

Housing Services Cabinet Committee

Thursday, 04 February 2021

7.30pm

Present:

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

Cllrs: Harold Craske
Baljit Hayre
Leslie Hills
Leslie Hoskins
Diane Morton
Lyn Milner
Peter Scollard
Frank Wardle

Daniel Killian	Assistant Director (Housing)
Lee Georgiou	Service Manager (Housing Options)
Nicole Arthur	Service Delivery Manager (Housing Repairs)
Jody Bulman	Service Manager (Housing Landlord Services)
Sharon Donald	New Homes Development & Strategy Manager
Lee Morson	IT Project Manager (Housing System)
Ben Clarke	Committee & Scrutiny Assistant (Minutes)

25. Apologies for Absence

An apology of absence was received from Cllr Leslie Pearton; Cllr Harold Craske substituted.

26. Minutes

The Minutes of the meeting held on Monday, 16 November 2020 were signed by the Chair.

27. Declarations of Interest

No declarations of interest were made.

28. Corporate Performance Report: Q3 2020-21

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

The Assistant Director (Housing) informed the Committee that he was proud of the work that his team had undertaken during quarter three; despite the pandemic they delivered all business as usual and the service received an increase in compliments from the public which outweighed the number of complaints by 50%.

The officers present guided Members through the report and highlighted key performance information for each of the below Policy Commitments that related to their respective areas:

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 officers for their informative updates and asked that her thanks be passed down to the teams for their excellent work through a tough quarter.

The Housing Officers fielded questions from the Committee for each policy commitment and explained that:

2. Enforce a high quality of private housing
 - Council Tax was charged at a higher rate on empty properties as it was used as an incentive to encourage the owners of the property to complete renovations as soon as possible and then inhabit it or put it on the market
 - If finance was an issue for owners of empty properties, there were options available to them such as an interest free loan through the No Use Empty Initiative Loan Scheme; the loan was only payable once the works were completed and the house was sold or let out. Gravesham dealt with the administration of the Scheme, but it was KCC who administered the loan. The New Homes Development & Strategy Manager advised that she did not have the criteria to hand for the empty properties interest free loan, but she agreed it to circulate it to Members after the meeting
 - The Private Housing Team consisted of Environmental Health Officers with additional; a new interim post had also been put in place with the new officer starting next Monday. A new structure, designed to increase the team's available resources, for the Private Housing Team was currently being mapped out and would be submitted to Management Team for their approval in the coming weeks. The Assistant Director (Housing) and the Chair recognised that resources need to be increased within the team and work had already started on creating a new staffing structure to address the resourcing issue.

The Chair informed the Committee that the senior level of Housing Service had undergone a positive restructuring and the next level of management was also going to be restructured to strengthen the service even more.

3. Provide a proactive, supportive and financially efficient housing service:
 - There was usually a host of different issues linked to tenants' situations which Housing Officers had to deal with; many cases became even more complex during the pandemic. Housing Officers would often have to address many tenants' issues such as anti-social behaviour, mental health problems with the involvement of social services if there were children involved. To achieve an adequate resolution, the Housing Team usually had to resolve multiple issues and work with partner agencies if specialist assistance was necessary

Members commended the team for having some of the lowest rent arrears in the South East and stated it was a testament to the team's hard work.

4. Safeguard residents:

- The team were hopeful to receive in the region of £70K from the Protect Plus fund which would be used to provide accommodation for rough sleepers and provide them support once they had moved into the accommodation; some of that fund would be used to buy them a small number of personal belongings such as a bed, cooker and kettle etc. The team were aware of the Kent Support and Assistance Service which provided goods/services to those in need

5. Deliver a skilled in-house building management team

- The DSO Building Management Team had robust policies in place which outlined the responsibilities for tenants and the responsibilities for the Council as landlord with regards to housing repairs and maintenance. The staff had been excellent at implementing their responsibilities and the Service Delivery Manager (Housing Repairs) was confident that her team were only carrying out repairs that should be completed by the landlord. Members were advised that due to lockdown the need for repairs had increased as people were spending more time in their properties which led to things such as blocked toilets, sinks and broken items. Compared to previous years, the team were roughly on track with their performance levels, a real achievement throughout a pandemic, and repairs reported were not much higher than seen in the quarter three report. On average, the benchmark for housing repairs was roughly six repairs a year per property

The Housing Officers agreed to several actions during the course of the meeting:

- In response to a concern raised by Cllr Hills regarding one of his residents that was paying the higher rate of Council Tax for his empty property, the New Homes Development & Strategy Manager asked for Cllr Hills to pass on the residents contact details so that her team could make contact and provide assistance
- The Assistant Director (Housing) agreed to circulate an email outside of the meeting outlining the number of prosecutions there had been from the private Housing Team
- The new Neighbourhood Housing Managers name was Jill Rogers; the Service Manager (Housing Options) agreed to circulate the name of the interim officer outside of the meeting
- In future reporting, the Service Manager (Housing Options) advised that it would be helpful to Members if a case study was included on how the Housing Team had helped a vulnerable resident attain suitable housing

The Committee thanked the officers for their hard work and asked that the Committees thanks be passed down to all of the teams.

29. Project Update - Housing IT System

The IT Project Manager (Housing System) provided the Committee with a presentation on the Housing IT System and outlined the key workings of the system.

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

<https://democracy.gravesham.gov.uk/documents/b13391/Housing%20IT%20System%20Presentation%20Thursday%2004-Feb-2021%2019.30%20Housing%20Services%20Cabinet%20Committee.pdf?T=9>

Following the presentation, the Assistant Director (Housing), further praised the system and called it a significant step forward which would free up time for Housing Officers allowing them to spend more time with the Councils tenants and out on the estates.

In response to a question concerning tenants' changeover to direct debit, the IT Housing Manager (Housing System) explained that the tenant did not have to do anything; the direct debit information would move seamlessly from one system to the other.

The Chair thanked the IT Housing Manager (Housing System) for an informative presentation.

The Committee noted the information contained within the presentation.

30. Revised Housing Allocation Scheme

The Committee were presented with a report that outlined the final version of the Council's Housing Allocations Scheme as discussed and agreed by the Housing Services Committee in November 2020. It summarised the responses received following a 20-week public consultation period. The revised scheme provided a greater degree of clarity than the current scheme whilst also ensuring that those with the greatest housing need were assisted in order of defined priorities. The changes to the policy would ensure that the Council's Housing Allocations Scheme met the requirements of current legislation, guidance and good practice to provide a clear and comprehensive scheme which described how the Council would assess and prioritise the demand from applicants for limited social housing within the Borough.

The Service Manager (Housing Options) provided Members with a presentation which outlined key points from the Council's Housing Allocation Scheme.

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

<https://democracy.gravesham.gov.uk/documents/b13392/Housing%20Allocation%20Scheme%20Presentation%20Thursday%2004-Feb-2021%2019.30%20Housing%20Services%20Cabinet%20Commit.pdf?T=9>

Before opening up the item for questions, the Chair advised that Members previous comments had been taken on board during the creation of the Scheme. Addressing a previous raised concern, the Chair advised that any residents taken off of the register would receive written communication in the post as well as an email to explain why they had been removed from the register.

The Assistant Director (Housing) further explained that the document had been delayed a year due to combination of factors, but the document was better for it and input from Members had helped to shape a robust and relevant scheme for Gravesham. .

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

- The Policy had to have a certain degree of discretion as it would be unlawful if there were no ways the Council could make discretionary decisions in certain exceptional circumstances. The Policy was designed in such a way that made it clear how the Council were prioritising people but the ability to make discretionary decisions allowed officers to assist residents that may be in a difficult situation that wouldn't usually be able to be helped due to the Policy. However, there were still checks and balances within the Policy as to how it was being implemented and the terms of reference would be sent to a Housing Allocation Panel; a document would also be shared with the Committee so that Members understood how decisions were made on a case-by-case basis. The discretionary powers had to be used consistently otherwise they would be unlawful.
- People had a right to refuse the properties they were offered; they would be given a chance to present evidence to the Housing Allocations Panel as to why the property being offered was not suitable for their needs. The Panel would use all evidence presented to make an informed decision about whether or not the offer was suitable and if the applicant should remain on the housing register.
- Membership of the Housing Allocation Panel was extended to include an external senior officer, but it was not appropriate to have Members sit on that Panel; the inclusion of senior manager, outside Housing Services, helped to add balance to the Panel
- People were not being pushed outside of the Borough by the team however there would be occasions where a person on the list would be given only one offer and if they refused then they might be suspended from the register. The law required the team to be clear when offering properties and the possible consequences the person faced if they refused the property; in the past some people had refused too many houses which meant the Council had no further duty to provide support
- With regards to Brexit, historically EU nationals had the rights to free movement, to work and to access benefits/housing assistance. Following the 01 January 2021, EU nationals no longer had the right to be placed on the housing register. The Council encouraged EU nationals to apply to the EU Settlement Scheme before the June 2021 deadline so that they could retain their rights. Those that missed the deadline and did not register would be treated like nationals from other countries; unless they had immigration status, they would not be entitled to assistance from Housing Services
- Concerning a previous question regarding the rights of Afghan citizens, extra provision was introduced to the immigration rules on 01 October 2013 which gave Afghan citizens who helped the UK try to stabilise Afghanistan relations at that time the right to live in the UK
- With regards to residents being informed of the consequences of turning down an offer, it was advised that the website was updated, and it was policy to ensure that the resident receiving the offer completely understood that they may be suspended from the register if they refused the housing offer
- Within the Policy there was provision for foster care children, if a child had returned from foster care to a family that was on the register then the child would be considered part of that household; confirmation from the social care provider would be needed
- The Housing Allocation Panel would meet on a case-by-case basis as well as when appeals were received

The Chair thanked the Service Manager (Housing Options) for an informative presentation; the Committee were informed that Services Manager (Housing Options) was leaving his post and his replacement was due to attend the next housing Services Cabinet Committee.

The Service Manager (Housing Options) thanked the Committee for working with him during his short time at Gravesham Borough Council.

The Chair agreed to consider the points that had been raised by Members prior to approving the Policy as she had delegated authority as the Cabinet Member for Housing Services.

31. Housing Ombudsman Review

The Committee were informed of the introduction of the Housing Ombudsman Complaint Handling Code and the contents of the Council's self-assessment form against the Code.

The Service Manager (Housing Landlord Services) highlighted key points from the report concerning the new Complaint Handling Code that was published by the Housing Ombudsman in in July 2020, the self-assessment form and how the Council would improve complaint handling in the future.

Concern was raised by a Member regarding the Council filling out the self-assessment forms as the landlord.

The Service Manager (Housing Landlord Services) explained that when a self-assessment form was completed it was done so with input from senior managers from different teams who had different views on how complaints were handled; input from several managers ensured that the self-assessment forms were filled out objectively. In addition, it was confirmed that the Corporate Complaints Policy would be kept under regular review in the next 12 months to ensure that the necessary changes to complaint handling were made.

In response to a question concerning complaints being made through social media platforms, the Service Manager (Housing Landlord Services) advised that when a complaint was received it was dealt with by the Communications Team. A Member of the Communications Team would then send the complaint directly to the team responsible who would then raise it as a complaint at that stage; no responses to complaints would be fed back through social media, they would be sent directly to the individual complainant.

Members noted the introduction and contents of the Housing Ombudsman Complaint Handling Code and self-assessment form.

32. Draft Estate Management Policy

The Committee were informed of the proposed Estate Management Policy as set out in Appendix Two of the report.

The Service Delivery Manager (Housing Repairs) highlighted key points from the point regarding the creation of the Estate Management Policy, the 'Rate My Estate' guide, its objectives and the teams plans for the future.

The Service Delivery Manager (Housing Repairs) advised that she was working with the Communication and Digital Teams to get the 'Make My Estate Great' survey out by early March 2021. The aim of the survey was to encourage residents to get involved in their

estates by telling the Council how they felt about the estate, where areas could be improved and where money was best spent in the estate in the future. The responses from the surveys would be essential in the long-term development of the Estate Management Policy as the Policy would be constantly evolving to suit the needs of the residents.

Cllr Milner praised the Caretaking Service as they undertook an excellent job; Cllr Milner was also glad to see the specifics of their job role included as well as them being named the more neighbourhood friendly 'Caretakers' instead of 'Site Managers'.

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

- Infestations and vermin (pigeons, foxes, insects and squirrels etc) were areas that the team would be reviewing as part of the long-term development of the Policy as they could all cause damage to residents' houses. The Policy would include solutions, deterrents and removal options for any infestations or vermin
- The Service Delivery Manager (Housing Repairs) agreed to raise the issue of tree stumps on Jellicoe Avenue with the Assistant Director (Operations) as it fell under his remit. A response would be brought back to the Committee
- The officers would carry out a 'blitz' inspection on the estates to see what works needed to be completed and what could be completed in the short term such as littering picking, grass cutting and hedge trimming. A long-term priority of the team was to reduce the amount of litter on the estates
- The Assistant Director (Housing) added that he was aware of the issues on Jellicoe Avenue and some of the issues fell under the responsibility of KCC; the Estate inspections would allow information to be passed to the relevant department or external organizations such as KCC
- To address the litter, issue the Estates Management Team would work alongside the DSO Team; the Policy was more efficient and allocated more resources to the estates; enforcement action would also be used if particular tenants were persistently breaking the rules
- A review was carried out on the provisions that the estates had for disposing of litter and some did not have any litter bins while others had bins that were a long walk away from the buildings; the review was ongoing, and the intended outcome of the review was to make it easier for residents to dispose of their rubbish safely and easily
- With regards to a Members comment about unruly gardens and waste left in the open, the introduction of the new Housing Management System would enable a much more proactive approach to estate management with all information about tenants being stored in one location making it easier officers to make informed and intelligence led decision and actions regarding estates.

Members agreed to support the implementation of the Housing Estate Management Policy.

Close of meeting

The meeting ended at 21:42pm.