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COMMUNITY SELECT COMMITTEE

Date: Tuesday, 11 October 2022

Time: 6.00pm,

Location: Council Chamber, Daneshill House, Danestrete

Contact: Stephen Weaver 01438242332

committees@stevenage.gov.uk

Members: Councillors: S Mead (Chair), A Farquharson
(Vice-Chair), S Booth, A Brown, J Brown, N Chowdhury, J Duncan,
L Harrington, W Kerby and A Wells

AGENDA

PART 1

1. APOLOGIES FOR ABSENCE AND DECLARATIONS OF INTEREST

2. MINUTES - MONDAY 5 SEPTEMBER 2022

To approve as a correct record the Minutes of the Community Select Committee held on Monday 5 September 2022.

Pages 3 – 6

3. DRAFT SCOPING DOCUMENT - VOIDS REVIEW

To consider and comment on the draft scoping document for the review into voids.

Pages 7 – 10

4. MAPPING EXERCISE FOR HOUSING VOIDS REVIEW

To consider the mapping exercise document for the Housing voids review.

Pages 11 – 18

5. URGENT PART 1 BUSINESS

To consider any Part I business accepted by the Chair as urgent

6. EXCLUSION OF PUBLIC AND PRESS

To consider the following motions:

1. That under Section 100(A) of the Local Government Act 1972, the press and public be excluded from the meeting for the following items of business on the ground that they involve the likely disclosure of exempt information as described in paragraphs 1 – 7 of Part 1 of Schedule 12A of the Act as amended by Local Government (Access to Information) (Variation) Order 2006.

2. That Members consider the reasons for the following reports being in Part II and determine whether or not maintaining the exemption from disclosure of the information contained therein outweighs the public interest in disclosure.

7. URGENT PART II BUSINESS

To consider any Part II business accepted by the Chair as urgent

STEVENAGE BOROUGH COUNCIL

COMMUNITY SELECT COMMITTEE MINUTES

Date: Monday, 5 September 2022

Time: 6.00pm

Place: Council Chamber, Daneshill House, Danestrete

Present: Councillors: Sarah Mead (Chair) Alex Farquharson (Vice Chair),
Stephen Booth, Jim Brown, Nazmin Chowdhury, John Duncan, Liz
Harrington, Wendy Kerby and Anne Wells

Start / End Start Time: 6:00 pm
Time: End Time: 7:06 pm

1 **APOLOGIES FOR ABSENCE AND DECLARATIONS OF INTEREST**

Apologies for absence were received from Councillor Adrian Brown.

There were no declarations of interest.

2 **MINUTES - 7 JULY 2022**

It was **RESOLVED** that the minutes of Community Select Committee meeting held on Thursday 7 July 2022 be approved as correct record and signed by the Chair.

3 **OFFICER PRESENTATION ON VOIDS**

The Committee received a presentation regarding Council's housing voids. The presentation outlined the issues and challenges that faced the Council in dealing with void properties in the Council's social housing stock. The Housing Supply Manager and the SDS Service Delivery Manager provided the following key points to the Committee:

- Void properties resulted in a loss of rental income for the Council.
- Costs were incurred for any work required to ensure the property met lettable standards.
- The Repairs Team received on average 7 void properties per week.
- The current turnaround targets from one tenant moving out to a new tenant moving in was 32 days on average for a general needs property.
- Historically the turnaround for sheltered housing void properties were longer as the properties needed more work.
- The void properties were processed in the following three stages, with the teams providing the service denoted in brackets:
 - Pre-void and tenancy termination (Housing and Investment team)
 - Followed by the voids works (Repairs and Voids Team)

- Inspection and letting (Housing and Investment team)
- Void properties with general needs had a standard target of 26 days, and some properties with major needs had a turnaround of up to 64 days.
- The Voids Team were struggling with the demand and currently working at 50% capacity. The Team was in the process of recruiting a Voids Officer, a Voids Operative and 3 DLO operatives to ease the pressure.
- Some of the challenges that impacted the delay in void operations were: dealing with asbestos; condition of the property; level of aids and adaptation; major works and some hard to let properties.
- The specialist team removed some of the major asbestos to improve the condition of the property to a standard lettable property.
- The cost involved in carrying major works at the void properties had gone up due to the sharp rise in inflation linked to the cost-of-living crisis.
- Where possible, adapted properties were matched up to people who needed the adaptation to avoid extra cost of removing the adaptations and making good the property.

The Committee discussed the issues around voids, and during the discussion the following points were raised by Members:

- Key improvement would take place in the next six months. These changes included to re-engineer the letting process, reviewing the lettable standard and benchmarking with other local authorities that had a similar housing stock.
- The Service Delivery Manager advised that most of the properties needed some work to turn them into a lettable standard.
- The Housing Supply Manager explained that some of the properties were hard to let because they were in less popular areas, or these properties were not suitable for some families if it already had some adaptations or with the less popular older sheltered accommodation for older people. On some occasion, customer also refused to take on the property, which Members were keen to explore the reasons for this, as this seemed curious given the lack of affordable rented accommodation available.
- Members were advised that customers could be penalised if they refused a property for the second time.
- Members were informed that the Service was reviewing the process to improve including a pre-void inspection and the programme of visits during the tenancy.
- Following a comment that a large number of properties were left in a poor state by tenants who vacated the property, the Chair suggested that officers could consider ways to incentivise tenants to leave their property in good order, perhaps if they were to receive a financial reward such as a month or a couple of weeks rent returned to them if they left the property clean and empty, as this could save the Council time and money rather than paying for 2 or 3 skips to clear rubbish etc. as was often the case

Councillor John Duncan, who had met with officers to explore the process explained that the current voids process was old fashion and was not sufficiently customer focused. He explained that there was not a single issue that if corrected could

transform the service. The Council needed to look at ways to retain skilled staff as the pay levels were below the industry standard. More focused benchmarking could also improve the Council's perceived performance compared to other housing providers. He clarified that he was not proposing any major changes to the process but rather to improve the process by refocused procedures.

Members noted that a scoping document for the review would be submitted to a future meeting of the Committee and as part of the scope Members wished to carry out some site visits to observe the void process at various stages.

It was **RESOLVED** that the Voids update be noted.

4 **UPDATED WORK PROGRAMME**

The Scrutiny Officer presented a report on the Committee's Work Programme for the rest of the current Municipal Year 2022/23. He advised Members the Crime and Disorder was a statutory annual item for the Committee scheduled for March 2023. The Committee would also look at the Public Health as priority item and a one-off update on the Local Community budget.

It was **RESOLVED** that the updated Work Programme be noted.

5 **URGENT PART 1 BUSINESS**

None.

6 **EXCLUSION OF PUBLIC AND PRESS**

Not required.

7 **URGENT PART II BUSINESS**

None.

CHAIR

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DRAFT

Template Scoping Document

<u>Community Select Committee</u>	
<u>Scrutiny Review Title:</u>	Voids Review
<u>Background issues</u> to review – rationale for scrutinising this issue:	When Members considered their work programme for the 2022-23 Municipal Year at its meeting on 16 March 2022 and then again on 7 July 2022 it was agreed to include a review item on the Voids process.
Is this issue covered by Corporate Plans?	Yes, it is one of the Council's Key Performance Indicators in its Corporate Performance suite.
<u>Focus of the review:</u> (State what the review focus will be)	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• <u>To look at the current issues facing Housing Investment and Direct Service officers in making void properties ready for let</u>• <u>Identify ways to improve the current service including, where possible, reducing the time to carry out works in the property before it is relet</u>• <u>Re-engineer the letting process</u> (The context is that rather than wait until any works are done on the property invite any prospective tenant to view the property first and discuss any possible works based on the condition of the property and budget available, and then keep the relationship going through the letting process following work etc. to avoid future complaints)• <u>Better define the thresholds for standard void and major void</u> – (The context is that there is a need for more rigor regarding the levels of categories for turnaround times depending on the level of work needed)• <u>Review the lettable standard</u> – (The context is that there is a need for a brief, easily readable document that can be understood and accessible via the Council's website)• <u>Benchmark with like for like "family group" or similar composition local authorities</u>. It is felt that the current benchmarking is not helpful for the Council as the benchmarking does not reflect enough similarities with Stevenage, e.g. size, demographic, urban, retained stock etc.)

<u>Timing issues:</u> Are there any timing constraints to when the review can be carried out?	None Scrutiny Officer is aware of, other than there are only 2 formal Committee meetings in the calendar of meetings earmarked for this work. Other work may need to be carried out informally and reported back to the Committee.
The Committee will meet on (provide <u>dates</u> if known):	Dates: Day/Month/Time/Venue <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • August 2022 – Cllr John Duncan, met with officers to help identify scope issues for the review • 5 Sep presentation to the Committee giving an overview of the service, including possible lines of enquiry that could lead to improvement • Some site visits to see types of void properties at various stages of the process - dates to be agreed and carried out in Sep/Oct 2022. • Oct 2022 – Scope signed off by Committee. Feedback from any site visits and from officers/Critical friend. • Early recommendations and outline draft report to Select Committee in January 2023 • Final recommendations & report – February 2023
<u>SBC Leads</u> (list the Executive Portfolio Holders and SD's Heads of Service who should appear as witnesses):	<i>Officers have suggested the following people:</i> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • <i>Executive Portfolio Holder(s) for Housing and Housing Investment</i> • <i>Operations Director, Housing Investment & Communities & Neighbourhoods, Rob Gregory</i> • <i>Cllr John Duncan has an extensive CV and experience with running a building maintenance company who provide building services in repairs and voids to the Ministry of Defence's housing stock.</i> • <i>Tracy Jackson, Operations Manager – Providing Homes</i> • <i>Dean Stevens, Maintenance Manager</i>
Any <u>other witnesses</u> (external persons/critical friend)?:	To be identified by the Committee at the scoping meeting. <i>Possible options identified by officers:</i> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • <i>To be advised by the Operations Director, if it is possible meet with tenants/prospective tenants to discuss their views</i>
<u>Allocation of lead Members</u> on specific individual issues/questions:	To be identified by the Committee at the scoping meeting.

Any other Questions Members wish to cover:	Members will undertake their own desktop and fact-finding research and ask questions on the following areas (list the issues to address during the interviews): <i>To be identified</i>
<u>Site visits and evidence gathering in the Community</u>	Officers are arranging some site visits to properties showing voids at various stages of the process. This can be carried out during October 2022. The dates offered are 1pm and 3.30pm on Tuesday 11 th and Thursday 13 th October.
<u>Equalities and Diversity issues:</u> The review will consider what the relevant equalities and diversity issues are regarding the Scrutiny subject that is being scrutinised	It was agreed that the review would address equalities and diversity issues directly in the review. <u>Equalities & Diversity Issues</u> – Are there any E&D issues to consider in this review? – The review should consider what equality and diversity issues a Voids service should encompass such as, fair access to bids for those in digital poverty?
<u>Constraints</u> (Issues that have been highlighted at the scoping stage but are too broad/detailed to be covered by the review):	<i>To be identified by the Committee at the scoping meeting on 11 October 2022</i> (These issues can be captured and dealt with via other means – Briefings/email/officer action etc)
<u>Background Documents/data</u> that can be provided to the review	<i>As identified by the Committee at the draft scoping meeting 20 October 2022:</i> Evidence requested: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Current Voids standards (??)
<u>Agreed Milestones and review sign off</u> -To be agreed by Members and officers	<i>Formal response from Executive Portfolio Holder (Executives have a Statutory requirement to respond to Scrutiny review recommendations two months after receiving a final report and recommendations of a review: Date Executive Portfolio responses are expected (dependent on the final report & executive portfolio response template publishing date): DD MM YY</i> Date for monitoring implementation of recommendations – final sign off (typically one year from completion of the review): DD MM YY (Close to this date the Select Committee will receive a report at a Committee meeting to agree the final sign off of the review recommendations)

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Mapping exercise for Community Select Committee – Housing Voids Scrutiny Review

Issue	Who's effected? (where relevant)	Who identified to address this/provide data and interview? (whether they are internal SBC or external partner)	What evidence/data can they provide?	Meeting interview/ evidence received date: Link to Committee meeting where evidence/interview was undertaken:	Meeting scheduled for date: How the info will be gathered? (i.e. formal meetings, informal sub-groups meetings, written representations)	Action & date required If complete sign off in table:
Provide an officer presentation to CSC on the challenges around void properties		Housing Investment and Direct Service officers	A PowerPoint presentation that outlines the challenges for the service		5 September 2022	✓
Interview with Exec Portfolio Holder for Housing Investment		Executive Portfolio Holder for Housing Investment, Cllr Jeannette Thomas.	Face to face conversation with CSC Members to discuss Portfolio's priorities and views.		2 November 2022	
Speak to tenants about their experience of the lettings process.		Tracy Jackson, Operations Manager – Providing Homes to advise.	Some anecdotal evidence. Could be supported by current new tenancy surveys		Possibly undertake this work outside a formal meeting setting.	

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<p>Arrange site visits</p> <p>Page 12</p>		<p>The Scrutiny Officer has asked officers for possible dates in October to undertake some site visits to properties at various stages in the Void/let process.</p> <p>Tracy Jackson Operations Manager – Providing Homes to advice by the end of September.</p>		<p>Tracy Jackson has arranged sites visits on 11 & 13 October.</p>	<p>Informal site visits with whichever CSC members can attend a daytime site visit.</p>	<p>Tracy Jackson to update on 11 October meeting.</p>

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Sign off a scoping document		Scrutiny Officer submit draft scoping document to CSC 11 Oct 2022	Draft scoping document.		11 October 2022	
CSC consider the mapping exercise document		Scrutiny Officer write up and maintain the document	Mapping document.		11 October 2022	
Meetings with Cllr John Duncan to help with the draft scoping document.		Cllr John Duncan meet with Rob Gregory, Steve Dupoy, Dean Stevens, Tracy Jackson on ad hoc basis.			A meeting took place on 30 August 2022. Cllr Duncan has said he is willing to meet again to provide further professional advice if called up by officers.	

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Identify circumstances why prospective tenants do not take up properties when they are offered it?		Tracy Jackson Operations Manager – Providing Homes. Members raised this as a question during the officer presentation, as it seemed at odds with the dire need for social housing and the competitive cost of social rents compared to the private sector.			Tracy Jackson to update the Committee 2 November 2022.	
Specific measures identified in the scoping document – Identify ways to		Dean Stevens Maintenance Manager, SDS	Work to be undertaken outside of the formal committee meetings and then a verbal update from		To be advised.	

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reduce the time to carry out works in the property before it is relet			officers /draft written options to Committee when available.			
Specific measures identified in the scoping document – Re-engineer the letting process		Tracy Jackson Operations Manager – Providing Homes & Dean Stevens Maintenance Manager, SDS	Work to be undertaken outside of the formal committee meetings and then a verbal update from officers /draft written options to Committee when available.		To be advised.	
Specific measures identified in the scoping document – Better define the thresholds for standard		Rob Gregory Operations Director & Steve Dupoy, Assistant Director, SDS.	Work to be undertaken outside of the formal committee meetings and then a verbal update from officers /draft written options to Committee when available.		To be advised.	

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void and major void						
Specific measures identified in the scoping document – Review the lettable standard		Tracy Jackson, Operations Manager – Providing Homes	Work to be undertaken outside of the formal committee meetings and then a verbal update from officers /draft written options to Committee when available.		To be advised.	
Specific measures identified in the scoping document – Benchmark with like for like “family group” or similar composition local authorities		Dean Stevens Maintenance Manager, SDS and Tracy Jackson Operations Manager – Providing Homes The Scrutiny Officer has approached	Work to be undertaken outside of the formal committee meetings and then a verbal update from officers /draft written options to Committee when available.		To be advised.	

Issue	Who's effected? (where relevant)	Who identified to address this/provide data and interview? (whether they are internal SBC or external partner)	What evidence/data can they provide?	Meeting interview/ evidence received date: Link to Committee meeting where evidence/interview was undertaken:	Meeting scheduled for date: How the info will be gathered? (i.e. formal meetings, informal sub-groups meetings, written representations)	Action & date required If complete sign off in table:
Page 17		Welwyn Hatfield Council to see if they would meet with officers to start a conversation about benchmarking.				

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