

Housing Services Cabinet Committee

Thursday, 4 June 2020

7.30 pm

Present:

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

Councillors: Baljit Hayre
 Leslie Hills
 Leslie Hoskins
 Diane Marsh
 Lyn Milner
 Leslie Pearton
 Peter Scollard
 Frank Wardle

Nick Brown Director (Housing & Operations)
Daniel Killian Assistant Director (Housing)
Lynn Wilders Housing Manager (Needs & Improvements)
Lauren Wallis Committee Services Officer (Minutes)

1. Chair's Introduction

The Chair welcomed everyone to the first virtual meeting of the Housing Services Cabinet Committee including residents watching on YouTube. She specifically welcomed two new members of the Committee Cllr Baljit and Cllr Leslie Hills.

On behalf of the Committee, the Chair congratulated Daniel Killian on his recent appointment to the position of Assistant Director (Housing) and thanked him for his already positive impact on the service.

The Chair thanked the Housing Services team and officers across the Council for working efficiently and effectively throughout this difficult time. The staff of the Repairs and Maintenance service were highlighted as they had mostly been working from home and yet still managed to meet the sometimes complex needs of Council tenants.

The Chair also expressed her thanks to the Digital Team without whom the virtual meetings could not take place; the Committee Services Team for all their help and support and the IT Services.

2. Apologies

There were no apologies for absence.

3. Minutes

The minutes of the meeting of the Housing Services Cabinet Committee held on 12 February 2020 were signed by the Chair.

4. Declarations of Interest

Cllr Hoskins declared an other non-significant interest in that his daughter worked for the MHCLG and was the Team Leader for the Gypsy, Roma and Traveller Team.

5. Homelessness Reduction Act 2017 - Update

The Housing Operations Manager (Needs & Improvements) advised that the report was for information only and provided an update on the Council's response to the new duties to prevent and relieve homelessness introduced by the HRA in April 2018. For the past 2 years, the focus had been on prevention, and the officer gave a summary of the Council's new work processes under this legislation.

The table at 4.1 of the report showed that in 2019/20 the Council received a total of 1,484 new approaches for help. This included customers contacting the housing options team directly, those that had been referred by other council teams including the allocations team and housing income team, and those referred by external agencies under the Duty to Refer provision. Most customers were assisted at the prevention stage, with 211 households recorded as able to remain in their current home, usually by resolving issues between the landlord and tenant such as arrears or disrepair, or by a planned move to alternative accommodation. A large number of these approaches did not trigger prevention or relief duties, were resolved by initial advice or steps in the Personal Housing Plan (PHP), or were cases where the customer lost contact or disengaged with the service before the outcome could be recorded.

The following points were raised during discussion on this item:

- Following a question on the outstanding debt to the Council (set out in paragraph 3.4 of the report) and the connection between Revenues and Benefits and Housing Services processes, the officer advised that the Council was working with debtors to assist them in making arrangements to pay the debt. The Housing Needs and Improvements Manager confirmed that the Housing Options team work very closely with both Council Tax and Housing Benefits and The Assistant Director (Housing) confirmed that there was a corporate approach to debt recovery and that the teams utilised a system that joined up debts across the authority, giving complete visibility of debts for one person.
- A question was raised on the 56 days mentioned in paragraph 3.1 of the report and the Committee was advised that if a person was already homeless, then the Council owed that person a duty to relieve their homelessness for 56 days.
- The report stated 1,484 residents had been assisted and this was a record of the total number of approaches received by the Council a number of which were homeless preventions. Some people approached the Council seeking advice and some were not within 56 days of being threatened with homelessness.
- Following a request for more clarity in the recording of figures, Members were assured that all systems were being reviewed together with way the statistics were recorded which would give more clarity in the future.

- If a person was found to be intentionally homeless then that person had 14 to 28 days to find themselves somewhere to live and the person was assisted to do that even though the Council was not under a statutory duty to help.

Resolved that the report be noted.

6. Temporary Accommodation Update

The Committee was provided with an update on the Council's statutory duties in relation to the provision of temporary accommodation to homeless households, following the implementation on the Homelessness Reduction Act (HRA) 2017 on 3 April 2018.

Further to a previous report regarding the Council's homelessness prevention and relief duties, the report set out how the use of temporary accommodation had changed since the introduction of the HRA. Where a homeless person had children, was vulnerable or otherwise considered to have a priority need, then the Council has an initial duty to provide temporary accommodation during the 56 relief duty period. The Council reserved stock of around 65 to 70 general needs properties for use as Temporary Accommodation, the majority of which were one bedroom flats. Since the introduction of the HRA, the demand for this accommodation had steadily increased, from 71 placements at the end of April 2018 to 111 by the end of April 2019. Whilst the number of GBC units available for use as Temporary Accommodation remained fairly static, the number of households placed in nightly paid accommodation rose from 11 to 44 during this period. Many of the families in nightly paid accommodation were placed with providers in neighbouring boroughs due to the shortage of appropriate properties within Gravesham.

To address these issues, the Council had implemented a temporary accommodation reduction plan in November 2018, which saw a further 10 units of family sized accommodation added to the portfolio, and 20 families moved out of long term, usually overcrowded accommodation into settled homes. These actions, coupled with the proactive homelessness prevention and relief activities by the housing options team, has seen a significant fall in the number of families now living in Temporary Accommodation to 74 as at the end of March 2020, including just 7 in nightly paid accommodation as shown in Table 4.1 of the report.

The Committee noted that temporary accommodation for rough sleepers during the Covid-19 pandemic not included in this report.

Resolved that the report be noted.

7. Out of Borough Placements

The report set out the background to offering settled homes outside of the Borough as one of the ways that homelessness can be resolved. Since the freeze on LHA in 2016, the cost of renting in the private sector has become increasingly difficult for those households on a low income who rely solely or partly on housing benefit or the housing element of Universal Credit to pay their rent.

The Chair noted that training would be provided to Members on this subject when it was possible and the Cedar video had already been circulated to Councillors.

The Housing Manager (Needs & Improvements) advised that where the Council had accepted the main housing duty, to a household with children or otherwise in priority need, which did not become homeless intentionally, there is an option to discharge that duty by way of an offer of private rented accommodation. In the past year 3 families have been rehoused in this way, all within the Gravesham area. However, in cases where the Council has not accepted a duty to rehouse, 24 customers have been able in the past 12 months to secure affordable, settled housing outside the Gravesham area. The majority of these have been single people accessing the winter night shelter facility in Gravesend, or rough sleepers.

Many have relocated to Bradford and Leeds via a referral to various providers including Cedar Housing who manage a large portfolio of affordable properties in the area, and accept referrals from local authorities throughout London and the South East. Customers were able to view property details and research the facilities in the local area before they move, and the Council remains in contact with Cedar to provide virtual tours of properties that were ready to let. Assistance with travel, removal costs, supermarket vouchers and top up cards were provided, and Cedar provides a package of support to assist customers through the relocation process, and meet customers on arrival or arrange for transport to their new home and to help them to integrate into the community once they have arrived.

The following points were raised during discussions on this item:

- In relation to paragraph 2.9.1 of the report, Members were advised that LHA stood for Local Housing Allowance.
- The Committee advised that whilst most of the people who had relocated out of Borough had been very happy with their placements, two former rough sleepers had returned to Gravesham,
- It was noted that whilst officers cannot physically inspect the properties, the Council relies on organisations that send inventories and virtual tours. The date and time of the relocation is the decision of the customer and arrangements such as utilities and food parcels etc were made in advance.
- Properties were inspected by Cedar before they were allowed to be let. On a single occasion a boiler had not worked after a customer had moved in and it had been quickly resolved. Cedar had proved themselves and the Council had no concerns about this partnership.
- The local council whereby the property was located was also contacted to find out what was known about the property.
- The customer did not pay any rent in advance and arrangements were made to cover the cost of deposits, furniture and white goods. This approach had proved less costly in the longer term than temporary accommodation.
- The Assistant Director (Housing) undertook to circulate the average cost of relocation out of borough to members of the Committee,
- Following a question of time taken to investigate those customers who were likely to be interested in an out of Borough relocation, the officers advised that all options for each client were fully looked into including the income of the customer and what they could afford. Because of the high cost of rent in the Borough and in Kent, most local properties would be out of customer's reach.

Resolved that the report be noted.

8. Coronavirus: Cabinet Portfolio Impact

Members were provided with an overview of the impact if the Coronavirus (Covid-19) pandemic upon the practical delivery of Housing Services. The Assistant Director (Housing) advised that on 25 March the Coronavirus Act 2020 was enacted to legislate for the restrictions the Government was seeking to enforce to keep people as safe as possible and reduce the spread of the virus. The Act introduced or amended 39 powers related for district councils to help shape the local response and two of those 39 had a direct impact on the housing service.

Set out in paragraph 2.3 of the report, these two changes related to protection from eviction and the powers related to events and gatherings. A direct result of these changes meant that seven evictions that had been planned due to non-payment of rent were cancelled and a further 18 put on hold. It also meant that Shears Green Community Centre was closed with all bookings cancelled in the short term. Appendix 2 of the report set out some of the impacts experienced by Council's housing services.

The workforce had responded incredibly well to the challenge for which tenants had been appreciative and the service had received numerous compliments over the past few weeks.

Members' attention was drawn to the suite of performance indicators introduced by the Council's Management Team to measure the on-going impact of the virus and the housing related indicators were attached at Appendix 3 of the report. As the restrictions start to ease and life returns to a new normal, services will, in accordance with government guidance, be re-starting

The following points were raised during discussions on this item:

- Members reiterated the Chair's thanks to officers for working so hard and flexibly during this difficult time. The Assistant Director (Housing) was also congratulated on his new responsibilities and that some Members had found him to be 'a breath of fresh air'.
- It was noted that Housing officers would shortly be issued with smart phones to enable them to carry out virtual viewings of properties.
- Following a question the officer confirmed that there had been no increase in the Private Sector Housing Team during lockdown. However, a review of the structure of all housing team was planned.
- The Committee was advised that there had been no evictions during lockdown and the team was working closely with tenants in an effort to support them to continue working with the Council to pay off any arrears. Once the embargo was lifted, evictions would not start again until October 2020. However, it was noted that if tenants failed to engage with the Council, sometimes enforcement action was the only way forward.
- Assistant Director (Housing) confirmed that there were 9 people currently rough sleeping in the Borough and advised that some rough sleepers refused to engage with the Council or other agencies and Keith Scarlett – Housing Needs Officer (Rough Sleeper Initiative) had been trying to persuade these people to go to the shelter. It was recognised that rough sleepers often had other issues which needed addressing and the Council was working closely with organisations such as The Hub and Gravesham Sanctuary in an effort to get these people to engage.

- The Chair noted that rough sleepers lives were often so chaotic and stated that any assistance that Cllr Marsh, with her County Council responsibilities, as adult vulnerability was part of her County portfolio, could offer would be most appreciated. The Chair also encouraged Members to contact the Housing Operations Manager (Needs & Improvements) with any information on rough sleepers but noted that their wishes must be respected.
- The Assistant Director (Housing) advised that funding received via the Government was being used for partnership working with various different agencies utilising specialist workers and outreach workers from Porchlight. He also noted a slight gap in mental health provision and that the Hub was looking to develop a service.
- The Committee was advised of the rough sleeper in the woods who, it was said, had not been approached by officers. Another rough sleeper had been sofa surfing and officers and Porchlight had worked for over a week to get him settled.
- It was noted that £9k funding had been received from the Government to help rough sleepers at the start of the lockdown but the Council had actually spent in excess of £50k. The Assistant Director (Housing) and the Housing Operations Manager (Needs & Improvements) had weekly meetings with Ministry of Housing, Communities and Local Government (MHCLG) who recently announced the creation of six thousand additional bed spaces to help rough sleepers and were looking to local authorities on bringing this work forward. The Borough Council was currently exploring its options.
- The Committee was advised that the Council did not want its sheltered homeless to go back on the streets. However, this approach was costing in the region of £9k per week (from the General Fund) to provide temporary accommodation. It was noted that the funding could not be gained from the Housing Revenue Account.
- Following a question about the use of hotels to house homeless people, the officer advised that hotels had been contacted including the Travelodge. However, they had been unable to help as staff had already been furloughed.

Resolved that the report be noted.

Close of meeting

The meeting ended at 8.39 pm