

Housing Services Cabinet Committee

Tuesday, 23 March 2021

7.30 pm

Present:

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

Councillors: Baljit Hayre
 Leslie Hills
 Leslie Hoskins
 Lyn Milner
 Leslie Pearton
 Peter Scollard
 Aaron Elliott
 Gary Harding

Daniel Killian	Assistant Director (Housing)
Jody Bulman	Service Manager (Household Landlord Services)
Victoria May	Service Manager (Housing Options)
David Herrington	Digital Services Manager
Lauren Wallis	Committee Services Officer (minutes)

33. Chair's Announcements

The Chair noted that anniversary of the announcement of the first lockdown in relation to the Covid-19 pandemic on 23 March 2020 and expressed her condolences to all those effected.

The Chair also welcomed Victoria May – Service Manager (Housing Options), who replaced Lee Georgiou, to the Borough Council.

34. Apologies for Absence

Apologies for absence were received from Cllr Diane Morley and Cllr Frank Wardle. Cllr Gary Harding and Cllr Aaron Elliott attended as their substitutes.

35. Minutes

The minutes of the meeting of the Committee held on Thursday, 4 February 2021 were signed by the Chair.

36. Declarations of Interest

No declarations of interest were made.

37. Social Housing White Paper - Briefing Paper

The Service Manager (Housing Landlord Services) presented an overview of the Government's Social Housing White Paper – A Charter for Social Housing Residents and gave a presentation on the implications this would have for social landlords and more specifically, for the Borough Council. Members noted that the report was for information only and highlighted future changes that would need to be incorporated into the Housing Service to ensure that the Council was able to meet the obligations in the new Charter.

The presentation made by the Service Manager (Housing Landlord Services) which reflected the content of the report and could be accessed via the link set out below:

<https://democracy.gravesham.gov.uk/ieListDocuments.aspx?CId=443&MId=4457&Ver=4>

The Committee was informed that the changes made within the Housing Service over the last 4 years had placed the Council in a good starting position to build on the achievements to date and to take forward and implement the new obligations contained in the White Paper without significantly increasing workloads or resources.

The following points were raised during discussion on this item:

- The Assistant Director (Housing) confirmed that the White Paper was solely about social housing and had come about as a result of the Grenfell tragedy. Whilst the Council did have private sector enforcement powers, the White Paper did not include this sector which was covered under other legislation.
- Following a question on communication of information to people with disabilities and those whose first language was not English, the Committee was advised that officers were working to ensure that key documents and all communications were made accessible to all potential interested parties, including the use of videos with sign language. To this end Housing Services was also working towards ensuring that all documents and communications were produced in an appropriate format for this use. The Assistant Director (Housing) noted that engagement with residents was key in this process.
- Whilst it was noted that it was good to have the Decent Homes Standard back on the agenda, concern was expressed on the lack of timeframe for promised Government reviews. The Service Manager (Housing Landlord Services) confirmed that the Government had not published any set dates. However, it was noted that the Government's Building Safety report was due in 2023 and the Leasehold Reform White Paper was due within 12 months. A watching brief would be kept on information promised by the Government that had been delayed by the pandemic and the Committee would be updated as and when appropriate.
- Following a question, it was confirmed that the Housing Health and Safety Compliance Officer was Gary Hewitt who was managed by Bal Chattha the Council's Compliance and Projects Manager.

The Chair congratulated the officer on a thorough and informative report and presentation.

Resolved that the report be noted.

38. Implementation of the Revised Housing Allocation Scheme - Verbal Update

Further to the last meeting of the Committee, the Assistant Director (Housing) gave an update of the implementation of the Revised Housing Allocation Scheme. An extended consultation had taken place throughout 2020 and the revised Housing Allocation Scheme had been approved under delegated authority by the Lead Member on 17 February 2021, with officers implementing the changes from 22 February 2021.

Since this time, the following had taken place:

- The IT back office system used to manage Housing Register applications had been reconfigured to reflect the changes.
- A Member Briefing Note and a list of Frequently Asked Questions (FAQ) had been created and circulated.
- The Council's website had been updated to reflect the Briefing Notes and FAQs.
- All existing applications for social housing, approximately 1,900, had been considered against the new criteria and all applicants affected by the change will be contacted via Kent Home Choice.
- A Housing Allocations Panel had been introduced with appropriate Terms of Reference, which would consider appeals from applicants who had been removed from the Housing Register. Meetings of the Housing Allocations Panel had been scheduled to take place every Thursday afternoon
- A virtual drop-in session designed to assist Councillors in understanding the changes with an opportunity to ask questions had been held last week.
- The officer highlighted that the Local Connections criteria had changed from 2 to 3 years but that this change was not being applied retrospectively.
- It was confirmed that the new scheme would go live on 5 April 2021.

The following comments were made during discussion on this item:

- The Chair noted that there was likely to be far more questions once the Scheme went live.
- Members were advised that there was a provision to enable officers to override the Local Connection requirement with regards to existing applicants and the Assistant Director (Housing) gave an example.
- The Committee was advised that decisions made by the Housing Allocations Panel would not be published and Members would not be informed unless the decision fell within their casework and that this was the usual practice.

The Chair advised that this was the first time the Housing Allocations Scheme had been revised since 2014 and, in future, it would be reviewed on an annual basis.

39. Housing Services - Covid Update Report

The Service Manager (Housing Landlord Services) presented a report which provided an update against how the Council had responded to the COVID pandemic, both in terms of specific activities in response to the pandemic and how service delivery had been maintained across Council services and more specifically in Housing Services.

The officers went through the report in detail and the following points were raised during discussion on this item

It was noted that 20,000 repairs had been undertaken which equated to 4 repairs per household and a question was raised on the differentiation of responsibility for repairs between the Council and the householder. The Committee was reminded that the Council had a very robust Repairs and Maintenance Policy which clearly listed the landlord and the tenant responsibilities and it was noted that repairs to damage caused by the tenant were be recharged. Since the introduction of these policies, the Council had only undertaken work that the Council was responsible for.

The Council had recently purchased a property with a view to convert it to a House in Multiple Occupation (HMO). The Assistant Director (Housing) confirmed that investigation work had been completed and the next stage would be to installed en-suite bathrooms for all the bedrooms. It was forecast to be ready to open in the summer of 2021.

The Chair thanked the officer and Housing Services for a very positive report after what had been a very hard year and officers were commended for all their hard work. This sentiment was echoed by a number of Councillors.

Resolved that the report be noted.

40. Housing IT System - Verbal Update

The Assistant Director (Housing) gave an update on progress with regard to the Housing IT System as follows:

- The system had been configured and was being robustly tested as it needed to be fit for purpose.
- Officers were working with the supplier towards a go live date in the summer.
- The system was made up on a number of modules and work was currently being focussed on the housing module and the module that facilities agile working for Housing Officers.
- As a consequence these modules would now be going live at the same time.
- Remote training and testing would take place over the coming months ready for go live in the summer.
- It was hoped that a demonstration of the functionality of the system could be presented to the next meeting of the Cabinet Committee.

Close of meeting

The meeting ended at 8.36 pm