

COMMUNITIES SCRUTINY COMMITTEE

MINUTES OF MEETING HELD ON WEDNESDAY, 20 SEPTEMBER 2023

Present:

Councillor Stuart Fawcett (Chair) (in the Chair)
Councillor Michael Durrant (Vice-Chair)

Councillor Graham Baxter MBE
Councillor Pam Jones
Councillor Pam Windley

Councillor Richard Beech
Councillor Kevin Tait

Also Present:

J Dethick	Director of Finance and Resources & (Section 151 Officer)
L Pepper	Assistant Director Communities
A Maher	Governance Manager
T Scott	Governance and Scrutiny Officer
L Shaw	Managing Director - Rykneld Homes Ltd

CSC/ Apologies for Absence

9/23-
24

An apology for absence was received from Councillor C Renwick.

CSC/ Declarations of Interest

10/2
3-24

None.

CSC/ Notes of the Informal Meeting

11/2
3-24

RESOLVED – That the notes of the Informal Communities Scrutiny Committee meeting held on 14 July 2023 were endorsed.

CSC/ The Council Tax Premium on Empty Homes Policy

12/2
3-24

Committee discussed how accommodation in the District might be increased by bringing back into use currently vacant properties. In particular, it heard from the Assistant Director – Communities about proposals to impose a Council Tax ‘Premium’ (or additional charge) on those home which had been empty for two years or more. Members were informed that many local authorities across Derbyshire and other areas had introduced a Council Tax premium in order to encourage the owners to occupy, offer for rent or sell them for owner-occupation.

Committee discussed the problem of empty properties in the District. Members highlighted the impact which unoccupied homes can have on local communities, and especially when they become a focus for crime and anti-social behaviour. Members also heard about the range of powers which the Council has to combat the problem. In this context, they discussed the number of empty properties within the District and how these vary by Council Tax category. They also discussed the

income that might be generated from a Premium and how this could be used by the Council to help owners bring their properties back into use through the creation of an Empty Homes Officer Post.

Members queried whether the funds generated from the additional Council Tax premium for Empty Homes would meet the cost of the Empty Homes Officer post. The Director of Finance and Resources confirmed that the intention was for it to be self-financing, but advised that for the first year the post would be funded from the available grant to give the scheme the opportunity to embed. It was also noted that the additional income generated from Council Tax forms part of the Collection Fund so benefits all major preceptors.

At conclusion of the discussion the Consensus that the imposition of the proposed Premium would be an appropriate response to the problem of empty homes in the District and should be supported.

RESOLVED – That the proposed approach be supported.

CSC/ **The Problem of Damp and Mould**

13/2

3-24

The Rykneld Homes Limited Managing Director gave Members a presentation on recent developments relating to Damp and Mould in homes.

Members were informed of the national Damp and Mould picture, including the 2020 death in Rochdale of Awaab Ishak, changes needed and led by Government, the Housing Ombudsman/Regulator and changes to Regulation of Damp & Mould.

The steps taken by Rykneld Homes in response were as follows:

- A Damp and Mould Policy
- Triage Process
 - Information & Advice
 - Mould Clean
 - Identification of issue
 - Rectification/Repair
- Specialist Trained Team
 - 2 x Surveyors
 - 1 x Administration Role

A 'Condensation and Mould' leaflet was presented to Members which would be circulated to tenants. The leaflet set out steps to prevent Damp and Mould and guidance for when both are found in homes.

Members asked where the budget was for Damp and Mould publicity, and were informed that it was within Rykneld's own budget. The Council Director of Finance and Resources added that in 2012, self-financing regulations were introduced which meant Rykneld had to cover the cost, but the Council was considering a change to this arrangement.

Members asked if properties had been surveyed for Damp and Mould. The Rykneld Homes Managing Director explained that every property had to be

surveyed by Damp and Mould surveyors.

Members enquired how many disrepair claims had been made relating to Damp and Mould. The Rykneld Homes Managing Director explained that 18 claims had been received, and added that each claim was legally challenged.

Members were concerned by the possibility of vulnerable people being targeted by companies to put in the complaint. Members were advised that these people should contact Rykneld Homes directly.

Members referred to private tenancies and asked what the Council was doing to protect private renters. The Assistant Director – Communities explained that work was being carried out by Environmental Health and its private sector team (that deliver work of this nature in the PRS) to reach out to private landlords. The Chair requested that the action taken to address the problem of Damp and Mould through the Environmental Health private sector team be looked at further and included as an item on a future Committee meeting agenda.

RESOLVED –

(1) That the update be noted.

(2) That action to address the damp and mould problem in private rental accommodation be taken as an item on a future Committee meeting agenda.

CSC/ Legislative Changes affecting the Housing Service

14/2

3-24

The Director of Finance and Resources explained to Members an important upcoming change in Housing law, which would mean social housing landlords must meet four standards set by the Regulator of Social Housing:

- Safety and Quality Standard
- Transparency, Influence and Accountability Standard
- Neighbourhood and Community Standard
- Tenancy Standard

The Director of Finance and Resources added that the Council would need to decide how to work to these standards over the next six months.

Members discussed the forthcoming changes. As part of this, they asked for clarification on how the work required to meet the standards would be funded. They also discussed what controls would be put in place to ensure compliance. Committee was informed that the budget would come from the Housing Revenue Account (although other sources were being considered) and the Government's inspection regime would be very strict.

At the conclusion of the discussion Committee indicated that the implications of the new standards should be considered further at a future meeting

RESOLVED –

(1) That the update be noted.

(2) That the impact of the new social housing standards be included as an item on a future Committee meeting agenda.

CSC/ Cabinet Business

15/2

3-24 The Governance Manager presented the Forward Plan of Executive Decisions to the Committee.

The Committee was informed that future updates on the Forward Plan would be provided in a digest style, to identify Cabinet decisions that they could scrutinise further, and how scrutiny of them could contribute to achieving the Council Plan objectives.

RESOLVED – That the Committee noted the update.

CSC/ Work Programme

16/2

3-24 Committee discussed the work programme for its next meeting. It reiterated that the Environmental Health work to address Damp and Mould problems in private sector rented properties, and an assessment of the implications of the new social Housing standards both be placed on the agenda of the next Committee meeting.

RESOLVED - That the suggested items be included in the Work Programme for the next meeting.

CSC/ Additional Urgent Items

17/2

3-24 None.

CSC/ Date of Next Meeting

18/2

3-24 10.00am Wednesday 15 November 2023.