

Housing Services Cabinet Committee

Tuesday, 22 September 2020

7.30pm

Present:

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

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

Daniel Killian	Assistant Director (Housing)
Lee Georgiou	Service Manager (Housing Options)
Nicole Arthur	Service Delivery Manager
Lee Morson	IT Project Manager (Housing System)
Ben Clarke	Committee & Scrutiny Assistant (Minutes)

9. Apologies

No apologies for absence were received.

10. Minutes

The Minutes of the meeting held on Thursday, 04 June 2020 were signed by the Chair.

11. Declarations of Interest

No declarations of interest were made.

12. Introduction from the Chair

The Chair welcomed Lee Georgiou - Service Manager (Housing Options), who joined the Council just last week and Lee Morson Project Manager (Housing Services), who joined the Council six weeks ago.

The Chair also advised Members that the Committee would be welcoming Jodie Bulman - Service Manager (Housing Landlord Services) next month when she took up her post. .

The Chair read the following statement to the Committee:

'Just before we go the Minutes of the last meeting, I would like to draw Members' attention to the fact that the Housing Allocations policy is not on the agenda.'

However, by way of an up-date, following COVID-19 the consultation date has not long closed and, as you know, Housing Services has gone through a positive senior management structural change. Lee Georgiou has just joined us and the Allocations policy will very much be within Lee's remit. We would like to benefit fully from his expertise and knowledge in this field - and we therefore need to ensure that Lee has time to properly review the Policy prior to its submission to our Committee.

This will all work towards ensuring we have an excellent, user- friendly Allocations policy to put before the Housing Cabinet Committee in December, ready to launch in 2021.

You may also recall that at the June meeting I said that we want to use this policy as the basis for a training session for all Members. Subject to what the Government Covid-19 guidelines will be stating at the time - and our own Council's timetable - I hope that we will be able to do such a training session in the first half of next year.'

13. Corporate Performance Report: Quarter 1 2020/21

The Committee was presented with an update against the Performance Management Framework, as introduced within the Council's Corporate Plan, for Quarter One 2020-21 (April to June 2020).

The Assistant Director (Housing) guided Members through the report and gave a detailed update against each of the below Policy Commitments:

1. Deliver an ambitious and diverse programme of building
2. Enforce a high quality of private housing
3. Provide a proactive, supportive and financially efficient housing service
4. Safeguard residents
5. Deliver a skilled in-house building management team

The Chair thanked the Assistant Director (Housing) for an informative update and asked that her thanks be passed down to the team for their excellent work through a tough quarter.

The Assistant Director (Housing) fielded questions from the Committee and explained that:

- All of the five hundred homes due to be built within the next four years, as well as the sixty four homes that had already been built during quarter four of 2019/20, would be affordable homes; the Assistant Director (Housing) did not have the makeup of the homes to hand but he agreed to circulate an email outside of the meeting informing Members what type of homes they were (social rented etc) and how they were to be funded.
- In response to a question concerning the New Homes Bonus and the delivery of EDC's planned homes, only the houses built inside the Borough of Gravesham would count towards the New Homes Bonus which Gravesham would receive
- Most of the DSO work was done in house but the Council did not employ Gas Service Engineers as gas servicing for residents properties was specialist work; the Council has a contract with Swale Heating to carry out all gas servicing and they have always provided an excellent service to residents.
- The structure of the two teams under the two new Service Managers would be reviewed to address any underlying issues and make both teams more effective

- The Rough Sleeper Team consisted of one Rough Sleeper Coordinator that worked with two outreach partners from Porchlight and also worked closely with representatives from Sanctuary and The Hub at the Methodist Church, Gravesend

Cllr Lyn Milner asked that her thanks be noted and passed to the Housing Teams for their hard work during the pandemic including the safe way they conducted themselves and the public when they visited resident's properties wearing masks and socially distancing etc.

Several Members of the Committee expressed concern over the layout of the policy commitments as they were formatted over a small part of the page which made it hard to read on the iPad as well as the hard copies. The Committee asked that in the future the entire page was used for the graphs and associated information.

14. Presentation - Update on New Housing Management System

The IT Project Manager (Housing System) provided the Committee with a presentation that updated them on the new Housing Management System.

The presentation was published and could be found through the following link:

<https://democracy.gravesham.gov.uk/documents/b13180/Supplementary%20Presentation%20-%20Housing%20Management%20System%20Tuesday%2022-Sep-2020%2019.30%20Housing%20Services.pdf?T=9>

The Chair thanked the IT Project Manager (Housing System) for an informative presentation and expressed hope that a similar presentation that explained the work of the Service Delivery Manager (Housing Repairs) team would also be brought to the Committee in the future.

At the Chair's request, the Assistant Director (Housing) gave an overview of the existing Housing Management System and further information regarding the purchase of the new system to Members:

- The existing Capita housing management system became de-supported on 01 September 2020; however, the Council paid to extend the support provided by Capita until the end of March 2021
- The purchase of the new housing management system was delayed due to a procurement issue and at the time it was felt that the new system would not be able to be implemented until May 2021. However, due to recent work undertaken with the IT Project Manager (Housing System) and various teams it is likely that the will be brought forward to January 2021
- The new housing management system would run in parallel with the old housing management system until March 2021 at which point the old housing Management System would be switched off and made defunct

The Assistant Director (Housing) fielded questions from the Committee and explained that:

- The revised Housing Allocations Policy would have no impact on new Housing Management system; the new system is in relation to the management of properties and tenants and therefore irrelevant in terms of policy. However, the Locata system, which is the system used to manage the allocation of properties and mentioned

during the presentation would link in to the new Housing Management System as and when properties are let to applicants.

- With regards to Member involvement, there would be regular updates from the project group to Cabinet and the Housing Services Cabinet Committee. . Once the implementation of the system is completed Members would have an opportunity to be shown how the new system functions and the benefits it will bring to our tenants and the service.

15. Updated Repair Policies - Repairs and Maintenance Policy and Rechargeable Repairs Policy

The Committee were informed of the updates to the Repairs & Maintenance Policy and Rechargeable Repairs Policy.

The Service Delivery Manager (Housing Repairs) guided Members through the report, explaining the current state of the two policies, the reasons for the proposed changes and the full list of changes to the two policies which could be seen at 3.1 and 3.2 of the report.

The Chair thanked the Service Delivery Manager (Housing Repairs) for a comprehensive introduction and praised the concise way in which the changes to the two policies had been laid out in the report.

The Service Delivery Manager (Housing Repairs) fielded questions from the Committee and explained that:

- The Assisted Re-Decorations Scheme was a very popular and commonly requested service from Council tenants over the age of sixty five; often if one resident received the service then many of the residents in the same area wanted the same. It was an expensive service and took time to pack up and decorate an elderly residents house however it was a worthwhile service and Schemes Managers/Housing Officers widely promoted it
- The £40 charge for a tenant that has missed three consecutive appointments had been in effect since 2017; the warning was included in all messages and appointments cards etc to the tenants so that they were fully aware. It was rare that a tenant wilfully missed three consecutive appointments but when they did miss appointments there was a cost to the Council and other residents had to wait longer for their appointments. There was a correlation between the tenants that missed their appointments and the ones who had anti-social behaviour or tenancy issues
- Trickle vents were fitted into all new window installations to alleviate condensation issues

Several concerns were expressed by Members:

- Some of the wording in section '37. Domestic Abuse' was an issue; it was suggested that the word 'may;' should be replaced with 'will' to convey a stronger message that the Council would always help domestic abuse victims
- Some of the wording in section '6. Right to Buy' was an issue; it was felt that the first paragraph and the last paragraph contradicted each other as the first paragraph stated that the Council had no obligation to carry out any repairs/maintenance once a property was subject to a Right to Buy application. However the last paragraph

implied that works would still be carried out on the properties. It was requested that the wording be checked to ensure it was not contradictory

- The tenants were not always solely responsible for damp and mould appearing in their homes; a variety of issues could exacerbate the problem and it was not always as easy as opening the windows and keeping rooms well ventilated as it outlined in the report in section '31. Damp and Mould'

In response to the first concern, the Chair responded that that the team had to be very careful with the wording due to the responsibility that would stem from a commitment but the Chair agreed to take it away and consider whether or not the wording needed to change which would also be checked with colleagues in Legal.

In response to the second concern, the Assistant Director (Housing) advised that he would take the concern back to his team and revisit the wording to ensure it was not contradictory, again, with advice from Legal. .

In regards to ongoing issues with damp and mould in tenant's houses, the Assistant Director (Housing) advised that he had completed a lot of work in that area since he worked for the Council and a significant amount of money had been invested in putting in preventative measures such as certain wallpapers and special paint products etc that were designed to protect from damp/mould. However, many of the measures were not that effective and it was simpler measures that were more successful such as helping tenants make lifestyle changes and cross ventilation in all of the properties. The team engaged with a specialist damp & mould building surveyor (known as the Mould Doctor) who also happened to be a life coach; their expert knowledge and advice that was given to the tenants was very useful in combatting damp/mould. The Assistant Director (Housing) did not have to hand the number of houses with extractor fans installed but he clarified that they were not always the answer as there were many mitigating factors such as how it was used, where the property was located, how the property was heated, the tenants lifestyle and available ventilation etc. The Assistant Director (Housing) reiterated that the Council had made far better progress with the issue when the Mould Doctor was utilised rather than the previous preventative measures.

The Service Delivery Manager (Housing Repairs) further added that by engaging with the Mould Doctor, following the best practice solutions and engaging in two virtual meetings with different Councils to discuss the best approach it had meant Gravesham had been proactive and effective in dealing with the issue.

The Committee noted the contents and updates of the Repairs & Maintenance Policy and Rechargeable Repairs Policy.

16. DSO Building Management Annual Report 2019/20

The Committee were provided with the DSO Building Management Annual Report which was intended to give Members easy to understand, key information about the performance of DSO Building Management and outlined what had been done in many important areas across the service between April 2019 and March 2020 to ensure the Councils properties were kept warm, safe and well maintained.

The Service Delivery Manager guided Members through the report highlighting key figures from the following sections:

- Improvement to Homes
- Day-to-day repairs in homes
- Empty Properties
- Health and Safety
- Social Value
- Environmental Footprint
- Future

The Vice-Chair praised the excellent report and the Committee echoed that thanks be given to the officers for their hard work throughout the year which was clearly evidenced from the figures in the report.

Following several questions surrounding the social value aspect of the report, the Assistant Director (Housing) advised that:

- Social value was looked to be secured through the contractors that the Council procured as part of the DSO Building Management team; the largest contributor was Swale Heating and they committed to sponsor certain events such as the Fireworks display every November. Due to the fireworks events being postponed, it had just been agreed with Swale that this year's funding was going to be redirected into provision for the homeless
- Your Borough was funded by the Breyer Group who supported the DSO Building Management team with the day to day responsive repairs
- As part of the procurement process all of the contractors that were hired had to commit to some kind of social value such as event sponsorship or funding for training etc

The Committee noted the information contained within the report.

Close of meeting

The meeting ended at 21:09pm.