

Meeting of the Housing Overview and Scrutiny Committee

Thursday, 6 June 2024, 2.00 pm



SOUTH
KESTEVEN
DISTRICT
COUNCIL

Committee Members present

Councillor Lee Steptoe (Chairman)
Councillor Zoe Lane (Vice-Chairman)
Councillor Matthew Bailey
Councillor Anna Kelly
Councillor Bridget Ley
Councillor Penny Milnes
Councillor Habibur Rahman
Councillor Paul Wood
Councillor Harrish Bisnauthsing

Other Members present

Councillor Tim Harrison
Councillor Phil Dilks
Councillor Virginia Moran
Councillor Rhea Rayside

Cabinet Members

Councillor Virginia Moran, Cabinet Member for Housing
Councillor Phil Dilks, Cabinet Member for Planning
Councillor Rhea Rayside, Cabinet Member for People and Communities

Officers

Karen Bradford, Chief Executive
Alison Hall-Wright, Director of Housing
Graham Watts, Assistant Director (Governance and Public Protection) and Monitoring Officer
Sarah McQueen, Housing Options Manager
Debbie Roberts, Head of Corporate Projects, Performance and Climate Change
Mark Rogers, Head of Technical Services (Housing)
Nick Thacker, Interim Head of Technical Services (Housing)
Ayeisha Kirkham, Head of Public Protection
Tom Amblin-Lightowler, Environmental Health Manager
Phil Swinton, Health, Safety and Compliance Manager
Suniel Pillai, New Build Officer
Lucy Bonshor, Democratic Officer

1. Public Speaking

A question was asked by Councillor A Bowling, Vice-Chairman of Londonthorpe and Harrowby Without Parish Council on behalf of the Parish Council in respect of the former Blessed Hugh More playing field site in Grantham and the Asset of

Community Value that appears on South Kesteven District Council Asset of Community Value Register.

“Good afternoon, I would like to ask a question on behalf of the Parish Council and their parishioners around an Asset of Community Value that appears on SKDCs ACV Register. This is the former Blessed Hugh More playing field site. In the public notes in the January meeting there is a reference to building homes on this site and we understand a meeting has been held with ward councillors in February who had no idea until that point that some detailed work had been instigated. Could the committee please explain why after years of work and financial investment by the Parish Council plus many hours of work by community volunteers there appears to be a plan to presumably remove the ACV status in 2025, remove the covenant, and take this valuable recreational area away from all the community? Could we see what is being planned and the details behind the plan? Thank You. “

The Cabinet Member for Housing thanked Mr Bowling for attending the meeting and responded to the question. She gave a brief history of the land in question. She said that the Ward Member had requested that another look at the site be undertaken and some plans drawn up. When the basic plans were shown it was not what had been envisaged and due to the demographics of the area it was suggested that only 20 bungalows be built which mirrored the street next to the land and the rest be landscaped and a play park built. The Cabinet Member for Housing was adamant that the site was not in the pipeline for development. No feasibility work had been carried out or any costs looked at especially with the Asset of Community Value and the covenants on the site. The meeting that had been held was with the Portfolio Holder at the time, the Director of Housing and the Ward Councillors. The request had been made by the Ward Councillors but it was agreed that nothing would be pursued any further.

Mr Bowling expressed concern with the potential design and location of the scheme especially with the amount of work that had been put into the site by volunteers and that it appeared that work was being done that the Parish was unaware of.

The Cabinet Member for Housing reiterated that nothing was set in stone, no feasibility work had been done on the site, no proper plans had been drawn up and no proper consultation had been carried out. Currently there were no plans to develop the site and until such time as any feasibility work was carried out to see if any kind of development was economically viable and proper consultation and plans drawn up nothing would be happening with the site. Any development would have to have majority agreement between all the parties concerned and it was not in the pipeline to be developed.

The Chairman encouraged Mr Bowling to keep in contact with the Cabinet Member for Housing via email if he had any future concerns and he thanked Mr Bowling for attending the meeting.

2. Apologies for absence

An apology for absence was received from Councillor Emma Baker and she was being substituted by Councillor Harrish Bisnauthsing.

3. Disclosure of Interest

None disclosed.

4. Minutes of the meeting held on 21 March 2024

The minutes of the meeting held on 21 March 2024 were proposed, seconded and **AGREED.**

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

There were no announcements or updates currently.

The Chairman took the opportunity to congratulate Councillor Virginia Moran, the previous Chairman of the Housing Overview and Scrutiny Committee, to her appointment as Cabinet Member for Housing.

A Member commented that a lot of the reports before the Committee were for noting and he asked what the procedure was if the Committee wished to raise further queries or comments about the items before them on the agenda.

The Chairman stated that it was within the Committee's right to make any recommendation to Cabinet or Council providing the recommendation had been proposed, seconded and agreed by the Committee.

The Director of Housing stated that items could be placed on the Cabinet Forward Plan for Cabinet and Council to consider with reports coming before the Committee to make recommendation or for review.

6. Housing Overview and Scrutiny Committee Review

The Cabinet Member for Housing gave an overview of the matters that had come before the Housing Overview and Scrutiny Committee since it had been created following the Council Annual General Meeting in May 2023. Issues that the Committee had covered included:

Policies on Housing Repairs and Maintenance, HRA Disposal and Acquisition, Total Housing Compliance, Private Sector Housing Houses of Multiple Occupation Licensing Policy, Anti-Social Behaviour, Tenancy Management, Estate Management and the Housing Allocations Policy.

Choice Based Lettings had been implemented which allowed tenants to bid on properties that suited them and enabled them to track their bid on line and see where they were placed on the property short list. The Cabinet Member for Housing stated that it was a really good system which gave tenants a realistic view of where they were when bidding on a property.

The Cabinet Member for Housing stated that at least 380 void properties had been completed during the 12 months that the Committee had been running.

Twenty-two properties had been purchased which included 21 properties funded from the Local Authority Housing Fund. Nine properties were currently being purchased, eight of which were funded from the second tranche of Local Authority Housing Fund. New build schemes were starting at Swinegate, Grantham and Elizabeth Road, Stamford which would deliver 24 more properties. Planning Permission had been granted for a development scheme at Larch Close, Grantham for 20 properties. Recent approval had been granted to purchase 36 units over the next three years at Corby Glen. The total number of properties came to 112, in the previous five years only 47 new units had been purchased or built.

The Cabinet Member for Housing then spoke about the Regulatory Compliance and listed figures for:

- Asbestos Inspections – 259 – legal requirement
- Fire Risk Assessments – 147 on blocks and schemes within communal areas – legal requirement
- Fire Prioritisation tool reports – 147 on the same blocks and schemes within communal areas
- Compartmentalisation Fire Service – 147 this was in addition to what was required under compliance regulations

The results were informing the Compartmentalisation Programme which was currently being undertaken with 50 schemes programmed for completion later in the year.

The Gas reporting position would be discussed in the Regulatory Compliance agenda item.

Twenty-six lift inspection had been carried out, two inspections per lift, Legionella inspections were on a two year cycle and this was not a reporting year. Thirty-three locations would be tested for Legionella next year.

Clarification was sought in respect of Compartmentalisation to which the Heath, Safety and Compliance Manager responded that it was connected to fire safety and looked at lofts, gaps in doors etc that could be sectioned off to prevent fire spreading and was done in addition to the legal requirements for fire risk assessments.

A question was asked about the number of properties sold under the Right to Buy (RTB) scheme during the past year to which the Director of Housing stated that 25 properties had been sold under the scheme. A further question was asked about the total number of properties sold under the RTB scheme to which the Director of Housing stated that she would have to look at what figures were held by the Council and report back to the Committee at the next meeting.

One Member asked the Cabinet Member for Housing whether or not she thought that housing was in a good position as he felt that was not the case and made reference to voids, housing repairs and projects currently being undertaken.

The Cabinet Member for Housing stated that the Housing Section was in a better position than it had been and although it was not perfect it was improving to the position that it had been in. If the Member had a specific query, then he should email her directly.

Another Member made reference to the challenges that had faced the Housing Department due to staff shortages and the lack of a director for a period of time and was encouraged that the department was in a better position than it had been.

The Chairman echoed the comments made and thanked the Officers for the work that they had done on the ground over the last 12 months.

7. Mutual Exchange Procedure

The Cabinet Member for Housing introduced the report which detailed the Mutual Exchange decision making process and outlined the circumstances in which Mutual Exchange could be refused.

It was essential that the Council had a robust procedure in place to administer Mutual Exchange applications and that staff were fully trained on the process and that a comprehensive inspection process was in place. This would ensure that the approved policy was effectively implemented and that the potential for any issues with the exchange process were mitigated.

A Tenants' rights relating to mutual exchange were listed within the Tenants' Handbook which was given to all tenants and was available on line via the Council's website. A review of the inspection checklist was completed with Technical Services to ensure that specific items were not missed. Any repairs that did not meet the standard required when inspections were carried out were the responsibility of each tenant.

The Mutual Exchange Policy and Procedure were appended to the report.

One Member sought clarity in relation to the Mutual Exchange Policy which had come to a previous meeting of the Committee and had been deferred, why had it not come back to this meeting. It was stated that the Mutual Exchange Policy had become part of the larger Tenancy Management Policy that had been approved by Cabinet at its meeting on 6 February 2024.

Members asked questions in relation to the procedure, defects to the property and tenants' responsibilities and disclaimers to which the Director of Housing responded.

Members were supportive of the document and noted the Mutual Exchange Procedure.

8. Change4Lincs (C4L) update

The Cabinet Member for Housing presented the report which gave the Committee an update on the Change4Lincs Partnership Initiative.

The Change4Lincs Partnership was an initiative set up to tackle rough sleeping across Lincolnshire for South Kesteven, North Kesteven, West Lindsey and South Holland. The initiative was launched in October 2020 and funding had been secured until March 2025, South Kesteven hosted the Initiative.

The Cabinet Member for Housing informed that the Committee that rough sleeping was increasing but this was not due to the failure of the service but due to the increase in volume of rough sleepers and this was a national trend. Going forward it was being considered whether South Kesteven remained within the Change4Lincs Partnership or separated. Currently the area covered by the Partnership was massive and it was whether having its own budget, South Kesteven could target specific areas, however, any change would come back before the Committee for consideration.

One Member asked if there was any reason that rough sleepers came to the Lincolnshire area to which the Housing Options Manager responded that there was no evidence to suggest a specific reason for the increase in rough sleepers coming to Lincolnshire, other than those issues affecting everyone nationally, such as the cost of living crisis and the decrease in rental options.

Further questions were asked in relation to the location of rough sleepers were they in more urban areas than rural, it tended to be urban areas due to the location of shops and provisions and also who managed the fund, which South Kesteven did as the host authority. There was an outreach team which covered all four districts but this was a large area and the teams went out at night and also during the day.

Another question was asked in relation to the budget and it was confirmed that the current budget would last until March 2025. There had been an overspend in respect of temporary accommodation in the past but this had now been addressed.

A further question was asked about rough sleepers and begging. It was important to note the difference between genuine rough sleepers and those giving the impression of rough sleeping, it was a challenge but work was being done with colleagues and the Neighbourhoods Team to tackle the issue and liaison did take place with local law enforcement teams.

Members thanked the Officers involved and the work that they undertook.

9. Update on the Social Housing Decarbonisation Fund wave 2.1

The Cabinet Member for Housing introduced the report which updated the Committee on the ongoing Social Housing Decarbonisation Fund. The project sought to upgrade South Kesteven District Council Housing Revenue Account dwellings with energy efficiency measures.

The Council was responsible for around 6,000 properties which had an average Energy Performance Certificate (EPC) of D. There was a requirement that Council properties were required to achieve an EPC rating of C by 2030. Wave 2.1 of the Social Housing Decarbonisation Fund was announced in 2022 by the Department of Business, Energy and Industrial Strategy. The fund was designed with the objectives listed below to support local authorities and registered social housing providers.

The key objectives of SHDF Wave 2.1 were to:

- deliver warm, energy efficient homes
- reduce carbon emissions
- tackle fuel poverty
- support green jobs
- develop the retrofit sector
- improve the comfort, health and wellbeing of social housing tenants

To date 154 measures had been completed on Phase 1 of the project which comprised the installation of 122 Solar PV arrays, 10 cavity wall extractions and re-fills, 3 loft insulation upgrades and 12 ventilation measures.

Phases 2 of the project was detailed at paragraph 2.8 of the report and Phase 3 of the project was being targeted at Turnor Crescent in Grantham as a whole street approach.

It was noted that 10 residents had refused heating upgrades to the properties and it was proposed that three engagement days would take place to which tenants would be invited to attend to discuss any concerns they had and answer any questions they may have.

Members welcomed the scheme and questions were asked in respect of the type of works carried out in respect of cavity wall insulations and the breathability of materials used to which the Interim Head of Technical Services responded that all the work had to meet the decent homes standards for the properties and ventilation of properties was always reassessed for each individual property.

Members noted the work done to date.

10. Housing Compliance Figures Report

The Cabinet Member for Housing presented the report and stated that the areas for Fire Risk Assessment, Legionella, Asbestos re-inspection and Lift Inspections remained at 100%. These focused on areas such as communal areas and areas where the tenant did not require to grant access to. Figures for May had been provided for gas and electricity and reference was made to the contractor related issues in respect of these.

Electrical figures which had stood at 92.48% had a slight drop to 91.89% in May. It was noted that the outgoing contractor had failed to engage with the Council and there was a number of properties which had not been visited which had contributed

to a backlog which the new contractor was working to reduce as quickly as possible.

The figures shown in the report appendix for Gas showed 98.9% in April, May's figure was 98% and the June figures showed 98.21%, a slight improvement. The report indicated that 91 properties were non-compliant, however, that figure now stood at 83, of which 65 were newly non-compliant. 48 of the properties had not had 3 access attempts and were therefore not eligible for capping or warrants. 18 had gone to court for warrant approval with 20 eligible to cap in the next two week subject to a vulnerability assessment being carried out to see if capping would be permitted.

The report made reference to the out going contractor, Liberty Gas and the lack of engagement which had resulted in appointments not being kept and although a number were rescheduled more than once these had not been adhered to. The new contractor was working to clear the backlog and it was hoped that the backlog would be cleared and the figures would be up to 99% in July.

Members noted the current position. One Member asked if it would be possible to have the information within a graph so that trends could be seen clearly within the data given. It was confirmed that this would be done for the September meeting.

➤ **Action Note**

That information be shown in a graph format to enable trends to be easily seen within the data provided.

The Director of Housing reassured the Committee that work in respect of gas compliance was being closely monitored and stated that 15 warrants had been obtained on Monday at court in respect of non-compliant tenants.

11. Earlesfield Grantham Project Update

The Cabinet Member for Housing introduced a regular report that the Committee received in respect of the Earlesfield Project in Grantham. To date 49 properties had been completed under Phases 1 and 2 and currently work was being carried out in respect of a further 15 properties. Appendix 1 to the report detailed the work that had been completed and the works yet to be undertaken. A new contract had been agreed with United Living from 1 April 2024 with a revised schedule of works which were clearly defined.

A dedicated Tenant Liaison Officer had been placed on site to answer tenant queries and to administer the day to day work of the project. Monthly meetings were held with the contractor to monitor the on-site work and that the project was being delivered within the timescale agreed.

A revised set of KPI's were being agreed with United Living to ensure the contractor performed satisfactorily for the remainder of the project.

The Chairman, who was one of the Ward Councillors for the area commended the project for the fantastic work that was being carried out and stated that any issues were dealt with quickly.

One Member expressed concerns about the project and made reference to problems that had been encountered early on in the project with the contractor and that the project was over budget.

The Chairman stated that with any major project there would be “bumps on the road” however he was really pleased with how the project was going and any concerns were sorted out promptly.

The Chief Executive echoed these comments and stated that things hadn't gone wrong but the quality of the sub-contracting work had been below that which had been expected which was why a meeting had been arranged with the contractor in December 2023 to clarify what was expected and that the new contract was more comprehensive in what was expected also monthly meetings were held to ensure that the quality of work was up to standard and the project was on target.

One Member on behalf of the other Ward Councillor for the area, stated that the work being undertaken was phenomenal and that the project was travelling in the right direction.

12. Build and Acquisitions Update

The Cabinet Member for Housing introduced the report which updated the Committee on the Housing Revenue Account New Build Programme and housing acquisitions made.

- Swinegate, Grantham
The demolition works had been completed and ground works were being undertaken. The additional works required in respect of the façade had meant that the project would not be completed until July 2025 and an additional £60,000 had been agreed with the contractor. Costs would be reviewed throughout the development to see if any savings could be made.
- Elizabeth Road, Stamford
Work was on target to be completed for handover in August 2024 of four one bed apartments. The Council was also in the process of purchasing a one bed house and a two-bedroom flat in Stamford to add to the housing stock.
- Larch Close, Grantham
A 21 unit development had been procured and the contract for the development would be coming to Cabinet within the next two months.
- Wellington Way, Market Deeping

Meetings were continuing to take place in respect of the proposed development area to ensure that the Scout Hut situated within the development site could continue to operate during development of the site. Once plans were agreed the procurement and planning process could be twin tracked with a possible award of a contract in October 2024.

Work was continuing to take place in respect of sites at Gorse Rise, Grantham, Bourne End Road Estate, Colsterworth and Kesteven Road, Stamford.

The Cabinet Member for Housing then made reference to the 36 units that had been purchased in Corby Glen which she spoke about during the review earlier in the agenda. It was a £6.5m investment by the Council on a variety of different sized units. It was her intention as Cabinet Member for Housing that when any new development came into the pipeline then she would speak to the Ward Councillors for the area and bring them in at the beginning of the process.

Discussion followed with comments being made in relation to unforeseen costs and the lessons that could be learnt from this, the delay in the building works at the Swinegate site and the impact on parking and loss of revenue to the Council and attractiveness of new build properties and the Right to Buy scheme after three years of tenancy. It was stated that although properties were eligible for RTB after three years there was a cost floor associated with new build properties which could be recovered up to ten years from when the property was built to enable the Council to recover costs.

The Chief Executive suggested that as there appeared to be a lot of interest with the RTB scheme and what this meant to the Council then a report should come before the September meeting of the Committee.

➤ **Action Note**

Right to Buy report to be added to the agenda for the September meeting of the Housing OSC.

13. Integrated Housing Management System Implementation Update

The Cabinet Member for Housing presented the report which updated the Committee on the implementation of the Integrated Housing Management System.

The implementation had taken place in two phases. Phase 1 of the project had also been carried out in two stages. Phase1, stage 1 had occurred on 22 January 2024 and stage 2 had taken place on 26 February 2024. The Cabinet Member for Housing referred the Committee to paragraphs 2.5 and 2.6 of the report which detailed the modules that had been implemented and tasks completed.

Due to the level of knowledge required to design and create reports from the system some issues had been experienced. Urgent reports had been prioritised to

ensure that these had been produced first. Regular meetings were being held to identify any issues with reports and how these could be resolved.

Members were then referred to paragraph 2.9 of the report which gave details in respect of Phase 2 of the project.

A question was asked in respect of the new system and the Director of Housing stated that the implementation of the system was to streamline processes to ensure everything was on-line to reduce the need to generate paper. An example was given of a tenancy pack which had to be printed off and handed out for signing. With the new system this could be done electronically via tablets to enable tenants to be signed up on-line without the need to generate a paper copy.

Members noted the progress to date.

14. Corporate Plan 2020-23 Key Performance Indicators End-of-Plan and 2023/24 End-Year (Q4) Report

The Head of Corporate Projects, Performance and Climate Change introduced the report on behalf of the Cabinet Member for Corporate Governance and Licensing who had sent his apologies. The report outlined the Council's performance against the previous Corporate Plan for 2020-23 and the KPI's for Quarter 4 and presented an overall summary of performance over the lifecycle of the previous Corporate Plan.

The report was split into two parts. The first part was a retrospective look at the last four years.

The Corporate Plan listed 10 actions under the priority "Housing that meets the need of all Residents". This had set the Council's agenda for the life of the Corporate Plan 2020-23. The first round of reporting in 2020/21 had set out criteria of what successful delivery would look like and this had been used to measure and judge the Council's performance. Of the 10 actions listed, five were outside of the Council's control, of the five actions within the Council's control four had been achieved and good progress had been made in respect of the fifth action which was the New HRA Pipeline for Housing.

Seven actions had been presented for the new Quarter 4 data, three had been rated green which were on or above target, four were at amber, below the planned target. None of the actions were at red.

The new Corporate Plan had been approved in March 2024 and the reporting of the new suite of KPI's would be presented in Quarter 3.

Members noted the report.

15. Empty Homes Strategy

The Cabinet Member for Housing presented the report which concerned the updated Empty Homes Strategy. The Strategy had been initially published in 2022, in February 2024 the Strategy had been reviewed and updated by a multi service working group to reflect changes in the national and local context which provided a framework for the Council's approach to reducing the number of Empty Homes within the district.

There was no statutory requirement to have an Empty Homes Strategy, however it was regarded as good practice to have a Strategy in place which aimed to provide transparency and consistency in the Council's approach to Empty Homes.

Long term empty homes were defined as those properties that had been vacant for over two years. The Strategy covered residential empty homes only. The majority of empty homes were privately owned but there was a small number owned by South Kesteven District Council. Recent figures as at May 2024 indicated that there were 154 long term empty homes with South Kesteven. Fifteen of these properties were owned by South Kesteven District Council and were the responsibility of the Voids Team and were not within the scope of the Strategy. The tools available within the Strategy were not applicable to Council owned housing.

The number of empty homes within South Kesteven was below the national average which stood at 1.02% of properties empty over six months. In South Kesteven .99 of a percent of homes had been empty over six months. The focus of the Strategy was on those houses that had been empty for two years or more. Those properties would be RAG rated (red, amber, green) and reviewed against service interactions to create a priority list to see which properties had the most impact on communities.

The use of the Strategy was for an approach to offer advice and guidance, however there were enforcement tools available if required.

Although the Strategy had been revised, the priorities listed had not changed since the original Strategy was published in 2022. The document had been streamlined and information added about the benefit of bringing empty homes back into circulation and the concerns that long term empty properties presented. Figures had been updated to present both the national and local picture. Appendix 2 of the Strategy detailed updated enforcement options.

The Cabinet Member then made reference to the 15 properties owned by the Council. The properties all had legitimate reasons for being empty. Some were part of wider redevelopment schemes whilst the majority of the properties were used as decamp properties whilst repairs were carried out.

Members discussed the document and the following comments were made:

- What was the membership of the Working Group referenced, it would have been helpful if this had been included within the report – the working group

had been made up of operational Officers from service areas that had dealings with empty homes, it was felt that perhaps the terminology used had been misleading as it was not a Member Working Group.

- The Strategy appeared to be a “new” document as it had been reduced from 15 to 10 pages – the document had been streamlined and unnecessary information taken out.

Members were supportive of the proposed Empty Homes Strategy and it was proposed, seconded and unanimously **RECOMMENDED** to Cabinet for adoption.

Recommendation

That the Housing Overview and Scrutiny Committee recommend the updated Empty Homes Strategy to Cabinet for adoption.

16. Work Programme 2024/2025

The following items to be added to the Work Programme for September:

- Update on Riverside Flats, Grantham
- Report on Right to Buys

A Member asked for an item on Voids to be added to the Work Programme. It was noted that a Voids workshop had been held previously.

Comments were made in respect of older properties and their repair with reference being made to Lumby's Terrace in Stamford. It was stated that this was a sensitive issue and meetings were being held every six weeks in respect of that particular area and work was being done with the tenants involved.

A question was asked about the Private Sector Housing Enforcement Policy and it was noted that this was now part of a larger overarching Enforcement Policy that was currently being compiled.

The Director of Housing asked for the following items to be included on the Work Programme:

- Review of Change4Lincs
- Complaints Policy/Ombudsman Code

A question was asked about having an update in respect of Garage Sites. It was noted that the Committee had received a report in respect of sites for possible development but it was requested that a further update be given as to what is happening with the other garage sites in respect of repair or demolition.

- Garage sites update

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

None.

- 18. Close of meeting**

The meeting closed at 15:45.