

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