

Meeting of the Housing Overview and Scrutiny Committee

Thursday, 13 July 2023, 10.00 am



SOUTH
KESTEVEN
DISTRICT
COUNCIL

Committee Members present

Councillor Virginia Moran (Chairman)
Councillor Lee Steptoe (Vice-Chairman)
Councillor Anna Kelly
Councillor Zoe Lane
Councillor Habibur Rahman
Councillor Jane Wood
Councillor Paul Wood
Councillor Charmaine Morgan
Councillor Graham Jeal

Other Members present

Councillor Tim Harrison
Councillor Bridget Ley
Councillor Ian Selby
Councillor Mark Whittington

Cabinet Members

Councillor Ashley Baxter, Deputy Leader of the Council
Councillor Phil Dilks, Cabinet Member Housing and Planning
Councillor Rhea Rayside, Cabinet Member for People and Communities

Officers

Craig Spence, Acting Director of Housing
Graham Watts, Assistant Director of Governance and Monitoring Officer
Jodie Archer, Head of Housing
Julie Martin, Head of Technical Services
Debbie Roberts, Head of Projects, Policy and Performance
Sarah McQueen, Housing Options Manager
Lucy Bonshor, Democratic Officer

1. Public Speaking

An email had been received from a Miss Lisa Freeman requesting to speak on homelessness, the environment as a rough sleeper and the effects of unwarranted intervention of 3rd parties. However, Miss Freeman was not present at the start of the meeting and it was agreed to continue with the agenda and take a decision on whether or not to allow Miss Freeman to speak if/when she arrived.

Miss Freeman arrived at 11:00am and was given the opportunity to speak.

Miss Freeman stated that she lived in a tent near the public toilets in Welby Gardens and stated that not one of the Committee had recognised her which she felt was bad as the Committee dealt with housing. She had been rough sleeping for 33 days. She had moved to Grantham recently due to personal circumstances from Peterborough where she had lived her whole life. She was 52 years old and it had taken a lot for her to move from Peterborough to a new area, but it had been due to personal issues and she felt that she was being bullied and harassed by services in Peterborough. She had visited Grantham several months ago, felt that it was a lovely place and moved here for a fresh start, as she couldn't take any further action where she had lived. She had informed the services what she had planned to do and was informed that she would need a local connection, if she didn't have one to move here, they would see what they could do.

The last 38 days had been the most traumatic of her life. She was offered assistance for a small amount of time and put in a hotel in Gonerby and she was under the impression that she would be given temporary relief, a hostel or another place. The accommodation only lasted a week and then she was put back on the streets by the Council and she felt that the Council had made her intentionally homeless after offering assistance. She had been sleeping rough for 33 days, she had engaged with all services, she had to do all the work to provide information to the Council, she was not an officer she didn't get paid and she felt she had been bullied and harassed by people as they didn't want to assist her for whatever reason.

NACRO had offered her a place and various other organisations had offered her a place, she had visited Lincoln and Newark and they too had offered her a place. She stated that someone within South Kesteven had advised these places not to assist her as there was an open case here. They had referred her back to the town where she was from, even though she was escaping domestic violence.

She had been on the street 30 days, she had no drink or drug issues, she was well spoken and professional. She didn't believe that the services were up to date with current housing laws and the homelessness reduction act and the various other processes and procedures and she thought that they needed to be looked at.

The Chairman stated that Miss Freeman's comments had been noted and referred to the meeting that had been arranged at the end of the Housing OSC or at lunchtime with Senior Officers of the Council where the Chairman was confident that everything would be resolved and that she would receive updates following the meeting.

2. Apologies for absence

Apologies for absence were received from Councillor Emma Baker and Councillor Penny Milnes and these Members were substituted by Councillor Charmaine Morgan and Councillor Graham Jeal.

3. Disclosure of Interest

None disclosed.

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

There were no announcements or updates.

5. Housing Regulatory Compliance Update

The Chairman expressed her admiration for the phenomenal work that had been carried out to get to the current position and she thanked all those involved for their work. She acknowledged that being in special measures was a process and that it had to be monitored even when you were at the high level that the Council was currently.

In introducing the report, the new Cabinet Member for Housing and Planning stated that he was delighted that there was a dedicated Overview and Scrutiny Committee for Housing. He made a commitment to working together with all those present to deliver the basic requirement of a decent home for those who were in most need whatever challenges the Council faced. He made reference to the national housing crisis and the challenges that were being faced including record inflation, rising interest rates and rising mortgage rates. Reference was made to the local backlog in fitting kitchens, bathrooms and central heating and the current high turnaround period for void properties.

The first report before the Committee updated Members on the actions taken to ensure regulatory compliance of the Council's Social Housing Landlord function. The Council was a social housing landlord to almost 6,000 properties and was one of the largest local authority providers of housing across the East Midlands.

The Council had been in special measures since 2021 when it self-referred itself to the Regulator of Social Housing for its failure to comply with a range of legally required safety checks to protect its tenants with year on year failures in respect of gas, electricity and fire prevention measures.

Since February 2021 necessary actions had been taken following guidance from the Regulator of Social Housing. The current compliance requirements were very close to reaching their goal and many of the actions and improvements were reported to tenants via the SKyline magazine a copy of which was appended to the report at Appendix 3. The Cabinet Member for Housing and Planning was confident that the Council would soon be coming out of the special measures and that the housing service would be fit for purpose which hadn't been the case two years ago.

The Acting Director of Housing referred Members to appendix 1 of the report which listed the KPI's current position as at the end of May 2023. Legionella, asbestos

(re-inspections), Fire Risk Assessments and Lift Inspections were all at 100%, gas inspections were at 99.3% and electricity was at 90.29%, with Smoke and CO at 99.76% (14 properties outstanding) and Damp and Mould at 99.80% (12 properties still in need of work), there were still some issues with gaining access to some properties.

Members thanked everyone for the work involved to date and asked when full compliance would be achieved and the Council would come out of special measures. The Chairman stated that an audit had been undertaken and there were still a few minor matters that needed addressing but it was estimated that in two to three months the Council would be as close as it could be to 100% compliance.

Questions were then asked about the KPI's in relation to the smoke detectors and the figures shown and a question that was asked at a recent Governance and Audit Committee and how long-standing repairs were managed to which the Acting Director of Housing replied and referred to the new housing management system and aligning it to the repairs system.

Further comments were made about policies and political decisions to which the Acting Director of Housing stated that there were a number of policies that needed a refresh, there were 34 across the housing directorate and due process had to be given to each, which was why the allocations and repairs policy had been brought before the Committee.

Further comments were made about the achievements that had been made over the last two years and the amount of work that had been done by Officers and Members to reach the current position.

Reference was made to the SKyline magazine and its informative content which it was felt would benefit private tenants also. It was stated that some of the key pages were reproduced in SK Today. The Deputy Leader of the Council referred to SK Today which was now produced on-line and hard copies were no longer delivered, therefore reducing costs, although the bin schedule would still be circulated each year.

Members noted the latest compliance position following the ongoing meetings with the Regulator of Social Housing and that the Committee received a further update report at its next scheduled meeting.

➤ **Action**

That the Committee receive a further Housing Regulatory Compliance update at its next scheduled meeting.

6. Housing Repairs & Maintenance Policy

The Cabinet Member for Housing and Planning presented the report which concerned the new Housing Repairs and Maintenance Policy which laid out the

responsibilities of the Council as a landlord and also the responsibilities and expectations of tenants in respect of housing repairs and maintenance to the housing stock of the Council.

The draft document had been compiled following the work carried out with the Social Housing Regulator to improve engagement with tenants. The document was part of a consultation process and a framework for delivering repairs and maintenance. The document also included key performance targets and at page 67, Appendix 2, there was a specific proposed Damp and Mould Protocol.

The Head of Technical Services stated that the document set out a framework for the delivery of repairs and maintenance within the repairs team and covered both responsive repairs and also capital improvements as well as cyclical work such as painting and decorating and some of the compliance activities. Previously the information had been available in a set of separate protocols and the proposed policy brought all those protocols into a transparent framework which tenants would be consulted on.

It was acknowledged that a lot of the work was reliant on the implementation of the IHMS system to enable data led decisions to be made and also the ongoing monitoring of KPIs.

The framework made clear the expectations of both the Council as a landlord and what was expected of tenants. The separate Damp and Mould protocol had been compiled following the recent report from the Social Housing Regulator and to make transparent what the Council's responses would be to significant damp and mould cases.

The Housing Team were congratulated on compiling the document before the Committee.

Comments were made in respect of

- the Damp and Mould protocol with concern being expressed in respect of investigations into damp and mould and tenant's intervention which may impede an investigation and how this would be managed.
- Fencing repairs and potential safety concerns especially where tenants were elderly or vulnerable.
- Security was raised in relation to smoke and carbon dioxide detectors and accessibility when changing batteries.
- Issues with faulty fobs for gaining entrance in communal accommodation

A question was asked in respect of changes to the documents content and best practice from other local authorities. It was stated that the format had been changed for clarity, so that it was clear what was expected of tenants.

Members acknowledged the work that had gone in to compiling the document and asked how regularly the policy would be reviewed, refreshed and revised.

It was stated that the policy was a key document and communication in respect of the document with tenants was very important and various consultation routes were being put in place. There would be an on-line consultation as well as a telephone message reminding people that the document was out for consultation. It was also proposed to create a north and south focus group to try and engage with as many tenants as possible.

Documents were routinely reviewed in respect of changes required by legislation and the report by the Social Housing Regulator had prompted the Damp and Mould review and to keep it as a separate protocol document. It was suggested that a communication strategy was worked up in respect of documents and that they were reviewed at least once every four years.

The Cabinet Member for Housing and Planning welcomed the comments made by Members and stated that policies were reviewed regularly due to the nature of the housing sector. Reference was made to the national scene and the tragedy that had occurred in the Northwest which had made a review of the Damp and Mould Protocol timely.

Further comments were made about the amount of information within the document and how it was presented to people making sure that the important information was highlighted. An amendment was proposed to the second recommendation within the report to include the Cabinet Member for Housing so that the recommendation read:

That the Committee recommends that the Director of Housing in conjunction with the Cabinet Member for Housing make alterations and amendments to the Policy to incorporate comments arising from consultation, for submission and adoption at full Council.

The amendment was seconded.

(10:55am Councillor Whittington left the meeting and did not return)

The Acting Director of Housing stated that a communication strategy was being undertaken to enable effective consultation and he hoped to be able to circulate it to the Committee within the next four weeks.

Further comments were made about the format of the Communication Strategy and that it would need to be available in a variety of formats and also the right to repair and what was classed as a priority, with an example being given of a failure to repair. It was stated that response time was usually one day but it was difficult to set a timeframe.

As the amendment had been proposed and seconded the Chairman read out both recommendations with the amendment. On being put to the vote they were **AGREED.**

Recommendation

- 1. That the Committee notes the Housing Repairs and Maintenance Policy and that it is in line with best practice and will ensure clear operational guidance for staff and all customers.**
- 2. That the Committee recommends that the Director of Housing in conjunction with the Cabinet Member for Housing make alterations and amendments to the Policy to incorporate comments arising from consultation, for submission and adoption at full Council.**

7. Housing Pipeline update

The Cabinet Member for Housing and Planning presented the report which provided an update on the HRA new build pipeline programme. The Capital Programme for 2023/24 Housing Development investment had been established at £4.5m and would fund the construction of 20 apartments at Swinegate, Grantham and four one bed flats at Elizabeth Road, Stamford, both schemes were due to start in the autumn of 2023. Further schemes were also referenced including a 21 unit development at Larch Close, Grantham due to start in June 2024 and a scheme at Wellington Way, Market Deeping for 14 units, date to be confirmed. The complexities involved with developing smaller garage sites was recognised and the costs these incurred, also buying back Right to Buy sales may be seen as counter intuitive but they could be the most cost-effective option.

The Head of Corporate Projects, Policy and Performance reiterated that the report was an update on the housing pipeline programme. Cabinet had recently approved the start of the Elizabeth Road project and contracts would soon be exchanged. The Larch Close development was with Planning and there were slight amendments to be made to the development before the application was resubmitted. Feasibility work was currently being undertaken in respect of the Wellington Way site at Market Deeping together with a few other sites that had been brought forward.

A question was asked about the Larch Close site with reference being made to local opposition when the scheme had first been proposed some years ago and the loss of green space. What percentage of land was being taken up by the new scheme. It was confirmed that the original scheme was wider than the current proposed scheme which was a far smaller development. The Head of Projects, Policy and Performance stated that she didn't have the information to hand but would forward it on to Councillor Steptoe who was one of the Ward Members for the area in due course.

➤ Action

Information on the size for the Larch Close, Grantham site to be forwarded to Councillor Steptoe in due course.

Concern was expressed by one Member about sites that had been marked for development and the loss of green space, where could Members see what sites were being brought forward. Reference was made to the sites allocated within the Local Plan and land owned by the Council such as old garage sites. The Cabinet Member for Housing and Planning assured the Committee that when plans for new builds were known they would be brought before the Committee. It was suggested that the item be added as a substantive agenda item.

Questions were asked about land and development, specifically employment land in Bourne and a recent high profile bankruptcy involving a development in Grantham. One Member asked about how more homes would be delivered especially in light of the rise in homelessness and the lack of housing stock. The Cabinet Member for Housing and Planning stated that this was a critical question and referred to the current situation in respect of housing stock which was currently void due to requiring major works. It was a huge challenge and although new properties were being built where they could be, developing smaller sites was expensive, although changes meant that Right to Buy sales could be reinvested, it was a matter of priority and balance. It was felt by certain Members that a housing strategy was needed to give real structure to housing before the end of 2023. The Acting Director of Housing stated that the Housing Strategy was being revised and a draft would come before the Housing OSC before the end of the calendar year.

Further questions were asked about the costs stated, £4.2m in 2023/24 and only £2.8m in 2024/25. It was stated that due to the late commencement of the schemes underspends had occurred and these would necessitate carry overs, but Officers were confident that the schemes would come in on budget.

A further question was asked about multi occupancy houses for people with special needs and the challenges this involved. It was stressed that this was more for the private sector but the Acting Director of Housing would speak to the Member outside of the meeting.

Members noted the updated report.

8. Key Performance Indicators

The Head of Policy, Projects and Performance presented the report which outlined the Council's performance against the Corporate Plan Key Performance Indicators (KPIs) for the year 2022/23. The information contained within the report was up to 31 March 2023.

Information on the KPI's was presented twice a year. A further review of actions was due to take place with the Quarter 2 report and it was noted that 2023/24 was the final monitoring year for these specific KPIs, all Members would have the opportunity to engage in the new Corporate Plan when it was discussed.

Appendix A to the report outlined the overall performance against the original actions which came within the remit of the Committee. Currently there were 9 actions, 5 actions were rated Green, 2 amber and 2 red.

Paragraphs 2.8 – 2.15 of the report gave background information on the actions.

One Member asked a question in relation to the homelessness case figure which seemed to be getting worse. It was stated that people presenting as homeless had increased and they had a lot more complex needs. Proactive work was being undertaken to ensure that rough sleepers had a sustainable option for the future with significant work being done with other partners within Lincolnshire.

A question was asked about whether South Kesteven was the lead on homelessness and it was confirmed that South Kesteven hosted the Rough Sleeper Initiative funded Change4Lincs initiative with North Kesteven, South Holland and West Lindsey. When presented as homelessness South Kesteven had a duty to assess the person in respect of any local connections to South Kesteven or other areas such as Peterborough or Lincoln and work with that local authority.

A further question was asked about those fleeing domestic violence and it was stated that South Kesteven had adopted a Domestic Abuse Policy last year. There was a national scheme for refuge accommodation across the country and for those wanting to relocate there were powers and tools to take the best action. Partnership working was key to enable the best option to be taken forward for those fleeing domestic violence.

A further comment was made on the potential for an increase of those presenting as homeless and how this would be managed to which the Head of Housing replied.

Reference was made to the solid fuel heating still in place in some council properties and how soon these would be replaced. The Council had been successful with the Social Housing Decarbonisation Fund and there was a two-year programme currently in place to hopefully replace solid fuel heating by 2025.

The Cabinet Member for Housing and Planning stated that reducing solid fuel heating in homes was a legacy issue which would be addressed as quickly as possible. He made reference to the national housing crisis which was being exacerbated by the cost-of-living crisis, record mortgage interest rates and the effects on the rental market which was causing a major problem in the housing sector.

Members noted the report.

(The meeting adjourned between 11:45 and 12:05)

(11:45 Councillor Graham Jeal left the meeting and did not return)

9. Voids Performance and update

The Cabinet Member for Housing and Planning presented the report which updated members on the progress of the Council's void properties, the changes in the process in the past year and current performance measures.

On average there were 370 void properties each year which meant that no rental income was being received for these properties whilst void. Where possible properties were let to the right applicant as soon as possible to minimise the loss of rental income. Getting voids back into the rental system was a huge challenge with current void turn arounds taking in excess of 100 days. The KPI was sub 60 days with industry best practice being 40 days or less. Challenges included a national labour shortage in certain trades plus supply chain issues.

Following a restructure of the Housing Directorate, focus was placed on the requirements of the void team. Voids were split between minor and major works and unfortunately a higher proportion of the properties coming back as voids were in need of major works.

Historically there had been around 20/25% of voids requiring major works, recently the figure was upwards of 55/60% of properties that required major works.

The Acting Director of Housing drew Members attention to the void period when one tenancy ended and another began and the procedures required and the number of resources needed. The Housing Teams management of voids was proactive and he referred Members to Appendix 4 of the report which gave a snapshot of voids during 2022/23 and the mapping of properties.

Concern was expressed by Members about the number of voids requiring major work and it was stated that this in some part was due to a lack of historical capital investment, the neglect of properties by tenants and problems with supply chains for the supply of goods such as kitchens. More proactive work was being done with pre-termination inspections and in the planning of the works with data led decisions being made to try and reduce the numbers.

A comment was made about recharging tenants who had not looked after a property. Previously it was stated that recharging had not been enforced with regularity as tenants had left properties and the landlord had limited means of contacting them. Changes that were being put in place gave the tenant more empowerment and ownership of a property with work being completed to a higher standard.

Further concern was expressed about the extensive turnaround of properties and a proposal was put forward:

That the Committee recommended that the Cabinet discuss the issue of voids with senior officers to try and suggest a way forward to address the problem and reduce the turnaround of properties to 60 days.

The proposal was seconded.

Further discussion followed with the Acting Director of Housing stating that revised procedures had been implemented and a new structure and robust processes had been put in place so that voids currently had the highest priority. One Member referred to how the work was undertaken on the void properties, were people employed by the Council or sub-contracted and could South Kesteven's apprenticeship scheme be used to help "grow" capacity.

The Chairman proposed that a workshop be arranged with the Housing Committee Members to discuss voids and to try and seek a way forward.

A question was asked about those people who were currently at the Urban Hotel in Grantham to which the Head of Housing responded that this was in relation to the migration crisis and there was full wrap around support in place.

Further comments were made about the "trashing" of properties and examples given and how these people should not be allowed further properties. More comments followed in respect of the turnaround times and what was required when a tenant left a property. It was acknowledged that the void turnaround times were a challenge.

The proposal put forward that the Committee recommended that the Cabinet discuss the issue of voids with Senior Officers to try and suggest a way forward to address the problem and reduce the turnaround of properties to 60 days was voted on and was **LOST**.

The recommendations contained within the report were then proposed with the addition that a workshop be arranged to discuss voids with Members of the Housing OSC and any other Member with an interest.

Recommendation:

- 1. That the Committee notes the performance for 2022/23 regarding void properties.**
- 2. That the Committee recommends future reporting on voids to be quarterly, advising on the progress and the performance measures being met.**
- 3. That a workshop be arranged to discuss voids with the Housing OSC and any other Members who were interested in the topic be invited to attend.**

(Workshop to be arranged before the next meeting of the OSC)

10. Housing Allocations Policy

The Cabinet Member for Housing and Planning presented the report which updated Members on the progress of the Council's allocation policy which had been adopted in July 2022. Since the current policy had been adopted it had become clear that further changes were required following the proposed introduction of a Choice Based Lettings service. The report and associated appendices detailed the proposed changes to satisfy the allocation of housing stock utilising a Choice Based Lettings approach.

All those currently on the Housing Register would be required to re-register between the period 28 of August 2023 to the 25 September of 2023, with the new system due to go-live from the 23 of October 2023. The re-registration request would be a validation of the current Housing Register list as to what people's needs were as these changed over time. Choice Based Lettings was a tried and tested method for a fairer and more transparent allocations process system which had been widely used across the social housing sector.

The Head of Housing stated that following the adoption of the policy in July 2022, it had felt prudent to bring the proposed changes back to Committee for complete transparency in relation to the proposed changes and Choice Based Lettings which was due to go live from the end of October 2023. A strong communication drive would be implemented in respect of the need to re-register for all the Council's tenants and those in the private sector wishing to go on to the Housing Register. The Communication drive would start from the date of the meeting. All people currently on the Housing Register would be written to with clear information on how they could access support should they have any difficulties around re-registration. Events would be attended in four market towns to give advice and guidance about re-registering.

The new Choice Based Lettings system would give transparency about what properties were available on a daily basis and on re-registering there would be a clear focus on housing need. The current six bands would be reduced to four bands.

Members welcomed the change to a Choice Based Lettings system and congratulated Officers on their work to date. Concern was expressed by some Members about the "faceless" people at Grantham and that for those who lived outside of the Grantham area there was no face-to-face contact and that perhaps one day a week Officers could work from community hubs in specific towns such as Bourne. Another Member was concerned about engagement with those who had learning difficulties or lacked communication skills, it was felt that these people may lose out. It was stated that Officers were aware that there were a number of people with special needs and triggers were in place to highlight these individuals.

It was reiterated that re-registering was a validation of housing need within the district in a fair and transparent way, and whether people still wished to be on the Housing Register.

One Member questioned about those people registering between the dates or they had not read about the deadline. The Housing Options Manager stated that these would be looked at and honoured where a valid reason could be supplied.

A further question was asked in relation to auto bid, band 1 and homeless persons to which the Housing Options Manager replied that each case would be dealt with on a case-by-case basis.

The Committee noted the proposed changes to the Allocations Policy and the current position and timeline for implementation of the Choice Based Lettings system and it was recommended that a future update on Choice Based Lettings would come back to the Committee prior to the system going live in October 2023.

➤ **Action**

That an update on Choice Based lettings to come back to the Committee prior to the system going live in October 2023.

11. Work Programme 2023/24

The following items were to be added to the Work Programme:

- Progress report following the proposed Void workshop
- HRA Capital Programme – progress monitoring report

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

None.

13. Close of meeting

The meeting closed at 1:09pm.