

Meeting of the Rural and Communities Overview and Scrutiny Committee



SOUTH
KESTEVEN
DISTRICT
COUNCIL

Wednesday, 9 July 2025, 10.00 am

Committee Members present

Councillor Nikki Manterfield (Chairman)
Councillor Rhea Raysia (Vice-Chairman)

Councillor Pam Byrd
Councillor Richard Dixon-Warren
Councillor Tim Harrison
Councillor Habib Rahman
Councillor Mark Whittington
Councillor James Denniston

Cabinet Members present

Councillor Richard Cleaver (Cabinet Member for Property and Public Engagement)
Councillor Phil Dilks (Cabinet Member for Planning)
Councillor Philip Knowles (Cabinet Member for Corporate Governance and Licensing)
Councillor Virginia Moran (Cabinet Member for Housing)

Officers

Karen Whitfield (Assistant Director – Culture, Leisure and Place)
Claire Moses (Head of Service – Revenues, Benefits, Customer Service and Community)
Carol Drury (Community Engagement Manager)
Nicola Moore (Customer Services Manager)
Beth Goodman (Physical Activity and Wellbeing Lead)
Charles James (Policy Officer)
Debbie Nicholls (Armed Forces Covenant Officer)
Amy Pryde (Democratic Services Officer)
Paul Drury (Lincolnshire Armed Forces Community Covenant Officer)

1. Public Speaking

There were none.

2. Apologies for absence

Apologies for absence were received from Councillors Robert Leadenhamb and Steven Cunningham.

Councillors James Denniston substituted for Councillor Steven Cunningham.

3. Disclosure of Interest

There were none.

4. Minutes of the meeting held 12 March 2025

The minutes of the meeting held on 12 March 2025 were proposed, seconded and **AGREED** as an accurate record.

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

There were none.

6. Armed Forces Update

The Cabinet Member for Planning presented the report. The report outlined the commitment to support those who had served in the Armed Forces.

The role of the Lincolnshire Armed Forces Community Covenant Officer was introduced in 2024 as a 2-year fixed contract. The post was currently funded by the seven district council's of Lincolnshire and the NHS. Across the partnership, it had been agreed to continue the funding for the post for a further 2 years at which time Lincolnshire County Council would also contribute to the post.

An annual report on the Council's compliance within the Armed Forces Covenant in relation to engagement and advocacy was presented annually in December of each year.

A presentation was given to the Committee by the Lincolnshire Armed Forces Community Covenant Officer. The presentation provided an overview of the work undertaken which complemented the provision in the District. The Lincolnshire Armed Forces Community Covenant Officer role added value to expansive work undertaken in support of the Armed Forces families and individuals of both those serving currently or who had served previously.

- A query was raised regarding the progress of the veterans welcome pack and when this was due to be rolled out.
- A question was asked how success would be measured and what targets the Armed Forces Officer had.

It was hoped the veteran welcome packs would be rolled out by September 2025.

Annually, the work of officers was monitored and measured by the Covenant Partnership. Regular updates would also be brought to this Committee for scrutiny. The Armed Forces Covenant was under review. Currently the Covenant places a

legal duties on public bodies (local authorities and the NHS) in relation to healthcare, housing and education.

Going forward, Government plans to extend the scope of the legal duty to include central government and devolved administrations. This means more public bodies will be legally required to consider the Covenant when making decisions.

- Operation Valour had been announced in May 2025, and the pilot had been running in the North of England. It was queried as to what arrangements and strategies were in place with all local authorities across Lincolnshire to be prepared for the operation in possibly rolling out in 2026.

The Lincolnshire Armed Forces Community Covenant Officer was liaising with the Office of Veteran Affairs at present and had requested Lincolnshire be considered as the second pilot. Work was being undertaken to identify key areas and people within Lincolnshire to establish a forum.

To provide an update on the work of the Lincolnshire Armed Forces Community Covenant Officer by means of a presentation to Members of Rural and Communities Overview and Scrutiny Committee.

7. Corporate Plan 2024-27: Key Performance Indicators Report - End-Year (Q4 2024/25)

The Cabinet Member for Corporate Governance and Licensing presented the report.

The Corporate Plan 2024-2027 was adopted by Council in January 2024 and subsequently, 9 targets were monitored for this Committee.

7 of the actions were rated green overall and were on or above target as planned. 1 action was rated amber, which meant it was currently below the planned target. There were no actions rated red. An action to implement the Safer Streets Programme had been marked as completed, which had been funded nationally.

One Member noted the Safer Streets funding had finished, it was queried how the legacy would be continued.

It was highlighted that the Officers and the Home Office were working on exploring ways in which the programme could still provide safer streets in Grantham.

The Assistant Director for Culture, Leisure and Place clarified some UKSPF funding had been secured for Safer Streets.

ACTION: For the Head of Service – Public Protection to provide a funding update on the Safer Streets Programme.

A target for Licensing was rated amber due to staffing challenges, it was questioned whether this had been addressed.

ACTION: For the Licensing Team to provide an update on staffing challenges faced.

The Cabinet Member for Corporate Governance and Licensing had confirmed an administrative member of staff had been employed. However, there had been long term sickness amongst other members of staff.

A suggestion was made to remove the Safer Streets KPI and focus on other elements of possible funding or other areas of concern.

It was proposed, seconded and **AGREED** to remove the Safer Streets KPI and focus on other elements of possible funding or other areas of concern.

That the Committee:

- 1. Notes and scrutinises the performance against the Corporate Plan Key Performance Indicators in relation to the delivery of the Corporate Plan 2024-27.**
- 8. South Kesteven Health and Wellbeing Action Plan & Age Friendly Communities Update**

The Cabinet Member for Property and Public Engagement presented the report which provided an overview of the Health and Wellbeing Action Plan.

In December 2023, Members of the Committee endorsed the Lincolnshire Districts Health and Wellbeing Action Plan and agreed to receive six monthly updates on progress.

The delivery period for actions had come to an end. Officers were working on refreshing the actions over the next 12 months, details could be found in appendix 2 of the report.

The report also provided an overview on the progress of Age Friendly Communities work within South Kesteven. The Committee had previously agreed in February 2025 to receive six monthly progress reports.

In April 2025, SKDC were accepted into the UK Network of Age Friendly Communities which demonstrated the hard work of Officers by achieving this milestone.

Officers would continue to gather data information to create a baseline profile on people's opinion of living, working and ageing within South Kesteven which would be finalised by March 2025.

Officers were thanked for all their hard work on this project.

It was noted the NHS 10-year plan was recently published. The plan included a major shift from hospital to community and from cure to prevention meaning a greater role for Local Government would be seen in future for community health and wellbeing.

A query was raised on the homeless sector and how the Council were prioritising which empty homes would be brought back into use. It was further questioned whether any targets could be implemented on the number of homes aimed to be brought back into use.

ACTION: For an Officer from Housing to provide how the Council were prioritising which empty homes would be brought back into use and whether any targets could be implemented on the number of homes aimed to be brought back into use.

The Cabinet Member for Housing highlighted additional work was ongoing at present to review long term voids. There had been a concentration on empty homes which could be turned around quickly. If properties were beyond economical repair, they were sold.

The target on void properties for the end of 2025 was 80, and this target had already been achieved. It was hoped the number of voids by the end of 2025 could reach 60.

It was noted that £15,000 of funding had been spent on food support. It was queried whether Council had plans to replenish the funding or build a more sustainable solution.

The £15,000 budget had been established as part of the budget setting process. The funding was offered to all of the foodbanks, community larders and pantries. The funding was not always accepted by these community services.

Central Government had introduced a trial programme on community restaurants for people struggling to feed their families. It was suggested whether the Council could look into the programme and explore options.

The Community Engagement Manager highlighted that cafes within the District offered a 'pay what you can' service.

The economic inclusion part of the strategy referred to supporting low paid workers. It was questioned how low paid workers would be identified.

Economic inclusion actions were due to be reviewed once the new Head of Economic Development had started their role towards the end of 2025, and would be brought to a future meeting.

ACTION: For the Economic inclusion actions be brought back to Committee once the new Head of Economic Development had started their role.

One Member queried when the survey would be rolled out to all residents or those residents of a certain age.

The organisation survey was due to be rolled out on 21 July 2025 and would last for 4 weeks. Following the closure of the survey, a review period will take place and feedback of data would form the questions due to be asked to residents. This would be sent to all residents in October 2025, but with a focus on residents over the age of 50 years old.

It was suggested that Parish and Town Council's be involved and encouraged in making their areas more age friendly.

To provide an update on the progress and delivery of the South Kesteven Health and Wellbeing Action Plan, and the progress of South Kesteven District Council becoming part of the UK Network of Age Friendly Communities

9. Customer Service Update - Outturn 2024/25

The Cabinet Member for Corporate Governance and Licensing presented the report.

This report detailed the service provided through the Council's Customer Service Team and the priorities high contact service areas strive to deliver.

A telephone and call handling report was presented to the Rural and Communities Overview and Scrutiny Committee on 12 March 2025. The report focused on the position regarding call handling.

The Customer Service Team handle customer interactions in various ways for 17 high contact service areas, as well as general public enquiries. The report provides an update regarding customer interactions for these service areas for 2024/25.

It was noted that over 1000 feedback comments were received from the website, it was queried what common issues were raised and how they were actioned or resolved.

ACTION: For the Head of Service (Revenues, Benefits and Customer Service) to provide figures on common issues raised on digital feedback forms and how they were actioned or resolved.

Staff members were enjoying the space in the new Customer Service Centre and felt as if it had a positive atmosphere.

It was queried whether staff were coping with a major increase in phone calls or whether any new staff had been recruited due to the increase in activity.

It was highlighted that 79% of calls were answered and 21% of calls were rerouted to a particular department, meaning 100% of calls were answered. A query was raised on abandoned calls as they had not been recorded. It was questioned how many rings a call would have before being answered.

The digital increase in activity was due to the improvements on the website and customer portals that had been launched. There was not an increase of staffing levels within the team, at present the increase in volumes were manageable.

It was clarified that 21% of calls were abandoned and not answered at first point of contact. However, the increase in digital and other contacts showed that people were moving into using this form of contact.

Complaints and feedback received regarding the ability to contact the Council had not increased which indicated calls were being re-routed to a different type of contact channel.

The Council had an aim to answer calls within 8 rings, however, if this wasn't possible, callers were advised to use other methods of contact. The caller also had an option for a voicemail and callback facility.

It was queried whether terminated calls were distinguished separately to dropped calls.

The Head of Service (Revenues, Benefits and Customer Service) confirmed that if a call ended, it was unknown whether the call dropped, or the call was terminated by a customer. Members were requested to encourage residents to inform the Council of any issues with phone calls, which could be tracked via time, date etc.

It was queried what the Council could do to assist vulnerable elderly people who cannot access the internet, website or landline phone.

The Customer Services Manager confirmed the Council had face-to-face customer service centres in the North and South of the District. A service of appointments, drop-ins and advice was available in all offices.

One Member raised that residents had provided good feedback on the new customer service centre.

A suggestion was made on whether SKDC's Customer Services could compare customer service levels with other local councils.

It was requested that any future reports include details on resolution rates.

The Council worked alongside other customer service teams across Lincolnshire and met with them quarterly to compare different services and how they are delivered.

It was highlighted that resolution rate information was received from a variety of ways. The Council did not have a customer management system that all services could feed into, making resolution rates difficult to obtain. Anecdotally, resolution rates could be seen through feedback from customers through complaints.

As part of the Customer Experience Strategy, an action plan would come to the Committee in October 2025. A theme within the action plan is technology which could explore how this could assist in gathering information to enable improvement of services going forward.

A query was raised on whether the team had a sufficient tracking and monitoring IT system for checking resolution rates.

Within the action plan, options around resources and budget would be brought forward. Workshops had taken place with other service areas to emphasise the service standards set across the Council.

The Committee:

1. Noted the report and provided feedback on the information contained in the report

10. Welfare and Financial Advice Team Update

The Cabinet Member for Housing presented the report that provided and update on the Household Support Fund Scheme 2025/26.

One of the main responsibilities of the Cost of Living Team was to administer and distribute the fund.

The funding was provided by the Department for Working Pensions and distributed by Lincolnshire County Council, who then shared the funding between District Councils.

Lincolnshire's allocation for 2025/26 was £9.66 million and the figure for South Kesteven was £458,452.

The Council were encouraged to emphasise more on proactive working rather than reactive.

The delivery plan for the scheme was detailed within the report and appendices.

The largest proportion of support continues to be the issuing of voucher by referral, and as of recently the team head received 134 referrals.

Running parallel to the funding, the team also identify additional support for residents in the form of general budgeting advice and financial support.

Members were able to access leaflets to provide to residents who needed support. The Council would also put on 'pop-ups' around the District for residents to access the help in person.

It was queried whether Lincolnshire County Council were returning the money back to SKDC.

Up until 2024, the Council were receiving the money back the following month. This year, County Councillors had agreed for the money to be returned on a quarterly basis.

Concern was raised around not spending all the money and having to return it alongside spending the money and having to wait for a reimbursement from Lincolnshire County Council.

The Head of Service (Revenues, Benefits and Customer Service) confirmed the first half of the funding had gone to Lincolnshire Community Foundation around £46,000, and the second half would be given to them in December 2025. The treasury team were aware of this prior to the financial year.

The vouchers were sent out via a third-party company who were endorsed by the Department for Work and Pensions and all other Districts across the county. This funding was issued at around £30,000 per requirement and funding was not handed out at one go.

The management of the money of Household Support Fund was positive and the Council had an excellent working relationship with Lincolnshire County Council and all other Districts. The Council's Welfare and Financial Advice Coordinator attended regular meetings on this matter.

Lincolnshire County Council did keep an element of the funding for preschool meals.

From 2026, the Household Support Fund would be merged with Discretionary Housing Payments, and it would become a Crisis Resilience Fund. A meeting was due to take place between Government and Department for Work and Pensions to discuss this.

It was queried whether the Council undertook any direct reporting on veterans and access to funds for them alongside how many of those were accessing support funds.

The Head of Service (Revenues, Benefits and Customer Service) clarified the correct wording for questions would be reviewed and could be included within the referral form to capture the information.

It was requested whether information on what impact the support was having and whether information on the number of households receiving support in 2024 to 2025 could be shared.

The following questions were collectively raised:

- Data on how many residents had been supported and had not required further intervention.
- Any evidence that the preventative and outreach work was reducing the need for the support over time.

The Household Support Fund had only recently launched, and the funding had been given to Lincolnshire Community Foundation and to the voucher providers. This figure of vouchers given out last year would be provided at the meeting in October 2025.

The amount of support was a low amount for an individual or a household and it was available to assist in an immediate situation. Unfortunately, residents seeking support tended to require it year-on-year.

Preventative measures was a new element to the scheme. The action plan would include all activities and would also be reported at the next meeting.

Concern was raised on the eligibility criteria for the Household Support Fund and what input the Council had on it.

The eligibility criteria was reviewed on a regular basis and was South Kesteven's own criteria. The household income of £50k was aligned to Department for Work and Pensions and other benefits

The Committee:

1. Noted the report and provided feedback on the information contained in the report.

11. Work Programme 2025 - 2026

The Committee noted the Work Programme 2025-26.

It was requested that the following item be added to the October meeting:

- Annual Position Statement on Equality and Diversity

It was requested that the following item be added to the December meeting:

- Q2 KPIs

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

There were none.

13. Close of meeting

The Chairman closed the meeting at 11:30.