

# Meeting of the Rural and Communities Overview and Scrutiny Committee



SOUTH  
KESTEVEN  
DISTRICT  
COUNCIL

Thursday, 10 September 2020,  
1.00 pm

Meeting held virtually, via Skype

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## Committee Members present

Councillor Ray Wooten (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

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

## Officers

Senior Housing and Policy Strategy Officer  
Community Engagement and Policy Development Officer  
Assistant Chief Executive Housing Delivery  
Interim Assistant Director  
Scrutiny Officer  
Democratic Officer

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### 58. Comments from Members of the Public

There were no comments from the members of the public.

### 59. Register of attendance, membership and apologies for absence

No apologies for absence were received.

### 60. Disclosure of Interest

There were none.

### 61. Action Notes from the meeting held on 18 June 2020

The notes from the meeting held on 18 June 2020, were agreed as a correct record.

## **62. Updates from the previous meeting**

There was nothing to report.

## **63. Verbal Updates from Cabinet Members**

The Cabinet Member for Communities delivered updates on the following subjects to the Committee.

### Covid-19

As of 6 September 2020, a further 18 cases of Covid-19 had been reported in the District; 10 more cases than the previous week. There had unfortunately been a total of 471 cases within the District and tragically 72 Covid-19 related deaths.

Residents were urged to continue to wash their hands, wear masks and remain socially distant from those outside their own households. The Government had announced that as of 14 September 2020, groups larger than 6 made up of more than 1 household were no longer permitted to meet. This reflected a change to the current guidance in respect of group sizes that were permitted to meet whilst taking the necessary precautions.

The Council were continuing to promote the safety precautions set out by the Government to residents, by its social media channels.

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

### Traveller Community

- The location of a Traveller site was on land owned by the Council, held within the HRA.
- The land represented a potential future development opportunity which was in very close proximity to established social housing, which included flats, houses and properties where previous tenants had exercised their Right to Buy.
- The Traveller site had been established for several months now and had involved the Council completing social assessment needs, as the traveller occupants included vulnerable adults.
- Housing assessments had also been completed and offers of accommodation had been previously made, but they had been refused by the Travellers.

- Legal preparation was now well advanced, Counsel had been instructed and the Council was seeking a court judgement to secure the removal of the Travellers.
- Continued complaints from residents were still being received. Horses which belonged to the travellers were regularly tethered and grazed on land adjacent to a children's play area, close to the traveller site.
- Final updating of statements from officers, photographic evidence, and site plan identification relating to the submission of evidence to Counsel would be completed the week commencing 14 September 2020 September. Securing of a court date would follow shortly after. Full legal costs through to court were difficult to assess at that time, it would depend on total Counsel time involved, but were likely to be in the region of £10,000.
- Plans to secure the traveller site and the land enclosing the play area were being finalised. It would involve hard barrier arrangements; costs were estimated at around £10,000.

#### Disabled Facilities Grant

- All contractors were now undertaking works on site with appropriate Covid-19 secure measures in place to protect them and residents, prior to attending and whilst they were on site.
- Some delays were experienced as contractors had backlogs of work due to Covid-19, additional controls meant that some jobs were taking longer to complete.
- Several jobs were still on hold, which was at the clients' request, due to shielding or other vulnerabilities.
- External works such as ramps continued where possible during lockdown. This was alongside works which were considered essential to the health and safety of the occupant, where it could have been carried out safely. Applications continued to be processed, where it was possible, ready for surveyor visits and contractors to commence works when lockdown was lifted. This meant that 37 adaptations had now been completed since 1 April 2020.
- It was noted some properties required more than one adaptation. The adaptations completed were as follows:
  - 2 heating
  - 16 stairlifts
  - 9 level access showers

- 11 ramps
  - 1 garage conversion
  - 6 other
- New occupational therapy recommendations were being advised of, as they had returned to undertaking assessments.

#### Housing Maintenance Service

- A full review of the day to day maintenance and improvements works services was due to be undertaken. An improvement plan, which included objectives alongside other improvement and change activity for Housing, would be presented to Cabinet in due course.
- The current service continued to emerge from the impacts of the Covid-19 pandemic. Maintenance activity had increased and more flexibility was introduced into day to day activities. Maintenance activity remained under review, as the Government reacted to increasing cases of the virus.
- Phase 2 of backlog repairs activity continued; this involved working on internal repairs for up to 4 hours in tenant properties.
- There were still significant supply chain issues impacting the service, particularly where materials were being ordered. The furlough of key staff by contractors contributed to delays.
- Plans were still being prepared to move to phase 3 repairs activity, subject to changing restrictions.
- Up to the end of July, some 2643 emergency jobs had been completed since lockdown. Some slowdown in work activity occurred in August, this was due to more operatives taking their summer holiday break.
- Current level of complaints associated with the service were still increasing, the current backlog of jobs outstanding totalled 1,916.

#### **64. Equality Annual Position Statement**

The Cabinet member for Communities introduced the report, presenting the Equality and Diversity Annual Position Statement 2020. The Councillor requested that members consider the contents of the report and make comments, prior to its publication.

The author of the report, Community Engagement and Policy Development Officer was introduced to the Committee and presented the contents of the Annual Statement.

The Equality Act 2010, section 149, imposed a duty on public sector organisations, to have due regard to:

- Eliminate discrimination, harassment and victimisation
- Advance opportunities for people who shared protected characteristics and those who didn't.
- Foster good relations between those who shared a protected characteristic and those that didn't.

These were known as the three aims of the Equality Duty.

In addition, there were two more specific duties placed on public sector organisations, which were to:

- Publish information to show compliance with the Equality Duty, at least annually
- Set and publish equality objectives, at least every four years.

The publication was to provide information which showed due regard had been given to the three aims of the Equality Duty and included demographic information, broken down by protected characteristic, of the district and SKDC's workforce.

The Annual Position Statement, which was found at Appendix A of the report, included the latest Equality Objectives which covered the period 2020 – 2024. An action plan had been developed which would ensure that the Authority delivered the required outcomes. All services areas were required to feed in and help deliver those objectives.

Whilst producing the Annual Statement members and officers were able to identify areas of underrepresentation in the Authority's workforce. The Statement would help improve awareness of equality responsibilities and further embed those within the workforce.

Members highlighted an additional word within the Statement and asked if the references to the different religions could appear in a more consistent format.

The Committee queried why there was such a high percentage of officers who had not provided information relating to their protected characteristics as part of equality and diversity monitoring. Members were concerned that perhaps they were not provided the opportunity to give that information. The Community Engagement and Policy Development Officer advised that the level of information an individual gave in relation to their sexuality, religion etc. was provided on a voluntary basis and there was no obligation to divulge it. All officers were asked as part of equality and diversity monitoring, however

the data showed that there was a high number who did not wish to share that information.

Members asked if there was to be further opportunity to undertake further equality and diversity training, as they felt what was received in the past had been beneficial. It was also felt that this type of training should be mandatory for all elected members. It was advised that there was no mechanism to mandate members to undergo equality and diversity training. Members Services created the training schedule and the relevant officers would be able to advise when further training was planned.

It was discussed that the constitution was currently being reviewed and members asked if the review could also look at the wording for Equality and Diversity Training and its requirements for members to undertake it. It was appreciated that whilst it was not an area that could be mandated, specific wording could perhaps be used to stress its importance.

## **ACTION**

**That the Cabinet Member for Communities ask the Constitution Committee to consider as part of its work in reviewing the Constitution the wording around the requirement for members to undertake Equality and Diversity Training.**

There were concerns that the data used to form the Statement, in relation to the population was based on the 2011 Census. It was felt that the information was out of date and that the makeup of the population within South Kesteven may have changed quite considerably in that time. It was unfortunate and frustrating that the information available was largely based on Mid-Year Population Estimates provided by the Office for National Statistics and based on the 2011 Census, however that was what was available to compile the data for the Statement and its use was standard practise. Data would not be comprehensively updated until after the next Census in 2021 and some information would not be available until 2-3 years after it had taken place.

The Chairman asked if there were any officer groups within the council that supported those groups within the Equality Act 2010, that had one or more protected characteristics. There were no groups at that time, however it would be beneficial for officers to have the opportunity to join a group that supported those with protected characteristics. A single group, rather than one per characteristic would be beneficial, as all individuals were protected under at least five of the nine characteristics represented in the Act.

## **ACTION**

**Members were in support of the Annual Statement and requested that comments made as part of the discussion be captured, prior to its publication.**

## **65. Feedback from the Workshop to Explore Future Working with the Voluntary and Community Sector**

A working group met on 27 July 2020 and held a workshop which discussed the Council's current involvement with the voluntary and community sector. The membership of the working group included; members of the Rural and Communities Overview and Scrutiny Committee, the Cabinet Member for Communities and relevant officers.

The workshop covered five topics:

- Councillors – considering the important role Members play
- Conversation and Communication
- Working together
- Celebrating Community Heroes; and
- Grants and Funding Pots.

As the next item to be considered by members at the meeting was a report regarding Grants and Funding Pots, verbal feedback on the other 4 topics would be provided.

Feedback from members on the first item had related specifically to the South Kesteven Community Hub and the support provided to communities by the Council and its voluntary and community sector colleagues during lockdown. Members felt the Community Hub had been invaluable during the Covid-19 pandemic and the fact that information had been sent to vulnerable residents at the start of lockdown had ensured residents were aware of how they could get in touch with the Council and what assistance and support was available to them.

Under topic two Members had discussed the introduction of a voluntary and community sector forum. Members were asked if it was more important to focus on County wide groups or more local ones. It was agreed that local groups should be the focus and that a database of local groups should be compiled.

Members also discussed whether the introduction of an e-newsletter would provide an important link to communities. Members agreed this would be a useful tool but also advocated the use of already established communications such as SK Today and parish newsletters to spread the word. It was noted that the website required updating and much of the information needed streamlining so that it was more consistent.

When exploring innovative ways to integrate the delivery of services between the Council and the voluntary and community sector Members provided the following insights:

- The Council should look to groups such as Rotary and Lions clubs for the larger projects that offer volunteering opportunities. These groups were keen to be involved in larger community projects
- Volunteers should never be seen as a money saving scheme to use volunteers to deliver Council services
- Volunteering provides mutual benefit; we can all gain a lot from the process.
- Volunteering has a positive impact on community spirit, mental health and wellbeing
- Volunteering can lead to employment. Employers look favourably on people who volunteer as it shows local interest. The Council should consider providing volunteers with certificates to prove their involvement

Members were reminded that the work of local volunteers had been acknowledged with certificates of appreciation during Volunteer Week 2020. The workshop considered how volunteers could feel more welcomed and appreciated. It was noted that volunteers did not enjoy being called 'Heroes' and much preferred the term 'Champion'. The Grantham Journal Business Awards could potentially include an award which showed appreciation for the work of volunteers, or the Council could consider sponsoring a Chairman's award to cover the wider District.

The Chairman thanked those members who took part in the workshop and noted that the overview provided some interesting points.

## **66. Review of Community Funding**

The Cabinet Member for Communities supported by the Community Engagement and Policy Development Officer presented a report to Members which provided a review of existing community funding streams. There were currently three funding streams, which directly supported voluntary and community groups:

- SK Community Fund: annual funding pot of £100,000 from 2020/21 - this was open to applications from constituted community groups for capital projects and events. Awards were determined by a panel of elected Members, based on agreed criteria
- Ward Member Scheme: annual funding pot – originally set at £26,000 for 2020/21 but increased to £56,000 as a direct response to the Covid-19 outbreak. Awards were determined by individual elected Members; and

- Foodbank Support Fund 2020/2: one-off support fund of £15,000 for Foodbanks located within South Kesteven. Via the completion of a simple form, Foodbanks could access the fund which would support their operation in any way required and for any amount, whilst there was still budget remaining.

In addition to the three funding streams there was LotterySK, which provided a platform for groups to raise money through lottery ticket sales. 60p of every ticket sale went to support local voluntary and community groups. From each £1.00 ticket purchased, the group that the purchaser wished to support would receive 50p and the SK Community Fund would receive 10p. If no group was specified, then 60p would be allocated to the SK Community Fund.

It was the purpose of the report to focus specifically on the SK Community Fund and discuss its operation and impact. Members of the working group were asked to propose amendments to its criteria.

Background of the fund was provided to the Committee. The fund was established in 2015 and until March 2020 was administrated as part of a Service Level Agreement by Lincolnshire Community and Voluntary Service. The Fund was now managed directly by the Authority.

It was highlighted to members the types of projects that the fund supported and the level of grants which they were eligible to receive. The level of funding enabled applicants to seek up to 80% of the cost of their project. Since the introduction of the fund, 18 funding rounds had taken place and it had supported 93 capital projects and events.

As the agreement between South Kesteven District Council and Lincolnshire Community Voluntary Service had come to an end, alongside a reduction in the funding pot from £150,000 to £100,000, a sensible point to review the criteria of the fund had been identified. It was important that the fund continued to meet the needs of the community and the priorities of the Council.

Due to the impact of Covid-19, the review, which had been scheduled for March 2020, could not take place. At this point the fund had been temporarily closed to applications, until the necessary changes were able to take place.

Covid-19 had a significant impact on communities, both financially and emotionally. The proposals set out within the report were intended to strengthen the connection with the community groups. The proposed amendments were also intended to make the fund fit better with identified needs in local communities, supporting the constituted groups across the District.

Proposed changes to the criteria of the SK Community Fund, which required the Committee's recommendation to Cabinet, were as follows.

- All applications would qualify for a grant up to £5,000 towards the cost of their project or event, which aligned all the different categories that qualified to apply
- Introduction of a new category which supported projects that addressed mental health, social and rural isolation and loneliness
- The claim period for awards to be reduced from two years to one, which provided parity with the budget processes
- The removal of parish and town councils from the eligibility criteria, as they had alternative means of raising revenue, such as the Town and Parish Precept.

Members were further asked to consider and make recommendations on the future operation of the Fund for 2021/22 onwards, based on the following options:

- To maintain the status quo, leaving the fund open to all eligible groups
- In the first year ringfence 20% of the Fund for applications relating to mental health and wellbeing, loneliness and isolation
- Increase focus on areas of priority and introduce a weighting mechanism for individual applications to score higher if the focus was on those priority areas

The Council was currently working in collaboration with the Lincolnshire Community Foundation (LCF). This was to raise funds via a Total Giving crowd funding initiative to support local groups, as a direct response to the Covid-19 crisis. The Council would undergo further exploration with LCF of options of a mutual benefit and would seek support to enter into an agreement if a suitable option was found.

It was highlighted to Members that a single grant register had been established, which was to reduce the risk of groups receiving double funding. SK Community Fund, Foodbank Support Fund and Ward Member Grant Scheme therefore could not unknowingly give grants to the same initiatives.

Members asked if many groups had applied for a £10,000 grant and if the maximum funds available were reduced to £5,000 what impact would it have. It was advised that recent figures showed 24 applications were received requesting £5,000 - £10,000, only four of which requested the full £10,000. Reducing the maximum grant would have the potential to assist more groups. The grants were to be applied for as 'match funding' and were not intended to cover the whole cost of any project.

Concern was expressed about smaller groups within the district, which perhaps did not have a constitution and few members to help support them. The Officer advised that should this be the case; the Council would be able to offer them advice on other routes they may take to receive funding or signpost them to support to put the appropriate governance in place. There were also funds available to ward members, who could use their own budgets to support those smaller groups.

It was queried if the reduction in maximum grant was introduced, would it reduce the application time and would groups receive grants sooner. As the administration of the fund had been brought back 'in house', this would considerably reduce the administration time, as information was not needed to be shared between organisations.

## **ACTION**

**It was proposed and seconded that option 3 was the most favourable for the future operation of the fund in 2021/22, with priority areas receiving the fund's focus. Members unanimously agreed with the recommendations set out in the report.**

### **67. Lincolnshire Homelessness Strategy Review and the Impact of the Homelessness Reduction Act: SKDC perspective**

Members considered the report of the Cabinet Member for Housing and Planning on a review of the Lincolnshire Homelessness Strategy and the Impact of the Homelessness Reduction Act (2017).

It had been two years since the Homelessness Reduction Act (2017) came into force in England, on 3 April 2018. There were three main changes, which were:

- The definition of homelessness had changed from being threatened with homelessness within 28 days to 56 days
- The introduction of prevention and relief 'duties' rather than 'powers'
- New 'duty to refer', which required certain statutory agencies to refer homeless and potentially homeless people to housing authorities (this was introduced in October 2018)

The Local Government Information Unit (LGUI) report 'The Homelessness Reduction Act: is it making a difference?', was published on 7 May 2020. It incorporated findings from two reports: "[A Foot in the Door](#)" by Crisis and "[Caught in the Act](#)" by Shelter. The main findings were:

- People were more likely to receive personal assistance from local authorities, especially single adults

- Councils helped about two in five households to resolve their homelessness problem
- Just one in five households assisted through the prevention duty end up staying in their existing home
- 'Digital gatekeeping' and other barriers existed at some local authorities
- Personalised plans were too general and not always followed up by councils
- The duty to refer was having limited success but did not include enough public bodies

The report stated how the Ministry of Housing, Communities & Local Government (MHCLG) showed figures relating to the national homelessness picture, including the causes of homelessness. Members were also provided with the SKDC comparison.

It was important to look at how implementation of the Act could be improved, both Shelter and Crisis were adamant that the solution to homelessness did not lie in better legislation. Councils had made better use of their discretionary housing payments, to help those with rent problems or negotiate with landlords on the tenant's behalf. Many customers wanted to be seen by a housing officer in person, rather than via the telephone or online.

The introduction of a statutory code of practice which provided a clear and enforceable set of standards for local authorities would hopefully improve standards nationwide. Better partnership working, which included the duty to refer across other bodies and increasing awareness of their obligations under the Act would also contribute to reducing homelessness.

In 2017 the MHCLG provided councils in England with £73,000,000 in funding over three years, as part of 'New Burdens' funding. It was felt that this was not sufficient by many local authorities. South Kesteven District Council had received £27,536 in New Burdens Funding.

South Kesteven was part of a countywide Lincolnshire Homelessness Strategy (2017 – 2021) and the report highlighted several achievements made as a part of the Strategy. In addition to this South Kesteven was also part of the Lincolnshire Rough Sleeping Strategy (2019 – 2021), a countywide action plan was to be drawn up to tackle the challenges identified by the Strategy.

The MHCLG had advertised an opportunity to bid for a Rough Sleeper Initiative. South Kesteven had submitted a bid, as the District had experienced a significantly increased number of rough sleepers. This increase was also apparent in neighbouring Districts and the bid was

submitted in partnership with; North Kesteven DC, South Holland DC and West Lindsey DC. An award of £595,523 was received. The funds were to be used to establish several new posts across the authorities and other funding pots to help with the Rent Guarantee Scheme, Enhanced Bond Payments, Emergency Access Accommodation and Funding for Rough Sleeper Support.

Members were concerned about the considerable increase in the numbers of homeless people across the District. The Senior Housing and Policy Strategy Officer explained to members that there was now better recording and with the increase in figures for the definition of homeless, this was then reflected in much higher figures.

It was queried whether empty private rented households were utilised to help ensure there was sufficient accommodation. Members were advised that there was no longer dedicated support for that area, so officers were unsure of its current status. Council owned housing stock had been better utilised for temporary accommodation.

Some members were concerned that the figures were not reflective of the current number of rough sleepers for each town and they feared that it was much higher. Officers explained that the figures were gathered at a single point in time. Some rough sleepers did so intermittently and may have been off the streets that night. If a rough sleeper was identified they should be reported, the outreach team would try to contact them within 72 hours. Unfortunately, the team were not always able to make contact immediately as often the rough sleeper may have moved on, but the team would keep trying until they were able to do so.

Members asked if unused office buildings had been considered to create more accommodation. A property had been purchased with the potential to convert it into 1-bedroom flats, to be used as temporary accommodation.

There were concerns that some rough sleepers perhaps may not wish to be assisted by the Council, members asked officers if that was an issue within South Kesteven. The "Everyone In" campaign as part of the Covid-19 Government measures had seen only 1 long standing rough sleeper refusing assistance.

It was noted by members that other neighbouring authorities had specific officers whose remit was dedicated to helping rough sleepers, there was concern as to why South Kesteven did not have that resource. South Kesteven did have a rough sleeping outreach team, the current contract was held by P3 charity. The funding received was part of the successful MHCLG Rough Sleeping Initiative Year 3 funding, awarded to South Kesteven and neighbouring authorities, it would be used to recruit new officers to cover that remit and the prevention of homelessness.

## **ACTION**

**Members noted the content of the report and requested that officers' feedback the Committees comments to the relevant officers and Lincolnshire County Council.**

### **68. Work Programme**

The Committee noted the contents of the Work Programme.

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

The Chairman had no further business to discuss.

### **70. Close of meeting**

The meeting closed at 15:27.