



SOUTH NORFOLK SCRUTINY COMMITTEE

Minutes of a meeting of the South Norfolk Scrutiny Committee of South Norfolk Council, held on Thursday, 4 April 2024 at 10.00 am.

Committee Members Present: Councillors: J Rowe (Chair), T Laidlaw (Vice-Chair), B Bernard, K Cross and T Graham

Apologies for Absence: Councillors: J Cork, J Overton and D Thompson

Substitute: Councillors: K Murphy (In place of D Thompson)

Cabinet Member in Attendance: Councillors: R Elliott and G Minshull

Officers in Attendance: S Carey (Strategic Advisor and Deputy Monitoring Officer), N Howard (Assistant Director for Regulatory), R Dunsire (Head of Housing and Benefits) and L Palmer (Democratic Services Officer)

Also in Attendance: J Webber

1374. APOLOGIES FOR ABSENCE

Apologies for absence were received from Cllr J Cork, Cllr J Overton and Cllr D Thompson with Cllr K Murphy substituting,

1375. DECLARATIONS OF INTEREST

No declarations of interest were received.

1376. MINUTES

The minutes of the meeting of the Scrutiny Committee held on 29 February 2024 were confirmed as a correct record.

1377. WORKING WITH HOUSING PROVIDERS

The Chair welcomed representatives from Clarion Housing, Sally Greetham (Head of Operations), Nigel Bussey (Area Manager for Clarion Response) and Yvonne Ogden (Communities Manager).

Cllr G Minshull, Portfolio Holder for Supporting People, introduced the report. He highlighted the vital relationship between housing associations and the Council which provided housing for those in need within the district.

The Head of Housing and Benefits said that although there were challenges for housing providers, there were tools available for those companies to help to deal with those challenges. The numbers of tenants made homeless through eviction from social housing had plummeted over the last four years which was encouraging.

South Norfolk Council did not have its own housing stock and provision was made through housing associations. The Council did have a Tenancy at Risk programme which was intended to be a complementary service to those provided by the housing associations.

There were a number of key concerns in relation to the housing stock:

- Aging properties due to a high level of post-war stock
- Greater competition for homes
- Increasingly complex tenant issues
- Inconsistent data sharing

The Chair invited the Clarion Housing representatives to address the committee.

Sally Greetham (Operations Manager, Clarion housing) said that Clarion was the largest housing provider in the UK with approximately 300 properties in the South Norfolk area. She referred to the recent introduction of consumer guidelines and the introduction of the Social Housing Regulation Act, both of which were implemented in reaction to the Grenfell incident and the death of a child due to poor quality housing conditions. The regulator had the power to do regular inspections and the housing providers had a duty to report to the Regulator against the new consumer standards.

In response to this, Clarion Housing had captured the key strand of the consumer standards in their 'Clarion Commitments' with common threads of accountability, transparency and engagement with tenants. The company had started to record and report data on the tenant satisfaction measures, using satisfaction surveys. This was a new requirement and was required of all registered providers. The Strategic Housing and Independence Manager added that South Norfolk Council was also a registered provider and therefore was also bound to these reporting measures.

Clarion had an Asset management Strategy – Clarion 2050 – which aimed to ensure that the stock was fit for the next generation. Clarion was aiming to be leaders in terms of sustainability and affordability of homes. This would be achieved through having the right homes in the right places, understanding the challenges of aging properties and ensuring that tenants had safe homes to live in.

Clarion had around 300 properties in the South Norfolk area for general needs. There was also the 'Live Smart' scheme for retired tenants as well as some

shared ownership properties. There was an occupancy target of 98.4% which had been exceeded and was at 98.6%.

Reports of Anti-Social Behaviour (ASB) were initially triaged by the housing association and depending on the severity of the problem, would be dealt with in either 1 or 5 working days. Issues of criminal activity were encouraged to be reported directly to the police. In other instances, early intervention with mediation and written warnings were instigated and legal action would only be taken in the most serious cases and as a last resort.

Nigel Bussey (Area Manager for Clarion Response) explained that the Eastern Region was split into seven areas, each with approximately 3,000 properties. He highlighted repairs statistics and said that there was an average of 178 jobs scheduled each wee and around 35 completed each day. This high level of productivity kept jobs that were over 60 days to a minimum, with these usually being due to customer or material availability. The data was compared with other regions on a like for like basis.

Around 250 team members had been trained to be proactive around mould and damp issues, but this had initially led to a reduction in available labour resources for day-to-day maintenance. Apprentices were also being taken on across the country and in response to a question from the Chair, Nigel Bussey confirmed that Clarion looked to give permanent jobs to those apprentices.

A survey was sent out after each job was completed, which was based on the operative's performance, and then a full survey of the start to end process would be sent out on a selection of jobs. The high levels of satisfaction were a good reflection on the staff and the service they provided to the tenants. If any negative feedback was received, this would be discussed with the customer and learning points taken away.

Yvonne Ogden (Communities Manger) said that Clarion had a programme called 'Clarion Futures' which was a charitable foundation giving residents the opportunities to thrive. Funding was given to community projects, job skills and digital skills. Around £77k had been invested into Norfolk with £19k invested into South Norfolk.

The Chair thanked the Clarion representatives for their informative presentations and invited questions from the committee.

In response to a question from a member, Sally Greetham explained that housing providers were obliged to report on a new set of performance measures. These were very new to the industry and would need some time to settle but should provide greater accountability and transparency.

A member commented that the void turnaround times were impressive and asked how much time was allocated for each void. Nigel Bussey replied that the initial target was 12 days, but with properties needing more complex work and other changes to procedures, the timings were at 20 days. The head of Housing and Benefits added that these timings were still good in comparison to other housing associations and the council was looking to facilitate a discussion with other housing providers to share good practice around reducing void turnaround times.

(Cllr J Rowe left the meeting at this point and Cllr T Laidlaw took the Chair)

In response to a member's question on resourcing for the work, the Head of Housing and Benefits said that housing register work made up the majority of the Housing Register team's workload. Online forms and online shortlisting had increased efficiencies. Telephone calls were received by the Help Hub, the housing team and the benefits team, and these teams would work together to support those tenants for both South Norfolk Council and Broadland District Council.

Members discussed funding streams for more complex repairs and Nigel Bussey confirmed that although there could be some funding from Central Government for specific projects, the majority of funding for maintenance was taken out of rent payments.

In terms of accidental damage to properties, an operative would attend the property and if the damage had been caused by the customer, the recharging of those works were assessed on a case by case basis.

A member asked if tenants were able to make alterations to their properties, such as putting up a stud wall to maximise bedroom space. Nigel Bussey replied that any alterations would need to be formally requested and the works would be agreed and registered by a surveyor. This ensured that there were no issues with the property once that tenant left.

The Chair invited the Assistant Director of Regulatory to address the committee regarding ASB.

The Assistant Director of Regulatory said that the Council and the housing associations had equal responsibilities around dealing with ASB. The Council had an ASB Policy which outlined a progressive approach designed to de-escalate situations. There were a range of formal powers that the Council could use, although the expectation was that the housing associations would deal with these issues in the first instance. A daily update meeting was held with a multi-agency group including housing associations, the Police and the Council. Around 60% of issues were resolved within three working days and 75% within five working days.

It was recognised that the Council played a key role in dealing with ASB and the plan to develop, with the housing associations, Memorandums of Understanding, covering roles, responsibilities, respective powers and working together to support and protect tenants and others affected by ASB.

A piece of work to map all housing association addresses was underway and this would allow more nimble working between housing associations and the Council. There were significant issues around ASB, but the help Hub and housing associations were ready to support tenants through these.

In response to a member's question around pest control, Sally Greetham said that this was a prevalent issue at the moment and Clarion was working with tenants to address any problems. A contractor would be sent out to assess the problem and

they would recommend any works needed. Once the report was received, an operative would be sent out to carry out those works and a follow up visit from the pest control company would be carried out.

Members discussed the loss of properties due to the Right-to-Buy legislation. Sally Greetham explained that this only applied to tenants who were originally on a local authority tenancy so there were very few customers with those rights in South Norfolk. Some customers did have the Right to Acquire which was a separate piece of legislation. The Head of Housing and Benefits added that there were also issues with larger properties being allocated for disposal due to the increased costs of bringing them back into the process. There was a need for those larger properties so the Council had started to use some Section 106 money to cover the additional works to allow the retention of stock.

RESOLVED

To recommend that officers:

1. Introduce an anti-social behaviour Memorandum of Understanding with housing providers to provide a more coordinated and consistent approach to dealing with housing issues.
2. Review the tenant satisfaction measures for housing associations within south Norfolk.
3. Work with Housing providers and other relevant providers to share appropriate information and resource.
4. Review the housing needs assessment to improve long term housing availability and stock to meet our future housing needs and this to be brought back to the Scrutiny Committee at an appropriate time.

1378. SCRUTINY COMMITTEE - ANNUAL REPORT 2023-2024

The Strategic Advisor and Deputy Monitoring Officer presented the report. She reminded members that this was a factual summary of the work of the committee over the last civic year and would be presented at the Council AGM. The outcomes from the meeting today would be added to the tracker and the Chair would have final approval of the report.

A member asked if the wording for actions in the tracker should be changed to the past tense to indicate these had already happened. The Strategic Advisor and Deputy Monitoring Officer explained that the wording was as the committee had agreed it at the time, but she would review this ahead of the AGM.

A member commented that the committee would often take the recommendations within the report as read and asked whether the headings within the report should be changed to 'suggested recommendations' to make it clear that the committee had the option to add to or amend those recommendations if desired.

In response to a comment from a member on reporting from the Norfolk Health Overview and Scrutiny Committee and the Norfolk Countywide Community Safety Partnership Scrutiny Sub-Panel, the Strategic Advisor and Deputy Monitoring

Officer explained that these were operated by the County Council and minutes and reports were published online for the public to access.

It was suggested that the option for Parish and Town Councils to ask for items to be added to the scrutiny committee agenda could be promoted more widely. The Strategic Advisor and Deputy Monitoring Officer agreed to consider the most appropriate way to do this.

RESOLVED

To recommend the Annual Report of the Scrutiny Committee 2023-2024 to be presented to Council with the final wording to be agreed by the Chairman of the Scrutiny Committee.

1379. SCRUTINY COMMITTEE WORK PROGRAMME, TRACKER AND CABINET FORWARD PLAN

The Chair introduced the report and said that the report from the Key Performance Indicators Task and Finish Group would be added to the meeting on the 9 May 2024.

There would also be a discussion on the future direction of the Policy Committees.

There had been concern around the number of Scrutiny Committee meetings being cancelled and the Strategic Advisor and Deputy Monitoring Officer explained that key subjects would be spread across the schedule of meetings with opportunities for any call-ins to also be taken at those meetings. She clarified that the cancelled meetings had been those identified as call-in only meetings, and these had been cancelled if no call-ins were received.

RESOLVED

To note the Work Programme, Tracker and Cabinet Forward Plan.

(The meeting concluded at 12.00 pm)

Chairman