

Annual Council Housing Report 2021- 2022

Welcome to our annual report.

This review of our operations over the past 12 months (1 April 2021- 31 March 2022) comes at a challenging time for our tenants and ourselves.

Rising energy bills, inflation pressures, and the cost and supply issues associated with sourcing building materials mean that just like our tenants, we face real financial pressures.

However, that will not stop us striving to provide the best possible service to each and every one of our residents – it's what we are here for.

We are also doing all we can to ensure our tenants have all the help and advice they need to navigate these difficult waters, either directly through personal contact or by signposting them to the help available and measures they can take themselves through our Your Home tenant newsletter.

Despite these challenges, this report highlights the excellent work being done on a daily basis by our team here at Gravesham.

We are proud to be one of the few local authorities to retain our own council houses, meaning we are in direct control of all repairs and maintenance and our tenants know they can speak directly to us if they have any issues or problems.

We are of course only too well aware that the number of people waiting for social housing in the Borough outstrips supply, which is why we are committed to a programme of building new council-owned homes and to ensuring our teams turn around vacant properties and make them available for their next families as quickly as possible.

I am proud of the way our team works with our tenants to deliver homes and a Borough they can be proud of.

With all good wishes

Cllr Jenny Wallace

Cabinet Member for Housing Services

Housing Income – collecting your rent

Rental income and service charges pays for the services that all our tenants receive such responsive repairs, new kitchens and bathrooms, redecoration of external areas and building new council homes. Therefore, it is important that our tenants pay their rent, and on time so that the planned and required work can go ahead.

Despite Covid-19 restrictions lifting, the impact is still being felt by tenants who continue to be affected by the repercussions of this virus, such as an increase in unemployment alongside the cost of living crisis. To support our tenants, the Housing Income Team have changed the way in which they recover the rent and introduced a more collaborative approach by encouraging our tenants to make contact with the team as soon as possible to discuss any financial difficulties and to put a sensible and achievable plan in place to lessen any negative impacts. The team also offer help to tenants in submitting claims for Universal Credit as, for many of our tenants, it has been the first time they had ever had to make such a claim.

The team has significantly increased the amount of personal contact made with our tenants and this is something that we will continue, ensuring that we recover rent and arrears in a respectful and supportive manner. We have received some amazing compliments from tenants thanking us for our empathy, understanding and support and what a difference we made to their lives during these challenging times.

In 2021/22 two thirds of our tenants paid their rent in full and in time. However, there are some tenants who did not pay when they was able to do so and therefore we adapted our approach depending on whether it was a case of “can’t pay” or “won’t pay.”

Non-payment of rent through choice will not be accepted as this is unfair on the majority of our tenants who try their best to make payments and have worked with the team during challenging times to agree an arrangement. Rent is one of the priority payments that should be made so if wages/benefits are used for other things when the rent is not being paid the team will use the Legal options available which could ultimately lead eviction if all other methods of rent collection has been exhausted

In 2021/22, we evicted 3 tenants for non-payment of rent. This low number is a reflection not only of the Government restrictions prohibiting evictions for a period of time, but also our commitment to try our hardest to help our tenants to remain in their homes. For us eviction is always a last resort and we will always do our best to avoid having to take such action.

If you are having difficulties paying your rent, please do let us know as soon as possible by contacting our Housing Income Team directly on 01474 337358.

The level of rent arrears increased from £579,394 in 2019/20 to £886,761 at year-end in 2021. The figure equates to 2.99% of the overall income expected for that period. However, given the challenges everyone experienced throughout 2021/22, the year-end position was much more positive than the initial scenarios predicted; so whilst an increase is never a good thing, the year-end position was considered to be

a positive outcome and the recovery actions were tailored to offer more support than ever before.

Based on performance and the changes made to how the Housing Income Team work, they were awarded “Team of the Year Award” at the Kent Housing Group Extraordinary Awards Ceremony for 2021. This is an immensely proud moment for the team, and the Council as a whole, as the team were recognised by our peers as being worthy of an award due to the work they had carried out.

Independent Living

The last 12 months have been incredibly challenging times for everyone, including the Independent Living Team. This team have responsibility to all our older tenants living in one of our Independent Living schemes and as part of this have a responsibility for supporting the welfare, health, and safety of our older tenants.

At the end of 2021, the team were completely restructured to better reflect the services they were providing; this included changing the name of the service from sheltered housing to independent living. Both the staff and our tenants have adapted to the new way of working and the team continue to provide support to some of our most vulnerable residents.

Throughout 2021/22, our Independent Living Officers carried out 36,043 welfare calls to our tenants, and 1,095 health and safety checks on our schemes.

Our Independent Living Schemes are designed for people over the age of 55 years old to live in a safe and welcoming environment with other people of a similar age.

Tenant Engagement

This year has seen the launch of our Tenant and Leaseholder Engagement Strategy and we would like to take this opportunity to thank everyone who took the time to respond to our survey and consultation documents to help us shape the strategy.

Our Tenant Engagement Officers have spent a significant amount of time over the last 12 months supporting residents whose resident associations had disbanded as a result of restrictions during the pandemic. With the support of our Engagement Officers many new residents associations are up and running. If you would like any support to set up a formal residents association or informal resident groups please do contact the Tenant Engagement Team at tenantengagement@gravesham.gov.uk

In addition the Tenant Engagement Team have been involved in a number of events such as the Riverside Community Fun Day, St Patricks Garden Consultation Events, coffee mornings, a range of community projects and groups and administering our covid support fund in addition to supporting a very successful Community Payback scheme.

The work of the Tenant Engagement Team is focused on addressing key issues for our tenants such as combatting loneliness, digital inclusion and shaping the future development of the estates you live in.

Housing Management - Estate Inspections

In 2021/22 we implemented a set of programmed estate inspections for the Housing Services Team. This meant that our Housing Officers have increased their presence on our housing estates by carrying out regular estate inspections alongside any of our tenants that want to be involved.

The number of homes on an estate will determine the frequency of inspections, these are currently:

Size of Estate	Frequency of Inspections
Less than 20 properties	Quarterly
Between 20 – 50 properties	Bi-monthly
Over 50 properties	Monthly

Many of these inspections have been carried out jointly with other departments within the Council to help address some of the more serious issues on our estates such as anti-social behaviour and fly Tipping, which have led to successful outcomes.

During the last 12 months, our Housing and Independent Living Officers have carried out approximately 318 inspections to ensure we address issues promptly and effectively.

If you would like to join us for our estate inspections, you can find a list of areas, frequency, inspection dates and times and meeting points on our website at [Estate inspections | Your estate – Gravesham Borough Council](#) We would love for you to join us and share your views on the estates in which you live.

Housing Management – Anti-Social Behaviour (ASB)

Unfortunately, there will always be that small minority that do not respect the area in which they live and choose to live in an anti social manner. However, we have a 0% tolerance approach to anti social behaviour and are committed to reducing ASB through preventative work, providing support to victims and communities where ASB is more prevalent and using enforcement powers where necessary. Our primary approach will be to reduce ASB by educating people to recognise the impact of their behaviour and where possible, making changes to the physical environment to 'design out' the opportunity for ASB to occur in the first place. However, we will also take a robust stance on enforcement where preventative steps and interventions have failed to change behaviour. We will make full use of powers and tools available to us to tackle persistent problems and repeat offenders.

If you are experiencing ASB, please do let us know by contacting your Housing Officer so that we can tackle the issues. All contact details for our Housing Officers and the areas that they cover can be found here [Your housing officer | Information for tenants – Gravesham Borough Council](#)

If you feel threatened, intimidated or at immediate risk please do report any incidents of ASB directly to the Police either by calling 101 or 999.

Leasehold and Right to Buy (RTB) Services

We have seen a significant increase in the number of tenants wishing to purchase their council home over the last 12 months. Initially the introduction of the stamp duty relief scheme prompted a significant rise in requests, however this trend has continued despite the scheme coming to an end. In 2021/22, we processed 114 Right to Buy requests, and this resulted in 33 properties being sold under the Right to Buy

For our leaseholders, the law requires us to consult before we carry out any qualifying works or enter into a long-term agreement for the provision of services. In 2021/22, we carried out 111 Section 20 consultations. The reason for this is to protect leaseholders from paying unnecessarily large sums of money for work carried out to their homes. Qualifying works may include things such as window replacements, roof replacements and fire protection works. To ensure that we comply with legislation, we have carried out a significant amount of section 20 consultations over the last 12 months, which is a reflection of our commitment to ensure that our tenants and leaseholders have a safe and welcoming environment to call home.

Housing Development

Although we are required to sell properties to our tenants if they want to exercise their Right to Buy, we do try to mitigate the impact of this by committing to developing new council housing within the Borough.

In 2021/22, we built a total of 62 new homes, giving our existing tenants an opportunity to move, whilst also addressing the needs of those on our Housing Register. This was 45 more than the previous year. These homes were delivered across three schemes within the borough:

Admiral Beatty House - 32 homes

Bishops Court- 23 homes

Constable Road- 7 homes

Repairs & Maintenance

As a landlord, we are responsible for carrying out a range of repairs in our tenants' homes to ensure they are kept in good condition. Our tenants also have obligations in terms of carrying out, and reporting repairs such as blocked sinks and fencing.

The pandemic brought many challenges for the repairs service and at times created backlogs of work. Our dedicated and directly employed tradespeople continued to respond to tenants to make our homes safer and better and completed 25,603 repairs in 2021/2022 with a customer satisfaction rate of 98%. This was 2,000 more repairs than the previous financial year. We worked hard to make sure we could respond to repair requests through the pandemic in line with government guide restrictions and safety guidance and received 30,000 calls to the repair telephone line.

100% of emergency repairs were completed on time and 89% of non-emergency repairs were completed within the 28-day timescale.

Active Housing was also launched on the Council's website which is an online repair reporting service which allows tenants to self-appoint and manage their appointment in terms of cancelling and re-schedule if the appointment is no longer convenient. 430 appointments made by tenants were missed due to tenants not being at home at the agreed time, and this came at a cost to the Council of £17,000. Money which could have been spent on providing other services to you, our tenants.

When someone moves out of one of our properties, we need to give our repairs team some time to make any necessary refurbishments, but we want to make it available as soon as possible to a new tenant.

During 2021/2022, we refurbished 310 homes to bring them up to a standard where they can be re-let and managed to complete a minor void that only needs basic repairs within 9 days and a major void that needs major work such as a new kitchen and bathroom within 31 days. This was an increase from 240 homes in the previous year.

Safety and Improvement work

As your landlord we are committed to ensuring all our tenants live in a home that is warm, safe and in good condition. During 2021/2022 we continued to undertake planned improvements to your homes which included replacing kitchens, bathrooms, boilers, installing new windows and doors, replacing roofs, external decorating, electrical testing of blocks and dwellings, LED upgrading of communal lighting and adaptations.

Throughout 2021/22:

- 136 homes had new window and door installations
- 7 blocks of flats had the flat roofs completely replaced
- 17 individual houses had their roofs replaced

- 12 blocks and 465 houses had cyclical decoration completed. This is where we undertake work to keep the external and internal communal areas of our properties in good decorative condition
- 1,127 dwellings had electrics upgraded and tested
- 48 blocks had communal electric upgraded and tested.

We also carried out several adaptations to help give our tenants greater freedom within their home including;

- 53 properties had level access showers/wet rooms installed;
- 11 properties had over-bath showers;
- 31 stair-lifts were installed in properties
- 2 kitchens were adapted
- Essential safety maintenance of systems continued as usual, such as passenger lifts, communal lighting, CCTV, fire alarm, sprinkler and warden call systems, which included 216 new gas boilers Installed
- 5,700 Gas Safety Inspections completed
- 100% of our homes with a valid gas safety certificate.
- 2 Passenger Lifts Upgraded

Caretaking and Grounds Maintenance

We know a clean and tidy estate means a lot to our residents and because of this it is important to have clear standards as to what they can expect. We are committed to making sure residents have estates that are clean and cared for, safe and secure and in a good state of repair.

In 2021/2022 we launched the Rate My Estate Guide which can be found on our website along with the Make My Estate Great Survey and we will be using this information to build an action plan for improvements on each site.

Through the year, in response to the pandemic, our Caretaking team focused on sanitising touch points, such as communal door handles and lift panel, on all our estates to help keep residents safe.

We are working to deliver the climate emergency action plan and find more sustainable ways of working. This includes planting wildflower meadows and providing green spaces for residents. Residents told us they wanted natural green areas with more colour, and for us to think about nature conservation and value for money in our environments work. We have also been working to increase habitats for pollinators such as butterflies and bees, in line with Royal Horticultural Society guidance.

We also worked hard to deliver 5 exciting new play parks on our estates at Medhurst Gardens, Park Place, Warwick Place, Fountain Walk and Carl Ekman House and have plans for many more in the future.

Energy & Sustainability

The council are committed to reducing carbon emissions and improving the energy performance of its homes. The decarbonisation and retrofit of these homes is essential for the council to reach its net zero targets.

During 2021/2022, a number of key projects commenced which included:

- The design and installation of Ground Source Heat Pumps to 16 Independent Living flats in Higham.
- Installation of our first Air Source Heat Pump in a property previously on solid fuel.
- Successfully being awarded £297,000 through the Government's Local Authority Delivery Scheme Phase 2 (LAD2) funding scheme which will see around 130 properties benefit from a number of energy efficiency measures including loft and cavity insulation.
- Successfully being awarded £823,000 through the Government's Social Housing Decarbonisation Fund (SHDF) which will see 364 council homes receive loft and cavity wall insulation.
- 28 homes received loft and cavity wall insulation through the Energy Company Obligation 3 (ECO3) scheme
- Creation of a Resident Engagement Strategy for energy efficiency retrofit projects.

Complaints and Compliments

There will always be things that don't go to plan and we welcome complaints as a learning opportunity. Throughout 2021/22 we received 103 official complaints about a housing service. Every complaint allows us to listen to our tenants, explain why we have made a particular decision, put things right but also understand how we can do things better next time.

Of these 103 complaints 90 were resolved at stage one of our complaints process, 10 at stage two and 3 complaints went onto stage three of the process.

Compliments highlight areas of good practice and acknowledge the hard work and commitment of our staff. During the same period, we received 119 compliments. Thank you to all of our tenants who took the time to make contact with us to formally compliment a staff member or service.

Watch this space

Over the next 12 months, there are some key changes taking place within Housing Services. These are:

- 1) **A new Housing Management system** – We will shortly be going live with the second phase of our new housing management system. For our residents, it will mean an improved digital offering, enabling you to carry out a range of

tasks online, at a time that is convenient for you. This will include things such as being able to update your contact and household details, request permission for a pet and let us know about any other issues that concern you at a time to suit you.

- 2) **Tenant and Leaseholder Engagement Strategy** – Although the Tenant and Leaseholder Engagement strategy has been launched, part of that strategy includes a three year action plan to improve the way in which we engage with our residents. Over the next 12 months you will see more opportunities and a greater range of engagement activities being publicised to tackle the variety of issues that you told us were important to you.

If you would like to know more about tenant and leaseholder engagement activities or how to get involved please do contact us at tenantengagement@gravesham.gov.uk

- 3) **Tenant and Leaseholder Handbook** – throughout the next 12 months we will be updating our Tenant and Leaseholder handbook to ensure that it is relevant and contains the information that you need.
- 4) **Revamp of many of the Independent Living Schemes** – during the next 12 months many of our independent Living schemes will be redecorated and revamped to ensure that we are providing modern, welcoming and attractive communal spaces that meet the needs of our older population.