



COMMUNITY SELECT COMMITTEE

Date: Wednesday, 2 November 2022

Time: 6.00pm

Location: Council Chamber, Daneshill House, Danestrete

Contact: Ian Gourlay (01438) 242703

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 I

1. APOLOGIES FOR ABSENCE AND DECLARATIONS OF INTEREST

2. MINUTES - TUESDAY 11 OCTOBER 2022

To approve as a correct record the Minutes of the Community Select Committee held on Tuesday 11 October 2022.

Pages 3 – 10

3. INTERVIEW WITH THE EXECUTIVE PORTFOLIO HOLDER FOR HOUSING & HOUSING DEVELOPMENT

Members are invited to interview the Executive Portfolio Holder for Housing and Housing Development regarding void properties.

4. FEEDBACK FROM THE MEMBER SITE VISIT TO VOID PROPERTIES - 13 OCTOBER 2022

To receive a report back on the Member site visit to three void properties on Thursday 13 October 2022.

Pages 11 – 14

5. UPDATE MAPPING EXERCISE DOCUMENT FOR HOUSING VOIDS REVIEW

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

Pages 15 – 22

6. URGENT PART I BUSINESS

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

7. 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.

8. URGENT PART II BUSINESS

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

STEVENAGE BOROUGH COUNCIL

COMMUNITY SELECT COMMITTEE MINUTES

Date: Tuesday, 11 October 2022

Time: 6.00pm

Place: Council Chamber, Daneshill House, Danestrete

Present: Councillors: Sarah Mead (Chair), Alex Farquharson (Vice-Chair), Stephen Booth, Adrian Brown, Jim Brown, Nazmin Chowdhury, John Duncan and Wendy Kerby

Start / End Time: Start Time: 6:00 pm
End Time: 7:25 pm

1 APOLOGIES FOR ABSENCE AND DECLARATIONS OF INTEREST

There were no apologies for absence received.

There were no declarations of Interest.

2 MINUTES - 5 SEPTEMBER 2022

It was **RESOLVED** that the minutes of Community Select Committee meeting held on Monday 5 September 2022 be approved as correct record and signed by the Chair.

3 DRAFT SCOPING DOCUMENT – VOIDS SCRUTINY REVIEW

The Chair introduced the draft scoping document to the Committee. The Chair summarised what the focus of the review would be on:

- To look at the current issues and challenges facing Housing Investment and Direct Service officers in making void properties ready for let
- To identify ways to improve the current service including, where possible, reducing the time to carry out works in the property before it is relet
- To re-engineer the letting process
- To better define the thresholds for standard voids and major voids
- To review the lettable standard
- To benchmark with like-for-like “family group” or similar composition local authorities who retain a housing stock

The Chair said she wanted to see a laser focus on what were the current problems with void properties and what made them difficult to turnaround and bring back to a lettable standard. The Chair was looking for the review to come forward with some practical recommendations that the Executive and officers can implement to improve the void service.

The Chair invited comment on the scoping document and highlighted the following issues:

Staffing issues

The Chair asked officers to update the Committee on staffing issues covering pay, terms and conditions and recruitment and retention issues in Stevenage Direct Service. Consideration of staffing issues is not just about pay as that is also considered in the context of work life balance, distance of commute, pension contribution, sick pay; which in a cost-of-living crisis can all impact on employment decisions. The Chair is keen for the review to consider remuneration aspects if these are factors that are affecting performance / capacity, such as a bonus system. The Assistant Director, Steve Dupoy, stated that they were also working with Human Resources, looking at the pay and remuneration package as there were shortages of skilled workers in what is a buoyant construction sector. In some instances, agency staff were being used, but this was a costly option and not something that is sustainable in the long term.

The Operations Director, Rob Gregory informed Members that an Empty Homes Co-ordinator post had been created. The post holder would take on the ownership and coordination for the end-to-end processes, to help towards synergising and optimising the voids service.

Members raised the issue that vacancies in SDS that are advertised on the Council's website do not come up under search engines such as Google, which many people use as a mechanism to search for jobs. The Chair suggested also advertising SDS jobs in the windows in the reception area. The issue of utilising apprenticeships was also raised, but a Member cautioned that this is not a panacea as there was a danger in recruiting apprentices if there was not a good level of staffing to train them which results in them staying low skilled and just being used as cheap labour. The flipside to this is, if they are well trained, there was a likelihood they leave for a better paid job in the industry. Officers stated that they would give this some further consideration and that the Strategic Leadership Team had recently discussed utilising the apprenticeship levy to see if there were opportunities that could be explored.

Re-engineering the letting process

Regarding re-engineer of the letting process, the Operations Director, Rob Gregory, stated that the legal standard would clearly be maintained as a minimum. In connection with this there was a Government review nationally of the Decent Homes Standard. Consultation on the Decent Homes standard had been finally published in early September and was open until the 14 October 2022. Currently the Stevenage Decent Homes standard is higher than the statutory standard, but the new national Decent Homes standard will likely be higher which will have implications on the Housing Revenue Account, so there will likely be issues regarding its affordability. Officers are hoping to receive the information on the new standard by the end of December 2022.

The Chair asked officers to consider a scenario where it might be better for a

potential new tenant to go into a vacant property once statutory safety checks are completed rather than waiting further weeks until the property meets the lettable standard, as they may be in urgent need of being re-housed following a private tenancy ejection? Tracy Jackson acknowledged that it would be helpful to know early in the process if new tenant was likely to turn the property down.

Members asked Officers to find out the number of private rented evictions there were in the Stevenage housing market. Tracy Jackson advised that the council only had knowledge of those who approached our Housing Options Service and agreed to circulate this information to Members.

The Chair asked Members and Officers to explore the issue of allowing new tenants to take access of the property so long as the minimum standards of health and safety are maintained. Officers could then enter the property and carry out other minor fixes when the tenant is in the property. A member stated that they were concerned with this approach, as it could take the pressure off the Council and the tenant could be left with problems in their property.

The Operations Director, Rob Gregory, stated that the Council has a legal responsibility to carry out electrical and gas safety inspections prior to new tenants taking on a lease as part of the existing Decent Homes standard. Issues like the quality of the kitchen and bathroom are covered by the Stevenage Decent Homes standard. Small aesthetic works could be carried out once a new tenant is in the property if that helps the tenant be housed quicker, but any major repairs would need to be done prior to a new tenancy.

Improved definitions between major and minor repairs

The review would need to address a demarcation between a major or minor repair. This needs to be better defined and broken down to clearer categories.

Benchmarking

A member asked what is meant by the need for more appropriate benchmarking as suggested in the scoping document? Cllr John Duncan suggested that the Council currently benchmarks with a national set of data via Housemark. The shortcomings of this benchmarking group are that this group may not be comparable to the housing stock in SBC. If the Council could find a more similar group of authorities / registered social landlords, it would add more value to officers in the sharing of best practise and ideas as well as performance.

The Chair asked if officers could consider using a void property to see what changes could be made to make it address climate change such as improved insulation/heat pumps etc. as the new Decent Homes standard will drive this, and the Council needs to be in a position to know what measures work best?

The Chair encouraged Members to look at what other authorities were doing with regard to housing in view of modular properties or reuse of existing housing.

The Chair shared with the Committee some other thoughts she had which she was

keen that the review should consider these included:

Exploring other options including pod style accommodation

Can officers consider a modular pod type simple accommodation (such as converted shipping containers or new build flat pack prefabricated one or two storey buildings), if we own plots of land that could be connected to utilities? A member suggested that 108 Oaks Cross would be a good example to look at as converted containers. Perhaps the new tenants of this accommodation should be asked what their view is? Tracy Jackson stated that a visit has been arranged for 24 October at 4pm if the Chair wished to attend? Where these have been used elsewhere, they are a cheap and effective option for housing and are well insulated so low energy to run.

Improved communications

The Chair raised the case that had been reported in the Comet newspaper that had raised a lot of angst regarding a tenant that had moved from London and had complained about the state of the property they were moved into it. The context is that this has angered people on the waiting list that can't get a property, who don't understand Statutory direct lets that the Council needs to accommodate, who are in category A.

The Chair raised this issue as she felt that there was a need for some clear messaging to be sent out from the Council on this issue, to help explain it to the public, with perhaps an article in the Chronicle and the use of social media to share accurate information on this issue. This could address the issue of lowering expectations of the Council, with older generations believing that it should be possible to house younger people, whereas the whole housing market has radically changed since the building of the new town. A Member cautioned that it would be very difficult to easily explain the Housing Allocations Policy. It might be more successful to inform the public on the numbers of stock such as circa 3,000 3 bed houses and the average tenancy is 12 years that would give the public an idea of the scale of the problem. The Operations Director, Rob Gregory, stated that although allocations wasn't in the direct scope of the review it was a related issue and the Community Select Committee would be invited to a Portfolio Holder Advisory Group later in the municipal year to look at a revised allocations policy, this would be accompanied by a wide public consultation on the issue.

Analysis of reasons for termination of tenancies

The Chair asked why are people leaving their accommodation? Some of the reasons can be forced evictions due to anti-social behaviour of the tenant. The Operations Director, Rob Gregory, confirmed that people leave their accommodation for a variety of reasons including ASB, death of the tenant, change of circumstances household family composition changes. The Operations Director offered to provide some in-depth analysis around the statistics and reasons for why people leave their accommodation and terminate their tenancies. A Member asked what happens to succession rights, which are often complicated to resolve? The Operations Director, Rob Gregory, stated that they all needed to be looked at on a case-by-case basis governed by the law. The Operations Manager – Providing Homes, Tracy Jackson

stated that we have secured tenancies, so it is different to the world of private landlords and tenants. The Council employs a Downsizing officer who would make an approach to older underoccupied tenants to see if they would consider a more suitable property. The Council can assist with removals as older people are often daunted with the huge upheaval of moving and the new dwelling needs to meet their needs but if the tenant refuses to move there is nothing that can be done.

The stress on the system comes from a high demand for property whilst stock remains void and also a loss of income to the Council.

The Chair raised the issue of tenant swaps and shared the example of an older resident who is not inclined to leave the 3 bed family home, although her children are now all adults and have left the home. In the same area there are families living in 1 or 2 bed flats with multiple children. The Chair asked if it is possible to have a fair and compassionate system that works for all? Is it right for the single older person to not have to consider moving to a smaller property to house the family so long as mitigations can be considered? The Chair shared the example of a former Housing Portfolio Holder who used to hold events akin to “speed dating” to try and match up prospective tenants to swap their properties which would formally be understood as a mutual exchange. A member cautioned that there can be unintended consequences if large groups of older people move out of larger accommodation to smaller units as this can stop the natural organic supply of this housing and make it very difficult for new generations coming into the social housing market.

Incentives for tenants to look after the property

The Chair asked if as part of the review officers could explore the issue of offering some incentives to tenants to look after their property. Can a deposit scheme be considered, perhaps £1 or £2 a week that could be accrued (to a maximum financial cut off point) as part of the rent over the life of the tenancy that could be given back to the tenant if the property is left to a standard re cleaning/decoration etc.? This would help reduce the cost to the Council and provide the tenant with a small deposit that would help them in their new dwelling when they move, if they do not leave it to the agreed standard this money could be a contribution for repairs and cleaning required in the property when they vacate the property. Coupled with this could be a more regular inspection regime that could warn the tenant that they could lose their accrued deposit.

The Operations Director, Rob Gregory, stated that this would definitely be worth looking at, currently tenancies audits are done by the residents and estates team, whose time is spent chasing rent arrears and looking at ASB issues, so a look at how the teams time could be freed up to look at tenancy audits would be really beneficial, and would mean the team can nip issues in the bud that left alone become much bigger issues to deal with and gives officers greater leverage when the property is handed over to the voids team to determine what needs to be done in the property.

The Chair asked how many people were currently being housed in hotels? The Operations Manager – Providing Homes, Tracy Jackson, advised that the use of

hotels for temporary accommodation has been significantly reduced as more accommodation has been made available via our Housing Development team. She agreed to bring back some figures to the Committee on this.

The Chair asked is the current SBC new build social housing stock finish of the Housing Development team too high a standard compared with the standard of the old stock? This matter would be picked up when the Executive Portfolio Holder for Housing & Housing Development was interviewed by the Committee in November. The Operations Director, Rob Gregory, said that this would need to be looked at as part of any future HRA business plan to balance the investment on the existing stock with the investment of the new stock. This is linked to the current asset management strategy, with an ageing original stock that is needing significant investment coupled with the pressures of retrofitting the stock to be net zero carbon to meet the demands of climate change there will need to be some difficult decisions about where the priorities are for both existing stock and new build.

4 **MAPPING EXERCISE DOCUMENT FOR HOUSING VOIDS REVIEW**

Members noted that the site visits to three void properties would be carried out on Thursday 13 October, and it was hoped that the visits would give those Members who attended it a better understanding of the challenges that face the Council when addressing voids.

A member expressed concern that there was a limited time to conduct all of the elements of the review that was left to do. In response the Chair suggested that individual Members on the Committee do their own “homework” and do their own desk top research with other new towns such as Crawley, Basildon and Harlow who have similar housing stock. The Chair stated that the Committee would endeavour to complete the review in the time allotted and the Operations Director was keen to come up with practical recommendations and make improvements to the performance on void properties.

It was noted that the Executive Portfolio Holder for Housing & Housing Development would be invited to attend the Committee’s next meeting on 2 November 2022 to discuss Housing Voids.

It was **RESOLVED** that the Mapping Exercise Document for the Housing Voids Review be noted.

5 **URGENT PART 1 BUSINESS**

None.

6 **EXCLUSION OF PUBLIC AND PRESS**

Note required.

7 **URGENT PART II BUSINESS**

CHAIR

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STEVENAGE BOROUGH COUNCIL

NOTES OF THE COMMUNITY SELECT COMMITTEE SITE VISIT TO VOID PROPERTIES FOR THE SCRUTINY REVIEW OF VOIDS

Date: Thursday, 13 October 2022

Time: 1pm

Site visit locations:

Void Property No.1 in the Roebuck Ward

Void Property No.2 in the Bedwell Ward and

Void Property No.3 in the Martinswood Ward

Present:

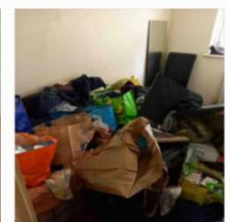
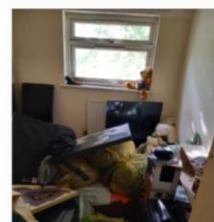
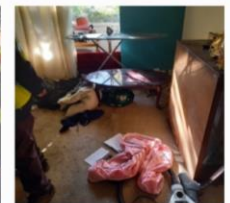
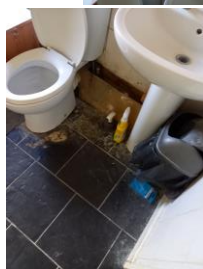
Councillors: Stephen Booth, and Julie Ashley-Wren

Officers: Tracy Jackson, Housing Supply Manager, Housing and Investment; Kamal Hulusi, Commercial and Contracts Manager Repairs and Voids; Andy Gore, Projects Officer, Stevenage Direct Services; Annabelle Wigann, Empty Homes Support Officer, Stevenage Direct Services; Lori Smith, Housing Options Case Worker, Housing & Investment and Stephen Weaver, Scrutiny Officer, Democratic Services.

Start Time: 1pm

End Time: 2.30pm

1. Void property no.1 – Roebuck Ward

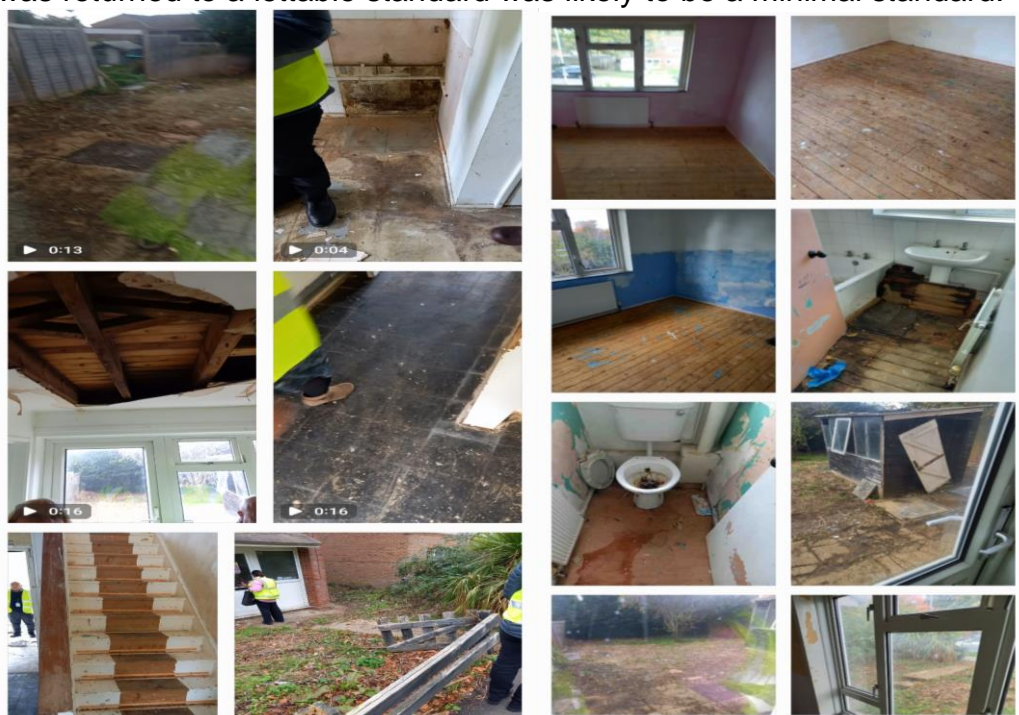


The property in the Roebuck Ward had recently been handed to the Stevenage Direct Services Voids Team, the site visit was carried out before any work had commenced on the property. The property had been vacated by the tenant. The circumstances of how the property had become void was not clear. The property had been left in an untidy and damaged state, with broken doors and broken tiles in the bathroom. The previous tenant had left a lot of personal possession as well as litter in the property. The carpets were all damaged and would need to be removed. The property smelt very damp. There was a lot of work needed to bring the property back to a lettable state.

2. Void property no.2 – in Bedwell Ward

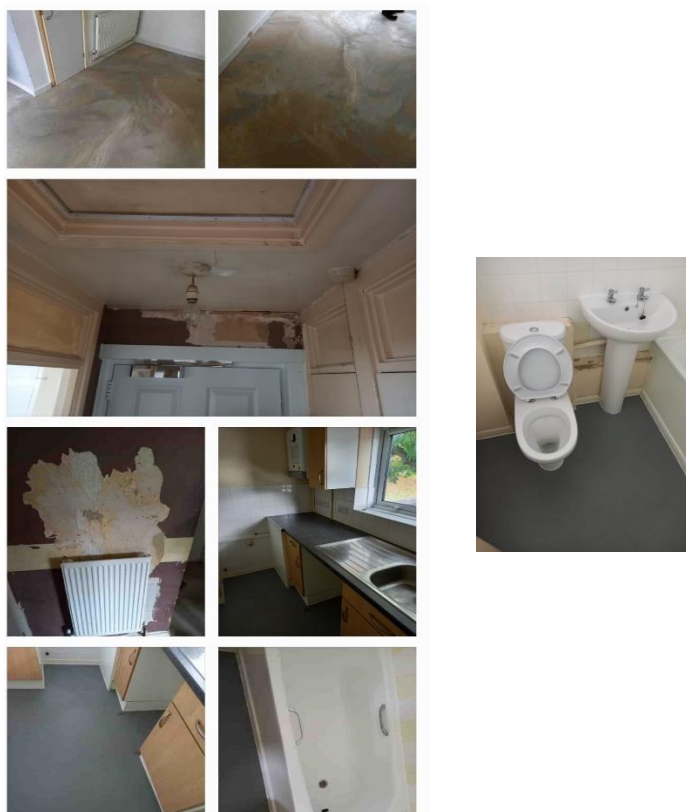
The property in the Bedwell Ward had undergone some work by the Stevenage Direct Services Voids Team, the site visit group were shown some print outs of photos of the property before any work had been carried out (these will be available to view at the meeting). The property had been left in a terrible condition with very large piles of rubbish at the side of the property and in the garden, including over 100 soiled nappies. The rubbish had all been cleared when viewed on the site visit. The property had been rat infested due to the poor condition the tenant had been living in. The family living at the property had contained young children so there were child safeguarding issues that were apparent to the Members and officers at the site visit.

The property had suffered from a first-floor flood in the bathroom which had damaged both the bathroom and the kitchen ceiling. The kitchen had been removed in preparation for a new one to be installed once the internal ceiling had been replaced. The toilet was in a poor state and would need to be replaced with likely some work needed in the bathroom. It appeared that some work had been carried out on the walls such as repairs to the plaster work. Once all the repairs were carried out the property would be a sound 3-bedroom property. However, Members were of the view that the level of decorating to be carried out before it was returned to a lettable standard was likely to be a minimal standard.



3. Void property no.3 – Martinswood Ward

The property in the Martinswood Ward was very close to being signed off by Stevenage Direct Services Voids Team. Members were of the view that although the property was brought back to a lettable standard having been in state of major disrepair because of the behaviour of the former tenant, similar to the other two properties, the level of decoration was minimal and therefore left an impression of not being complete.



4. Other comments made by Members

(i) It was commented that regular visits to the properties should be carried out to avoid them getting into such a terrible state. This could highlight problems to all relevant SBC departments and other public sector bodies and save the Council money in the long run by not having to carry out such extensive cleaning and repairs to the property if the tenant was warned about their care of the property before it reached such a terrible state.

(ii) Members asked how indicative as a percentage of void properties per year/month/week were the examples that Members were shown?

(iii) Was the low level of decoration on completed void properties not encouraging better behaviour with tenants or would it just be a waste of money if the tenant's lifestyle was so chaotic that the property would be bound to be left in such a poor state when they know there is no real consequences for their behaviour other than eviction?

5. Written note from Cllr Julie Ashley-Wren who attended the site visit

Thank you all for giving up your time yesterday to allow us to visit the three void properties.

It is shocking how people are living particularly when little children are part of the equation.

For me I think it highlights the need for regular inspections to all council properties. Unfortunately, so many professionals are no longer visiting children for health check-ups including Speech & language. The NHS and Social Care are really struggling so many issues are not being addressed and people who could manage to live independently with support are just not able to cope.

I think that we must address the issue of properties going under the radar and being vacated without SBC's knowledge. It is a travesty that other families are living in inadequate accommodation while properties are lying empty, for in some cases a year. This must have financial issues for the SBC including being required to pay the Council tax on these properties, that becomes 150% of the amount when a property has been empty for 6 months I believe.

It was clear yesterday that some of the properties are in a disgusting state when they become voids. I totally appreciate the team for all of their hard work in clearing and rectifying the properties. I am however concerned that delays in the turnaround of properties is due to a lack of staff in the in-house team. Surely to resolve this we should be outsourcing if we can't increase the number of in-house staff.

We need to make these properties available as a matter of urgency. Our families need us to up our game to support them with appropriate accommodation.

I do feel that we should consider ensuring that our accommodation matches the expectation of quantity of private rentals. If people move into a well decorated house/flat tenant they will have a better understanding of the expected standard of care of SBC properties.

Thank you all again
Julie

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	Community Select Committee 5 September 2022	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 16</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 13 October.</p>	<p>Informal site visits with whichever CSC members can attend a daytime site visit.</p>	<p>Scrutiny Officer to provide a note including photos from the site visit on 13 November 2022 to the CSC meeting on 2 November 2022</p> <p>✓</p>

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Sign off a scoping document		Scrutiny Officer submit draft scoping document to CSC 11 Oct 2022	Draft scoping document.	Scoping Document 11 10 22	11 October 2022	✓
CSC consider the mapping exercise document		Scrutiny Officer write up and maintain the document	Mapping document.	Mapping Exercise Document 11 10 22	11 October 2022	Scrutiny Officer to provide an update to 2 November meeting.
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		Tracy Jackson, Housing Supply Manager / Kemal Hulusi, Commercial	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		& Contracts Manager, Repairs & Voids	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.	Work to be undertaken outside of the formal committee meetings and then a verbal update from officers /draft written options to Committee when available.	This will be led and guided by Ridge, with support from SBC colleagues via the project group.	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.	This will be led and guided by Ridge, with support from SBC colleagues via the project group.	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		Tracy Jackson Operations Manager – Providing Homes The Scrutiny Officer has approached Welwyn Hatfield Council to see if they would meet with	Work to be undertaken outside of the formal committee meetings and then a verbal update from officers /draft written options to Committee when available.	A link has now been made with officers from Welwyn Hatfield and a meeting is being arranged for November 2022 to discuss informal benchmarking.	To be advised.	

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Page 21		officers to start a conversation about benchmarking.				

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