

Meeting of the Rural and Communities Overview and Scrutiny Committee



SOUTH
KESTEVEN
DISTRICT
COUNCIL

Thursday, 12 November 2020, 2.00 pm

Meeting held virtually, via Skype

Committee Members present

Councillor Ray Wootten (Chairman)
Councillor Sarah Trotter (Vice-Chairman)
Councillor Mike Exton
Councillor Mrs Rosemary Kaberry-Brown
Councillor Philip Knowles
Councillor Amanda Wheeler
Councillor Linda Wootten

Cabinet Members

Councillor Kelham Cooke (Leader and Cabinet Member for Corporate Services and Transformation)
Councillor Robert Reid (Cabinet Member for Housing and Planning)
Councillor Rosemary Trollope-Bellew (Cabinet Member for Culture and Visitor Economy)
Councillor Adam Stokes (Cabinet Member for Finance and Resources)

Officers

Karen Bradford, Chief Executive
Ken Lyon, Assistant Chief Executive
Housing Delivery
Richard Wyles, Interim Director of
Finance, Section 151 Officer
Shahin Ismail, Director of Law and
Governance
Chris Stratford, Interim Assistant Director
of Housing
Carol Drury, Community Engagement &
Policy Development Officer
Patrick Astill, Communications Officer
Candy Richards, Communications Officer
Debbie Roberts, Corporate Project
Officer
Ben Russell, Performance Lead

Other Members present

Councillor Ashley Baxter
Councillor Phil Dilks
Councillor Charmaine Morgan
Councillor Jacky Smith
Councillor Ian Stokes
Councillor Mark Whittington

External Presenter

Julie Picken (Independent Consultant)

71. Comments from Members of the Public

Mr Phil Gadd addressed the Committee ahead of item 11. Key points were noted as:

- Mr Gadd had been involved in highlighting the heating and hot water system in Riverside since 2016
- It had been difficult to receive responses and he felt the council were not listening to the complaints raised
- The residents of Riverside had spent several years experiencing intermittent supply of hot water and heating. Temporary heating or hot water should be a short-term fix only
- Mr Gadd had had to continue to raise and revisit the issue with the Council, involving councillors, the MP and press as well as Mr Gadd attending Council meetings
- Many of the issues he had raised at full council are now reported for action
- The system installed in 2016 was already relatively obsolete and at end of life with spares and replacement parts being hard to find and expensive
- The issue started with the removal of storage tanks and replacing them with Heat Distribution System (HDU) system in 2016

Mr Gadd concluded that he hoped that SKDC took full notice of the report undertaken by the independent consultant and to comply with its findings. He hoped for a more open, honest and proactive response to issues raised by residents.

The Chairman requested that should a response to Mr Gadd's comments not be covered in item 11, for him to contact the Chairman and he will ensure a reply is provided.

72. Register of attendance, membership and apologies for absence

A register of attendance was taken, confirming all committee members were present.

73. Disclosures of Interest

No interests were disclosed.

74. Action Notes from the meeting held on 10 September 2020

The Action Notes from the meeting held on 10 September 2020, were agreed to be a true record.

75. Updates from the previous meeting

No comments were received, and all actions were noted as complete.

76. Verbal Update from Cabinet Members

Due to the Cabinet Member for Communities being unable to present the report the Community Engagement and Policy Development Officer delivered a verbal update on her behalf to Committee members.

Covid-19

- National deaths caused by Covid-19 had been updated to 50,000
- There had been a reported rise of 68 cases in South Kesteven on the previous week with a total of 78 Covid-related deaths
- Work was continuing with the Lincolnshire Resilience Forum during the second lockdown
- Letters from Government have been sent to the clinically extremely vulnerable including parents and carers with advice to stay at home. Qualifying residents have been encouraged to register with the NHS national shielding service
- The community hub was still active. Food box service was not available. It was possible if required, for The Hub to be placed on full capacity.
- A new walk-in testing station was being placed in Grantham to supplement the popup facility. Pre booking was required

The Chairman recorded his wishes to the Cabinet Member for Communities for a speedy recovery and requested a report be presented at the next meeting.

A member requested testing stations for the south of the district. A temporary station was already available with no plans for any additional facilities within the district. Facilities were determined by greatest risk.

Feedback from anti-racism motion to Council

- The Council had passed the anti-racism motion on 1 October 2020. An action plan was now being worked on to be presented at the next meeting of this committee.

Community Fund

- The report was presented to Cabinet on 13 October 2020 including the committee's observations. The proposed removal of parishes and towns from the criteria was not agreed by Cabinet who extended their

appreciation of the committee's input. Applications to the Community Fund were available up to 4 December 2020.

The Committee received updates from the Cabinet Member for Housing and Planning on the following items:

Homelessness Partnership with other Districts

- The Rough Sleep Initiative Change for Lincs reported that 13 staff were working with individuals needing emergency accommodation
- 3 people had been identified for emergency support
- £145,000 of funds had been provided for development and refurbishment of 4 privately acquired properties; £40,000 for an intensive support worker and an additional £14,000 for short-term bed and breakfast

Cold weather payments for homeless people

- Cold weather support for the homeless was available from central government towards bed and breakfast and energy costs.

Local Plan

- The submission was issued on 28 October 2020. Consultation findings were awaited.

External Planning Review

- Findings of the planning review were reported to be with Cratus having been presented to members and officers. The review was to be considered by the Governance and Audit Committee on 19 November 2020 and would return to this committee in six months.

Disabled Facilities Grants Quarter 2

- Home works and occupational therapy have continued despite Covid-19 with £410,000 spent to date out of the total budget of £800,000.

Housing Repairs Update

- Housing repairs had been impacted by Covid-19. Urgent and emergency repairs had been given priority. A reported 666 planned tasks were in process with the November lockdown not being as restrictive to that experienced earlier in the year.

Garden Maintenance Scheme

- Garden maintenance criteria was being reviewed with planned adjustments. The enhancement of sheltered garden schemes was continuing.

ACTION 1

To be added to the Committees work programme:

- Report of action plan following the Council the motion on anti-racism.

77. Mental Health Challenge Workshop

Due to recognition of increased mental health concerns by the pandemic, it was proposed to hold a joint workshop on 10 December 2020 with the Culture and Visitor Economy Overview and Scrutiny Committee. Members were asked to delegate authority to the workshop to make representation to Cabinet rather than to return to these committees. Members were invited to attend the workshop; there was no limit on numbers.

On being put to the committee the following Members volunteered to attend:

Councillor Michael Exton
Councillor Sarah Trotter
Councillor Amanda Wheeler
Councillor Linda Wooten Councillor Ray Wooten

Councillors Ashley Baxter and Jacky Smith, who were not members of either Committee also wished to volunteer for the workshop.

Following a procedural point by a guest Councillor, it was noted that a remit should be provided at the start of the workshop.

ACTION 2

Councillor volunteers for the Mental Health Challenge workshop to be noted, and the list of names provided to the event organisers.

78. Health and Safety Compliance Report

The Cabinet Member for Housing and Planning introduced the report on behalf of the Leader of the Council who was experiencing technical issues. Additional presenters were the Chief Executive and Interim Assistant Director of Housing.

In his introduction, the Cabinet Member for Housing and Planning outlined the background and impact to residents and the public. The Cabinet Member had been working since his appointment, prior to receipt of the report, to improve record keeping on council stock.

The Chief Executive recorded her sincere apologies on behalf of the Council to all tenants. She informed the Committee that the report with the conclusions of the housing compliance audit had been commissioned by herself, the Leader of the Council and the Cabinet Member for Housing in June 2020.

In June 2020 RSM were appointed as auditors to undertake a compliance review, they undertook a desktop review with key findings attached to the report. The conclusions of the report led to the appointment of an Interim Assistant Director of Housing. The Chief Executive in consultation with the Cabinet referred SKDC to the Housing Regulator.

Systems were assessed to be not fit for purpose that led to an action plan being incorporated along with an improvement plan that had been shared with the Regulator. A compliance response was awaited from the Social Housing Regulator.

Members were assured by the Chief Executive that the right team with the right skill set was now in place. A new head of technical services had been appointed to ensure compliance on electrical works.

The Cabinet Member for Housing and Planning added that a risk analysis was in place to ensure compliance during work on a revised programme for housing stock, particularly sheltered housing.

A meeting to go through processes with the Regulator had been held with follow-up correspondence from the Chief Executive to update on critical issues around compliance and progress on the improvement plan.

An action plan was presented to the committee with the primary focus on sheltered housing as well as up-to-date fire risk assessment and inspection. It was additionally reported that:

- Certification to be reissued on 3,500 properties
- A rewiring contract to be commissioned to include certification
- Gas compliance stood at 98% with a strategy in place
- New IT was to be installed by January 2021 to improve monitoring

All Members would be provided a copy of the action as provided to the Regulator with regular reports back to the committee.

Members raised a number of questions and received the following responses:

- An officer group had been set to manage and drive forward changes that included the new IT system and deployment of staff. There would be elements of external procurement.
- Updates to the improvement plan would be provided to the Committee.
- A housing dashboard was being investigated which would provide regular reports with an audit plan that provided further checks on delivery.
- The Director of Housing and Property was anticipated to be in place by April 2021. Appreciation was expressed at the skills provided by the Interim Assistant Director of Housing.
- The Cabinet Member for Housing and Planning, the Leader of the Council, the Chief Executive and the Interim Assistant Director of Housing met weekly to address housing issues.
- A quarterly report covering S106 arrangements would be provided.

- As a result of high heating costs to residents, all current installations had been halted with future systems to include insulation and factoring in fuel costs.
- An external peer review had not been undertaken for many years and the need for an external review was recognised.
- Implications of contents and private insurance for resident had been investigated with assurance that there were no risks to residents.
- Void progress would be reported by the Cabinet Member for Housing and Planning.

Members were advised that the Housing Regulator would be monitoring the Council over a 4-year period with intervention over the initial 2 years. A new housing business plan was to be incorporated once the survey of housing stock had been completed.

A councillor made a statement to the Committee outlining the need to address scrutiny failures and the proposed timescales of the action plan that he felt could be shorter through the use of the additional housing profit funds while flagging concerns of future legal costs. The Cabinet Member for Housing and Planning confirmed that he had met with the Conservative Group and all members to discuss housing compliance and vision for future improvements. Production of a one year and a separate three-year budget to address improvements were to be presented in 2021. Additional funding was being discussed with Homes England.

A statement was read by the Leader of the Council:

We can all admit that the findings of the reports today make incredibly difficult reading, they have highlighted clear failings in the processes relating to our housing service and I would like to say on behalf of the South Kesteven District Council that I am sorry and I would like to apologise unreservedly to all of our tenants who have been impacted by this.

The priority of the Council is and will always be, our residents and tenants and we have taken direct action in response to the findings of these reports.

We are working closely with tenants to support them and ensure these issues are never repeated.

In terms of the housing audit report this was commissioned by myself and Councillor Reid after we raised concerns with the Chief Executive who also had concerns, shortly after she took up her role.

We are taking direct action in response to the findings and working closely with the Regulator of Social Housing as I know Chris Stratford will have

informed you and we will be providing you with regular updates going forward.

Open and honest communication with tenants has also been at the heart of our approach and I know this is particular key in terms of the Housing Portfolio Holder, Councillor Reid.

We have a dedicated team to respond to questions and support tenants throughout this process.

And what I hope this provides is clear reassurance that I, alongside Councillor Reid and our Chief Executive are determined to tackle any challenges we face head on.

Our focus is driving forward significant improvement to our housing service for our tenants and for that of course, that will take all of our work as all of us represent in our ward residents in our social homes.

And once again can I apologise unreservedly on behalf of the Council for our failings we are having to deal with following our commissioning of that report.

ACTION 2

1. The Interim Assistant Director of Housing to provide all Committee Members with a copy of action plan as provided to the Regulator.
2. Add to the work programme ongoing reports on progress by the Interim Assistant Director of Housing.
3. The Cabinet Member for Housing and Planning to provide members with a copy of the improvement plan.
4. The Chief Executive to put in place a housing dashboard.
5. Note an error on page 28 of report, which at table 6.1 Bulford Drive, Bourne states 'planning not submitted' but should read 'planning application has been made and refused'
6. Breakdown of costs for current IT system to be provided by the Interim Assistant Director of Housing.

On being put to the vote it was AGREED to recommend:

1. To review the Compliance Audit and action plan to meet the recommendations indicated within the audit plan and agree to receive quarterly updates on the progress being made within the work programme.
2. To note and provide comments on the revised 3 year rolling HRA New Build Housing Investment programme and support the principle that the housing service should focus on compliance priorities, utilising where necessary funds released through rationalising the HRA New Build Housing Investment programme proposals.

3. That Officers provide necessary updates to members regarding key performance and delivery of programmes to ensure capital investment and compliance objectives are achieved.
4. To note that the Council has reported itself to the Regulator and is jointly working with the Regulator towards compliance as a matter of priority.

A further recommendation was proposed to form a working group which was not seconded.

79. Key Performance Indicators (KPIs)

A presentation of Key Performance Indicators and targets to align with the new Corporate Plan was introduced by the Leader of the Council who explained that the Corporate Plan had been approved by Council on 1 October 2020. This was now being presented to scrutiny for review.

The report was then presented to the committee by the Assistant Chief Executive who set out the targets of the committee, advising that a revised draft would then be circulated should there be any changes. This committee was the first scrutiny committee to consider the KPIs, the other Scrutiny Committees would consider their relevant KPIs at future meetings of those committees.

On being put to the vote it was AGREED to recommend:

1. To approve the proposed key performance indicators and targets associated with the actions in the South Kesteven Corporate Plan 2020-23.
2. To note that key performance indicators and success criteria for each action will be reviewed and if necessary revised as part of the annual review process.

80. Riverside Flats

The Chairman advised that due to the Appendix for this item being exempt should this be referenced then the meeting would go to closed session. Julie Picken, an independent consultant was welcomed by the Chairman to the meeting.

A statement was read to all present by the Chairman as a ward member:

I was horrified to read in the local Grantham Journal a headline: "Lied to and let down" as my colleague, Councillor Smith and I had both responded immediately to every call we had had of lack of water or heating from the Riverside complex.

The whole sorry saga has been a catalogue of errors and like the residents we too have been let down as we escalated the complaints to the housing department in blind faith that positive steps had been taken.

I believe many residents had reported their complaints to Customer Services and then contacted councillors in desperation and frustration when things did not improve.

Let me make it clear, the residents and the community are my priority and this must never, ever, happen again as it is a total disgrace to the residents and some elderly and vulnerable people in such distress.

Hopefully lessons have been learned.

However I fully understand the distress all this has caused and I was pleased to hear from a couple of residents last year that they were happy with the repairs that had taken place and to quote one gentleman he said to me he was "as warm as toast" which was good news.

We also have a new Chief Executive who, along with the Leader, is totally committed to putting in place the proper management within a housing portfolio; supported by Councillor Robert Reid the Cabinet Member for Housing.

I look forward to having a single point of contact for residents and further updates at meetings.

The Chairman invited ward Councillor Jacky Smith to make a statement however she was not able to due to technical difficulties.

The Leader of the Council reported that he had visited Riverside with the Cabinet Member for Housing and Planning and would continue to do so on a regular basis. The commissioned report had identified failures for which he unreservedly apologised on behalf of the District Council to the residents for the inconvenience and trauma. The Chief Executive added her sincere apologies and expressed disappointment that the Health and Safety Executive report had not yet been received to also present at this meeting.

The Cabinet Member for Housing and Planning reported that he had not been satisfied with the heating system being provided to tenants. There was a 5-year life span remaining for the boilers which he would be looking to replace with allocated budget already in place.

A report was presented by the independent consultant, Julie Picken, in the form of slides which were circulated with the agenda. The consultant was appointed on 20 January 2020 to conduct an independent inquiry.

A further presentation by the Cabinet Member for Housing and Planning providing an update on works performed to date including a recommendation to the committee to create a Tenants Liaison Panel which would be made up of himself as the Cabinet Member and two nominated Councillors.

It was recommended that the Tenants Liaison Panel include a councillor from each of Stamford, Bourne and The Deepings. The Cabinet Member for Housing and Planning stipulated the need for the Panel to be localised with representatives of other areas separately.

A Member requested dedicated members of staff to support requests by elderly residents due to their specific needs. She also requested any works avoid the winter months at elderly households and where work was unavoidable to offer alternative temporary accommodation while work was undertaken.

The meeting having reached the scheduled 3-hour limit the Chairman proposed an extension of 30 minutes which was seconded and AGREED by all present.

Appreciation was expressed to the private consultant for her presentation. Tribute was also paid to Mr Gadd for his persistence in raising issues at Riverside.

The Cabinet Member for Housing and Planning informed councillors that the repairs/servicing of the heating and hot water system was complete with an upgrade commencing 23 November 2020.

Members were advised that until receipt of the report by the Health and Safety Executive, it was not known whether any action may be taken against the Council.

Councillor Jacky Smith, having overcome earlier technical difficulties, made a statement as a ward member, providing a short account of her efforts on behalf of residents at Riverside, and relaying her frustration at having been informed by officers at the time that everything repairs were proceeding.

A member queried whether the two tenants referred to by the Cabinet Member for Housing and Planning now had access to hot water and heating and whether this would need to be turned off during the upgrade: In response the Cabinet Member informed that the loss of hot water was a result of the units silting up and assured members that the two residents would be the first to receive upgrades. He was not aware that the residents in question were currently without hot water.

The Cabinet Member for Housing and Planning did not have sight of the report until September 2020. The independent consultant confirmed that she had sent the report to the Council in March 2020; it had been received by a person

who was no longer in the employment of the Council. Different options for environmentally friendly heating were being explored.

On being put to the vote it was AGREED to recommend:

1. To note the recommendations contained in the attached Independent Consultants Report, and requests that officers be required to update the Committee on progress to achieve full implementation of the recommendations on a quarterly basis.
2. To note that the Health and Safety Executive's report dealing with potential breaches relating to the management of asbestos during the carrying out of the Riverside hot water and heating repairs would be submitted to the Committee once received.

The Chief Executive confirmed receipt of the report provided by the independent inspector and explained that it had been intended to present the report alongside that of the Health and Safety Executive, however the impact of the pandemic had delayed this report. She further advised members that any councillor can request copies of exempt papers.

Councillors opted not to go into closed session, as they did not wish to discuss any matters contained solely within the exempt appendix.

81. Work Programme

The work programme was noted.

Meeting closed: 17:30