

Minutes

Rural and Communities Overview and Scrutiny Committee



SOUTH
KESTEVEN
DISTRICT
COUNCIL

Thursday, 1 February 2024, 2.00 pm

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

Committee Members present

Councillor Nikki Manterfield (Chairman)
Councillor Steven Cunnington (Vice-Chairman)
Councillor Pam Byrd
Councillor Robert Leadenham
Councillor Habibur Rahman
Councillor Vanessa Smith
Councillor Sarah Trotter

Cabinet Members present

Councillor Ashley Baxter (Leader of the Council)
Councillor Phil Dilks (Cabinet Member for Housing and Planning)
Councillor Patsy Ellis (Cabinet Member for Environment and Waste)
Councillor Rhea Rayside (Cabinet Member for People and Communities)

Other Members present

Councillor Harrish Bisnauthsing
Councillor Phil Dilks
Councillor Richard Dixon-Warren
Councillor Patsy Ellis
Councillor Charmaine Morgan
Councillor Rhea Rayside
Councillor Ashley Baxter

Officers

Graham Watts (Assistant Director of Governance and Public Protection, Monitoring Officer)
Nicola McCoy-Brown (Director of Growth and Culture)
Claire Moses (Head of Service - Revenues, Benefits, Customer and Community)
Jodie Archer (Head of Housing Services)
Ayeisha Kirkham (Head of Service – Public Protection)
Carol Drury (Community Engagement Manager)
Tom Amblin-Lightowler (Private Sector Housing Team Leader)
Debbie Nicholls (Armed Forces Officer)
Amy Pryde (Democratic Services Officer)

42. Public Speaking

There were none.

43. Apologies for absence

Apologies for absence had been received from Councillors Penny Milnes and Virginia Moran.

Councillor Peter Stephens substituted for Councillor Penny Milnes.
Councillor Tim Harrison substituted for Councillor Virginia Moran.

44. Disclosure of Interest

There were none.

45. Minutes from the meeting held on 14 December 2023

It was proposed, seconded and **AGREED** that the minutes of the meeting held on 14 December 2023, were a correct and accurate record.

46. Updates from the previous meeting

The Head of Service (Revenues, Benefits, Customer and Community) and the Community Engagement Manager provided an update on Safeguarding:

'At the last meeting of this committee on 14 December 2023, the Mid-year KPI report was presented for "Healthy and Strong Communities".

The action "protect our most vulnerable residents with robust safeguarding processes" had an action status of "Significantly Below Target".

As a result of this, it was proposed, seconded and AGREED that the Committee:

- 1. Review and scrutinise the performance against the Corporate Plan Key Performance Indicators in relation to the delivery of the Corporate Plan priorities and outcomes.*
- 2. Use this report to inform and support the ongoing work programme of the Committee*
- 3. For the Committee to receive a further report on a breakdown of staff training and the type of training they require, as well as the progress made against each service area, including contractors and the safeguarding process within Housing.*

I would like to take this opportunity to update the Committee on the actions taken since this meeting.

On 19 January 2024, Carol Drury, myself, Jodie Archer and Sarah McQueen met to discuss the actions from the Committee meeting and agreed a formal approach to the training.

Officers felt that a cross team approach to be taken in regard to safeguarding would be the best way forward, to maximise and make best use of officer expertise. The following officers would have responsibilities for areas of safeguarding:

- Carol Drury
- Review of information reported through ITrent (resulting in the figure within the KPI measure)
- Training
 - Review current levels
 - Undertake awareness sessions with senior management
 - Provide in-person training to those teams who do not have access to a PC
 - Regular monitoring of progress for individual officers and against the KPI target
- Jodie Archer and Sarah McQueen
- Are our dedicated safeguarding Officers
- Leading on the Section 11 Safeguarding Children Audit
- Presenting the annual safeguarding report to Governance and Audit on 13 March)
- Day-to-day accountability for safeguarding (including supporting staff with referrals and understanding of their role in the process)

The KPI within Healthy and Strong Communities with the action to:

Protect our most vulnerable residents with robust safeguarding processes relates to the percentage of '**relevant staff**' **trained in applying effective safeguarding processes**. This was reported to be at 45%.

The % reported is based on the number of officers from across the Council that have accessed the induction training "An introduction to Safeguarding Everyone in Lincolnshire" so there relates to a % of new starters.

Relevant staff are those who interact regularly with potentially vulnerable residents so the percentage reported should be based on that figure (and their levels of completed training) and not across the whole staff.

To clarify more generally, I will remind Members as stated at the last meeting of this Committee – all officers and elected Members are required to complete safeguarding training – relevant to their role.

At this time, I am still awaiting some information on staffing but, based on the information I currently have, I have reviewed present levels and can inform Members that the actual percentage (at this time) of 'relevant officers' having

completed some safeguarding training is 63%. Still lower than we want it to be, but action has been taken to address this.

I have also reviewed the 6 year training pathway of both the LSCP and the LSAB and updated our training pathways as necessary.

I have produced spreadsheets across three levels of training. They are for:

- *Officers with limited or no direct contact with the public*
- *Officers with regular contact with the public – likely to make a safeguarding referral (these would be classified as 'relevant officers')*
- *Safeguarding Leads.*

I have attended a senior management meeting to update and inform and to share the requirement on them and their teams to undertake safeguarding training.

Following that meeting – the revised 6 year pathway and the spreadsheets have been shared for managers to disseminate to their teams.

In house training relating to safeguarding and the importance of professional curiosity will also be provided for staff members who have no access to a computers.

Going forward, I will monitor the progress of training completed and will provide the information required against the KPI.

A further update will be brought to this Committee to give assurance that actions are being delivered against for this important aspect of our work.'

The Head of Housing Services informed the Committee that the next session on Safeguarding on Members was due to take place on Tuesday 6 February at 6pm.

It was clarified that the KPI relating to Safeguarding training would only relate to relevant Officers. The total number of staff trained would be part of the annual report that goes to Governance and Audit Committee, which contained training levels for Officers and elected Members.

The target for Officers to be trained on Safeguarding was 90%.

In future, figures would be provided on by service area, relevant roles and levels of training required to be undertaken.

It was queried whether elected Members were included within the 63% completion rate.

The Community Engagement Manager clarified that the 63% related to only Officers. The annual report would contain the figure of how many elected Members had completed the training.

47. Announcements or updates from the Leader of the Council, Cabinet Members or the Head of Paid Service

One Member requested comments from the relevant Officers regarding recent flooding in the area.

The Chairman informed the Committee that the issue was being investigated and would be considered by a Joint Meeting of the Environment Overview and Scrutiny Committee and Rural and Communities Overview and Scrutiny Committee.

48. Armed Forces Covenant Action Plan

The Armed Forces Covenant Action Plan was presented by the Cabinet Member for People and Communities. The plan outlined the Council's action on the past year and future proposals.

The Armed Forces Champion commended the report.

Members reiterated the District's pride to hold the gold award.

One Member queried whether the report took into consideration the reserve forces of all three branches of the armed forces: Army, Navy, and Air Force.

The Armed Forces Officer stated that officers were working with the Chief Executive of the East Midlands Reserve Forces and Cadets Association to raise awareness to inform employers of the value of hiring reservists.

An update was requested on how Officers were communicating with relevant charities to ensure that efforts were not duplicated.

The Armed Forces Officer stated that officers regularly meet with charities (Royal British Legion and SAFFA) and view them as support forces to help the Officers in their efforts.

It was queried whether the benefits for reservists under the current plan would continue, once they leave the reserve forces.

It was reiterated that the current focus was on engaging the business community with regards to the benefits of hiring reservists. It was estimated that 2000 reserves graduate and pass through Prince William of Gloucester Barracks per year, advocating support back to their employers.

That the Committee:

Notes the Annual Armed Forces Engagement Report and comments on the content.

49. Council in the Community

The Community Engagement Manager presented the report which was provided as an update on two outreach initiatives undertaken during 2023/24.

The first 'Council in the Community' was developed on request as a way to support those residents who struggled to attend Council offices to deal with queries. It was noted that, there was no actual evidence to support this.

None the less, 2 pilot events were arranged, one in an urban setting, and one in a rural setting.

As part of the planning, service areas of high demand were looked into:

- Council Tax
- Benefits
- Housing (social and private sector)
- Antisocial Behaviour
- Cost of Living support.

Details around the events were outlined:

- A team of 8 officers was put together to cover the topics.
- The first event took place in Bourne. The event was held in the Corn Exchange on a market day as it was felt there would be greater potential for footfall.
- The events were advertised via the Council's recognised social media channels and also with flyers.
- During the event in Bourne, attendees sought support from housing colleagues and from community engagement (community funding)
- No queries were presented relating to cost of living, ASB or benefits. The event attracted 21 visitors including 8 elected Members.
- The second event took place in Belvoir Ward at the request of one of its elected Members.
- For the Belvoir Ward event, a team of nine officers attended this event representing: Community Engagement, Neighbourhoods (ASB), Homelessness, Tenancy Support and Engagement, Cost of Living, Private Sector Housing, and Revenues and Benefits.
- Publicity for the Belvoir Ward event also went out to all residents of the Ward in the parish newsletter.

Both elected Members from the Belvoir Ward attended the event. Disappointingly, no members of the public attended this event.

However, having piloted events in both a rural and an urban setting with little evidence of need identified, it is considered that an alternative method of engaging with residents should be explored.

There was a proposal for officers to attend pre-existing community events (festivals, carnivals, fun days etc) with an information stand to allow for less formal engagement with the public but still with the absolute intention of being able to offer support and information to anyone who needs it.

The second initiative to update Members on was the funding workshops which had been delivered by the Community Engagement Team along with colleagues managing the UKSPF.

The workshops had been provided in support of the charity, voluntary and community sector across the District and have, to date, taken place in the evening.

The workshops covered information on the SK Community Fund, Lottery SK, UKSPF and a pre-recorded presentation from colleagues at the National Lottery.

Attendees to these workshops were asked to book a place through Eventbrite. Although free to attend, the workshops were held in community venues, so places were limited. Events had been held in Deepings, Stamford and Grantham.

Collectively, the workshops had attracted 107 participants representing 83 voluntary and community groups across the district.

Members praised and recommended the workshops that had taken place.

One Member suggested that the events taken place in Bourne and Belvoir Ward may be more successful taking place elsewhere within the District.

Face-to-face contact with residents was encouraged via workshops. It was noted that the necessity to book ahead of events may turn away prospective attendees.

One Member stated that there had been confusion amongst residents in their ward on the purpose of the events and that further clarity could lead to greater turnout.

It was suggested that markets be targeted for the workshops with elected Member attendance in order to maximize reach without necessitating the presence of as many officers.

That the Committee:

Note the contents of the report and that further updates on six monthly basis be provided as part of reporting against the Community Engagement and Development Strategy Action Plan.

50. Cost of Living Team Update

The Head of service (Revenues, Benefits, Customer and Community) presented the report which outlined the first Cost of Living update report for 2023/24.

By way of background, in August 2022, the South Kesteven Cost of Living Strategic Working Group (COL SWG) was formed in response to increasing cost of living concerns and energy price increases.

As a result of the activities undertaken by the COL SWG, it was identified a business case could be put forward for a dedicated Cost of Living Co-Ordinator.

A successful bid was put forward to the UK Shared Prosperity Fund on 26 January 2023 and following successful recruitment, the two Cost of Living Co-Ordinators commenced their roles from 5 June 2023.

Since 5 June 2023, the Cost of Living Team had been working to objectives set out within the action plan, which is included within Appendix One of the report.

One of the main responsibilities of the Cost of Living Team is to administer and distribute the Household Support Fund. The Household Support Fund (HSF) was first announced by Government in October 2021 and has continued through to 31 March 2024. The expectation was that it should primarily be used to support households in most need for help with food, energy, and water bills.

The table in paragraph 2.14 of the report confirmed the value of Household Support Funding for 2023/24 for South Kesteven of £177,342.

The table in paragraph 2.15 of the report pack provided a breakdown of how the funding had been distributed, either by the Council's own Cost of Living Team or by the support organisations such as Lincolnshire Community Foundation and the Post Office.

Information in paragraphs 2.24 to 2.54 of the report provided more detail regarding the various schemes and how they are administered.

The Team also provide a vital advice service, which, following receipt of referrals the team were able to contact the resident to discuss their current circumstances and determine the best support available to them. The team utilise the support of other external agencies and also the Tenancy Support team for SKDC tenants.

Between 24 August and 31 December 2023, 682 referrals had been received.

As well as providing advice, the team had also been able to identify £49k of additional financial wrap around support for 235 of these residents.

There had been no announcement so far that HSF will continue in 2024/25. Any HSF funding that had not been issued in 2023/24 i.e. vouchers not redeemed, could be issued during 2024/25, providing it is for the same cohort of residents.

Any such decision would need to be approved by Lincolnshire County Council, as the recipient and distributing authority of the HSF funding.

Once the residual funding amount was known, and a decision had been made, the Cost of Living Team would propose a scheme of support for 2024/25.

Finally, the Cost of Living Team was currently funded to 31 March 2025. The team's activities, as detailed in Appendix One, would continue and a further update as to additional activities for 2024/25 will be provided to this Committee at its meeting in May 2024.

One Member queried the likeliness of the Council receiving further funding to aid the District's Household Support Fund.

The Head of service (Revenues, Benefits, Customer and Community) stated that South Kesteven District Council and several other local governments were lobbying for more funding, and any announcements of increased funding would be made in March 2024.

It was queried further whether Lincolnshire County Council's opinion on the requests for greater funding was the same as the Council's.

The Head of service (Revenues, Benefits, Customer and Community) stated that Lincolnshire County Council had previously agreed with South Kesteven District Council in similar circumstances.

One Member requested a breakdown as to how the funding had been spent.

ACTION: For The Head of service (Revenues, Benefits, Customer and Community) to circulate figures on a breakdown as to how the funding had been spent.

The Cabinet Member for People and Communities thanked Officers and stated that the team had been brainstorming ways to make sure the funding is spent efficiently.

The importance of having a platform for residents to easily ask for support was emphasised.

One Member queried if there was a way elected Members could better assist their constituents at a local level to ensure they are receiving the help they require from the vouchers.

Due to issues around GDPR, it was unknown as to whether information could be shared with Councillors. The Head of service (Revenues, Benefits, Customer and

Community) would explore whether the details could be shared and provide the Committee with a response.

That the Committee:

- 1. Notes the activities and levels of support being provided by the Cost of Living Team**
- 2. Asks questions in relation to the activities and provide feedback.**

51. Private Sector Housing Adoptions Policy

The Cabinet Member for Planning and Housing presented the report.

South Kesteven District Council provided Disabled Facility Grants for the adaptation of properties of residents who require them be able to remain in their homes and complete everyday activities.

There were two main grant categories – mandatory and discretionary. In order to provide discretionary grants, the Council must have a policy covering this.

The policies for discussion were both for the discretionary grants, one had been created in conjunction with the other districts to try and create a standard offer across Lincolnshire, and the other is an updated South Kesteven District Council policy only.

The Council currently had a policy and either of the discussed policies will replace this once approved.

The funding came from a government awarded grants from the Better Care Fund and can only be used for the delivery of disabled adaptations. The grant award is provided annual and for the financial year 2023/24 the amount provided was £1,060,000.

The policies only covered grants awarded to the Private Housing Sector including Housing Associations and does not cover Council housing stock.

It was queried as to why the statistics used within the report were from 2009.

The Private Sector Housing Team Leader highlighted that it had been difficult to find more recent published information, but once the team had found more updated published information, the committee would be notified.

Clarification was sought around the differences between the two policies (SKDC standalone and Lincolnshire-wide).

The Private Sector Housing Team Leader stated that the SKDC standalone policy was the current policy, and needed updating. There had been working groups in all seven of the county's districts working to develop a county-wide policy.

The main differences of the policies were outlined:

- The Lincolnshire-wide policy did not specify individual grant types, whereas the SKDC policy did.
- The cap for the Lincolnshire-wide policy was £15,000, and the cap for the SKDC policy was £10,000.
- The third main difference was land charges elements and products in terms of grants for adaptations.

The Private Sector Housing Team Leader noted that there were no concerns with either policy.

One Member queried whether either of the policies had been means-tested.

It was confirmed that some aspects of the policy, including the mandatory aspects and some of the larger discretionary aspects, had been means-tested.

It was questioned as to where the money attained from land charges would go.

The money attained from land charges would go into the discretionary funding pot to use on other grants.

It was suggested that the Lincolnshire-wide policy may be the best option due to its handling of land charges.

It was queried whether there was a difference in the costs of applying the land charges.

It was noted that there was not a difference in administrative costs or Officer time. The land charges were managed within the team.

The Private Sector Housing Team Leader stated that Officers had no personal preference of either policy, it was noted that the Lincolnshire-wide policy was expected to be implemented in at least five of the county's seven districts.

It was queried if residents under the right-to-buy scheme would be eligible for the grants under the policy.

It was confirmed that any resident who had brought their house off of the Council, would fit into the criteria to be assessed.

One Member queried whether there would be any legal costs for the policies.

The Private Sector Housing Team Leader clarified that legal costs were unknown, however, the cost would be less than other administrative costs due to legal services being conducted in-house.

It was proposed, seconded and **AGREED** that the Committee:

- 1. Notes and considers the policies put forward.**
- 2. Recommends the following option for cabinet to approve.**

Option 2: Recommends that the Lincolnshire Discretionary Housing Financial Assistance Policy be adopted and published.

52. Work Programme 2023-24

The Committee noted the Work Programme 2023-24.

The Director of Growth and Culture informed the Committee that the Heritage Action Zone would close on 31 March 2024 and had historically had been reported to Finance and Economic Overview and Scrutiny Committee.

The Chairman highlighted that the topic of flooding would be discussed at a future meeting.

One Member requested that a representative from Lincolnshire County Council (LCC) could attend the meeting where flooding would be discussed.

Another Member requested that the relevant Officer from the Emergency Planning and Health and Safety team attends the committee meeting in which flooding is discussed. Concerns were raised on the issue of contaminated sandbags and issues around storage.

One Member queried the remit of the Committee and whether the creation of additional parking bays was included.

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

There were none.

54. Close of meeting

The Chairman closed the meeting at 15:30.