

Housing Services Cabinet Committee

Tuesday, 22 March 2022

7.30 pm

Present:

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

Councillors: Ejaz Aslam
John Caller
Dakota Dibben
Sarah Gow
Baljit Hayre
Leslie Hills
Jordan Meade
Leslie Pearton

Daniel Killian Director (Housing)
Jody Bulman Service Manager (Housing Landlord Services)
Nicole Arthur Service Manager (Housing Operations)
Victoria May Service Manager (Housing Options)
Mark Segal Housing IT Systems Manager
Chris Wakeford Committee Services Officer, Scrutiny (Minutes)

29. Apologies for Absence

An apology for absence was received from Cllr Leslie Hoskins and Lyn Milner; Cllr Jordan Meade and Cllr John Caller attended as their respective substitutes.

30. Minutes

The minutes of the meeting of the Committee held on Thursday, 3 February 2022 were agreed and signed by the Chair.

31. Declarations of Interest

No declarations of interest were made.

32. Annual Review of Housing Allocation Scheme

The Service Manager (Housing Options) provided Members with a presentation on the Annual Review of the Housing Allocation Scheme which can be viewed on the link below:

[\(Public Pack\)Presentation - Annual Review of Housing Allocation Scheme Agenda Supplement for Housing Services Cabinet Committee, 22/03/2022 19:30 \(gravesham.gov.uk\)](#)

Following questions and comments from Members, the Service Manager (Housing Options) highlighted the following:

- The Council will offer a property that a resident has already expressed an interest in and that is deemed suitable for their needs. The Council can add a 'task' to flag that a person is due to come off a suspension.
- The Banding can be summarised as follows:

Band A

- Urgent medical need - Those with an urgent need to move as their current accommodation is unsuitable for their medical or disability needs and they are unable to be discharged home from hospital or other clinical or respite facilities.
- Severe medical need -Where an applicant has a terminal illness and the current accommodation is unsuitable for their medical needs and end-of-life care.
- Urgent Welfare need- Households that need to move because they will experience severe or significant physical or mental illness as a result of their present housing circumstances Releasing adapted housing Transfer applicants currently living in a property with significant adaptations to meet a disability need but those adaptations are not required by any member of the household.
- Redevelopment -Transfer applicants who need to move because their home is scheduled for redevelopment by the Council or one of its development partners.
- Management move -Applicants who have been assessed by the Housing Allocations Panel as needing a move internally or under the National Witness Mobility Programme (NWMP) or other similar vulnerable person protection scheme.
- Environmental/safety - Where the Private Sector Housing Team have assessed there are one or more Category 1 hazards (as assessed under the Housing Health and Safety Rating Scheme) or other severe property conditions that impose an imminent risk of harm to the occupants and remedial action is considered unreasonable or impractical for cost or other reasons.
- Urgent need Applicants who have been assessed by the Housing Allocations Panel as needing a move due to an immediate, urgent or exceptional need.
- Demolition or Compulsory Purchase Order - Where there is a rehousing obligation because a demolition, prohibition or compulsory purchase order has been served in respect of the applicant's current accommodation.
- Under occupying social housing - Transfer applicants who are looking to downsize and move to a home with at least one bedroom fewer than in their current home.
- Overcrowding – lacking 3 bedrooms or more
- Armed Forces – Medical - Serving members of the Armed Forces who need to move because of a serious injury, medical condition or disability sustained as a result of their service.
- Armed Forces – Homeless - The bereaved spouse or civil partner of a member of the Armed Forces leaving Services Family Accommodation following the death of their your spouse or partner.

Band B

- Overcrowding - Applicants who are living in accommodation with two bedrooms fewer than their assessed need.
- Move-on from supported housing- Applicants living in supported housing schemes within the borough (or temporarily displaced to a supported housing scheme in another borough) who have been assessed as ready to move on into independent living.
- Environmental/safety - Where the Private Sector Housing Team have assessed that there are one or more Category 1 hazards (as assessed under the Housing Health and Safety Rating Scheme) which are having a negative impact on the medical, disability or welfare needs of a member of the household and remedial action is considered unreasonable or impractical for cost or other reasons.
- Armed Forces – end of tenancy - Tenants occupying HM Forces service family accommodation who are threatened with homelessness because they have been served with a valid notice to vacate their tenancy (usually at least three months).

Band C

- Homeless temporary accommodation - applicants where we have accepted the full rehousing duty to secure accommodation under part 7 of the Housing Act 1996, that are residing in temporary accommodation but who are not assessed as having additional needs.
- Rough sleeper - Verified rough sleepers who have a local connection to Gravesham.
- Overcrowding – applicants needing at least one more bedroom than their current home.
- Medium medical need - Households where one or more members are awarded a priority on medical, disability or welfare grounds as the current housing conditions are having a negative impact on the medical, disability or welfare needs of a member of the household.
- Medium welfare need - Households that would benefit from a move because they will experience a physical or mental illness as a result of their present housing circumstances, where the need to move is assessed as not urgent or life threatening or where a reciprocal has been agreed with another social housing provider.

Band D

- Older person's housing - Applicants assessed as needing sheltered accommodation who are not currently residing in sheltered accommodation.
- Low housing need - Homeless applicants where we do not owe a duty to secure accommodation, such as:
 - non-priority homeless households; or
 - households assessed as having become homeless intentionally; or
 - those who are of no fixed abode, including those staying or "sofa surfing" with relatives or friends, or living in a garage, shed, outbuilding, car or tent; or
 - where we have a duty to prevent and relieve homelessness and where a PRS offer is offered following this duty.

Further details on banding will be circulated to Committee Members

- It is difficult to give a reasonable answer on the waiting time for each Band as it depends on numerous factors. The advice to Councillors who are asked about waiting times is to not give an indication as it raises expectations.
- Regarding the methodology of who should be living with who / who people currently live with; the Council considers dependent children, adult children, people living in an area to give care or coming to an area to give care. Siblings are a little more complicated and these matters are dealt with on a case-by-case basis.
- The Allocations Panel has brought so much value and challenging conversations have led to change. Overcrowding has been discussed will be investigated.
- The Council assesses welfare needs carefully and tries to work with people.
- The website for those who wish to apply for housing is www.kenthomechoice.org.uk. Customers should try to complete this themselves and where there are difficulties they can obtain assistance from support workers, friends and family. If a household has no support network or professional working with them and they are having difficulties then an officer can assist in completing this with the customer.
- The Service Manager (Housing Options) agreed to circulate the Allocations Policy to the Committee following the meeting.

The Committee thanked the Service Manager (Housing Options) for the presentation on the Annual Review of Housing Allocation Scheme.

33. Update on Housing Management System

The Housing IT Systems Manager introduced himself to the committee and provided Members with an update on the Housing Management System.

Due to a technical difficulty the Committee agreed that the presentation on the Housing Management System would be arranged for Members outside of the meeting.

The Director (Housing) advised that the new system will allow tenants to go online, interact and make changes on tenancy in real time. The system will free up time for housing officers so they can spend more time out on their estates. The plan is to go live with system in mid-June 2022 and an update will be provided to the Committee at its next meeting.

Following questions and comments from Members, the Director (Housing), the Service Manager (Housing Landlord Services) and the Housing IT Systems Manager highlighted the following:

- Personal data for the new system will be held by MRI and the Assistant Director (Transformation & IT) is happy that all necessary checks and balances are in place.
- There isn't an 'App' version of the system as the advice from the IT and Digital Teams was that it was best to stick with an agnostic web browser version to avoid updates and complications. The Housing IT Systems Manager will speak to MRI to see if a shortcut link can be created to the system.
- Tenant Engagement officers will be holding in-person 'pop-up' session out on the community to promote the new system.

- Councillors will be provided with a specific text / guide about how to sign up to the new system. This will be considered for other services too.
- The system would not be suitable for private landlords, but GBC are engaging with them to understand their needs.
- A virtual demonstration of the Housing Management System to Members will be arranged before go-live.

The Committee thanked officers for the update on the Housing Management System

34. Draft Tenant Engagement Strategy

The Service Manager (Housing Landlord Services) provided Members with the Draft Tenant Engagement Strategy and highlighted the following:

- In the spring of 2021, tenants and leaseholders were invited to take part in consultation to help the Council develop a tenant engagement strategy and action plan in order to improve tenant and leaseholder engagement.
- From the responses received; five clear commitments were developed:
 1. To be clear on what our engagement offering is.
 2. To publicise our engagement activities.
 3. To offer a range of engagement methods but prioritise tenant meetings, forums and community fun days and projects.
 4. To offer a range of engagement topics, but to place significant focus on ASB, repairs and maintenance.
 5. To feedback to tenants and leaseholders and to continue consultation ensuring that topics are relevant and the frequency and methods.
- As a social housing provider there are regulatory requirements that we must adhere to in relation to tenant and leaseholder engagement, these are set out by the Regulator of Social Housing. There are two key requirements set out by the Regulator, which are the 'Tenant Involvement and Empowerment Standard 2017' and 'The Charter for Social Housing Tenants 2020.'
- The Social Housing White Paper sets out what every tenant and leaseholder should expect from their social housing landlord. It requires every social housing landlord to be transparent about their performance and decision-making, so that tenants, leaseholders and the regulator can hold them to account; put things right when they go wrong and listen to tenants and leaseholders through effective engagement. To ensure that landlords meet these expectations the paper sets out seven key themes for tenants, leaseholders and landlords, these are:
 1. To be safe in your home – the regulator will work with industry and landlords to ensure every home is safe and secure.
 2. To know how your landlord is performing, including on repairs, complaints and safety, and how it spends its money, so that tenants and leaseholders can hold it to account.

3. To have your complaints dealt with promptly and fairly, with access to a strong Ombudsman who will give tenants and leaseholders swift and fair redress when needed.
 4. To be treated with respect, backed by a strong consumer regulator and improved consumer standards for tenants.
 5. To have your voice heard by your landlord, for example through regular meetings, scrutiny panels or being on its Board. The Government will provide help, if you want it, to give you the tools to ensure your landlord listens.
 6. To have a good quality home and neighbourhood to live in, with your landlord keeping your home in good repair.
 7. To be supported to take your first step to ownership, so it is a ladder to other opportunities, should your circumstances allow.
- The Council want tenants and leaseholders to be part of this journey and to work together. Following this meeting; the strategy will go back to tenants and leaseholders for comments and feedback, which may lead to further amendments.

Following questions and comments from Members, the Service Manager (Housing Landlord Services) highlighted the following:

- Every avenue will be explored to publicise the draft Tenant Engagement Strategy
- The Council will go into the community to engage with people (e.g., visit estates, pop-up gazebos, communal areas etc). A full diary of events will be published with plenty of notice.
- The Council will ensure the draft Tenant Engagement Strategy is accessible to all (e.g. translated into different languages etc)
- The feedback received on the draft Tenant Engagement Strategy will be brought back to Members.
- There is a high demand for the Right to Buy scheme in Gravesham and Council is inundated with requests.
- The Service Manager (Housing Landlord Services) agreed to circulate the exact number of responses to the consultation outside of the meeting.
- The difference between 'repairs' and 'maintaining a home' are that the Council are responsible for repairs and tenants have an obligation to maintain their home.
- The Director (Housing) clarified the tenant figures in the strategy and advised Members that the wording would be revisited for this matter.

The Committee noted the Draft Tenant Engagement Strategy.

35. Managing Damp & Mould in Council Housing

The Service Manager (Housing Operations) updated members of the Housing Cabinet Committee on the Housing Ombudsman report addressing the issue of damp and mould called "Spotlight on: Damp and mould. It's not lifestyle" and associated action plan.

The report calls for landlords to take a 'zero-tolerance' approach to damp and mould as well as considering proactive actions to identify homes that have or may be at risk of developing problems rather than waiting for residents to report issues.

The Housing Ombudsman's report recognises the challenges for landlords in tackling these issues including overcrowding, poverty, the age and design of homes, but says landlords

should avoid inferring blame on residents due to 'lifestyle'. The document identifies best practice and makes 26 recommendations for landlords to implement including:

- Greater use of intelligence and data to prevent issues and ensure robust record keeping
- Adopting a consolidated policy for actions it may take based on diagnosis
- Ensuring strategies for delivering net zero homes consider and plan for any potential unintended consequences around damp and mould.
- Ensure staff and contractors have appropriate expertise to properly diagnose and respond to reports of damp and mould.

Following the report being published, work has been undertaken within Housing Operations to benchmark current processes and ways of working against the 26 recommendations for landlords to consider to highlight any areas of improvement required. A copy of the benchmarking exercise and any actions identified can be found at Appendix 2 to the report.

Following questions and comments from Members, the Service Manager (Housing Operations) highlighted the following:

- No claims have been received by the Council under the Homes (Fitness for Human Habitation) Act 2018
- The Courts will allow reasonable time for mould repairs (between 30 and 56 days)
- The Council will raise this matter with Private Landlords at the Landlord Forum in June.
- The Housing Ombudsman is reasonable and wouldn't expect the Council to keep going out and talking to tenant about a mould issue. Once the mould has been fixed the Council monitor the situation. Smart meters are used that notify the Council about damp and mould forming.
- Housing officers will refer any mould issues to the repairs team in the first instance who will then investigate to see if it falls within the repairs remit; if it does not then the matter will move into offering advice / educating the tenant. Opening windows to let the moisture out is good advice and it initially increases the room temperature.
- The Council does put vents in windows and holes for tumble dryers, where possible. New Council properties have dehumidifiers and extractors on the windows.

The Committee noted the contents of the report and action plan.

36. Corporate Performance Report: Q3 2021-22

The Director (Housing) presented Members of the Housing Services Committee with an update against the Performance Management Framework, as introduced within the council's Corporate Plan, for Quarter Three 2021-22 (October to December 2021).

The Director (Housing) highlighted the following areas:

- PI 18 - Average time taken to re-let council housing (days) - 64 days, this is due to a combination of Covid-19, supply chain and resourcing issues and is not unique to Gravesham as many social landlords are experiencing the same issues.
- PI 21 - Total number of households in temporary accommodation - There are currently 159 households in temporary accommodation, as at 31 December, of which 77 are in social stock and 82 are in nightly paid accommodation. The increase in use

is largely around Covid-19 and the lift on the ban of evictions as well as the need for re-housing under the Domestic Abuse Act 2021.

Following questions and comments from Members, the Director (Housing) highlighted the following:

- The Ukraine refugee situation is changing daily and there are mixed messages from the government. Without much evidence to go on, it has been predicted that 18,000 Ukrainian refugees could enter Kent, and Government has changed legislation to allow them some rights around social housing and homelessness advice. The Council is trying to work with the relevant partners. There is currently no funding for family connections.
There will be some funding for the Homes for Ukraine scheme but there is no further detail on this at the moment and its likely this will go to Kent County Council. The Council will be asked to do checks on private accommodation. The Council won't place people in temporary accommodation at this point but that may change; the Council's website will be kept up to date as the situation changes.
- Evictions are a last resort for the Council and all avenues are explored to prevent this scenario, particularly in vulnerable cases. Rents have been paid using grants in the past and the Council did win an award for its approach in dealing with rent arrears.
- The Council currently has around 30 void properties.
- The Service Manager (Housing Options) agreed to circulate the average time people spend in temporary accommodation to Members outside of the meeting.

The Committee noted the Corporate Performance Report: Q3 2021-22.

Close of meeting

The meeting ended at 9.32 pm