

Meeting of the Housing Overview and Scrutiny Committee



SOUTH
KESTEVEN
DISTRICT
COUNCIL

Thursday, 21 September 2023, 3.00
pm

Committee Members present

Councillor Virginia Moran (Chairman)
Councillor Lee Steptoe (Vice-Chairman)
Councillor Emma Baker
Councillor Zoe Lane
Councillor Penny Milnes
Councillor Habibur Rahman
Councillor Charmaine Morgan

Other Members present

Councillor Richard Dixon-Warren
Councillor Tim Harrison
Councillor Ian Selby

Cabinet Members

Councillor Ashley Baxter, Deputy Leader
Councillor Phil Dilks, Cabinet Member for Housing and Planning
Councillor Rhea Rayside, Cabinet Member for People and Communities

Officers

Craig Spence, Acting Director of Housing
Jodie Archer, Head of Housing
Julie Martin, Head of Technical Services
Ayeisha Kirkham, Interim Head of Public Protection
Tom Amblin-Lightowler, Private Sector Housing Team Leader
Lucy Bonshor, Democratic Officer

14. Public Speaking

There were no public speakers.

15. Apologies for absence

Apologies for absence were received from Councillor Jane Wood, Councillor Paul Wood and Councillor Anna Kelly. Councillor Anna Kelly was substituted by Councillor Charmaine Morgan.

16. Disclosure of Interest

None disclosed.

17. Minutes of the meeting held on 13 July 2023

The minutes of the meeting held on 13 July 2023 were proposed, seconded and **AGREED.**

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

The Cabinet Member for Housing and Planning informed the Committee that there had been significant progress towards the Council's Corporate Priority of Housing that Meets the Needs of all Residents. He paid tribute to the work of the Housing Team which was led by Craig Spence, the Acting Director of Housing and highlighted the following:

- That the Council was moving towards coming out of housing special measures.
- That the Choice Based lettings system would be introduced from 23 October 2023 which allowed applicants to actively bid for properties they were interested in. Housing authorities across the country had been using the system for a number of years and work was currently being undertaken to verify the housing register. To date 780 applications had been received in the first two weeks to reapply to remain on the housing register. Residents had up until 3 October 2023 to reapply to remain on the Housing Register.
- Voids had been highlighted at the last meeting of the Committee and the time taken from a tenant leaving a property to a new tenant taking over the occupancy which was over 100 days on average. The average sector voids time was half this figure. As the Committee were aware a Voids workshop was arranged with the Acting Director of Housing and the Housing Team for Members of the Committee and any other Member interested in Voids. The workshop had enabled Members to have a better understanding of how voids were tackled and the challenges faced due to the lack of investment in the properties over a long period of time. Progress in the backlog was being made and in the last three months more properties had been let than had been received back. In the last month over 30 voids had been relet which was the best turnaround since February 2022. He referred to the Chairman's plans to hold future workshop/briefings on housing issues and challenges.

Under the Right to Buy scheme, between 40 and 50 homes were lost from the housing stock a year. This had diminished the housing stock as they were not been replaced with either new builds or purchases. At the last Cabinet meeting steps had been taken to make £1 million from the Housing Revenue Account (HRA) available, to purchase suitable homes as they became available. Progress on new build projects was also being made, with building work starting next month on four, one bed apartments in Stamford and also 20 new homes in Swinegate, Grantham.

- Reference was then made to the closure of the Urban Hotel in Grantham and its use as temporary accommodation for 290 Afghan refugees. The Housing Team had worked closely with colleagues from Lincolnshire County Council and had successfully secured alternative accommodation for the refugees, outside the district, mainly in the Birmingham area. Work by the dedicated Officer and the team involved had been recognised by the Home Office.
- The Local Authority Housing Fund Initiative from the Government had been utilised to purchase 21 houses to meet the Council's obligations to house Ukrainian's and Afghans who had been invited by the Government to seek refuge in this country. The Housing Team were asked to identify suitable properties and 12 newly built homes were purchased in Langtoft. News of the purchase had not been universally welcomed in Langtoft and a public meeting was arranged in Langtoft to which the Acting Director of Housing, the Deputy Leader, the Chairman of the Housing OSC and the Cabinet Member for Housing and Planning attended. It was explained how the purchases had come about and questions were answered. The following week a letter was sent by the Council to every property in Langtoft explaining the reasoning and the funding behind the homes. The Cabinet Member for Housing and Planning made it clear that the purchases were completed in line with well-established processes and procedures of the Council. An assurance was given at the public meeting that an examination of the purchases and the Council's communication strategy would be carried out with a view to learning any lessons which could be used for future purchases. Discussion had taken place with the Acting Director of Housing, the Director of Growth and Culture and the Communication Team and the Cabinet Member for Housing and Planning suggested to the Chairman of the Committee that the Housing OSC add the them to their work programme.

The Chairman thanked the Cabinet Member for his presentation.

Questions were then asked about the response rate in respect of numbers on the Housing Register to which the Acting Director of Housing responded that there were 1,583 on the register, and the response rate so far was good and it was confirmed that further communication was being carried out. Concern was expressed by some Members in relation to those people who were on the register who had special needs and completion of the necessary paperwork to continue to be on the Housing Register. The Acting Director of Housing stated that this was being addressed with the right tools being put in place so that help and assistance could be accessed and given to those who needed it through the dedicated project team, whether that was by telephone calls or home visits.

The Chairman indicated that the purchase of the housing at Langtoft could be added to the Committee's work programme.

A further comment was made about the Choice Based Letting process and those vulnerable residents on the system. It was confirmed that those who couldn't access the system for any reason would receive the necessary help and guidance from the team managing the system.

19. Regulatory Compliance update

The Cabinet Member for Housing and Planning presented the report which gave an update to the Committee on the actions taken by the Council to ensure regulatory compliance of the Council's social housing landlord function. Members were aware that the Chief Executive in consultation with the then Leader and Cabinet Member for Housing and Planning self-referred the Council to the Regulator of Social Housing in February 2021 following the failure to meet legal requirements regarding checks on fire, gas and electric services were identified.

Monthly meetings had been held with the Chief Executive, the Acting Director of Housing and the National Regulator to cover issues of work in respect of the regulatory framework. Following the documents that are appended to the report and the work done by the Council, the Regulator recommended that the Council sought the formal removal of the Regulatory Notice. It was confirmed that the letter was sent by the Chief Executive to this effect. A further meeting with the Regulator was scheduled for the following week and the Cabinet Member for Housing and Planning was confident that the Council would soon be out of special measures.

The Acting Director of Housing referred Members to Appendix 1 of the report which dealt with the current compliance performance for July 2023 and was reported in August to the Regulator. The format of the report was slightly different as it was a bench marking document. The Acting Director of Housing highlighted the following:

- Five 100% compliance areas were reported in July.
- Gas compliance was at 99.13%
- Electric compliance was 90.80%, which was a huge increase from when the Council went under Notice.
- Asbestos compliance was at 100%.
- The standout item was the completion of fire risk assessments which when the Council went under Notice was below 50% it was now at 100% and this had been sustained since late 2022.

The Acting Director of Housing reiterated what the Cabinet Member for Housing and Planning had stated, that the Regulator had invited the Council to send a letter requesting the removal of the Notice and this was submitted the next day and data for the end of July had been submitted in August 2023.

The line graphs appended to the report showed the continuous improvement made, which had been reported to the Rural and Communities OSC when its remit included housing since the Council went under special measures. The work was not yet complete, but the Council should hear within the next six to eight weeks in respect of the removal of the Notice.

Members agreed with the fantastic progress that had been made and congratulated the Acting Director of Housing and his team and asked how further improvement could be made. It was stated that continuous improvement would be instilled into the work undertaken with the right tools in place to continue the positive progress.

The compliance would form part of the KPI reporting to both the Housing OSC and the Governance and Audit Committee and through the Corporate Plan.

Further discussion followed with comments being made in respect of the positive change in culture within the housing team, the consolidation of working practices being reactive and responsive to regulations such as the damp and mould, smoke and CO2 issues and incorporating them into working practices and policies without being asked too. The Acting Director of Housing informed the Committee that there would be suite of compliance policies and procedures coming forward within the next few months for adoption by Cabinet.

One Member asked how information was monitored, such as when inspection were due and what tools were in place and also whether the Council had any responsibility in respect of private landlords and their tenants. It was stated that the private sector was not strictly within the remit of the Council.

There were systems in the background such as 'propeller' which captured the information such as fire risk inspections and monitored the work and the actions required. The future asset management system and the integrated housing management system would allow for a single version of data which wasn't available two years ago.

The report also included the external audit actions in respect of policy and procedures and having the correct procedures in place to ensure they were fit for purpose. It was stated that following the Housing restructure there was a permanent dedicated team in place that monitored the information and looked to make improvements.

The Chairman stated that although going into special measures had been viewed with dismay, the work that had been undertaken by the Housing team to date had ensured that all properties were safe for the tenants and the quality of housing being offered was of a high standard.

One Member asked whether Fabric First was being used alongside the compliance areas and if it wasn't whether it should be. The Acting Director of Housing replied that one of the key deliverables between now and March 2025 was the energy efficiency upgrades across 332 properties which was being funded through the Social Housing Decarbonisation Fund (SHDF). Future legislation would not allow properties with a EPC rating below a C to be rented, therefore those current properties with a D or below rating would be targeted to ensure their energy efficiency was increased. The first strand of SHDF work would soon be undertaken and Eon would be working on behalf of the Council and the first tranche of letters would be going out within the next few weeks. Work covered would be in respect of solar panels, external wall insulation and also different heating systems.

The Technical Services Manager referred to the internal team which was having retrofit training so that the resources were inhouse for that particular knowledge and expertise. The Technical Services Manager then gave details of the proposed works with the caveat that they were subject to change. It was proposed that 149 had solar panels plus insulation to walls and lofts. 136 conversions to air source

heat pumps and 48 to external wall insulations, she reiterated that the numbers weren't fixed until the properties had been surveyed.

Members noted the update.

20. HRA Capital Programme - Progress Monitoring

The Acting Director of Housing introduced the report on the HRA Capital Programme which had been requested at the last meeting of the Committee. It was stated that the figures contained within the report mirrored those that had been reported to the recent Finance and Economic Overview and Scrutiny Committee on Tuesday of that week.

The Acting Director of Housing referred Members to the sizable variances shown within Table 12, (*the table should read Table 2*) of the report and the significant underspend. He then went through each line of the table.

- Heating and Ventilation – work was to be delivered through the Social Housing Decarbonisation Fund and was due to go live imminently and would increase the spend on this item and carried forward until May 2025.
- Housing System Enhancements – Savings were due to the reduced scope of the project.
- Kitchen Refurbishments – There had been a significant spend in respect of kitchen refurbishments, the profile had been changed since the report had been compiled and it was felt that the underspend would not be near the £248,000 shown.
- Bathroom Refurbishments – same as with kitchen refurbishments and the reprofiling of the budgets.
- Passenger Lifts - It was known that eight lifts needed replacing and that there was between an eight and nine month lead in time. Two were in progress at the present time at Riverside and were near completion. The bulk of the underspend would be committed before the year end or would form a further carry forward.
- Re-roofing – Unfortunately the current roofing contractor had not been willing to extend the current contract for a further year and therefore procurement of a new contractor was currently being undertaken. Emergency roof repairs could still be undertaken as required.
- Re-wiring – A lot the work was built into the Earlesfield programme with approximately 110 properties as part of the programme and 160 overall. The programme was being extended due to time constraints and the money would be carried forward to the next year.
- External Wall Finishes – through work with the SHDF bid which was why the underspends seemed great at the present time. Profile work was being done under the SHDF bid.

The Capital Programme was approximately £18million for the year with a forecast underspend of £3million however, £15million was a huge investment in the housing stock compared to previous years.

The Chairman asked about the date in respect of the Riverside lift and the Technical Services Manager indicated that she would send the information to the Chairman.

➤ **Action**

Riverside lift completion date to be circulated to the Chairman.

A Member asked if it was possible to know when refurbishment work was to be carried out on properties and she specifically highlighted two areas within her ward to which the Technical Services Manager replied that it was difficult to specify, as there was then an expectation that the work would be carried out at a specific time and it was not always possible to fulfil and therefore generated complaints.

The programmes were drawn from the Apex database and the stock condition data and where people had let the surveyors into the house that information was up to date, other information may need to be qualified. The decency standard was around age and condition and the stock condition survey tended to drive the investment programmes.

Members noted the current position.

21. Earlesfield Programme update

The Cabinet Member for Housing and Planning introduced the report which updated the Committee on the current position of the Earlesfield project. Despite some early delays with the project work was progressing. There were 152 properties of a post war non-standard construction on the Earlesfield estate which contained some asbestos material. The asbestos was being removed as part of the programme with the tenants being decanted to other properties whilst the work was being carried out. Nineteen had been successfully completed with refurbishments including doors, heating, kitchens and bathrooms. In a couple of cases, the tenants had realized that the property was too big and had down sized.

Although the report stated that the Cabinet Member had visited the site, this referred to the previous portfolio holder and it was hoped that a visit to the area would be arranged soon for the current Cabinet Member. The Chairman of the Housing OSC asked if she could also attend when the visit was arranged.

The Vice-Chairman of the Committee who was also one of the Ward Councillors for the Earlesfield area, commented on the successfulness of the project and he thanked the Housing Team for their work.

22. Update following Void Workshop (Future workshops)

The Chairman referred to the Void workshop that had been held at the end of August. She felt that the afternoon had gone very well and that Members had received from the Housing team information that enabled them to understand why the void turn around could take an average of 100 days and the importance of getting the properties in the right condition before they were re-let.

Questions had been constructive and a different view had been given to that of the void paperwork generated. Although the date had been fixed before the funeral of an ex Councillor of the Council had been set and some Members were unable to attend, it was stated that depending upon numbers the Housing team were happy to re-run the event and any Member should speak to the Chairman of the Housing OSC direct.

The Chairman wished to continue to hold either a workshop or a briefing session on individual topics between meetings of the Housing OSC that were relevant to housing. The next briefing would be in respect of Homelessness and would be held on Thursday 19 October at 2pm. The briefing would be open to all Members who had an interest in the topic. She thanked the Housing team for the information and work done in respect of the voids briefing.

23. Fee Policy Licensing of Mobile Homes

The Cabinet Member for Housing and Planning presented the report which dealt with the policy in respect of fee charging for the licensing of mobile home and caravan sites. The Council was required to publish a policy if it was to charge for these sites. The Council had an existing policy and the fees were reviewed on an annual basis to reflect the true cost of the licensing process that the Council incurs in undertaking the statutory function.

The report contained a table outlining the proposed fee increase which for an annual fee increased from £81.00 to £88.00.

A question was asked in respect of the fee and who paid the fee. It was stated that the operator of the site who held the licence paid the fee.

Members noted the report and the proposed fee increase.

24. HRA Disposal & Acquisitions Policy

The Cabinet Member for Housing and Planning presented the report which concerned a new HRA Acquisitions and Disposal Policy which established a framework for the way in which the Council acquired and disposed of land or assets to and from the Housing Revenue Account. The Policy was a standard policy based on best practice and was in line with the Corporate Assets Acquisitions and Disposal Policy and gave a clear framework and transparency around the decisions taken.

The Acting Director of Housing stated that there were some assets within the HRA estate which lent themselves to disposal and the policy gave a framework to undertake this work. The disposal of assets would help to fund future development or extensive remodelling programmes within the HRA. He referred to some assets which were “resource hungry” and from a business perspective the Council wouldn’t want to keep due to their cost, but they were important or sought after properties on the open market. There were some informed decisions to make around some properties as well as small parcels of land within the HRA estate and the report sought the Committees support before the policy went to Cabinet.

Discussion on the policy followed with Members supporting the document and giving examples where the costs of keeping properties in good repair did not outweigh the benefits in terms of value for money. Reference was made to the recent news coverage of RAAC (reinforced, autoclaved aerated concrete) did the Council have any properties made from this material. It was stated that the material was not used widely in the housing sector and proactive work was being undertaken to identify any properties which may fit the criteria.

One Member made reference to including consultation within the policy with local communities in respect of land that was either a common green space or play areas to protect these areas. She felt that consultation should be undertaken with the relevant Ward Member and the public.

The Acting Director of Housing stated that these areas did not tend to be within the HRA estate, requests for land were often to enable a garden to be extended. Further discussion followed with regard to the conflict of protecting the environment and quality of life and building new homes and various examples were given by Members in relation to park areas within the district. A question was asked about Beeden Park within the Earlesfield Ward and whether it was HRA land. The Acting Director of Housing stated that if the Member could confirm the exact location, he would come back to the Member outside the meeting.

Further discussion then followed in respect of derelict garage sites. The Acting Director of Housing indicated that the garage sites were being surveyed to see what opportunities there were for development and referenced the proposed new build at Elizabeth Road, Stamford which was an old garage site. Not all sites were viable due to their location and a lot of survey work was still to be carried out, it was suggested that viable options could be brought to the Committee in the New Year.

Modular building on garage sites was then raised and it was stated that these often had high costs due to the need to redirect services to sites to enable works to be carried out which made the costs prohibitive. The use of modular building and energy efficiency was always being explored and a HRA Development Officer had recently been appointed to explore the viability and plans for sites and to explore the technology available.

One Member asked if reference could be made within the policy to the protection of green spaces which were deemed to be a community asset if disposal or buying was being considered, with consultation being carried out with relevant parties prior to making any decision. The Acting Director of Housing stated that he would add suitable wording to the policy to this effect and circulate it.

Recommendation

The Committee notes the HRA Acquisition and Disposal Policy is in line with best practice and will provide clear operational guidance and recommends that the Acting Director of Housing make alterations and amendments to the Policy to incorporate comments arising from the Committee discussion, for submission and adoption at Cabinet.

25. Work Programme 2023/24

The Chairman listed the items currently on the Work programme for the Housing OSC.

- Regulatory compliance update - November
- Choice-base lettings update - November
- Private Sector Housing Enforcement Policy - November

Future items were:

- The Private Sector Housing Assistance Policy - TBC
- Housing in Multiple Occupation Policy - TBC

The Chairman asked that the Review of the Properties purchased in Langtoft be added to the November meeting of the Committee.

Following the discussion on garage sites and their suitability for development, it was suggested that this item be added to the January meeting of the Committee.

A further update on the Earlesfield Programme was asked to be added also to the January meeting.

A short discussion on Fabric First followed and it was suggested that this could be an issue that could be discussed at one of the Housing briefings. Although the Member who suggested the item agreed with the proposal, she also wanted it to be an agenda item for January 2024, even if it was only in relation to the reporting of a KPI.

The Acting Director of Housing informed the Committee that he had a raft of policies and procedures to come before the Committee in November and they covered the Total Housing Compliance Policies and also Tenancy, Leaseholder and Estate Management Policies.

An update on the Social Housing Decarbonisation Fund (SHDF) would come to the Committee in March 2024.

➤ **Action**

Items to be included on Work Programme:

- ***Review of the Properties purchased in Langtoft – November***
- ***Total Housing Compliance Policies – November***
- ***Tenancy, Leaseholder and Estate Management Policies - November***
- ***Garage sites and their suitability for development – January 2024***
- ***Update on the Earlesfield Programme – January 2024***
- ***Fabric First – January 2024***

- ***Update on the Social Housing Decarbonisation Fund (SHDF) – March 2024.***

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

None.

27. Close of meeting

The meeting closed at 16:29.