

Minutes of a Meeting of the Scrutiny Commission

At 7:00pm on Tuesday 9 May 2023

Held in the Council Chamber, Corby Cube, George Street, Corby

Present:

Members

Councillor Wendy Brackenbury (Chair)	Councillor Kevin Watt (Vice Chair)
Councillor Valerie Anslow	Councillor Ken Harrington
Councillor Robin Carter	Councillor Philip Irwin
Councillor John Currall	Councillor Zoe McGhee
Councillor Mark Dearing	Councillor Tom Partridge-Underwood
Councillor Jim Hakewill	Councillor Geoff Shacklock

Officers

Adele Wylie – Executive Director of Customer and Governance (Monitoring Officer)
David Watts - Executive Director of Adults, Health Partnerships and Housing
Evonne Coleman-Thomas – Assistant Director of Strategic House, Development and Property Services
Tom Barden – Head of Performance, Intelligence and Partnerships
Dan Hannam – Interim Strategic Lead for Housing Property Services
Carly Hohn – Interim Strategic Lead for Housing Strategy and Solutions
Leona Mantle – Interim Strategic Lead for Tenancy Services
Louise Tyers – Senior Democratic Services Officer

Also Present

Councillor Matt Binley – Executive Member for Housing, Communities and Levelling-Up

77. Apologies for Non-Attendance

Apologies for non-attendance were received from Councillors Andy Mercer, Gill Mercer and Lee Wilkes. Councillors Ken Harrington and Tom Partridge-Underwood attended as substitute members.

78. Members' Declarations of Interest

The Chair invited those who wished to do so to declare any interests in respect of items on the agenda.

No declarations of interest were made.

79. Notification of Requests to Address the Meeting

There had been no requests to address the meeting.

80. Minutes of the Meeting Held on 4 April 2023

RESOLVED:

That the minutes of the meeting held on 4 April 2023 be approved as a correct record and signed, subject to:

Minute 74 – Green Burial Options in North Northamptonshire

Point vii – to read "...funeral directors in the Thrapston Ward area..."

81. Consideration of Any Matter Referred to the Commission for Call-In

There had been no requests for call-in.

82. Housing Voids and Repairs

The Scrutiny Commission considered a report of the Executive Director of Adults, Health Partnerships and Housing which provided information around the housing responsive repairs backlog and preparing void properties for re-letting.

During the Covid-19 national lockdowns/tier 4 restrictions in 2020 and 2021, the legacy councils in Corby and Kettering were limited to carrying out emergency repairs and external work only, causing a backlog of outstanding repairs. Since April 2021, NNC had been working hard to resolve the backlog, alongside new repair requests received, with the same resource levels as pre Covid-19. An allocation of an additional £900,000 from HRA reserves would be used to increase resources in the coming year to reduce the number of outstanding repairs. As at 1 March 2023, the number of responsive repair jobs which were out of target timescale was 5,313.

A separate team of four multi-skilled operatives, a surveyor and an administrator had been recruited to undertake the repairs and the booking of appointments. An estate-based approach to the order in which repairs would be completed was being taken to ensure that the most efficient use of resources, with all outstanding repairs in that property completed at the same time, where possible.

With regards to voids, each year NNC received on average 550 sets of keys from outgoing tenants. How long a property which had been returned to NNC remained vacant was dependent on the condition in which it was returned. The average time to re-let a property during 2021/22 was 75.3 days, not including properties undergoing major works. For the coming year, the target for the length of time taken to re-let a standard void property was 56 days, the equivalent of eight weeks.

During discussion on the report, the following key points were made:

- i. With the new team in place, how long was it expected to take to clear the backlog? In response the Executive Director advised that the team had an idea on how many repairs could be done and it was estimated

that it would take around a year. However, how repairs were reported varied and until operatives entered a property, it would often not be clear what the actual repairs were.

- ii. In response to a question around how issues such as oil fired boilers in properties in rural areas, where parts would be unable to be obtained, would be approached, the Interim Strategic Lead for Housing Property Services advised that there were currently around 80 oil fired heaters and these would be part of the Capital Programme to replace. Alternatives would be looked at including intelligent radiators and air source systems. Heating repairs would not be part of the backlog, which was for general repairs.
- iii. The Executive Member for Housing, Communities and Levelling Up stated that this was an inherited backlog which needed additional resources to address or it would not be cleared. An ambitious plan was being put in place and there was the political will to deliver it.
- iv. Corby would be replicating the Kettering model of having an in-house store for parts. This would ensure that operatives had everything they needed to get the jobs done. A 'superstore' model had been considered but it was believed that it would be more effective to have a presence in both towns which would minimise the movements of operatives.
- v. It was suggested that the left behind estates should be looked at first and in response the Executive Member advised that the focus would be on Kingswood and Avondale Grange first.
- vi. In response to whether surveys of the housing stock were undertaken, the Interim Strategic Lead for Housing Property Services advised that surveying in the legacy authorities had varied. A rolling stock condition survey would be started so properties were surveyed every five years.
- vii. There needed to be more investment in building new houses as the current stock was getting old. A long-term plan for social housing was needed. In response, the Executive Director stated that council housing was not the only way to meet housing needs, e.g. social landlords. New development schemes were looked at, but these had to be covered by the HRA. The new Assistant Director would be developing a strategy for the longer term.
- viii. It was frustrating to tenants when staff did not get back to them when trying to arrange a repair. If appointments could not be made, staff should make their best efforts to contact tenants. The Executive Member accepted that there were challenges with the service. The Council had agreed a budget to deal with the backlog and a robust plan was now in place.
- ix. In response as to whether asbestos could be an issue, the Interim Strategic Lead for Housing Property Services advised that some properties would have asbestos which needed to be managed. All staff had training on asbestos awareness and some staff were also trained on asbestos removal.

- x. Was there support for older and disabled tenants who had difficulty in managing their property? Was there a charge if a property was handed back in a poor condition? Visits were undertaken to properties before tenants left to see if there were any issues which may need charging for. Officers also tried to visit a property every five years, but if there was a risk of a tenancy failure, they would visit more often dependent on needs.
- xi. With council housing, tenants did not pay deposits, and this did not give them any incentive to maintain properties in a good condition. In response the Assistant Director advised that many tenants would not be able to afford deposits but where we could, we tried to take some payment in advance. We looked to support tenants in managing their rent, so they were not in debt when they left.
- xii. What safeguards were in place for tenants who undertook house swaps? It was the Council's responsibility to ensure that the houses were safe but for other matters, such as decoration, it was for the tenants to agree what was acceptable.
- xiii. How were social care and other agencies involved with tenants? The Executive Director advised that his new department was an opportunity for key areas such as health and social care to work together and look to build in triggers for support for tenants when needed.
- xiv. The Assistant Director advised that she would be starting to meet regularly with other housing providers at a strategic level. It was also our role to be an enabler and support others if we could not provide housing.
- xv. All members welcomed the project to reduce the backlog and the new money which was being invested.

RESOLVED:

- (i) To note the report and the information provided.
- (ii) That further progress reports should be added to the Work Plan of the relevant Scrutiny Committee.

83. Performance Indicator Report 2022/23 (Period 11)

The Scrutiny Commission considered a report of the Executive Director of Finance and Performance which provided an update on the Council's performance across a wide range of services, as measured by performance indicators. The report provided a summary of the performance of Council services and further detail including trend lines and exception reports.

Comments on several specific indicators were made, including:

- Number of rough sleepers (single night snapshot figure) (AFL12) – was the target of 9 a realistic figure? The Executive Director of Adults, Health Partnerships and Housing advised that it was about

understanding benchmarks and there had been lots of learning during the pandemic.

- Number of children without a school place (BBF22) – how many of these children were SEND and how many had been refused a school place? The Head of Performance, Intelligence and Partnerships undertook to provide a response outside of the meeting.
- Total number of households living in temporary accommodation (AFL17) – the number was very high but it was hoped that the work discussed earlier in the meeting would help to improve performance.
- Total active applicants on the Keyways Housing Register (STP04) – an affordable housing policy was needed to help increase the number of homes. The Executive Director advised that a policy was being looked at. Situations such as the global pandemic and Ukrainian and Afghanistan refugee projects had not helped the position. The new recruitment of an Assistant Director post was an acknowledgment that the resources had not right.
- Vacancies – the vacancy figures had been removed. The Executive Director of Customer and Governance advised that they had been removed following a data cleanse. The system was being rebuilt to give the actual position. It was expected that this would be done for the end of period 3.

RESOLVED:

To note the performance of the Council and its services.

84. Close of Meeting

The Chair thanked members and officers for their attendance and closed the meeting.

The meeting closed at 9.55pm.

Chair

Date