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COMMUNITY SELECT COMMITTEE

Date: Thursday, 9 March 2023

Time: 6.00pm

Location: Council Chamber, Daneshill House, Danestrete

Contact: Abbie Hamilton (01438) 242587

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 OF THE PREVIOUS MEETING - MONDAY 9 JANUARY 2023

To approve as a correct record the Minutes of the Community Select Committee held on Monday 9 January 2023.

Pages 3 – 6

3. DRAFT WORK PROGRAMME FOR 2023-24

To consider the draft work programme for the Community Select Committee for 2023-24.

Pages 7 – 12

4. DRAFT REPORT & RECOMMENDATIONS OF THE SCRUTINY REVIEW OF HOUSING VOIDS

To consider the draft report and recommendations of the Community Select Committee review of Housing Voids.

Pages 13 – 22

5. URGENT PART I 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 100A 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, 9 January 2023

Time: 6.00pm

Place: Shimkent Room, Daneshill House, Danestrete

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

Also in Attendance Councillor Julie-Ashley Wren

Start / End Time: Start Time: 6.00pm
End Time: 7.30pm

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

Apologies for absence were received from Councillor John Duncan.

There were no declarations of interest.

2 **MINUTES OF THE PREVIOUS MEETING**

It was **RESOLVED** that the Minutes of the meeting of the Community Select Committee held on Wednesday 2 November 2022 be approved as a correct record and signed by the Chair.

3 **UPDATE ON DAMP AND MOULD**

The Committee received a presentation from the Housing Investment Programme Manager, regarding the latest position with regard to damp and mould cases in the Council's housing stock, including the statutory response to the Secretary of State following the tragic death of Awaab Ishak, who died of a respiratory condition caused by mould in his housing association home in Rochdale.

Members were reminded of the 2017 review of damp and mould carried out by the Committee which resulted in a new Policy being adopted in 2020 which included the appointment of specialist contractors, a new case management approach to enable more effective handling of damp cases and new contract specifications to take a holistic approach.

Members were pleased to note there had been a reduction in repeat cases and customer complaints since the implementation of the new Policy.

Officers advised that future steps included:

- carrying out a review of the Council's damp & condensation policy to ensure it remained fit for purpose and further develop the improvement plan;
- an ambitious condition survey programme targeting 50% of stock to identify future improvement programmes;
- developing case management processes further to improve resident engagement. Additional capacity would be built into the HRA Budget for 2023/24 to support this;
- developing the IT system for case management including reporting tools to get more data enabling more targeted and earlier interventions;
- planning further projects such as air quality monitors, use of technology and alternative wall finishes;
- improving reporting and feedback mechanisms to make it easier for tenants.

In response to a question from a Member, Officers advised that in relation to recent stories on social media regarding legal advice to residents regarding disrepair claims, the advice to residents was not to engage with landlords. It was felt that this could jeopardise remedial works which were needed.

Members were pleased to see the improvements in this area since the review in 2017 however, were still concerned regarding the quality and timeliness of the response received when dialling into the Customer Service Centre (CSC). Officers advised that they were aware of this issue and that work was being undertaken to improve the response including the script used by staff in the CSC.

In response to a question, Officers advised that tenants were responsible for reporting any issues they may experience in a timely fashion to the Council. Officers outlined multiple issues currently contributing to the rise in cases. These included not enough air changes, the refusal to use extractor fans and to turn central heating on due to the increase in utility charges added to the problem of poor air quality.

Members were confident that the service would continue to improve, particularly following the recent television interview given by the Operations Director, Rob Gregory and also the knowledge and work of the Housing Investment Programme Manager, Keith Pierson.

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

4 **UPDATE ON VOIDS SCRUTINY REVIEW**

The Committee received an update on the scrutiny review of Housing Voids, including an updated mapping document highlighting the areas for improvement based on the issues raised by the Committee.

Improvements included:

- Pre-Void inspection must be completed to make outgoing tenant aware of their responsibilities and allow for planning of work needed;
- A review of Stevenage Direct Service's capacity to turnaround current properties;

- A review of the lettable standard required along with lettings packs;
- Customer surveys pre and post-let and complaints analysis;
- Benchmarking partners contacted to allow assessment of the Council's performance against similar organisations.

Officers advised that it was essential for the Council to make use of the whole 4 week notice period to offer advice and if necessary explanations regarding what the tenant would be charged for at the end of their tenancy as well as scoping out required works.

It was noted that a new Empty Homes Co-ordinator had been appointed to manage the process from as soon as notice had been given by a tenant to the re-letting of a property.

Concern was expressed regarding the process of changing the locks for a property which officers agreed to reconsider to ensure there were no issues for new tenants.

Members agreed the need to improve post-work inspections and ensure the property was inspected by a different team to that which carried out the improvement works and ensure the property was turned round in good time to the current lettable standard.

The Scrutiny Officer asked officers to consider assigning timescales to the various elements and actions from the voids mapping document and to report this back to Members. The Operations Manager – Providing Homes, agreed to consult with officers and report back on this.

The Operations Director advised that due to current levels of staffing, consideration was being given to the exploration of short-term partnering arrangements with third party contractors.

Members noted the Reviews required to underpin Future Voids Key-to-Key Process:

- Review of Tenancy Audit Process;
- Review of documentation required to end a tenancy (to include clarity about early return of keys and subsequent commencement of works);
- Review of Standard and Major Works definitions required
- Review of ongoing Asset Management Strategy
- Review Aids and Adapts process to make best use of stock.

In response to a suggestion from a Member, Officers agreed to review the issue of a potential deposit scheme for tenants.

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

5 **URGENT PART 1 BUSINESS**

None.

6 **EXCLUSION OF PUBLIC AND PRESS**

Not required.

7 **URGENT PART II BUSINESS**

None.

CHAIR

Meeting COMMUNITY SELECT COMMITTEE

Portfolio Area

Date 9 March 2023

COMMUNITY SELECT COMMITTEE - DRAFT WORK PROGRAMME ITEMS FOR 2023-24

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Contributors

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1 PURPOSE

- 1.1 To agree the draft scrutiny work programme for the Select Committee for the new Municipal Year from a list of suggested possible work programme items by Members and items previously suggested by Members.

2 RECOMMENDATIONS

- 2.1 That Scrutiny Members' feedback on ideas for improving Scrutiny (see section 4) be noted.
- 2.2 That having considered ideas put forward by individual Members, (see section 5), the Committee determines the subject matters to be added to a work programme of potential Scrutiny reviews items for 2023/24.
- 2.3 That the Portfolio Holder Advisory Group meetings to carry out policy development work identified so far for the Committee (see section 7.1) be noted.

3 BACKGROUND

- 3.1 Scrutiny Committees are asked to draft their work programme ahead of the new Municipal year in order that work may begin as soon as the Committees are appointed at Annual Council. Any outstanding and unfinished studies, where applicable, might also need to be included.

- 3.2 During February 2023 Members provided feedback on the current Scrutiny activity and on ideas for the Work Programme for the 2023/24 Municipal Year.
- 3.3 When considering what work to undertake in the coming year, Members may wish to consider if the matter in question is of a cross-cutting nature and might lend itself to being considered jointly with another Select Committee.
- 3.4 Officers have also been requested to bring to the Committee's attention, likely Portfolio Holder Advisory Group (PHAG) policy development items that the Select Committee might be requested to consider and comment on before reports there are submitted to the Executive.
- 3.5 The Committee may also consider whether specific time should be allocated for monitoring or review of recommendations of previous studies. During the summer the Committee will receive a copy of the Action Tracker for the Community Select Committee at which time the Committee can note progress on past reviews and determine whether they wish to bring back any further detailed updates on specific former review items at that time.
- 3.6 It is recognised that there is a limited dedicated officer resource for the scrutiny work of three Scrutiny Committees and therefore it is important to ensure that work plans are in place in order that the call on those resources and on each Committee's time on all its activities are prioritised and evenly spread across the year. To make best use of the resource it is suggested that each Committee chooses 1 substantive review item for the year which will be the Committee's main review, undertaken over a number of meetings. In addition the Committee could receive between 2 or 3 one-off single issue performance items and 3 to 4 Portfolio Holder Advisory Group (PHAG) meetings during the year.

4 MEMBERS' IDEAS FOR IMPROVING SCRUTINY

- 4.1 In February 2023, all Members of the Council's Scrutiny Committees were emailed a survey to gauge views of the Scrutiny work undertaken and ideas for future studies. The following summary is based on the 8 replies received from the 22 Members who are on one or more of the Council's Scrutiny Committees.
- 4.2 Members were asked to (i) comment on current scrutiny activity and (ii) identify any issues that could be addressed to improve the current arrangements and (iii) state what training needs they may have. Members provided comment and challenge around the following areas that relate to the Community Select Committee:

Survey Question 1 - Please rate the following aspects of this year's scrutiny activity:
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Voids process review was good
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Voids has been productive, with some decent recommendations put forward
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • E&E seems to be getting to grip with the climate emergency, but it's been a long journey. It still needs a commitment to get annual reports on outcomes like the total CO₂ equivalent emissions in Stevenage; the recent O&S meeting on climate was extremely disappointing and left me worrying that the Council still hasn't really understood the subject or the urgency
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Some PHAG meetings have been poor – the Zoom format has not helped
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • I hope the most effective piece of scrutiny will turn out to be the climate change work
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Getting £7,500 for the Old Town
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Effective (producing a result that is wanted) None
Survey Question 2 - What aspect of scrutiny could be improved to provide a better scrutiny service?
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Accountability
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Only scrutinising things you actually have the influence or cooperation to change.
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • We did some work on 'scrutiny of scrutiny' a couple of years ago. I am not sure what has happened to it? Change of council leadership may provide a new opportunity to press for change here
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • The public health scrutiny hasn't happened yet. It should.
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • We are in a halfway house with the election / appointment of scrutiny chairs and national advice. Perhaps if we move further there will be further improvement. It is clear that some have a limited grasp of what scrutiny could do. It is not a sub-set of the Executive.
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • I'd like to see more decisive action coming off the back of the exercise, maybe with some targets
Survey Question 3 - Regarding supporting you in your Scrutiny role is there any specific training you would like for next year, and would you (occasionally) like to receive information about possible Member Scrutiny training?
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Work shadowing opportunities to gain a more hands on experience of understanding experiences of different areas of SBC
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • If there is going to be training, please can it be with something like the CfPS rather than in-house. We need to get wider experiences.
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Happy to receive any training offered x 2

5 MEMBERS' IDEAS FOR FUTURE SCRUTINY REVIEWS

5.1 Scrutiny Members' Suggestions for Future Scrutiny Review Items

5.1.1 In response to Survey question 4 “What issues would you like to be considered for inclusion in scrutiny work programme for next year” The following issues have been raised by Members as potential Scrutiny review items:

Survey Question 4 - What issues would you like to be considered for inclusion in the (Community Select Committee) scrutiny work programme for next year? (Max 3 items)	What type of review (main, PHAG, one off performance)?
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Suggested last year in 2022 - Locality budgets and ward related spending: reviewing inputs from ward members. 39 members have a say in this. Comms with officers are still not as good as they good be. Some SBC links with neighbourhood groups still very clunky and appear bureaucratic and controlling. This effectively reviews progress or lack of in FTFC and CNM. Where are those blockages? 	One off 1 meeting performance review
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Suggested last year in 2022 - Local Community Centres / Local Committees / Residents Meetings: a review of the current mix, and a consideration of the pros and cons of Joint Local Committees, as previously operated. Then we had a problem that the usual few hogged the discussion (including members!). But the current mix is confusing. We need to see how we can engage a wider public in our local projects, programmes and spending. The background of the emergent hub and spokes model for SBC investment in community infrastructure makes perfect sense. The overlong review of current community centres has passed through 4 portfolio holders, including me. And taken far too long! 	Possible main review
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Repairs definitely need looking at • I would like a review of the way that the housing repairs service is managed in order to make it more efficient. I specifically mean the practice of having no one person overseeing work on a property with multiple issues. Instead, each department deals with their tiny bit of the puzzle and no one talks to one another. I continually witness this leading to massively inefficient practices and frustrated residents. I think there are some easy wins here that we should explore 	Possible main review
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • I would like to put the cultural Strategy on too 	One off performance meeting
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • An update on the Community Centres – what is the relationship between SBC and the community centre’s now? 	One off performance meeting
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Enforcement of tenancy agreements 	One off performance meeting
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • A look into Housing section at SBCs use of consultants, to include statements from the people responsible for hiring the consultants and the due diligence they completed on the individuals or companies and the steps they took to ensure we didn’t have the skills required within the existing team. (This suggestion is also being raised at O&S Committee but not ringfenced around housing) 	Possible main review
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Public Health Scrutiny needs to happen x 2 (<i>this year’s session did not take place as the Dir. of Public Health was unable to attend the scheduled meeting</i>) 	One off performance meeting
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • We already have a commitment to look at the latest census data for Stevenage. Some of the questions could be how are we responding to the changing demographic; how are we ensuring that future surveys will represent the population including by age, ethnicity and tenure; how well does the SBC employment profile match the community profile? (This suggestion is also being raised at O&S Committee) 	One off performance meeting

5.2 **Statutory and Standing Items**

5.2.1 Crime and Disorder Committee (Statutory Committee)

5.2.2 Public Health Meeting (Standing Item)

5.3 Members should note that whatever issues they agree to be scrutinised as a main review item would be subject to a full scoping process and subsequently a scoping document would need to be agreed by the Committee at a future meeting. Other items, which can be addressed by a briefing and discussion item, may not require a full scoping document.

5.5 **Work Programme Schedule for 2023/24**

5.5.1 When the Scrutiny Work Programme is agreed by the Community Select Committee, the Scrutiny Officer will, using the agreed dates for generic Select Committee meetings in the Calendar of Meetings, draw together a work programme schedule for the 2023/24 Municipal Year, including scrutiny review meetings, monitoring of previous reviews selected by Members and policy development meetings, which will be circulated to Members, and electronic diary invites will be sent to all Community Select Committee Members.

5.6. **Role of the Assistant Directors and Scrutiny**

5.6.1 The Assistant Directors will take a leadership role in assisting and supporting the relevant Scrutiny Committees and specific reviews that align to their area of expertise. The Assistant Directors (ADs) will support each review through its various stages, from scoping of reviews, attending Chair and Vice-Chair briefings and offering support to the Scrutiny Officer in providing written and oral evidence for reviews as well as identifying 'Critical Friends' and other review witnesses. The Assistant Directors will liaise with the relevant Executive Portfolio Holder(s) and the Senior Leadership Team (CE and Assistant CE's).

5.6.2 Strategic Director, Tom Pike from the Strategic Leadership Team has overall responsibility for the Scrutiny function, deputised by Strategic Director Richard Protheroe.

6 MONITORING REVIEW OF RECOMMENDATIONS VIA THE ACTION TRACKER

6.1 The Committee may consider there is a need to undertake some follow-up work on recommendations arising from previous studies. It may be considered sufficient to simply request update briefings from the relevant Heads of Service to be circulated to Members at appropriate intervals. However, if the Committee requires more detailed consideration or examination of the progress of previous recommendations, this should be factored into its work programme. To help assist Members to consider this, an updated Action Tracker document will be brought to the Committee in the summer and any additional work programme items will need to be added following that meeting.

7 PORTFOLIO HOLDER ADVISORY GROUP - POLICY DEVELOPMENT WORK FOR 2022/23

7.1 In line with the Council and Executive work plan, the following items have been identified for potential Policy Development to be undertaken with the relevant Portfolio Holders during the 2023/24 Municipal Year:

- Future Model for Community Centres, currently to be scheduled to the Executive, PHAG to be advised.
- Likely to be other PHAGs but not currently flagged on the Exec Work Programme

7.1.1 The above schedule is subject to change and may be added to. Members will be contacted with a meeting invitation closer to the PHAG meeting.

7.2 These meetings are private informal meetings Chaired by the relevant Executive Portfolio Holder and supported by the relevant Assistant Director.

8 IMPLICATIONS

Financial Implications

8.1. There are no direct financial implications arising from the recommendations in this report.

Legal Implications

8.2. The role of Overview and Scrutiny Committees is set out in the Local Government Act 2000. The recommendations made in this report are to facilitate the Committees to fully undertake this role.

Equalities and Diversity Implications

8.3. There are no direct Equalities and Diversity implications arising from the recommendations in this report. Specific equalities and diversity implications are considered during each scrutiny review.

Meeting: COMMUNITY SELECT COMMITTEE

Portfolio Area: Housing & Housing Development

Date: 9 MARCH 2023

DRAFT REPORT AND RECOMMENDATIONS OF THE SCRUTINY REVIEW OF VOIDS

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Contributors – Councillor Sarah Mead, Chair of Community Select Committee;
Councillor Alex Farquharson, Vice-Chair of Community Select Committee;
Operations Director, Rob Gregory; Assistant Director, Steve Dupoy and Operations
Manager – Providing Homes, Tracy Jackson

1 PURPOSE

1.1 To consider the report and recommendations of the Community Select Committee Scrutiny, looking at the performance of void properties within the Council's housing stock.

2 BACKGROUND & SCRUTINY ISSUE IDENTIFIED

2.1 The issue of scrutinising the performance of voids was agreed by the Select Committee as a scrutiny review item along with other scrutiny items when it met on 16 March 2022, and this choice was confirmed by the Committee when it reconsidered their work programme on 7 July 2022.

2.2 Scope and Focus of the review

2.2.1 The scope for the review was agreed when the Committee met on 11 October 2022 [Agenda for Community Select Committee on Tuesday, 11 October 2022, 6.00pm \(stevenage.gov.uk\)](#). It was agreed that the scope should include a focus on:

- To look at the current issues facing Housing Investment and Direct Service officers in the end to end process of voids; from tenants out to tenants in
- Identify ways to improve the current service including, where possible, reducing the time to carry out works in the property before it is relet
- Re-engineer the letting process

- Better define the thresholds for standard void and major void – (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)
- Review the lettable standard – (The context is that there is a need to review the lettable standard as well as there is also a need for a brief, easily readable document that can be understood and accessible via the Council’s website)
- Benchmark with like for like “family group” or similar composition local authorities. It is felt that the current broad national 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.

2.3 **Process of the review**

2.3.1 The Committee met on 3 occasions in total with 3 formal Committee meetings to undertake the review as follows: On 5 September 2022, 11 October 2022 and 2 November 2022, and held 2 site visits days on 13 October to visit 3 properties at various stages of the void process at properties in Roebuck, Bedwell and Martinswood and a revisit on 2 November to the property in Bedwell.

2.3.2 The Committee interviewed the following witnesses:

- Operations Manager – Providing Homes, Tracy Jackson
- SDS Service Delivery Manager, Dean Stevens
- Assistant Director, Steve Dupoy
- Operations Director, Rob Gregory
- Executive Portfolio Holder for Housing & Housing Development, Cllr Jeannette Thomas

2.4 Site visits

2.4.1 At the site visits Members were supported by Kemal Hulusi, Commercial and Contracts Manager; Tracy Jackson, Housing Supply Manager; Andy Gore, Projects Officer, Stevenage Direct Services; Annabelle Wigann, Empty Homes Support Officer, Stevenage Direct Services; Lori Smith, Housing Options Case Worker, Housing & Investment.

3 THE COMMITTEES FINDINGS

3.1 Conclusions of the Community Select Committee re scrutiny of voids

3.1.1 Following an informal meeting with Cllr John Duncan and two site visits and the formal meetings of the Committee on 5 September, 11 October, 2 November 2022 and 9 February 2023, the following suggestions and observations were made by Members which have led to the recommendations in the report at section 4:

3.2 Reducing the time to carry out works in the property before it is relet – test case Bedwell property

- 3.2.1 The time it takes to carry out works is an area that should be looked at for improvement. Using the example of the properties that Members viewed on the site visits, showed that there were delays that could possibly be improved on. For instance, the property viewed in Bedwell was subject to a lengthy legal process due to the former tenant abandoning the property in March 2022 and the whole relet process taking 8 months. During this time there was a very long legal delay including a notice to quit period, and then a further delay before the property was repossessed.
- 3.2.2 Members have asked officers from the Housing and Investment team, during the pre-void and tenancy termination period, to look at these processes to see if, in cases where the tenant has clearly abandoned the property, not being able to access the property or do any works on the property during this time appears to be unreasonable, given that the Council is the landlord.
- 3.2.3 Even when access was regained in July 2022 there was still a delay in carrying out works such as the clearing of the garden, erection of a new fence and removal of an asbestos outbuilding, which could have been carried out in parallel to the internal works, many of these tasks were carried out close to the property being relet, adding a further delay. Members accept that this is one case, but the case demonstrated that there is clearly room for improvement. Without data that shows the type (standard or major works) and length of works there is no way to properly assess the performance of voids.

3.3 Scheduled inspection of property

Members of the Select Committee have identified during the review the benefits of more frequent inspections to identify tenancy breaches and tenants who need further support. A complete programme of tenancy audits would require an increase in staffing resource and this proposal would need to be considered as part of future Housing Revenue Account business plans and budget proposals. This would be an 'invest to save' proposal which would require an up-front investment to recruit more inspection staff but should stop cases of neglect of the property which then requires substantial investment to carry out repairs to the void and bring it back to a lettable standard. This recommendation would tie into a review that officers are carrying out for the whole service to improve pre-void inspection and the programme of visits during the tenancy.

3.4 Voids end-to-end process review

Members are aware that there is going to be a Voids end-to-end process review to identify areas for improvement and to achieve optimum service performance. Members are of the view that this needs to be carried out as a priority.

3.5 **Recruitment**

Members were informed that the voids team were struggling with the demand and at the time of the review were working at 50% staff capacity. However, the team was in the process of recruiting an Empty Homes Co-ordinator, a Voids Officer, a Voids Operative and 3 DLO operatives to ease the pressure. Members will be keen to be kept informed of the progress of this recruitment process. Members are also aware that as a stop gap to relieve the backlog with the void cases, a partnering arrangement with a contractor has commenced to address this problem. Members wish to be kept informed of the progress of this work with meaningful data on quantity of cases and timescales to complete work.

3.6 **Data on void properties**

Throughout the review it has been difficult to gauge the extent of the problem as there has been no definitive number of voids or length on time voids take to complete. It has been recognised in the corporate performance report and work is under way to address this.

3.7 **Incentives for tenants to keep properties in order**

Following comments from officers 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, this could be 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 currently the case, which builds in a delay to the void process.

3.8 **Capacity of the Stevenage Direct Service's to turnaround current properties**

The Stevenage Direct Services (SDS) team who are engaged to undertake repairs to the empty homes, are currently under resourced with vacancies in key positions within what is a small team. This creates capacity issues for the team to respond and keep on top of their existing work load. The interim partnering arrangement described in 3.5 will mitigate this.

3.9 **A review of the lettable standard required along with lettings packs**

Members were of the view that the current lettable standard was very low, and consideration needs to be given as to whether a higher standard is achievable without significantly increasing the budget or whether efficiencies can be found within the current void budget (if less is spent on repairs due to increased inspections then more funds could be directed to an improved lettable standard). Providing revised lettings packs would help officers manage new tenants and would help establish what the expectation of the tenant's behaviour is from the beginning.

3.10 **Customer surveys pre and post-let and complaints analysis**

Members were of the view that Housing officers should be using the response of their customers the tenants to shape the service based on their responses in customer surveys at pre and post let stages. If tenants are happier with the process as evidenced in their survey responses this should drive down the number of complaints that the service receives and has to respond to.

3.11 **Benchmarking partners contacted to allow assessment of the Council's performance against similar organisations**

3.12 During the review the Operations Manager – Providing Homes, Tracy Jackson and the Scrutiny Officer, Stephen Weaver met with two officers from Welwyn Hatfield District Council.

3.13 Welwyn Hatfield District Council (WH) had just gone through a similar review process of their own end-to-end voids process. There were parallels with Stevenage around the size of their retained housing stock (WH having 10,000 properties to Stevenage's 8,000) but WH service was being solely run via an external third-party contractor, unlike Stevenage they did not have their own direct labour trades teams. However, they experienced problems with a former contractor and had recently awarded the work to a new contractor with tighter monitoring of the finished work. Officers have reached out to their counterparts at Dacorum District Council to see if they would be willing to discuss benchmarking but it has not been possible as yet to arrange a meeting with them.

3.14 Key issues the WH officers shared that could be incorporated into SBC voids processes:

- Make sure you (housing client side in our instance) sign off the void repair works – you control the quality, not the voids repair team whether outsourced contractor or internal DSO
- Don't be tempted to allow the voids repairs team to say we will come back on various jobs to finish off once the tenant is in situ, there is a good chance that this work will slip or won't happen at all
- There is a need for accountability for the DLO with a separate survey team
- It's important to have firm key to key dates, for both short term and long term voids work
- The Housing Team should keep all of their own data and monitor/manage it
- There is always a triangle of Cost, Quality and Time, you can't have all three e.g. if you have quality you can't do it quickly or cheaply – The service and Members will need to decide what the priority is?

3.15 Housing Officers have seen the benefits of this initial benchmarking exercise and are keen to expand this to other similar local authorities with similar

housing service composition. However, it should be noted that it is hard initially to get responses and engagement from other authorities and takes some work to arrange meetings.

3.16 Review of Tenancy Audit Process

It has been established that a programme of tenancy audits would identify issues such as alterations made by the tenant, as well as ensuring that property information is correct for future lettings. Contact with the outgoing tenant during the notice period has also been identified as essential.

3.17 Review of Standard and Major Works definitions required

To ensure that properties are correctly managed, and performance is monitored. The review of Voids will establish a clear definition for Standard and Major Voids to ensure properties are correctly managed along the Void path and performance is effectively monitored.

3.18 Review of ongoing Asset Management Strategy

It was not possible to develop this area of the review during the three formal meetings. This issue will be picked up as part of the Ridge review.

3.19 Review Aids and Adapts process to make best use of stock

It was not possible to develop this area of the review during the three formal meetings. This issue will be picked up as part of the Ridge review.

Conclusion

In the first instance the current void process, end to end, is not optimised in terms of the time it takes. Capacity challenges in SDS has also meant that empty homes repairs are taking longer than they should, plus activities between the Housing voids team and the repairs team need to be better synergised. The whole end to end process needs to be improved so that valuable assets that bring in much needed income to the Council and much needed properties to existing and prospective tenants are made available as soon as possible. Housing officers (in particular the newly appointed Empty Homes Coordinator) need to closely monitor the whole end-to-end voids process and if the new practises are put in place this will improve performance. As well as speeding up the process, reliable data on the number and types of voids and the various stages of voids need to be recorded and shared on a regular basis with Members. Stages of Voids need to be recorded and shared via the quarterly Executive performance report.

4 RECOMMENDATIONS

- 4.1 That the Community Select Committee agrees the conclusions of the report as well as the recommendations below and that these will be presented to

the Executive Portfolio Holder for Housing & Housing Development and that a response be provided from these and any other named officers and partners within two months of the publishing of this report.

4.2 **Recommendation 1- Carry out programmed Tenancy Audit of properties:**

4.2.1 Carry out a programmed cycle of inspections on properties. See para 3.1.3. Consideration would need to be given to how such an inspection regime would be instigated and whether there could be agreed triggers that would necessitate a visit, such as complaints from neighbours due to the dumping of rubbish, non-payment of rent as well as any planned maintenance or reactive maintenance visits to the property etc.

4.3 **Recommendation 2 – Parallel processes:**

4.3.1 When a tenant has given the Council notice and hands in the keys early, the voids team will carry out works and administrative processes that are required to minimise the void loss period.

4.3.2 In cases where it is clear that the tenant has abandoned the property, and where the Council is legally able to do so, that the works that are required in the property be carried out in parallel to the legal process of formally regaining the property via the notice to quit period and the repossession order.

4.4 **Recommendation 3 - Regular sharing of useful data on voids with Members:**

4.4.1 Provide data on all void properties for a twelve-month period. To see what the actual performance of 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.

4.4.2 That until Members are confident that there are new robust monitoring procedures in place for the voids process then Members will be recommending that there should be regular monitoring of progress with voids which is shared with Members on a quarterly basis.

4.5 **Recommendation 4 – Recruitment:**

4.5.1 Provide periodic updates to the Executive Portfolio Holder for Housing and Housing Development, and in turn the Community Select Committee on the progress with recruitment and retention of DSO officers and with any temporary outsourcing of voids work to external contractors.

4.6 **Recommendation 5 - a revised Officer data capture of end-to-end void process:**

4.6.1 That officers provide Members with a proposal of the end-to-end void process so they can make a view as to whether this process is likely to have the desired Impact of raising the current performance levels of the voids service.

4.7 **Recommendation 6 – investigate potential incentives and penalties to encourage tenants to maintain their rented properties in a reasonable condition**

4.7.1 As referred to in paragraph 3.1.7 the Chair is keen for officers to explore opportunities for ways to incentivise tenants to maintain and leave their properties in a reasonable state of repair without piles of rubbish and discarded personal possessions, which is often currently the case. This could be in the form of a financial incentive scheme (at the level of £100 if it is left up to the required standard) or in the form of a disincentive, such as a penalty fee or delay/ban in transferring to an alternative SBC property. Members are aware that this may be of limited impact, especially for tenants who simply abandon the property.

4.8 **Recommendation 7 - Pursue better benchmarking with similar local authorities**

4.8.1 Officers saw the benefit of local, meaningful benchmarking discussions and future sharing of data compared with the current national benchmarking group – Housemark. see paragraph 3.1.11. Housing officers will continue to reach out to other similar sized authorities who have a retained housing stock to share experiences and where possible data.

4.9 **Recommendation 8 – Undertake a review of the lettable standard**

4.9.1 Members found that the current lettable standard is too low. Members are therefore recommending that there be a review of the lettable standard. Members recognise that there would likely be cost implications to this recommendation, but this can be considered as part of the wider revision of the HRA Business Plan.

5.1 Legal Implications

5.1.1 There are no direct legal implications for this report.

5.2 Equalities Implications

5.2.1 It is hoped that by carrying out the review of voids the needs of the protected characteristic groups whether they are new housing applicants or existing tenants, will improve their customer journey.

5.3 Climate Change Implications

5.3.1 It is important that any new ways of working regarding improving the current Voids process takes into account the need to consider the climate change

implications so that the Council does not make the position any worse than it currently is with regard to the amount of carbon used and where possible identifies ways to reduce the carbon. For instances, an earlier intervention with regular inspections could result in carbon being saved due to less intensive repairs having to be carried out on a property, with the replaced goods requiring carbon in their manufacturing processes and the likely use of landfill for disposal of household items and old kitchens and bathrooms with associated carbon costs and environmental impact for this.

5.4 Financial Implications

5.4.1 There are no direct financial implications in the report. Any recommendations considered by the Executive if they are agreed for implementation where there are potential financial implications would need to be addressed as part of the refreshed HRA Business Plan.

APPENDICES:

None

BACKGROUND DOCUMENTS – Notes of the Member Site Visits

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