

# Meeting of the Rural and Communities Overview and Scrutiny Committee



SOUTH  
KESTEVEN  
DISTRICT  
COUNCIL

Thursday, 21 November 2019, 1.00  
pm

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## Committee Members present

Councillor Penny Milnes  
Councillor Sarah Trotter (Vice-Chairman)  
Councillor Amanda Wheeler  
Councillor Linda Wootten  
Councillor Ray Wootten (Chairman)

## Cabinet Members

Councillor Rosemary Trollope-Bellew

## Officers

Assistant Director Housing (Harry Rai)  
Head of Repairs and Improvements (Andrew Sweeney)  
Scrutiny Officer (Zena West)  
Democratic Officer (Lucy Bonshor)

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## 17. Membership

The Committee were notified that Councillor Linda Wootten was substituting for Councillor Mike Exton.

## 18. Apologies

Apologies for absence were received from Councillors' Kaberry-Brown and Ian Stokes.

An apology had also been received from the Cabinet Member for Communities and HR, Councillor Reid who had a previous engagement.

## 19. Disclosure of Interest

None disclosed.

## **20. Action Notes from the meeting held on 12th September 2019**

The action notes from the meeting held on 12 September 2019 were noted.

## **21. Updates from the previous meeting**

A Member asked for clarity regarding the reference to Occupational Therapists (OTs) in the notes, was this in relation to Disabled Facilities Grants. The Assistant Director Housing clarified that it was and how the use of OTs within council owned stock affected funding figures.

Due to the election being called and subject to his availability John Turner would be invited to attend the January meeting to speak about the Healthy Conversation consultation.

## **22. Turn around on Void Properties**

Members received a presentation from the Head of Repairs and Improvements on the turnaround on void properties which the Committee had asked for at a previous meeting. A review on voids had been undertaken as the turnaround time did impact on rental income. The main issues surrounding voids included excessive turnaround times with reoccurring bottlenecks, low up take of stock in areas with limited sustainability, there were in the region of 500 voids per annum which was reaching optimum levels and there had been a notable increase in major voids in the last two to three years. Loss of rental income was above average at £136,000 in May for between 350 – 380 void properties.

The Head of Repairs and Improvements then spoke about possible causes for the current void turnaround time which stood at between 52 – 55 days. Causes could be the void process itself, the method of prioritising voids, the condition of the housing stock, some of which may be obsolete stock and tenant's expectations which may be higher than the minimum letting standards that were currently used.

In order to address the void situation a review group was formed with members of the Housing Team, the Repairs Team and the Business Transformation Team. The review team mapped the current process and identified bottlenecks and duplication of work and reviewed the processes for prioritisation where the most popular properties were brought forward, and they looked at handover processes between all teams.

As part of the recent housing restructure exercise a review of all current void related roles and responsibilities across the Housing and Repairs teams were undertaken. Roles were redefined to stop repetition. KPI's had been revised to offer properties within five days of notice being received. Amendments had been made to the sign-up procedure to remove unnecessary forms. Re-evaluations had taken place as to what constituted a "priority" void and those

in popular locations would be occupied quickly. The new Tenancy Agreement would include a stronger access provision to enable properties to be accessed to carry out any necessary work.

House mark data had been used to find authorities who were already achieving good turnaround figures and they had been contacted to see how processes could be streamlined and re-aligned to achieve better outcomes. Work had been done to minimise the number of handovers with training being carried out to enable cross team working and decision making.

Other actions included having a new void re-let standard, the current standard was a minimum letting standard and it could be that tenants' aspirations were higher than the minimum standard which affected the re-let. It was noted that having a higher standard did have cost implications. Choice Based Lettings would also be utilised and hard to let properties would have robust assessments carried out to see whether they were unsustainable. A new housing system (Northgate Housing System) would also be implemented which would improve linkage between assets and housing management. It was hoped that the planned actions would achieve a shorter turnaround of between 23 and 25 days.

The following points were then raised.

- Number of people currently on the waiting list, currently within band 1-3 there were 800.
- Notice period, four weeks – where notice was given and the property still occupied, pre inspections would take place to help with planning any work required.
- Clarification about what the Northgate Housing System was.
- Reasons for refusals – they included house condition, location, where children go to school, vulnerability.
- Mutual exchanges when matching properties.
- Process for communication between tenants and councils and keeping people in touch with what is going on – letters sent out annually to see if tenants circumstances have changed.
- New housing software will enable a slicker system between asset management and housing management – better liaison between teams.
- Properties left in a damaged/poor condition – cost recovery undertaken where ever possible – notes made in case tenants return to area for them to be re charged if necessary, this included rent arrears where people had mutual exchanged properties and left rent unpaid.
- Going forward it was hoped that properties would be advertised on a portal to which all tenants would have access via a password. Tenants who were genuinely interested in a property could register their interest. An advocacy role would be undertaken by Housing in the case of vulnerable tenants wishing to express an interest in a property.

It was acknowledged that the proposed targets were challenging but it was hoped that with the proposed actions put in place it would speed up the process. A further question was asked about any void properties held back for emergency housing. The Assistant Director Housing stated that the majority of housing stock was in Grantham, but they did not hold emergency housing stock. A request was made for a copy of the slides to be circulated.

➤ **Action Note**

***Copy of slides to be re-circulated.***

The Head of Repairs and Improvements was thanked for his presentation and the Chairman asked if the Committee could be circulated with the current waiting list numbers.

➤ **Action Note**

***Up to date waiting list figures to be circulated to Members of the Committee.***

The Committee supported the proposals that had been outlined and congratulated Officers on the solutions put forward and asked that the Committee be given an update at a later date.

➤ **Action Note**

***An update on void turn arounds to be given at a later date.***

## **23. Tenancy Agreement**

The Assistant Director for Housing presented the report on the proposed Tenancy Agreement for tenants. The Council's current Tenancy Agreements format had been in place for 17 years with statutory changes and good practice being made overtime. The current documents no longer reflected the current needs of the housing services or the context in which social housing operated. Changes to the document which covered both Introductory and Secure Tenancy Agreements were outlined within the report and had been undertaken to help with clarity and understanding and to stop duplication. The Tenancy Agreement was a "weighty" document and to cut down on unnecessary content, tenants would be signposted to the Tenancy Handbook for guidance.

Joint tenancies had been clarified and the responsibilities of joint tenants about issues such as rent payments. Other changes included the tightening of requirements for allowing access to properties, including carrying out gas servicing or health and safety checks. Clarification on the rules around damage and improvements to the property with the emphasis on how the

Council as landlord would enforce the sanctions if tenants damaged property or carried out improvements without permission. The new document emphasised the tenants responsibilities with regard to minor repairs and clarified the rules in relation to disclaimers for improvements taken on by new tenants. Rules around conditions in relation to animals and pets had also been clarified which allowed a more flexible approach, providing more discretion on how they were managed and enforced as it was acknowledged the companionship animals gave.

There had been 440 responses, 300 of which had no comments and 140 had comments, of the responses with comments 60 were in relation to the tenancy agreement and 80 were in relation to other issues. The main comments received were listed in the report but included having no smoking in shared communal areas, assistance required if someone could not do minor repairs and the number of pets. The comments had been taken on board and put into the draft Tenancy Agreement. Once the draft document had been adopted by Cabinet it would come into force from 1<sup>st</sup> April 2020.

Members then discussed the document and the following comments and questions were made.

- What was meant by immoral – could there be examples within the document. It was noted that the terms used had been taken from the legislation in the Housing Act.
- What support was provided to those who were evicted, it depended upon what led up to the eviction and the reason for it – if issues arose, anti-social behaviour, rent arrears etc intervention was put in place quickly to try and mitigate issues.
- The percentage turnover rate for council evictions was not high but it depended upon whether the tenant had made themselves homeless due to their actions or they had become unintentionally homeless. The Council did try to work with tenants so that they could remain in their home.
- Responsibility for gardens was discussed in relation to breaches and tenants who were unable to look after their garden. It was stated that estate managers did do walkabouts in their area and any problems would be dealt with accordingly.
- Assistance Garden services were not being taken away, but a refresh was underway and would come before the Committee next year.
- Reference was made to page 20 (b) second paragraph of the draft Tenancy Agreement where it was felt that the “they” should be changed to “you”.
- Subletting was discussed and what its definition was (a bedroom could be classed as self-contained within a house).
- A question was asked in relation to electric wheelchairs and mobility scooters and recharging them, they were often located in a stairwell. The Assistant Director Housing stated that this was currently being

investigated with a view to creating common areas to charge these types of vehicles.

- A question was asked about clause 13 which was referenced on page 34 of the draft document. The Assistant Director Housing said that he would find out what this was in relation to.
- Grass verges and parking on them within housing complexes was discussed, who was responsible for them. Some were maintained and adopted by Lincolnshire County Council. Where possible areas which were the Council's responsibility and had been damaged were fenced off.
- Ending your tenancy was also discussed and what could be taken or left, i.e carpets and flooring - there was no blanket policy in relation to the end of tenancy.
- A question was asked about the financial situation of tenants – a tenancy was for life unless it was breached, there was no legislation to allow any change to a tenancy due to financial circumstances.

In proposing the document for adoption by the Cabinet the Chairman asked for the following points to be addressed:

- That further clarification was given in the document on what was meant by immoral behaviour.
- That page 20 (b) second paragraph of the draft Tenancy Agreement be changed from "they" to "you".
- That the reference to Clause 13, page 34 is clarified.

That the Committee are sent the number, types and causes of evictions that had taken place.

The proposal was seconded and on being put to the vote agreed.

**Recommendation:**

***The Rural and Communities OSC recommends the proposed draft Tenancy Agreement to Cabinet for adoption and for it to be sent as a 'notice of variation' to all tenants of South Kesteven District Council in accordance with Section 103 of the Housing Act 1985 subject to the following:***

- That further clarification was given in the document on what was meant by immoral behaviour.
- That page 20 (b) second paragraph of the draft Tenancy Agreement be changed from "they" to "you".
- That the reference to Clause 13, page 34 is clarified.

**That the Committee are sent the number, types and causes of evictions that had taken place.**

## **Extra meeting of the Rural and Communities OSC**

The Chairman informed the Committee that an extra meeting of the Committee was required and asked Members to agree to hold an extra meeting of the Committee on Thursday 16<sup>th</sup> January 2020.

### **➤ Action Note**

***The Committee agreed to hold a further meeting of the Rural and Communities OSC on Thursday 16<sup>th</sup> January 2020.***

## **25. Work Programme**

Members were informed of the items for discussion at the next meeting of the Committee. Items included the Housing Strategy, Healthy Conversation, Customer Experience Strategy, Streamlining Community Guide and the Safeguarding Policy. The Committee were also notified about a request from a Member to look at the “Stop the Knock” campaign and for this to be included on the agenda for the next meeting.

One Member asked what the Healthy Conversation was to which the Chairman replied.

Members agreed with the items for inclusion on the next agenda. It was noted that if John Turner was not available for the January meeting, he would be invited to the February meeting of the Committee.

## **26. Close of meeting**

Meeting closed at 2:14pm.