

ACTION NOTES

Rural and Communities Overview and Scrutiny Committee

Thursday, 1 July 2021, 2.00 pm

Council Chamber - South Kesteven House,
St. Peter's Hill, Grantham. NG31 6PZ



SOUTH
KESTEVEN
DISTRICT
COUNCIL

Committee Members present

Councillor Ray Wootten (Chairman)
Councillor Sarah Trotter (Vice Chairman)

Councillor Mrs Rosemary Kaberry-Brown
Councillor Philip Knowles
Councillor Jacky Smith
Councillor Hilary Westropp
Councillor Amanda Wheeler

Cabinet Members in attendance

Councillor Robert Reid (Cabinet Member for Housing and Property)

Officers in attendance

Andrew Cotton (Director of Housing and Property)
Ken Lyon (Assistant Chief Executive)
Richard Wyles (Interim Director of Finance)
Carol Drury (Community Engagement and Policy Development Officer)
Claire Moses (Head of Revenues and Benefits)
Ben Russell (Performance Lead)
Seb Brady (Democratic Officer)

1. Comments from Members of the Public

There were none.

2. Apologies for absence

Apologies for absence were received from Councillor Exton and Councillor Jacky Smith was acting as his substitute.

3. Disclosure of Interest

There were none.

4. Action Notes from the meeting held on 29 April 2021

Members considered the Action Notes of the meeting held on 29 April 2021.

It was proposed, seconded and **AGREED** that the action notes were a true and accurate record.

5. Updates from the previous meeting

All actions from the previous meeting were reported as complete.

6. Compliance update

The Cabinet Member for Housing and Property updated the committee on:

- A very favourable review that had been received from the social housing regulator
- Fire regulations assessments were running slightly behind schedule, but were nearly complete, with only two left to finish.
- Ongoing issues regarding gas surveys, whereby 42 properties have yet to be surveyed due to access issues.
- 100% compliance record with regards to Legionnaire's disease and asbestos.
- Ongoing issues with the Earlesfield Estate properties were being addressed, the Team would continue to be utilise a void property as an onsite office.

Members raised a number of questions:

- SKDC properties and whether any had any potentially dangerous flammable cladding, Members were assured that this was not the case.
- Were complaints received from residents about Liberty Gas (SKDC's subcontractor), being addressed.

Members were informed the contract was shortly due to expire and other options are being explored

- If Members could be provided with a list of tasks that were required to be achieved over the next 18 months. An improvement plan would be circulated to Members, for their information.

Officers confirmed that this would be actioned.

ACTION 1

That a list of tasks to be completed, in relation to the work with the Housing Regulator and the Improvement Plan be circulated to Members.

7. Housing Customer Feedback Policy

The Cabinet Member for Housing and Property introduced to Members a report on the Council's, Housing Customer Feedback Policy.

The Council's Corporate Plan set a clear priority in relation to Housing – that it should meet the needs of residents. As a social landlord, listening and acting on the views of service users expressed as complaints, compliments and comments was a significant part of understanding those needs. The draft Housing Customer Feedback Policy sets out how the Housing Service would manage that feedback.

Members considered to report and were encouraged that it would be instrumental in opening clear lines of communication between officers and residents.

A query was raised regarding how a resident would exercise their right to contacting the Ombudsman, should they feel they needed to do so. Members were advised that the Council would provide contact details and support any resident.

DECISIONS:

- a) The Committee considered and were encouraged that the content of the report in relation to the management of complaints, compliments, and comments.**
- b) That the Committee reviewed the proposed Housing Customer Feedback Policy.**
- c) That the Committee forward any comments to the report author, prior to consideration by Cabinet.**

8. Housing Service Assisted Garden Maintenance Scheme

The Portfolio Holder for Housing and Property presented the Committee with a report of on proposed changes to the current Assisted Garden Maintenance Scheme, in terms of eligibility for the scheme and whether it would be appropriate to recover the costs for providing the service to tenants.

The Committee raised various questions:

- There was a need to ensure that the Assisted Garden Maintenance scheme was fit for purpose and was only being utilised by those who were eligible, how would that be achieved?

Members were advised that that making sure that only those residents who were eligible was a core part of the policy. There would be a clear criterion to identify eligibility.

Members discussed the reasons for a charge to resident and requested that a breakdown of the costs be obtained, which was agreed that they would be.

The three options regarding charges to residents were discussed; to pass all costs on to those on the scheme, to part subsidise or thirdly to fully subsidise; but only for those who fulfilled a specific criterion.

The cost of the garden cuts was discussed, it was noted that there would indeed be a charge between EnvironmentSK Ltd and the Council. Clarification was sought on the hourly charge and the number of hours planned for each garden cut. It was highlighted that there had been an 150% increase on a reducing requirement. One Member requested for the base figures to be reviewed again.

It was proposed and seconded and **AGREED** that the third option be recommended for adoption.

ACTION 2

That a breakdown of costs of the Garden Maintenance Scheme be provided to Members.

RECOMMENDATIONS:

- 1. That the Committee supported the adoption of the renamed Assisted Grass and Hedge Cutting Scheme**
- 2. Recommended that the scheme be fully subsidised; but only for those who fulfilled a specific criteria.**

9. Compensation Policy

Members received a report from the Portfolio Holder for Housing and Property on the Housing Service Compensation Policy.

In common with all social landlords, Councils are obliged, in some circumstances, to make payments to tenants or leaseholders to compensate them for loss or inconvenience. The report sought the input of the Committee into the principles on which a Housing Service Compensation Policy could be based. Any Policy would be intended to provide clarity of the circumstances,

both discretionary and statutory, where it was appropriate, such payments would be made.

Members were impressed with the comprehensive report and its recommendations.

The Committee endorsed the recommendations of the report and encouraged Cabinet to agree approval.

RECOMMENDATION:

That the Committee endorsed the Policy and indicated its support for further work processes, prior to consideration by Cabinet.

10. Breathing Space - Update

The Cabinet Member for Finance and Resources introduced to Members a report on the Breathing Space Policy. The report provided an update on the Debt Respite Regulation and the instruction of the Policy.

On 4 May 2021, South Kesteven District Council, as a creditor, were required to introduce the Debt Respite Scheme, Breathing Space. There were two types of Breathing Space – Standard and Mental Health crisis

Members considered the report and raised a number of points:

- As most debt was related to council tax and rent why had the Council not sought to provide help and guidance before significant sums of debt were built up.

Members were informed that the instances of very high levels of debt were rare and that Covid 19 has disrupted our recovery methods.

- Whether there was a possibility of bridging the gap between mental health and breathing space in the case of undiagnosed mental health issues.

Officers had been trained to look for safeguarding issues and concerns.

Members were reassured that SKDC had a good history of engagement and dialogue with residents who were struggling with their finances.

DECISION:

Rural and Communities Overview and Scrutiny Committee noted

introduction of the Debt Respite Scheme and the arrangements that have been put in place to enable the Council to respond to the legislative requirements.

11. Corporate Plan Key Performance Indicators 2020/21

Members were presented with a report on the Corporate Plan Key Performance Indicators for 2021/22. The report outlined South Kesteven District Councils performance against the current Corporate Plan Key Performance Indicators (KPIs).

The Assistant Chief Executive provided Members with an overview of progress that had been made, in relation to the Committee's remit:

- 9 were green
- 7 were amber (meaning mitigation measures were in place).
- None were red

The Committee were informed that progress had been made setting up a Mental Health Working Party, that SKDC were one of only three authorities to have a five-year Housing Plan confirmed, through an Annual Position Statement.

With regards to affordable homes it was noted that the number built were lower than expected, this was partly due to the slowdown in the market caused by the Pandemic. Repairs completion times were identified as an area for improvement. The Committee were reminded that all KPI's were to be reviewed and refreshed after 12 months.

Members raised a number of questions, as follows:

- What was the current situation with the shortage of homes and both the Voids and Empty Homes Strategies?

Officers advised Members that most of the long-term void issues had been resolved. A policy had been drafted, as room for improvement had been identified. Reassurance was given that empty homes were being addressed by a working party formed from different teams and a strategy was being drafted.

Members were informed that solid fuel heated council properties would be altered to provide more appropriate alternatives, supported by the Green Homes Grant.

- The former Police homes on Stonebridge Road were raised and what was the current situation with bringing them into use.

The Cabinet Member for Housing and Property advised that there were a number of housing schemes coming forward. The former Police Housing was

a further scheme where capital fund allocation was being considered, following the stock condition survey.

DECISION:

Members noted the contents of the report

12. Work Programme 2021 - 2022

Members requested that the Empty Homes and Voids Strategies be added to the work programme. A further request was made that feedback be provided regarding the Breathing Space Policy, at the October meeting.

ACTION 3

Update on the Empty Homes and Voids Strategies be added to the Work Programme, a date to be confirmed.

ACTION 4

Update on the Breathing Space Policy be added to the Work Programme, to be considered at the October meeting of the Committee.

13. Any other business which the Chairman, by reason of special circumstances, decides is urgent

There were none.

14. Close of meeting

The Chairman closed the meeting at 16:04.