

Housing Services Cabinet Committee

Monday, 14 November 2022

7.30 pm

Present:

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

Councillors: Ejaz Aslam
 Sarah Gow
 Baljit Hayre
 Leslie Hills
 Jordan Meade
 Leslie Pearton
 Elizabeth Mulheran
 Frank Wardle

Daniel Killian – Director (Housing)
Victoria May – Service Manager (Housing Options)
Jody Bulman, Service Manager (Housing Landlord Services)
Clare Reynolds, Private Sector Housing Manager
Karen Gingles - Committee Services Officer (Minutes)

51. Apologies for Absence

Apologies for absence were received from Councillors Leslie Hoskins and Lyn Milner. Councillors Frank Wardle and Sarah Gow attended as substitutes.

52. Minutes

The minutes of the meeting held on Tuesday, 6 September 2022 were signed by the Chair.

53. Declarations of Interest

Cllr Bajit Hayre declared an other interest in the Draft House of Multiple Occupation (HMO) Licensing Policy and Charging Structure report, as he was a HMO Licence holder.

54. KentHomeChoice procurement update

The Service Manager (Housing Options) gave a presentation on the KentHomeChoice procurement update. The presentation can be viewed via the following link [\(Public Pack\)Housing Committee Presentation on KentHomeChoice Supplementary Agenda Supplement for Housing Services Cabinet Committee, 14/11/2022 19:30](#)

The Committee were informed that KentHomeChoice was a partnership of local authorities and Housing associations that provided social and affordable housing in Kent. The Kent partnership is the biggest in the country, began in 2008 and had been a county delivery since with many partners represented across local authorities and housing associations across Kent.

The system had both a front office system for the customer called KentHomeChoice and a back-office system for officers called Locata. The customer system advertises the available social homes and customers can place bids for these properties. The back-office system manages both the housing register and the homelessness case work conducted under the Homelessness Reduction Act. The Locata contract will come to an end in July 2023.

The Service Manager (Housing Options) explained to the Committee that Gravesham was part of a working Group with other local authorities, in which Dover District Council were the lead authority. Dover District Council undertook a procurement process in early 2022 which included nominating senior officers from 6 of the 13 Council partners including the Service Manager (Housing Options) from Gravesham.

Members were advised that Huume Ltd won the contract for the new Homechoice system on both price and quality.

The Service Manager (Housing Options) explained the transition between systems with the current Kenthomechoice programme closing to new applications on 1st June 2023. New properties would continue to be advertised via Kenthomechoice until 16th June 2023. After 16th June 2023 all data would migrate to the new system Huume. Huume would then go live on 1st July.

The Committee considered the presentation and highlighted the following:

- The new system offered a more efficient and user-friendly approach for both customers and officers.
- Members wondered how homeless cases would be dealt with in the interim between closure of the Kenthomechoice system on 16th June 2023 and the new Huume system going live on 1st July 2023. The Service Manager (Housing Options) advised the normal statutory functions would remain the same with triage of cases and if temporary accommodation was required this would still be provided.
- Members queried how you became a lead authority for the partnership. The Service Manager advised that Members of the partnership nominated a lead and Dover was selected.
- Whether any issues were foreseen with the standardisation of data. The Service Manager (Housing Options) advised that the transition of data should be smooth and alluded that authorisation had been given for a dedicated administrator to assist with inputting of data. This administrator would not be solely for Gravesham but for all authorities within the group.
- The Committee questioned whether the service users could have the opportunity to view the new system prior to it going live. The Service Manager (Housing Options) agreed this was a valid point and would feed this back to the working group.
- Concern was raised as to whether all authorities involved would be going live on the same date and what disruption this could potentially cause. The Director (Housing) advised that all authorities would go live on the same date and although there would be a four-week window in which no new applications can be taken, the impact would

be minimal, as it would be very unlikely someone would be housed in less than four weeks. If there was an emergency case such as fleeing domestic violence temporary accommodation would be used.

- Members queried if being in a partnership with other local authorities would intercept the authority's procedure rules in the constitution. The Director (Housing) informed the Committee that this would be investigated and communicated back to Members.

The Committee noted the report.

55. Draft House of Multiple Occupation (HMO) Licensing Policy and Charging Structure

The Service Manager (Housing Options) presented the Draft House of Multiple Occupation (HMO) Licensing Policy and Charging Structure report via a presentation to the Committee. The presentation can be viewed via the following link ([Public Pack](#))[Statutory and Non Statutory Fees Presentation Supplementary Agenda Supplement for Housing Services Cabinet Committee, 14/11/2022 19:30](#)

The purpose of this report was to provide Housing Services Cabinet Committee with an opportunity to make comments on the expanded Houses of Multiple Occupation (HMO) Licencing Policy. In addition, the report also provided the Housing Services Cabinet Committee with the updated fees matrix for Private Sector Housing enforcement activity, to ensure a consistent and transparent approach to charging fees for both statutory and non-statutory inspections, that will form part of the Council's annual review of fees and charges.

It was recommended for Members to discuss and provide feedback on the HMO Licencing Policy prior to being ratified by the Cabinet Member for Housing Services.

The Service Manager (Housing Options) gave the Committee a background on the Private Sector Housing Team, outlining their role to support and advise privately renting tenants, homeowners and private landlords, with their primary aim to work towards safe and well-maintained accommodation. The Committee were informed that the Private Housing Team also administered Disabled Facilities Grants (DFGs), licenced certain Houses in Multiple Occupation, Caravan sites and would soon be managing empty homes within the borough.

The Service Manager (Housing Options) updated members that currently there was not a dedicated policy for HMO Licencing and the current HMO licence fee structure within Gravesham had remained the same for over 5 years.

The Service Manager (Housing Options) drew members attention to the proposed new fee structure detailed on page 11 of the report. It was proposed that there would be different fees depending on the type of application, that would be split in to two parts, Part A and Part B payments. The current fee for an HMO Licence was £540. With the new proposed scheme there would be an increased fee of £703.33 (made up of the two-part payment) for 2022/23. It was stressed that fees were not for profit and any income made through charging would put into the Council's General Fund. Members were informed that Section 49 of the Housing Act 2004, enabled local authorities to make such reasonable charge as they considered appropriate as a means of recovering certain administrative and other expenses incurred by them. By introducing a charging matrix this would support service delivery.

The Chair commended the report and introduced Gravesham's new Private Sector Housing Manager to the Committee.

The Committee considered the report and raised the following:

- Members raised a small administrative discrepancy between the report and presentation regarding the proposed new HMO licence fee. It was confirmed that the fee was £703.33 not £703.00 and this would be corrected on the report.
- Reference was made to the Mandatory Licence minimum requirements outlined on page 27 of the report and why there was no mention of EPC certificates and carbon monoxide detectors. The Private Sector Housing Manager advised that an EPC certificate would not be required for an HMO as an EPC was a requirement for an entire dwelling not for a room in an HMO. It was also confirmed that carbon monoxide detectors fell under the fire safety section of mandatory minimum requirements.
- Members referred to the Minimal Requirements on page 27 and mentioned that it would be useful to know what size single and double occupancy rooms should be and also the number of WCs and kitchens to occupant ratio. The Private Sector Housing Manager advised that the relevant housing legislation did not run parallel with that of planning and that the department was working on amenity standards and better guidance for Gravesham, as the current format was not robust. Members were advised that this would be published in due course.
- The Committee questioned why the proposed renewal HMO licence fee was only £5.40 more expensive than the current renewal HMO licence fee, which had been set over 5 years ago. The Director (Housing) notified Members that when setting the fees, a matrix was followed to ensure fees were correct based on officer time. The Committee were also informed that applications were much quicker and therefore was less administration involved than 5 years ago and so in line with the matrix, there was only a minimal permitted increase.
- Members asked how the Council would encourage tenants to make contact if they had issues with a landlord and how this would be promoted going forward. The Director (Housing) advised there was an online form on the GBC website to report a landlord. This was not something that was currently being promoted but would be in the future via the Council's Communications team.
- The Committee asked what authority Gravesham had to undertake random checks on HMOs to ensure standards are being met. The Director (Housing) confirmed that the team were currently investigating reported issues with licenced premises and due to the current challenging workload/lack of resources, random visits were not something that they were able to do currently. However, since the restructure of the private housing team, there would be a much more proactive approach moving forward.
- Members observed that more enforcement of licence breeches would be welcomed. Reference was made to the cost of enforcement charges and whether this element was considered in the costing matrix when setting the proposed fees and could this therefore be increased. The Director (Housing) acknowledged the importance of this, but informed Members that the Private Housing team had been through a great deal of change laying the foundations for a better future and so it was not right time to do this at present. This would be an increase to consider next year when the structure was in place to enforce.

The Committee noted the report and accompanying policy.

56. Corporate Performance Update: Quarter Two 2022-23

The Director (Housing) presented the Corporate Performance Update: Quarter Two 2022-23. The purpose of this report was to provide the Committee with an update against the Performance Management Framework, as introduced within the Council's Corporate Plan, for Quarter Two 2022-23 (July to September 2022). The report was for information purposes only.

The Director (Housing) drew member's attention to PI 18 of the report, which outlined the average time taken to re-let council housing. It was noted that the average time taken to re-let council housing had continued to reduce. This quarter the average time to re-let houses had reduced to 19 days compared to 28 days in the first quarter of 2022/23. This continued to reflect the great, collective work of all of the teams within Housing, who had been working together to re-let properties as quickly as possible.

The Director (Housing) informed the Committee that this quarter had seen an increase of those in homelessness with 194 households in temporary accommodation. Of these, 90 households were in Gravesham stock with the remaining in nightly paid accommodation.

The Committee was notified that the Housing department were looking to build a business case to explore the option of creating a social lettings agency to work with Landlords to move more households out of temporary accommodation and prevent homelessness before reaching crisis point. Members were advised that homelessness is a national issue and not unique to Gravesham and a contributing factor to homelessness was the financial crisis.

The Committee considered the presentation and highlighted the following points:

- Members praised the work of the Gravesham housing officers and in particular, that of James Newman. It was felt by the Committee he should receive their appreciation of his efforts in the form of a letter.
- Members referred to page 37 of the report regarding enforcing high quality private housing, working with landlords to tackle standards, empty housing and homes in multiple occupation. It was queried why the Stork at Rest site was used as an example specifically and whether this was just one example. The Director (Housing) advised this particular property was highlighted in the report as it is an example of where there had been joint working and bringing an empty property back into use for new property and in back into the community. In this case there had been a working partnership with KCC .
- Clarity was sought regarding the term affordable rent within the private rental market, in which the Director (Housing) advised that housing rents at 80% of the market value was considered affordable housing.

The Committee noted the report.

57. Draft Housing Management Annual Report 2021/22

The Service Manager (Housing Landlord Services) presented the Draft Housing Management Annual Report 2021/22. The purpose of this report was to provide Housing Services Cabinet Committee with a draft copy of the Annual Council Housing Report and to seek comments on the content prior to design work being undertaken by the Communications Team and ratified by Cabinet Member for Housing Services.

The Service Manager (Housing Landlord Services) informed the Committee that the purpose of the Housing Management Annual Report was to provide tenants with information relating to all of the achievements of the last 12 months. The reason for this was to celebrate the successes, to provide tenants with information regarding the services provided and to give an insight into what they could expect in the coming 12 months. The report would give tenants information on a number of services they received such as:

- Housing Income
- Independent Living
- Tenant Engagement
- Housing Management (Estate Inspections and ASB Management)
- Leasehold and RTB services
- Housing Development
- Repairs and Maintenance
- Safety and Improvement Works
- Caretaking and Grounds Maintenance
- Energy and Sustainability

The Service Manager (Housing Landlord Services) highlighted a few key points from the Housing Management Annual Report 2021/22:

- It acknowledged that some tenants were experiencing difficulties due to the cost of living and Members were advised that the report signposted tenants to financial help through the Housing Income Team.
- Throughout 2021/22, the Independent Living Team carried out 36,043 welfare calls to tenants living in Independent Living (previously known as Sheltered Accommodation), and 1,095 health and safety checks.
- A Tenant Engagement Strategy had been launched this year and with the support of the Engagement Officers many new residents associations had been set up. Several events such as the Riverside Community Fun Day, St Patricks Garden Consultation Events, coffee mornings and a range of community projects had been organised with tenants.
- In 2021/22 programmed estate inspections were implemented for the Housing Services Team. During the last 12 months, the Housing and Independent Living Officers had completed approximately 318 inspections. The report gave the tenant the opportunity to attend inspections via a link to the Council's website.
- There had been a significant increase in the number of tenants wishing to purchase their Council home over the last 12 months. In 2021/22, 114 Right to Buy requests were processed and this resulted in 33 properties being sold. The impact of this was mitigated however by building 62 new homes during this period.
- 100% of emergency housing repairs were completed on time and 89% of non-emergency repairs were completed within the 28-day timescale.
- In 2021/2022 the Rate My Estate Guide was launched on the website along with the Make My Estate Great Survey. Information gathered will be used to build an action plan for improvements.
- The Council delivered 5 new play parks on GBC estates for residents at Medhurst Gardens, Park Place, Warwick Place, Fountain Walk and Carl Ekman House and had plans for more in the future.
- The Tenant and Leaseholder Handbook would be updated throughout the next 12 months.

- It was noted that throughout 2021/22 103 official complaints were received about housing services. Of these 90 were resolved at stage one of the complaints process, 10 at stage two and 3 complaints went onto stage three of the process.

The Committee considered the presentation and gave their feedback and comments:

- Members praised the report. Reference was made to page 50 of the report regarding repairs and maintenance and the overall cost to the council when appointments were missed. It was proposed that the report could also include that tenants would incur a charge for missed appointments. The Service Manager (Housing Landlord Services) confirmed that a charge of £40 was enforced when a second appointment was missed, and this would be added to the report.
- It was raised that tenants may find it useful to have the out of hours repair number on the report, the Service Manager (Housing Landlord Services) agreed this point and advised the report would be updated with the contact details.
- Members felt it was important that the report should not only include the positive comments received by tenants but all feedback given. The Service Manager (Housing Landlord Services) informed the Committee that this would be included to show where lessons had been learnt from previous complaints.
- Reference was made to page 48 of the report which addressed the issue of anti-social behaviour. More clarity was sought regarding how the Council dealt with this matter. The Service Manager (Housing Landlord Services) advised that the approach was dependant on the nature of the case, however the Council took a robust stance on enforcement. She went on to say that in the first instance, initial contact would be made with both the perpetrator and the victim to establish the details, evidence of the incident would then be gathered. Officers would look to work with the tenants to educate individuals in recognising the impact of their behaviour, before enforcement would potentially escalates further, if not resolved.
- Members referred to the Right to Buy (RTB) section of the report (page 49) and queried why tenants now received a discount on purchasing their property after 3 years of occupation, when this used to be after 5 years. The Service Manager (Housing Landlord Services) explained that this change was set in Government legislation and had to be adhered to. The Service Manager (Housing Landlord Services) gave context on how the RTB scheme impacted the housing stock, by alluding to the fact that prior to the scheme in the 1980's Gravesham had 14,000 Council houses and now had under 6,000. However, the Council continued to try and mitigate loss but committing to developing new Council housing within the borough.
- Information was sought by Members regarding the Council buying back properties that we had previously owned. The Director (Housing) advised the Council were able to keep 40% of the sale which could then part fund any new build purchases the Council made. It was noted that this capital would need to be spent within a 5-year period. If the funds were not spent in that time a penalty would be incurred, so it was important to buy other properties to ensure no penalty was paid.

The committee noted the report.

Close of meeting

The meeting ended at 8:50pm