

Housing Services Cabinet Committee

Tuesday, 19 March 2024

7.30 pm

Present:

Cllr Jenny Wallace (Chair)

Councillors: Deborah Croxton
Baljit Hayre
Lyn Milner
Leslie Pearton
Emma Elliott
David Beattie
Alan Metcalf
Tony Rana

Nicole Arthur Head of Housing Assets
Andrew Johnson Head of Neighbourhood Services
Vicky May Head of Housing Solutions
Kenan Dogan Housing Options Manager
Carlie Simmonds Committee Services Manager (Minutes)

23. Apologies

Apologies for absence were received from Cllrs Ejaz Aslam, Jordan Meade and Christina Rolles. Cllrs David Beattie, Alan Metcalf and Tony Rana attended as their substitutes.

24. Minutes

The minutes of the meeting held on Thursday 1 February 2024 were signed by the Chair.

25. Declarations of Interest

No declarations of interest were made.

26. Corporate Performance: Quarter Three 2023-24

The Committee was informed that, in October 2023, the Council formally adopted its Corporate Plan for 2023-27. The plan established the authority's ambition for the Borough, complete with a suite of corporate objectives and supporting policy commitments that will shape the Council's activities over the four-year administrative period. In order to evaluate if the Council was effectively achieving against its stated policy commitments, and was ultimately delivering consistently high-quality services, a sound performance management process was implemented. Developed by Senior Council Officers and Cabinet Portfolio Holders, the Council's Corporate Plan introduced a Performance Management Framework (PMF) that formed the basis of reporting corporate performance to Members and residents.

The Committee was therefore presented with an update against the PMF, in relation to those performance measures that fall within the remit of the Housing Services Cabinet Committee for Quarter Three 2023-24 (October to December 2023).

The Head of Housing Assets provided the Committee with an overview of each of the performance measures and responded to the questions/comments raised by Members.

The Committee noted the report.

27. Private Rented Sector Offer Policy

The Chair welcomed Kenan Dogan, Housing Options Manager, to his first meeting of the Housing Services Cabinet Committee.

The Housing Options Manager informed the Committee that, as part of managing a Housing Options Service, all local authorities were required to discharge their homeless duty in line with the Homelessness Reduction Act 2017.

The Localism Act 2011 (sections 148 and 149) introduced provisions which enabled the Council to bring its statutory housing duty under section 193 of the Housing Act 1996 (as amended) to an end, by making an offer of a private rented sector tenancy rather than a social housing tenancy.

The Council's Housing Allocation Scheme sets out who will be offered social housing and how they will be prioritised. In order to offer private rented accommodation, the Council needed to have a separate policy in place; the Private Rented Sector Offer policy.

The policy will allow the Council to make an offer of accommodation to people experiencing homelessness, working alongside a series of other tools to help prevent people's homelessness and move people on from costly and unsettled temporary accommodation, and bring its statutory duty to an end.

The policy would be applied on a case-by-case basis. However, it would consider a series of groups that would ordinarily be prioritised for private rented accommodation; the report detailed the guiding principles that would be applied when making a private rented sector offer. Prior to making an offer, the Council would undertake a suitability assessment to identify affordability and whether the household was already engaged in local services within a particular area, such as schools and medical services. The household would also be supported if moving out of area.

It was noted that households may be offered private rented accommodation outside of the Borough, where appropriate, for example those households may already be living outside of the Borough and/or cannot stay in Gravesham for a particular reason such as fleeing domestic violence or abuse.

Only one suitable offer would need to be made in order for the Council to bring its statutory duty to an end; this included those cases where a household may refuse an offer. In those circumstances, the policy provided a safety net in that those households would have a statutory right for review and/or a reapplication duty.

The Committee was informed that Gravesham, and Kent, faced severe housing pressures across all tenures. A combination of historic and on-going lack of new supply, a reduction in the number of available lets across the social housing stock, welfare reform, and rising property prices and rents, had led to rapidly increasing, and unmet, demand for social housing. This increasing demand had recently started to translate into acute pressure for

temporary accommodation. The latest data, both national and local, showed that demand for temporary bed spaces had doubled in two years. Demand remained high and despite a re-focus on preventing homelessness by the Council's front line Housing Options team, the numbers in nightly paid accommodation had not reduced.

Adopting the Private Rented Sector Offer policy will increase the Council's abilities to best meet its statutory duties, through providing an additional option to help people access settled accommodation and support the Council to reduce costs. It will also bring the Council in line with many other local authorities who actively make Private Rented Sector Offers to homeless households. The policy takes into account the need to make offers on a case-by-case basis and ensure that all offers of accommodation are suitable and affordable for households. It will help improve people's life chances and move more quickly into settled accommodation, ending their homelessness. The policy provided a safety net for people who are made an offer of accommodation, including a statutory right to review, a reapplication duty and support if moving out of area.

The Committee was invited to review and comment on the policy.

The Chair of the Committee highlighted that the Council will check the condition and standard of the properties prior to them being offered for accommodation where practicable.

It was noted that Prince William had announced plans to end homelessness therefore the Committee asked whether funding would become available via Prince William's plans/initiatives. The Head of Housing Solutions advised that in order to end/tackle homelessness then funding would need to be allocated.

The Committee noted the report.

28. Temporary Accommodation Update

The Committee was presented with a report which detailed the current national and local climate in relation to temporary accommodation (TA) and associated spend, the impact it was having on the organisation and what was being done (now and in the future) to mitigate the impact.

The Head of Housing Solutions advised that it was not uncommon for Councils to spend on TA however it had increased tenfold or more since 2012, both nationally and locally. A growing number of Councils were now spending millions of pounds a year on TA. In addition to the increase demand for TA, rough sleeping had also increased.

In terms of the position within Kent, a recent report by the District Council Network (DCN) highlighted, as of June 2023, the number of households in TA in district areas had risen by 16% compared to the same time in 2022. In addition, there were over 1,550 more households with children in TA which was a 24% increase compared to the same period in 2022. There had also been a 10% increase in housing registers between 2020 and 2023 meaning almost 31,000 additional households were now waiting to access social housing.

Despite Autumn Statement measures, the cost of TA and homelessness services continued to threaten the financial sustainability of some Councils and puts them at risk of having to issue section 114 notices. Total district Council spend on TA was £216m in 2022-23 compared to £66m in 2017-18 i.e. an increase of 228% over 5 years.

The DCN also reported that Housing Benefit subsidy now covered just 38% of district councils' TA costs on average. In some cases, it was less than 20% dependent on the area. This compared to around 90% in 2011 when the cap was introduced.

Section 2.4 of the report demonstrated the subsidy loss to Gravesham per week per placement.

The Head of Housing Solutions advised that over the last five years Gravesham had seen a significant increase in homelessness and demand for TA. 1,727 households approached the Housing Options Service between April 2023 – February 2024 claiming to be homeless or in threat of becoming homeless. Of these approaches and subsequent assessments, 188 new TA placements were made as, following a robust assessment, officers were satisfied that the households were eligible, homeless and in priority need.

Since April 2023, there had been a steady increase in the numbers of households requiring TA and a consistent reliance on nightly paid which was the most expensive forms of TA. Gravesham currently had 245 households in TA of which there were 130 households in nightly paid accommodation by various providers. There were currently 37 households outside of the Borough with an aim (where appropriate) to bring them back into Borough if and when suitable housing was to be found. Gravesham predominately used self-contained units and for some single households, shared HMO accommodation would be utilised.

The cost of TA was monitored regularly and reported monthly. All officers within Housing Services were continually adjusting the service to ensure that early intervention takes place to increase prevention activities and were actively progressing various work streams to mitigate the financial impact on the Council, however as quick as solutions were being found, the demand was increasing. There had also been considerable efforts in ensuring the service maximises income where practicable.

Section 5 of the report outlined the short-term opportunities created to reduce the dependency and use of nightly paid accommodation and section 6 of the report detailed the further/long-term opportunities.

The Head of Housing Solutions advised that Housing Services had attended various forums that were lobbying to Government to bring about change and whilst the increase of local housing allowance on 1 April 2024 was positive, it was only addressing part of the issues. The biggest impact to all local authorities was the subsidy rules around TA.

The Head of Housing Solutions advised that she would continue to regularly report to Management Team and all officers were actively considering new and creative solutions in addition to what was already being done.

The Committee considered the report and highlighted the following:-

- was the average loss per week to the Council always negative. The Head of Housing Solutions advised that, due to the current subsidy rules, it would always be a losing/negative figure; and
- was the Council ensuring that void properties where being renovated/repared in a timely manner in order to be available as soon as practicable. The Head of Housing Solutions advised that the team regularly monitor upcoming void properties and will therefore assess and liaise with the Repairs and Maintenance team to ensure that void properties become available as soon as practicable.

The Committee acknowledged the homeless challenges/impact detailed within the report and noted that they were outside of the Council's control. The Committee thanked the Housing Services team for the hard work being undertaken to try to mitigate the impact.

The Committee noted the report.

Close of meeting

The meeting ended at 8.18 pm.