

Housing Services Cabinet Committee

Tuesday, 5 September 2023

7.30 pm

Present:

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

Councillors: Ejaz Aslam
 Lee Croxton
 Baljit Hayre
 Emma Elliott
 Jordan Meade
 Leslie Pearton
 Alison Williams

Daniel Killian – Director (Housing)
Nicole Arthur – Head of Housing Assets
Joshua Arthur – Project Surveyor (Energy and Sustainability)
Florentina Bela – Rough Sleeping Partnership Manager
Bal Chattha – Compliance & Projects Manager
Clare Reynolds – Private Sector Housing Manager
Karen Gingles - Committee Services Officer (Minutes)

1. Apologies for Absence

Apologies for absence were received from Councillor Deborah Croxton and Councillor Lyn Milner. Councillors Lee Croxton and Alison Williams attended as their substitutes.

2. Minutes

The minutes of the meeting held on Tuesday, 21 March 2023 were signed by the Chair

3. Declarations of Interest

There were no declarations of interest.

4. Rough Sleeping Strategy

Members were presented with the new Rough Sleeping Strategy 2023. The purpose of this report was to provide the Housing Services Cabinet Committee with an overview of the Councils Rough Sleeping Strategy 2023-2025, to help achieve the Government's target of reducing rough sleeping.

The Rough Sleeping Partnership Manager explained that Gravesham had not had a standalone strategy before and now more than ever there was a great need for one. She

highlighted that the new Rough Sleeping Strategy would be published on the Council's website, providing transparency, increasing awareness of the issue and informing the public of the Council's approach on how rough sleeping would be tackled. It was noted that a published strategy would facilitate collaboration between the Council and other stakeholders, including local businesses, community groups, and service providers.

The Rough Sleeping Partnership Manager outlined key aims and objectives of the report which included:

- Explaining how the Council work with the Department of Levelling Up, Housing and Communities to meet the Government's commitment to significantly reduce rough sleeping by 2027.
- Reducing the number of people sleeping rough in the area
- Providing support and accommodation for those sleeping rough
- Working with local partners to offer further support to those who are homeless or at risk of homelessness.
- Offering tailored support to vulnerable individuals, such as mental health issues, substance abuse and those who have experienced domestic violence.

The Rough Sleeping Partnership Manager informed the Committee that the Council had been successful in securing funding of £999,631 from the Rough Sleepers Initiative (RSI) along with £350,372 for long term accommodation support. She advised Members that the funding from the RSI had facilitated recruitment of a new positions to assist with the cause, including a Rough Sleeping Initiative Manager, a Housing Resettlement Officer and Outreach Workers. The funding also provided budgets to assist with accommodation.

Members were updated that the funding for the long-term accommodation support, had enabled the Council to invest in a 10 bedroom supported accommodation facility which also had the provision of 4 emergency rooms.

The Rough Sleeping Partnership Manager concluded that the main focus of the strategy would be on prevention. Activities were planned to support this at community events and hubs to offer advice to people who may be at risk of sleeping rough. Close collaboration with partners would also continue along with using Street Link reports to identify individuals who are reported to be sleeping rough.

Members were advised that section 5.2 of the strategy relating to who the Council's Rough Sleeping Partners were, needed to be updated as The House of Mercy was unfortunately closing.

The Rough Sleeping Partnership Manager drew Members attention to the action plan within the strategy, advising that it would be monitored and reviewed on a regular basis in order to keep information up to date.

The Chair thanked The Rough Sleeping Partnership Manager for the report and invited Members to give feedback:

- The Committee all welcomed the strategy, highlighting it was very positive standalone document for residents in Gravesham.

- Members queried section 5.2 (Rough Sleeping Partners) and whether this should include Adult Social Care and the emergency services (Fire Service and Ambulance Service). The Rough Sleeping Partnership Manager advised she would change this to add the other emergency services, however expressed that work had specifically been carried out with the Police and Probation Service. Members were updated that the team had recently formed a good partnership with Adult Social Care, so they would also be added to the list in section 5.2.

The Committee also suggested that domestic abuse partners be included within section 5.2. The Rough Sleeping Partnership Manager informed Members that domestic violence was covered within the Housing Needs Strategy, however reference could be made, signposting the public to the Housing Needs Strategy.

- In section 5.3 (support and assistance), it was suggested that help to obtain a bank account and assistance with gaining UK status should be included. The Rough Sleeping Partnership Manager agreed this could be added along with the details for Street Link.
- Members queried how Gravesham compared to other areas within Kent in relation to rough sleeping and expressed that the graph in section 4 of the report did not show a particular pattern. The Rough Sleeping Partnership Manager informed Members that comparison to other boroughs was difficult as everyone had seen an influx of rough sleeping. She expressed that a pattern was also hard to determine at this stage, as data prior to 2022 was not very accurate. There had been an increase in rough sleeping and in September, KCC funding for supported accommodation was coming to an end. The Director (Housing) added that a pattern was difficult to determine as there were many other external factors with the situation on the streets.
- Members asked how the team would engage with individuals who were refusing help. The Rough Sleeping Partnership Manager assured the Committee that the team tried different approaches to gain trust. The Rough Sleeping Partners also engaged where appropriate offering specialist support. Members were informed that although some people did not want to receive help, the team always persevered and worked consistently with the individuals to gain information on their situation, along with gaining their trust. The Chair echoed this praising the team for their continuous work. Members felt this should be reinforced within the document to show how proactive the team were in engaging with the rough sleepers.
- Reference was made to the action plan, item 3.4, in relation to working with KCC and Lookahead, which stated that work would continue with KCC until March 2024, however the Committee had been advised that this partnership was to end due to the withdrawal of funding. The Rough Sleeping Partnership Manager advised that this date had now changed to 2023. The Director (Housing) clarified that it was not the case that the team would no longer engage with KCC, the decision had been made to end the service and the Rough Sleeping Partnership Manager would continue to work with both KCC and Lookahead to mitigate any issues once the funding ended.
- Members observed that the strategy included no mention of the success stories, which they felt should be identified for both the community and partners to see. The Director (Housing) agreed and informed Members that feedback of the successes would be presented to Committee in a separate paper at a later date.

The Committee noted the report.

5. Council Housing - Building Safety

Members were presented with The Building Safety Act 2022, The Fire Safety Act 2021 and The Fire Safety (England) Regulations 2022 in relation to Council Housing. The purpose of the report was to update the Housing Cabinet Committee of recent changes to building and fire safety laws and regulations, their implications for the Authority, and the measures Housing Assets were taking to comply.

The Head of Housing Assets and Compliance & Projects Manager highlighted key aspects from the report.

- The Head of Housing Operations informed Members that the new legislation changes were very relevant in the wake of the recent fires in Rose Street and the raac concrete in current news reports. Members were advised that the amendments to building safety law was passed following findings of an independent review in the wake of the Grenfell Tower fire. She noted that following the Grenfell Tower disaster, Gravesham had been on the front foot and had already taken a number of measures prior to this new legislation, such as sprinklers in all high-rise residential buildings. The Committee were advised that the changes had been incorporated into existing legislation and with the creation of new legislation.
- The new building safety law defined a high risk building as being 18 metres tall and above, of which Gravesham has 5 residential buildings that were applicable to this category. Members were informed that all high-rise building must be registered by 1st October 2023.
- The new building safety act required the Council to appoint an accountable person to be responsible for monitoring and assessing health, safety and fire risk of a high risk building and to apply for a Building Assurance Certificate from April 2024.

The Chair invited Members to ask questions and give feedback:

- In the event of a fire Members queried how residents would be accounted for. The Compliance & Projects Manager explained that ultimately this was the role of the Fire Service, however there would be officers on site to keep record. He went on to say that there were plans to have lists of residents held in the secure information box, with details of any vulnerable residents plus those who would require assistance with evacuation. The Chair praised the Compliance & Project Manager for being on site at the recent fire in Rose Street and for the Head of Housing Asset's assistance the next morning.
- In relation to recent national news stories relating to raac concrete, Members asked if the Committee would receive an update relating to any impact on Gravesham properties. The Head of Housing Assets informed Members that all relevant buildings had undergone surveys and there was no indication of any concrete issues. She went on to say that a certificate would be obtained to that effect.
- Clarification was sought regarding the role of Accountable Person and whether this would be an officer or Member of the Council, as it was highlighted within the report

that the appointed person(s) could be prosecuted if there was a breach. The Head of Housing Assets advised it had been decided as a corporate entity, that the responsible persons would be the Management Team of the Council including the Head of Housing Operations and Compliance & Projects Manager, in respect of the action plan, to evidence and demonstrate commitment. It was noted that the Council's Risk Register would be updated to reflect the 4 acts.

Members asked if the Local Government Authority gave guidance on the proposal of prosecution, as the term 'negligence' would be a concern to Members. The Head of Housing Operations confirmed there would be Member Training at the end of October which would cover this, along with proposed building awareness training for Members in the future.

- The Committee queried how the Council would deal with situations where a resident would not permit access into a building for safety repairs, ensuring the Council did not become liable for a potential breach. The Head of Housing Operations assured Members that if a resident was not working with the organisation and preventing the Council to carry out works and improve safety, the team could take a legal course of action to obtain access if required. The Director (Housing) concurred that any compromise to safety would be put right.
- Reference was made to a negative media story relating to the recent fire in Rose Street. The Director (Housing) informed Members this story was not factually correct and the Communications Manager had contacted BBC Southeast, who had since apologised. The Committee were updated that all residents in the effected houses were accommodated by the Council into temporary accommodation on the night of the fire, whether they were Council tenants or private occupants.

The Committee noted the report.

6. Ellenor Household Goods and Recycled Furniture Project

Members were presented with Recycled Furniture and Household Goods Project. The purpose of the report was to inform Housing Services Cabinet Committee of a newly created sustainability initiative with Gravesend based charity, Ellenor Hospice, to recycle good quality unused furniture and household goods from void Council properties and estates to be sold in their charity shops reducing the waste sent by the Council to landfill.

The Project Surveyor (Energy and Sustainability) highlighted key information from the report:

- Prior to this scheme, figures from the Waste Management department indicated that on average 3 tonnes of waste was disposed from empty Council properties on weekly basis. This waste would be cleared when a tenant had deceased, been evicted or had abandoned their property.
- In 2022 the Council approached Ellenor about introducing a furniture collection service from the Council's void properties, which would result in a reduction of waste and the repurpose of furniture to be sold in Ellenor's shops, which in turn would help fund the care they provided in the community.

- The first trial collection took place in January 2023, which had a positive outcome which led to further collections. The charity would also be collecting larger furniture items and white good moving forward.
- Currently, around £2,700 has been generated by Ellenor from sales of the items that had been collected from the empty Council properties. It was note however, that this had risen to nearer £3000 since the report had been written. This figure in real terms amounted to 55 hours of online exercise/relaxation sessions at home, 28 home meetings between a patient and a hospice nurse and 32 hours of expert nursing care in the hospice.
- It had been found that along with furniture items, items such as dry/tinned foods and unused toiletries where often left in void properties. The Project Surveyor (Energy and Sustainability) informed the Committee that the team were working with Northfleet based food bank, Hive Hope to make use of these also.
- It was noted that this new scheme met with the Council's climate change pledge and in turn helped the local community.

The Chair commended the report noting it was a good news story and invited Members to give feedback:

- The Committee were all in agreement that this positive working partnership was of great benefit to the community and a sound cost saving exercise for the organisation.
- Members queried whether once the goods had exchanged hands if the Council would be excluded of liability for the condition of the items. The Project Surveyor (Energy and Sustainability) assured Members that the team had been supplied with a brief which stated that Ellenor would not accept any items that did not have the required fire rating. It was also explained that once collected, Ellenor would take full ownership and responsibility of the items.
- The Committee requested that an annual report of the successes of this project be produced, to include the savings the Council had generated through the scheme. The Project Surveyor (Energy and Sustainability) advised he would work with waste management to produce the report and would include the savings both financially and through staff hours.
- Members enquired if the scheme could also be rolled out to private sector housing, thereby generating a greater income for Ellenor. The Project Surveyor (Energy and Sustainability) advised the Committee that the scheme would be extended further having already notified the private housing team and would be looking to expand beyond social housing residents.

The Committee noted the report.

7. Empty Homes Strategy

Members were presented with the Empty Homes Strategy 2023-2028. The purpose of the report was to provide Housing Services Cabinet Committee an introduction to the Empty Homes Strategy 2023-2028, along with action plan for implementation of the service.

The Private Sector Housing Manager highlighted key information from the report:

- Members were informed that since the service function had moved directorates as of January 2023, the Empty Homes Strategy had been passed to the Private Sector Housing team.
- It was explained that the strategy had been set for a 5 year period with three main objectives; maintaining a proactive approach towards prevention, bringing empty properties back into use and working with partners to raise awareness.
- The Committee were advised that the strategy only dealt with properties that had been vacant for 6 months or more and identification was Council Tax lead, as the properties in question must have a Council tax premium set.
- Members attention was drawn to pages 9 – 10 of the report which outlined the priorities of the strategy.
- The Private Sector Housing Manager explained that Gravesham Borough Council was part of the Kent County Council's No Use Empty Scheme, which provided funding, however Gravesham currently had no properties that fell under this scheme. However, a corporate working group had been created to look into this going forward.
- Members were advised that an excellent working relationship had been formed with the Council tax team, with empty home data being pulled into private housing's Uniform database.
- The Committee's attention was drawn to Appendix 2, highlighting the enforcement towards empty properties and also Appendix 3 which set out the action plan for the next 5 years.

The Chair praised the report and invited Members to give feedback:

- Members queried how many properties were empty within the borough. The Private Sector Housing Manager advised that as of 4 September 2023 there were 728 empty properties, of which 354 were long term vacant properties. We're currently working on 174 long term empties with relevant premiums.
- Members enquired if the Empty Property Strategy had been created in connection to the development of the Social Lettings Agency. The Director (Housing) responded stating that there was no connection at all. He stressed that there needed to be a clear focus on the strategy.

The Committee noted the report.

8. Corporate Register of Partnerships and Shared Services

Members were presented with the Corporate Register of Partnership – July 2023. The purpose of this report was to inform Members of the Housing Services Committee of the Council's involvement in partnerships that were within the remit of the Committee.

The Director (Housing) noted that the report came to Committee on an annual basis. He drew Member's attention to Annex 1 of the report, which set out the Corporate Register of Partnership, that related to the work of Housing Services Committee. Members were updated that a new partnership had been formed with the Gravesham Community Investment Partnership.

The Committee noted the report

Close of meeting

The meeting ended at 8:51pm