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COMMUNITY SELECT COMMITTEE

Date: Monday, 9 January 2023
Time: 6.00pm,
Location: Council Chamber, Daneshill House, Danestrete
Contact: Lisa Jerome 01438 242203
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

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AGENDA

PART 1

1. APOLOGIES FOR ABSENCE AND DECLARATIONS OF INTEREST

2. MINUTES OF THE PREVIOUS MEETING

To approve as a correct record the Minutes of the Community Select Committee held on Wednesday 2 November 2022.

Pages 3 – 8

3. UPDATE ON DAMP AND MOULD

To receive a presentation from the Housing Investment Programme Manager, Keith Pierson, regarding the latest position with 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.

4. UPDATE ON VOIDS SCRUTINY REVIEW

To receive an update on the scrutiny review of Housing Voids, including an updated scrutiny review mapping document and a simple process map for voids, highlighting the areas for improvement based on the issues the CSC have raised.

CSC Voids review mapping document attached. Process map for voids to follow.

Pages 9 – 14

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

Agenda Published 22 December 2022

STEVENAGE BOROUGH COUNCIL

COMMUNITY SELECT COMMITTEE
MINUTES

Date: Wednesday, 2 November 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, Wendy Kerby and Anne Wells
Start / End Time:	Start Time: 6.00pm End Time: 7.58pm

1 APOLOGIES FOR ABSENCE AND DECLARATIONS OF INTEREST

There were no apologies for absence.

There were no declarations of interest.

2 MINUTES - TUESDAY 11 OCTOBER 2022

It was **RESOLVED** that the Minutes of the meeting of the Community Select Committee held on 11 October 2022 be approved as a correct record and signed by the Chair.

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

The Select Committee interviewed the Executive Portfolio Holder for Housing and Housing Development in respect of void properties.

The Chair referred to a series of questions she had asked in advance, and to which the Portfolio Holder had answered. These had been circulated to Members of the Select Committee, and the Chair stated that they would form the basis of any supplementary questions asked at the meeting.

The Portfolio Holder's (and officers') responses to a series of supplementary questions and statements included the following:

- there was a requirement for recruitment of both front line operatives and support staff to bring the repairs service back up to a full complement;
- it was planned to introduce a cyclical service of gutter cleansing in the near future, which was an example of enhancing the focus on planned/cyclical preventative maintenance works;
- statistics would be provided on the number of housing tenants who vacate properties without leaving any forwarding address details;

- the legalities of imposing a form of deposit system would be investigated, as would a possible incentive scheme to reward tenants for leaving a property in a decent condition;
- Repairs Team response times were monitored by the Executive on a quarterly basis. In terms of fencing, the Team was geared up to respond to fencing repairs e.g. a broken panel, rather than demands for the installation of replacement runs of fencing. The fencing policy would be reviewed. Officers were seeking to enhance the delivery of planned and cyclical maintenance through the HRA Business Plan, which would better maintain the assets, and reduce the reliance on the repairs service;
- in respect of benchmarking with comparable authorities with its own housing stock, it was confirmed that a meeting had been set up for this purpose with officers of Welwyn Hatfield District Council; and
- of the average of 80 voids per quarter, these properties were at various stages of review before repairs commenced (some jobs were carried out in-house and others by external sub-contractors). This was managed through the Northgate IT system, which was currently under review regarding data quality, inputting and reporting.

The Chair invited the Housing Operations Manager (Providing Homes) to give a short slide presentation on housing voids – refusal of Council houses. The Select Committee was advised that 57 general needs properties had been let between April and September 2022 (Quarters 1 and 2). Of these, 10 properties were refused by prospective tenants, some more than once.

The Housing Operations Manager (Providing Homes) explained the reasons for these refusals, including not meeting expectations; some areas were seen as less desirable; fear of heights and/or anti-social behaviour in high rise flat blocks; the poor aesthetic condition of properties (cleanliness, decorative state, condition of kitchens/bathrooms); no space for washing machine; garden too large to manage; and incorrect information available about the property.

The Housing Operations Manager (Providing Homes) stated that the focus on improvement to address some of the above issues would include the Investment Team reviewing the elements of each property; an updated Asset Management Strategy, targeting more funding through the HRA Business Plan towards cyclical/planned preventative maintenance works; Repairs Service review; increased tenancy audits; lettable standard review; re-engineering the lettings process; and benchmarking with a comparable housing stock holding authority.

In response to a question regarding Choice Based Lettings, the Portfolio Holder for Housing & Housing Development stated that this system had operated for the past 10-12 years. With regard to bidding on properties, the assisted bidding process was available for vulnerable groups, whereby applicants from these groups could be helped by officers. In extreme circumstances, the direct process could also be used.

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

The Select Committee considered a report providing feedback from Member site

visits to three void properties on 13 October 2022.

Although not a Member of the Select Committee, Councillor Julie Ashley-Wren, accompanied by Councillors Stephen Booth, Jim Brown (who had attended the second site visit to Homestead Moat) and officers, had visited these properties. The councillors provided feedback on these visits, which included:

- walls were not freshly painted – officers advised that it could cost up to £3,000 for a professional re-painting of the whole property, including the glossing of all the replaced internal doors, although it was reported by officers that it would be considerably less than this if the property was simply whitewashed. The amount of cleaning/re-decorating and repairs, including clearing the garden and property of extensive rubbish, replacement of all internal wooden doors, new bathroom and floor, toilet and replacement kitchen units and new ceiling required for the property visited in Homestead Moat had cost in the region of £13,000 so far;
- the Repairs service was understaffed for the number of voids coming through the system;
- the property visited in Homestead Moat needed a thorough cleaning out, with a shed that required removal;
- Councillor Ashley-Wren had visited a further property with the SDS Commercial & Contracts Manager. The garden at this property required extensive attention and officers had estimated that the cost of clearing the garden area and rectifying the interior was approximately £25,000;
- although new tenants were provided with a £250 decorating voucher, it was considered that the baseline condition of the properties they were moving into needed improvement (noting that the current Lettable Standard was part of the wider review); and
- there appeared to be cost-cutting involved in replacing items, for example replacing wooden fence posts with similar, rather than with concrete posts.

The Chair thanked the Members for their feedback. In opening the item for questions and discussion, the following emerged:

- officers agreed to look into the reasons and report back as to why one of the visited properties had been empty for over a year. In some void cases, the occupants may have moved out, but had not formally ended their tenancy;
- some ancillary items, such as the removal of the not fit for purpose shed identified at one of the properties, could be carried out after the new tenants were in situ, rather than holding up the letting process;
- it was confirmed that the Lettable Standard was in the process of being reviewed;
- officers advised that pre-void inspections and completion inspections were carried out. An issue picked up at the Homestead Moat property concerning defective-looking guttering, and damp inside the property, had not been indicative of a problem, although this would be double-checked;
- assurances were given that the properties would meet the current Lettable Standard by the time they were handed over to tenants;
- the void-letting process required revision, including a review of the Lettable Standard, following appropriate benchmarking;

- the Schedule of Rates for repairs and redecorating should be reviewed;
- the overall inspection regime should be improved. For example, there should be a requirement for non-Repairs Team operatives (Tenancy Officers, Gas Boiler engineers, etc.) to flag up issues relating to the condition of properties when they visited, and report them back to the Repairs Team;
- although it was acknowledged that potential occupants had to be educated in ways to look after their homes properly, although it was felt that his was the responsibility of families and schools rather than SBC, as there were no resources/finances to assist in this regard;
- it appeared obvious that the Repairs Team was under-staffed, and that the Council could not afford to match the pay offered by the Private Sector, which potentially increases the amount of works that had to be sub-contracted;
- the introduction of a higher Lettable Standard (and therefore higher costs) could equate to the need to increase rents, or even some form of tenants' deposit;
- there was a need to keep in touch with tenants on a regular basis, perhaps through newsletters; and
- officers had commenced work on process mapping to map a Voids repair from start to finish. The Operations Director agreed to share this process mapping information at the next meeting of the Select Committee.

5 UPDATE MAPPING EXERCISE DOCUMENT FOR HOUSING VOIDS REVIEW

The Select Committee considered an updated mapping exercise document for the Housing Voids review.

In reply to a question from the Chair, the Operations Director advised that the intention would be report back to the January 2023 meeting of the Committee on a number of issues contained in the document, including re-engineering the letting process; a better definition of the thresholds for stand voids; and reviewing the lettable standards.

The Portfolio Holder for Housing & Housing Development acknowledged that up to date statistics would be vital to the work on improving the voids process, including within a certain timescale (say the previous 6 months) how many were standard voids and how many were major voids; and how quickly (typically) were voids turned around and brought back into use.

The Scrutiny Officer clarified that the mapping document was for the scrutiny review of voids, as distinct to any possible future mapping of the actual voids process.

6 URGENT PART 1 BUSINESS

None.

7 EXCLUSION OF PUBLIC AND PRESS

Not required.

8 URGENT PART II BUSINESS

None.

CHAIR

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Mapping exercise for Community Select Committee – Housing Voids Scrutiny Review
Updated for 9 January 2023 Community Select Committee meeting

Issue	Who identified to address this/provide data and interview? (whether they are internal SBC or external partner)	What evidence/data can they provide?	Link to meeting interview/ evidence received date:	Meeting scheduled for date & how the information will be gathered:	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 05.09.2022 - Voids Presentation for CSC 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.	Final CSC Minutes - 2.11.22.doc	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.	Possible Recommendation from CSC. Request Lettings do a short survey when completing a letting. Monitor complaints.
Arrange site visits	The Scrutiny Officer has asked officers for possible dates in October to		Agenda for Community Select Committee on	Site visits arranged for CSC members who can attend a daytime site visit. 13	Tracy Jackson arranged site visits ✓

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	undertake some site visits to properties at various stages in the Void/let process. Tracy Jackson Operations Manager – Providing Homes to advice by the end of September.		Wednesday, 2 November 2022, 6.00pm (stevenage.gov.uk) (see item 4)	10 22	
Sign off a scoping document	Scrutiny Officer submit draft scoping document to CSC 11 Oct 2022	Draft scoping document.	Agenda for Community Select Committee on Tuesday, 11 October 2022, 6.00pm (stevenage.gov.uk)	11 October 2022	✓
CSC consider the mapping exercise document	Scrutiny Officer write up and maintain the document	Mapping document	Agenda for Community Select Committee on Tuesday, 11 October 2022, 6.00pm (stevenage.gov.uk) Agenda for Community Select Committee on	11 October 2022 & 2 November 2022	Ongoing

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			Wednesday, 2 November 2022, 6.00pm (stevenage.gov.uk)		
Meetings with Cllr John Duncan as critical friend to the review	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.	✓
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		Final CSC Minutes - 2.11.22.doc	Tracy Jackson to update the Committee 2 November 2022.	✓

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	compared to the private sector.				
Specific measures identified in the scoping document – **Identify ways to reduce the time to carry out works in the property before it is relet**	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.		Update from Tracy Jackson, 9 January 2023.	• Updated Asset Management Strategy to seek to maintain the condition of existing stock before it becomes Void • Repairs Service review to help optimise the Repairs Service. • Assessment of Voids Teams capability to turn around current number of Void properties and explore the options of working with external contractors • Targeting more funding through the HRA Business Plan towards cyclical/planned preventative maintenance works • More HRA funding to increase tenancy audits including pre-void contact as soon as notice is received to identify alterations carried out by the existing tenant, damage to the property and the level of clearance required • Lettable standard review to focus on an agreed new standard – post works inspections and Lettings packs signed by project officers to drive up standards and avoid properties not being ready to let. • Improved reporting on Voids path to track works, identify issues & drive up performance

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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.		Update from Tracy Jackson, 9 January 2023.	Voids review to identify opportunities including: • Pre-void inspections by Resident & Estates Officer • Streamlined end of tenancy process – Keys returned to a 'safe box', improved online documentation for ending a tenancy following the death of tenant • Empty Homes Co-ordinator recruited. Start date 9.1.23. Will track progress and manage the progress of a property as it passes between teams • Aids and Adaptations process being reviewed to mitigate delays
Specific measures identified in the scoping document **– Better define the thresholds for standard void and major void**	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.		Update from Tracy Jackson/Rob Gregory, 9 January 2023.	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 managed.
Specific measures identified in the scoping document – **Review the**	Tracy Jackson, Operations Manager – Providing Homes	Work to be undertaken outside of the formal committee		Update from Tracy Jackson, 9 January 2023.	Lettable standard being updated: • Voids Team & Contractor must meet Lettable Standard before signing off property as Ready to Let.

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lettable standard		meetings and then a verbal update from officers /draft written options to Committee when available.			• Lettings packs to be signed by project officer following a post works inspection. • KPIs to be introduced to track performance e.g. number of properties returned that meet Lettable standard.
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 Welwyn Hatfield Council to see if they would meet with officers to start a conversation about benchmarking.	Work to be undertaken outside of the formal committee meetings and then a verbal update from officers /draft written options to Committee when available.		Update from Tracy Jackson, 9 January 2023.	Meeting with officers from Welwyn Hatfield District Council on October 22 identified possible service improvements to link in with SBC's Transformation programme. Further conversations being explored with Dacorum, Hemel Hempstead & Harlow, as possible benchmarking partners.