

Housing Services Cabinet Committee

Thursday, 01 February 2024

19.30 pm

Present:

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

Councillors: Ejaz Aslam
Deborah Croxton
Baljit Hayre
Lyn Milner
Leslie Pearton
Emma Elliott
Jordan Meade

Daniel Killian Director (Housing)
Nicole Arthur Head of Housing Assets
Andrew Johnson Head of Neighbourhood Services
Ben Clarke Committee Services Officer (Minutes)

16. Apologies for Absence

An apology for absence was received from Cllr Emma Elliott (Cllr Alan Metcalf substituted).

17. Minutes

The minutes of the meeting of the Committee held on Monday, 13 November 2023 were signed by the Chair.

18. Declarations of Interest

No declarations of interest were made.

19. Springvale Court - Decarbonisation Project

The Committee received a presentation on the decarbonisation project at Springvale Court.

The presentation has been published and can be accessed through the below link:

- [\(Public Pack\)Supplementary - Springvale Court - Decarbonisation Project Presentation Agenda Supplement for Housing Services Cabinet Committee, 01/02/2024 19:30 \(gravesham.gov.uk\)](#)

Members were also shown a video of a different development that had undergone the works that would be carried out at Springvale Court as well as the positive testimonies from residents living at the site.

The Director (Housing) further explained that similar schemes to Springvale Court would be brought forward in the future, and he advised Members that when a new scheme was

announced in their wards, they may be contacted by worried residents. However, the Director (Housing) assured Members that a significant amount of work had gone into the planning of each scheme and his team would help assuage any concerns that residents may have.

In response to a Members question regarding future projects and the wider circulation of the video, the Head of Housing Assets advised that the video was only recently created, and the plan was to upload it to the Councils website and use it to engage with residents of other schemes that would benefit from the works. With regards to future plans, the team were looking at Independent Living Schemes in the Borough as the works would mitigate the current high costs for communal heating and lighting and there were no leaseholders living in the buildings making it easier for the works to be completed. The team were reviewing key schemes and work would be carried out in a variety of areas in the next financial year.

The Chair thanked the Head of Housing Assets for an informative presentation.

20. Review of Repairs & Maintenance Policy

The Committee was informed of the proposed revisions to the Housing Assets Repairs & Maintenance Policy and support for the revisions was sought.

The Head of Housing Assets explained that the landscape for landlords had changed drastically since the implementation of the original Repairs & Maintenance Policy in 2017, and whilst the policy had had a desk top review conducted annually, it was necessary to undertake a fundamental review due to changes outlined below:

- Introduction of Tenant Satisfaction Measures
- Social Housing White Paper
- Disrepair Claims
- Spotlight on Damp and Mould
- Awaab's Law
- Consumer Standards

The Head of Housing Assets directed Members to appendix two which summarised the amendments made to the Repairs & Maintenance Policy with an explanation as to why each revision had been made.

Concern was raised by a Member over the removal of the Assisted Re-Decoration Scheme and asked that the 'Equality Impact Assessment' box in the report be amended to advise that elderly and disabled people would be affected negatively by the removal of the scheme.

The Head of Housing Assets explained that the Assisted Re-Decoration Scheme was stopped during Covid and work, since the pandemic, had been focused primarily on the statutory work that had to be completed. The scheme wasn't just for elderly and disabled residents and the Council ensured that all of the Independent Living schemes in the Borough were well maintained, and each unit was already fully decorated prior to residents moving in. However, with any policy, there was a certain degree of discretion that could be exercised and assistance with re-decoration could be offered to individual cases if it was in the Councils and residents' best interests.

The Director (Housing) further clarified that the Assisted Re-Decoration Scheme had not been available or in demand for a long time; instead there had been a focus on the delivery of service for all residents. Money had been spent on improving the standard of void properties in the Borough in order to move families into those properties. The Director (Housing) advised that in the past, officers attended properties that had requested assisted redecoration and had found the properties to be in good condition and the residents just wanting company. With those cases, the residents were signposted to the relevant support organisations and discretion was applied where required.

The Head of Housing Assets added that the teams' discretionary powers were not limited to re-decorating and there were a number of other works offered on a case-by-case basis. Following further discussion, the Chair agreed that a clause would be added to the policy advising that the Council had flexibility with a number of works that could be undertaken, and discretionary powers could be used on a case-by-case basis.

Members supported the revisions to the policy.

21. Professional Standards in Housing

The Committee were provided with a presentation on the professional standards in Housing.

The presentation has been published and can be accessed through the below link:

- [\(Public Pack\)Supplementary - Professional Standards in Housing Presentation & Background Information Agenda Supplement for Housing Services Cabinet Committee, 01/02/2024 19:30 \(gravesham.gov.uk\)](#)

The Chair praised the presentation and advised that it was an important step in improving the Housing Service; the necessary officers of various Housing teams would be encouraged to complete the qualification.

The Chair reminded the Committee that there was a significant amount of Government legislation coming into effect in the future and it was prudent of the Council to get ahead of its release.

Following the presentation, a number of concerns were raised by the Committee:

- Was the overall cost of administering the Chartered Institute of Housing (CIH) professional qualification to an unknown amount of Housing Officers best value for money when it was not known how much value the qualification would bring to the organisation
- Officers spending time working on the qualification would affect the operational ability of the Housing Teams and impact the residents.
- Were the CIH's code of conduct and principles aligned with the Council own existing policies
- Were Legal Services staying abreast of the new legislation changes coming into effect
- Were the changes proposed being proposed too early before the legislation had made it clear what was required and how would the Council ensure staff stayed within the organisation once they had completed the training

In response to Member concerns, the following points were made:

- The Head of Neighbourhood Services explained that it was not currently known what level of qualification the Regulator of Social Housing was going to set as a minimum requirement nor how senior the officer had to be to require the qualification in their role, although it was likely to be senior officers such as Heads of Service and Directors.
- The Director (Housing) explained that as the Council was an employer and landlord it was important to give staff access to the tools that allowed them to do their job to an excellent standard. The CIH were the nationally recognised professional body for Housing Officers, and it was important that that level of professionalism was implemented into Gravesham's Housing Service and officers could be held accountable against those professional standards. The cost of the qualifications was minimal when compared to the professional standards that the qualification would incorporate into the service. To alleviate Members concerns, the Director (Housing) advised that he would bring a report back to committee to outline the benefits of the professional standards to both the Council and its tenants
- The Director (Housing) clarified that there was a difference between the qualifications and membership of the CIH. Membership of the CIH meant that officers would have access to a CIH portal which gave them resources and guidance in areas such as arrears, tenancy management and other Housing matters, which would benefit the residents. Whereas the qualification was a paid for course which only senior officers in Housing would undertake; a small portion of senior officer's time would be required to be spent on the qualification, but the benefits outweighed the negatives as the qualification would make them a professional in Housing and that additional level of expertise would improve the Housing Service in Gravesham for all residents. The CIH was aligned with the Nolan Principles and the code of conduct for officers was very similar to Gravesham's own code of conduct; if an officer breached the CIH's code of conduct it would likely breach the Councils existing policy and trigger a disciplinary procedure.
- The Councils approach embedding the CIH professional standards in to the service was not unique; most local authorities and Housing Associations in Kent facilitated access to the CIH portal for their staff. In terms of prioritizing the investment put into Council officers, the Director (Housing) explained that any staff member that underwent a qualification paid for by the Council signed a training agreement which protected the investment for a certain number of years. If a staff member left the Council during the length of the agreement, then they would be expected to repay that original investment.
- The Director (Housing) confirmed that Legal undertook horizon scanning but the Housing Service also kept abreast of legislation changes as they were professionals in Housing, and it was a key responsibility. The Housing Service would still contact Legal Services for advice on changes in legislation
- The Head of Neighbourhood Services advised that the additional level of professional training should improve the delivery of the service and reduce the amount of money that had to be spent on complaint resolution litigation

The Chair thanked the Committee for the information discussion and agreed with the Director (Housing) that a report be brought back to committee once the standards had been embedded within the teams.

22. Update on Damp & Mould Action Plan

The Committee was provided with a report that updated them on the progress that had been delivered in relation to the Damp and Mould Action Plan implemented following the Housing Ombudsman report addressing the issue of damp and mould called “Spotlight on: Damp and mould”.

The Head of Housing Assets took Member through the report and gave a detailed outline of each section:

- A number of those actions for the Damp and Mould Action Plan had been implemented since the report was taken to Housing Services Cabinet Committee in March 2022 and the updates to the action plan could be found in Appendix 1
- A breakdown of the key actions that had been implemented were listed in section two of the report
- Section three outlined the creation of the Healthy Homes Task Force and its primary aim to discuss and identify ways that the Council could be more proactive as a landlord to deal with the rising cases of damp and mould
- Section four confirmed the Council's acknowledgment of the seriousness of damp and mould as a safety issue that had to be addressed in an appropriate and timely manner. In light of the increased responsibility, monitoring of the Council's response to damp and mould had been transferred to the Building Safety team and the Compliance Dashboard which would be presented to Management Team quarterly and would be expanded to include data on damp and mould

Several suggestions were made by the Committee:

- Removing mould and damp safely was important for the health of the residents and to ensure tragedies such as the death of Awaab Ishak didn't happen again however educating the public should also still be a priority. By providing education around how to prevent mould from forming, proper room ventilation and other general housekeeping matters there would be less houses suffering from mould and damp. A leaflet should be created which could be given to all Gravesham tenants informing them of the basics such as opening windows, proper room ventilation and not drying wet clothes inside their homes
- All Members should be made aware of the processes for reporting mould and damp as Members visited residents' homes; additionally the partner approach should be widening so that external partners such as social workers, Police and KFRS could also report to the Council, properties where mould had appeared

The Head of Housing Assets agreed that in the majority of cases mould and damp was caused by condensation within the property and could be prevented by the tenant; guidance leaflets were already available and given to tenants as well as hydrometer with a traffic light system. There were also videos on the Council website which educated the public on causes of mould and public engagement ideas similar to the one created for the Springvale Court, that informed people what they should expect during the mould and damp removal process. The Head of Housing Assets had previously liaised with the Head of Housing Options about tenant education in which initial home visits were conducted, discussions had with the tenants about early signs of mould and preventative measures. A new Resident Liaison Officer had also been recruited who would help with that education.

The Director (Housing) explained that there had been a significant shift towards mould and damp removal since the Rochdale tragedy; he had attended several house visits with the Damp and Mould surveyors to see the level of mould issues in the Borough. The Director (Housing) advised that the officers were very knowledgeable and educated the tenants while carrying out inspections of properties; some tenants had never managed their own properties before and needed the additional education. There would be a more focused approach around educating tenants in the coming months.

In response to a Members question concerning the rise of 'no win, no fee' solicitor cases, the Head of Housing Assets confirmed that a lot of organizations had been affected by those cases however mould and damp was not typically targeted due to the potential risk that it had been generated within the property by the tenant. There had been a national fall in disrepair cases being taken to court over the last couple of months.

The Director (Housing) further added that there had been a change in case law where fees had been capped on the 'no win, no fees' cases and solicitors were no longer able to charge astronomical fees to their clients; prior to the change it was typical that 75% of the cost would go to the solicitors and 25% to the client.

With regard to working with Members and external partners on reporting mould, 'every visit counts' would be rolled out to Members as part of the annual Members training plan and all contractors for the Council were aware of the reporting processes in place.

The Head of Housing Assets informed Members that the scale of known mould and damp cases in Gravesham was around 5/6 out of 10 and had much improved in recent years due to the improved reactivity of the teams and the mechanisms in place to report mould in properties. When the team were aware of houses with a history of mould and had data from public health, visits would be carried out regularly.

Members noted the contents of the report, the current progress and assurances given in relation to the Council's approach to managing damp and mould in the housing stock.

Close of meeting

The meeting ended at 20:58pm.