

Housing Services Cabinet Committee

Monday, 16 November 2020

7.30 pm

Present:

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

Councillors: Baljit Hayre
 Leslie Hills
 Leslie Hoskins
 Diane Marsh
 Lyn Milner
 Leslie Pearton
 Peter Scollard
 Frank Wardle

Daniel Killian Assistant Director (Housing)
Jody Bulman Service Manager (Housing Landlord Services)
Lee Georgiou Service Manager (Housing Options)
Nicole Arthur Service Delivery Manager (Housing Repairs)
Carlie Simmonds Committee Services Manager (Minutes)
David Herrington Digital Manager (Technical Support)

17. Introduction from the Chair

The Chair welcomed Members and officers to the meeting together with the Gravesham residents watching via the Council's YouTube channel. The Chair wished everyone well in these times and reiterated the words of the Leader of the Council: 'We are here to provide support and advice for you. We will come through these most difficult of times'.

The Chair also welcomed Jody Bulman, Service Manager (Housing Landlord Services) who joined the Council just over four weeks ago.

Before proceeding to the agenda, the Chair highlighted what a very positive agenda it was. Despite COVID-19, the Corporate Performance Update showed that Housing performance was holding up well. The Allocations Policy had now benefitted from Lee Georgiou, Service Manager (Housing Options) expertise in particular residents needing to have been living in Gravesham for three years. This was to protect residents from other boroughs coming into Gravesham and renting Gravesham properties for their residents. There would also an interesting and progressive presentation about the Online Repairs Diagnostics Tool with the meeting concluding with a DSO (Direct Services Operations) good news story.

18. Apologies

No apologies for absence were received.

19. Minutes

The minutes of the meeting held on Tuesday, 22 September 2020 were signed by the Chair.

20. Declarations

No declarations of interest were made.

21. Corporate Performance Update: Quarter Two 2020-21

The Committee was presented with an update against the Performance Management Framework, as introduced within the Council's Corporate Plan, for Quarter Two 2020-21 (July to September 2020).

The Assistant Director (Housing) drew Member's attention to appendix two which provided a statistical overview and reminded the Committee that outturns in the appendix were presented separately in both the table and graph provided and that it was important to note that they were not one of the same product and should not be used as such, they were simply two methods of presenting the same content.

The officers present went through each policy commitment in turn and provided an update on what activity had and/or would be delivered in order to successfully realise the policy commitments.

The Committee highlighted the following:-

- in relation to PI 19 - % of Disabled Facility Grant applications processed on time, the Committee asked how many applications were received per quarter and how many of those were successful. The Assistant Director (Housing) advised that he would circulate this information to the Committee outside of the meeting;
- the Committee welcomed sites being developed by the Council and suggested that hoarding be erected;
- the Committee commended the Sheltered Housing Team for working with local charities during the pandemic in order to support vulnerable tenants;
- the Committee requested further information on hospital discharge/prevention work. The Assistant Director (Housing) advised that he would circulate further information to the Committee outside of the meeting; and
- the Committee asked what support was currently being provided to homeless persons who had tested positive for COVID-19. The Committee was advised that, although there was no statutory responsibility to do so, the Council was currently providing 'contained' temporary accommodation to homeless persons who had tested positive for COVID-19 in order to reduce the spread of the infection.

The Committee noted the information contained within the report.

22. Update on Allocations Policy Consultation

Further to minute 25 (12.02.2020), the Committee received a summary of the responses received during the 20 week public consultation period together with the draft framework for the revised Housing Allocations Scheme. The revised scheme will provide a greater degree of clarity than the current scheme whilst also ensuring that those with the greatest housing

need are assisted in order of defined priorities. The proposed changes will ensure that the Council's Housing Allocations Scheme meets the requirements of current legislation, guidance and good practice to provide a clear and comprehensive scheme which describes how the Council will assess and prioritise the demand from applicants for limited social housing within the Borough.

The Committee received a short presentation from the Service Manager (Housing Options) summarising the process to date together with the next steps as detailed below:-

- to undertake further work to refine the document with colleagues, senior managers and the department;
- to undertake a Equality Impact Assessment;
- to present the final version of the scheme to the Housing Services Cabinet Committee on 4 February 2021; and
- to present the final version of the scheme to the Cabinet on 22 February 2021 with a recommendation to adopt the revised scheme to enable it to be implemented in April 2021.

The Committee considered the revised scheme and highlighted the following:-

- there was a typographical error on agenda page 29 (third paragraph), it should state '*....their status as a jobseeker or an initial **three months** right of residence....* ';
- there was a typographical error on agenda page 35 (last paragraph of section 3.5), it should state '*....they will not be included on your Housing Register application; **and** they will not be....* ';
- concern was expressed regarding the change to refusal sanctions/applicants being suspended from the housing register for 12 months if they refuse a suitable offer. Previously, there had been some flexibility on the number of refusals as it was acknowledged that some properties may not be suitable. These sanctions would usually result in Member involvement so there needed to be transparency. The Committee was advised that discretion would be taken however there needed to be a fine balance to ensure that there was no impact on the housing register, length of turnaround time, rent loss etc. The use of the Locata system and setting applicants preferences would also help to mitigate against any suitable offers being refused;
- would the Housing Allocation Panel be made up of internal and/or external representatives and would there be any expenditure relating to the setting up/membership of this Panel. The Committee was advised that the Panel would be made up of internal officers from a variety of relevant teams within the Council and that there would be no expenditure relating to the setting up/membership of this Panel. The Panel will add a level of transparency and ensure that there is a consistent approach;
- concern was expressed regarding the lack of responses to the consultation. The Committee was advised that the consultation period was extended and the Council actively reached out to a wide range of partners, landlords, statutory services and local community groups;
- concern was expressed regarding the qualifying length of residence or employment in the Borough changing from 2 years to 3 years. There may be an individual/family that has a strong need but their local connection is less than 3 years compared to an individual/family that a lesser need however their local connection is more than 3 years. The Committee was advised that a certain level of discretion had been built in

to the policy so that cases can be viewed taking individual personal circumstances in to account;

- no pressure to be put on individuals/families to downsize;
- reference be made to gypsy and travellers; and
- concern was expressed regarding specific reference being made to ‘Afghan citizen’ (agenda page 28, section 4.2). The Committee was advised this reference was set out in current legislation therefore the Council must comply with it.

A Member of the Committee expressed concern regarding some of the responses provided by officers. The Chair advised that she would deal with the Member’s concerns outside the meeting.

The Committee commended the work that had been undertaken to date in producing a clear and complex document.

Resolved that the outcome of the consultation be noted and the next steps to progress the Housing Allocations Scheme as set out in Section 4 of the report be agreed.

23. Active Housing - Online Repairs Diagnostics Tool

The Service Delivery Manager advised that DSO Building Management had gained approval to purchase the Active Housing’s Online Repairs Diagnostics Tool. It will offer tenants a self-service experience to schedule repair appointments as well as allowing them to cancel/reschedule appointments, view their appointment history, receive a text message confirming their appointment date/time, provide feedback on visits and offers self-repair advice/videos.

The Service Delivery Manager provided Members with a live demonstration of the Tool and how the information inputted by the tenant would be transferred to the office-based system (Oneserve).

The Tool had been designed to identify when a repair would be classed an urgent and will instruct the tenant to contact the Repairs Team directly.

The Committee was advised that the introduction of the Tool was to offer more choice to tenants. Therefore, tenants would be able to continue to contact the Repairs Team directly by telephone and/or email if that was their preferred choice of communication.

The Committee welcomed the Tool and commended the work that had been undertaken to date.

24. Update on Additional Resources - DSO Building Management

The Committee was informed that, in October 2018, the Cabinet agreed to Phase 1 of the expansion to the DSO Building Management Team which began in November 2018 and saw a well-publicised recruitment campaign. There was a really good response with over 200 people applying for the vacant positions. However, whilst a high calibre of applicants was received it was essential that people were recruited with the exact skill set that were needed in order to generate the savings and efficiencies that had been identified. The very specific

requirements meant that recruitment took longer than first anticipated and the newly-created roles in Phase 1 were not fully occupied until September 2019.

At the Cabinet meeting on 9 November 2020, the Cabinet recognised that an in-house workforce would be more competitive than using contractors to carry out certain elements of work and will be recommending to Full Council the proposals to expand the in-house workforce further as set out in the report. Phase 2 of the expansion will create further opportunities to reduce the reliance on term contractors within the DSO Building Management Team by expanding the in-house workforce at a more competitive rate than current contractors to further assist with efficiency savings, improving the quality of work and timescales in which work would be completed.

In addition to this, the proposals outlined within the report would also enable a more commercial approach to be adopted within the repairs teams to ensure the service is in the best possible position for trading to the public through Rosherville Limited.

The Assistant Director (Housing) advised that the recruitment of the additional craft workers would be accommodated within existing budgets and will allow the service to continue to drive through efficiencies and savings by bringing more work back in-house. The changes as proposed within the report were likely to generate a saving of £672,500 within Capital HRA budgets and £256,480 within HRA Revenue budgets whilst also increasing the quality of work and capacity to deliver more for the tenants.

The Committee congratulated the Assistant Director (Housing) and DSO Building Management Team for the entrepreneurial approach and for making the expansion a success.

Close of Meeting

The meeting ended at 8.58 pm.