

POLICY REVIEW AND DEVELOPMENT PANEL REPORT

REPORT TO:	<i>Environment and Community Panel</i>		
DATE:			
TITLE:	Housing Standards Update		
TYPE OF REPORT:	<i>Update</i>		
PORTFOLIO(S):	Housing		
REPORT AUTHOR:	Mark Whitmore		
OPEN/EXEMPT	Open	WILL BE SUBJECT TO A FUTURE CABINET REPORT:	No

REPORT SUMMARY/COVER PAGE

PURPOSE OF REPORT/SUMMARY:
To update members on the work of the Housing Standards Team during 2020 and into the next year
KEY ISSUES:
Housing Standards role in the Covid response Houses of Multiple Occupation Energy Efficiency Standards and Electrical Safety Regulations Green Homes Grants Fit & Proper Person Test for Residential Caravan Sites
OPTIONS CONSIDERED:
None – report is for information only
RECOMMENDATIONS:
None
REASONS FOR RECOMMENDATIONS:
N/A

REPORT DETAIL

1. Introduction

The Housing Standards Team have had a busy year with the introduction of a number of new areas of work and of course supporting the council's response to the Covid pandemic. In addition the team has been carrying a vacancy for much of the last year. I am pleased to advise Members that this vacancy has now been filled.

2. Covid

The initial response of Housing Standards to the epidemic began as early as February 2020. This principally involved the team assisting Housing Options in making sure there was suitable accommodation available for those either homeless or in unsuitable temporary accommodation).

The team were tasked with:

- Seeking out alternative accommodation by investigating what accommodation was available on caravan sites and hotels etc. and making necessary arrangements with owners for their use.
- Liaising with larger organisations (CITB, Travelodge etc.) with a view to leasing larger properties and establishing the suitability of such accommodation.
- Investigating other options such as the rental of caravans, camper vans and site cabins.

Included in this were such tasks as: facilitating the relocation of tenants to more suitable accommodation; and the daily delivery of food parcels to accommodation where there were no cooking facilities.

The main accommodation arranged in the first lockdown was the Travelodge and 4 accommodation 'pods' - both located in Kings Lynn. With the Travelodge, the team providing a detailed inventory of the accommodation at the beginning and end of the contract and dealt with practical issues that arose during its occupation by liaising with the management and other stakeholders. In the case of the 'pods' all matters from arranging leasing to cleaning and maintenance was organised by housing standards – albeit that we had specific actions undertaken by contractors and Property Services

In the second lockdown, housing standards were tasked with the acquisition of a further 10 pods on the same basis. This remains the case, but the number of pods has now reduced to 8 from 14.

Housing Standards also participated in initiatives by Public Health England - where the working knowledge of Housing Standards was deemed significant. This was mostly in relation to HMOs and the Gypsy and Traveller community. During both lockdowns, genuine travellers were encouraged to remain in situ and, were it to have been necessary, Housing Standards would have been tasked with supporting such encampments. In addition the team have supported the vaccine rollout by visiting all gypsy and traveller sites to provide information and advice on eligibility and access to the vaccine programme. We found a high level of take up within the community which was encouraging.

During this time Housing Standards continued to undertake its normal duties and workload. The works undertaken by Housing Standards are largely based on legal duties for which no exception was given as part of the Covid response. However, the pandemic did require change to the usual working practices of Housing Standards as a result of modifications to the corporate risk assessments relating to visiting residential properties. This meant that many complaints were dealt with remotely as

far as was possible – but in all cases resolution was sought to the same extent as usual and some inspections were required as part of that process.

3. Houses of Multiple Occupation (HMO)

The inspection of HMOs in the last year were significantly compromised. The ability to follow the constraints of the corporate risk assessment and the need to adhere to social distancing restrictions, made the process of inspecting HMOs fraught with difficulty. As a consequence, proactive inspections of HMOs were not actively undertaken. Licensing of HMOs largely continued (with all associated inspections) – albeit that significant additional burdens relating to arrangements for inspection were experienced.

In addition all HMOs are now included in the programmed inspection regime. This includes any shared accommodation with greater than 2 occupants and all rented buildings converted to flats to a poor standard. Previously, the regime largely comprised licenced HMOs only. The inclusion of low risk HMOs should not impose a substantial burden, as the intervals between inspections should be longer in most incidences.

Both Covid and the expansion of the inspection regime has resulted in a backlog of work that will be addressed partly due to the team being fully staffed and also through improving systems to reduce the burden of inspections, including standardised schedules, improved fire safety guidance and investigating the use electronic recording of inspections.

4. Minimum Energy Efficiency Standards (MEES) Regulations

Significant changes to the MEES regulations came into force in April 2019 and were applicable to both existing and new tenancies from April 2020. It is likely that a significant number of rented properties remain non-compliant with these regulations and identification of these properties is a significant obstacle to enforcement.

An initial project targeting the likely worst performing properties has been instigated based on data obtained from the Energy Saving Trust. It is anticipated that the data available to Housing Standards will be significantly flawed and the number of investigations resulting in positive identification of breaches and a subsequent penalty charge will be small and will consume disproportionate staff resources. Nevertheless, the contribution of such efforts to the overall aims of the council in reducing local emissions is significant, and the scope of the regulations will encompass additional properties in future years. Such work is also complementary to the regular activities of the section in dealing with properties with a poor energy efficiency performance.

5. Electrical Safety Standards Regulations

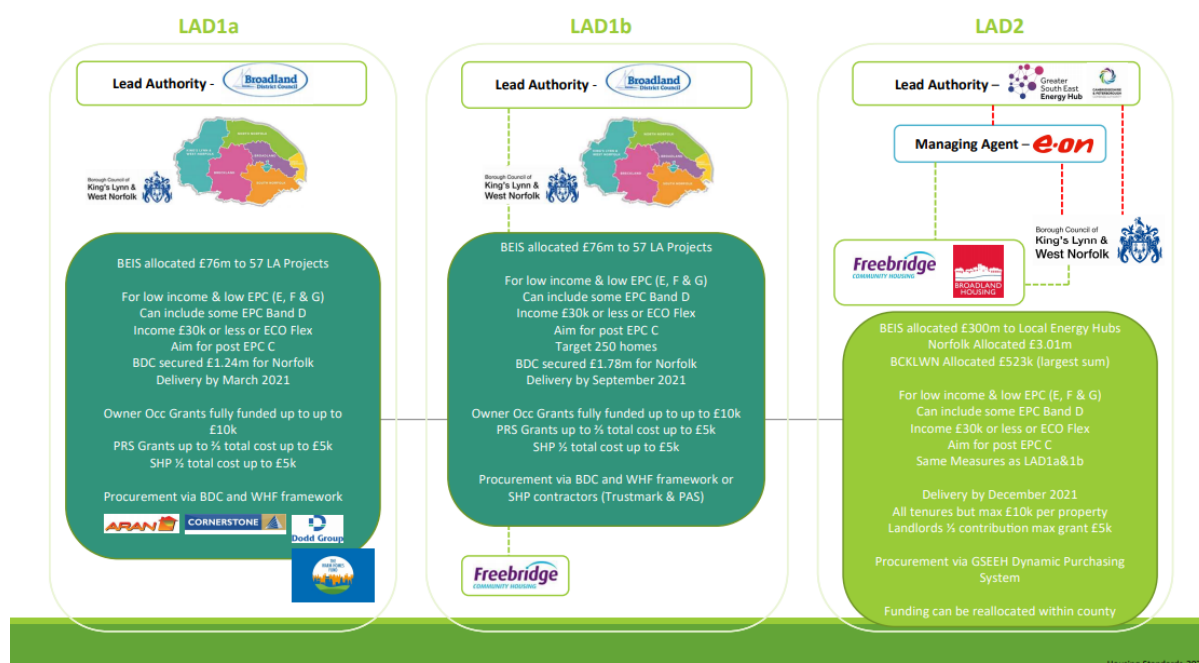
The Electrical Safety Standards became applicable to all rented properties from April 2021. The workload with this was not as great as anticipated. Our expectation was that a number of statutory notifications would be made to the council, where there were significant failures identified with testing of electrical installations, and that we would be required to follow these up. In practice, landlords are addressing any issues in conjunction with the inspection and issue of the electrical installation condition report (EICR).

Nevertheless, this legislation will enable housing standards to deal effectively with matters such as faulty electrics or lack of EICRs going forward. It is not anticipated that we could successfully identify rented properties without current EICRs given the intelligence we presently possess – so proactive investigations into such breaches are impracticable

6. Green Homes – Local Authority Delivery (LAD) Schemes

The team have been proactive in respect of obtaining grant funding for energy efficiency measures for housing resulting in a substantial allocation of Green Homes Grant (GHG) funding for rented and owner-occupied properties in the Borough. The initial GHG voucher scheme, which was not administered by the council has now been terminated by the Government due to difficulties experienced in take-up. The Council is a partner in the Green Homes Grant (Local Authority Delivery) Schemes and the graphic below explains the differences in the three schemes.

In addition, Housing Standards continues to actively promote and seek out energy efficiency funding otherwise and facilitates such other measures as ECOflex and the Warm Homes Fund.



LAD 1A & LAD1B

The initial Local Authority Led (LAD) scheme - GHG(LAD)1a – was successfully bid for by a Norfolk-wide consortium of councils, with funding distributed to schemes in all Norfolk districts. GHG(LAD)1a is managed on behalf of the consortium by Broadland District Council (BDC). Following a joint initiative by Housing Standards and Freebridge Community Housing, BDC also successfully bid for further funding – the GHG(LAD1b) scheme. The latter scheme bid was successful due in no small part to the inclusion of Freebridge housing stock in the bid. These schemes were for £1.24m and £1.78m respectively.

LAD2

A further scheme – GHG(LAD)2 – has now been finalised. This scheme differs from LAD 1 in that Housing Standards have independently made proposals to the scheme for use of a locally allocated sum of £523k for energy efficiency measures in the borough. Again, it is proposed that a substantial part of that funding is allocated to efficiency measures for social housing stock. This is to ensure that initial funds can be successfully spent without complication. Where initial funds are successfully used there is the prospect of further funding from underspend from other councils.

7. Caravan Sites Fit & Proper Persons Test

In July 2021 the requirement for residential caravan sites to be managed by ‘fit and proper’ persons comes into force. This area of work is subject to a report to Cabinet in June to approve the policy that will enable the council to charge for undertaking the necessary checks to determine if an applicant meets the criteria.

However, for the benefit of members of the panel the key elements are:

- The ability of the person to manage such sites, and their suitability to do so (by reference to criteria such as previous criminal activity etc.).
- Both the person and site must be assessed as part of this process (in addition to existing annual inspections and new site applications). In most circumstances it will be the owner of the site that will have to be included on a council held registry as ‘fit and proper’. However, the legislation does allow for a person other than the owner to become the ‘fit and proper’ person (manager) for the site if circumstances require this.

This requirement does not include those sites that are not residential or those sites where occupation is by a single family with no commercial element. The exclusion of family sites is something that Housing Standards have previously successfully lobbied for at national forum level (with the MHCLG) prior to finalisation of the legislation.

It is not expected that the ‘fit and proper’ requirement will have a large impact on workload once the initial setup has been completed and all existing sites have been properly vetted. However, the initial work involved with this has been onerous and resources will be impacted going forward over the short term.

8. Corporate Priorities

The Housing Standards work contributes to:

Priority Three – carbon reduction

Priority Four – improving social mobility and inclusion through improved housing conditions

9. Financial Implications

There are no specific financial implications associated with this report. The fit & proper licensing scheme will be a chargeable service and should be cost neutral.

10. Any other Implications/Risks

As with all services there is ongoing risk of disruption to service delivery from Covid.

11. Equal Opportunity Considerations

None

12. Consultation

Cllr Lawrence – Portfolio Holder

John Greenhalgh – Assistant Director