

Action Notes

Rural and Communities Overview and Scrutiny Committee

Thursday, 7 October 2021, 14:00

Council Chamber, South Kesteven
House, St. Peter's Hill, Grantham.
NG31 6PZ



SOUTH
KESTEVEN
DISTRICT
COUNCIL

Committee Members:

Councillor Ray Wootten (Chairman)
Councillor Sarah Trotter (Vice-Chairman)

Councillor Philip Knowles
Councillor Hilary Westropp
Councillor Amanda Wheeler

Members in attendance:

Councillor Jacky Smith

Cabinet Members in attendance:

Councillor Robert Reid (Cabinet Member for Housing and Property)

Officers in attendance:

Andrew Cotton (Director of Housing and Property)
Ken Lyon (Assistant Chief Executive)
Anne-Marie Coulthard (Assistant Director, Operations and Public Protection)
Carol Drury (Senior Community Development Officer)
Amy Pryde (Democratic Services Officer)

15. Comments from Members of the Public

There were none.

16. Apologies for absence

Apologies for absence were received from Councillor Rosemary Kaberry-Brown.

17. Disclosure of Interest

There were none.

18. Action Notes from the meeting held on 1 July 2021

Members considered the Action Notes of the meeting held on 1 July 2021. It was proposed, seconded and **AGREED** that the action notes were a true and accurate record on the basis that further information was included on agenda item 8, Housing Service Assisted Garden Maintenance Scheme.

19. Updates from previous meeting

The Chairman noted that there would be an update on the Housing Garden Scheme, at a later date.

One Member raised a concern about the time frame for the Committee to receive statistics on the Assisted Garden Scheme; hourly charges, number of gardens and cost of overheads which had been asked for in July 2021.

The Cabinet Member for Housing and Property apologised for the delay in disclosing the information. He stated that the Housing Service had ongoing pressures due to staffing difficulties and that the information relating to the Assisted Garden Scheme was not a priority. The Committee were assured that this information would be provided by the end of October 2021.

The Cabinet Member for Housing and Property also stated that due to the Stock Condition Survey that the Housing Revenue Accounts Budget would not be supplied at the same time as the General Fund Budget, but would be several weeks later.

The Member who had raised that concern acknowledged that the information would be circulated to him and the Committee by the end of October 2021.

ACTION 1

Committee to receive statistics on the Assisted Garden Scheme; hourly charges, number of gardens and cost of overheads.

20. Compliance update

The Director for Housing and Property presented the report which outlined the compliance issues within the Housing Service.

Members' attention was drawn to various sections of the report: meetings with the Regulator; the implementation plan. The Earlesfield Estate Action Plan; Sheltered Housing improvements; and Regulator's Customer Regulation Review.

A query was raised regarding how long the Fire Risk Assessments had taken to complete and if there were any unexpected circumstances discovered during the Assessments. The Director confirmed that the Fire Risk Assessments had been rolled out at the beginning of the year. The focus had been on blocks of flats and he confirmed 100% completion, over a 12-week period. The Director highlighted findings within the fire assessments, he was pleased to confirm that the Council's 'in-house'

work force had now been trained on the replacement of fire doors which would help address issues going forward. The Director for Housing and Property stated that the Regulator was satisfied with the Council's approach.

Members discussed the report as follows:

- Would the new IT system be available for tenant feedback and if it would be live by the end of October 2021?

The Director confirmed that the system would be up and running by the end of October 2021. Reference was made to the Government White Paper, that had recently been published, in the Charter for Social Housing Tenants. It was important to listen to tenants and take their views into account. South Kesteven District Council would be the first local authority to use the "Rant and Rave" software which was already used widely by housing associations.

- Lack of Stock Condition Surveys. The last Survey had been carried out in 2009. A Member asked if the whole of the stock review would be ready later in 2021 or just 20%.

The Cabinet Member for Housing and Property expressed disappointment at how the issue had been addressed in the past. He stated that the preliminary findings would be available by the end of October 2021. The findings would be used to build next year's budget and was one of the reasons that the Housing Revenue Account budget would be delayed in December. It was confirmed that the survey was 100% of all Council housing stock.

- Housing budget for 2021/22 and how numbers had been reached in relation to the housing stock and this was less than satisfactory performance of the housing service and this had not previously been picked up by Scrutiny.

The Chairman of the Committee stated that they would be carrying out a thorough scrutiny review and that all evidence would be considered.

The Cabinet Member for Housing and Property stated that he understood Members' ongoing concern. A culture shift was being supported within the teams and remedial work was being prioritised with more complicated work being outsourced. Recruitment was being carried out to get more skilled labour, also forward ordering and planning for supplies had been undertaken.

The Chairman stated that if any Member had any concerns to raise it with him or the relevant officer.

- Members suggested that a designated email address, was set up for Member enquiries only and that Members be given a reference number.
- It was confirmed that a general inbox for Member enquiries was available and was being monitored by officers, who had access.

The Cabinet Member for Housing and Property stated that although a single point of contact for Members to make enquiries and complaints had been put in place, the Officer was currently not available, however a temporary officer appointment would be made.

The Cabinet Member for Housing and Property gave a brief overview of the current position of void properties. It was noted that Void Management would remain a key area of operational focus and that immediate changes were being introduced to assist in turn-around times.

AGREED:

- 1. To note the latest compliance position following the ongoing meetings with the Regulator of Social Housing.**
- 2. To receive a further update report at its next scheduled meeting**

21. Empty Homes Strategy

The Cabinet Member for Housing and Property presented the report on a draft Empty Homes Strategy which outlined the clear commitment in the Corporate Plan to reduce the number of empty homes within the district. It was noted that the number of empty homes in the district was comparatively low.

A clear strategic framework was needed to provide clarity to Members and residents of the district in terms of the Council's approach to empty homes.

The Chairman stated that it was important that the right tenants were in the right homes, everyone was important, but tenants needed to be made aware of what their responsibilities were in respect of house before occupation.

The Empty Homes Strategy was welcomed by Members, it was hoped that the figure of 24 empty homes which had remained empty for 10 years, be reduced.

It was highlighted that the Housing team would be looking into a 'test case' of a house that had been empty for 10 years and the options putting it back into use. It was confirmed that the details following the 'test case' would be brought to the Committee.

The recommendations were proposed, seconded and **AGREED**.

AGREED:

- 1. Noted and discuss the content of the report and the draft strategy.**
- 2. Provided comment and suggestion in relation to the strategic approach.**

RECOMMENDATION:

To recommend that further work is undertaken to submit an Empty Homes Strategy for Cabinet consideration.

22. Equality Annual Report

The Senior Community Development Officer presented the report on the Equality and Diversity Annual Position Statement. The document was produced in accordance with the Council's legal duties under the Equality Act 2010 and included the Council's specific information relating to the Corporate Plan, showing corporate commitment to equality and diversity.

The report highlighted the background of the Council's responsibility under the public sector equality duty and the Council's equality objectives. To date, nearly 40% of the objectives in the Action Plan had been met and the Key Performance Indicators required that 50% were met by March 2022. The Position Statement also gave a profile of the district and demographics of the wider community across South Kesteven and the workforce profile, as required by law.

A query was raised in regard to the number residents living within the district who were of different nationalities. The evidence from community information showed that there had been an increase of population of Nigerian and Indian nationals living within the district.

The Jubilee Church Life Centre in Grantham had re-started their free English language lessons every week and the Centre intended on hosting their Celebrating the Nations event this year. The Chairman requested that the officer consults the Jubilee Church Life Centre to ask them to invite the Committee to this year's event.

One member noted that a diversity festival had previously taken place in Stamford and had been supported by officers from South Kesteven District Council as well as funding of £5000 from a community grant.

The Chairman raised a query regarding the 'chat café' and if any money was provided from the government to progress this. The officer confirmed that the Jubilee Church Life Centre had gained funding through alternative sources to host the 'chat café' 3 days a week, 1 day which is focused on mental health. The officer emphasised that these sessions are available to all in the community.

ACTION 2

That the Jubilee Church Life Centre be contacted and discuss the possibility of the Committee being invited to the annual Celebrate the Nations event.

The recommendation was **AGREED** by the Committee.

AGREED:

Noted and recommended the Equality and Diversity Annual Position Statement 2021 for publication.

23. Disabled Facilities Grants

The Cabinet Member for Housing and Property presented the report which outlined the delivery of the Council's Disabled Facilities Grant programme during 2020/21.

The outturn for the first 6 months included 31 Occupational Therapy recommendations during the first quarter, only 5 of these did not progress. In the second quarter there were 23 recommendations, 1 was not progressing. 56 grants had been approved since the beginning of April 2021. 46 adaptations had been completed since 1 April 2021, which included a variety of assistances such as stair lifts, level access showers, level access ramps and wash/dry toilets. The current expenditure, commitment and accruals stood at £678,000 against a budget of £975,000. There were currently 20 adaptations in progress.

Members raised the following:

- The Chairman raised a query regarding a limit for contribution.

The Assistant Director for Operations and Public Protection confirmed that the maximum grant entitlement for a mandatory disabled facilities grant which is means tested was £30,000. It was highlighted that the majority of requests were received by community Occupational Therapists for people already living in their homes, however that part of the Council's discretionary policy did allow an expedited grant to assist people who had recently left hospital.

The Assistant Director clarified that the Disabled Facilities Grant did not apply to the Council's HRA properties. HRA properties were under their own specific scheme.

- Eligibility of the Disabled Facilities Grant was queried if it was available for people with mental health issues.
- The Assistant Director confirmed that if the condition met the definition of a disability, following an assessment from an Occupational Therapist, then a recommendation would be made to the Council, if appropriate.

The Committee **AGREED** the recommendation.

AGREED:

The Committee noted the outcome on the delivery of the Council's Disabled Facilities Grant programme during 2020/21.

24. Updates – People and Safer Communities

The Assistant Chief Executive provided a brief update on the progress within the People and Safer Communities portfolio, on behalf of the Cabinet Member.

The Safeguarding report had been reviewed and supported by Governance and Audit Committee.

The Council had received a green rating following the Children's Section 11 audit and had been identified as a best practice Council.

25. Work Programme 2021 - 2022

Members requested that feedback be provided regarding the Breathing Space Policy and Empty Homes and Voids Strategies, at the December 2021 meeting.

The Cabinet Member for Housing and Property confirmed that information regarding Council House New Builds would be brought to the February 2022 meeting of the Committee.

ACTION 3

Update on Breathing Space Policy and Empty Homes and Voids Strategies be added to the Work Programme, to be considered at the 9 December meeting.

ACTION 4

Update on Council House New Builds be added to the Work Programme, to be considered at the 17 February meeting.

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

The Chairman provided a link to Members regarding the Lincolnshire Acute Service Review which would be available until December 2021. Every household in the County would receive notification regarding changes to the following services:

- Orthopaedic services in Lincolnshire
- Urgent emergency care in Grantham
- Acute medical beds in Grantham
- Stroke services across Lincolnshire.

The Chairman highlighted that the link included information on a consultation meeting on 14 October at Grantham Jubilee Centre at 6:30pm.

27. Close of meeting

The Chairman closed the meeting at 15:40.

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