
Housing and Health Committee

MINUTES of the Meeting held in the Council Chamber, Swale House, East Street, Sittingbourne, ME10 3HT on Tuesday, 4 March 2025 from 7.00 pm - 9.29 pm.

PRESENT: Councillors Lloyd Bowen, Hayden Brawn, Ann Cavanagh, Charles Gibson (Substitute for Councillor Hannah Perkin), Alastair Gould, Angela Harrison (Chair), Ben J Martin, Pete Neal, Tom Nundy, Carrie Pollard, Karen Watson (Vice-Chair) and Ashley Wise (Substitute for Councillor Kieran Golding).

OFFICERS PRESENT: Rick Bhatia, Steph Curtis, Carl Dewey, Tina Grafton, Charlotte Hudson, Tony Huges, Kellie MacKenzie and Karin Stockerl.

APOLOGIES: Councillors Monique Bonney, Peter Marchington and Hannah Perkin.

710 **Emergency Evacuation Procedure**

The Chair outlined the emergency evacuation procedure.

711 **Minutes**

The Minutes of the Meeting held on 14 January 2025 (Minute Nos. 534 – 542) were taken as read, approved and signed by the Chair as a correct record.

712 **Declarations of Interest**

No interests were declared.

713 **Southern Housing - Overview and stock condition verbal update**

The Chair welcomed the following officers from Southern Housing (SH): Tony Hughes (Head of Region – General Housing), Karin Stockerl (Executive Director of Assets and Sustainability), Carl Dewey (Director of Repair and Estate Transformation), and Rick Bhatia (Head of Land & Partnerships).

The officers from SH gave a presentation based on the following themes: SH profile; SH Swale profile; operational activity; housing review; tenant satisfaction; Swale investment priorities/challenges; Decent Homes Standard and Planned Investment; retrofit programme; Damp and Mould – Awaab’s Law; SH approach to damp and mould timeline, framework, performance and within Swale; and New Development Commitments.

Following a request from the Chair the Head of Housing agreed to circulate the SH presentation to all Members.

The Chair invited questions from Members, and points raised included:

- What were SH doing to reduce the re-letting period?;
- what were the figures for all categories of the damp and mould framework;
- what feedback had there been on how the measures to prevent damp and mould were working?;
- tenants also had responsibilities, what sanctions were in place if tenants

- interfered with ventilation in their property?;
- of the 7,000 SH homes in Swale, how many were occupied?;
 - the £3billion investment could soon reduce due to the impact of replacing cladding etc.;
 - were SH obligated to install heat pumps at properties and how much would that cost?;
 - if tenants had to vacate a property due to damp and mould, where were they vacated to and who covered that cost?;
 - did officers evaluate the appropriateness of the size of the property for the tenants needs?;
 - what provision was there to monitor asbestos in properties?;
 - was devolution a concern for SH, or would it bring positives?;
 - what was the average cost of retrofitting a property?;
 - were properties being fitted with solar panels?;
 - mould was not always due to ventilation, and were SH focusing on mould in bedrooms, caused due to the lack of heating or overcrowding?;
 - would garage blocks at Love Lane, Faversham, Reedland Crescent, Faversham; and The Charltons, Off Bull Lane, Boughton under Blean be redeveloped?;
 - how many damp and mould claims had been made?;
 - aware of a SH property in Milton Regis that had been empty for a long period?;
 - saddened to hear about the difficulties of using Section 106 funding?;
 - were SH reviewing the tenancy types to ensure that properties were adapted to meet the specific needs of tenants 'home for life'?;
 - Extra Care Housing, such as Regis Gate, Sittingbourne was a fantastic scheme and suggested improved promotion of the scheme as not all Members would be aware of it?;
 - had there been costs associated with damp and mould claims?; and
 - how did SH measure tenant 'satisfaction'?

The Head of Region (SH) responded to points made and outlined what was being done to reduce the re-letting time period and that SH had trialled a 'wrap-around' approach with their Swale contractor, Axis, by granting them authority to deliver works including asbestos checks, gas servicing, and pest control. The trial had improved the service and officers were exploring the possibility of it being rolled-out across Kent. The Head of Region stated that SH External Affairs Team were 'tracking' devolution very carefully and what impact there would be on partnerships, what it meant locally for SH, and also what opportunities it may present.

The Director of Repair and Estate Transformation (SH) provided approximate numbers of cases for each of the damp and mould hazard level categories. He said if a significant risk was identified under category 1, tenants would be moved to a suitable void property or hotel which would be paid for by SH. The default position to resolving damp and mould issues was 'ventilation', if that was working properly within the property then mould could not grow. He said that if tenants interfered with the ventilation they could be at risk of breach of the tenancy, but it was about working together with tenants to resolve the issue. The Director of Repair and Estate Transformation explained that SH had two satisfaction surveys. The Tenant Satisfaction Measures, which was prescribed by the regulator and the satisfaction levels were generally around 60% with tenants being mostly concerned about the repair service. A Transactional Survey on repairs was also undertaken which had a 80% satisfaction level.

The Executive Director of Assets and Sustainability (SH) said that SH were aware of their obligations under the Asbestos Regulations and kept a register of where it was present which was regularly updated and shared with contractors. She said that with regard to heat pumps, it was important that properties were insulated to an adequate standard before considering installing them and some properties had been fitted with solar. The installation of waste water recovery systems was currently not viable. The average cost of retrofitting was between £20,000 to £25,000 per property, and confirmed the £54million over the next five years was Swale specific.

The Executive Director of Assets and Sustainability spoke about a new project SH were working on looking at whether derelict garages could be re-developed, she asked Members to let her know of any within Swale that could be looked at.

The Head of Land & Partnerships said that with regard to Section 106 funding the situation was not isolated to SH. He added that SH were lobbying to get grant into Section 106 homes to make them viable and liaising with developers early on.

In response to a question from the Chair, the Anti-Social Behaviour (ASB) and Safeguarding Team Leader reported that they were working very closely with SH.

Members asked that the following information be shared with the committee the tenancy rates for the 7,000 SH properties within Swale; details of fuel costs for tenants following retrofit of their property; what was the difference in turn-around time between Optivo and SH for the Swale properties; figures to show the impact on housing stock reduction; what were the figures for the number of Member of Parliament and Councillor complaints SH received and what were the complaints e.g. ASB or repairs; and what percentage of gas safety certifications were currently outstanding?

The Head of Region (SH) reported that extra care tenure and homes were managed as part of SH's specialist 'Independent Living Service', he agreed to liaise with them about how extra care living was promoted and facilitate a visitor to one of SH properties if possible.

The Chair thanked the SH officers for attending the meeting.

714 **Safeguarding Policy Review**

The Community Services Manager introduced the report which summarised the amendments proposed to be made to the Draft Swale Borough Council Safeguarding Policy 2025 set out at Appendix I of the report.

A Member referred to the table under paragraph 5.1.2 on page 16 of the Policy, and that 'neglect' should be included under the column for types of abuse of children. A Member referred to page 41 paragraph 'Factors that increase risk' and asked that 'somebody that had given birth within 12 months the increase of baby blues and post-partum depression' be included. The Community Services Manager agreed to update the policy as requested.

Members highlighted some typographical errors and missed words within the draft Policy. A Member also asked that the colouring of some of the charts be reviewed to make them easier to read. The Community Services Manager agreed to amend the reports as requested.

The Chair proposed the recommendations, which were seconded by Councillor Ben J Martin.

Resolved:

- (1) That the refreshed Safeguarding Policy for 2025 be approved subject to the amendments as minuted.**
- (2) That the Safeguarding Policy be reviewed bi-annually rather than annually.**

715 Temporary Accommodation (TA) spend - Scrutiny Report

The Head of Housing and Communities introduced the report which provided an update on the current performance in relation to Temporary Accommodation (TA) and the current budget position. The report also set out current controls in place to manage the TA budget.

The Head of Housing and Communities reported that since the report had been published she had been made aware that the Council would receive £32,000 from the Winter Preparedness Fund for the current financial year. She said the funding more than covered the Council's Severe Weather Emergency Protocol Placements and some additional Rough Sleeper placements. The Head of Housing and Communities further reported that the Council had also received a grant of £87,699 to spend on Prevention Responsibilities. The grant was subject to a spend deadline of 31 March 2025, and officers were looking at the terms of the grant to ensure it was utilised.

The Head of Housing and Communities referred to an 'open' consultation on the future formula for the Homeless Prevention Grant (HPG) 2026-27 closing date 11 March 2025. She stated that if the 'funding pot' remained as it was, currently the Council would do better financially. However, officers had some concerns regarding the proposed formula in respect of TA which she outlined for Members. The Head of Housing and Communities advised that officers were preparing a consultation response and comments from Members were welcome.

Councillor Lloyd Bowen moved the following motion: That delegated authority be given to the Head of Housing and Communities in consultation with the Chair of the Housing and Health Committee to prepare a response to the consultation on the future formula of the HPG. This was seconded by Councillor Ashley Wise. On being put to the vote the motion was agreed.

The Chair invited questions from Members, and points raised included:

- The new affordable homes figures were disappointing;
- noted that the Council would be looking at the impact from the caravan park closures and pre-empt the last minute problems caused;
- how did officers differentiate whether it was or was not domestic abuse in respect of requests for TA?; and
- how long had it taken for Bridge House, Sittingbourne to become available for TA, and how many people could it accommodate?

In response, the Head of Housing and Communities reported that officers within the housing department were highly trained to recognise the signs of domestic abuse and that customers had to complete a nationally approved questionnaire. If customers were

deemed to be high risk of domestic abuse they would receive a higher level of protection. She further reported that the Council had a dedicated domestic abuse worker and part of their role was to increase knowledge within the housing team and work closely with partner agencies. The Council were also currently applying for the Domestic Abuse Housing Accreditation.

With regard to Bridge House, the Head of Housing and Communities advised it was owned by SH, and the Council had entered into an agreement with them and she understood that the delay in letting-it had been due to some unfinished void works and issues with the previous tenants leaving the property. The Head of Housing and Communities agreed to provide the committee with the updated position on when the property would be available as soon as possible.

The Chair thanked the officer for the report and welcomed the progress made due to the hard work of the housing team.

Resolved:

- (1) That delegated authority be given to the Head of Housing and Communities in consultation with the Chair of the Housing and Health Committee to prepare a response to the consultation on the future formula of the HPG.***
- (2) That the TA spend update be noted and congratulated officers on progress made.***

716 Forward Decisions Plan (FDP)

Members suggested the following future items for the FDP:

- A report on the potential impact of devolution; and
- invite SH for another update in 2026.

The Chair asked that the Head of Housing and Communities circulate to members an easy read guide for Members once the Renters Rights Act once it had been agreed.

Resolved:

- (1) That the forward decisions plan be noted.***

Chair

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All minutes are draft until agreed at the next meeting of the Committee/Panel