

CABINET

11 SEPTEMBER 2020

REFERENCE REPORT FROM THE RESOURCES AND SERVICES OVERVIEW & SCRUTINY COMMITTEE

A.4 OVERVIEW AND SCRUTINY OF HOUSING ISSUES

(Report prepared by Keith Durran and Ian Ford)

BACKGROUND

At the meeting of the Resources and Services Overview and Scrutiny Committee held on 9 July 2020 (Minute 68 refers) the Committee conducted overview and scrutiny on the theme of Housing. A report in respect of the items to be considered had been produced and circulated to the members of the Committee prior to the commencement of the meeting. Members paid particular emphasis to service delivery and performance in relation to:-

A. [PRIVATE SECTOR HOUSING FINANCIAL ASSISTANCE POLICY](#)

The Committee was provided with the report on the Private Sector Housing Financial Assistance Policy as approved by the Cabinet on 26 June 2020 (Minute 24 of that meeting referred).

The Committee's consideration of the policy focussed on Disabled Facilities Grants (DFGs): the processes, the timescales, any obstacles to delivery and options for solutions (and whether those options had been pursued) and the relative advantages of pooling. It was explained to the Members that the DFGs were mandatory grants for those in owner occupied, private rented or housing association properties to provide disabled adaptations and were the only grant left from the Housing Grants, Construction and Regeneration Act 1996. Funding for the DFG came from the Better Care Fund.

B. [VACATED/EMPTY COUNCIL HOUSING \('VOIDS'\)](#)

The Committee looked at the numbers of empty properties there had been over the past year, the proportion that those represented of the entire Council housing estate, expectations on standards of vacated properties, the extent to which the vacated properties were subject to major/minor repair works, the target times for inspecting vacated properties once they were empty and for repairs to be conducted, the periods of time properties were empty, the lost rental income during the period it was empty and the cost of housing homeless persons in the same period. Members also examined the situation one year on from the Council taking back the ROALCO Ltd contract (following the company being placed in administration), the transfer of staff to the Council and responding to the immediate issue this posed and the plan for sustaining the work now and in the future.

It was reported to Members that the turnaround time for a void property depended on the condition it was left in by the previous tenant and the extent of previous works such as asbestos removal. Many were left in a poor condition and required extensive void works before they could be let again.

Many voids required replacement kitchens and bathrooms, caused by a combination of them having been abused by the tenant or that they had come to the end of their life span, unfortunately most of them were from abuse.

C. COUNCIL HOUSING TENANT SATISFACTION AND INVOLVEMENT

The Committee looked at the measurement processes in relation to tenant satisfaction levels and tenant participation arrangements.

The Committee was informed that in 2018, this Council had carried out the eighth comprehensive survey to find out how satisfied tenants were with the services that the Council provided, as a landlord. This survey had been carried out in accordance with Housemark's framework and was carried out in the summer of 2018 over a six-week period.

40% of those canvassed responded, which ensured the statistical reliability of the responses. Although this was less than the response rate achieved in previous years, this was a common phenomenon when research of a similar nature was undertaken on a regular basis.

D. NEW BUILD OF 10 COUNCIL HOUSES IN JAYWICK SANDS

The Committee looked at the project and the delivery of those 10 houses in Jaywick Sands and whether there were lessons for further development there and for the emerging Acquisitions and Development Strategy of the Council. The Performance Report for 2019/20 as presented to Cabinet at its meeting held on 29 May 2020 had included that project at Page 10 of that report. Page 21 of that report had also referenced Council House Building and the emerging Acquisitions and Development Strategy. The aforementioned Pages 10 and 21 had been circulated with the Agenda for the meeting.

It was reported to the Committee that whilst the 10 houses being built in Jaywick were slightly behind schedule due to COVID 19, the larger project of developing a new Council house building programme and increasing the stock of new affordable/Council homes was on target. Due to the success of the 10 builds in Jaywick and the unexpected increased value, two investors were in talks about a further 100 properties to be developed on a lease back programme to the Council. Members were informed that once an investor came back with actual figures, it would be brought before Cabinet for a formal decision.

COMMITTEE RECOMMENDATIONS AND COMMENTS TO CABINET

Following discussion, the Committee **RECOMMENDED TO THE CABINET** that:

(a) Cabinet be recommended to develop a public engagement plan in respect of financial assistance for private sector housing that includes providing information to community groups, health professionals and more widely to ensure that all those who would benefit from adaptations that could be funded through the financial assistance available through the Disabled Facilities Grant arrangements are aware of those arrangements and the process to apply for those Grants;

(b) the Chief Executive be advised that this Committee considers that it would be advantageous to report on the public engagement plan at the time that it is prepared and ready to be delivered so that Councillors can support the delivery of that plan across the District;

(c) consideration be given to including details of grants available for those in private rented accommodation and in receipt of benefits (at the time of notification of benefit award/change/discontinuance) to support the installation of adaptations to the properties they rent to improve their lives (both related to disability facilities, safety and to address energy poverty).

(d) the maintenance contract currently out for tender not be extended beyond the first year or re-tendered until this Committee has had the opportunity to review the delivery of that contract and the appropriate balance between in-house and contracted maintenance.

HOUSING PORTFOLIO HOLDER'S COMMENTS AND RECOMMENDATIONS TO CABINET

Comments

"It is clear that the Committee covered a number of housing related topics at this meeting. The discussions highlighted the great work undertaken by our officers in delivering much needed adaptations to our residents and managing and maintaining our own housing stock to a high standard, resulting in high levels of tenant satisfaction that we should be proud of.

I therefore accept the recommendations (a)-(c) as proposed above. In respect of (d) the Maintenance contract is tendered as a seven year contract and as such I propose to carry out a review after one year to ensure that the contract is being run properly and to ensure an appropriate balance between the in-house and contracted maintenance delivery."

Recommendation

That the Housing Portfolio Holder's response to the recommendations of the Resources and Services Overview & Scrutiny Committee be both noted and endorsed.