

Housing Services Cabinet Committee

Wednesday, 5 June 2024

7.30 pm

Present:

Cllr Karina O'Malley (Chair)
Cllr Christina Rolles (Vice-Chair)

Councillors: Derek Ashenden
 Ejaz Aslam
 Gurdip Ram Bungar
 Lee Croxton
 Emma Elliott
 Jordan Meade
 Lyn Milner

Daniel Killian – Director (Housing)
Nicole Arthur - Head of Housing Assets
Vic May – Head of Housing Solutions
Andrew Johnson – Head of Neighbourhood Services
Florentina Bela – Rough Sleeping Partnership Manager
Clare Reynolds - Private Sector Housing Manager
Karen Gingles - Committee Services Officer (Minutes)

1. Apologies for Absence

An Apology for absence was received from Councillor Leslie Pearton. Councillor Derek Ashenden attended as his substitute.

2. Minutes

The minutes of the meeting held on Tuesday 19 March 2024 were signed by the Chair.

3. Declarations of Interest

There were no declarations of interest made.

4. MEES Policy

The Committee were presented with the Creation of Minimum Energy Efficiency Standards (MEES) Policy with charges report. The purpose of this report was to present the newly created Minimum Energy Efficiency Standards (MEES) Policy with set charges matrix, and to highlight the key links with the Council's Housing Strategy, Housing Enforcement Policy, and the Climate Change Strategy 2022-2030.

The Private Sector Housing Manager outlined key areas of the report:

- MEES had been around for some time with the aim to improve the quality of private sector rented homes and increase energy efficiency. Although the housing team delivered this under the Housing Act 2004, this was an additional enforcement tool for the standards surrounding energy efficiency.
- The policy included an enforcement fees matrix. This matrix was set by Government, so the Council were unable to amend the amounts set out. The fees were outlined in paragraphs 4.2 – 4.5 of the report.
- The Council already carried out work informally via the Housing Act 2004 to raise standards of private rental accommodation, so the policy would act as an additional tool to assist with this.
- A stock condition survey is also be carried out in this quarter and this information will be used in conjunction with the policy, to target properties that were identified as not meeting standards.

The Chair invited Member questions:

- Members asked for clarity of an energy rating F and G and queried what would happen in the situation of a landlord not complying in improving energy efficiency of a premises. The Private Sector Housing Manager explained that the energy ratings were set by Government and that band F and G were the lowest end of the rating. If landlords of properties highlighted as a low F or G, did not wish to comply, the Council would have the tools to enforce and persuade them to make the improvements required. Landlords of such properties could also be searched for via the EPC database. The stock conditions work would also highlight low rated properties.

It was noted that there were exemptions available to landlords, subject to criteria being met, to assist whilst improvements were taking place. The team would be educating landlords of this option.

- It was queried whether any comparative work had been carried out to see how many F and G rated dwellings were also classed as listed properties. The Private Sector Housing Manager stated that this had not yet been investigated but work would be carried out moving forward.

The Committee noted the report.

5. Rent Deposit Scheme

The Committee were presented with the Updated Rent Deposit Policy report. The purpose of the report was to provide the Housing Services Cabinet Committee Members with an overview of the policy for consideration and feedback.

The Rough Sleeping Partnership Manager outlined key areas of the report:

- Members were informed that the update was to the existing 2018 policy and reflected the Homeless Reduction Act and the support required due to the increase in homelessness applications. The Committee were advised that the aim was that the amendments would reduce the number of residents in temporary accommodation.

- The policy set out the grant and loan facilities. Anyone wishing to apply would be assessed on affordability. A grant or a loan would only be permitted if the property was deemed suitable and affordable for the client. Assessments would be carried out the property to determine this.

The Chair invited Member questions:

- Members queried why the draft policy not being included within the agenda pack. The Head of Housing Solutions informed the Committee that the policy was currently in draft until comments had been received from Members. Once feedback had been gathered, the policy would be finalised and ratified.
- The Committee requested clarity on a typical figure for a rent deposit payment. The Rough Sleeping Partnership Manager advised that payments would not exceed 5 weeks rent in advance/deposit at the weekly Local Housing Allowance (LHA) rate.

To provide an example of how much 5 weeks would equate to, the Head of Housing Solutions explained that the amount was based on the number of bedrooms. As an example, the applicant for a three-bedroom property would receive £216 LHA per week, meaning the 5-week rent deposit would amount to £1300 approximately.

The Rough Sleeping Partnership Manager advised Members that in the last financial year, 11 households were assisted with rent deposits. Moving forward the aim would be for the scheme to be more accessible and assist people into the private rental sector.

- Members asked whether the LHA could be paid to authorities in other areas and vice versa. The Rough Sleeping Partnership Manager explained that if someone who met the eligibility criteria, with a local connection, found a suitable property out of the area, the Council could provide the funds to the tenant but not the authority. Other Councils could also do this for a tenant moving into Gravesham, if they were to have a similar scheme.
- The Committee queried whether tenants looking to rent under GBC Lettings would be eligible for this assistance. The Head of Housing Solutions explained that the proposed rent deposit scheme and GBC Lettings were separate entities, with GBC Lettings is aimed at those coming out of temporary accommodation and the rent deposit scheme is to assist those facing homelessness or who were not already homeless, to secure private accommodation to avoid them going into temporary accommodation.
- Members noted that there were currently 235 households in temporary accommodation and asked if the team were proactively assessing these to identify households who the scheme could be suitable. The Rough Sleeping Partnership Manager updated Members that currently the team worked with the housing register and GBC Lettings to actively move people on from temporary accommodation, but the scheme was set to empower clients to proactively look for private accommodation themselves. Ideally the scheme was used as a preventative tool, when a client was facing eviction to find alternative accommodation. The Housing Solutions Manager added that all household that are owed a prevention or relief duty would all have a personal housing plan which provides steps that the council and

customer has to do and this would include finding alternative housing in the private sector.

The Committee noted the report.

6. Housing Complaints report

The Committee were presented with the Social Housing – Complaints in 2023/24 report. The purpose of the report was:

- To inform the Housing Services Cabinet Committee of the statutory Housing Ombudsman Complaint Handling Code introduced on 1 April 2024 and the responsibility to have a member Responsible for Complaints and the self-assessment form which would be the Cabinet Member for Housing.
- To update Housing Cabinet Committee with details of Housing related complaints received during 2023-2024.
- To update Housing Cabinet Committee of the role of the Building Safety regulator in complaint handling

The Head of Neighbourhood Services outlined key points from the report:

- The Committee were informed that the code came into force from 1 April in order to comply with the new standards set within the Social Housing Regulation Act 2023.
- The report set out various types of complaints and showed how GBC's policies and processes were compliant with the new standards. The report also outlined where it had been necessary to make any changes or improvements to services following receiving a complaint.
- The report set out the two-stage complaint process and outlined complaint handling relating to the Housing Ombudsman and the Building Safety Act 2022.
- Members were informed that the associated appendix was a copy of the annual self-assessment that the Council were required to submit and sought further comments.

The Chair invited questions from Members:

- The Committee queried whether any benchmarking had been carried out against other authorities to see how Gravesham compared in regard to the number of complaints. The Head of Neighbourhood Services informed Members that GBC took part in a benchmarking scheme called The Nearest Neighbour, where comparisons were made with other authorities. The latest regulations also included tenant satisfaction measures which would be benchmarked nationally.

The Committee noted the report and its purpose.

7. Pest Control Policy

The Committee were presented with the Pest Control in Council Housing Policy. The purpose of this report was to inform the Housing Services Cabinet Committee of the proposed Pest Control in Council Housing Policy and seek comments prior to the policy being agreed by Cabinet Member, Housing Services.

The Head of Housing Assets outlined key points of the report:

- Historically pest control was deemed to be the full responsibility of tenants and only infestation to common areas were the responsibility of the landlord. This changed when the Homes Fitness for Human Habitation Act 2018 was introduced, which included all 29 hazards under the Housing Health and Safety Rating System (HHSRS). This meant that landlords had to ensure that the property was fit for human habitation and free from hazards when the tenant moved in and remains so during the tenancy.
- The liability of an infestation was dependent on the cause. Landlords were expected to act quickly to resolve the issue.
- Due to the changes, increased reporting and associated spend, it was important to have a stand-alone policy. The Head of Housing Assets clarified that the provisions outlined in the report, were what the Council already provided in regard to pest control. The policy now formalised this provision and set out clearly to both staff and tenants on what their responsibilities were.

The Chair invited Member questions:

- Members sought clarity on the tenant's responsibility in regard to pest control. The Head of Housing Assets explained that the report outlined when the tenant was responsible and the Council's responsibility. She gave the example of bed bugs, advising if these were introduced into the property rather than a defect in the property, would always be the tenant's responsibility. It was recommended in either case that the tenant report issues for them to be resolved.
- Members asked if Asian Hornets featured within the policy. The Head of Housing Assets advised that the Council would only be responsible if the pest created a nest in a Council owned property.
- The Committee asked if the Council would be undertaking promotion to encourage residents not to leave food out which attracted rodents. The Head of Housing Assets advised work had been carried out with the Waste Team to introduce food waste collection in areas that were not previously included in the scheme, with proactive baiting in the area also. The Head of Neighbourhood Services advised the tenant handbook was being updated, but felt this was not covered sufficiently, so would ensure the responsible disposal of food waste was included.
- Members noted that there had been a recent change in legislation to ban the use of glue traps in England and Wales and whether the Council were fully compliant. The Head of Housing Assets informed Members that pest control was provided by Rosherville Repair and Maintenance and were fully compliant.

The Committee noted the report.

8. Corporate Performance: Quarter Four 2023-24

The Committee were presented with an update against the Performance Management Framework, as introduced within the Council's Corporate Plan, for Quarter Four 2023-24 (January to March 2024). The report was for information only.

The Director (Housing) drew Members attention to page 83 of the report setting out the Housing performance for Quarter 4. The Committee were informed that the report was largely positive and highlighted key points:

- PI 27 – in Q4 the total licensed HMO properties in occupation was at its highest with 79 licensed HMOs. It was noted that it was actually the largest number of licensed HMOs in the past 4 years, which was due to the proactive work carried out in Private Sector Housing team, with an amnesty period encouraging landlords to come forward, if they were unsure whether they required a licence. There was now 23 HMOs being investigated.
- PI 28 – Members were informed the indicator had moved from Q1 to Q3 due to the requirement to report the tenant satisfaction measure to the regulator by 30 June. The Council were not permitted to publish prior to the regulator. This data would be available at a later date.
- PI 31 – outlined the number of households in temporary accommodation. Members were updated that Q4 had ended with the most people in temporary accommodation, however this was starting to reduce and currently stood at 235 households.
- PI 33 – sadly the number of verified rough sleepers, despite a proactive rough sleeping team, currently stood at the highest number this year.

The Chair invited Member questions:

- Members queried whether officers were aware that recently two of the largest HMOs were now up for sale. The Director (Housing) advised the team were aware and kept an active eye on the market, looking to purchase property for temporary accommodation, if appropriate.
- Members noted it would be useful for the report to be benchmarked against previous years, as a comparison.
- Members queried the need to have an HMO license. The Private Sector Housing Manager stated that if the house were to have 5 occupants or more, a license would be mandatory.
- Members queried how HMOs would be identified. The Private Sector Housing Manager advised that there was an HMO tool checker available on the Council website for landlords to complete and check if a licence was a requirement along with the standards expected. Checks, investigations and enforcement were carried out by the team also.

Members praised the overall positivity of the report and commended the officers on their hard work.

The Committee noted the report.

Close of meeting

The meeting ended at 8:06pm