

Housing Services Cabinet Committee

Thursday, 3 February 2022

7.30 pm

Present:

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

Councillors: Ejaz Aslam
Dakota Dibben
Sarah Gow
Baljit Hayre
Leslie Hills
Leslie Hoskins
Lyn Milner
Leslie Pearton

Nicole Arthur Service Manager (Housing Operations)
Victoria May Service Manager (Housing Options)
Chris Wakeford Committee Services Officer, Scrutiny (minutes)

24. Apologies

An apology for absence was received from Cllr Peter Scollard and Cllr Sarah Gow attended as his substitute. An apology for absence was received from Daniel Killian, Director (Housing).

25. Minutes

The minutes of the meeting of the Committee held on Monday, 15 November 2022 were agreed and signed by the Chair.

26. Declarations of Interest

No declarations of interest were made.

27. Working safely in Council Housing

The Service Manager (Housing Operations) outlined the report and gave assurances to the Housing Services Cabinet Committee on how DSO Building Management meets compliance with the general requirements of the Health and Safety at Work Act 1974 and the more specific requirements of the Construction Design & Management Regulations 2015 (CDM)

The Service Manager (Housing Operations) highlighted the following:

- The CDM Officer carries out scheduled and unannounced site inspections on the Council's contractors and provides comprehensive reports on a monthly basis to

the relevant Project Manager and the Principal Contractor. The inspection report focuses on elements of the project that are specific to CDM Regulations

The inspection report will recommend remedial actions, further control measures and deadlines to track progress and will be reviewed at contract meetings

- The voids, responsive repairs and in-house work programmes are also subject to periodic site inspections by the CDM Officer with a subsequent follow up report. Unlike major projects not all of the elements of the CDM Regulations apply, however, to ensure best practice, the managers and supervisors within the service adopt a similar approach when establishing safe systems of work.
- Over the last three years, five accidents/ injuries have occurred amongst the operational workforce which have involved small injuries such as bruising as banging of hands which is low for this sector and also taking into account that over 65,000 repair jobs were undertaken during this period as well as refurbishment on 813 empty properties.
- There are sufficient health and safety arrangements in place across DSO Building Management that will continually be reviewed and improved upon, and this should give Housing Committee confidence in the working practices and processes of the service.

Following questions and comments from Members, the Service Manager (Housing Operations) highlighted the following:

- The Council has a corporate Lone Working Policy and there is also a specific policy in place within the Housing Operations team to ensure the safety of the workforce. The Oneserve Field Service Management system and tracking systems on work vehicles allows the Council to carefully monitor staff and look after their welfare.
- There is a duty officer who manages the out of hours service. Staff go out in pairs in the evening with a lone working device and check in with the duty officer.
- The Council provides specialist manual handling training to its staff as it is important to protect workers from injury.
- The Service Manager (Housing Operations) will review the wording used at paragraph 4.2.2 of the report to reflect the fact that staff must report any accidents or incidents to enable changes in work practices or amendments to risk assessments.
- The Council tries to be as proactive as possible and keep neighbours informed of any works that are going on.
- Staff used to be CRB cleared but the requirements then changed to DBS checks and the Council weren't able to get DBS checks for staff.
- In relation to extra job requests when on site; staff make an assessment on a case-by-case basis. If the Council is responsible for the work and the job can be done within the allocated time, staff will complete the work, but it has to be recorded as an extra job.

The Committee noted the report.

28. Draft Temporary Accommodation Policy

The Service Manager (Housing Options) provided the Committee with a draft policy that details the councils approach to placements into temporary accommodation, including consideration of the statutory requirements on Councils and introducing charging under s206(2) Housing Act 1996 to charge homeless people for temporary accommodation. Members are requested to provide feedback on the policy prior to it being ratified by the Chair of Housing Services Cabinet Committee as Cabinet Member for Housing.

The Service Manager (Housing Options) highlighted the following:

- Whilst the majority of Temporary Accommodation (TA) placements are currently offered within the borough, increasing demand coupled with the decreasing supply of suitable accommodation locally inevitably means that the service is reliant on nightly-paid options both in and outside the Gravesham borough.
- The Council aimed to use its own housing stock however as homeless approaches increase, over time this has had to be supplemented with nightly paid units managed by private sector housing providers both within and outside the borough. It is important that the council is satisfied that accommodation offered to households is suitable and reasonable to occupy. In addition, with the TA budget overspent it is important to obtain reasonable contributions towards the temporary accommodation costs, which are impacting the general fund.
- There are currently 161 households in temporary accommodation of which 76 are GBC accommodation and 85 are in nightly-paid accommodation. 112 households have been accepted as homeless under the Housing Act 1996 (amended 2202) and therefore there is a duty to find a housing pathway so that the Council can discharge their legal duty to them.
- The Council now has a Temporary Accommodation Officer with a new system in place to monitor the work they are carrying out.

Following questions and comments from Members, the Service Manager (Housing Options) highlighted the following:

- The budget for Temporary Accommodation is £50,000 a year and the Council is currently going a long way over that which is having an impact on the General Fund. The Housing Revenue Account is also affected but the exact details won't be known until the end of the year.
- There isn't a 'typical' homeless person or family; it can happen to anyone.
- Rates in Gravesham: 1 Bedroom Rate £155.34, 2 Bedroom Rate £195.62, 3 Bedroom Rate £241.64, 4 Bedroom Rate £299.18
- The government provides a homeless grant each year; in Kent the majority of the grant is used for TA costs due to the very high demand.
- After the eviction ban was lifted by the government, there have been more Section 21 and Section 8 notices as well as more domestic abuse victims (both male and female)
- Quite often victims of domestic abuse still want to stay in the local area but for those who wish to leave the Borough the Council works with other local authorities.
- Since April, the Council have opened 1033 cases where people have stated that they are about to be evicted. The Service Manager (Housing Options) agreed to circulate the full statistics on this matter to the Committee.

- The average waiting time to get a 3 bedroom home depends on a households band but it can be up to 3 years for some homes. Since then the Service Manager has run a report:

Type / Size	Longest wait	Average wait
Sheltered accommodation	28 years	13 months
Studio general needs	9 years	14 months
1-bed general needs	29 years	16 months
2-bed flat or maisonette	14 years	14 months
2-bed house	12 years	17 months
3-bed flat or maisonette	15 years	17 months
3-bed house	14 years	16 months
4-bed	14 years	23 months
5-bed	4 years	16 months

- When looking at a household in Temporary Accommodation; once the Council know it has a legal duty to help it will move the household into TA within its own stock. Some households aren't sustaining their tenancies so can't be converted to a 2 year introductory tenancy.
- The Service Manager (Housing Options) agreed to look into the average length of stay in TA and circulate to the Committee. This is a piece of work that will take some time.
- Social housing is the most relied upon but also the most difficult to access.
- If a person is accepted as homeless and the Council has a legal duty this will enable them to join the register without meeting the residential criteria. It is an offence to be dishonest on a homeless application and therefore with thorough investigations it is unlikely this would be missed.
- The GBC Housing Department was restructured because it was crucial the Council had dedicated officers to work with private landlords to prevent homelessness.
- The Council wouldn't look at a medical diagnosis in isolation when considering the suitability of Temporary Accommodation as there are a number of factors to consider.
- The Council will seek to ensure all placements in TA are within 45 minutes travelling distance each way of any primary schools and 75 minutes each way for secondary schools. This relates to all forms of travel and is in line with Kent County Council guidance.
- The out of hours service has been added to officer job descriptions and is now a very responsive service that can offer meaningful advice and decision making.
- The 'shared facilities' mentioned in Section 6 of the policy refer to a house of multiple occupation. Each household would have their own room and there are no families sharing accommodation together.
- The criteria around homelessness is complex; the Council has to determine if a person has made themselves homeless.
- The Council does its best to meet the peoples needs with Temporary Accommodation, but with the limited supply this is challenging.
- The Council is keen to work with partners and private landlords to help prevent homelessness.
- The Council has recruited a Homeless Prevention Manager who will start in March. The role will involve working closely with private landlords and offering support where needed.
- All families are currently in self-contained accommodation in Gravesham.

- London Boroughs are buying properties in Kent because they are cheaper. One local authority should notify the other if a person is placed in Temporary Accommodation in their Borough.
- The Council doesn't wait for court orders before providing assistance to people who are being evicted.
- The Council is working towards tackling the small minority of rogue landlords and rogue tenants.

The Chair and Service Manager (Housing Options) agreed to look at training for Members who had not attended the previous homeless and allocations training sessions.

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

Close of meeting

The meeting ended at 8.35 pm