

Meeting of the Housing Overview and Scrutiny Committee



SOUTH
KESTEVEN
DISTRICT
COUNCIL

Monday, 20 January 2025, 2.00 pm

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 Paul Wood

Other Members present

Councillor Harrish Bisnauthsing
Councillor Tim Harrison
Councillor Virginia Moran
Councillor Ian Selby

Cabinet Members

Councillor Virginia Moran, Cabinet Member for Housing

Officers

Alison Hall-Wright, Director of Housing & Projects
Sarah McQueen, Head of Service (Housing)
Mark Rogers, Head of Technical Services (Housing)
Phil Swinton, Health, Safety and Compliance Manager
Debbie Roberts, Head of Projects, Performance and Climate Change
Suniel Pillai, New Build Project Officer
Lucy Bonshor, Democratic Officer

51. Public Speaking

The Committee were informed that there was one public speaker. The speaker was advised that they could ask one question plus one supplementary question.

Louise Horsfall asked the following question:

What protections are in place for dealing with vulnerable tenants while dealing with repairs, improvements and adaptations for their homes and what happens when things go wrong.

The Cabinet Member for Housing replied that in respect of the first part of the question, what protections are in place. When it was improvements, we (the Council) take time during the survey stages to understand the residents needs especially the ones that were vulnerable and any support that might be needed.

This may be in the form of decanting the tenant, decanting is moving the tenant to another property whilst the work is being done, or providing support through external resources to assist with things such as moving of possessions, furniture if it was a kitchen replacement or we might provide temporary facilities if it was an adaptation. Whatever the circumstances were sympathetic to the tenants needs and react accordingly.

When it comes to repairs, we have flags on our repairs IT system where we are aware of tenant vulnerabilities or where two person visits are required this information would be included in the repair order to ensure that operatives or contractors are aware of the customer's needs. When required, we work closely with housing management or the tenants support officer when booking in repairs and visiting properties. If we identify that tenants are vulnerable through our own work, we will make a referral to housing to get them involved and the systems updated.

Should anything go wrong either during or post works, we would investigate on a case-by-case basis and react accordingly. This could be a simple case of getting an operative or contractor back to rectify the issue, which is what happened in your case, more complex matters could involve the supervisor or a manager investigating and agreeing appropriate actions.

We have got robust complaints policies and procedures in place to ensure that formal complaints are investigated and matters resolved. The complaint policy involves a two-stage process with managers responding to stage one complaints and the head of service, responding to stage two's. If the customer was still not happy with our response so the complaint is not resolved, they can escalate the complaint to the Housing Ombudsman. Obviously, the Council would do everything it can to avoid an official complaint purely because of the amount of time that's involved in officers investigating every single bit of information we have on that and producing a report, so we do bend over backwards if something has gone wrong to try and put it right. I hope you feel that is what happened in your case although there are still a couple of appointments pending.

No supplementary question was asked as the Cabinet Member for Housing had answered the question.

The Chairman thanked Ms Horsfall for attending.

52. Apologies for absence

Apologies for late attendance were received from Councillor Matthew Bailey and Councillor Penny Milnes who both had prior engagements and would be late. Apologies were also received from Councillor Habib Rahman.

53. Disclosure of Interest

None disclosed.

54. Minutes of the meeting held on 14 November 2025

The minutes of the meeting held on 14 November 2024 were proposed, seconded and **AGREED**.

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

No announcements were made.

56. Housing Compliance Figures

The Cabinet Member for Housing presented the regular housing compliance report which gave the status of the compliance figures in relation to the Council's landlord function. Legionella, asbestos, fire risk assessment and lift inspections remained at 100%.

There had been a slight drop in electrical inspections over the Christmas period due to missed appointments by tenants. The gas servicing inspections were currently at the highest that they had been since August 2023 at 99.41%. A total of 27 properties were currently non-compliant and these included:

- 11 were new non-compliant
- 2 needed repairs
- 2 were void properties
- 4 were due to have the external meter capped

Smoke and CO₂ inspections were at 100%, to date 598 inspections had been completed taking the total to 5,439.

At the time of writing the report 922 damp and mould inspections had taken place with works completed on 592 properties. 333 were booked in with contractors and 245 with the repairs team.

Members thanked the Officers for the report. A question was asked in respect of the damp and mould inspections were these carried out by contractors. The Director of Housing and Projects stated that the Council had its own Damp and Mould Team which had been in place since September and consisted of a surveyor, builder and two labourers. Some of the necessary works could be carried out internally, however some works were required to be undertaken by external contractors. There was a backlog of works and good progress was being made in addressing the backlog as well as tackling new issues.

One Member asked a question in respect of external meter capping and the average timeframe for this. It was stated that currently that information was not available but the Officer stated that he would email the information to Members.

➤ **Action**

The Health, Safety and Compliance Manager to email the external meter capping timeframes to Members.

Members noted the current compliance figures position.

57. Earlesfield Project Overview

The Cabinet Member for Housing presented the report which updated the Committee on progress in respect of the Earlesfield Project. To date under Phases 1 and 2 85 properties had been completed. A further 13 properties were in progress which left 23 properties to be started.

A Core Group meeting had been held on 26 November 2024 where concerns were raised by the Council in relation to the progress that was being made. Following the meeting a comprehensive action plan was provided by United Living to address the delivery of the contract. A site visit took place on 28 November where site teams from both United Living and the Council discussed operational issues which included frequent programme updates, snagging/defects and tenant move dates. Weekly meetings were now taking place to discuss any issues, handovers and delays. A further Core meeting had been held in December 2024 where the number of defects had decreased and the number of completions increased.

Monthly meetings continued to be held with United Living to monitor on-site works and quality. It was still proposed that all properties would be handed over by 31 March 2025, however, the Cabinet Member for Housing stated that it was possible that 10 properties may not make the deadline and these would be handed over in April or May at the very latest. A huge amount of work had gone into the project which had been a massive undertaking. Appendix 1 listed the works carried out.

Discussion on the project followed with one Member querying the “robust” meetings that had taken place and the reason for them to which the Director of Housing and Projects replied that it was a huge and complex project and slippages of even a week had a knock-on effect which impacted the project and could cause delays. References were made to the Christmas period and families not wishing to be decanted out of their properties at this time which was understandable but did cause delay to the project. Confirmation was given that the contractor, United Living had adequate resources on site to complete the project and that any costs due delays by the contractor would be picked up by the contractor.

Members noted the current position.

58. New Build and Acquisitions

The Head of Projects, Performance and Climate Change gave a verbal update to the Committee on the new build housing pipeline and purchases.

The 20-unit scheme at Swinegate, Grantham had reached the halfway point and was on track to be completed by July 2025.

The Larch Close scheme had been amended to change the four-bedroom properties to two adapted bungalows and that was currently with the Planning Authority for determination.

Mercer Building Solutions are building the Larch Close scheme on the Council's behalf and some of the planning conditions are being discharged and they hoped to be on site in March/April this year.

Pre-application advice had been provided on the 11-unit scheme at Wellington Way, Market Deeping and a biodiversity net gain report was being awaited. It was hoped that a full planning application could be submitted to the Planning Authority shortly.

The first phase of the 36 houses at the David Wilson Homes development in Corby Glen had been accepted and were now fully tenanted. Work was ongoing with them to try and bring forward the other phases sooner.

The last Local Authority Housing Fund (LAHF) Phase 2 properties would be bought by the end of the week (24 January 2025). They were all new build properties and would be excepted on Friday.

The Council had been offered back a bungalow and a six-bedroom property which would also be taken through the acquisition process.

Members noted the current position.

59. Fire Compartmentation works update

The Cabinet Member for Housing presented the report which provided the Committee with an update on the program of fire compartmentation work which was being undertaken within the Council's housing stock.

The report outlined the work carried out by the Compliance Team as part of the fire safety improvements programme to improve fire safety where gaps were identified. The initial step was to commission new fire risk assessments for every scheme and block which contained a communal area/shared communal space as required by law. A total of 147 new reports had to be completed and reviewed along with a review of all previous reports and fire related information.

Following the review the Compliance Team identified the need for more detailed investigations and although everything was legally compliant the information provided did not identify all the fire safety improvement options available.

Compartmentation was a key part of the fire strategy as it puts break areas in to compartments which help to delay or prevent a fire spreading through shared areas and means of escape.

The works were being completed on a risk-based approach with those buildings with residents which could be classed as more vulnerable being prioritised and split into three phases.

Appendix 1 to the report detailed the three phases. The works being undertaken included the replacement of fire doors, the provision of fire breaks and fire curtains in roof voids, sealing gaps/voids in communal spaces. To date 471 fire doors had been replaced, 40 fire curtains had been fitted in ceiling breaks and individual flats across all 15 sites. The areas had also been surveyed to identify any required fire safety improvement works.

Eleven of the 15 sites had been completed with works underway at the remaining four sites.

A question was asked in relation to fire curtains to which the Health, Safety and Compliance Manager replied.

Members noted the report and the work done to date.

60. Homelessness and Rough Sleeper update

The Cabinet Member for Housing presented the report which detailed the status and recent activity of the Homelessness and Rough Sleeper services. The report showed the current position in respect of Change4Lincs, the Council's homelessness service and the outcome of the annual rough sleeper which was conducted in November 2024.

The report also detailed the emergency protocol in respect of severe weather which had been triggered twice in recent weeks. Members attention was drawn to the details in the report in respect of the new night provision shelter.

Working in partnership with Grantham Ark a new night shelter had been opened in Grantham on 19 December 2024. It was stated that 117 bed nights had been provided up to (17 January 2025) to 17 different people. Two of the people who had used the facilities were now in permanent accommodation, three others had found alternative accommodation. Visits were made when people checked in and in the morning with staff offering help and advice. People were still in the shelter and work was still being carried out with them and providing overnight accommodation.

(14:33 Councillor Bailey arrived at the meeting)

Members were very supportive of the initiative and asked whether it was purely for people within the district. It was stated that people had to have a local connection and the shelter was running at capacity.

A question was asked in respect of temporary accommodation and it was stated that outside of the SWEP there was no duty to house these people however, officers did work over and above what was required to help.

A question was asked in respect of the extra £300k budget for homelessness to which the Cabinet Member for Housing replied. Further discussion on the homelessness grants and the Change4Lincs initiative. It was confirmed that funding for 2025/26 had been allocated to mirror that of 2024/25. The funding totalled £646,348 and would be used to continue to deliver the service for the four district councils.

Work had started to finalise plans to deliver the service across the four districts with the aim of moving away from the current model to a model where the team is dispersed across all districts. This would allow each district to have a dedicated team in place to complement their existing Housing Options Service.

Further discussion in respect of the night shelter followed with one Member, not on the Committee stating that people in the shelter really appreciated it. It was suggested that a visit be arranged with Members of the Committee to visit the shelter when it was convenient to Officers.

The Chairman congratulated the Housing Team on the fantastic work that had been done.

61. Damp and Mould Policy

The Cabinet Member for Housing introduced the report which updated the Committee in respect of the Damp and Mould Policy which would be effective from April 2025.

All social landlords must adhere to several regulations relating to damp and mould and a lack of compliance could place a landlord at risk of prosecution or financial penalty. It was essential that the Council had a damp and mould policy in place that meets all regulatory requirements.

The standalone policy was attached at Appendix 2 to the report and was in line with good practice and replaced the current damp and mould protocol.

Key considerations were highlighted within the report and included:

- Responding sensitively and assess the issue with urgency to identify the severity of the damp and mould and potential risk to residents.
- Landlords should inspect homes at least six weeks after remedial work had been carried out to ensure that the issue had been fixed and damp

and mould had not reappeared. If damp and mould had reappeared, further investigation and intervention should be pursued.

- Landlords should take a proactive approach to reduce damp and mould including having a clear process in place to document, manage and act on reports of damp and mould, understand the condition of their homes and make necessary interventions to ventilation, energy efficiency and address any building deficiencies.

Members welcomed the Policy and felt that it was essential that the Council kept on top any instance of damp and mould. Questions were asked about the types of damp and mould and whether living conditions played a role. It was stated that once more data was available, this could be shared with the Committee. It was noted that there were a new suite of KPI's being developed which would be brought before the Committee on a regular basis.

Further discussion followed with comments being made in respect of private landlords and have adequate loft insulation.

One Member stated that it would have been helpful to see where the policy had been amended but it was stated that the policy had been totally rewritten which was why track changes had not been included. A further comment was made in respect of return visits due to a reoccurrence of damp and mould and the Head of Service (Technical) stated that more support would be offered to tenants in these cases. It was stated that a balance was required to allow for ventilation but keep homes warm. The recommendation within the report was proposed, seconded and **AGREED**.

Recommendation

That the Housing Overview and Scrutiny Committee notes the content of the updated Damp and Mould Policy and recommends the updated Policy to Cabinet for adoption, effective from April 2025.

62. Decant Policy

The Cabinet Member for Housing introduced the report which provided the Committee with details of the Council's proposed new Decant Policy which explained the approach that would be followed when requiring tenants to be decanted from their home to a different property. It was stated that tenants usually remained within their homes whilst works were being carried out such as improvement or major repairs.

However, in certain circumstances the health and safety of the tenant would be at risk, or the works to be carried out were extensive and the tenants were unable to remain in the property whilst the work was completed and therefore would be required to decant to another property temporarily or permanently.

The new Policy showed the practical steps that would be taken to facilitate this process. The report recommended that the policy be recommended to Cabinet for adoption.

Discussion on the new Policy followed with various parts of the policy being highlighted and concern being expressed by Members and these included the rehoming of pets, children changing schools, the costs of school uniforms and home contents insurance.

It was stated that the policy had tried to cover every eventuality, wherever possible these issues would not come into effect but if they did the policy covered that area. The requirement to decant tenants would be looked at as a last option and it did not happen frequently. Further discussion followed on school uniforms and it was stated that each case would be looked at individually and they were not set in stone. A query was made in reference to home contents insurance and whether a timeframe needed to be included within the policy so it was clear what period any payment would take place for. The recommendation as outlined within the report was proposed and seconded and on being put to the vote it was **AGREED**.

Recommendation

The Housing Overview and Scrutiny Committee notes the proposed Decant Policy which is in line with best practice and will provide clear operational guidance and recommends the submission and adoption of the policy to Cabinet.

(A short adjournment took place between 15:12 – 15:27)

63. Repairs Service Update

The Cabinet Member for Housing presented the report which concerned the progress made following the internal repairs service audit report that had been received in April 2024. The report stated that the Council could take partial assurance that the controls to manage this area were suitably designed, consistently applied or effective. The report identified actions that were required to strengthen the control framework.

Members were referred to Appendix 1 of the report which outlined the progress made against the audit actions. This appendix was presented to the Governance and Audit Committee at the meeting on 27 November 2024.

There was a total of 13 actions with two advisory actions. Ten of the actions were complete with one action due to be completed by 31 March 2025. The other actions concerned a new post and upgrades to IT systems which were due to be completed by 31 March 2025.

It was stated that significant progress had been made with the introduction of a new interim staffing structure as detailed at Section 4 of the report. The new structure

included replacing the single Repairs and Voids Manager role with two managers, one to look after voids and one to look after repairs to allow the development of expertise in each area and provide greater resilience within the staffing structure. The introduction of separate managers had created capacity for the new Damp and Mould team which would be included within the Repairs team.

Performance reporting had been significantly strengthened since the audit and new Key Performance Indicators had been created together with reports within the new QL repairs system which allowed weekly and monthly performance reporting. Extracts from the reporting system were shown within the report at Section 5. Section 6 of the report detailed the Repairs Service Improvement Plans and the actions that had been completed to date and those actions planned for Q4 2024/25. Section 7 covered the weekly reporting of repairs which had been introduced in November 2024 to monitor the progress of the improvement plans. A snapshot of jobs was included in the report. It was proposed that the item become a regular item on the agenda and the Committee was asked for a timeframe of either three or six months.

A discussion on the report followed with Members noting the progress made to date. The Cabinet Member for Housing stated that going forward it was proposed that local contractors within the four main towns would be approached to see if they could undertake small local repairs. A question was asked in respect of new and old repairs to which the Head of Service (Technical Services) responded. A further question was asked about who made the call in respect of simple or complex repairs and it was stated that this was done in the Repairs centre with an example given of a complex repair which required different contractors to attend. More discussion followed in respect of Damp and Mould to which the Head of Service (Technical Services) replied. It was proposed that a report would come before the Committee every three months going forward.

➤ **Action**

That the Committee received an update report on the Repairs Service every three months.

64. Riverside Heating Upgrade Works

The Cabinet Member for Housing updated the Committee on the progress of the Riverside communal heating upgrade works.

Members attention was drawn to Table 1 of the report which detailed the short-term rectification/enhancement works which had been presented to the Committee in September 2024. At the meeting it was confirmed that items numbered 1 – 8 would be the focus of the work including the replacement of boilers. The Cabinet Member for Housing confirmed that the new boilers had been installed and had been operational since December 2024. A temporary boiler had been installed whilst the works were being undertaken to ensure that residents had access to heating and hot water.

The Building Management System had been installed and was expected to go live during January 2025. There were still three immersion heaters to install, these had not been done due to gaining access to properties. The flushing of the secondary system and the installation of new thermostatic controls commenced the previous week. Chemicals would be added to the system to ensure the existing pipes were in working order and to ensure that the system worked efficiently.

The Council's Mechanical Contractor had regularly attended Riverside whilst the works were being carried out to monitor progress and address any concerns or issues which residents had experienced.

The Cabinet Member for Housing referred the Committee to Table 2 of the report which provided a breakdown of the costs that had been incurred to date in respect of the project. It was noted that complaints had been received from residents, the most prolific complaint was due to residents' flats being too hot. The Council's Mechanical Contractor had shown residents how to lower the temperature which would be easier once the new thermostatic controls had been installed and so far, the project had been successful.

The Ward Member for the area welcomed the news in respect of the project for the residents at Riverside and also thanked the emergency services and those officers that had attended a small fire which had happened at the weekend. The Member made reference to compensation which had been discussed at a meeting of the Committee and what the current position was in respect of the budget, what was the final figure likely to be acknowledging what had been spent to date as shown in Table 2.

The Director of Housing and Projects confirmed that all compensation had been paid, it had gone against residents rent accounts and had been paid in line with the Council's compensation policy. The only works that were missing from the Table within the report were the replacement heaters for the communal room which were in the region of £3,000 and also it was proposed to replace the flooring in this area which would cost in the region of £10,000. It was noted that these works would bring the total cost in, under that which had been originally budgeted.

The Ward Member thanked the Officers and the Cabinet Member for Housing for the work done in respect of the heating project which had hopefully resolved the issues at Riverside.

The Committee noted the current position.

65. Response times to Housing Enquiries

The Head of Service (Housing) gave a verbal update to the Committee in respect of Member enquiries to the Housing Service. Members were encouraged to send emails to the generate housing inbox housingenquiry@southkesteven.gov.uk to enable any response times to be tracked.

Since April 2024, 25 council enquiries had been received per month which was an average figure, although it was stated that this could vary and the complexities of the enquiry could take time to address. Up until November 2024 there had been a response time of 15 working days, however it was felt that this was not in line with any other response times such as complaint response times so this was reduced to 10 working days in November 2024. It was stated that if the enquiry was urgent this would be responded to within one to two working days or even the same day.

In April 2024 of the 25 enquiries received, there was a late response, over 15 working days on 10 of the enquiries. Since then, response times had improved and in November 2024 there were no late responses. Following the reduction in response times from 15 working days to 10 working days in November, December's figures showed that there were three late response times.

Members were reminded that although Officers were approachable any enquiry that they had, should go through the generic email inbox as this was manned all the time, whereas Officers were often out on site or in meetings. It also enabled statistics to be compiled that enabled clear improvement to response times to be seen from a central location. The Head of Service (Housing) encouraged good communication between Officers and Members and she hoped that Members had seen that improvement over the last year.

The Chairman stated that he had seen a massive improvement and he thanked the Head of Service (Housing) and all those in the Housing Team.

Discussion on response times followed with one Member asking whether the responses were an acknowledgement of the email or a full response. The Head of Service (Housing) stated that where possible this would be a full response, unless due to the complexities of the enquiry more work was required.

The Cabinet Member for Housing also gave an example of a response time to an enquiry that had been made. She also referred to the number of people cc'd into an email and the response to all that "clogged up" inboxes unnecessarily. If she was one of the recipients to an email with a complex problem this would be addressed and responded to.

66. Work Programme 2024/25

A discussion on topics for the Work Programme took place. A question was asked about an update on Repairs at the March meeting however, it was felt that this item should come to a later meeting possibly May/June to enable more information to be available. An update in respect of the Night Shelter was asked for, however the Director of Housing and Projects stated that there was a standing item on the agenda for Homelessness and Rough Sleeping which would include the night shelter as well as the position in respect of Change4Lincs.

One Member referred to the discussion on cladding at the last meeting and the Health, Safety and Compliance Manager stated that an email had been sent out to

Members on this issue. The Chairman asked that if Members had not received the email to get in touch with him.

A further question was asked about response times to calls from members of the public in respect of housing. It was noted that only performance and complaints were logged and these were considered by the Governance and Audit Committee, however the Director of Housing and Property stated that she would look to see what information was available and this would be reported to a later meeting of the Committee.

➤ **Action**

The Director of Housing and Property to see what information was available in respect of housing calls and response times and report any information available to a later meeting of the Committee.

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

None.

68. Close of meeting

The meeting closed at 4:00pm.