

Housing Services Cabinet Committee

Tuesday, 21 March 2023

7.30 pm

Present:

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

Councillors: Ejaz Aslam
 John Caller
 Leslie Hoskins
 Nirmal Khabra
 Lyn Milner
 Leslie Pearton

Daniel Killian	Director (Housing)
Victoria May	Service Manager (Housing Options)
Jody Bulman	Service Manager (Housing Landlord Services)
Jill Rogers	Neighbourhood Housing Manager
Kudu Omogbai	Independent Living Service Manager
Florentina Bela	Neighbourhood Partnership Manager
Clare Reynolds	Private Sector Housing Manager
Ben Clarke	Committee Services Officer (Minutes)

7. Apologies for Absence

Apologies for absence was received from Cllr Hayre, Cllr Mulheran and Cllr Hills (Cllr Khabra and Cllr Caller substituted).

8. Minutes

The minutes of the meeting of the Committee held on Thursday, 02 February 2023 were signed by the Chair.

9. Declarations of Interest

No declarations of interest were made.

10. Agenda Order Change

The Chair advised that agenda item 6 would be considered at item 8 instead.

11. Allocations Scheme Update

The Committee received a presentation from the Service Manager (Housing Options) on the Allocations Scheme.

The presentation had been published to the website and could be accessed via the below link:

- [Allocations Policy Presentation](#)

Following the presentation, the Service Manager (Housing Options) and the Service Manager (Housing Landlord Services) answered Members questions

- The Holding Hands Policy was currently in review, but it was still implemented to assist tenants when they wanted to downsize their home.
- When tenants completed their application, there was an option to fill out if they were armed forces; the armed forces priority also extended to ex-armed forces and the spouses of deceased armed forces. In the new banding, all the armed forces tenants came under Band A – Critical Housing Need
- The new Banding System was streamlined and within those bands were reasons for how each tenant was put into each band, which was outlined in the presentation:
 - Band A – Critical Housing Need
 - Band B – Urgent Housing Need
 - Band C – Reasonable Preference
 - Band D – General Housing Need
- With regards to the Bedroom Tax being charged to disabled tenants, there were different regulations under Housing Benefit; the Service Manager (Housing Options) agreed to circulate a proper response with the minutes.
- Choice based lettings were available to all Council tenants but a tenant providing a very narrow search area would likely result in the tenant waiting years to move; a tenant was much more likely to be able to move if they cast a wider net around the Borough. The Team actively called tenants that had been on the list for years and hadn't bid for available properties to encourage them to broaden their search for a better to chance to move house.
- The allocation of properties was done by the banding but the banding date was also important as tenants that had applied earlier would be shortlisted before those that had applied more recently; for example, those tenants on the waiting list for the longest would receive priority and bump them up higher within the banding reasons.
- With regards to waiting times, tenants that didn't bid on any properties and only wanted a very specific house in a specific area such as a three-bed semi-detached in Meopham, would be waiting for a longer time than someone who bid on numerous available properties all over the Borough.
- One of Band A's reasoning was urgent medical care; an example being a tenant being wheelchair bound and living in a property with stair only access that wasn't suited to their needs. Medium medical care reloaning came under Band C and an example was a tenant with less severe disabilities that lived in a property that they could manage, but it wasn't perfectly suited to their needs. When medical reasoning was part of a tenants banding there wasn't a one size fits all classification; many different surrounding facts were taken into account for each individual case. Within Gravesham many tenants prioritized medical need over overcrowding reasons
- The number of three-bedroom properties with one tenant in residence who was looking to downsize to somewhere else in the Borough was relatively low.

Following a discussion on managing tenants' expectations on waiting for certain types of properties, Members were encouraged to inform residents that the wider their search the more likely they were to move into an available property. The Director (Housing) informed

Members that information on average waiting times was a snapshot in time and not meaningful data due to the varying circumstances that can influence the data.

The Committee asked that, during housing training to Members in the new financial year, a section be included that advised Members to explain that chances of tenants moving to a different property were higher when they searched Borough wide.

The Committee thanked the Service Manager (Housing Options) for a clear and informative presentation.

12. Draft Damp & Mould Policy - Council Housing

The Committee received a report which informed them of the proposed Damp, Mould and Condensation Policy and Members comments were sought prior to the policy being signed off by the Portfolio Holder, Housing Services.

The proposed policy outlined the processes when damp, mould and condensation was reported by tenants or identified by the Council and the action that would be taken and support that would be given to tenants to resolve the issues. It also included how damp and mould should be reported by tenants and ensured that the process for them to do so was straightforward. The policy also outlined what the Council did to ensure that preventative measures were in place to reduce the number of cases that were received including the introduction of an 'Every Visit Counts' approach which ensured all frontline officers across the Housing directorate, who carried out home visits, took responsibility for reporting damp, mould, and condensation in the Councils homes. The Council had taken a 'blameless' approach to the Policy so that instead of placing blame on the tenants, the team would work with the tenants to get rid of the mould as soon as possible and offer advice on how to stop it reoccurring in the future.

Members praised the Policy and were happy to see that different types of mould were outlined for tenants and that the Council worked with all tenants regardless of how the mould had occurred.

The Chair asked that the positive feedback be taken back to the Service Manager (Housing Operations).

13. Corporate Performance Report: Q3 2022-23

The Committee were presented with an update against the Performance Management Framework, as introduced within the Council's Corporate Plan, Quarter Three 2022-23 (October to December 2022).

The Director (Housing) advised that appendix two to the report held an overview of the council's performance against the Corporate Plan for Quarter Three 2022-23, covering the period October to December 2022.

The Director (Housing) directed Members attention to:

- PI15 – The Performance indicator had no figure for quarter three due to it being an annual indicator but included an update on the six affordable homes handed over to Town and Country Housing for letting via Kent Home Choice

- PI20 – The total number of households in temporary accommodation in quarter three had increased but The Service Manager (Housing Options) and her team were working hard to mitigate the impact of the additional temporary accommodation needs. The team were looking to establish a social lettings agency in the future to alleviate the pressure of the rise in temporary accommodation.

14. Housing Service Progress 2019-2023

The Director (Housing Services) introduced the report and advised that in 2019, the Council adopted an ambitious Corporate Plan following a period of consultation with residents. Within that plan, there were specific commitments in relation to Housing in the Borough and the report sought to outline to Members a summary of progress made in relation to those commitments, and how service changes and improvements have had an impact on both the Council and the community it served over the last four years.

The Director (Housing) Services) had invited several managers from Housing to attend the Committee tonight to be able to showcase some of their work and highlight key improvements to Members.

Housing Landlord Services

The Service Manager (Housing Landlord Services) highlighted several key areas of changes/improvements from the Housing Land Services Department:

- Restructure of the Sheltered Housing Team
- Introduction of Capital Project
- Review of Tenant Engagement Team
- Increased Tenant Engagement including the development of a tenant and leaseholder engagement strategy with a three-year action plan

A full list of the changes/improvements to the Housing Landlord Services department for 2019-23, their link to the Corporate Plan and the benefits of each change/improvement to the Council could be found on pages 13-15 of the report.

Housing Options

The Service Manager (Housing Options) highlighted several key areas of changes/improvements from the Housing Options Department:

- Allocations Policy & introduction of Allocations Panel
- Consulted on and implemented a new staffing structure.
- Introduction of Financial penalties
- Housing Enforcement Policy review
- Introducing HMO Licence applications
- Wrotham Road Rough Sleeping Provision/Next Steps Funding
- Rough Sleeping Initiative Funding (RSI4 2021/22)

The Rough Sleeping Partnership Manager outlined further key points regarding her work with rough sleepers in the Borough:

- In 2021, the Rough Sleeping Service was evaluated, and a new multi-agency partnership was formed to ensure all needs of the vulnerable people could be addressed. The Partnership included local communities, Churches, Kent Police, House of Mercy, Job Centre, Servico Outreach Services and Northgate Mind. Additionally, there were mental health support services and a Porchlight Alcohol & drug abuse officer who worked with residents placed in the Wrotham Road Council accommodation.
- The Partnership was extremely effective and meant that all partners were giving out the same information to those that were supported ensuring there wasn't any conflicting advice given.

A full list of the changes/improvements to the Housing Options department for 2019-23, their link to the Corporate Plan and the benefits of each change/improvement to the Council could be found on pages 21-24 of the report.

Housing Development & Enabling

The Director (Housing) highlighted several key areas of changes/improvements from the Housing Development & Enabling department:

- Creation of an Investment Partnership to help accelerate affordable house building.
- Directly developing (or currently in planning) 200 council homes across the Borough
- Formed a consortium with Elizabeth Huggins Almshouses in order to access £500,000 of Homes England funding.

A full list of the changes/improvements to the Housing Development & Enabling department for 2019-23, their link to the Corporate Plan and the benefits of each change/improvement to the Council could be found on pages 20-21 of the report.

Housing Operations

The Director (Housing) highlighted several key areas of changes/ improvements from the Housing Operations department:

- Introduced Phase 2 expansion of the workforce – In 2016, there were only 26 employees in place to carry out plumbing/carpentry/electrical work in Council Houses with a large reliance on external contractors. 40% of the Councils repairs work was carried out by external contractors which was costly and meant the Council couldn't ensure the quality of service provided or maintain influence over all of the work carried out. Since the restructure the workforce had been increased to 76 craft workers with the majority of work conducted in house with only minimal reliance on external contractors ensuring the Council had complete control of the works carried out and gave the opportunity for more local people to work for the Council
- Introduction of an Estate Management Policy
- Introduction of Rate my estate inspection and guide
- Introduction of an Energy & Sustainability Team
- Successfully securing £1.5million of funding through various Government funding streams to retrofit the housing stock helping to meet the Councils Carbon Neutral Pledge and saving customers money on their energy bills

A full list of the changes/improvements to the Housing Operations department for 2019-23, their link to the Corporate Plan and the benefits of each change/improvement to the Council could be found on pages 16-20 of the report.

Concern was raised by a Member regarding several anti-social behaviour cases in the Whitehill ward and the lack of progress report on anti-social behaviour cases compared to other areas of Housing.

In response to the Members concern, the Director (Housing) stated that it was an unfair comparison as that report outlined progress made over the last four years in different areas of Housing and the new Anti-Social behaviour Policy had only been in effect for one month so the progress of the Policy could not be measured accurately in the report at this time.

In addition, the Service Manager (Housing Landlord Services) advised that she was aware of the cases that the Member was referring to and had provided responses to those cases outside of the meeting.

The Service Manager (Housing Landlord Services) further added that she was proud of the new ASB policy as staff now had a clear process to follow which wasn't available to them prior to implementation of the Policy. Tenant engagement was classified as a key part of the policy and officers would remain in contact with residents during the case and following conclusion of a case to ensure that the residents were supported; the Policy would ensure residents were supported and protected by the Council moving forward.

The Committee praised the excellent work of the officers over the last four years in improving the service and asked that their thanks be passed to the whole department; Members also noted the Excellent Housing Professional award won by the Neighbourhood Partnership Manager and commended her for it.

The Chair thanked the officers for their informative presentations and the hard work that they put into improving the efficiency of the Housing Department over the last four years.

The Chair also thanked Members for their participation in the Housing Services Committee over the last year.

The Chair advised that this was the last meeting the Service Manager (Housing Landlord Services) would be attending as she was leaving the Council and Members wished the Service Manager (Housing Landlord Services) good luck in her new job.

Close of meeting

The meeting ended at 20:42pm.