

Housing Services Cabinet Committee

Thursday, 2 February 2023

7.30pm

Present:

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

Councillors: Ejaz Aslam
Baljit Hayre
Les Hoskins
Jordan Meade
Leslie Pearton
Elizabeth Mulheran

Daniel Killian Director (Housing)
Victoria May Service Manager (Housing Options)
Jody Bulman Service Manager (Housing Landlord Services)
Chloe Taylor Committee Services Officer (Minutes)

58. Apologies for Absence

An apology for absence was received from Cllr Leslie Hills.

59. Minutes

The minutes of the Housing Services Cabinet Committee held on Monday 14 November 2022, were agreed and signed by the Chair.

60. Declarations of Interest

Cllr Baljit Hayre declared an interest in Item 6 as he was an HMO license holder.

Cllr Jordan Meade declared an interest in Item 5 as he was a Kent County Councillor (KCC) and the report made reference to the 'No Use Empty' scheme.

61. Draft Empty Homes Strategy 2023-2028

The Service Manager (Housing Options) presented the Committee with the Draft Empty Homes Strategy 2023 – 2028. The purpose of this report was to provide the Housing Services Cabinet Committee with an overview of the strategy and to give Members the opportunity for comment prior to approval by Cllr Jenny Wallace, Cabinet Member for Housing Services.

The Service Manager (Housing Options) highlighted the following key points from the report:

- The Empty Homes service transferred from Housing Development to Private Sector Housing on 1 January 2023.
- The previous Empty Homes Strategy expired in 2019.

- At the time of writing the strategy, Gravesham had a total of 661 empty properties with 336 of those being empty for a period of at least six months.
- There was a wording error with the use of the term 'grant' on page 24, which should have stated 'loan'.
- A Corporate Working Group was being set up to have representation across the Council. The first meeting was due to take place in February 2023.

Following questions and comments from Members, the Service Manager (Housing Options) explained that:

- The empty properties discussed were privately owned housing and not Council owned housing.
- Homes were declared empty for a number of factors, such as sentimental reasons, inherited properties, and second homes. These were identified through the council tax system.
- The Corporate Working Group would help to calculate the impact of legislation on empty homes, such as the Levelling Up and Regeneration Bill with council tax helping to shape the approach to empty homes to produce a proactive service.
- The Director (Housing) explained that statistically, second home ownership in Gravesham was relatively low and therefore, it was not thought that the Levelling Up and Regeneration Bill would have a huge impact.
- Members can help by reporting any known empty properties.
- The Housing Services Team were working with Communications to gain publicity on what they're doing, when and how empty properties can be reported.
- The website was being updated to make it more effective.
- National Empty Homes Week would provide the team with information regarding what tools they have at their disposal. The Service Manager (Housing Options) was happy to report back to the Committee on what strategies they planned to use to promote the identification of empty homes.
- The Housing Services Team were working closely with different departments across the Council, such as Communications, Digital, Enforcement and Private Sector Housing, as well as KCC's No Use Empty Scheme to identify what other areas were doing to help identify any gaps.
- The Service Manager (Housing Options) assured Members that they held confidence in the service and would do the best they could to bring empty homes back into use.
- Marketing strategies targeted towards Landlords presented them with what's on offer and provided them with an analysis on how much rental income they could generate, as well as information regarding GBC helping them to find a suitable tenant.
- The Empty Homes Strategy would be reviewed every year to ensure that it's kept up to date with new legislation.
- The Service Manager (Housing Options) agreed to circulate a link to the Committee Members regarding KCC's No Use Empty Scheme.
- The Service Manager (Housing Options) agreed to find out more information on the exemptions of eligibility.
- Landlords were protected by Landlord Insurance Packages and a Landlord Liaison Service if problems arose with a tenant.
- After a meeting with the Communications team, the ways in which the Empty Homes Week could be promoted were explored.

The Committee noted the report.

62. Updated Property and Management Standards Applicable to Houses of Multiple Occupation (Amenity Standards)

The Service Manager (Housing Services) presented the Committee with a report that updated Members on the Amenity Standards applicable to Houses of Multiple Occupation (HMOs), and outlined the following:

- The Government provided minimum standards, which were last updated in 2018, and as such a refresh was needed.
- The Service Manager (Housing Services) was aware that not all existing landlords met the threshold, but they were working to get them up to standard.
- It was not possible to stop a landlord from having a HMO license, but conditions could be placed upon it.
- The most recent update came from increased fire regulations in January, making the standards as up to date as possible.

Following questions and comments from Members, the Service Manager (Housing Services) explained that:

- For listed buildings, they were aware of the importance in flexibility, whilst ensuring all standards are met, to make it as feasible and as reasonable as possible.
- HMOs were designed for single occupancy and no children should be housed in a HMO. Initial inspections will take place at the point of application, and if a report was filed of a child living at a HMO, an investigation would take place.
- The Service Manager (Housing Services) agreed to share the standards with Planning.
- The Service Manager (Housing Services) agreed to amend the table on page 36 to reflect the order of the note's underneath. Additionally, it was agreed that a door guard be implemented.

The Committee noted the report.

63. Eviction Report / Anti-Social Behaviour Policy

The Service Manger (Housing Landlord Services) presented the Committee with a report detailing an overview of the eviction process as a social housing landlord when dealing with anti-social behaviour.

The Service Manager (Housing Landlord Services) outlined the following key points from the report:

- Members were reminded that eviction was always a last resort. Residents should be given opportunity to change their behaviour and reasonable steps should be taken.
- A study carried out by Shelter in September 2021, identified that it costs at least £28 million pounds to evict tenants from social housing each year, acknowledging that the approximate cost of supporting a homeless household due to eviction was £24,000 per household.

- 75% of anti-social behaviour can be resolved if early intervention was successful.
- The new policy outlined the difference between what was defined as anti-social behaviour, and what was defined as unwanted behaviour.

Following questions and comments, the Service Manager (Housing Landlord Services) explained that:

- Restorative justice was a more formal element of intervention which comes from the police. GBC would start mediation early by meeting in an informal environment or use a trained mediator.
- Housing Anti-social Behaviour Officers previously sat with Community Safety, but housing officers know their tenants best and so it was felt that the service should be brought back into housing.
- There was not one specific mode of reporting anti-social behaviour. Residents would email and call, as well as tell officers who were out on estate inspections.
- Residents are encouraged to report any incidences of anti-social behaviour to the police. The team had a good working relationship with the police, so it often benefitted the residents by reporting to both the Council and the police, who have established information sharing protocols.
- Reports of anti-social behaviour relating to drug use were investigated on evidence, either by GBC or the police, and this would be presented at Court. However, a balance must be maintained if they have received multiple reports regarding the same incident.
- There were no specific signs in housing estates that promoted an intolerance to anti-social behaviour as there was debates around the effectiveness of the signs highlighting anti-social behaviour in the area. However, the Service Manager (Housing Landlord Services) agreed to look into the use of digital noticeboards within Gravesham.
- As part of an anti-social behaviour report, staff complete a risk assessment and these categorise it as high, medium or low risk. A low-risk case may involve monitoring, whilst a high-risk case would immediately put staff in contact with the police to ensure the safety of the tenant. This could involve finding them alternative accommodation.
- Noise complaints regarding the washing machine being used at night fall into the category of household noise. The Service Manager (Housing Landlord Services) agreed to reflect this within the report.

The Committee thanked the Service Manager (Housing Options) and Service Manager (Housing Landlord Services) for the detailed reports and the hard work that went into making this report.

Close of meeting

The meeting ended at 8.32pm

