

Housing Services Cabinet Committee

Monday, 07 June 2021

7.30 pm

Present:

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

Councillors: Ejaz Aslam
Dakota Dibben
Baljit Hayre
Leslie Hills
Bob Lane
Lyn Milner
Leslie Pearton
Peter Scollard

Daniel Killian Director (Housing)
Nicole Arthur Service Manager (Housing Operations)
Jody Bulman Service Manager (Housing Landlord Services)
Lee Morson Housing IT Systems Manager
Ben Clarke Committee Services Officer (minutes)

1. Apologies for Absence

Apologies for absence were received from Cllr Leslie Hoskins and Cllr Lyn Milner. Cllr Bob Lane and Cllr Elizabeth Mulheran attended as their substitutes.

2. Minutes

The minutes of the meeting of the Committee held on Tuesday, 23 March 2021 were signed by the Chair.

3. Declarations of Interest

No declarations of interest were made.

4. Chair's Announcements

The Chair congratulated Daniel Killian for his appointment to Director (Housing) in April 2021.

The Chair also congratulated Nicole Arthur and Lee Morson who took up their new posts today; their new posts were Service Manager (Housing Operations) and Housing IT Systems Manager respectively.

5. Q4 2020-21 Corporate Performance Report

The Committee were presented with an update against the Performance Management Framework, as introduced within the Council's Corporate Plan, for Quarter Four 2020-21 (January to March 2021).

The Director (Housing) guided Members through the document and pulled key statistical figures from the Performance Indicators that were listed in full, at appendix two to the report.

The Chair thanked the Director (Housing) for the positive figures and ask that the Committees congratulations be given to the Housing Income Team for winning the Kent Housing Group Extraordinary Team Award 2021.

The Director (Housing) fielded questions from the Committee regarding Housings performance and explained that:

- It was likely that the Council would see an increase in applications for temporary accommodation in the short term as there had been an increase, during lockdown, in the breakdown of relationships and domestic abuse. However, in the long term the need for temporary accommodation should decrease and level off as extra resources had been put into the team whose sole work was to help prevent residents from losing their homes
- The Council employed a specialist surveyor who surveyed Council owned properties after they became vacant to assess if the property were suitable for certain residents; disabled residents disabilities would be taken into consideration when they were assigned a property. The Council also enlisted Occupational Therapists from KCC to assist in matters with disabled residents
- The Private Sector Housing Team had been under resourced for too long, so a review was conducted to see what the team required to run a more efficient service; a proposed Housing restructure was submitted to MT and approved. That restructuring was currently underway and would improve the resourcing in the Private Sector Housing Team significantly

In response to a Members concern, the Director (Housing) asked that Cllr Hayre send him the details of the case of a disabled resident moving into a property that had no disabled facilities; Cllr Hayre advised that Cllr John Caller had been dealing with it. The Director (Housing) agreed to copy Cllr Hayre into all correspondence.

6. Draft Tenant and Leaseholder Decant Policy

The Committee was informed of the proposed Tenant and Leaseholder Decant Policy and their comments were sought comments prior to the policy being agreed by the Cabinet Member, Housing Services.

The Service Manager (Housing Landlord Services) guided Members through the report and gave a detailed overview of the policy; the decant policy covered both temporary and permanent decants including tenants and leaseholders and set out what the Council hoped to achieve from decant, how the process would be managed, how those affected by a decant would be engaged, what support would be provided and what home loss payments individuals could expect to receive. The policy took into account relevant legislation and guidance to ensure that home loss payments were set at the correct levels and that any decants were followed in a lawful process. A full copy of the Decant Policy could be found in Appendix 2 to the report.

The Chair thanked the Service Manager (Housing Landlord Services) for her detailed overview of the report and appreciated that the Policy was good for the Council to have in place.

The Service Manager (Housing Landlord Services) and the Director (Housing) fielded questions from the Committee and explained that:

- The policy could be made accessible online on the Councils website for all tenants/leaseholders to view whenever they wanted, and the Council would happily share the policy directly with a tenant/leaseholder when they requested or were going through the decant process. If the Council were aware of an area that was being decanted then the residents would be told about the policy through the engagement process prior to the decant
- There weren't any specific decants scheduled for the near future; the team reviewed schemes as they arose and there were a few developments coming forward but nothing yet that would require a resident to go through the decant process at present. Ward Members would be contacted by the Director (Housing) for an early consultation if any decants were planned in their wards
- Being eligible for assistance and possible rehousing after twelve months living in the affected property was the accepted rule as it was beyond an introductory tenancy; the Council did not have any obligations to rehouse introductory tenants. However, as stipulated at paragraph 16 of the report 'The Director of Housing, may exercise their discretion to depart from this policy due to the exceptional individual circumstances of the case.'
- All tenants were advised to take out their own home contents insurance and should use that insurance in the first instance if there was an emergency decant. If a tenant did not have any home contents insurance, then the Council would still provide assistance however every decant situation was different and the Council could not promise to rehouse the tenants in every case which is why the policy stated 'may be rehoused'
- There was not a set time for notice to be given to a property that a decant had been scheduled as there was a lot of work leading up to it and it was a slow process. However, tenants would be engaged with early on and the Director (Housing) confirmed that the Council would aim to inform residents before any planning applications were submitted so they would usually be informed 12 – 18 months before the decant which was deemed enough time for them to sort themselves out
- Tenants had the right to appeal and to make a complaint; in the first instance the complaint would be received by the Service Manager (Housing Landlord Services) and an investigation would be conducted. If the resident wasn't happy with the result, then the complaint would be progressed to the Director (Housing)
- The Director (Housing) added that when the Housing Allocation Scheme was revised an Independent Panel was set up to hear appeals; it was likely that appeals for decant would also go to an Independent Panel with an independent officer able to hear those appeals
- It would be too difficult to advise what grounds for appeal would possibly be successful, but the Director (Housing) agreed to circulate the terms of reference of the Independent Panel to Members
- Residents were expected to give three quotes for each of the items listed at 11.2 in the report; some contracts may well cover several of the times in each quote. It may have seemed like a lot but following extensive research it was identified that requesting three quotes was the norm and it was important that decants were balanced and reasonable. A degree of sensibility would be applied to every case as all cases were different and some things would need to be catered to an individual's

needs; it was recognised that 'Re-direction of mail' would only receive one quote from Royal Mail

- The Director (Housing) added that there were Liaison Officers that would support tenants during a decant and they could assist the tenants with their quotes
- The policy only outlined how a Council property would be decanted; if the owners of a private property refused to move from a property that was to be decanted then a notice of cession would have to be sought from a judge

In response to a Members concern, the Service Manager (Housing Landlord Services) agreed to make clear in paragraph 12, the distinction between what the Council needed to do for Council and privately owned properties when residents refused to move. The Chair agreed to the request.

The Chair thanked Members for their feedback and agreed to consider all feedback prior to approval of the Policy as the Portfolio Holder.

7. Draft Electrical Safety Policy

The Committee were informed of the proposed Electrical Safety Policy and their comments were sought prior to the policy being agreed by the Cabinet Member, Housing Services.

The Service Manager (Housing Operations) gave a brief overview of the report to Members.

The Electrical Safety Policy detailed how Gravesham Borough Council met the requirements for electrical safety under the Landlord and Tenant Act 1985, the Housing Act 2004 and the Electricity at Work Regulations 1989. In addition to that, the policy provided assurance that measures were in place to ensure compliance with those regulations and identified, managed and/or mitigated risks associated with electrical installations.

In response to Member questions, the Service Manager (Housing Operations) and the Director (Housing) explained that:

- The policy only reflected the responsibility of the Council as the social housing landlord; it did not apply to privately owned housing. It was important to keep the areas split and made sure that tenants knew what we expected of them and what they should expect of the Council
- There were provisions in place for disruptions caused by electrical work as sometimes whole families had to be moved outside properties while the team rewired the house; tenants and the Service Managers (Household Landlord Services) team were worked with closely during the process. Other aspects had to be taken into consideration such as if the resident was a hoarder and the property had to be cleaned before any electrical work could be carried out. Residents did not always see electrical safety as interesting as getting a new bathroom//kitchen and so educating residents was important. The team would also combine the electrical work with any other work that needed doing so that it could all be done at once while the family was moved out
- The Director (Housing) added that tenants would be able to count on the support of the Tenant Liaison Officers during the process of moving between properties
- The Council inspected Council owned properties every five years; if an electrician felt that the property had damaged electrical outlets or was not maintained properly etc

then they could request an inspection sooner but as a general rule it was every five years

- The Director (Housing) added that the Council were not required to inspect each property every five years but the Council took the decision to mirror what was required in the private sector in order to lead by example. As such, the electrical testing programme was brought in house and the five-year rolling programme was implemented
- When a tenant moved out of a property, the whole property was retested from scratch and then the new tenant would be given the electrical safety certificate upon moving into the property

The Chair asked Cllr Pearton to contact the Service Manager (Housing Operations) after the meeting so that he could report instances where he had seen Council properties with damaged electrics.

Following concern raised by a Member, the Service Manager (Housing Operations) agreed to talk to the Electrical Manager tomorrow to see if there was a requirement to include reference to 'GS38 Health & Safety Equipment' in section 11 of the report; Approved Testing Equipment.

The Chair thanked Members for their feedback and agreed to consider all feedback prior to approval of the Policy as the Portfolio Holder.

8. Demonstration of some functionality within the new Housing Management System

The Housing Services IT Manager provided Members with a presentation and a short video which demonstrated some of the functionality within the new Housing Management System and gave examples of what a Housing Officer would be able to report at a residents address.

The presentation was published and could be found through the below link:

<https://democracy.gravesham.gov.uk/documents/b13874/Housing%20Management%20System%20Presentation%20Monday%2007-Jun-2021%2019.30%20Housing%20Services%20Cabinet%20Committee.pdf?T=9>

The Chair thanked the Housing Services IT Manager for an informative presentation.

The Director (Housing) added some context to the demonstration that Members received:

- In the video the Housing Officer was able to talk to the resident at the property, take pictures, record the issues, make notes and send everything back to the Council through the Housing Management System app on their business iPhones, all within a few minutes. All relevant officers would then be able to access the information that was collected before the Housing Officer had even made it back to the office
- Currently, a Housing Officer would take roughly around two hours to perform the same action as they had to visit the property, make notes on their personal phones/paper, drive back to the office, upload everything to the system as well as distribute the information to the relevant officers. The new system demonstrated how fast the new system was and would allow Housing Officers much more time to talk to tenants

Members raised several concerns regarding the personal safety of Housing Officers visiting properties where aggrieved tenants lived and the actual security of the business iPhones.

It was explained by officers that:

- All Housing Officers and any staff working outside alone would soon receive an individual lone working device and have to follow a new lone working procedure. The device was a small button which could be attached to a name badge and allowed the call centre to know where they were and what they were doing. If a staff member felt unsafe then they could discreetly press the button and assistance, including Police if needed, would be sent to their location
- Housing Officers generally knew tenants quite well and if there was a known aggressive tenant then two Housing Officers would be sent. As part of the new Housing Management System, officers could make notes of tenants that were aggressive which would be uploaded to the main system and accessed by the whole team
- The business iPhones given to Housing Officers were encrypted by Apple security and also had encryption within the Housing Management app itself as it required the officer to input a password when logging into the app. Nothing was stored on the mobile devices apart from photos which would be deleted after they had been put into the system

Close of meeting

The meeting ended at 20:32pm.