

Meeting of the Housing Overview and Scrutiny Committee

Thursday, 16 November 2023, 2.00
pm



SOUTH
KESTEVEN
DISTRICT
COUNCIL

Committee Members present

Councillor Lee Steptoe (Vice-Chairman)
Councillor Emma Baker
Councillor Anna Kelly
Councillor Zoe Lane
Councillor Penny Milnes
Councillor Habibur Rahman
Councillor Jane Wood
Councillor Paul Wood
Councillor Tim Harrison

Other Members present

Councillor Matthew Bailey
Councillor Jane Kingman
Councillor Ian Selby

Cabinet Members

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

Officers

Karen Bradford, Chief Executive
Debbie Roberts, Head of Corporate Projects, Policy and Performance
Jodie Archer, Head of Housing
Julie Martin, Head of Technical Services (Housing)
Sarah McQueen, Interim Head of Service (Housing Options)
James Welbourn, Democratic Services Manager and Deputy Monitoring Officer
Lucy Bonshor, Democratic Officer

28. Public Speaking

The Vice-Chairman informed the Committee that a question had been received but it had been rejected in accordance with the Overview and Scrutiny Procedure Rules specifically paragraphs b) and d).

29. Apologies for absence

An apology for absence had been received from the Chairman, Councillor Virginia Moran and she was being substituted by Councillor Tim Harrison.

30. Disclosure of Interest

None disclosed.

31. Minutes of the meeting held on 21 September 2023

The minutes of the meeting held on 21 September were proposed, seconded and **AGREED.**

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

The Cabinet Member for Housing and Planning referred to the removal of the non-compliance notice by the Regulator and also that interviews had taken place for an interim Director of Housing, and an offer made and accepted.

The Chief Executive confirmed that the interim Director for Housing would be taking up their post in January 2024 and a permanent post would be advertised.

A question was asked in relation to the lift at Riverside and it was confirmed that the lift had been fixed and was now working.

33. Housing Regulatory Compliance Update

The Cabinet Member for Housing and Planning presented the report and reminded the Committee that the Council had referred itself to the Regulator in February 2021 when it was found that the Council was not meeting its legislative requirements in relation to gas safety, electrical testing, asbestos, fire risk assessments, lift inspections and smoke and CO alarms.

He paid tribute to the huge amount of work undertaken by the Housing Team and the regular meetings attended by the Chief Executive, Leader and Cabinet Member for Housing and Planning and the Regulator which had finally resulted in the Regulatory Non-Compliance Notice being lifted. Although there were still challenges ahead, he looked forward to continuing to work with the Housing Team to make improvements.

The comments were echoed by the Head of Technical Services who referred to the new Total Compliance Policy that provided a framework of compliance going forward. It was noted that the appendices appended to the report contained figures for September and the specific graphs contained July data.

The Vice-Chairman passed on the Chairman's thanks as well as his own for all the hard work that had been done by Officers on all levels, the Cabinet and Members both current and those within the previous administration who had worked together to get to the current position which should be celebrated, although there was no room for complacency.

Members echoed the comments made and congratulated the Officers for their hard work to reach the current position. Concern was expressed by some Members as it was felt that some areas were still struggling with meeting standards, specifically void properties. One Member, not on the Committee, made reference to the dreadful living conditions of residents in properties on Lumby's Terrace in Stamford and felt that there was still a very long way to go. It was stated that the Committee was not the forum to discuss individual cases.

Further discussion followed with the Housing team being congratulated on the work done to get to the current position. A question was asked in relation to changes in the base figures used within the appendices, to which the Head of Technical Services replied that due to natural movement such as Right to Buy Sales, these did change from month to month.

The Chief Executive made reference to the significant amount of work undertaken by the Housing team since the Council had self-referred itself to the Regulator in February 2021. The amount of work undertaken over the last two and half years should not be under estimated. She made reference to the stock checking, stock surveys undertaken, the new systems put in place, the new electronic systems put in place, the monitoring undertaken, responding to Covid emergencies and she couldn't under estimate the amount of work that had been undertaken. She was disappointed that voids had been raised as Members had been to a workshop on voids and knew the challenges that were faced with void properties. She stated that the Council had a fabulous Housing Team and a fabulous Repairs and Maintenance Team and the five new apprenticeships that had started between the ages of 16 and 17. She wanted to recognise the amazing work that had been achieved and the significant improvements made, the meetings that she had attended with the Regulator month on month which reflected these improvements. It was a key milestone which happened on the 25 October 2023 and should be celebrated.

The Vice-Chairman congratulated the Chief Executive and the Housing Team for all the work that they had done during the previous administration and over the last six months.

The Cabinet Member for Housing and Planning thanked the Chief Executive for the comments made, he acknowledged all the work done to date, but that there was still room for improvement. There had not been a previous Housing OSC in its own right to scrutinise the work done and there were still big challenges ahead. References were made to voids and repairs and that more work was required in these areas. He briefly touched on the state of Lumby's Terrace and acknowledged

that the houses were not in a good state. There were still long standing problems in certain areas but progress was being made.

The Leader of the Council amplified the comments made by the Chief Executive and the Cabinet Member for Housing and Planning. To get out of special measures required a high degree of attention and a high degree of commitment from both Officers and Members. That same level of detail and attention would be applied to both repairs and voids to address the backlogs in a systematic fashion. Compliance checks would still continue whilst this work took place.

34. Total Housing Compliance Policy

It was noted that as the Policy document was not included within the agenda pack it was proposed, seconded and **AGREED** to **DEFER** the item to the January meeting of the Committee.

The Cabinet Member for Housing and Planning supported the deferral from having a decision made at the Cabinet meeting in December 2023 to after the Housing OSC had looked at the Policy at their meeting in January 2024.

Decision

That the Total Housing Compliance Policy was DEFERRED to the next meeting of the Housing Overview and Scrutiny Committee in January 2024 and that the item would be taken off the agenda for the December Cabinet meeting.

35. Earlesfield Project Overview November 2023

The Vice-Chairman of the Committee, as one of the Ward Councillors for the Earlesfield Ward, acknowledged the “teething problems” when the project first started. However, now that the project was underway, it was making a big difference to the families that were having their homes refurbished and he placed on record his thanks to the Housing Team for all the work that they had done both in the previous administration and the current administration in respect of the project.

The Cabinet Member for Housing and Planning referred to the long standing problems with about 100+ of the houses on the Earlesfield Estate that had been built to a particular design in 1970s. It had been recognised by the previous administration that the problems needed to be addressed. The Cabinet Member had visited the site recently, together with the Chairman and Vice-Chairman of the Housing OSC and had been impressed with the quality of work being done and he felt that families were getting back brand new houses. Going forward, innovative house designs would be looked at in more detail to avoid such problems and costs in the future.

The Cabinet Member for Housing and Planning confirmed that 23 properties had been completed to date and it was hoped that 30 families would be able to return to their houses by Christmas. Whilst the work was being carried out on the houses, families had been moved to temporary accommodation. Mention was also made of the amount of choice that was given to tenants in respect of design and colour for both the kitchens and bathrooms.

The Chief Executive confirmed that there were 154 properties being refurbished on the Earlesfield Estate. The primary reason for the refurbishments was due to an asbestos survey which had been carried out in 2017 but had not been actioned. Legislative changes had meant a delay in completing the refurbishments as there had to be a period (two weeks) in between having the asbestos work assessed and allowing the contractors in to start the refurbishment work. Work was going well with the contractor on site, United Living and the Chief Executive stated that she was part of the project management team.

One Member raised the delays that had been documented at the start of the project and asked if it was now on course and whether there were any extra costs involved. The Vice-Chairman stated that he was on public record at the start of the project in respect of the delays but they had been rectified and the project was well underway. The Head of Technical Services stated that they had wanted the management of the asbestos part of the project to be robust and this management had delayed the project due to the required HSE testing which could not be done whilst the tenants were in situ. This was being worked through with the contractor on site, United Living and the programme was continuing. In relation to costs this was currently being discussed with the contractor and there would be transparency over this once these were known.

Members noted the update.

36. Housing Options Workshop feedback

The Vice-Chairman thanked the Interim Head of Service (Housing Options) for the workshop that had taken place on 24 October 2023 in respect of homelessness. Circulated with the report were the slides from the workshop together with a contact sheet for Housing Option Officers.

The Cabinet Member for Housing and Planning stated that the workshop had been informative and followed on from the first workshop on voids which had been educational and it was useful for Members to ask questions directly of the team. The next workshop planned was on repairs.

The Interim Head of Service (Housing Options) thanked Members for attending as it enabled the hard work that the team did to be showcased.

Other Members thanked Officers for the workshop and the information given, especially in relation to the right language to use when dealing with homelessness.

37. Housing Pipeline Update Report

The Cabinet Member for Housing and Planning stated that the report updated the Committee on the current new build position. Going forward a multifaceted approach would be taken. Reference was made to the loss of around 50 council houses a year through the Right to Buy scheme and it was how some of these houses could be replaced going forward.

The Head of Corporate Projects, Policy and Performance informed the Committee that the project for March had recently been to the Planning Committee and planning permission had been granted for the 21 units. Work was being progressed with expressions of interest with contractors for the necessary work.

Members noted the current position.

38. Choice Based Lettings

The Committee received an overview demonstration on how the Choice Based Lettings application worked through the Council's website by the Interim Head of Service (Housing Options). The system had gone live on 25 October 2023.

The presentation allowed the Committee to see what customers would see when accessing the website for a choice based lettings application. Access could also be done using a smartphone as well as a PC as most traffic through the website was carried out via a smartphone.

One of the key benefits of the choice based lettings was that the applicant had a much more active role in the allocation process. They could see the properties available, see properties that they could bid for and make informed choices about the properties and see where they were on the short list if they bid on a property. It was a more transparent process.

The Interim Head of Service (Housing Options) went through an application showing how simple the system was to navigate and that anything that needed to be completed was shown in purple and in red if it needed to be amended.

The pre assessment captured basic information and asked basic information such as whether there was a local connection. If there was no local connection then it was unlikely that they would qualify. It was noted that there would still be people behind the system but the software could help to manage people's expectations.

As the applications was progressed the Interim Head of Service (Housing Options) answered Members questions which covered banding, criteria, how long the bid process took, what was taken into account when those bidding had the same banding and the demonstration of need. Questions were asked about vulnerable tenants and those that were not able to access IT equipment. It was stated that these people would still be supported and the necessary mechanisms to help them

put in place. Further comments were made about allocations and banding to which the Interim Head of Service (Housing Options) replied.

The Cabinet Member for Housing and Planning thanked the Interim Head of Service (Housing Options) for the presentation and stated that the system was not new and was already used by most of the country. He urged those that had not applied to go on the housing register as part of the recent revalidated review to do so.

Reference was again made to the changes in the banding and Members were reminded to look at the new Housing Allocations Policy.

Further questions were asked in relation to alerts for properties to which the Interim Head of Service (Housing Options) replied.

Members thanked the Interim Head of Service (Housing Options) for her presentation and the team as a whole for the work put in to getting the Choice Based letting system on-line.

39. Work Programme 2023/24

The Vice-Chairman reminded the Committee that currently the Housing Team were without a director and that the agenda for the January meeting was full.

One Member asked if an item could be included on the Work programme in respect of the HRA Capital Programme refurbishment and improvement and the costs to date.

The Chief Executive advised that these finances came under the remit of the Finance and Economic Overview and Scrutiny Committee which would be reported to the next meeting at the end of November 2023.

It was confirmed that the Total Compliance Policies would be added to the Work programme for January.

A question was asked about the garage sites item on the Work programme. It was stated that work was being done to look at the derelict garage sites to see where development could take place that was the most cost effective. Reference was made to the new one bedroom flats project in Stamford on a former garage site and the cost of the project. Other locations were being looked at to see which sites were feasible.

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

Members were reminded that further workshops in respect of housing repairs would be confirmed in due course for dates in January 2024. A question was asked about

whether the voids workshop would be held again and it was stated that currently due to the workload within the Housing section this was not a priority.

The Cabinet Member for Housing and Planning stated that if Members wished to raise housing problems on behalf of their constituents, please could they use the following email: housingenquires@southkesteven.gov.uk

A comment was made about further heating issues at Riverside, Grantham and the Member was asked to speak to the Head of Technical Services outside of the meeting.

41. Close of meeting

The meeting was closed at 15:32.