to under occupying tenants

- An observation was made that some tenants who wanted to downsize also wanted to stay in their locality and whilst Members understood that it was difficult to meet everyone's needs, it was hard to explain this to tenants. The Assistant Director (Housing Policy & Management) explained that officers would always look at the circumstances and would then work within the Council's limited resource balanced against the growing demand. The Director (Housing & Operations) added that it was hoped that the proposed changes would help to achieve the most equitable way of allocating housing, to assist in speeding up the process, and to not give false hope to applicants who had a very low chance of being housed.

It was noted that the date 25 March 2020 on pages 8 and 23 of the report should read 12 February 2020.

Members thanked officers for all their hard work on this process.

Following a question on the public consultation, the Director (Housing & Operations) advised that it was hoped that the public consultation would result in a wide range of feedback. It was considered that the proposals made the separations much clearer which would ensure that the Council's limited housing stock would be offered to those most in need.

Resolved that:

- (a) the proposed changes to the Allocations Policy, as set out in Appendix 2 of the report, be agreed for public consultation; and**
- (b) the commencement of a wider public consultation on the proposed changes to the Council's Housing Allocations Policy be agreed.**

26. Corporate Performance Report: Quarter 3 2019/20

The Committee was presented with an update against the Performance Management Framework, as introduced within the Council's Corporate Plan, for Quarter 3 2019/20 (October to December 2019). It was noted that this was the first report since the adoption of the new Corporate Plan.

The Assistant Director (Housing Policy & Management) went through each of the Policy Commitments contained in the appendix to the report and the following points were raised:

- 1. Enforce a high quality of private housing:** work with landlords to tackle property standards, empty homes and homes in multiple occupation (HMOs).
 - A few properties had been closed by the Council, approximately five that the Assistant Director (Housing Policy & Management) was aware of, because they had been deemed as being unsafe. Officers also worked with the Community Safety Unit, the Police and the Border Force UK on this issue as the residents that lived in such properties tended to be very vulnerable.
 - As a result of a successful bid for Government funding, an additional officer had been bought in to join the team. The Assistant Director (Housing Policy & Management) undertook to bring a report on this subject to the next meeting of the Cabinet Committee.
 - Following a question raised on a report on empty homes, Members were advised that the number of empty homes brought back into use were now lower than previously given the good performance of the Council over the last couple of years and a report would come to this Cabinet Committee if and when there was anything to report.
- 2. Provide a proactive, supportive and financially efficient housing service:** High quality tenant management experienced through a service making full use of its assets.
 - Members noted the good results achieved by the Council and the sheltered housing challenges. The Committee was advised the sheltered housing client

group often had needs unique to each individual and often required Occupational Therapy (OT) recommendations to be sought which in turn meant it took time to make the dwelling habitable. The OT Service was the responsibility of the Kent County Council. Sheltered housing was not as popular as it used to be and was difficult to let and the Council would continue to market these properties as effectively as possible. The officer undertook to bring a report on sheltered housing to a future meeting of the Committee.

- The Committee was advised that the Private Sector Disabled Facilities Grant assessments were funded via a central government grant and was a means tested grant.
- 3. Safeguard Residents:** put in place a package of housing measures and creative interventions that support the most vulnerable.
- The Assistant Director (Housing Policy & Management) advised that the process of administering Disabled Facilities Grants within the Council had undergone some changes over the last three years and that the applications were undertaken quickly and efficiently by the Borough Council. Whilst delays could sometimes occur, these were not on the parts of the process within the remit of the Council and were sometimes due to applicants not providing the required information or the manufacturing timeframe of equipment.
- 4. Deliver a skilled in-house building management team:** progressively improve the standard and efficiency of local housing.
- The Committee noted that a great deal of good work had been undertaken by the Direct Services Organisation (DSO) especially in relation to responsive repairs. The Council had worked towards an award in this area of work and had been selected as finalists. The workforce had also been increased to bring services in house to reduce the reliance on external sub-contractors which resulted in £119k savings as the Council was now able to complete more work for less money.
 - The Director (Housing & Operations) advised that many Members had visited Brookvale and that the Assistant Director (Housing Assets), the Service Delivery Manager and the team had worked to introduce cutting edge innovations within the operation. It was also highlighted that the Council was performing at 100% on the two performance indicators in this section.
 - Members commended the work of the DSO.
 - The Chair noted that the Council was ahead of the recommendations contained in the Hackitt Report on the independent review of building regulations and fire safety in relation the installation of fire sprinkler systems within the Council's blocks of flats.

Resolved that the report be noted.

27. Corporate Register of Partnerships - Housing Services Cabinet Committee Extract

The Assistant Director (Housing Policy & Management) advised that this was an annual report that provided details of the Council's involvement in partnerships that fell within the

remit of the Committee. The details of all eight partnerships were listed including the new Sanctuary Partnership which assisted single rough sleepers, as set out on page 43 of the report. This service had initially been open for 3 nights a week, but now the charity was able to open 6 nights a week from October to March. The services provided by the Sanctuary were mainly for local people and strict rules of use applied. Members' attention was drawn to an error in the report (page 45) in that Abbeyfield was now named Rapport.

The following points were raised during discussion on this subject:

- The Chair advised that the Council paid for the Sanctuary's utilities and the DSO donated labour and some contractors had also donated equipment.
- Following a question on how many housing associations served the Borough, Members' attention was drawn to page 45 of the report which set out the partnership arrangements but did not include all the housing associations in the locality.
- It was noted that there were no formal partnership arrangements with health services. However, the Council had regular contact with the local Clinical Commissioning Group (CCG) which was located at the Civic Centre.
- Members were advised that housing associations were subject to the rules enforced by the Ministry of Housing, Communities & Local Government (MHCLG).
- It was highlighted that the Council's Housing Partnerships Manager did a marvellous job pursuing energy deals for the Council and was also the Chair of the Kent Energy Efficiency Partnership.

Resolved that the report be noted.

Close of meeting

The meeting ended at 8.52 pm