

Meeting of the Rural and Communities Overview and Scrutiny Committee



SOUTH
KESTEVEN
DISTRICT
COUNCIL

Thursday, 18 June 2020, 2.00 pm

Committee Members present

Councillor Ray Wootten (Chairman)	Councillor Penny Milnes
Councillor Sarah Trotter (Vice-Chairman)	Councillor Ian Stokes
Councillor Mike Exton	Councillor Amanda Wheeler
Councillor Mrs Rosemary Kaberry-Brown	

Cabinet Members

Cabinet Member for Communities, Councillor Annie Mason
The Cabinet Member for Housing and Planning, Councillor Robert Reid

Officers

Community Engagement & Policy Development Officer (Carol Drury)
Elections and Democratic Support Officer (Jack Gardner)
Assistant Chief Executive Housing Delivery (Ken Lyon)
Strategic Director Commercial and Operations (Gary Smith)
Scrutiny Officer (Zena West)

Opening Remarks from the Chair

The meeting started with the Chair expressing gratitude to NHS and key workers during lockdown and this sentiment was echoed by the Vice-Chair who gave her thanks to those who worked within the community hub as well as those volunteers who worked across the council.

48. Comments from Members of the Public

No comments were received from members of the public.

49. Register of attendance, membership and apologies for absence

No apologies for absence were received.

50. Disclosure of Interests

There were no disclosures of interest.

51. Action Notes from the meeting held on 20 February 2020

The following correction was made to the previous meeting's action notes - change "The Chairman reiterated her thanks to the Community Engagement and Policy Development Officer for her work in putting the document together. She proposed that Committee agree to the mandatory safeguarding training by elearning, to recommend that the Cabinet adopt the Policy with fewer acronyms and that the Safeguarding credit cards be circulated to all Members of the Council" to read "The Chairman reiterated **his** thanks to the Community Engagement and Policy Development Officer for her work in putting the document together. **He** proposed that Committee agree to the mandatory safeguarding training by elearning, to recommend that the Cabinet adopt the Policy with fewer acronyms and that the Safeguarding credit cards be circulated to all Members of the Council" (amended wording shown in bold)

Subject to the amendment above being made, the notes from the previous meeting were agreed as a correct record.

52. Updates from the previous meeting

There were no updates from previous meetings.

53. Verbal Update from Cabinet Members

The Cabinet Member for Housing and Planning delivered updates on the following subjects to the Committee.

Garden Maintenance Scheme

The draft garden maintenance scheme for 2020/21 was almost complete and would be brought to the committee for scrutiny at the meeting on the 11 September 2020. Garden maintenance works had been interrupted due to staff being seconded to critical roles during Covid-19 and this had resulted in a backlog of work that was to be completed as staff returned to their substantive roles. The Cabinet Member wished to convey his thoughts to the wellbeing of residents who may have been affected by the suspension of garden maintenance.

Frozen Pipes

Frozen pipes occur at temperatures below -11°C and the council had identified 200 properties that were at risk. Work had been completed to remedy this issue in all but 27 properties. The work to resolve these issues had been suspended during Covid-19 and would be restarting on 1 July 2020.

Disabled Facilities Grants

Work had been suspended for all but the most critical cases during lockdown. The Cabinet Member informed the committee that there were twenty cases ready for site work to be completed. However, processing of applications continued in preparation for the restarting of works. The installation of stairlifts and external works had now resumed (following Covid-19 risk assessments for each case and then only with the full agreement of the applicant). Other works were expected to re-commence from 29 June. 20 cases were ready for works to be started on site and it was expected that Occupational Therapists would re-start assessments shortly. The demand for Disabled Facilities Grants had not reduced, however, there would be a “lag” as Occupational Therapy assessments started to come through and contractors returned to work. Members thanked the staff who facilitated disabled facilities grants and installed equipment and thanked them for the excellent work that they carry out for South Kesteven residents.

Housing Repairs

Members were informed that the focus remained on conducting urgent repairs. These were repairs which must be completed within twenty-four hours of being reported. Some external non-urgent repairs had started from 1 June 2020 and it was planned to start some internal routine repairs from 1 July 2020. There was a backlog of repairs and work had started to prioritize the backlog and in doing so to consider the individual needs and vulnerabilities of residents. A member asked if dangerous cladding was an issue within the district and the Cabinet Member stated that any issues with cladding had been resolved in a previous project.

Homelessness

All approaches for accommodation as a result of homelessness made to the council during lockdown had been offered accommodation and put into some form of temporary housing. This had incurred additional costs as the council's supply of temporary accommodation had initially been exceeded in a three-week spike in demand at the beginning of April. At that point, alternative accommodation options such as bed and breakfasts had been used. Minor voids had been used as accommodation and this had required additional work to bring these properties back to a fit for purpose state after being used. This was due in part to recycling centres and charity shops having been closed during lockdown, resulting in some residents leaving items behind which required disposal. Members enquired about the work to offer permanent housing to the homeless. The Cabinet Member explained that often demand for housing decreased during the warmer summer months, as for various reasons some homeless people either are unable to, or do not wish to enter permanent accommodation. He went on to mention the work of the Housing Solutions team in preventative measures to avoid rough sleeping for those at risk of becoming homeless. The committee also heard that the district has been asked to take in a number of early release prisoners and were working closely with Lincolnshire County Council in creating solutions for these cases.

The Cabinet Member for Finance and Resources was unable to attend the Committee meeting, and the following update was provided on his behalf:

Stop the Knock

The committee heard that work on this project had been suspended during the Covid-19 pandemic, but it was believed that a report was due to be considered by the Cabinet in September 2020.

The Cabinet Member for Communities provided updates on the following areas:

Local Lessons Learned from Covid-19

Members heard of the work undertaken by the Communications team in using social media to spread government guidance on staying safe. The Committee wished to ensure that citizens did not become complacent or underestimate the dangers posed by Covid-19.

The Assistant Chief Executive – Housing Delivery went on to talk about the lessons learned from working in the Lincolnshire Resilience Forum and the advantages that such a partnership gave in information and experience sharing across the region. As time progressed system changes took place within the forum which had increased understanding and better differentiated areas of responsibility between the organisations involved. Members heard that the Lincolnshire Resilience Forum continued to work together and meet on a weekly basis which allowed for lessons learned to be shared between authorities.

Members were informed that the Deputy Leader was overseeing the councils work to provide support, information and marshalling to assist businesses and help them comply with social distancing rules. The Chair asked for a verbal update on this work from the Deputy Leader at a future meeting. The committee asked if the reduced presence of marshals in recent weeks could have led to members of the public not following the two-metre distancing guidance while queuing for shops within the district. The Cabinet Member agreed that it was concerning that residents were not following the guidance. The committee heard that the approach of Lincolnshire Police had continued unchanged, and that they were now starting to adapt their response as government guidance was updated. The CCTV (Closed Circuit Television) team had been working closely with Lincolnshire Police to identify areas where social distancing rules were not being adhered to. A member spoke of their concerns that residents were not taking suitable precautions such as wearing face coverings and gloves. Committee members expressed their thanks to officers of the council for their hard work during the restrictions and also thanked key workers such as those working in the NHS.

ACTIONS

The draft 2020/21 Garden Maintenance scheme to be considered at the meeting on 10 September 2020.

The Deputy Leader to provide a verbal update at the meeting on 10 September 2020 on the work to support local businesses

54. SK Community Hub (The Hub)

The Cabinet Member for Communities thanked all members and officers who worked in the community Hub, conducting befriending calls and offering their support to residents during the Covid-19 pandemic. The Cabinet Member went on to discuss how the Hub was created in an extremely narrow timeframe and how the Hub looked to mainstream and build on the success of the Hub as staff began to transition back to their substantive roles.

The Community Engagement and Policy Development Officer informed the committee that the Hub was created due to initial confusion as to which authority would provide direct support to residents. Seventeen SKDC staff volunteers, all without any background in this new type of support, had worked in the Hub. The Hub worked closely with the Lincolnshire Resilience Forum as this was the organization tasked by central government to provide support to residents. From 21 March 2020 communications were sent out to local community groups, organisations and individuals to gather volunteers to assist residents during lockdown. This resulted in the Hub having coverage of 29 wards within the district, with the remaining ward covered by volunteers working within that area separately from the Hub.

By 18 June 2020, the Hub had received 2,000 calls and had worked with groups such as BHive and Evergreen to coordinate the volunteer response to these calls. There were many advantages of working with local groups, such as the ability to respond quickly to shopping requests which could, if required be repaid on invoice to residents at a later date and the use of experienced local coordinators. All groups registered with the Lincolnshire Resilience Forum were able to make use of Lincolnshire County Council indemnity insurance. This covered both the group and the individuals volunteering within the group.

Members heard that as restrictions eased the pressures on the Hub would be reduced but there was a need to build on the excellent work of the Hub and create a legacy. The committee heard that ongoing cover for the Hub would continue to be provided by staff who remained unable to return to their substantive roles due to ongoing restrictions. There was also a need to remain vigilant in case of a second wave of the virus. Members were informed that should such a wave occur the Hub was positioned to quickly respond. Members heard that there was a need to transition incoming calls into the existing Customer Services team and the council's out-of-hours offer.

The committee heard that volunteer groups that had worked with the council during Covid-19 could now start to return to their business-as-usual work, transition to other purposes, or disband. The Hub would support groups that decided to transition to other purposes post Covid-19. To this purpose the work of the Hub in creating a list of volunteer groups had given the council a great opportunity to engage further with voluntary and community groups in future. The Community Engagement and Policy Development Officer told the committee of a planned community forum which would be key to developing an ecosystem of connected organisations and community groups that could partner together, learn and cooperate with each other.

The Chair and members thanked officers of the council. Members were amazed at the community's positive response to the crisis. Concern was raised regarding the closure of community rooms within Council properties, particularly in one facility where the Post Office operated out of the community room. Such closures may leave vulnerable residents unable to access key Post Office counter services such as local banking. The Assistant Chief Executive informed the committee that there had been no reports of residents being unable to access food or services due to being unable to withdraw cash, and that if any specific issues arose, the Hub would be able to help any resident facing difficulty by utilizing the facility set up for such instances with Evergreen Care Trust and BHive.

Members discussed the difficulties around helping socially isolated residents during the pandemic and that many residents would lack the technical ability to access virtual meetings. Members asked what support could be provided to these individuals and were told that BHive and Evergreen would take over in the transition responsibility for offering the befriending service to these individuals. Once it was safe to do so, there would be a need to help transition the isolated back into in-person social interactions. It was noted that social isolation and loneliness could be more prevalent now than before lockdown, with those previously unaffected finding themselves more isolated.

Members were informed that plans continued to develop a 'chat café' in Grantham. The idea for the chat café had originally been developed as a support mechanism for residents whose first language was not English. The council was working with a local faith group to develop this proposal further to incorporate the needs of people experiencing isolation and loneliness and to promote mental wellbeing in communities.

Some residents would continue to need assistance from the Hub even as restrictions eased, and there was a need to identify those in need and develop systems of working going forward. Members were concerned for those residents who lacked technical knowledge, and there was a discussion of the work of community groups who aimed to increase this knowledge and confidence. The Cabinet Member for Communities spoke about the intelligence that had been gathered by the Hub during Covid-19 and spoke of

the opportunities that this presented to the committee to guide and support the community going forward. She asked the committee to approve the recommendations within the report to allow staff to transition to their primary roles and to gather more intelligence from committee members that would help shape the Council's work going forward.

ACTIONS

Members of the committee to participate in a workshop to explore future working with the voluntary and community sector.

That Cabinet approves the transition of the inbound call handling element of the SK Community Hub to the Customer Service Centre.

55. 2020/21 Committee Work Programme

The committee noted and agreed the work programme, and requested the following items be added:

10 September 2020:

- Verbal update on work to support local businesses through Covid-19
- Garden Maintenance scheme 2020/21

Meeting to be confirmed:

- Update on progress of Stop the Knock, following approval by Cabinet and implementation
- Site allocations for the travelling community

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

The Chair raised the issue of the change of Grantham Hospital's remit to a Covid-19 Urgent Treatment Centre. He informed the committee that this issue would be raised at an upcoming meeting of Extraordinary Council for debate. He spoke of the importance of Grantham A&E (Accident and Emergency) and noted that it had been closed overnight for 4 years on a temporary basis. It was questioned if the maternity wing could have been used as the Urgent Treatment Centre at an earlier meeting of Lincolnshire County Council's Health Scrutiny Committee. Members shared their concerns of their dwindling hopes for a return of an A&E Department at Grantham Hospital. Members expressed their ongoing support for the essential provision that Grantham Hospital provided and re-iterated the need to keep campaigning to re-open the A&E department.

57. Close of meeting

The meeting closed at 15:25.